

Home-Style Cooking at the Gateway Cafe

A Play by

Philip Middleton Williams

Contact:

Philip Middleton Williams

16600 SW 77th Avenue

Palmetto Bay, FL 33157

pmw@barkbarkwoofwoof.com

CHARACTERS:

CELESTE: Mid-fifties. Owner of the Gateway Cafe

EVA: Mid-thirties. CELESTE's daughter

J.R.: Mid-twenties. CELESTE's son.

LARRY: Mid-thirties. Local guy.

GINA: Mid-thirties. Local; Mestiza heritage.

ROBBY: Mid-twenties. Local kid.

TIM: Mid-thirties. Former local, visiting.

RAY: Middle-aged. Out of townner.

PLACE and TIME:

The Gateway Cafe, a diner in a small western town in the U.S. Present day.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

The spelling of the word "café" in this play is done without the accent over the final "e." Keep the spelling as it is in the script on programs and promotional material.

The set does not have to be fully realized as described; it is there to set the atmosphere and give the director and actors a sense of place. The play can be done with a table and six chairs.

Home-Style Cooking at the Gateway Cafe was first produced as a reading at the Valdez Theatre Conference in Valdez, Alaska, on June 23, 2021. It was directed by Cody Goulder with the following cast:

CELESTE: Tamar Shai Bolkvadze

EVA: Veronica Bissell

J.R.: Jay Stevens

LARRY: Ian McEwan

GINA: Cynthia Steele

ROBBY: Skyler Ray Benson Davis

TIM: Daniel Rozak

RAY: Paul Braverman

Stage Instructions: Cassie Jeremias

Home-Style Cooking at the Gateway Cafe

The setting is the Gateway Cafe, a diner in a small western town in the U.S. Stage Right is the clear glass door from the outside. There is a restaurant-style table with chairs center stage. It has the usual settings: salt and pepper and sugar packet holder. Along the back wall is a counter with a coffeemaker, coffee mugs, paper to-go coffee cups, a small counter-top refrigerator, and a cash register at one end. Stage Left leads off to the kitchen and restrooms.

At rise, it is mid-morning after the breakfast rush. There are no customers at the table or counter. Off Stage Left we hear the sound of dishes and silverware clattering as they are being washed, and from the kitchen we hear the tinny sound of a radio playing country music. J.R., an attractive and in-shape young man in his mid-twenties in jeans and a polo shirt, is sitting at the table counting a small pile of bills and change. From the pile he pulls a small pamphlet. He looks at it, shakes his head, and mutters something.

EVA enters from Stage Left carrying coffee mugs that she sets next to the coffeemaker. She is J.R.'s older sister, early-to-mid thirties, full-figured, wearing a colorful blouse and jeans.

EVA: How'd you do?

J.R.: Twenty-five-seventy-five. *(Holds up pamphlet.)* And another love note from The Lord's Messengers.

EVA: Goddammit.

(EVA comes over to the table, snatches the pamphlet.)

EVA *(cont'd)*: Mom! They're at it again!

(CELESTE comes on from Stage Right. She is EVA and J.R.'s mother, in her mid-fifties. She is wearing an apron spattered with grease and stains over her blouse and jeans, and a hairnet.)

CELESTE: Let me see it.

(EVA hands her the pamphlet.)

J.R. *(mockingly pious)*: "The true reward is not in money. Only Jesus Christ can give you everything you need." Table of six and a thirty-five-dollar tab. That's at least seven bucks they stiffed me out of.

CELESTE: God... *(Restrains herself.)* Blast. Next time they're in here, just slap ten percent on the bill when you ring them up.

J.R.: Won't work. They argued over the two bucks I charged for the large O.J. Forget it, Mom, it's not worth it.

CELESTE: Well, if I see 'em, I'm gonna have to go to confession twice for what I'll say to them if they stiff you again. I'd ask 'em how many of these tracts you need to pay your rent.

(CELESTE starts to exit to the kitchen.)

J.R.: Mom, what's the lunch special today?

CELESTE (*as she exits*): Same as yesterday. Meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans. I got a ton left over.

J.R. (*as he gathers up his tips*): Okay, we'll call it "vintage cuisine."

EVA: And charge five bucks with a drink.

