

THE DUST IN YOUR PLACE
A One-Act Play

SETTING:

Kitchen

CHARACTERS:

RICK- Comic strip writer

CLAIRE- Comic strip illustrator

THE SET:

A small kitchen table and two chairs.

THE PLAY:

[CLAIRE is seated at table, and the table is filled with a lot of papers, pencils and pens. There is a pair of fast food packages on the table. She poses to draw but doesn't. Instead, she looks at her watch. She opens one of the fast food packages and tries to eat. She puts it back. She waits. RICK comes in.]

CLAIRE Now that was awkward.

RICK I'm sorry that you had to hear all that drama.

[Silence.]

RICK By the way, *[puts a pencil case on the table]* I finally found your pencil case. *[Beat.]* Rather, Lisa did.

CLAIRE Where?

RICK Under the throw pillows.

CLAIRE How did it get there?

RICK You tell me. *[Pause.]* Shall we get back to work?

[RICK sits at table. Pause.]

RICK Where were we again?

CLAIRE Before that unpleasant interruption?

[RICK stares at CLAIRE. CLAIRE stares back at RICK. She finally breaks the stare and focuses on the sheet of paper in front of her.]

CLAIRE The third panel. Frank Fuhrer just said, "I'm so mad, I'm going to..."
[Beat.] The punch line.

RICK Right. *[Beat.]* I forgot what I was going to say.

CLAIRE Then come up with a new one.

[Long silence.]

RICK Sorry. I can't think of anything right now.

[Pause.]

RICK Three years of making these “Frank Fuhrer” comic strips and I finally hit writer’s block.

CLAIRE Maybe we should take a break.

RICK I don’t want to be chasing after deadlines. You know that. Give me a few minutes and I’ll think of something.

CLAIRE Actually, I don’t feel like drawing today either.

[Pause.]

RICK Is it because...

CLAIRE Yes.

[Beat.]

RICK Look, Lisa’s just overreacting. Both you and I know nothing is going on between us.

CLAIRE Lisa doesn’t seem to know that.

RICK She should.

CLAIRE But does she?

RICK What do you think we argue about sometimes?

CLAIRE And my being in your kitchen right now seems like a weak explanation.

RICK We are working and this is the ideal workplace. Quiet, with free flowing coffee, and snacks in the fridge... and it’s not as if I’m hiding the fact that you’re here.

CLAIRE That’s what got you in trouble today, right?

[Pause.]

RICK Are you telling me to lie to Lisa?

CLAIRE No, of course not.

RICK Don’t tell me that we’re doing the comic strips via e-mail from now on. [Beat.] I need to bounce ideas off you. You’re not just my illustrator, you’re my...

CLAIRE Editor, I know.

RICK And it's difficult to bounce ideas if you have to scan your drawings every time you have to show them to me. It disrupts the momentum.

CLAIRE Like the momentum disrupted earlier?

RICK Look, I'm only apologizing once about Lisa. [*Beat.*] Lisa's a wonderful person even if she's like that sometimes.

CLAIRE Like what?

RICK For lack of a better term? Slightly neurotic.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE How can you talk about your girlfriend like that?

RICK Didn't you hear what I said? I said...

CLAIRE Slightly neurotic. I heard you the first time.

RICK I said "for the lack of a better term." Put the neurotic part into context.

CLAIRE Still...

RICK Please. I don't want to talk about this. Not now.

CLAIRE Too bad. I do think we should talk about this.

RICK It's my problem, not yours.

CLAIRE You made it my problem.

RICK Could we just get to work and talk about it some other time?

CLAIRE Okay. [*Beat.*] When shall we talk about it?

RICK Now you're sounding just like Lisa.

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE Did you just call me slightly neurotic?

RICK That's not...

CLAIRE Gee, I don't know, maybe you do have a thing for slightly neurotic people.

RICK Hey, stop it. I didn't call you neurotic.

CLAIRE You said I was sounding like Lisa. And you said Lisa was slightly neurotic...

RICK And so you are! [*Stands up.*] You know what this is called? Selective hearing. I said that for a lack of a better term, Lisa is slightly neurotic sometimes. What do you recall? "Slightly neurotic". What about, "For lack of a better term"? Or what about, "Sometimes"? [*Beat.*] Think what you like.

[*RICK paces for a bit.*]

RICK Lisa is getting jealous over nothing. I thought that was clear with you too.

[*Silence.*]

RICK I am dealing with one woman problem already, and I don't want to deal with another.

