

The Flat and The Spare

Seven Short Plays

By

Sean Murphy

THE FLAT AND THE SPARE

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THE FLAT AND THE SPARE

*The Flat and The Spare is dedicated to
the performing troupes
who will author its final drafts.*

*To Glenn Apollo Hergenbahn-Zhao,
and the creative community known as Idiom Theater,
for 22 years of prolific welcome and support
generously invested in developing writers.*

*And, to Lisa Scheff,
whose words, ideas, point of view and humor
masquerade on these pages as though they were mine.
You are half of my brain
and all of your own.*

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Memory Is a Thief was originally produced at Idiom Theater in Bellingham, Washington, with Oliver Ross directing and the following cast:

Conrad - Sandy Brewer
Whalen - Devin Champlin

Memory Is a Thief received its 2nd production at Magnetic Theater in Asheville, North Carolina with Katie Jones directing and the following cast:

Conrad - David Hopes
Whalen - Jesse Barley

Nightmare Burger was originally produced at Idiom Theater in Bellingham, Washington, with Glenn Apollo Hergenbahn-Zhao directing and the following cast:

Chaz Burger - Sandy Brewer
Ellis D. Nightmare - Glenn Apollo Hergenbahn-Zhao

Water On The Brain was originally produced at Idiom Theater in Bellingham, Washington with Brendan La Botz directing and the following cast:

Mom - Krissa Woiwod
Bob - Brian Elvin
Walter - Woody Ciskowski
Shirley - Shu-Ling Hergenbahn-Zhao

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Production Note

Hew to the heart of the play but don't let it master you. If you don't have a fiddle, use a squeeze box, a penny whistle or whatever works. If you think your line reading is better than the one in the stage direction, scratch out the stage direction and use your own. If you have to cut lines, or shuffle the order, cut and shuffle. If there is an opportunity to insert an in joke or regional reference that will delight your audience with a sense of inclusion, insert and include. Plays like to be interpreted. It is not the performing company's fault if a play is not durable enough to suffer handling.

Note on Punctuation

Diction to the playwright; cadence to the players. Question and exclamation marks do not appear in the text, except in the case of Chaz's drum solo. Where they are not, they can be added at performing troupe's discretion, or in the case of Chaz's drum solo, deleted.

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STUPID

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Alex: A gender-queer presenting young adult.
They are barefoot or wearing slippers and
dressed in institutional patient's clothing.

Dane: A cisgendered presenting young adult. They
are dressed for a professional interview.

SCENE

There is a chain link fence between Alex and Dane. Dane is changing a flat tire.

TIME

The cycles have paused, and something needs patching before Dane and Alex continue on their way. If Dane were to drive off, alone, with the tire still flat, we would hear the sound of slack rubber slapping against the road - just as the tire sounded against the road as Dane pulled the car to the shoulder, before the play began - like a voice in one's head saying over and over: "stupid . . . stupid . . . stupid . . ."

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STUPID

DANE loosens bolt. ALEX watches unseen.

DANE. This is going to work. I'm going to be on time. If I can just get this flat tire off, putting on the spare is the easy part. And, I can do it. I can do it. Positive thinking is the most powerful force in the universe. I'm not going to get the job. I don't even want the job. But I am going to make it to the fucking interview. I'm going to make it to the interview. Take that negativity. (*Wrench slips out of DANE's hands.*) Oh, fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck you. Fuck you, Dad. I can just hear you now. "Rule number one, be on time. Rule number two, be on time. Rule number three, be on time."

ALEX. "Lefty Lucy. Tightie-Whities. A penny saved is a lightning hazard."

DANE. Oh my god. What the fuck.

ALEX. "Fifteen minutes early is an hour late." That's what my dad would say.

DANE. You've just been standing there.

ALEX. Do you have a cigarette. Standing. Looking.

DANE. At me leaning over to work on my flat tire.

ALEX. Well, I could tell you had a pretty face. Even if I couldn't see it. And, I've already seen everybody on this side of the fence. You look good, now that you've turned around. You look good. What's the matter with that. (*Pause.*) What is the matter.

DANE. You don't know what my dad is like.

ALEX. I bet I do.

DANE. My dad arranged this interview, but I'm not qualified. If I just make it there on time. He'll only be able to say: "Well, you did your best." And that will be bad enough. But. He won't be able to say: "Well, Dane, Triple A only costs seven dollars and fifty cents a month." Or: "What I would do next time, Dane, is plan on getting there an hour early with a thermos of hot coffee and the Sunday crossword."

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ALEX. Your dad is old, huh. Well, Dane. What if you show up and your shirt is all greasy from changing a tire. Will that get back to your dad. What will he say then.