(*LARRY, followed by ROBBY and GINA, enter. LARRY is a bearish man in his mid-thirties in greasy coveralls and work boots. ROBBY is a shy, well-built young man in his mid-twenties in a sleeveless t-shirt, jeans, and work boots. GINA is a Mestiza in her mid-thirties wearing a work-shirt, colorful vest, jeans, and cowboy boots. They go to the table and sit.*)

LARRY (*continuing a conversation from the time he entered*): So, I told him, look, either let me put in the rebuild that I got on the shelf right now, or wait until the new one comes in next week. Either way, your damn Pontiac wagon needs an alternator.

ROBBY: What'd he do?

LARRY: Should have the rebuild installed this afternoon. Be glad to get that P.O.S. outta my shop.

(*They all chuckle. EVA, without asking, brings three coffee mugs and the coffee carafe.*)

EVA (*as she fills the mugs*): So, coffee break already?

LARRY: Hey, I already have a wife. 'Sides, I need something to keep me awake.

GINA: And things are a little quiet at my place.

CELESTE (*off*): Gina!

GINA: Oh, shit.

CELESTE (*off*): Where the hell's my potting soil?

GINA: It's coming in today! I swear!

(*CELESTE enters Stage Right brandishing a large spatula like a weapon.*)

CELESTE: That's what you said yesterday. I got three huge geraniums that are dying to be repotted and I can't do a thing with them.

J.R.: She means I can't do a thing with them.

CELESTE: That's right. J.R. can't do a thing with them.

J.R.: That's because you can kill a cactus just by looking at it.

CELESTE: Well, you're the one with the green thumb.

J.R.: Three African violets on my window sill and suddenly I'm the Plant Whisperer.

EVA: Robby, what've they got you doing today?

ROBBY: Oh, I'm over on Elm Street diggin' out that storm drain from all the debris that came in from the rain the other day.

EVA: You wanna take a look at the one in front of my place? It's all clogged up.

ROBBY (*shrugging*): If the town gives me a work order, sure.

EVA: I'll call Gil and have him get right on it.

ROBBY: He's on vacation this week.

EVA: Shoot.

ROBBY: If I get time, I'll take care of it.

EVA: Aw, love you.

ROBBY (*shy grin*): Anything for you.

(TIM enters from Stage Right. He is a handsome man in his mid-thirties, dressed casually but nicely: jeans, casual shirt, and loafers without socks. He grins as he enters. CELESTE sees him.)

CELESTE: Well, bless my soul, look who's back in town.

TIM: Hi, Celeste.

(CELESTE goes to him and embraces him.)

CELESTE: I heard you were coming home.

LARRY: Well, there you are. How's things in Tinseltown?

TIM: Glad to be outta there for a while. *(Crosses to EVA and embraces her.)* How are you?

EVA: I'm good! How long are you home for?

TIM: Two whole weeks. *(To J.R.)* Hey, J.R., great to see you. You look good.

J.R.: Thanks, you too.

TIM: Hey, Robby. *(Goes to ROBBY, they shake hands.)* How's your mom?

ROBBY: She's good. Getting better all the time.

TIM: Can I come by and see her?

ROBBY: Sure, she'd love that. She's all done with the chemo.

TIM: Great. I want to tell her that I finally made through *War and Peace*.

ROBBY: Really?

TIM: To the bitter end. And without watching the movie.

GINA: You'll be the first of her students who won't be lying when they say they read it.

TIM (*laughing*): You were the one who made me read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. I should have gotten a medal for that.

GINA: Admit it; you loved it.

TIM: Only if I imagined you as the disgraced milkmaid and I was the handsome Angel.

GINA (*gigglesnort*): In your dreams, loverboy.

(*Everyone laughs.*)

CELESTE: Tim, you're too late for breakfast and too early for lunch.

TIM: Coffee's fine. Can I join you?

LARRY: Pull up a chair.

TIM: Thanks. How's things at the shop?

LARRY: Keepin' busy. All the new cars are run by computers so I spend more time downloading software than I do changing spark plugs.

TIM: Well, next time I come home I'll drive the Mustang and you can give it a real tune-up.

LARRY: You're still driving it?

TIM: Not every day, but yeah. Best car I've ever owned.

LARRY: It should be. You bought it off of me in high school.

TIM: Which explains why it still smells like farts and Marlboros.

CELESTE: What are you working on now, Tim?

TIM: I just finished up something called *Close Cover Before Striking*. Another action flick with lots of explosions and very expensive haircuts. Should be out next summer just in time to separate a lot of eighteen to thirty-six-year-old kids from their money and juice up their testosterone. Like they need that.

EVA: Are you the star?

TIM: No, I'm the star's best friend.

