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Shooting Pool with a Rope

**A Bittersweet Short Comedy
for One Old & One Young Man**

by

Lynn-Steven Johanson

"Shooting Pool with a Rope" is dedicated to the memory of Herman F. Hansen"

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Shooting Pool with a Rope

by Lynn-Steven Johanson

SETTING:

The present; at or near a park bench in a small Midwestern city

CHARACTERS:

AL; 68, *a retired businessman*

STACEY; 16, *a troubled teenager*

ETC:

Original production credits

SHOOTING POOL WITH A ROPE was first presented by the Old Opera House Theatre Company as part of their 10th Annual New Voice Play Festival on June 25, 2010, in Charles Town, West Virginia, with the following cast:

AL.....Steven Brewer

STACEY.....Rob Madden

It was directed by James P. Whipple.

Shooting Pool with a Rope

by Lynn-Steven Johanson

(AT RISE: A park in a small Midwestern city on a mild summer day. There are two benches, the type with metal frames and wooden slats. Nearby is a trash receptacle. AL crosses to the bench and sits down. He is a slightly overweight man of 68 who has a keen eye and a sharp wit. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and pats his forehead. After returning the handkerchief to his rear pants pocket, he picks up his magazine and begins to thumb through it. Not interested, he tosses it on the bench beside him. He breathes a big sigh and places his hands together in his lap and unconsciously begins twiddling his thumbs. He notices what he is doing and pulls his hands away in disgust. He doesn't know what to do with himself. A moment later, STACEY, a sixteen-year-old boy walks in wearing pants looking as if they are ready to fall off. Something is weighing heavily on his mind. STACEY sees AL but ignores him. AL observes STACEY for a moment.)

AL

(To STACEY) Hey, kid... *(No response; trying again with more volume)* You, kid...
(STACEY turns to AL.) Mind if I make an observation?

STACEY

You talking to me?

AL

No, I was talking to that spirea bush over there. Yeah, I'm talking to you. *(Beat)* Mind if I make an observation? *(STACEY does not answer; pause)* It's important.

(Annoyed, STACEY turns; their eyes lock.)

STACEY

Yeah?

AL

Your pants are gonna fall off.

STACEY

(Half under his breath) You asshole.

AL

And people can see your underwear.

STACEY

Did I ask you to talk to me?

AL

Mmm. I don't know. My memory isn't what it once was.

STACEY

Well, I didn't.

AL

Ah.

STACEY

And if you're some kind of pervert, I'm not interested. So you can just go fuck yourself.

AL

Interesting concept. (*STACEY glares at him.*) A rare ability like that could have alleviated a lot of frustration during my misspent youth.

STACEY

You're asking for it.

AL

For what?

STACEY

An ass-kickin'.

AL

You know, I experienced one of those once. On the streets of Melbourne—that's in Australia.

STACEY

I know where Melbourne is.

AL

Are you always this hostile? I mean, it's a terrible way to go through life.

STACEY

Will you just...

AL

What?

STACEY

Leave me alone!

(*STACEY crosses away.*)

AL

All right. I apologize. I should respect your wishes. Sorry, I didn't mean to get you upset. (*Silence; AL studies STACEY.*) Do girls think it's sexy to see your underwear?

STACEY

(Turns to stare at AL) They think it's sexy to see what's underneath.

AL

Ah-hah. I guess it was only a matter of time before butt cracks were elevated to the stature of cleavage. Tit for tat, so to speak.

STACEY

What the hell are—

AL

I guess I shouldn't be surprised given the visual similarities.

STACEY

Why are you talking to me?

AL

Why?

STACEY

Yeah, why?

AL

Well...

STACEY

You don't know me.

AL

True.

STACEY

How do you know I'm not going to pull a knife and steal your money?

AL

I don't.

STACEY

Or maybe I could be one of those thrill killers you read about. Kill just for the hell of it.

AL

You read?

STACEY

Well, duh...

AL

No, I mean that's good. Over the years, I've read everything I could get my hands on—still do. It's important to have command of one's language.

STACEY

So?

AL

You read, you speak well; you're personable—to a degree. Peel away the attitude and you have...possibilities.

