

CORNER TABLE

A one act play by Andrew Gunn

CORNER TABLE

CHARACTERS:

Emily, female, late 30s

Joe, male, late 30s

SCENE:

A table in a bar, surrounded by the audience. The play should be performed as if overheard.

PROPS:

1x phone (Emily)

2x handbag (Emily)

3x glasses with tonic water and lime (Emily and Joe)

2x rings (Emily and Joe)

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EMILY sits at the table by herself, sips a G&T with lime, thumbs her phone.

JOE stands at the bar as the audience arrive. The play begins as he orders two G&Ts and approaches the table hesitantly.

At length Emily looks up.

JOE

Hi. Well, I know it's presumptuous, but cou—

EMILY

Do you work here?

JOE

Um, could, ah . . . Do I—?

EMILY

Bringing me a drink I didn't ask for is presumptuous. But if you're a punter you'd have to say—

JOE

A "punter" . . .

EMILY

. . . you'd have to say to yourself, "well, a woman sits by herself in a bar" . . .

JOE

Yeah, can I just—?

Joe pulls a chair, sits at the table, sets down the drinks—

EMILY

. . . in a bar, *knowing* that a woman by herself can't expect to be left alone—an anthropologist might say "we're not—

JOE

The anthropologist might say "Can I borrow some money? because I studied anthropology instead of a proper subject like . . .

EMILY

Yes.

JOE

. . . like plumbing."

EMILY

. . . the woman sits there. An astute man, who may or may not have studied anthropology, might say “that’s too good to be true”.

JOE

Did you know that plumbers . . . when they re-do your bathroom and they offer to take away the old bits of copper for you, the pipes and that . . . they sell that on, you know.

EMILY

Scandalous. I interrupted you.

JOE

Right . . . I didn’t notice.

EMILY

Your opening line.

JOE

Oh.

EMILY

“It’s presumptuous.”

JOE

Yeah, I saw you over here rationing your liquid depressant and y— well, “she’s waiting for someone” I thought, but then we passed the Half-Past the Hour, which is when people meet, isn’t it?, and then like another fifteen minutes and I thought, well, either she’s meeting someone on the hour, which is odd, and if the *woman’s* early it’s not a date, or *he’s* late or he’s not coming, in which case he’s a dick or there’s something wrong with you, or you really *are* here by yourself, in which case I thought we should have a chat.

EMILY

Too good to be true.

JOE

Are you a bitch? Is that why he’s not coming? Are you kind of a bitch? Or a drunk? Or do you nag? Are you a nagger? Nag nag nag nag nag?

EMILY

I don’t nag.

JOE

You're into antique fairs. You're a terrible cook. A racist.
A backseat driver. Do you not dance very well.

EMILY

It's a blind date.

JOE

Ah. From over there he looked like an invisible date.

EMILY

That's a good line—did you get it from a Christmas
cracker? No, he's, I think he's running . . .

JOE

. . . yeah, a bit . . .

EMILY

. . . late. So:

JOE

Well.

EMILY

. . . now you know.

JOE

Well. It's me.

EMILY

No, it's not.

JOE

Yes.

EMILY

You're . . .

JOE

Why not? Him. I'm the, your, I'm—

EMILY

Oh, you *are*. What's your name, then?

JOE

Yeah. My *real* name or the one I *gave* you?

EMILY

The one you gave me.

JOE

. . . yeah, well, if I'm *not* him, and he's not *here*, then we can have a chat until he . . .

(*looks around*)

slopes in from wherever . . .

EMILY

No, you have to . . . Nobody's going to come up to a table with a *couple*, so you have to skedaddle.

JOE

He doesn't know what you look like.

EMILY

No. My picture. Yes he does.

JOE

Your profile picture.

EMILY

But those don't, necessarily . . .

JOE

This is fertile. What's wrong with your picture? Wait. No, what's *right* with your picture but *wrong* with you?