J.R.: Uh oh.

TIM: Yup.

EVA: What "uh oh"?

TIM: Rule Number One of action movies: the star's best friend is doomed.

EVA: So...

TIM: Dead on page fifty-six. (*Shrug.*) It's okay. The star spends the rest of the movie avenging my death, I get paid, and I get to come home and hang out here. I've eaten in a lot of really fancy places, but I gotta tell ya, there's nothing like the home-style cooking at the Gateway Cafe. What's the lunch special, Celeste?

CELESTE: Meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans.

TIM: Better than Spago.

ROBBY: You said Rule Number One. Are there others?

TIM (*counting off on his fingers*): If there's a dog in the title, the dog has to die. If there's a fancy party scene with a swimming pool, someone's gonna get thrown in. If there's a custard pie within camera range, someone's gonna get it in the face. There's a bunch more.

GINA: The dog in *Beethoven* doesn't die.

TIM: Exception that proves the rule. *Old Yeller. Marley and Me.*

EVA: Old Yeller dies?

TIM: Oops. Spoiler alert.

EVA: I'm kidding. But I still blub up. I had a huge crush on Tommy Kirk.

CELESTE: Well, we're glad you're home. Bring your folks in tomorrow for breakfast on the house.

TIM: Will do.

(*RAY enters from Stage Right door. He is in his mid-fifties, wearing casual clothes: a button-down chambray shirt with an open collar and the sleeves rolled up, fresh jeans, and work boots. He stops once he's inside, smiles, and heads for the counter. Everyone sees him and watches him as he sits. EVA goes to him.*)

EVA: What can I get you?

RAY: How about a cup of coffee and one of those sweet rolls I've heard so much about.

EVA: Coming right up. (*To CELESTE.*) Mom, a sweet roll for the gentleman.

(*CELESTE exits to the kitchen. EVA gets a coffee mug and pours, puts the mug in front of him, slides the creamer and sugar to him and puts down a spoon and napkin. Meanwhile, LARRY, GINA, ROBBY, and TIM all look at RAY, then nod to each other as if to say, "Yeah, that's him." RAY stirs his coffee, takes a sip, smiles, and then turns to the others.*)

RAY: Morning, folks. How're you all doing?

(The group nods and offers various replies such as “Okay,” “Fine,” “Good,” “Uh huh,” all softly spoken as they return their attention to their coffee mugs and each other, all the while glancing furtively at RAY.)

RAY (*cont’d*): Nice day to get in the fresh air and sunshine and go for a drive.

LARRY (*genially*): For some of us.

ROBBY (*smiling ruefully*): Some of us have to work.

RAY: Well, yes, of course. Work’s very important.

GINA: That it is.

(Awkward silence. Then TIM looks at RAY.)

TIM: You do this a lot?

RAY: Beg pardon?

TIM: This Henry the Fifth bit. Get out and wander among “the people.”

RAY: I’m sorry?

ROBBY: He means like King Henry before the Battle of Agincourt. He dressed up like a soldier and mingled with his troops to find out what they really thought of him. Act Four, Scene 1.

RAY (*clearly impressed*): Well... Wow.

GINA: Is that what you’re doing, Governor?

RAY (*chuckling*): Ah, you caught me.

GINA: Well, your disguise almost makes it with the work-shirt and jeans, but the boots need to look like they’ve been doing some actual work.

RAY: Almost wore my fringe jacket.

J.R.: Don’t push it.

RAY: I just like to get out once in a while and see what’s going on. You know.

LARRY: That’s why you’re traveling alone? No entourage? Not even a plainclothes officer?

RAY: I trust the people of this state. After all, they elected me. You elected me.

TIM (*chuckling*): Not all of us.

(RAY looks closely at TIM. A look of recognition comes across his face.)

RAY: Oh, wow. You’re... Tim Ford. The actor.

(TIM pulls out his wallet and looks at his driver’s license.)

TIM (*to the others*): By golly, he's right. I'm Tim Ford. And yes, I've done some acting.

RAY: I've seen all your movies, and I loved that TV series you were in a while back... what was it called?

TIM: *Capitol Dome*. A soap opera rip-off of *The West Wing*. But thanks; you were one of ten who actually watched it, other than the friends and family of the cast and crew.

RAY: Well, it's an honor to have you here in our state. What brings you by? Scouting out a location for your next major motion picture?

J.R.: He's from here.

RAY: Really?

EVA: Yeah. Didn't you know that?

RAY: No, I didn't.