STACEY

Oh?

AL

I find people like you interesting. *(Pause)* More or less.

STACEY

So, you just talk to anybody?

AL

Pretty much.

STACEY

Why?

AL

I could talk to that peony bush over there about how it feels to have ants crawling all over it, but I'm afraid it would—for the most part—be a one-way conversation.

STACEY

You talk to bushes?

AL

Only on "Tuesdays, Thursdays and Tuesdays."

(STACEY tosses AL a bewildered look as AL laughs at his own joke.)

STACEY

You're weird, man.

AL

That I am. I'm not afraid to admit it. But being weird isn't necessarily a bad thing, do you think? You can enjoy it. I always have. If people think I'm a little weird, I take that as a compliment. There's nothing worse than being beige.

STACEY

Beige?

AL

Beige. You know, "bland...boring."

STACEY

Oh.

(Beat.)

AL

I wasn't making fun of your clothes. *(STACEY does not answer.)* If I was your age, I'd probably dress just like you.

STACEY

You still can. Your pants are baggy enough.

(AL gets up and pulls his pants down like STACEY's pants.)

AL

What do you think? *(STACEY looks but does not respond.)* Pants—maybe. Still can—no way.

STACEY

Why not?

AL

I don't have what you've got to keep them up. My pants would be around my ankles—probably get me arrested. Or I'd fall down, and hurt myself. You see, you're in fashion. But me—I'd look like some old degenerate. Besides, my naval has moved up to here—*(Points to his solar plexus)*—and my boxer's aren't as attractive as yours.

(AL pulls his pants back up.)

STACEY

Maybe you'll turn on your wife.

AL

Not married.

STACEY

Some old lady might find you sexy. You could get laid.

AL

Get laid. Ha! You can't shoot pool with a rope, kid. Besides, it's been so long...

STACEY

It's like riding a bike.

AL

I'd probably fall off and chip a tooth. (*STACEY smiles.*) You can smile! Good. That's important. Now if you can laugh—hey—you'll live a longer, happier life.

STACEY

You know, they've got drugs now that will stiffen your rope.

AL

Oh, yeah?

STACEY

Don't you ever watch TV?

AL

Oh, that stuff. It would just aggravate the arthritis in my wrist. (*STACEY laughs.*) Ah-hah. See! Time spent laughing is time spent with the gods.

STACEY

I haven't had much to laugh about lately.

AL

Why's that? If you don't mind my asking. (*STACEY shrugs*) Since this park is across the street from a hospital, and since you should be in school but aren't, can I assume you might be visiting a loved one?

STACEY

(*Nodding*) Maybe.

AL

I figured. Me, too.

STACEY

Who?

AL

My daughter. And you? (*STACEY does not answer.*) It's all right. It's none of my business.

STACEY

Then why aren't you inside?

AL

If I have a choice of spending time in a park or in the waiting room of a hospital, the park wins hands down.

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

I'm not fond of hospitals.

STACEY

Why's that?

AL

If you've ever gone under the knife, you'll want to stay as far away as possible.

STACEY

You had an operation once?

AL

Once. Ha!

STACEY

More than once?

AL

Gall bladder, hemorrhoids, knee surgery, not to mention prostate cancer.

STACEY

But you're all right now.

AL

So far. I got radiation treatments every day for three and a half weeks. I now have my own built-in flashlight—I can find my way to the bathroom at night without turning on the lights. But don't ask me to demonstrate, I'm shy.

STACEY

You're shittin' me.

AL

Well... Maybe about the glow-in-the-dark part.

STACEY

I don't think cancer is very funny.

AL

It's not, no siree. Serious stuff. But you've got to have a good attitude about it. Otherwise it will get you. And the Big C isn't going to get me any time soon. I had an old gypsy woman tell my fortune once, and she predicted I would be shot during a lovers quarrel in a cathouse on my ninety-ninth birthday.

STACEY

Shooting pool with a rope?

(AL laughs.)

AL

Shooting pool with a rope. That's right. I think there's hope for you, kid.

STACEY

Will you knock off that "kid" stuff? My name is Stacey not "kid."

