

Dueling Writers

by

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CAST

LAUREN: Woman in her late twenties/early thirties. Dressed in business attire.

PHIL: Man of the same age. Dressed very casually, verging towards sloppy.

THE TIME

The present.

THE PLACE

A bar.

AT RISE: LAUREN and PHIL are on bar stools, with beers in front of them. PHIL keeps his head down, petulantly avoiding LAUREN's eyes.

LAUREN

Can't believe you're acting this way.

PHIL

What way?

LAUREN

Like a -- like a spoiled child. A prima donna. A--

PHIL

And I don't have a right?

LAUREN

No!

PHIL

No? You mean, I should be happy my writing partner all these years has sold out to--

LAUREN

Sold out? --

PHIL

Sold out! As in, writing for the man. For the establishment. For the almighty dollar.

LAUREN

Writing for "the man?" "The establishment?" You going to give me the peace sign, tell me everything's groovy?

PHIL

(To LAUREN)

I've been reading your name in the ad books. "The rising star, Lauren Flanigan."

LAUREN

Mmm hmm. And instead of congratulating me, you've decided rip me apart.

PHIL

I'll be damned if I sit quietly when I see you whoring away your creative talent.

LAUREN

Watch it, Phil. Just --

(Pause.)

PHIL

Sorry.

LAUREN

I mean, you want to get together after all these years, I say fine. We'll have a few laughs, great. But instead, I get this? I want abuseb I'll visit my mother.

PHIL

I ... Look, I know. I'm ... It's just that ... what the hell are you doing?

LAUREN

You know what I'm doing--

PHIL

But why? I mean, it's ... *advertising*.

LAUREN

I get a kick out of it.

PHIL

The joy of green--

LAUREN

It's not the money -- not *just* the money.

PHIL

What else could it be?

LAUREN

It's ... I like to succeed.

(PHIL groans.)

LAUREN

I do. I'm tired of writing in a void.

PHIL

That's just part of the game.

LAUREN

Of wondering if anybody knows what I'm doing.

PHIL

You get used to it.

LAUREN

Yeah, but how do you turn it off?

PHIL

What?

LAUREN

The noise in your head? The questions. The doubts. What am I doing here? Who cares? What the hell am I adding to the world?

PHIL

Give it time.

LAUREN

I ran out of time.

PHIL

But you were just starting to--

LAUREN

Starting to go crazy. Got so quiet, I looked forward to the rejection letters.

PHIL

I'm keeping a running tab of rejection letter transition words. "While your work shows ambition ..." has taken a strong lead.

LAUREN

Ohh.

PHIL

A strong second is, "Although we found your work to be intriguing ..."

LAUREN

How about the classic "However, at this time, we cannot accept" -

-

PHIL

"However's" played -- but, funny enough, "at this time" is skyrocketing to the top.

LAUREN
Why can't they just say "now?"

PHIL
Not as official sounding.

LAUREN
Just get to the damn point.

PHIL
Like, "Now your work sucks?"

LAUREN
(With a chuckle.)
Don't stop there. What about a big stamp on top, just says:
"Shit."

PHIL
I like it.

(Beat.)

PHIL
So what's it like in *that* world?

LAUREN
It's ... okay! And they seem to like me -- haven't gotten any rejection letters from them.

PHIL
What are you working on?

LAUREN
US News and World Report -- we just won an award for the slogan we came up with.

PHIL
Which is?

LAUREN
(Pausing for dramatic effect, then raising her hand towards an imaginary marquee.)
"Think Smart."

(Pause)

PHIL
Think--

LAUREN

Smart.

PHIL

That's it? That's what you won an award for?

LAUREN

What's wrong with it?

PHIL

It's two lousy words! I don't know, maybe I'm missing something.

LAUREN

US News and World Report readers think of themselves as smart people who like to think. "Think Smart" hits them right on their hot buttons. We showed that slogan to focus groups and people went nuts over it.

PHIL

So these random folks went nuts over "Think Smart," huh? They saw the face of God in these two words, huh? Tell me something, what kind of drinks do you serve at these focus groups?

LAUREN

Hey, I'm proud of the work my creative group did on--

PHIL

"Group?" It took a "group" of people to come up with a two-word slogan? What, was there a separate person responsible for each letter in each word? "Yes, I personally am responsible for with the letter "T" in the famous slogan, 'Think Smart.'"

LAUREN

Shut up. The client wanted it short, and they wanted the word, "Think" in it. So we're coming up with, "Think Intelligently, Think Much, Think A Lot, Think More, Think Some More" and I'm thinking, "somewhere between Think Intelligently and Think Some More, Think Some More, Think S'More, Think S'More ... THINK SMART!"

(Pause)

PHIL

How, uh, how many people are on this team?

LAUREN

Five--

PHIL

Five?--

LAUREN

Five--

PHIL

Five! Five people making a career out of "Think Smart." You're right, the business side is the way to go. Centuries from now, people will be quoting,

(He says following two quotes with a regal tone)

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls, the bell tolls for thee," and "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," and, "Think Smart!"

LAUREN

Dude, you've got the struggling artist superiority thing down to a science.

PHIL

Just hate to see talent go to waste.

LAUREN

And what about you, Mr. Scosese? The hell are you working on that's so awe inspiring?

PHIL

I'm working on ... things.

LAUREN

And?

PHIL

And ... those morons haven't accepted my screenplays -- yet.

LAUREN

Why not?

PHIL

Well, if you can believe this, they say I sound too New York bar-ish.

LAUREN

You? The original Bronx boy? Duh!

PHIL

They say that New York "Goodfellas" stuff is played.

LAUREN

So what are you doing about it?

PHIL

Well, I'm re-setting a lot of my screenplays to places like, Victorian England, the Amish Country -- artsy places like that.

LAUREN

But what about plots?

PHIL

See, I'm using this writing technique an old professor gave me. The trick is to try to flesh out a kid's nursery rhyme without changing its innocent tone. I've been fleshing out the old Humpty Dumpty story.

(PHIL pulls out his notes)

You want to hear it?

LAUREN

Sure.

PHIL

(He stands up to give the following monologue.)

This story is told by Humpty's best friend, OverEasy Ed. 'I don't give a shit about the soft hay,' Humpty told me. 'I don't give a shit about the heat lamps. I wanna get out of this friggin' cubicle. I wanna live, man.' 'But Hump,' I said, 'your old man hears you're tipping out, he'll kick the shit out of you.' 'Hey, how's he gonna know?' he said. 'He's always hanging out with the young chicks. He don't give a shit about me. If he hadn't laid that golden egg, we'd be livin' in a poor house anyway.' Well, I laughed right at him. Said everybody should have it so good, being a rich egg and everything. So he says he'd give it all up in a second if he wasn't so raw! 'If I could just get that hard-boiled treatment,' he said, 'then I wouldn't have to be cooped up in here anyway.' Well I told him, I said, 'you ain't hard-boiled. And if you screw around, you're gonna spring a leak, then good bye.' So you know what he says? He says, 'Maybe it would be better that way. You think I don't hear all those hard-boiled guys at the bar, snickering at me. You don't think I hear them saying, 'look at that soft-boiled wimp, bein' pulled in that cushioned wagon. Why don't you come out and scramble with the hard-boileds?' I asked him why he listened to them anyway? They're old, you know? Getting that smell, that rotten smell. What they wouldn't do for that refrigeration treatment Hump was getting. Then he barked that the refrigeration thing is bullshit! What the hell are they preserving me for? I'd rather go out in a blaze of splatter than where I am now.' So he bolts up to go, but I stopped him. I wanted to know how he was gonna get past the guards at the gate. So he says we wasn't going through the gate. Says he's going over the wall, they'll never know he left. Well, that was the last I ever saw of him. Now when I get lonely, I just look at that little piece of shell I've got on my mantelpiece.'

LAUREN

(With heavy sarcasm)

Oh yeah, that works.

PHIL

(In love with his work, oblivious to LAUREN'S sarcasm)
It's called, "Nursery Rhymes From The Gutter."

LAUREN

How anyone could come up with a Goodfellas version of Humpty Dumpty is beyond me.

PHIL

You think it's got a chance?

LAUREN

Hey, if I could get famous on "Think Smart," no telling how far you could go with Humpty Dumpty.

PHIL

When they make the movie, don't worry, I'll insist you handle the advertising.

LAUREN

Gee, thanks--

PHIL

That is, if you still haven't come to your senses and are still doing that--

LAUREN

Can you write anything without curses?

PHIL

I can't help it if my characters are too real--

LAUREN

And Phil?

PHIL

(Exasperated.)

What now?

LAUREN

Keep writing. Whatever it is you're seeing, whatever it is you're fighting for, keep fighting.

PHIL

Join me--

LAUREN

I can't.

PHIL

Sure you--

LAUREN

Not now. But -- but, keep ... keep after me.

PHIL

But you just said--

LAUREN

Don't always listen to me. Listen to what I'm saying.

PHIL

What do--

LAUREN

Just once in a while. But keep pushing -- yourself and me.

PHIL

Whatever.

LAUREN

Who knows, maybe someday I'll write the Nursery Rhyme from Hell.

PHIL

We could collaborate on it! I already have the idea, it's called Jack gets Jill on a hill and--

LAUREN

Not yet, Phil.

PHIL

Jack and Jill will be waiting.

LAUREN

Soon.

END