

THE POTATO CHIP EATERS

(inspired by Van Gogh's THE POTATO EATERS)

by Adam Webster

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(inspired by Van Gogh's THE POTATO EATERS)

CHARACTERS: FATHER – Man, 40s-50s; real go-getter
WIFE – Woman, 40s; real homemaker
DAUGHTER – Girl, 18; real slacker

[In black we hear the ending 5-10 seconds of what sounds like a typical 1950s sit-com riff. Then almost inaudible commercials or other programming underscore the lights coming up on living room, consisting of 2 chairs (or one chair and a couch) and a coffee table. DAUGHTER, 12-18 sits center facing straight out watching TV, which can be signified by her having a remote. She eats from a bag of potato chips absent-mindedly. FATHER, mid-40s/early 50s enters. He has a briefcase and wears a shirt and tie and a hat.]

FATHER

Honey! I'm home.

[He is immediately struck by the absurdity of having said this. Shakes his head and reproaches himself, for being silly. He hangs his hat up and places his briefcase down. He grabs the pile of mail, enters into the living room, and sits down. He looks through mail.]

FATHER

Bill (rips open, tosses on table); bill (rips open, tosses on table); Visa card (rips open, tosses on table); Insurance (rips open, tosses on table); "You could be a winner"; "Carpet cleaning \$39.95 four rooms"; "Windows professionally installed, \$159 per"; "Lowest rates ever – refinance today!" LL Bean, Red Envelope, Harry and David, DVD Direct, [add as many direct mail catalogues as you desire – the list should be embarrassingly long. He pauses and flips through, with interest, some of them.]

DAUGHTER

Hi, Dad.

FATHER

(looks directly at her; taken aback at having been addressed; a genuine inquiry) Huh?

[She reproaches herself just as FATHER did upon entering.]

DAUGHTER

Sorry.

[FATHER goes back to the catalogs; flipping through some. MOTHER, early 40s, enters from the kitchen; she is wearing an apron. During the following exchanges, unless otherwise noted, the responder does not look at the person when answering; it is done distractedly.]

WIFE

Hi, honey.

HUSBAND

Huh?

WIFE

Sorry.

HUSBAND

(to daughter) Watcha watchin'?

DAUGHTER

Huh?

HUSBAND

Sorry.

WIFE:

“Clown Chronicles.”

HUSBAND

Huh?

DAUGHTER

(irritated) TV.

HUSBAND

Oh! [turns to MOTHER] Dinner?

[MOTHER takes a plethora of takeout menus from her apron and flays them like playing cards. FATHER closes his eyes, scans his finger over them back and forth and settles on one; opens his eyes, and plucks it from the stack. Looks at it, shrugs: it's acceptable, but not great. Hands it back to her. She goes to the entryway, to the phone table. Picks it up. Hits a speed memory dial#]

MOTHER:

Phil? Donna. Right. 45 minutes? Great. Will do. Charge. Yes, the one on file.

[As she hangs up, theme music starts. MOTHER and FATHER slowly turn and stare at the TV.]

VOICEOVER:

The Clown Chronicles. This week's episode: “Doctored Expectations.”

[Lights fade into TV lights. DAUGHTER watches, transfixed, munching chips. Turns up volume. MOTHER gets into a white lab coat, grabs a clipboard or notebook and sits in the chair, she is the DOCTOR; FATHER lays back on either couch or coffee table, he is the PATIENT. At some point DAUGHTER will leave to become the CLOWN.]

PATIENT

(weary and frazzled) Well, doc. Can I call you doc?

DOCTOR

You've been calling me Doc for three years.

PATIENT

And it's, it's still okay?

DOCTOR

Yes.

PATIENT

Okay. Well, doc. You said it was okay, so, okay. I have made progress. I now think if the glass as half full instead of half empty.

DOCTOR

That's great!

PATIENT

But I think it's contaminated, so, I'm not really sure that that's progress.

DOCTOR

Well...

PATIENT

You see, I'm not dwelling on what I don't have...

DOCTOR

It's just that what you do have...

PATIENT

Sucks. Yes.

DOCTOR

Yeah, well, that's still a problem, then.

PATIENT

Yeah. I thought so.

[DAUGHTER, having run out of chips, gets up and exits to get more; at this time, she changes into CLOWN, offstage.]

PATIENT (cont.)

A lateral move, then?

DOCTOR

No, I think you've actually regressed.

PATIENT

That sucks. I mean, it's good I've gone somewhere, but where I've gone, sucks.