AL

I thought Stacey was a girl's name.

(STACEY glares at AL.)

STACEY

Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's not.

AL

Ease up. I'm just giving you a hard time.

STACEY

Well don't. I don't like it.

AL

Fine.

STACEY

What's your name?

AL

AL. Short for Alvin. *(Beat)* And no, I'm not one of the friggin' chipmunks.

(AL rises and offers his hand which STACEY shakes.)

STACEY

Chipmunks?

AL

You know—Alvin the Chipmunk.

STACEY

No.

AL

You've never heard of Alvin and the Chipmunks?

STACEY

No.

Cultural icons of the 1950's?

AL

No!

STACEY

They were seminal in the development of heavy metal rock and roll.

AL

In the 1950's?

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

Really?

STACEY

No.

AL

(AL laughs.)

STACEY

Jerking me around again.

AL

Sorry. I couldn't help myself. It's this ornery streak that surfaces every now and then.

STACEY

I hadn't noticed.

AL

Oo! Sarcasm. I like that. *(Pause; STACEY sits on the bench.)* What's the matter?

STACEY

Nothin'.

AL

Nothin', huh?

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

You want to talk about nothin'?

No. STACEY

I see. AL

(Pause; then) It's kind of personal. STACEY

Personal like in a loved one? AL

(Nodding) Yeah. STACEY

Parent? AL

(Nodding) Mm. STACEY

Getting it off your chest might make you feel better. AL

I doubt it. STACEY

You never know... I went to a priest once—to talk about a problem I had—and I found it very helpful. AL

Big deal—you're Catholic. STACEY

No, I'm not. AL

And you saw a priest? STACEY

Yeah. AL

You're just shitting me again. STACEY

AL

No, honest to God. I walked into the church and told him I needed some help. It didn't matter to him that I was raised a Methodist. Father Intagliata—that was his name—he took time to teach me about the power of redemption, and for that, I'll always be grateful.

STACEY

I could never do that.

AL

Talk to a priest?

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

Well, at your age I wouldn't have either. But I did something once I'm not very proud of, and it had been eating away at me most of my life. It's taken me over forty years to gather up the courage and the conviction to do something about it, and now I'm afraid it may be too late. I guess that's my punishment for being a coward.

STACEY

You don't seem the cowardly type to me.

AL

Well, I was—then. And now, I would rather face a burglar with a gun than to go into that hospital and face my daughter.

STACEY

That bad.

AL

You don't know the half of it. *(Pause)* So, you got any ugly little secrets?

STACEY

I'm not old enough yet.

AL

You want a couple of mine? *(STACEY shrugs.)* They're pretty horrible—I'll allow you only one.

STACEY

How horrible are they? *(AL mimics STACEY's shrug.)* Ever been in prison?

AL

Nope.

Committed any crimes? STACEY

No. AL

You a mean person? STACEY

No. AL

A liar? STACEY

No, but I'm prone to exaggerating. AL

An asshole? STACEY

Depends who you talk to. AL

You don't sound so bad. STACEY

So, is it your mother or father? AL

Mother. STACEY

How is she? AL

(STACEY pauses as he tries to formulate the word he has not had to say until now.)

Dying. STACEY

(Beat.)

I'm sorry. AL

STACEY

She's been fighting cancer for the last five years.

AL

That's tough.

STACEY

It would go into remission, and then it would just come back.

AL

You have a father?

STACEY

No, he was killed in a car accident—when I was four.

AL

No brothers, sisters? Aunts or uncles?

STACEY

No. My grandparents are all dead—except for one. He disappeared a long time ago...He could be dead too for all I know.

AL

(Pause) What's your name?

STACEY

I told you. Stacey.

AL

Stacey what?

STACEY

Miller.

AL

And your mother—what's her name?

STACEY

Why?

AL

Just humor me, okay. I'm an old man. Guys my age have been known to drop dead for no reason.

STACEY

All right.

Your mother's name?

AL

Diane. Diane Miller.

STACEY

And her maiden name?

AL

Crawford.

STACEY

(Sighs deeply) That's what I thought.