EMILY

All right. That's very charming. Don't you think you're wasting all this effort on a lost cause?

JOE

Not . . . even if you were a homo. Besides—

EMILY

If I was "a homo"—

JOE

Besides, I can use these lines again. Just not with you.

EMILY

No, not without Rohypnol.

JOE

One if its many, ah . . .

EMILY

Anyway. I haven't said I'm waiting for a *man*.

JOE

Hm.

(takes a drink)

EMILY

So if you'll excuse me . . .

JOE

Don't think I believe you.

EMILY

That wouldn't be relevant, though, would it?

JOE

You'd have said something before now.

EMILY

You mean, to stop you making a fool of yourself?

JOE

Well—

EMILY

How long after a stranger comes up to me in a bar *should* I
avail him of—? of my sexual—

(glances around—)

JOE

Nah, you see that? You don't want to say it. That's like a
tell. I don't think you're waiting . . . Wait, did you use your
passport picture? Is that what's wrong?

EMILY

Did I—? Yes—yes, like all people on social media, I used
my *passport* photo for a prof . . . it's, all I meant, you don't
always recognise, from—

JOE

So what's *he* supposed to look like?

EMILY

He looks very small in front of Notre-Dame. But Notre-
Dame looks nice.

JOE

Mm . . . You ever go?

EMILY

On my honeymoon.

JOE

Oh. Uh, so you're actually . . .

EMILY

Not wearing a ring.

JOE

Right. Oh. All right, sorry, I just—

EMILY

Use your imagination.

JOE

Well.

EMILY

—

JOE

You mean, where's the ring? Well, I suppose there are sev—, either you're divorced, or you're a widow, or you're married and unhappy, or you've recently put on quite a bit of weight in your hands.

EMILY

Water retention.

JOE

Yes.

EMILY

No. "Married and unhappy."

JOE

Did you know that, I read this: a divorced woman over the age of forty has more chance of parallel-parking a box van and then being killed by terrorists and *then* being resurrected by the Holy Returning Christ than she has of finding, finding another—

EMILY

If I could just take those offensive remarks in *order*, do I fucking look *forty* to you?

JOE

No, I *know* you're . . . it's just something to think about in the coming years, *many* coming years, between now and that . . . that time where you're not quite a regular at the hospital but *nobody* would say you're young. And *I'm* not—happens to us *all*, *all* of—my *point*, though: what seems like an unhappy compromise now, in ten years, when you . . . did, did you want to talk about the parking thing next?

EMILY

Tell me a compromise you'd make.

JOE

Me? A com—why, do you?, what—what's th—?

EMILY

Are you swallowing your own tongue?

JOE

No . . . fine, yes, a comprom—um, you mean to avoid *unhappiness* later on.

EMILY

In the twilight years of your forties.

JOE

A compromise.

(*beat*)

I'd, I might be willing to put . . . some of my career plans to bed.

EMILY

That's boring.

JOE

Isn't *compromise* boring? I'll tell you what's boring, is insurance. Claims, claims, "I left my phone on a bus in Prague", "my car got—", you know. "My neighbour's tree". But it pays the bi—

EMILY

Would you settle for a woman.

JOE

That's one of those, that's . . . I need to somewhat fucking re-sculpt that question before I can answer it. The word "settle", for example, has to be very carefully defined. Let's take it to mean, as a *good* thing like "the dust settled", the *settlement*, the restoration of equili— or maybe "settle" like the pilgrims in the New World. All good shit, right? All very positive? Agreed?

EMILY

The woman.

JOE

So in the sense that, would I settle, would I make a life with, I think you mean . . . *a* woman rather than a hypothetical parade of *other* . . . what we're talking about is, "a bird in the hand is worth two in . . ." —no, no, *all* of those words are terrible—

EMILY

I wish you'd come over about ten years ago. Probably've been the same shit, but with the conviction of youth.

JOE

Ten years . . .

EMILY

I was in a band.