DOCTOR

Yeah. (gets an idea) But I think I have just the trick.

[DOCTOR rises, crosses to the closet, door opens center stage so that the PATIENT cannot see in. Inside, there is a CLOWN, signified by something as simple as a nose and wig.]

PATIENT

It's not a clown, is it?

DOCTOR

What? Oh, nooooo. Noooo. Not a clown. It's an accountant.

[CLOWN steps out of closet, arms outstretched, smiley. He holds a 10-key.]

PATIENT

(pointing) Okay! That's a clown!

DOCTOR

This? Nooooo. He's an accountant.

PATIENT

That. Is not. An accountant. I know a clown when I see a clown.

DOCTOR

But do you know an accountant when you see an accountant?

PATIENT

(pointing) That is a clown!

DOCTOR

(angry, pointed, but calm, controlled) Do you know an accountant when you see an accountant?

[PATIENT sighs, rolls his eyes, sits back down. Folds his arms. Resigned to dislike this "accountant."]

DOCTOR

(overly enthusiastic) He has a 10-key! How many clowns have a 10-key.

PATIENT

(deadpan) One.

[DOCTOR stares at him. Dismisses him. Starts "acting" in a horrific children's theatre style for PATIENT's benefit.]

DOCTOR

Oh my god! I haven't done my taxes! [Notices CLOWN, as if for the first time.] Can you help me do my taxes?

[CLOWN pulls out horn and honks twice as he nods emphatically. Taps 10-key twice and waits for next instruction. DOCTOR shoves a bunch of disheveled papers (the bills from FATHER's mail) in front of the clown, who attacks them and scours over them emphatically, like a squirrel. He puts his finger up in the air, "Eureka!"-style. Finished with that "stage," he starts punching his 10-key. After five or so additions, he looks at total, then back at papers. Concerned, he advances roll of 10-key paper up a few inches to scrutinize the figures. Double take. Back to tax papers. He manually pulls the 10-key roll, hand over hand. As he continues to unravel the roll of paper, and it spins out, he looks around at PATIENT and DOCTOR, playfully bewildered. Huge grin. The paper seems to be advancing itself! The CLOWN is not in control of it; Why it is control of him! PATIENT starts to grin, then chuckle, then laugh. CLOWN continues to feed the paper out hand over hand; when the paper is completely unraveled, he keeps going, feeding air instead of paper. When he looks back at his hands and notices this, he stops. Bewildered. He honks his horn twice. PATIENT is rolling with laughter now, tears coming down his face. DOCTOR has become mortified.]

DOCTOR

(to CLOWN) Stop! Stop it right there! (to PATIENT) You know, I think you're right. (to CLOWN) You're not an accountant.

[CLOWN honks the horn. It is a sad, depressed honk. She hangs her head and shakes it. She rubs her cheeks, as though she is crying. When she raises her head, we see she has drawn on a teardrop.]

PATIENT

But, doc...

DOCTOR

Don't call me that! Don't EVER call me that!

PATIENT

Not... doc?

DOCTOR

No. Have some decorum for Christ's sake! I am a professional. Which is more than I can say for this... this... Animal!

PATIENT

Doc-tor?

DOCTOR

(wheels around as though this is the first time he has been addressed) Yes?

PATIENT

The glass. It was half full.

DOCTOR

Yes?

PATIENT

Yes.

DOCTOR:

(discrediting; reminding) But, contaminated.

PATIENT:

No.

DOCTOR:

(disbelief) No?

PATIENT

No.

DOCTOR

(dismissively) Good. You're cured!

[BEAT]

PATIENT

Oh! (tentatively) Then why are you so mad?

DOCTOR

I just figured out why I haven't gotten a return for the past five years.

[CLOWN honks horn. Regular honk. Looks sheepish.]

PATIENT

(incredulous) You hired this clown?!

DOCTOR:

That's not a clown. [Storms over to CLOWN and pulls off whatever minimal costume piece is used.] That's a monkey!

[MONKEY honks horn, runs around set, chased by DOCTOR. CLOWN/MONKEY runs off, followed by DOCTOR. As some ending music flares, PATIENT becomes FATHER again, by sitting on chair/couch as lights return to normal. MOTHER re-enters and takes a chair as well. DAUGHTER (no longer a monkey) comes back on with a bag of potato chips to finish watching the show; the music crackles and fizzles, and the lights snap off. Power outage.]

DAUGHTER

Oh, great.

MOTHER

Oh god!

FATHER

Don't panic.