AL

What's with all the questions?

STACEY

I just had to make sure.

AL

Make sure of what?

STACEY

Look kid, I—

AL

Stop calling me kid, will yuh?

STACEY

All right, all right.

AL

The name is Stacey.

STACEY

All right, Stacey. *(Beat)* You can call me "Al." I prefer that to "Hey, you!" or "Dumb ass."

AL

Al what?

STACEY

Crawford.

AL

Crawford, that's my...

STACEY

AL

Yeah.

STACEY

Are you messing with me?

AL

No. Honest, I'm not. *(Beat)* You see, I'm your grandfather—the one that "disappeared" as you put it. As you can see, I'm very much alive—at least for the time being.

STACEY

I don't believe you!

(STACEY begins to leave. AL rises to stop him.)

AL

Now, wait a minute. Hear me out.

(STACEY stops.)

STACEY

Why?

AL

All I ask is for a couple of minutes. Then you can leave, tell me to get screwed, whatever. But please, just—just a minute of your time. *(Beat)* What will it hurt? *(STACEY turns to AL.)* I was married to your grandmother, Frances Ingles Crawford. And we had a daughter named Diane Louise. Louise is your mother's middle name, is it not?

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

I'm not trying to pull some kind of scam, take advantage or otherwise mess with your head. I really am your grandfather. Long, lost grandfather, god help me.

STACEY

What're you doing here?

AL

Well... *(Pause)* I guess you could say I'm exorcising my guilt.

STACEY

Your guilt?

AL

A writer once described guilt as an "avenging fiend that follows you with a whip." There comes a time when you can't stand the lashings any longer and you have to clear your conscience. In order to do that I had to seek out my daughter and try to find some... measure of redemption.

STACEY

After all this time.

AL

Yeah.

STACEY

You have a lot of nerve coming here.

AL

Yeah. But not much courage.

STACEY

Why did you run away? (*AL does not answer.*) I think I have a right to know.

AL

Yeah, I suppose you do...I took off when your mother was three months old. Left your grandmother high and dry with a baby to raise. Nice guy, huh?

STACEY

Pretty shitty thing to do.

AL

And now you know why I'm experiencing some anxiety over going into that hospital room and seeing your mother. "Hi! You don't remember me but I'm your father, the shitheel." God!

STACEY

You didn't answer my question.

AL

What question?

STACEY

Why did you run away?

AL

Well, let's see. Immature...selfish...scared...irresponsible. Maybe all of the above.

STACEY

And you never contacted her?

AL

Nope.

STACEY

And she never tried contacting you either?

AL

When she divorced me, she sent me a letter saying she never wanted to see me again. So... I respected her wishes.

STACEY

She never talked about you that I remember.

AL

Understandable.

STACEY

After my dad died, Grandma came to live with us, and I asked her one time, "Why don't I have a grandpa?" She said, "Oh, he disappeared a long time ago and nobody knows where he is." That's all she'd say.

AL

I'm glad to know she didn't rave on about me ruining her life.

STACEY

Yeah, but you did. *(Letting him have it)* You know what she did for a living? Cleaned people's houses. Worked her ass off. And she never made much money so Mom had to start working when she was fourteen—after school and on weekends. And she's worked her ass off, too. She wanted to be a teacher but she couldn't afford to go to college. But she managed to take night classes at the community college and got an Associate's degree while she was working as a secretary to a fat-ass boss that treated everybody like shit. And then she gets cancer... *(Barely holding back tears)* It's not fair. It's not...

(Emotionally spent, STACEY collapses onto the bench in tears. AL crosses and sits beside him, comforting him.)

AL

Life isn't fair. If it was, your mother would be healthy and her boss would have cancer. *(Handing STACEY his handkerchief)* Here. *(STACEY takes it and dries his eyes.)* Look, it seems bleak right now—you're a victim as much as your mom, and the injustice of it all is burning a hole in your gut. But don't let all this put a chip on your shoulder so you end up bitter, blaming the world for what it did to you. If you do, that chip will become a millstone around your neck, and it will pull you forever into the depths. You have to defy it—stand up, look tragedy in the face and say, "You not going to beat me, damnit. You're never going to beat me."

