

Close Quarters

by Chico Eastridge

Adapted for stage 2021

Original screenplay 2015

Lights rise on Herman. A schlubby man in his underwear sits on a row of seats alone gazing out at the audience. His head goes round and round in hypnotic awe. He lazily shoves Corn Pops into his mouth from one of those tiny single serving cereal boxes. An sharp buzz cracks the silence alerting Herman to get up. He walks over to the edge of the stage and retrieves his soggy laundry from a box (washing machine.) He waddles to downstage center and places his wet clothing in another box (dryer.) He takes some quarters he's been clenching in his fist and deposits them in an imaginary slot. The quarters fall into the same box the clothing has been placed in, giving the audience the all too real illusion and thrilling perspective of being a dryer. After the third quarter is deposited Herman realizes he out of change. He grasps for non-existent pockets. Fumbles through his wet clothing. crawls on the floor in desperation. Nothing. He slumps back into his chair defeated.

Emma enters with a laundry basket. She places her clothes into the washing machine and puts quarters into it as if she were sowing seeds. She sits down a few seats away from Herman and casually spills a slew of quarters on the chair beside her. Herman's eyes widen. For some time he can look at nothing else. Emma pulls out a copy of Catcher in the Rye and meets Herman's gaze. She gives a polite smile as Herman timidly waves. She begins reading, unaware of Herman's plight. Time passes. Herman begins neurotically plotting a 25¢ jailbreak. A loud buzz disrupts the scheming. Emma looks over her shoulder at it and away from Herman. He sees his opening and goes to grab a quarter. Emma turns back and Herman pretends to be stretching. She locks eyes with him and gives a kind of "Do you mind?" sort of look. He looks away embarrassed as she huffs and goes back to reading. Herman broods on his failure. A new idea begins to emerge. He calculates the variables and acts.

HERMAN

Salinger huh? Your book I mean. It's a Salinger book.

EMMA

(coldly)

Right... It sure is.

HERMAN

Mmm. Classic. *(With an obnoxious southern drawl)* I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

EMMA

Really?

HERMAN

What?

EMMA

Really dude?

HERMAN

What? I was just trying to...

EMMA

You're going to sit here in your underwear and try to hit on my while I do my laundry?

The plan has already fallen apart.

HERMAN

Well, I. Uh. I... Yes. That's that is. That's what I was, am doing. Yes that's what I'm doing.

Herman looks as though he's about to be executed. Emma folds her book over her knee, puts her hand on her chin and stares at him.

EMMA

Well? Go on then.

HERMAN

Oh...Kay. My name's Herman.

He reaches out his hand to shake hers, but she just stares at it.

HERMAN

I'm an actor. Professionally. That's what I, uh, that's mostly what I do for money. I've got a casting call tomorrow. For television.

EMMA

What do you do?

HERMAN

Tomorrow I'm on television.

EMMA

What sorts of roles?

HERMAN

Tomorrow I'm going to be Santa... On TV though.

EMMA

And?... What else?

HERMAN

And... I've been Santa before.

EMMA

Uh huh, In?

HERMAN

The mall. And on the street. And once at Santa's village before the scabies outbreak. I'm a professional Santa Claus impersonator.

EMMA

It's June.

HERMAN

I get a vacation every year. A little man time. A little down time. Man-down time. Advertisers are getting ready earlier and earlier though. It's a clutch career to have right now. I think things are looking good. Yeah things are going really well for me right now. Yup... I make my own vinegar.

Emma loses her composure.

EMMA

Oh man. I'm sorry. I forgot what this was like. I haven't done this for awhile.

HERMAN

Been intimate with a man?

EMMA

Gross way to put that. No. I haven't been to a laundromat with randos for quite some time. I kind of miss it in a masochistic/nostalgic sort of way. I usually do this at home, but my washer decided to crap out this morning. So here we are. I have a

masters in Human Psychology, I graduated from Dartmouth. I got an A.

