

Home-Style Cooking at the Gateway Cafe

A Play by

Philip Middleton Williams

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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

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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.

The play is not over. To find out how it ends, contact the playwright at pmw@barkbarkwoofwoof.com.