DANE. What.

ALEX. I'm Alex, by the way.

DANE. Don't even kid. Is it bad.

ALEX. Take it off and have a look.

DANE. Oh. You'd like that. *(Dane removes and inspects shirt.)* It's fine.

ALEX. Everything I see is. Fine.

DANE. You can't be for real.

ALEX. You can't afford to get any of those nice clothes messed up. Take off the rest. Don't be shy. I've seen you without your shirt already. Come on. Then we'll both be in our jammies.

DANE. I can't stand here by the side of the road changing a flat in nothing but my underwear.

ALEX. You got nothing to be ashamed of.

DANE. Because. *(Gestures at self.)* Fine, right.

ALEX. I'm fucking with you. *(Alex takes off top & throws it over fence.)* You can have my jammies. They'll give me new ones. *(Alex takes off bottoms & throws them over fence.)*

DANE. I don't want to get you in trouble.

ALEX. I need so much help staying out of trouble, Dane. So much help. Let's just focus on you right now.

DANE. Um.

ALEX. Come on, buttercup. We are going to get you to that interview on time. Your dad's not going to say a word.

DANE. *(Dane brings Alex a cigarette, still half dressed.)* Thank you.

ALEX. Isn't there something else you want to tell me. *(Gestures at self.)*

DANE. Yes. Everything I see is. Fine. *(Alex curtsies. Dane lights cigarette through fence.)*

ALEX. You're going to get arrested for indecent exposure.

DANE. What happened to your wrist.

ALEX. Go change your tire.

DANE. *(Dane dresses. Begins working on tire again.)* I'm sorry. That was

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stupid.

ALEX. Oh, you're stupid is just a drop in the bucket. My parents think I'm crazy.

DANE. Your parents put you in there because . . .

ALEX. They're not allowed to give you electro-shock just because you're queer. Not anymore. Is that still a thing. Please tell me that is not still a thing. I'm in here because people are stupid. OK.

DANE. I'm stupid. Stupid. So stupid.

ALEX. I'm not calling you stupid. That's your dad, huh.

DANE. I just have to get these bolts off. See. Here. That's the last one. You don't have to be nice to me. I'm sorry. I didn't think. I'll just put this last bolt here with the other three, and I'll get this wheel off. And. No. I am stupid. Stupid stupid stupid.

ALEX. What.

DANE. I knocked all four bolts down the sewer grating. Oh god. I never do anything right. Stupid. When he finds out that I cancelled my Triple A. That's a good twenty minutes. I mean each time I see him now for the rest of my life. Twenty minutes about how he is going to have to take care of me for the rest of his life. I don't even want this job. I'm not qualified for it. I'm not qualified for anything. I'm qualified to do this. I'm qualified to fuck things up.

ALEX. At least you're still on the outside.

DANE. *(Laughing)* What. Is that where you think I'm heading. In there with you. You're . . . *(Stops laughing.)* Sorry. Stupid. You're having such a worse time than me. I shouldn't laugh.

ALEX. You make me wish I was out there with you. In the wild. You know what is really going to make you laugh.

DANE. I don't.

ALEX. Take one bolt off of each of the other wheels. Then use those three bolts to put the spare tire on.

DANE. Will that work.

ALEX. They didn't put me in here because I'm stupid.

DANE. I don't think that's true.

ALEX. Don't get sappy. Get your tire changed. Prove your dad wrong.

DANE. You can't prove anything to my father. *(As Dane speaks, the flat*

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tire is removed, and perhaps the spare is put in place unbolted. At some point Dane hugs or holds either the flat or the spare at chest level while directly addressing Alex, so we see that at this moment the wheel of life, the wheel of mortality and eternity, hovers between their two hearts.)

Nobody is ever this nice to me. You're really nice. Even if you do have a smart mouth. I'm sorry people are stupid. I'm sorry you hurt yourself. That you got hurt. You look fine. Just fine. I bet when you're on the outside - I mean, you look good now. Without your clothes on. But, I bet you look good when you're dressed to go out. I bet you dress up sharp.

ALEX. Sharp enough to pop a tire. *(Perhaps Dane and Alex share a cigarette through the fence.)* You know this is only a 48-hour thing.

DANE. I thought that was just the flu.

ALEX. The psychiatric hold. If you try to kill yourself, they put you in here for 48 hours.

DANE. What then.

ALEX. Give you a bottle of pills and let you go.

DANE. Like a trout.

ALEX. You don't look like someone who fishes. Someone who fishes would be able to change a tire.

DANE. Am I not.