HERMAN

I took a course at Phoenix College Online for a few weeks.

EMMA

I did some backpacking and humanitarian work in Mozambique.

HERMAN

I drove through Syracuse New York once.

EMMA

I spent a year and a half WOOFing in Europe on permaculture startups.

HERMAN

I think I woke up kind of high this morning.

EMMA

Now I take local business which are struggling to stay afloat and turn them around to be more sustainable while still preserving their authenticity. I call it sustainable revitalization. But... I like Santa Claus.

Herman takes a moment to register this comment.

HERMAN

I do that. Professionally. At the mall!

EMMA

I know.

HERMAN

You were listening!

Emma nods. Herman moves a chair closer.

HERMAN

I do a lot of character work actually. I was the statue of liberty during tax season.

EMMA

Ohh. That's deplorable.

HERMAN

You know what they say. You can't spell deplorable without adorable.

EMMA

(Smirking)

They don't say that.

Herman leans in to whisper.

HERMAN

Sometimes I take one hotdog, cut it down the middle, and then put it on two buns so that it seems like I have two hot dogs.

EMMA

Oh my god that's so pathetic.

HERMAN

I'm just kidding buns are out of my league. I usually use matzah crackers from the damaged goods rack.

Emma gasps with delight.

HERMAN

When people ask me if I have a pet, I say yes because I have a Roomba that can't suck up dirt. Her name's Sue, which is the name of my 8th grade civics teacher slash first crush.

EMMA

Hit me. More, more!

Herman is reaching his hand into Emma's pile of quarters and slowly dragging one back towards himself.

HERMAN

There are no windows in my apartment and I have five roommates and by roommates I mean my parents and step-parents.

EMMA

Oh Christ! I'm going to faint!

Emma reaches over to hold his hand.

EMMA

Herman, there's just something so refreshing about meeting someone who's genuine. The people I know like balloon festivals, vintage copper pots, and bullshit community theatre performances. Sometimes I think I'm going to kill someone, but then I don't. I just hold my breath, smile real big and try to get to bed as early as possible. You're like those little stores that I flip. You are who you are. The real deal. Authentic, and quirky, and..

The quarter drops from his hand.

EMMA

Are you seriously stealing my quarters?

HERMAN

I wanted to see what state was on it.

EMMA

(Exacerbated)

Fuuuuuuuck me!

HERMAN

I'm a coinologist

EMMA

A numismatist?

HERMAN

I don't know the word for what I am is.

EMMA

It's jackass. Whoo. Wow. Almost did that again. Alright up and at em'

HERMAN

Wait! What about your clothes.

EMMA

There are plenty of Laundromats in the sea.

She quickly dumps her soggy clothing back into her hamper.

HERMAN

I, I, I once had mai thai's with Dane Cook at an airport bar.

EMMA

I don't know who that is.

HERMAN

My mom made me eat Muesli until I was 19 because it "good for your gums."

EMMA

Oh man, that's pathetic.

HERMAN

I'm still confused about effect and affect. Awwww man!

EMMA

I have to go!

Emma gets halfway out the door.

HERMAN

Hey! HEY!

He starts collecting his things and pulling his wet Santa costume out of the washing machine and onto his body.

HERMAN

I'm sorry alright? That was stupid. I was trying to... I wasn't thinking. I need to reassess things. The person I've let myself become. The people I've hurt. Look at me. I'm already rambling about me me me. It doesn't matter. what does matter is that I think you're something really special and I thought maybe me and youuu. What's your name again?

Emma saunters up close to Herman and tugs on his dripping hat.

EMMA

You know something Herman. Here's a tip.

She places a quarter in his cereal box.

EMMA (CONT'D)

Keep it to yourself.

Emma leaves Herman alone, listlessly looking at the door she left from. He pours the quarter into his hand and contemplates it.

HERMAN
SUCKER!!!