

EARNING A SHARP REBUKE FROM EMILY POST

a play by

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Characters

Edith
Sally
Cora
Lourdes
Patrick
Milton

Setting

The living room of an Upper East Side apartment. Now.

[The guests sit or stand in the living room, each with a drink: champagne or white wine or scotch and water.]

EDITH: This really is—Unforgivable!

SALLY: Maybe he got the night wrong.

EDITH: *[sharply]* I spoke to him this morning! He told me how much he was looking forward to it. He asked me if I needed anything, and I said, “Dear God, your delightful self is all I require.”

CORA: He can be so thoughtful...

[LOURDES enters with a tray of hors d’oeuvres. She passes them around the room, then, as she’s about to exit, signals EDITH with her eyes. EDITH goes over to her.]

LOURDES: Mrs. Feldman, the roast gonna get burnt. I don’ know how much longer it can wait.

EDITH: I understand, Lourdes. But we’re still waiting for one more guest.

LOURDES: *[darkly]* Who? Who you waitin’ for?

EDITH: *[taken aback]* Who? God. We’re waiting for God, if you must know.

[LOURDES mutters something under her breath and goes off. EDITH looks after her uneasily. Laughter erupts from the group.]

PATRICK: I’ve been telling them about the time Renata Raymond showed up late for Nonny Whitmore’s dinner. Have you heard this?

EDITH: *[with a distracted smile]* No. Tell me.

PATRICK: Well, you know Renata is always late. Perennially, incorrigibly, tragically late. And it drives Nonny mad. On this particular night cocktails were called for 7:30, dinner 8:15. 7:45 no Renata. 8:00 no Renata. 8:15 Nonny tells the houseman they’re ready to sit down, and at 8:20 the guests are seated. 8:22 the doorbell rings. Nonny calls the houseman over. “Tell Mrs. Raymond I’ll call her tomorrow.” The houseman says, “But, Mrs. Whitmore—” “Tell Mrs. Raymond I’ll call her tomorrow.” The houseman—I believe his name is Brian—goes to the door, opens it. “Mrs. Whitmore will call you tomorrow.” And shuts it in poor Renata’s face.

[Everyone laughs.]

PATRICK: “Mrs. Whitmore will call you tomorrow!”

[The laughter fades. A brief silence.]

EDITH: Well, you couldn't do that to God.

SALLY: No indeed! Remember when Liz Wagner forgot to invite him to her Oscar party? A week later she was covered in boils.

PATRICK: Thousands at the dermatologist.

CORA: He can be a vengeful God.

PATRICK: Yes, he has decidedly Old Testament moments. And really! The fuss! Over an Oscar party. I'd much rather stay home with a bowl of popcorn and a few good friends.

MILTON: Another preference you apparently don't share with God.

PATRICK: Oh, I don't know about that. I think I rather understand God. I *get* him, if you know what I mean. I like him.

SALLY: Of course you like God. You're a homosexual and a Catholic. It's his S&M aspects you appreciate.

PATRICK: God gets a bad rap. That's all I'm saying. And really, when you get know him, he can be quite sweet. Quite—loving.

SALLY: People say that, but I've never seen any evidence for it.

EDITH: Where can he be?

SALLY: Have you tried his cell?

EDITH: God doesn't have a cell. He doesn't believe in them. He doesn't like to be that—reachable.

SALLY: I can never reach him at all. I get that stupid secretary who I'm sure is mentally deficient, if not mentally unstable. Try getting a message through *her*.

MILTON: [*comfortably*] The thing is, you're either in with God or you're not. Whenever I hear people running down God, I think, "Sour grapes. You're not in with God and you wish you were." It's envy.

PATRICK: And you're in with God?

MILTON: I think we have an understanding, yes. We come from the same place. Know the same people.

SALLY: Went to the same boarding schools.

MILTON: In a manner of speaking. There are people you don't have to worry about. You know they've got sound principles. You know they share your basic values.

PATRICK: *[mischievously]* You know they vote Republican.

EDITH: *[startled]* Surely we all do that.

SALLY: I wouldn't get too comfortable, Milton. Remember Joe Bradford. Thick as thieves with God. Thought he had God in his back pocket, as it were. Then God blasted his fields and blighted his cattle and scattered his kith and kin to the corners of the earth.

MILTON: *[grumpily]* Don't be absurd, Sally. Nobody has kith anymore.

EDITH: *[a murmured assent]* Nobody one knows.

CORA: I remember when I first met God...

[She is interrupted as LOURDES stomps in with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She presents the tray to each guest with accusatory force, killing the conversation. She starts to go, then turns.]