ALEX. Changing a tire. You're talking to me and your hands are empty. That's what I see. Don't you care what your dad thinks.

DANE. It's not something I can change.

ALEX. You couldn't get the job he picked out for you if you tried.

DANE. No I couldn't.

ALEX. I think everybody would prefer you did a job you were more suited for.

DANE. Not my dad. *(Long pause.)* Here. You take my clothes.

ALEX. Your clothes.

DANE. Take them.

ALEX. That look is so not me. You get that, right. Your clothes are not going to fit through the holes in this fence. You've got to throw them up and over, what are you doing.

DANE. I'm giving you my clothes. You helped me out. Now I'm helping you out. All the way out. They'll think you're a doctor or a visitor or

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something. You can walk out right through the front door.

ALEX. And you're going to be my getaway driver. I'm glad to see you've thought this all the way through. *(Pause.)* My dad reads the death notices first thing every morning. He gets the paper and reads them with his toast and coffee.

DANE. That's creepy. Because . . .

ALEX. Not because of me. I used to think it was creepy. Starting the day thinking about dying. But . . . It was just dad and me in the mornings, and after he left for work, I'd go sit in his chair. Smell the aftershave. Drink the last half inch of coffee left in his cup. And I'd read the obituaries. It gets to you. In a good way. Seeing the people. Reading the stories. It makes it easier to make decisions. You hear a clock ticking. Every decision is important. Every good thing feels better, and the bad things hurt less.

DANE. Then why . . .

ALEX. It felt like I was going to die if didn't get somebody's attention. And I wanted to live. If I wanted to die, I could have done it. I mean. I could have found a better way. I don't think I really could - Do you know what life insurance residuals are. A life insurance agent sells a policy to someone, they get monthly commissions. Maybe for the rest of that person's life. Which, for the person who bought the policy - well, you're both hoping that's a long time.

DANE. Your dad sells insurance.

ALEX. That's all there is to it. It's like seeing your song fall off the charts. Seeing a policy holder's name in the obituaries. If you were a songwriter instead of an insurance agent. I guess. No more residual checks coming in. That's all. It wasn't a life affirming ritual or anything.

DANE. Not for him. *(Alex & Dane touch or kiss.)*

END OF PLAY

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MEMORY IS A THIEF

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Conrad: Older. Has been living on the streets a long time.

Whalen: Younger. The personification of a memory of violence that haunts Conrad like a melody stuck in the head.

SCENE

Underneath a bridge on a rainy night.

TIME

Refuses to pass.

MEMORY IS A THIEF

CONRAD and WHALEN shelter under a bridge on a rainy night. Conrad sits on discarded couch in front of wooden crate illuminated by candle. They slowly and methodically take pills one at a time out of various prescription bottles, swallowing each with a sip from a can of Budweiser. Whalen lurks in shadow, playing Conversation with Death on a fiddle, perhaps singing the words.

CONRAD. *(Yelling) Ghost. (Whalen continues playing. Conrad takes more pills.) Stupid ghost. (Whalen continues playing. Conrad takes more pills. Raising voice) You're not funny. I'm not laughing. (Whalen stops playing.) Are you real. I thought I was imagining you. Don't lurk. If you're real, come out. (Whalen approaches.) You are real. Well, don't fiddle around then. Come over here and get dry. I won't bite. You're not really a ghost are you. (Gestures at couch.) You picked a bad night to be out busking. (Whalen takes seat on couch as far away as possible.) That's good. You stay over there. I don't want you to get too close to me either. One beer. One beer a night. Who the hell can get a wink of sleep out on the street without at least one beer. (Conrad passes Whalen a beer. Whalen puts it in pocket, stands up.) I'd feel safer, if you stayed for a while. After the pills, I drift off. Just keep an eye on me for a while. I paid for your fiddle music, didn't I. You're going to keep that beer. You know it will help you sleep. (Whalen looks toward the shadows.) You might be a ghost, huh. You don't talk. Play something, though. You play good. (Whalen plays a lullaby.) Kiki. Kiki's gone. You don't know. You're new around here. I could sleep when Kiki was here. If you don't want people to take your stuff. Get a dog. (Conrad drifts off. Whalen stops playing, watches, moves next to Conrad, who wakes briefly.) You're a very gentle person,*

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aren't you. (*Whalen waits to be sure Conrad is asleep again before quietly searching Conrad's backpack and pocketing a handful of bills.*) I can't ever sleep more than a few minutes at a time. These pills are supposed to help me stay asleep. But, I can't take those. If I took those, I would be dead to the world for hours. They'd rob me blind. Don't trust anybody out here on the street. Get a dog. You can trust a dog. (*Pause.*) I grew up in a nice house, you know. Up on the west side. My father was a doctor.