[*Silence.*]

CLAIRE That's a first.

RICK First? First what?

CLAIRE You calling me a woman. You finally noticed.

[*Pause.*]

RICK What is that supposed to mean?

CLAIRE Sometimes you call me "dude" or "man." It sounds...

RICK Weird?

CLAIRE Yes.

RICK There you go then. Isn't that proof that nothing's going on between us?

[*CLAIRE looks away.*]

RICK Shall we get to work, then?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Do you have a punch line already?

[*Silence.*]

RICK Frank Fuhrer says, “I’m so mad...” and then he bursts.

[*Silence.*]

RICK Well?

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE A cheap visual gag?

RICK Make his bursting funny! You’re the illustrator.

CLAIRE No amount of good drawing can compensate a bad punch line.

RICK God, you are making this so hard.

[*Silence.*]

RICK Make him turn into mud.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE A visual pun?

RICK Then we just make him say, “I’m so mad that I forgot the punch line!”

CLAIRE No.

[*Pause.*]

RICK Maybe we’re just not in a laughing mood right now. It might work.

CLAIRE No.

[*Silence.*]

CLAIRE What if we just talk about...?

RICK Why do you want to talk about me and Lisa? So Lisa's clingy today. All couples go through these problems. Lisa needs to mature, that's all.

CLAIRE And you?

RICK What about me?

CLAIRE Lisa needs to mature, you said. What do you need to do?

[*Beat.*]

RICK Are you taking her side?

CLAIRE Why would I take her side? Why should I be taking sides?

RICK Why do you want to talk about this? It's not...

CLAIRE It's not my relationship. It's yours, I know.

RICK Can we work now?

CLAIRE Do you have a punch line already?

RICK I cannot think of a punch line if you keep interrogating me.

[*Beat.*]

RICK This is why nobody asks you out.

[*Silence.*]

RICK That was foul.

[*Silence.*]

RICK I shouldn't have said that.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Forgiven.

[*Pause.*]

RICK Eight years we've known each other. Eight years, and we finally have a fight. Over a woman, of all possible topics.

CLAIRE That didn't...

RICK ...didn't sound right.

CLAIRE Right.

RICK Right.

[*Pause.*]

RICK Shall we get back to work?

CLAIRE I think we're doing fine progress talking about your issue.

RICK You are so persistent. Why do you want to talk about this?

CLAIRE It's your girlfriend we're talking about. You two argue in front of me and you make it seem that it's no big deal...

RICK I never said it's not a big deal...

CLAIRE But you act as if it is! Talk to me, "dude"!

[*RICK just stares.*]

CLAIRE Yes, you told me that you'll wait for her to mature, but...

RICK But what?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE What about you?

RICK What about me?

CLAIRE Face it. You are not exactly the paragon of boyfriendhood.

[*Beat.*]

RICK I didn't know you sized me up as boyfriend material.

CLAIRE Oh, please.

RICK Then explain. What do you mean, "not the paragon of boyfriendhood"?

CLAIRE Two examples: Karen and Michelle.

RICK Now you're the one being foul.

CLAIRE No, I'm making a point.

RICK That Michelle and Karen were right in dumping me? Now it's my fault?

CLAIRE I am not blaming you. [*Beat.*] Look, I know you long enough to see you start and end relationships. Two relationships already. Personally, I don't want to see a third go down the drain.

RICK I don't think you are in the position to give me advice. In the first place, you have never been in a relationship.

CLAIRE And you're not a girl.

[*Pause.*]

RICK Go on. Why can't I keep a relationship?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Is it still not obvious?

[*Silence.*]

RICK You're right. I'm sorry. You are absolutely right. You are neurotic.

CLAIRE Be serious.

RICK Eight years. And did anything bloom? [*Beat.*] Eight years. We've been at this, even before Lisa was in the picture. Before even Michelle and Karen were in—and out—the picture. If there was something between us, we could be married by this time! And it's not because there's something wrong with you that we aren't, right?

CLAIRE I don't think there's anything wrong with you either. We're happy the way we are. I know that.

RICK See? Lisa is seeing something that isn't there.

CLAIRE Lisa is seeing you talk to another girl. Me.

RICK So whenever a guy talks to a girl... any girl, not just you... do you mean that he is automatically hitting on her? That is such a sexist thing to say.

CLAIRE No. That's not what I meant.

RICK So what do you mean because of you?

CLAIRE We spend at least four hours a week planning and drawing, the two of us, in your kitchen of all places. And we've been doing this for goodness knows how long? What would anyone else...