JOE

Yeah. You were in a band? Wait.

(beat)

Bass guitar. Stand there looking pretty, doing fuck all.

EMILY

Drums.

Emily takes a drink. Joe glances at her arm—

JOE

Don't know why there aren't more women drummers. Call it the "lead" guitar, but if he doesn't follow the *beat* . . .

EMILY

I just liked to make a lot of noise. I wonder if I could still arm-wrestle a man for a pint?

JOE

Drummer sets the pace like a woman, makes a *racket* . . . any argument over who's out, drummer wins from being the *loudest*.

EMILY

What were *you* doing ten years ago?

JOE

You played guitar, I would have looked at your fingernails.

EMILY

What were you doing . . . ?

JOE

I don't . . . office, something or other. No, yeah, and I was drawing a lot more. Why aren't you in a band now?

EMILY

Well, we were just fucking around, and all the gigs kind of just happened. And as soon as we took it seriously . . .

JOE

Yeah.

EMILY

Self-consciousness: the emphysema of rock. What do—?

JOE

What were you called?

EMILY

. . . if I told you, you'd look us up.

JOE

I might look you up and I can't *find* you. Wouldn't that be worse? What do you do now?

EMILY

Oh . . . now I teach music. Pre-school, you know—maracas and tambourines. So what do you draw?

JOE

Mm?

EMILY

A will, an early pension . . . ? Curtains?

JOE

You like being around the kids all day . . . ?

EMILY

Do I . . . ?

JOE

Yeah, do you like—?

EMILY

You mean, do I have any of my own.

JOE

Well.

EMILY

Isn't that the question?

JOE

Where *is* your ring?

(*beat*)

I mean . . . in your bag? . . . did you leave it in the house?

EMILY

Whenever I'm in, they hold it for me at the bar.

JOE

—

EMILY

It's in my bag.

JOE

Right. It's just a bit . . .

EMILY

It's in my *bag*.

JOE

. . . just disrespectful.

EMILY

Oh, God . . .

JOE

No, but just a bit, to the . . .

EMILY

Can we ignore . . .

JOE

. . . just, to the thing *itself*.

EMILY

The “thing itself”?

JOE

The ring, the ri— to *it*, you know? It’s not just a wedding gift or . . . an access—, it’s one of the tenants of an, of—

EMILY

Tenets. Tenets.

JOE

Of an institu— Tenets. Which, and you can say this about morality also, or the concept of . . . God, it’s one of those, it’s *evolved* into be—, it’s like, beyond us. We’re . . .

EMILY

. . . beholden—?

JOE

“Beholden” to all this, marriage and all its . . . stuff, just like we’ll always have some moral . . . , and just like we’ll eventually replace *this* God with *another* God, or a lot of dinky wee gods, or the sun, or that guy under the sea with the big fork.

EMILY

It’s in my bag. Can we just—

JOE

Fine, yes, ignore. Ignorance. Apologies. I apologise. I was just, I had a mental . . .

EMILY

Seizure?

JOE

. . . of course we don’t *know* each other and it’s not my place to—

EMILY

It’s *not* your place, whether we *know*—

JOE
I apol—look, just . . . I didn't take *mine* off, and—

EMILY
Jesus *God*.

JOE
. . . and we didn't discuss that—

EMILY
I knew you'd drop the ball. I knew you'd—

JOE
I didn't drop . . . *You* couldn't—

EMILY
The *ring*? You're sat there, stuck on the *ring*.

JOE
Well, we never discussed . . . we never discussed props.
(*beat*)
And you, with, you blew it with the *honeymoon* thing, this
Notre Dame—

EMILY
I, no, I rescued the *hell* out of that. The rules were—

JOE
The rules, I know, the r— Look. All right. Look. Why
don't we start again. We'll just start again.

EMILY
No.

JOE
We'll start again. Or we'll pick up from . . . we'll pick up
from the band thing. No, from th— what was the next—?

EMILY
No.

