

Honest Work

CHARACTERS:

Lee. An art-school dropout. Does caricatures at carnivals to support herself.

Nova. A former writer and newly engaged. Is unhappy with the course of her life.

Ken. An airhead carnival barker. Nova's fiance.

Old Man.

Policeman.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Every character, besides Lee and Nova, has heavily painted on red cheeks and lips to mimic a caricature.

Lee is painting at her easel, unless otherwise noted.

[Lights up. LEE stands on stage with an easel and a small table of paints. A wooden stool sits in front of the easel.]

LEE.

Caricatures for the low low price of \$5 for individuals! \$10 for groups!

[OLD MAN walks past her.]

LEE.

Excuse me sir, would you like a painting?

[Old Man grunts and waves her off as a solid 'no'.]

LEE. (calling after him)

But I can shrink that bald spot of yours!

[Old Man exits. Lee sighs.]

LEE.

Fuck.

[KEN and NOVA enter.]

KEN.

Any moola today, Lee?

LEE.

The utter is dry today, Ken.

KEN.

Pity. Guess the degree doesn't help as much as they say it does, huh?

[He laughs at his own attempt at a joke. Nova and Lee are silent.]

KEN.

I'm telling ya, honey, Carnival Sundays are always the worst. An absolute snooze fest. I had an old fella earlier get on the ferris wheel, and he even fell asleep! He's gone four times on the thing so far, ya know, because I didn't have the heart to wake him up. I gave Burt a heads up before I left for my break, but, damn, that guy is gonna have a full-out heart attack when he wakes up and finds out he has to pay for all those rides!

[Ken's phone goes off.]

KEN.

Ah, speaking of, there's Burt. One second. *[into phone]* Hiya, Burt! Uh, huh. Yep, what about the old guy. Uh, huh. He's what?

[Ken's eyes open-wide in horrified shock.]

KEN.

I gotta go.

[Ken runs off stage. Lee and Nova are left alone.]

LEE.

So. I take it you're the fiance he's always babbling on about?

NOVA.

The one and only. I'm Nova.

LEE.

Lee.

[Beat.]

NOVA.

I came to pick Ken up from work. We're on our way to an appointment with a wedding planner.

LEE.

Ah. When is the big day?

NOVA.

Soon. Hopefully. We've changed the date a couple times. Something always seems to come up.

LEE.

Did your priest also fall asleep on a ferris wheel?

[Awkward silence.]

NOVA.

Soo. You do caricatures?

LEE.

When people actually want them. [Beat.] Yes, I do.

NOVA.

Cool.

LEE.

Yep.

NOVA.

Ken's talked about you before. Said that you went to Stanford on an art scholarship. That's impressive.

LEE.

Sure did. Did he tell you that I dropped out? That part is usually less impressive.

NOVA.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to -

LEE.

No, don't worry about it. That's the empty wallet talking.

[Nova sits down on the stool. Throughout the following conversation, Lee picks up her brush and begins to paint on the canvas.]

NOVA.

Why caricatures, though?

LEE.

What do you mean?

NOVA.

I don't know. Someone with your talent, you could make money off something that shows off your range more. Show off your authenticity instead of hiding it.

LEE.

People these days don't want talent or authenticity. A good caricature artist hides the parts that people dislike about themselves the most. Exaggerate the positives. You stroke the ego, you get paid.

NOVA.

You're still poor, though, so I don't think that approach is working out for you too well. Caricatures just seem dishonest to me.

[Silence. Lee sneaks a glare at Nova, then goes back to painting.]

LEE.

Have you gotten a caricature done before?

NOVA.

Once. On Ken and I's first date. I had just graduated from college, so I was still riding that high. I had this ripped denim jacket that I can't fit into anymore, and my hair was tied into the infamous messy bun that takes a whole hour to make it look like you took no time on it all. I had this red-polka dot ribbon with lipstick to match. I was hot shit.

LEE.

Sounds like it.

NOVA.

Right. And I remembered thinking that while the guy was painting. And later, when he was all done, I looked at it and he gave me the most grotesque smile I had ever seen. Like, complete Joker-level shit, not even a "sexy-Harley Quinn" vibe about it. It made me look like this demonic entity. Ken loved it though. He has it framed in our apartment all these years later.

LEE.

He probably thought you looked miserable.

NOVA.

Who?

LEE.

The painter. He probably thought you looked miserable on your date, so he overcompensated and tried to hide it in the painting by giving you an exaggerated smile.

NOVA.

Well, I was *not* miserable.

LEE.

If you say so.

NOVA.

Well, I do say so. I wouldn't be marrying Ken if I was.

LEE.

Sure you would. People do a million things in their life that make them miserable, but they do them anyway.

NOVA.

Well, maybe that's you projecting.

LEE.

How's your sex life?

NOVA.

Excuse me?

LEE.

You heard me.

NOVA.

We hardly even know each other. Why the hell would you ask me that?

LEE.

Terrible, then. Got it.

NOVA.

Fuck you. [Beat.] Why do you say that?

LEE.

A couple weeks ago, I was waiting in line for the port-a-potty and I heard a couple going at it in one of the stalls. Absolute feral. When they came out, they both looked absolutely ecstatic, especially the woman. No ounce of embarrassment whatsoever, even after this total stranger heard them going to town.

NOVA.

Um...okay? What's your point?

LEE.