RICK ...think? There's nothing wrong in what we're doing!

CLAIRE I never said that there was!

RICK So there is no reason for Lisa to be jealous! [*Beat.*] And you were not even the reason that Michelle and Karen gave when they dumped me. And don't pretend you forgot.

CLAIRE Pretend that I did.

[*Pause.*]

RICK Michelle just wasn't into comics. That's it.

CLAIRE She knew that you were into comics when you guys first met. It didn't stop you two from dating.

RICK Michelle couldn't connect with my work, okay? She thought she could. She tried. It happens. Stop theorizing. [*Beat.*] You try going out sometime.

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE We're not talking about me.

RICK Yeah? Maybe we should resolve that too.

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE In time.

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE And what about Karen?

[Pause.]

RICK Oh. So this is what it's all about. You're basing your assumptions on my time with Karen.

CLAIRE You can't say it?

[Pause.]

RICK Karen started seeing someone else. There! I said it. No big deal.

[Pause.]

CLAIRE No big deal?

[Beat.]

RICK It's no big deal now.

CLAIRE Of course. You just asked me to go out on a date with you right after the break up.

[Beat.]

RICK Can we just drop this for another time and get back to work?

CLAIRE Too uncomfortable for you?

RICK Yes.

CLAIRE Too bad. You can't walk out on me because we're at your place. And you can't throw me out because I'm a girl.

[Beat.]

RICK If your point is that I'm neurotic too, alright. Lisa's neurotic, I'm neurotic, we're both neurotic. We're meant for each other.

CLAIRE You're not getting it at all.

RICK So what is your point?

CLAIRE Karen was seeing someone else. What were we doing?

[Pause.]

RICK Karen was seeing someone else. We? We just saw each other. For work.

CLAIRE We had lunch, the two of us. In your kitchen.

RICK Was it more than a lunch for you?

CLAIRE No.

RICK Neither was it for me.

CLAIRE But it could have been for Karen. It definitely was for Lisa.

RICK But that's ridiculous! Does eating out with other guys make me gay, or does eating by myself make me narcissistic? There is a world of difference between going out and just having lunch!

CLAIRE Is there?

RICK Don't act coy.

CLAIRE After all, you did so gallantly stress that you're more experienced in relationships than I am.

[*Beat.*]

RICK When I asked you out... After Karen broke up with me... Do you still remember that time?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE I remember the nice food. And you footing the bill. And the movie after. And you paying for the ticket too. [*Beat.*] So that was a date?

[*Beat.*]

RICK It was supposed to.

CLAIRE Unless dates are when you pay for everything...

RICK That's why we never pursued it.

CLAIRE So what makes a date? [*Beat.*] Is it the holding hands part? The googoo eyes and saying sweet nothings and smiling the whole time? The candles and the background music?

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE Now that I said it, I do remember us trying to hold hands. It felt like...

RICK Look, my point is that the difference is the connection.

CLAIRE Like holding hands on our "date"?

RICK Stop it with the holding hands! *[Beat.]* Not the type of connection that you and I have. It's... *[Beat.]* You'll just know it.

[Pause.]

CLAIRE I don't think so. You might know because you have been dating. *[Beat.]* I've never dated. I wouldn't know.

RICK Why don't you go out with guys?

CLAIRE Don't change the topic.

[Pause.]

CLAIRE Unless we're carrying big neon placards announcing that it's not a date, it's going to look otherwise.

RICK We were working. And didn't I invite Karen to join us from time to time? And she did join us for lunch.

CLAIRE Listen to yourself: Karen did join us for lunch. She joined us. When it should be me joining you two for lunch. If at all.

RICK That's reading too much into things.

CLAIRE Really? I remember those lunches. It was mostly us doing the talking. Karen would just smile.

RICK Of course she would just smile. She isn't into...

[Pause.]

RICK Oh.

[Pause.]

CLAIRE The same thing happened with Michelle. *[Beat.]* Think! We're laughing at the same jokes, hating the same things... We finish...

RICK ...each other's sentences.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE And you let me leave my pencil case here in your place. [*Beat.*] What would anyone else think?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Don't say that we're siblings. Face it. We aren't. Karen could see that. So could Michelle. And so can Lisa.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE And so can the other boys.

[*Beat. RICK looks at CLAIRE.*]

CLAIRE Yes. If boys were mosquitoes, you're the repellent. Thanks for noticing.

[*Pause.*]

RICK You never said a word to me about this.