WHALEN. Bad things happen in nice houses.

CONRAD. Yeah.

WHALEN. I can't sleep indoors, can you.

CONRAD. No. Anything can happen behind a closed door. I like to be out here where everybody can see what's going on.

WHALEN. It's easier to trust ten people than it is to trust one.

CONRAD. When was the last time you ate. (*Conrad takes bread, etc. out of bag and makes Whalen a sandwich.*) Look at this. Oatmeal bread. (*Using squeeze packet*) Mayonnaise. A slice of swiss cheese. Some green olives. (*Using pepper packets*) And pepper. You gotta have pepper. You keep looking at me like I'm the Christmas goose. Eat. Drink that beer. (*Whalen takes sandwich, perhaps eats it, perhaps drinks beer. Conrad sings, beginning to fall back asleep.*)

Pretty Susie she came by
With a book under her arm
she walked up to her true love's grave
And she began to charm
She charmed the fish out of the sea
And the birds out of their nests
She charmed her true love out of his grave
So he could no longer rest
Will you go to the rolling of the stones
Or the dancing of the ball.
Or will you go and see pretty Susie
And dance among them all

(Conrad falls asleep. Whalen cautiously continues search of Conrad 's

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belongings, taking what is valuable. Whalen collects fiddle and readies to leave, stopping first to tuck blanket for Conrad.)

CONRAD. Stupid ghost. I still see it, you know.

WHALEN. Who is it. Who do you see.

CONRAD. My little brother. You look like him.

WHALEN. I look like a lot of people. Who hurt him.

CONRAD. Our dad.

WHALEN. The doctor.

CONRAD. I just want it to be over. But, he won't stay dead. Jimmy won't stay dead.

WHALEN. How long has it been.

CONRAD. 50 years.

WHALEN. Try to sleep. I'll play again. *(Whalen plays.)*

END OF PLAY

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DO NOT TOUCH

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sunny: The orange warmth of fire.
Winter: The grey mystery of smoke.
Love: Omnipresent and omniscient.

Scene

The characters are sometimes in Winter's world, sometimes in the arms of love, and sometimes in a small apartment. In Winter's world images speak louder than words. A monster made of eyes and hands lives in Winter's world.

Time

Time falls away.

DO NOT TOUCH

The first verse of Imagination, by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke, is heard: “Imagination is funny, It makes a cloudy day sunny, It makes a bee think of honey, Just as I think of you.” The tempo and mood is languid and ruminative, around 111 BPM, timing out so that the verse ends and an instrumental bridge begins near the 50 second mark. Ideally, the song is sung live by LOVE and accompanied by a small combo. Love, if not singing, awaits their monologue unobtrusively. While music plays, SUNNY and WINTER indicate through silent action, which may include dressing the set with props or set pieces, that they are young lovers moving in to a new apartment. Perhaps they dance. The apartment is small, and maybe it is the first time either has shared a home with a romantic partner. Winter loses focus in a box of photographs, Sunny does most of the lifting and moving in. They settle by each other’s side, and as an instrumental interlude begins, Winter draws in a sketchbook and Sunny begins writing, speaking the words aloud.

SUNNY. Hi, Winter it’s me. It’s so nice just to be here next to you. I know you like to be quiet and draw. I’ll just babble to you in my journal. I want to ask you if you feel it too. When you touch me, I know I am home. I know that wherever your body is, I am home. Wherever your body is because, who knows where your mind goes. Always in your sketchbook. Far away. Lost in the music.

Winter wanders different worlds,
appearing here from time to time,
rising like a spotted orange koi
through slimy green pond scum, sometimes
leaving only ripples in jet wet,
bubbles on the surface quivering
sinking once more below the lilies
to root in muck for more dark beauty.

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Winter sing together, though perhaps rather poorly. They sing the song lyrics which appear as dialog below, singing them as though they were singing along with Sweet Caroline in their earbuds. As they sing Sunny grabs Winter's hand, holding it tightly. Winter struggles. Sunny has eyes closed and sways to music, oblivious. Winter freezes, pauses in discomfort, pulls free, steps away. Sunny remains oblivious.)

SUNNY & WINTER. Hands. Touching Hands. Reaching out. Touching me. Touching you.

LOVE. Love is here. Love will listen. You can talk.

WINTER. It feels wrong. I know it should feel right.

LOVE. What feels wrong.

WINTER. Answering questions.

LOVE. Then don't answer.

WINTER. Being told what to do.

LOVE. I'll be quiet.

WINTER. Being closed in on by people who want to help. *(Love recedes. Winter stares into a mirror the audience can't see. Sunny approaches. Winter sees things beyond the mirror, is barely aware of present time and place.)*

SUNNY. Winter. Baby. Can you hear me. You've been standing at that mirror a long time. You left the kettle on the stove. Is everything ok. Can you hear me. Don't hurt your face. *(Winter grabs Sunny's hand too hard.)*

WINTER. *(Sometimes addressing Sunny)* I'm in the bathroom, ok. Can't I be alone. Can't you just let me be alone. I'm in the bathroom. Why don't you smile. Nothing's ever right. I'm in the bathroom. Can you see me. I'm in the bathroom. Stop staring.

SUNNY. I'm not like that. Let me go and I'll smile. Winter it's Sunny. It's Sunny. *(Spell is broken. Sunny is set free. Love approaches. Comforts Winter with touch, when/ if given permission.)*

LOVE. The song is in your head. Is it ok if I touch you. This is Love. Do you feel me. *(Winter shakes head.)* Tell me what you feel. Feel it. Feel your body. Before. You. Think. There, there. There is a there there. There is a "there there." This is real. Now is real. You can tell me if you want to.

WINTER. It comes in the dark and moves fast. Too fast. And then everything slows down and you see it. *(Masks, costumes and/or puppetry*

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depict a monster made of grasping hands and dead eyes. If the hands are lifted, they reveal a springing cobra. Monster lumbers, looms with menace, and at times, rushes forward, revealing hidden cobra.) It doesn't see you. Smells. Empty. Crawling. Can't. Glue. Paperweight. Stop. Like a dog sniffing a corpse. Hands. Dead eyes. Touching. Hands. Smells. Crawling spider fingers. Reaching out. Touching me. But nothing touches you. Nothing is touching you. The eyes are dead. *(Love comes to Winter. Sunny comes to Winter. Winter's hands are raised defensively in position of military surrender. Love and Sunny let Winter take their hands.)*

LOVE. Love is here.

SUNNY. So is Sunny. I'm here too.

WINTER. I'm sorry.

SUNNY. It's ok, now. Will you hold me. *(Pause. Perhaps a touch. Perhaps no close embrace.)* What is it.

LOVE. Love treads gently. Do you want to tell.

WINTER. It feels bad when you touch me.

LOVE. When Sunny touches you.

WINTER. When anybody touches me. *(Sunny reaches out to comfort Winter, then stops.)* No. It feels good. When it is you, it feels good too. *(Sunny touches Winter.)*

SUNNY. Are you happy we moved in together.

WINTER. It's what I want. But it feels bad. A little. A lot. Sometimes.

SUNNY. Then how do you know what you want.

WINTER. I don't know anything. Maybe this is a bad idea. I just guess at things. I don't understand them. Maybe I am not supposed to have a home. Maybe we shouldn't.

SUNNY. It's the only idea I have, Winter. I know this is the only home you have. I want to be your home. I like that you don't understand things the same way other people do. The same way that I do. I want to know what I don't know. I want to know you. You're a good guesser. I want to be a good guesser too.

WINTER. I'm here now.

LOVE. Love is here. Love is gentle.

WINTER. I'm here now.

LOVE. The story has a happy ending. Sunny loves you. *(Sunny and Love*

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embrace. They sway and sing the instrumental hook from Sweet Caroline. Combo joins in and continues to vamp on the hook under dialog. Winter cries and/or laughs.)

WINTER. No. No. Don't do it. I hate you. Please don't. I won't yell anymore. I promise. I'll help with the moving more, next time. Don't do it.

LOVE. You're going to take your medicine. You're going to be happy whether you like it or not. You scared Sunny.

SUNNY. It's true. You did.

LOVE. For Sunny. Sunny is good for you.

SUNNY. You are the one who put it on the mix tape.

WINTER. You bastards.

LOVE. *(To audience)* Should we sing the song. What do you think.

WINTER. No. Please. No.

SUNNY. Yeah. What do you think. *(Hopefully, audience shouts no.)*

LOVE. Ok. You asked for it. *(Counting to the tempo of Sweet Caroline)*

One. Two. Three. Four. *(At a significantly faster tempo, around 130 BPM, Love and combo perform a single verse of Sunny by Bobby Hebb, ending with a repetition or two of the last line, "I love you." Sunny & Winter do the Frug.)*

Sunny, yesterday my life
was filled with rain.
Sunny, you smiled at me and
really eased my pain.
The dark days are gone,
and the bright days are here.
My Sunny one shines so sincere.
Sunny one so true, I love you.
I love you."

(Alternatively, play ends with a blackout.)

END OF PLAY

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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