LOURDES: Mrs. Feldman, maybe God not coming tonight.

EDITH: Of course God is coming, Lourdes. God said he was coming and I have perfect faith that he will.

LOURDES: Maybe it not such a good idea you got so much faith in God.

EDITH: *[coolly]* I think Mrs. Baldwin's champagne glass is empty.

[LOURDES goes.]

EDITH: Oh, dear. I hope we're not going to have a problem with Lourdes tonight. Maybe I should have called in outside help.

PATRICK: Why is that?

EDITH: Lourdes is very *angry* at God.

SALLY: *[astonished]* Does she *know* him?

EDITH: No, of course not. Not personally. But she worshiped him from afar. Thought he was all-knowing and all-powerful. Which of course he is. But just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *will* or even *should*.

PATRICK: What did she want him to do?

EDITH: Her daughter became ill. Something very mysterious and debilitating and... disfiguring. She thought God should have saved her. These people, of course, are very simple about these things. They don't understand it doesn't work that way.

God can't go around curing everyone's sick daughter. If he could, we wouldn't need health insurance.

[LOURDES has come in behind her. She goes to refill CORA's champagne glass.]

LOURDES: My daughter didn't have no health insurance, Mrs. Feldman. God was her health insurance.

EDITH: Well, that was very imprudent of her. You can tell her so from me.

LOURDES: I can't tell my daughter nothing, Mrs. Feldman. She in a coma.

[She stomps out again.]

CORA: I remember when I first met God. Or do I? Well, you're all too young to remember when God first appeared on the scene. And now I think of it, I'm not sure I do either. It seemed that one day he was there and always had been and you couldn't say when you'd first made his acquaintance. And, of course, one was always pretending to have known him longer than one had because everyone else seemed to. They had met him the summer before in Bridgehampton or on an ocean voyage a few years back. I remember Myra Keane relating a *very* dramatic story in which God proved rather useful on a rough ferry crossing at Interlaken. But I wonder now whether we weren't all pretending to have known him longer and better than we did. What I mean is that, when it came right down to it, God was terribly hard to *place*. He was always very vague about where he'd come from and who his people were and even the sources of his immense wealth. And even *that*, his wealth, was difficult to pin down. He gave the impression that he owned all the earth, and the stars and planets besides. But it's only lately that I've begun to wonder if there wasn't something a little shaky, a little suspect, about this vast financial empire. That was the thing about God. One felt the closer one got to him, the less substantial he seemed. But none of us worried about this at the time. To a quite surprising extent, we took him at face value. I suppose because he was so charming. He was delightful company and could be very generous indeed. And funny! Oh my word! Much of his humor was rather spiteful, of course, but that only gave it piquancy. We *forgave* God a lot, if that makes sense. And it's only lately, as I say, that I've begun to wonder whether God was, well, quite everything he cracked himself up to be. Whether he was, when all was said and done, quite the thing.

[A pause. Everyone is appalled at this speech.]

SALLY: Is. God—Is.

CORA: What did I say?

SALLY: Was.

CORA: I was speaking of the past, but you're quite right, he is, or rather I suppose he is, I mean, I'm sure he must be, but I do wonder to what *extent* he is, if you take my meaning.

EDITH: [*coldly*] I don't think any of us takes your meaning, Cora.

CORA: No? Have I got myself all mixed up again?

[*LOURDES enters.*]

LOURDES: Mrs. Feldman, you got a phone call.

EDITH: Is it—God?

LOURDES: Didn't sound like no God to me.

[*EDITH hurries off. LOURDES remains onstage.*]

MILTON: I told Edith she should expect something like this if she insisted on inviting God tonight. He's a very busy man. It makes him unpredictable.

PATRICK: Capricious.

MILTON: I didn't say capricious. I said—

SALLY: Whimsical?

CORA: [*to herself*] I just wonder sometimes if God is really all *there*.

[*EDITH comes on, pale and shaken.*]

EDITH: There's been a—Terrible Accident. Something with the brakes. He couldn't stop. Or rather he did stop—quite abruptly and in the worst place possible.

SALLY: God?

EDITH: God is— God is—

[*She can't bring herself to say it. Unseen by the others, a smile of sly and secret triumph spreads across LOURDES's face. She takes a pair of wire cutters from the pocket of her apron and strokes them lovingly.*]

MILTON: [*sonorously*] He will be missed.

[*SALLY starts to laugh. The others stare at her, appalled. Through her helpless hysterical laughter, she manages to gasp out:*]

SALLY: What will we—talk about—now?