JOE
(*raises his arms*)
Well . . .

EMILY
You can't do it. I can't *rely* on—

JOE

You put me off. You're all over the place. You're waiting on a guy, then it's a woman, then you're in a *band* . . .

EMILY

Listen:

JOE

It's too much *pressure*.

EMILY

Listen: what were you doing over there for half an hour if you weren't coming up with a, with an act?

JOE

I was trying not to piss in my shoes. Worrying about what to say and . . .

EMILY

And "plumbers" is what you came up with.

JOE

It's been a long time since I've done this kind of . . .

EMILY

Done *what* kind of . . . ?

JOE

You know, in a *bar*, going up to some . . . some *woman* . . . *talking* . . .

EMILY

But we're . . .

(*makes a gesture for "married"*)

JOE

I *know*, but—

EMILY

Anyway, *I* was the one, back then—

JOE

You said—

EMILY

I was the one took the lead, because if I *hadn't*— and if I *don't*, nothing gets done, just sits there like an un-defrosted freezer.

JOE

Well, there you go, you know—I knew I'd fuck this up, and you knew I'd fuck it up, and I *did* fuck it up. So forget the whole thing.

(*stands*)

EMILY

Don't stand up.

JOE

Don't *tell* me not to stand—

EMILY

Don't stand up, because you don't have anywhere to go and you'll have to sit down again. People'll think you have an itch.

JOE

I don't care.

(*sits*)

Fuck me.

EMILY

I *needed* you to go along with this.

(*beat*)

Come over and . . . give me a line and buy me a drink and tell me lies about what you do and ask me about . . . don't ask me about fucking *work* or about *children* or about—

JOE

Yeah, . . .

EMILY

Objectify me. Take the lead.

JOE

(*gestures at her glass—*)

Brought you a . . .

EMILY

Problem with your imagination is, it's not connected to your inner caveman. You don't get it until it's too late. You need it *punched* into you.

JOE

I know, I—

EMILY

What I should have done is give you some competition. I *should* have made a date. Some man—or a woman, come along here, fuck up your . . . equilibrium.

JOE

What kind of . . .

EMILY

What?

JOE

No, it's—

EMILY

What kind of what?

JOE

Forget it.

EMILY

Say it.

JOE

What kind of man. Would you have brought.

EMILY

What kind of man?

JOE

If you wanted to fight my corner, what kind of—

EMILY

I don't know. Any fucking man.

JOE

Well, no, because I wouldn't be jealous if he was some big fat guy, for example.

EMILY

You might be.

JOE

Or one of those, an engineering student with fucking . . . his own twin growing out of his shoulder, and that greasy hair, and he's a vegan—and he's in a prayer group.

EMILY

Did you ev—? I don't actually know, did you ever sleep with a fat girl?

JOE

I . . . no. No, did you . . . and a jolly fat man ever . . .

EMILY

Yeah, and he knew a few things you don't know. But to answer your question, my hypothetical date would be a few inches taller than you, deep blue eyes, salt and pepper hair, clean shaven, nice strong forearms and no sense of humour.

JOE

Hm.

(beat)

Bit taller, then.

EMILY

Yes.

JOE

Going grey.

EMILY

A little.

JOE

No sense of humour . . .

EMILY

None.

JOE

Deep fucking dreamy amethyst eyes.

EMILY

Amethyst is violet.

JOE

What kind of, then—?

EMILY

Cobalt.

JOE

(rubs chin)

Fucking cobalt. And no stubble. You like my stubble.

EMILY

To look at. Not to lacerate my skin. Not between my legs like a fucking wire brush.

JOE

Some women *like* . . .

EMILY

Not *me*. And you *know*, . . . but you'd rather not *take* five minutes . . . always "something else you have to do".

JOE

All right:

EMILY

What kind of woman? If I brought along—

JOE

What kind of . . . ?

EMILY

. . . if I'd asked along a woman.