CLAIRE Why should I?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE I'm happy as it is. I don't care what the other boys think. [*Beat.*] It's you. You're the guy who has a relationship to maintain.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE I could have told you sooner. And it's not that I didn't try.

[*Silence.*]

RICK Thanks.

[*Silence.*]

RICK What now?

[*Beat.*]

CLAIRE We finish our comic strip. Obviously.

[*Beat.*]

RICK Back to work, then...

CLAIRE No. End the series.

[*Pause.*]

RICK For Lisa?

CLAIRE Yes.

[*Pause.*]

RICK That's a little too extreme.

CLAIRE Is it?

RICK Yes! How long did we wait for the chance to have our own comic strip?
And when things are finally flying... Three years, man! And we're about
to release the first anthology of Frank Fuhrer. This comic strip, it's our...

CLAIRE Our baby? Poor choice of words.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE You can have Frank Fuhrer. And you can find yourself another illustrator.
Better yet, teach Lisa to illustrate. [*Beat.*] Good luck on that, though.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Or give me Frank and I'll find a new writer.

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Unbelievable. It's like we're talking about child custody.

[*Silence.*]

RICK You talk about this like you're talking about which pen you plan to buy.
Eight years! You can't switch off your emotions just like...

CLAIRE Who said that I did?

[*RICK and CLAIRE stare at each other. CLAIRE remains stoic.*]

CLAIRE But I've made my decision. You have to make yours.

[*Beat.*]

RICK Don't put me on a spot.

CLAIRE I'm not.

RICK But...

CLAIRE Lisa will make that choice for you if you don't.

[*Pause.*]

RICK The situation is not as binary as you think.

CLAIRE Isn't it?

RICK Because that's what you're suggesting, right? We stop meeting for the comic strips? [*Pause.*] What about just working via e-mail? It doesn't sound so bad as an alternative...

CLAIRE And when Lisa checks your account... Or will you keep things from her now?

[*Pause.*]

CLAIRE Listen: you're making it feel like we're breaking up. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?

RICK It's not ridiculous.

CLAIRE All we have is a comic strip. We can start that with anybody.

RICK I can't.

CLAIRE What you have with Lisa... I mean, come on. I will still keep drawing, and you will still keep writing. It's a sweet deal.

RICK No, it's not.

CLAIRE It's just Frank Fuhrer.

RICK It's not just Frank Fuhrer! You think you're just asking us to stop doing anything that would raise Lisa's jealousy. We start by stopping with the

comic strips. *[Beat.]* But that won't be enough. Soon we won't be attending comic conventions together, and whenever we meet, we'll be watching out on whatever we're going to say to each other. We'll be talking less and less.

[Pause.]

RICK Did you think of that?

[Pause.]

RICK You're asking us to fall out.

[Silence.]

CLAIRE So what if I am? I am not asking us to hate each other. If we fall out, then we fall out. *[Beat.]* We're bound to reach this crossroads anyway. One day, if you don't propose to Lisa, she will ask you to propose to her. And I do think you should. *[Beat.]* I just don't want to wait for the time when your future kids are going to ask why their father is spending so much time with their aunt.

[Beat.]

RICK You're going way ahead of yourself.

CLAIRE Am I? Isn't that where you and Lisa should be headed sometime? Something you should be talking about soon? Goodness, why do you even get into relationships in the first place?

[Beat.]

CLAIRE Lisa's good for you. Despite of what you say about her being "slightly neurotic." *[Beat.]* You should treat her better.

[Beat.]

CLAIRE As for us, there are only so many "Frank Fuhrer" comic strips we can make. That we will make. After that, what next? Good times. Yeah.

[CLAIRE starts blinking.]

CLAIRE Look at what you made me do.

[CLAIRE starts dabbing her eyes. RICK moves towards CLAIRE, but CLAIRE motions him not to move closer. It is a firm but calm motion. CLAIRE recomposes herself.]

CLAIRE It's the dust in your place. It's a wonder how Lisa even tolerates you.

RICK You don't have to act so tough.

CLAIRE Don't make things more difficult than they already are.

[Pause.]

RICK It just feels so sudden.

[Pause.]

CLAIRE It's a long time delayed.

RICK I'll...

CLAIRE Please.

RICK Right.

CLAIRE Exactly.

RICK Sorry.

CLAIRE Thanks.

[Long silence.]

CLAIRE So.

RICK So?

CLAIRE Let's get back to work.

[Pause.]

RICK Let's.

CURTAIN.