LARRY: His dad owns the lumber yard.

RAY: He does?

LARRY: Yeah. For, what, Tim, the last twenty-five years?

TIM: Something like that.

(*CELESTE enters from the kitchen with the sweet roll on a plate.*)

CELESTE: I was there when they had the grand opening. Cut the ribbon with a chain saw.

RAY: What a great story. Nice to see that a small-town boy can make it in the big world. (*Beat.*) Any chance my team could get in touch with you about maybe doing an event.... You and me? My re-election's coming up....

(*RAY pauses, seeing the stony looks on everyone's faces.*)

RAY (*cont'd*): I'd be very honored if you would consider...

(*Absolutely no reaction from anyone.*)

RAY (*cont'd, faintly*): I mean, this town....

CELESTE: What about this town?

RAY: Well, you voted for me.

LARRY (*to the others*): We did?

ROBBY: I didn't.

J.R.: Neither did I.

GINA: What makes you think they did?

RAY: Well, I –

TIM: Because you ran with “Make Our State Great Again” and told everyone that if they didn’t vote for you, illegal aliens were going to take away all the good jobs and married lesbians would be lined up around the block to get free abortions. Public schools were a disaster and teachers are a bunch of freeloaders.

RAY: I never said that.

TIM: You implied that.

RAY: Well, illegal immigration is a real problem. People are coming across the border and having babies. (*He looks at GINA.*) No offense.

J.R.: Oh, shit.

GINA: Say what?

RAY: Look, it’s nothing personal. I’m sure you’re...

GINA (*with a calm demeanor that belies her cold fury*): Oh, no offense taken. As a matter of fact, I’m against illegal immigration myself.

RAY: Well, there, you see –

GINA: My father’s family came to this part of the country from Spain in 1598 and have been here ever since. My mom is full-blooded Jicarilla [pronounced “Hick-a-REE-yuh”] Apache. So, my ancestors were hanging out in the plaza in Santa Fe while the “pilgrims” were trying to figure out the seating chart for the first Thanksgiving. (*Beat.*) Your ancestry is Irish, isn’t that right?

RAY (*taken aback*): Uh, yeah.

GINA: Probably came over after the potato famine, right.

RAY: Yes, but... Look, I didn’t mean...

GINA: If there’s anyone who’s an illegal immigrant here...

RAY: But we can’t just open the borders.

ROBBY: Build the wall, right?

RAY: Yes! You understand.

ROBBY: Sure. Just be sure you build it in the right place.

RAY: Of course.

J.R.: ‘Cause you never know who’s gonna sneak across, right?

RAY: Right.

ROBBY: Great! Keep building that wall down there and make ‘em pay for it. And while you’re at it, let’s go after the queers, too.

RAY: Marriage should be between a man and a woman, yes.

ROBBY: Then you’ve got me on two counts. First, my dad came here on a student visa from Canada with my mom and me – I was five – and we’ve never been back.

GINA: You’re a Dreamer.

ROBBY: That’s right. And second...

(ROBBY grins at J.R., who comes over and stands behind him, resting his hands affectionately on ROBBY’s shoulders. ROBBY pats J.R.’s hand, then they both show off their wedding rings.)

J.R.: Read us our rights, Governor. We’ll go quietly.

ROBBY: If not fashionably.

TIM: And you thought all the liberals were in Hollywood smoking weed and driving Priuses.

RAY *(turning to LARRY)*: Well, certainly you get it. I mean, you look like a man who’s had to make a living using his hands... *(To CELESTE.)* You get it. Salt of the earth, working hard to make a go of it, small business struggling to get by... *(To EVA.)* And you...waiting tables for tips and worrying about... what do you worry about?

LARRY: What the hell are you talking about? I have a masters in mechanical engineering from M.I.T. I work on cars because I’m crazy about cars. Celeste quit a lucrative law practice because she loves to cook.

GINA: Eva here made a fortune in software development in Seattle before she got tired of listening to Bill Gates drone on.

RAY *(stunned)*: Really?

EVA: I got tired of having to find places to spend all my money.

J.R.: Robby is finishing up his PhD in English literature.

ROBBY: To quote the immortal Bard, “Love looks not with the eye but with the mind, and therefore is wingéd Cupid painted blind.”

LARRY *(standing up)*: Just because we’re in a small town and we look like a bunch of dumb hicks doesn’t mean we fall for your bullshit. Your tax cuts are killing the schools and your sweetheart deals with the oil companies are killing people with their fracking.