JOE

What . . . well, she's your guest, I don't know.

EMILY

What kind of woman would you like me to bring?

JOE

No, this . . .

EMILY

Just say.

JOE

I see where this . . .

EMILY

You think it's a trap.

JOE

You have form. Yes, a big fucking rusty bear-trap full of tetanus.

EMILY

I'm not offering to bring you a woman. I'm saying, if you fantasise, another woman here, what's she like?

JOE

That's irrelevant.

EMILY

To what?

JOE

To me retaining my dignity.

EMILY

My God . . . listen, that's *long* gone. Just tell me. I told you mine, you tell me yours.

JOE

(beat)

Well . . . you know, probably a redhead . . .

EMILY

A ginger girl.

JOE

But proper red hair, not that strawberry blonde shit.

EMILY

Freckles?

JOE

Mm . . . maybe subtle. No, she's got a kind of a hard face. Like . . . brittle. Just a wee bit.

EMILY

A little brittle.

JOE

Don't take the piss. And she has an accent.

EMILY

What kind of accent?

JOE

Irish is nice. Or South African. Or Danish.

(beat)

And she's cleverer than I am . . . or thick as pig shit. I can't decide.

EMILY

Those aren't mutually exclusive.

JOE

And a body like—fuck off—like a dancer. And she does yoga but she doesn't *ever* talk about it.

EMILY

What *does* she talk about? What does she do?

JOE

I don't . . . She works for the UN.

EMILY

She's a dancer for the UN.

JOE

She dances for peace.

EMILY

All right. So we're both here, me and your ginger Danish pastry—

JOE

No no no no no no—

EMILY

And you get to choose.

JOE

No no no, I get it, yeah, but your guy's here as well, Mister Cobalt with his . . .

EMILY

Fine.

JOE

Mister *Dull*, with his fucking dead-eyed humourless stare, the fucking loss adjustor, and he's—

EMILY

Fine.

JOE

. . . he's trying to get his arm around you without ruffling his pin-stripe suit or his neutral furrowed brow.

EMILY

Fine. And yours, she's on a break from her world tour . . . “grinding against landmines” or whatever . . . she's in town for the weekend. So we both get to choose.

JOE

Fine. Both get to . . . Fine. On you go, then.

EMILY

After you.

JOE

Your fella sat down first. And he's had his legs crossed since *my* girl came in.

EMILY

Let's say we both choose the other. I go home with him and you take the ginger strumpet off to some—

JOE

Go to her flat.

EMILY

. . . her flat, with an art student in one room making a chair out of hubcaps, and a bearded Euro-penis in the kitchen drinking wine, and she sneaks you in and you fuck each other until you can't tell who's inside who and you're just a big fleshy heap of sweat and come. You do *everything*.

JOE

Jesus.

EMILY

And I go home and this guy takes charge, he pays *attention* and he's firm, not gentle, and God, I can just relax because he reads my *body*, he doesn't need a translation.

JOE

Jesus.

EMILY

So then what happens?

JOE

After . . .

EMILY

Afterwards.

JOE

I don't know. Does he defrost the freezer? He calls the council about that couch on the pavement? I don't know, I'm still in that room with the girl. Give me a minute.

EMILY

We have our affairs. The guy on the street making eyes at me, some woman you see on the bus. Then what?

JOE

Well, I can't . . . I know I can't stay with the yoga lady.

EMILY

She's very bendy.

JOE

She is.

EMILY

She's bendier than I am. And she wouldn't *nag* you. She wouldn't nag you to shave.

JOE

She lets me organise my side of the desk. She doesn't "help" me with my driving.

EMILY

Probably doesn't know how.

JOE

But we'd have to go through the whole—fuck that, "getting to know you" again . . . probably allergic to things, and she doesn't . . . she doesn't like to sleep in or get up at midnight and eat bacon sandwiches in bed, she doesn't always find me the perfect tie . . . and we don't have all the memories. We don't have, remember the Chinese lantern?, and, and spider-geddon . . .

EMILY

I remem—, I never saw you *move* so fast . . . I thought we called it "spider-gate" though.

JOE

No, we agreed on "spider-geddon" due to the overuse of "gate". And, and remember when I tried to fucking draw you?

EMILY

I looked like a melting snowman with hair.

JOE

But what happens to you, do you, does that guy move into the house or what? Do you domesticate the poor guy?

EMILY

He doesn't make me laugh.

JOE

Probably doesn't get crumbs all over the bed, though.

EMILY

Well, no.

JOE

He's too busy exploring your uncharted erogenous zones with those dextrous croupier's hands of his.

EMILY

I don't like him any more. Because I'm capricious. And he doesn't leave me little cartoons in my bag.

JOE

I haven't done one of those in a while.

EMILY

But you might start again. And you might start showing a bit more passion for your ambitions—for your drawing, not for the day job.

(takes a drink)

JOE

Look: Emily:

EMILY

Don't . . .

JOE

Listen,—

EMILY

Don't tell me you love me. Joe. I know you love me. I don't want you to say you love me. I want you to say you *want* me.

JOE

I do.

EMILY

I want you to *lust* after me.

JOE

I do. It's just . . . easier with a stranger. It's just easier. It's, there's no effort. A crush . . . some girl on the bus, a guy on the street looks your way . . . it's a daydream.

Joe sits back, looks at Emily. Emily lifts her bag into her lap, opens it, finds her ring and screws it onto her finger.

Joe stands, moves around the table.

JOE

Hi. I was over there at the table in the corner, I was watching. And, ah . . . I was just watching and I thought, "I have to *have* her". And I could have her. I know how. A campaign of repartée, suggestive doodle on a napkin . . .

EMILY

A face like a baby's arse.

JOE

Well. I don't know you. But just, you look just like . . . you look just like all the women I missed my chance with. You look just like a promise. And I want *you*.

(stands)

Let's go. Come on, let's go.

Emily stands. Joe takes her hand.

EMILY

What if we have to do this every week?

JOE

Then we'll do it every week. Come on.

EMILY

. . . I'll be out in a second. Find us a cab.

Joe smiles and walks out. Emily waits by the table for a long moment.

Then she walks out after Joe.

APPENDIX: ALTERNATE DIALOGUE

Joe's description of his fantasy woman should be in contrast to Emily. Therefore if the actor playing Emily is has red hair, the following dialogue replaces the section on pages 18-20.

JOE

(beat)

Well . . . you know, probably a blonde . . .

EMILY

How original.

JOE

But a real one, none of that peroxide . . .

EMILY

Collar and cuffs, you mean.

JOE

No. Yes. And a bit . . . distant. A Hitchcock blonde.

EMILY

Icy and interchangeable.

JOE

And she has an accent.

EMILY

What kind of accent?

JOE

Irish is nice. Or South African. Or Danish.

(beat)

And she's cleverer than I am . . . or thick as pig shit. I can't decide.

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What *does* she talk about? What does she do?

JOE

I don't . . . She works for the UN.

EMILY

She's a dancer for the UN.

JOE

She dances for peace.

EMILY

All right. So we're both here, me and your icy Danish pastry with the custard-colour hair—

JOE

No no no no no no—

EMILY

And you get to choose.

JOE

No no no, I get it, yeah, but your guy's here as well, Mister Cobalt with his . . .

EMILY

Fine.

JOE

Mister *Dull*, with his fucking dead-eyed humourless stare, the fucking loss adjustor, and he's—

EMILY

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JOE

. . . he's trying to get his arm around you without ruffling his pin-stripe suit or his neutral furrowed brow.

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After you.

JOE

Your fella sat down first. And I tell you, he's had his legs crossed since *my* girl came in.

EMILY

Let's say we both choose the other. I go home with him and you take the blonde bombshell off to some—

JOE

Go to her flat.