STACEY

How do you know all this stuff?

AL

You'll find that time is one of life's great teachers, Stacey.

(Silence.)

STACEY

When you ran away, did you ever think about my mom?

AL

Of course I did.

STACEY

I'll bet.

AL

No, really. I did. I joined the navy and traveled aboard ships all over the world. Had a lot of things to occupy my time. But when I was alone in my bunk at night, yeah, I thought about her—what she was like—what she was doing. But I've always been able to compartmentalize things. And that was a compartment I seldom wanted to open and would never share with anyone else.

STACEY

So what about me? You gonna freak out and run away now you've seen me? Or stuff me into one of your compartments?

AL

I couldn't do that. I'm concerned about what will happen to you.

STACEY

Nothin'. That's what's gonna happen to me.

AL

What do you mean, nothin'?

STACEY

Mom's been talking with some of her friends—about taking me in. And you know what?
(Pause) Nobody's interested.

AL

Nobody. *(STACEY shakes his head.)* If nobody takes you in, what will happen to you?

STACEY

I'll become a ward of the state. Child and Family Services will stick me with a foster family until I turn eighteen.

AL

Foster family.

STACEY

Mom and I have always talked about me going to college, but...I don't know—maybe I can join the army or something. Pretty tough to go to college if you're a homeless person.

AL

You want to go to college, go. I can help you get this all arranged. I can—

STACEY

You say that now—but who's to say you won't just take the easy way out like you did before.

(STACEY rises and moves away.)

AL

I understand why you're skeptical. Words are cheap and promises are conveniently forgotten. But if you let me, I'll show you that I mean what I say.

STACEY

Yeah?

AL

All I ask is that you give me a chance.

(Once again, it is silent.)

STACEY

Why did you decide to come back here, anyway? Forget about the guilt and the need for redemption and all that dipshit stuff.

AL

Dipshit stuff?

STACEY

Yeah.

AL

All right. I don't have any relatives. None. I'm all alone in the world—except for you two. And I started thinking about what would happen if one day I just toppled over in the street.

STACEY

Toppled over.

AL

Yeah. Like I told you, guys my age have been known to up and drop dead.

STACEY

For no reason.

AL

Yeah. Walking, thinking, talking one moment and boom!—dead the next. I mean, who would care? So I thought this might be my last chance to connect with my daughter, and try to make amends—you know—before the "boom."

STACEY

I thought that gypsy said you were going to live to be ninety-nine.

AL

True, but what if her crystal ball had a systems failure? That could have screwed up her prediction. Stranger things have happened.

STACEY

Mm.

AL

(Beat) I guess you could say that it all boils down to "What good has my life been?" I saw the world, enjoyed myself, went into business. So what. It was all for me. But have I ever really done anything important, anything that really matters? Made any difference? Then, late one night that old compartment came open and I thought about... The next day, I hired an agency to find you, and eventually I worked up enough nerve to come here and check things out. When I arrived at your house and found no one home, I spoke with one of your neighbors who told me your mother was in the hospital. God! My heart jumped into my throat. Am I too late? Why didn't I do this sooner?

STACEY

I thought you said you were in the Navy.

AL

I was, but after I retired, I went to work for a dry cleaning business in San Diego. A few years later, I bought the place when the owner died. And then I bought another, and then another until I had six of them. "The San Diego Dry Cleaning Mogul." Sold them all five years ago, so I have more than enough money to keep me in Depends. *(STACEY suppresses a smile.)* I was planning on moving to Hawaii and simply enjoying myself. Then prostate cancer hit. After I finished my treatments, I started traveling. But having cancer changes your outlook on life—makes you reflect on what's important.

STACEY

And by coming back here after all these years, you think you can make us all feel better.

AL

Look, I can't make up for the pain I caused. Nothing can ever undo that. I'm just interested in doing what's right. I wanted to make sure my daughter had a future. Ironic, huh? But I'm still hoping it may be possible for us to get to know one another—and maybe—be a family before it's too late.

STACEY

It's already too late.

This is Not the End of the Play

Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes