

The Value of Horses

A play by Paul Barile

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**Perusal
Only**

Time: Last Spring

Place: A cramped apartment in Chicago

Characters:

Decker Merchant	mid-thirties
Woodrow Merchant	mid-twenties
Natalie Simon	mid-thirties
Sis Kowalczyk (Merchant)	late-thirties
Loretta Merchant	early-twenties

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Act one Scene one
Sunday evening

There is a couch and an easy chair.
DECKER is sitting in the easy chair looking
through a photo album. The only other signs
of life are open packing boxes and piles of
personal belongings scattered about. There
is nothing that suggests permanence.
WOOD is folding towels.

WOOD

Are you sure you can't stay on through the week? We got a lot of catchin' up to do

DECKER

It ain't I don't want to, but I got to get out of the city. The congestion is killing me. This
ain't no place for a man to live. Hell I was takin' out the trash last night and saw a rat as
big as some of my goats. You wanna catch-up? You have until 3 p.m. Wednesday which
is exactly what time you're gonna drop me off at the depot.

WOOD

You know Sis and them's comin' up Friday afternoon. Why don't you just wait until then
and see Sis and Loretta?

DECKER

Sis is comin' all the way up here?

WOOD

Yeah, she is.

DECKER

Is she bringin' Loretta with her?

WOOD

Matter of fact I think she is.

DECKER

You said they's comin' up on Friday?

WOOD

Yeah they should be here after lunch, Sis said.

DECKER

You're sure they said Friday.

WOOD

Decker, she said they would be here after lunch on Friday. Today is Sunday. Why all the questions?

DECKER

Just don't want to be surprised if I wake up in the morning and Sis and her gaggle of ankle-biters is invading the kitchen getting' all hopped up on coffee and sugar. Them little dickens get under my feet every time they in the same county.

WOOD

They's hardly kids, Deck. Anyway, she and Loretta are coming up to help me get the rest of the papers in order. You know I don't know too much about this legal stuff.

DECKER

So you are going to count on Sis to help you. Sis couldn't find an ice cube in Alaska and she'd never let Loretta – never mind.

WOOD

What?

WOOD crosses to the couch and sits.

DECKER

Nothin'. Naw, Wood if I was going to stay around you just blew it by telling me Sis was on her way up. They drivin' this time?

WOOD

Sis said she feels terrible about not being up here sooner. She said the back and forth was too much for her. She really wished she was up here for-

DECKER

Ain't no one blamin' her. I couldn't make the trip as often, so I waited until I knew I was needed.

WOOD

Well, seems like Sis got her a new mini-van - new to her anyway. She decided this would be a good time to see the world. Now that Bud's gone...

DECKER

See the world? In a minivan?

WOOD

Those ain't her *exact* words.

DECKER

Did you – at least – clear up Daddy's accounts with Juanito?

WOOD

Not yet.

WOOD stands and begins to look around for the checkbook

DECKER

What are you thinkin', Kid? You got to settle Daddy's accounts before you and the girls go muckin' around in what you think is yours.

WOOD

I been down to Nick's. I paid that one off straight away.

DECKER

You paid the bar, but not the grocery.

WOOD

Juan's got a daughter – Elsie or something – she makes me nervous whenever I go in there.

DECKER

Is she ugly?

WOOD

Decker!

DECKER

Seriously, Woody, what the hell are you gonna feed the hens when they get here? You better go down to Juan's place and give him a check first thing in the morning.

WOOD

See, Decker. This is what I mean. You know about this kinda stuff. I just don't think I'm ready for this.

DECKER

It ain't nothin' but some common sense and honesty. Before you and Sis and Loretta start dividing up Daddy's money, make sure he ain't got no more outside debts. He would hate to know you sent him on owing somethin' to someone.

WOOD

How do I find out? I don't want to do no wrong, but I can't just go walkin' around the neighborhood wavin' his checkbook and asking who wants some.

WOOD finds the checkbook and tosses it to Decker.

DECKER

You just got to go out there and investigate. You can ask questions. You have to know where he shopped or hung out at.

WOOD

And you won't stay for just one extra minute and help me out with this.

DECKER

Pal, you got the biggest, loudest mouth in the country on her way up here. She can help you out. Hell, Sis is so annoying a lot of guys as likely kick her out then take her money. You can't put a price on peace and quiet.

WOOD

They's good ol' girls, Deck. 'Specially Loretta. Things been hard on her since mamma died.

DECKER crosses down right.

DECKER

I never said they wasn't. And Loretta's fine. She's a good old girl. But that Sis operates on two volumes scream and holler. I'm more of a whisper to a grumble guy.

WOOD

So there's nothing I can do to convince you to stay.

DECKER

Sorry, kid. I almost wish I could but I gotta get outta here. This ain't where I'm from or where I'll ever be comfortable. When Momma passed you all left Montello and come out here. Y'all were lookin' for a new home and I'm glad you found it. Now I came down here to pay my respects to Daddy, but there is no way I'm stayin' on any longer than I have to. I gotta go to the only place I can hang my hat.

WOOD

I never wanted to leave you. I just had to go with Daddy. I was so –

DECKER crosses to couch and puts a hand on Woody's shoulder.

DECKER

Baby brother – I never held you any grudge. You made the choice that was best for you. So did I. You needed to be with your parent. I needed to be where I was. You can come home if you want. I'll put you to work. You can earn your keep. Or you can stay here if that pleases you. I never minded that you left. I just had no mind for of leaving – myself.

WOOD

Wanna get drunk? *(pause)* You can sleep in tomorrow – take the day off. We can run a few errands on Tuesday and come Wednesday, I'll carry you to the bus station after lunch as promised. You'll have plenty of time to get comfortable in that big soft chair and you'll be home before you know it.

DECKER

Maybe a whiskey or two would take this city edge offa me, but I ain't plannin' on getting drunk. I don't enjoy it like I used to. Sometimes I'll sip a glass of whiskey all night long just to feel the burn on my lips. I love that burn going down. I'm not too crazy about it when it comes back up.

WOOD crosses to the cabinet and pulls out a bottle of Jim Beam and sets it on the table.
HE exits to the kitchen.

DECKER

There should be some ice left from the reception.

WOOD

(from the kitchen)

How many pieces you want?

DECKER

Just throw a couple slivers in a glass and let's have us a drink.

WOOD

Do you want 7-UP or anything?

DECKER

A clean glass and couple of slivers of ice. Actually the clean glass is negotiable.

WOOD

Are you hungry yet?

DECKER

Wood, I been eatin' like a gubment mule all day long. Those old ladies kept bringin' in a banana pudding and fried chicken. His Mexican friends were bringin' in beans and rice with some little peas in it.

WOOD

So you're not thinkin' about a piece of this cheesecake or some ice cream?

DECKER

I'm thinkin' about some ice and a glass of whiskey. Is that gonna happen?

WOOD

Chips? Salsa? Pretzels?

DECKER

WOOD!

WOOD enters with an ice tray and two rocks glasses.

WOOD

Just trying to be *hospitable*.

DECKER heads back to the reclining chair.

DECKER

I understand, Wood, but I just want to sit here and sip some whiskey and relax. We haven't seen each other in a while and I thought maybe we could talk.

WOOD

Sure, Decker. What's on your mind?

DECKER

It ain't like that, Wood. I ain't got nothing special to talk about. I just wanted to talk a little. When we was kids we used to talk so much and so fast it's a wonder our jaws never come unhinged.

WOOD

Baseball... Girls... Food...

DECKER

Girls was always my favorite. You never did have the sense the Good Lord gave a yard goat when it come to girls.

WOOD

But when they found out who my big brother was, the work was already done for me. How's the drink?

DECKER

It's whiskey, Wood. How's it supposed to be? Would you just relax? I appreciate what you are doing, but I am not going to be around when Sis gets here. Can we move on?

WOOD

I'm sorry, Decker. I'm just -

DECKER

I know you're *just* - Woody – boy you got to let it go. Sis and Loretta's gonna be here and y'all gonna get everything in order before you know it.