ROBBY *(standing up)*: Our well water hasn’t been the same since they started. My mom got sick from it.

CELESTE: Post hoc ergo propter hoc. Gonna eat that sweet roll?

RAY: Hey, you can’t blame all of that on me.

ROBBY: Why the hell not? You're the one who told us it would bring jobs. Didn't tell us it was jobs at the hospital. Which, by the way, we can't afford because you're against "socialized medicine" and her state health insurance got cut off.

RAY: Well, I'm sorry but...

(They all approach him slowly.)

LARRY: But what?

(RAY looks like a cornered animal as they slowly come towards him.)

TIM: Hey, you're out among the people. You're getting it straight from the hoi polloi.

J.R.: Ahem.

TIM: Okay, directly from the hoi polloi.

CELESTE *(pointing the spatula at him)*: I'm warning you. I'd think twice about trying your "man of the people" act again or you'll be sorry.

(Tense pause as RAY looks at each one of them, reading their expressions with a growing sense of dread. Then, without warning, he bursts out laughing joyously, slapping his knees and clapping his hands. Everyone else is stunned, and they back away from him. He keeps laughing as the rest look at each other as if "What the..."? Finally, he stops and lets out a long sigh of relief.)

RAY: Oh, God! It works!

EVA *(mystified)*: What works?

RAY *(like Scrooge on Christmas morning)*: I'm on your side! On everything! Let as many immigrants in as we can take! Tear down that stupid wall! Women should have a right to choose! Black lives matter! Love is love; who cares about the bathrooms! I've been trying to stop the goddam fracking since the day I got into office and fighting with them ever since. And yes, healthcare is a right! We should all have it! Schools should be gilded palaces of learning and teachers paid six figures!

LARRY: Well then... why the hell didn't you run like that in the first place?

RAY: Because I knew if I did, I'd get beaten like hammered dog shit. All those right-wingers with their guns and pitchforks would never vote for me if I ran on what I really believe in.

ROBBY: So, all of that back there... that was just an act?

RAY: Yes! And you all fell for it. That means if I can sell you on it, it's a cinch the rest of 'em out here in the weeds will go for it.

TIM: That has got to be the most cynical thing I've ever heard of.

RAY: Coming from someone who makes a living in the movies, I'll take that as a compliment.

TIM: Touché.

CELESTE: Well, holy...

RAY: Well, friends, I'd love to sit around and chat all day, but I've got places to go and stories to tell. *(To EVA.)* Can I get that sweet roll to-go?

(EVA bags the sweet roll for RAY and he heads for the door.)

RAY: Thanks a lot, folks. It's been fun! See you on Election Day!

(RAY waves and exits Stage Right. Beat as we hear a car start up and drive off.)

LARRY: Well, if that don't beat all.

TIM: No shit.

GINA: Dios mio.

EVA: How about that.

ROBBY: Wow.

J.R.: You said it.

CELESTE: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

(Beat.)

J.R.: I've got five bucks and a Bible tract that says at this moment he's pulling in to the Ten Pin Bar and selling that crowd that first load of bullshit.

ROBBY: No bet. They'd fall for anything.

LARRY *(to GINA)*: You think he bought it?

GINA: What, your line about your masters in engineering from M.I.T.?

LARRY: I've been to Boston once.

EVA: And Gina and I took a class in Microsoft Word in high school. *(To CELESTE.)* Where'd you come up with that "post hoc ergo" whatever that was?

CELESTE: Father Webster says it all the time. It's his version of "It is what it is," I think.

GINA *(going to the door)*: Some lawyer. We'll make a Latina of you yet.

CELESTE: First get me my potting soil.

(GINA exits.)

ROBBY *(to J.R.)*: Thanks for the PhD.

J.R.: Good thing you remembered that stuff from Shakespeare.

ROBBY: Helps when your mom is your high school English teacher.

TIM: It is too bad about your mom.

ROBBY: She knew two packs a day were gonna kill her. But she's doing okay.

CELESTE: All right, you boys, break it up. We have to get ready for the lunch crowd.

LARRY: And that alternator won't install itself.

ROBBY: I got three more storm drains to muck out.

J.R.: See you at home.

(LARRY and ROBBY exit. TIM is still at the table.)

TIM: Just another day at the Gateway Cafe.

EVA: That's right. You gonna stick around for lunch?

TIM: Sure. What's the special again?

CELESTE: Meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans.

TIM: Better than Spago.

END OF PLAY.