DAUGHTER

There's supposed to be another episode. Back-to-back.

MOTHER

We'll just listen to music instead.

FATHER

Hello? Radio?

MOTHER

(correcting) CD.

DAUGHTER

(correcting) Downloads.

FATHER

Power?

MOTHER

Oh, right.

DAUGHTER

Battery.

[DAUGHTER opens her laptop, it does not power up. She taps the keyboard. She swipes the mousepad. She swipes it again, and taps again. She opens and closes the laptop. No such luck. She eyes the power cord coiled, discarded in the corner. Nods, resigned.]

DAUGHTER

(under her breath) Fucking batteries. (looks to parents; catches herself.) Sorry.

MOTHER

Hmm?

FATHER

Hmm?

(beat)

We could talk.

MOTHER/DAUGHTER

Huh?

FATHER

Sorry.

MOTHER

We could try.

DAUGHTER

Why?

FATHER

For old time's sake.

DAUGHTER

When did we ever talk?

MOTHER

Not our old time, dear, people's. Our parents, and their parents.

FATHER

Shall we try.

MOTHER

(to Father) Let's.

DAUGHTER

(resigned; a directive) Talk.

[They each face forward and state their lines in individual spotlights.]

HUSBAND

The Internet was out at the office today. I couldn't work. I tried. I just couldn't.

WIFE

At Starbucks? the muffins? Out of orange-cranberry nut. That whole power walk? For naught. Marsha was *pissed*.

DAUGHTER

For instant messaging, I think they changed the language again. I got some messages today that I just couldn't decipher.

FATHER

I mean, I tried. I just couldn't.

DAUGHTER

They musta changed the abbreviations.

MOTHER

So, of course, I didn't know what to do? Do I get a different kind of muffin? Forego the muffin? And if I get a different kind, should I still get the skim latte Frappuccino, or would that not taste right together?

DAUGHTER

Either that or I'm losing touch.

FATHER

And all the papers were piling up on my desk. But I couldn't get to them. Had to fix the Internet.

MOTHER

And the barista was of no help about apropos pairings.

DAUGHTER

I think we're going to have to invent new letters. We're going to run out. I mean, there's only so many abbreviations, right?

MOTHER

They should have a coffee sommelier.

FATHER

I don't even know what I use the Internet for. Research?

DAUGHTER

I mean, what? There's 26 letters and 9 numbers.

FATHER

Well, e-mail. (Pauses to think what else he uses it for; can't come up with anything.)

DAUGHTER

Ten if you count 'zero.'

MOTHER

Marsha and I didn't talk the whole way home. Oh, she talked. Vented. I just laughed.

DAUGHTER

But you can only say so much with that.

MOTHER

I hope she knows it was *with* her. She was very funny. I hope she knows that.

FATHER

(hits him; baffled) I never really thought about it –

MOTHER

I was going to call her from the driveway. But I couldn't get 4G. So, when I got home, well, I had to figure *that* out.

FATHER

-- until now.

DAUGHTER

Can you just expand the alphabet?

MOTHER

(hits her; horrified) I completely forgot I was going to call Marsha --

DAUGHTER

I mean, what would that do to the song?

MOTHER

-- until now.

DAUGHTER

(hits her – confused) I never really thought about it before. Why now?

[Lights flicker and fizzle back on. The three of them are dazed. MOTHER shakes off her stupor before speaking. ALL do so to no one in particular.]

MOTHER

(to no one in particular) Well, that was weird.

FATHER

(to no one in particular) I'm glad we had this talk.

DAUGHTER

(having heard, but not to anyone) Whatever.

FATHER

(to no one in particular) That we shared, ya know.

MOTHER

(to FATHER) Huh?

FATHER

(to MOTHER) Huh?

[FATHER retreats. Absent-mindedly starts to take some chips from DAUGHTER's bag. She instinctively jerks away.]

FATHER

Oh, right, right. I'll get my own bag.

DAUGHTER

There isn't any more. Last one.

MOTHER

(looks at watch) Dinner'll be another 35 minutes.

[FATHER and MOTHER look at DAUGHTER, expectantly.]

DAUGHTER

(swallow hard. Disgusted. Violated.) Fine.

[DAUGHTER pours the contents of the bag into a large bowl on the coffee table. The three of them awkwardly try to eat from the same bowl: bumping into each other; then trying to apply modern etiquette, like three over-gracious people that got to a 4-way stop at the same time. It should be painful to watch. Lights fade.]

END OF PLAY.