WOOD

(after a pause)

Whyn't you want any of the money?

DECKER

It's ain't my money.

WOOD

It ain't my money either. Does that make it wrong for me to take it?

DECKER

That ain't for me to say? You gotta do what's best for you.

WOOD

But most a' my life – growin' up I mean – I did what you did. You cheered the Packers; I cheered the Packers. You bought a Ford; I bought a Ford. Now you ain't takin' any of the money that Daddy left you.

DECKER

Wood, you – what – 27 years old? You don't need me making decisions for you. You want to cheer for the damn Bears? Go ahead. You want to drive a Chevy? Be my guest. You want to take the money Dad left, by all means, jump right in and take it. It's yours. He ain't gonna need it. Just do the right thing first and settle up his accounts.

WOOD

And you?

DECKER

There's a couple of pictures and ashtrays I want.

WOOD

Is that it?

DECKER

Well there...

WOOD

What, Decker?

DECKER

I'd like his glasses and his watch.

WOOD

That old watch ain't worth a dollar.

DECKER

Not to you it ain't.

WOOD

That's fine, Decker. I'll get 'em for you.

DECKER

They in my bag already. I wasn't askin' so much as informin' you.

WOOD

What if Sis or Loretta wants 'em?

DECKER

Not my problem. I'll be long gone by then.

WOOD

So you are going to take a few worthless knick-knacks and disappear?

DECKER

Pretty much, little bro. I came and paid my respects. I met his friends and listened to all their nice stories about him. Now I am going home. Don't get me wrong, Wood, I loved Daddy. He was the best, but there is nothing more for me to do here.

WOOD

More whiskey?

DECKER

That's a good idea, old son. Fill that glass and we'll say a word in Daddy's memory.

WOOD refills the two glasses.

DECKER

My Daddy – our daddy – taught me a lot of things over the years.

WOOD stands up hesitantly.

WOOD

Shouldn't we be standing, Decker?

DECKER

I think he'd understand if we just – if we just sat here and said our piece.

WOOD tries to stand again – hovers –
begins to sit – stops.

WOOD

If you're sure...

DECKER

I'm sure.

WOOD is unsteady as he tries to stand one
more time. DECKER looks at WOOD who
drops back into his seat.

WOOD

If you say so.

DECKER

I say so. Can we get on with this?

WOOD

Sorry, go ahead.

DECKER

My Daddy-

WOOD
(whispers)

Our Daddy.

DECKER

Our Daddy was a pretty wise man. He taught us a lot over the years. The one thing he taught me that stuck with me my whole life was that no matter how strong your reins is – or how hard your hold on 'em – if your horses ain't strong and true – you ain't goin' nowhere.

WOOD

Daddy never had no horses, Decker.

DECKER

That's ain't the point, Wood. The point is he always knew the value of his horses. It's symbolism, Woodrow. Now, what is the best lesson Daddy taught you?

WOOD

You're gonna laugh.

DECKER

Probably, but go ahead.

WOOD

Well the one thing Daddy taught me the most was that –

WOOD stands and crosses down left.

WOOD

Aw, I can't Decker. It's silly.

DECKER

We're doin' a tribute here. You gotta share what Daddy taught you.

WOOD

He taught me that the best day was the one that you wake up and are able to get out of bed.

DECKER

Did he get that off a coffee cup? That don't sound like Daddy.

WOOD

I knew you'd laugh. You weren't here when he got sick. Every morning when he came into the kitchen for his breakfast was a like a victory for him. When he couldn't come in anymore – when Natalie had to start bringing him his breakfast in his room - that was... that was...

DECKER

I didn't mean to laugh, Wood. I just remember Daddy differently. You gotta forgive me.

WOOD crosses up center.

WOOD

It's okay, Decker. I know you didn't mean nothin' by it. I just wish you coulda been here. He would have loved it if we were all here.

DECKER

I'm sorry. I would have loved to have been here but life don't slow down - not even for death

WOOD

Still...

DECKER

I'm serious about you coming up to the spread so we can spend some time together – kind of get reacquainted.

WOOD

Really?

DECKER

If you pour me one more taste of that whiskey.

WOOD

Fair enough.

DECKER

So who is Natalie?

WOOD

Same old Decker. I'm talkin' about our daddy and you only heard the girl's name.

DECKER

I heard the other stuff too. I did. I was just surprised to hear there was a woman in the picture – another hand grabbing at the pot of gold.

WOOD

Natalie's not like that. You don't know her.

DECKER

What's to know?

WOOD

Natalie was Daddy's nurse. She was coming here because the hospital sent her. Later I think she was coming around more because – well – maybe she likes me.

DECKER

Really? Little Woody Merchant with a nurse? Doesn't that kind of make you feel bad about your lack of formal education?

WOOD

She ain't like that. She seems to really like me. I don't know. I just kind of feel it when we're together. She seems to move closer to me when we are talking.

DECKER

Is she ugly?

WOOD

Decker Merchant, why you gotta bust my chops every time I like a girl. We ain't kids anymore. Let me have this one, willya?

DECKER

Of course you can have her. What I want with her? I'll be gone before you know it and the next time I come to this God forsaken city will be for your wedding.

WOOD

You'd do that?

DECKER

Shucks, Wood, if you's to marry a nurse? I wouldn't miss that for the world.

WOOD

That'd sure be nice.

DECKER

One more snort?

WOOD

Naw, I'm good. I'm goin' to bed.

WOOD tries to take DECKER'S glass back to the kitchen. DECKER holds on to his glass. WOOD takes his own glass to the kitchen. DECKER picks up a photo album. WOOD exits up stage left.

DECKER

Night little brother.

WOOD

Night big brother.

Fade-out.

Act One Scene Two
Monday Morning

DECKER is sleeping in the chair. The glass of whiskey is held on his chest. The photo album is in his lap. NATALIE dressed in surgical scrubs moves past him as the lights come up. SHE stops. SHE steps back and takes the drink from his chest and lays it on the table. DECKER jumps. NATALIE is startled. SHE screams.

DECKER

What the... Hey...

NATALIE

I'm sorry. Are you... Where's Woody?

DECKER

Ah... You must be...

NATALIE

I'm sorry if I startled you. I just wasn't expecting... You must be Decker.

DECKER

Yes, I must.

WOOD

What's going on out – Hey Natalie.

NATALIE

Woodrow?

WOOD

I see you met my brother Decker... Decker – Natalie – Natalie – this is Decker.

DECKER

This must be *your* Natalie?

WOOD

Uh... I wouldn't say it like that. *(beat)* Uh... Natalie Simon; meet Decker Merchant. Decker; Natalie.

DECKER

Hello, Natalie. Sorry if I startled you. Hey Wood, does your nurse make coffee?

NATALIE

Hey Woodrow, does your brother have any manners?

WOOD

I would have to say no to both of you. I just put coffee on though. Too bad we can't do nothin' about him.

NATALIE

I just came by to pick up a few things. I will be out of your way in a minute. I can come back another day to complete the paperwork.

DECKER

Don't rush off on my account little lady. By the time you realize I'm here, I'll be gone. Wood, how long until that coffee's ready?

WOOD

Just about a minute, Deck. You know Daddy and his coffee machines. I still can't always figure 'em out.

DECKER

He never gave that up, huh? I figured he'd get bored of it and start drinkin' Maxwell house.

WOOD

Naw, Daddy loved his crazy coffee. He liked his coffee makers too. We didn't have many fancy things but he had the best coffee machines. One night he had me walk nearly a mile for some African coffee just because he liked the way it smelled brewin'.

DECKER

He loved him some coffee.

NATALIE

Guys, I'm sorry. I know this is a tough time for you.

DECKER

Ain't so tough for us, Nurse Natalie. It's tougher for Daddy.

NATALIE

Right. Well, let me just gather up those things from his room and I'll be on my way.

DECKER

Don't leave on my account, Sweetness. I'm sure you and the young Woodman here have plenty to jaw 'bout. I'll take my coffee in my office. Where's today's paper, boy?

WOOD

It's already in your – uh – office, Deck. Are you going to be long?

DECKER

Tell ya' what, Wood. When you and your pretty little nurse are done pitchin' woo, you knock on that door. I'll be ready to go.

NATALIE

I'm not sure if you amuse me or irritate me, Mr. Merchant.

DECKER

What's that, little one?

NATALIE

My name is Natalie. Natalie Simon. Not *Sweetness*. Not *Sugar*. Surely not *Little One*. My name is Natalie. I was your father's nurse. There is no woo to be pitched here. I came to pick up the left over canulas and the extra tank filters the agency forgot about.

WOOD

I'm sorry, Natalie. If I had known you were comin' I would have woken him up and had him out of the way. We can still have a cup of coffee, can't we?

NATALIE

I'm sorry, Woodrow, I have to get back to the office. I have a pressing caseload today. I just came by to pick up the-

DECKER

Have a cup of coffee with the boy, Natalie. What would it hurt? I'll leave the room. Aren't y'all nurses supposed to be angels of mercy or some bunk like that? What a crock. What a big-city crock o'bunk. Woody, I'll be in my office if you need me.

WOOD

I think I'll be fine, Deck. You go ahead on.

DECKER exits up stage left.

WOOD

(to Natalie)

Are you sure you can't stay for a minute? I sure would like to talk to you.

NATALIE

I guess one cup wouldn't hurt. We can talk for a few minutes, but then I have to get back to the agency. I don't mean to sound uncaring, Woodrow, I just have so much to get done before the end of my shift today.

WOOD

I understand, Natalie Thanks for stayin' for one cup. And call me Woody, will ya'?

WOOD exits quickly.

NATALIE

Sure... Woody...

NATALIE sits on the couch.

WOOD

(from offstage)

Light - sugar?

NATALIE

You remembered. Thank you. Yes. I'm flattered.

WOOD enters with two cups of coffee.

WOOD

My pleasure.

NATALIE

So what did you want to talk to me about? Are you having trouble dealing with the loss of your father?

WOOD

Not exactly.

WOOD hands NATALIE a cup of coffee and sits on the couch very close to her.

NATALIE

Do you have a billing question? I don't handle billing, Woodr-Woody.

WOOD

It ain't about the bills.

NATALIE

What then?

WOOD

Well... it's about this guy I know who really likes this girl. She's smart and pretty and fun to be around. My friend likes this girl an awful lot.

NATALIE

Would this friend be you, Woody?

WOOD

Well...sort of... uh... yeah...

NATALIE

Not that I'm an expert, but I would say to just be honest. Whatever you do, be yourself. If she doesn't like you, then just move on. You can't convince someone to feel the same way you do. Even if she doesn't like you – that doesn't speak any less of who you are Woodrow Merchant. People like different people for their own reasons. Just look her in the eye and tell her. Let the chips fall here they may.

WOOD

Really?

NATALIE

Everyone has the right to be loved. Sometimes it is just a matter of finding the right person to love you. My advice is to sit that girl down the next time you see her and... oh... uh... you are talking about...

WOOD

(eases into it)

I like you Natalie. These past few months I have learned that I really really like you.

NATALIE

That's... uh...so... I...

NATALIE stands and crosses stage right.

WOOD

Do you think you might find a place in your heart for a guy like me?

NATALIE

Oh Woody... Dear sweet Woody...

NATALIE crosses back to the couch and pats WOODY'S shoulder uncomfortably.

WOOD

I don't think I like the sound of that *Dear sweet* part.

NATALIE

Woody, I think you are about the nicest person I have met on the job in a long time. You're a sweet man, but I don't think I'm what you're looking for. I work an awful lot. You need someone who will give you more of what you want out of life. You deserve more, Woody.

WOOD

What do you think I want out of life, Natalie?

NATALIE

You want to love someone. You want someone who can love you.

WOOD

Couldn't you love me, Natalie? You seemed to love my dad. I never seen anyone take better care of someone.

NATALIE

That was compassion, Woodrow. That's my job. I came here to bring some comfort to your dad in his final days. I liked your father very much. He was a fine man and we had some nice talks.

WOOD

Woody.... And what did you talk about?

NATALIE

We talked about Alex Trebec with and without a mustache. We talked about crossword puzzles and scrabble. Mostly we talked about your brother and sisters and you. How he'd always hoped you would find someone to marry and live happily ever after with.

WOOD

I think he meant you, Natalie.

NATALIE

No, Woody. He didn't. He *did* say that you had a crush on me and would use him to get a date with me if you could.

WOOD

He actually said that?

NATALIE

It's okay, Woody. This is a trying time for you. You are feeling very much alone. You just lost a loved one you were very connected to. You have a lot of mourning to go through.

WOOD

So you'll help me get through this?

NATALIE

Woody, I'm not a counselor. You have to know that I feel terrible about all of this. I simply am not qualified to help you.

WOOD

So dinner and a movie's out of the question?

NATALIE

I'm afraid so.

WOOD

Will you - at least - think about it?

NATALIE

Your father said you'd try this.

WOOD

Did you tell him you'd eventually break down and go out with me?

NATALIE

As a matter of fact, he and I agreed that I was not the one for you.

WOOD

But you will at least *think* about dinner.

NATALIE

For as long as it takes me to gather the equipment. Then you have to promise me that whatever answer I give you; you will accept it. Fair enough?

WOOD

I promise.

NATALIE exits. WOOD licks his hands and pats down his hair. HE gets up and paces. HE strikes a few poses. HE checks his hair again. HE whistles a happy tune. HE rushes back to his chair as NATALIE re-enters.

NATALIE

I thought about it, Woody.

WOOD

And?

NATALIE

I'm sorry. I just don't think it is a good idea.

WOOD

Not at all, huh?

NATALIE

I'm sorry, no.

WOOD

You're sure?

NATALIE

I'm sure, Woody. I really have to get going now. Please promise me you'll take care of yourself. If you need to talk to the chaplain or one of the doctors, don't hesitate to call.

NATALIE exits up stage right.

WOOD

Bye, Natalie.

DECKER enters.

DECKER

Where's your Florence Nightingale?

WOOD

If you're talkin' 'bout my Natalie, she had to get back to work. She is so funny. She really likes me, but she is afraid to let me know.

DECKER

If you like her and she likes you, shouldn't someone be doing something about it?

WOOD

I don't want to rush her into anything. You watch though - me and that girl gonna make a beautiful couple one day. You just watch. So where do we start?

NATALIE enters. DECKER does not see her. SHE has come to bring WOOD a pamphlet on grief.

DECKER

Tell you what, Wood – if I never see that old girl again, it'll be fine by me. Know what I mean? She's mean-spirited. She reminds me of that scrawny, old coyote I caught creepin' around my fence. Now for me? I want me a woman with-

WOOD

Uh, Decker... I

WOOD is gesturing to DECKER who doesn't notice until it is too late.

DECKER

I'm happy you in love, Wood. I really am. I'm just tryin' to get home. Two more days is about all I can handle down here. You got your Bonesaw Betty and I got my spread.

DECKER turns and sees NATALIE. SHE exits quickly.

DECKER

You want to tell me how long she was standing there?

WOOD

Does it matter?

DECKER

Don't reckon it does. Coffee's mighty good though. Let's have another cup, before we head out.

WOOD

Whatever.

BLACKOUT

Act one Scene Three
Monday evening

DECKER is packing some things into a box.
HE picks up a photo album and begins to flip through it. There is a knock at the door.

DECKER

Enter

NATALIE
(from offstage)

Woody?

NATALIE enters. DECKER puts the album, into the box. HE turns away from her.

DECKER

Sorry to disappoint you, nurse. Woody's out picking up some sandwiches. If I'd'a known you was comin' I woulda had him get you somethin'. I bet I can rustle ya' up a saucer of cream.

NATALIE
(coldly)

I just dropped by with a few pamphlets on grief and how to handle the loss of a-

DECKER

The best way to handle the loss of a loved one is to be surrounded by the living – the living loved ones.

NATALIE

Even if the family is *you*?

DECKER

I imagine so.

NATALIE

But you're leaving in two days. Aren't you? Wait... How did you say that? *Two more days is about all I can handle down here.*

DECKER

He's going to have his sisters here.

NATALIE

You know he needs his- Never mind. Why are we talking about this?

DECKER

What are *you* talking about?

NATALIE

I'm just not sure why I'm even standing here talking to you. Can you just give-

DECKER

I can, but it might mean more to him if you came back and gave 'em to him.

NATALIE

Mr. Merchant, please don't misunderstand my intentions here. I have other patients to see. Even if I wanted to come back, it would be difficult.

DECKER

You can take a minute for Woodrow.

NATALIE

Do you understand that I am a medical professional and there are people who need my attention? You don't seem to understand that.

DECKER

Do you understand that you can do a lot of good for a living healthy person by spending a little time him?

NATALIE

Your father warned me about you.

DECKER

What'd he say?

NATALIE

Never mind.

DECKER

No. Not *never mind* Miss... it is *Miss*, isn't it?

NATALIE

Yes, it is. Miss Simon.

DECKER

Well *Miss* Simon, It's hardly fair to open that door and then not walk in.

NATALIE

Your father just said you had a – he said you were aggressively stubborn and you used this gruffer-than-thou exterior to hide who you really are.

DECKER

Really? And just who am I?

NATALIE

Strangely, he said you were a sensitive man. Your father seemed to think of you as sensitive. Funny, I don't see it.

DECKER

Oh Yeah. No. I'm sensitive. I am sensitive about being in this crowded, dirty city for so long.

NATALIE

(softly)

I didn't mean to embarrass you, Mr. Merchant.

DECKER

Calling me *Mr.* Merchant is the only thing embarrassing me.

NATALIE

Your father said you'd say that, too.

DECKER

You and the old guy got pretty close, huh?

NATALIE

He is – was a very charming man. He was very well read. He loved his family which is nice to -

DECKER

What's not to love?

NATALIE

Uh...yeah...

DECKER

Look, I'm just a guy who thinks he is funnier than he really is. Wait. Let me rephrase that; I am a homesick guy who thinks he is funnier than he really is.

NATALIE

I concur

DECKER

Oh you...

NATALIE

Concur.

DECKER

You *concur* do you?

NATALIE

I simply mean that you think you are funnier than-

DECKER

I guess I know what *concur* means, Miss Simon.

NATALIE

Well, Mr. Merchant, I really do have to go. Please make sure that Woodrow gets these.

DECKER

Miss Simon, listen a minute, will ya? I am sure you have guys put their moves on you every day. You might be what some guys think is good lookin'... leastways in these parts...

NATALIE

Mr. Merchant.

DECKER

Let me finish. I just think that – look - I need a way to prove to you that I'm not *always* a jerk. Maybe then you'll see something in me that you saw in Daddy and you'll listen to what I have to say.

NATALIE

Is this about you or me?

DECKER

It's about Woody. Right now there is nothing more important to me than Woody's feelings. You've got to believe that.

NATALIE

If his feelings are so important why don't you stay here for a while longer? It is going to be difficult for him to cope. Why can't you give him a week or two?

DECKER

Why can't you give him thirty minutes? Come back tonight with your pamphlets. Go to Peterson's for an ice cream – grab a taco on the corner. Let him feel good about something – even if it is only for 30 minutes.

NATALIE

What would be the point, Decker? Don't you think it would lead to harder feelings later?

DECKER

I think Woody would be willing to take the chance. Who knows maybe once you got to know him a little, you might like him.

NATALIE

Your father warned me about your persistence, too.

DECKER pulls the photo album out of the box. HE flips it open and skips through a few pages of the book.

DECKER

Look at this picture, Miss Simon. See that chubby little kid in the middle?

NATALIE crosses to DECKER. THEY stand too close for a moment. SHE backs off – then HE backs off. SHE gets closer to look at the book. HE gets closer to share the book. THEY settle on a neutral ground.

NATALIE

The one using the tennis racket for a guitar?

DECKER

Yeah... That's the one. Look how happy he is.

NATALIE

Is that Woody?

DECKER

He used to play that old tennis racket all night long pretending he was going to be a rock and roll star.

NATALIE

That's sweet, but I don't know what it has to do with...

DECKER

Stay with me for a minute...

NATALIE

Is that you with a mullet?

DECKER

(quickly)

He knew he'd never be a rock and roll – aw hell – I mean heck - he knew he couldn't even play the guitar, but for a few hours he was Elvis Presley. Know what I mean, Miss Simon?

NATALIE

You can be pretty persuasive, Decker Merchant.

DECKER

So you'll give it a try? You'll come back tonight?

NATALIE

Let me see how my day plays out. I have a more clients to see and a few errands to run.

WOOD enters unseen.

DECKER

Trust me. It'll be worth the trip. There is nothing as appealing as a Merchant brother when he's been showered and shaved.

NATALIE

There's a charming picture.

DECKER

So it's a date?

WOOD reacts to how close they are standing together. DECKER puts a hand on Natalie's shoulder.

NATALIE

I said I'd call, didn't I?

DECKER

I just want to know if I should make other plans.

NATALIE

Wait until you hear from me.

WOOD drops the bag of food on the table loudly.

WOOD

Oh nice. Real nice. Decker Merchant Giant Slayer – Dragon Killer – Nightingale Hunter.

DECKER

Woodman. Hey Buddy, I know you aren't going to believe me but-

WOOD

You're right I don't believe you. You're like one of them hawks we used to watch out at the spread. You fly around pretending that you don't notice what's goin' on then – BAM you scoop down and – You suck, Decker.

DECKER

Hey... I'm just tryin' to -You better watch your mouth little man.

NATALIE

Guys... can we just...

WOOD

I'm sorry, Natalie. I'm sorry you got stuck in here with him. *(pause)* Look, Daddy is gone. Decker will be too, soon. I'll be fine. Who knows maybe I'll go live with Sis and Lo. I sure as hell don't need this.

DECKER

Woodrow Merchant! You was raised better than to talk to a lady like that. Now if you ain't gonna listen-

WOOD

I ain't.

DECKER

Then leave us alone. We was having a civil conversation until you came along. We was talking about you, you big baby.

WOOD

Sure, you were.

NATALIE

Woody, you know I wouldn't lie to you. Decker was talking about-

WOOD

Forget it. Just forget it.

WOOD exits. WOOD returns and grabs the bag of food before exiting again.

DECKER

Well that went smoothly.

NATALIE

I never saw him come in.

DECKER

I gotta start looking over my shoulder when I'm runnin' my mouth. Well it don't matter no how. If he ain't gonna believe me – fine. He should believe you.

NATALIE

I feel terrible.

DECKER

He'll get over it. How about maybe you and *me* grabbin' that ice cream?

NATALIE

I really don't think that's a very good idea.

DECKER

I ain't askin' for marriage. I just want to hear about Daddy's final days.

NATALIE

Why don't you ask Woody?

DECKER

He'll just say what he thinks I want to hear. I need someone who doesn't know me to just give me the truth.

NATALIE

I have a pretty full caseload today, Mr. Merchant.

DECKER

How about a rain check?

NATALIE

Your father told me about the family. I guess he intrigued me. If you are going to be around long enough, we could have lunch and talk.

DECKER

Are you just doing this to make me stay longer for Wood's sake?

NATALIE

Does it matter?

DECKER

I guess not.

NATALIE

I'll try to call tonight. If not, I will definitely call tomorrow.

DECKER

Fair enough. I look forward to hearing from you.

NATALIE

Take care.

NATALIE exits.

DECKER

Yeah...take care... Natalie Simon.

BLACKOUT

Perusal
Only