Women are asked to hide so much of themselves. It's a learned survival mechanism, so there's no sense in judging it. But, women seem to be the most authentic with their sex lives. When it's bad, sure, lie. Deflect, hide it, do whatever. But, when it's good? They want to scream it from the rooftops. Share it with whoever will listen. Many don't, but the urge is there. The urge of having no shame. To stop hiding. If women applied that to everything else? Absolute chaos.

NOVA.

I'm not hiding anything.

LEE. [sarcastically]

Of course you're not. You're too committed to the act to admit otherwise.

[*Beat.*]

NOVA.

I wanted to be a writer, after college. Then I met Ken, and he told me it wasn't a serious career path.

LEE.

Bold remark from a guy who wears striped overalls for a living.

[*Nova giggles, visually warming up to Lee.*]

NOVA.

That's fair. He always said I wouldn't amount to much. Told me I needed to focus on something more serious. Him, mainly. [Beat.] But I've never understood what that fully meant. Everything's more "serious" when you're in it, you know, it's a construct to organize society and importance. So I don't know what the world wants when they say to be more "serious." In relationships. Jobs. 401Ks. "Seriousness" seems to be a means to achieve a sense of security, which doesn't really exist. Everything can disappear at a moment's notice, we're on a floating rock. So, sometimes I just wonder if we should all devolve into absolute outrageousness and disorder. That's authentic. That's real. Natural, even.

[Silence.]

You think I'm crazy don't you.

LEE.

I think that's your natural state of being.

[Beat. They both laugh.]

LEE.

I brought up that port-a-potty story earlier, because I think about it a lot. Of how I wish I could paint that. Not the physical context of the situation, but the essence of it. That brazen, liberating feeling. That someone would be able to look at the canvas, and be struck by how much of their life they spend hiding themselves and what they want.

You want to talk about authenticity? Honesty? Well, there you go. That's what I got. No one would buy it, but, well, no one buys my shit anyway.

NOVA.

I would.

[Lee stops painting and puts her brush on her easel. She and Nova stare at one another.]

NOVA.

No offense, but I have no need for another caricature. I already feel like a walking caricature of myself most days.

LEE.

How so?

NOVA.

I don't think I've ever truly known myself. Just the exaggerated version that's easy for everyone else to comprehend.

LEE.

And marrying Ken is the answer to that?

NOVA.

I never said it was the answer to anything. More like a forgone conclusion.

LEE.

I'm sorry, but that is so fucking sad. Sounds like you're settling.

NOVA.

The same could be said for you. You obviously hate it here. And nothing is stopping you from leaving.

LEE.

Say I did leave. Then I'd probably find another dead-end, miniscule paid job that might somewhat make use of my talents, but will in the end leave me unfulfilled.

NOVA.

So, you're settling?

[*Beat.*]

LEE.

Fuck it, I probably am. But, I don't know if it is possible to be true to yourself. To not be the reflected version of how others view you. I'm always going to be seen as a deadbeat artist drop-out. Paint sunken eyes on me, a thin-lined frown. Devil horns, maybe, cuz I'm a societal leech with nothing to offer. Society's a systemic caricature. And that's mine. It doesn't have time for nuance or individuality, only generalizations. It's a bitch, for sure, but it is what it is.

NOVA.

Then what would be mine?

LEE.

You? Well, if you marry Ken...you'll have huge-ass housewife doe eyes. So innocent, no one would expect anything out of you. Perpetual rosy cheeks, maybe, for every time he says something mildly embarrassing but you bite your tongue. Then pair it with that joker smile, because every day while you're cooking dinner waiting for him to come home you'll be inching closer and closer to filing for a life insurance policy.

[*Before Nova can respond, Ken enters with POLICEMAN following behind him.*]

KEN.

I'm telling you, Officer, I have no clue what happened to the guy. One minute he was breathing, he closed his eyes...for an extended period of time...than-POOF!-he was dead.

POLICEMAN.

We are going to have to ask you to come to the station for more questions. At this moment in time, we cannot rule out foul play. No other patrons were spotted near the scene. And you were the only one clocked into work that ride today until your co-worker came to relieve you. The evidence we've gathered so far is incriminating.

KEN.

This is completely ridiculous. Nova, baby, tell him this is ridiculous. Officer, this is my fiance, she's as honest and sweet as they come. She'll tell you I would never do such a thing.

[Nova stares wordlessly at Ken.]

KEN.

C'mon, baby, you were there at the end of my shift. I was playing sudoku! You need to tell them I'm blameless here, otherwise we'll-we'll miss our appointment. You don't want that, do you?

[Nova stares at Ken, then back at Lee.]

NOVA.

I don't know what you're talking about. I was here getting my caricature done. I haven't seen you all day.

POLICEMAN.

C'mon, off to the station.

[The Policeman cuffs Ken and leads him offstage.]

KEN.

Nova, what the fuck? Tell him the truth. Nova!

[They exit.]

[Nova sits back down on the stool. Lee looks at her, wide-eyed.]

NOVA.

Can I see what the finished product is?

LEE.

Yeah. Uh, sure.

[Lee turns the easel around so it faces the audience. It is a completely red canvas.]

NOVA.
It's-

LEE.
Red. Yeah.

NOVA.
Why?

LEE.
It's the color that gets exaggerated the most. To represent lust. Warmth. Anger. Love. War. It's all contradictory, but true at the same time. That's my authentic rendering of you. I'm done with caricatures for today.

[Nova nods her head in understanding.]

NOVA.
How much?

[Nova and Lee share a smile.]

[The End.]