

28 Plays Later – Challenge #21

So let's do that! Let's write a play with the intention of offending others.

For bonus points - write something that offends **you!**

But like - TRULY makes you scream in anger and upset!

LOCK HER DOWN

By

Melissa A. Bartell

Time: Any evening this week.

Place: A meeting room at a community center.

Lights up on your average community center or public library meeting room. There's a table to one side with a coffee urn, disposable cups, cream, sugar, wooden stirring sticks, and a plate of cookies. There's a circle of folding chairs. There's an easel or blackboard with "Meeting tonight: Domestic Violence Intervention."

CHARLIE ENTERS WITH A LEATHER COMPUTER BAG SLUNG OVER HIS SHOULDER. HE LEAVES IT ON THE CENTER CHAIR, THEN GOES DIRECTLY TO THE COFFEE URN, TO MAKE SURE IT'S TURNED ON. IT IS, SO HE POURS A CUP OF COFFEE AND DOCTORS IT TO TASTE.

HE LINGERS THERE UNTIL A FEW OTHER MEN ENTER.

SOME GO TO THE URN, SOME MOVE DIRECTLY TO CHAIRS.

CHARLIE: Hello, everyone. Bill, Sam, Mark, Javier, glad you made it. We're waiting for a guest and then we'll start.

BILL: Can we start soon? I'm allowed to talk to my kid before he goes to bed if I'm home by nine.

CHARLIE: We'll do the best we can.

SAM: It's good you get to talk to him.

BILL: Yeah. He started little league last week. I'm not allowed to go to games, though.

JAVIER: Restraining order?

BILL: Yeah.

JAVIER: I feel you, bro. It's like the bitches got us comin' and going. Pay child support, but don't come near the kid.

CHARLIE: Javier, you know we don't refer to women as 'bitches' during group.

JAVIER: Dude, group hasn't started yet. You're still stirring your coffee.

SAM: Man, I could use a beer.

MARK: Man, I could use a sixpack.

ALL LAUGH.

CHARLIE BRINGS HIS COFFEE OVER TO THE GROUP, REMOVES HIS BAG FROM THE CHAIR, AND SITS DOWN.

CHARLIE: Okay, let's get started. Bill, it's great that you're allowed to talk to Bobby now. How do you feel about that?

BILL: How do you think I feel. I'm pissed that I have to have permission to talk to my own kid...

CHARLIE: Is that all?

BILL: No, I... I'm glad they're letting me have the phone call. Even if it is only five minutes.

MARK: Five minutes is five minutes more than I get.

SAM: You *did* put her mother in the hospital for a month.

MARK: Her bruises were so pretty, though. And the screams....

THERE IS A GASP FROM THE DOORWAY, RHONDA HAS ARRIVED.

RHONDA: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... Am I late?

CHARLIE: No, you're fine. Come in...

CHARLIE GESTURES TO THE EMPTY CHAIR NEXT TO HIS.

CHARLIE: Come sit by me?

RHONDA MOVES INTO THE ROOM AND TAKES THE INDICATED SEAT.

CHARLIE: Rhonda's a friend of mine. She's doing her psych rotation at County General, and asked if she could observe tonight, and maybe ask a few questions. Is that okay with everyone?

THE MEN ALL EXCHANGE GLANCES.

JAVIER: We're good with it.

CHARLIE: Okay, then... does anyone have anything else to share about their week? (He waits, but no one does.) Okay, then... Rhonda, you had a question?

RHONDA: Actually, I was wondering... you've all been out of relationships for a while, right? (She waits for collective acknowledgement). So, when you... when you start a new relationship, do you get physical – violently physical, I mean – right away, or...?

JAVIER: Dude, you never start right away!

MARK: Yeah... there's like... a honeymoon period.

SAM: You have to build trust. You build it, and you take it away.

BILL: You lock her down.

CHARLIE: Lock her down? What does that mean?

BILL: It's like, with a dog, you know? You don't get a puppy and expect it to know not to piss and shit in the house. It's got to be trained.

JAVIER: It has to love you, so when you kick it, it thinks it's done something wrong. Bitches (he glances at Rhonda) – ladies – whatever – they're the same. You make them love you.

SAM: You give them enough so they even if want to leave, they'd lose too much by doing it.

MARK: You lock them down. Make sure they have no escape.

BILL: It's systematic. You're normal at first, you know? Loose. Then, you start doing things like checking in a lot... you start isolating her from her friends. Maybe you meet her after work with flowers for a while, but you make her expect you.

RHONDA SEEMS A BIT ALARMED BY ALL OF THIS, BUT SOMETHING IN HER FACE IMPLIES THAT WHAT THE MEN ARE DESCRIBING FEELS SOMEWHAT FAMILIAR. SHE LOOKS DOWN AT HER HANDS AND FIDDLES WITH HER ENGAGEMENT RING.

RHONDA: How long... from when you start dating a new person to when you start abusing your partner... how long does it take?

BILL: A year, year and a half.

SAM: Two years.

JAVIER: A year, minimum.

MARK: At least two years.

CHARLIE: Interesting. Do you think you could come up with a consensus?

JAVIER: Figure a year to date, then you get engaged. Maybe you start getting a little physical after the wedding... sex that's just a little too rough. Or shaking her when she does something wrong, like not having the right beer...

MARK: But you don't leave marks. You don't hit that soon. You wait. You get permanent.

BILL: You get her locked down tight. Like, you move to the suburbs where she doesn't know anyone.

SAM: You have a kid... maybe two. She won't leave if she has two kids to take care of.

CHARLIE: So... timeframe?

BILL: If you want to be sure? Eighteen months.

SAM: Yeah... that long.

JAVIER: I'll go with that.

MARK: A year and a half, yeah... that's... look. It takes time. To cut off all the escape routes. To make the stakes high enough that she'll stay. Money. A nice house. Kids. That's the big stuff, but the other stuff, like...

JAVIER: Like she's not on the deed to the house.

BILL: And the credit cards are in your name only.

SAM: And you track her phone, you know her pattern, so if you think she's gonna bolt you can stop her.

BILL: You got her locked down.

JAVIER: Locked down so tight... like uh, uh.

RHONDA: I thought... I thought batterers were just out of control.

CHARLIE: Is that true?

JAVIER: You're supposed to think that. And yeah, sometimes we are. We're drunk, or we had a bad day, or our team lost the game...

SAM: But those are just the triggers for specific actions. They're just the easy excuses.

MARK: They're what you blame it on when your arms are showing handprints.

BILL: Or your eyes are black, and you have to wear sunglasses everywhere.

SAM: Or when you've got no marks, but every move you make is like a scared rabbit.

BILL: Will he hit me today?

JAVIER: Will he fuck me with the handle of his knife or can we have normal sex?

MARK: Will he leave me sobbing on the bathroom floor?

BILL LEANS FORWARD AND DIRECTS HIS NEXT LINE TO RHONDA

BILL: You're not here doing a psych rotation, are you? You've been fiddling with your ring all night. Your fiancé has you spooked?

RHONDA: Charlie thought, if I came here...

BILL: You'd see the signs? If you're even thinking that he might hurt you, end it. End it now. Don't get married. Don't move in – you haven't yet, right?

JAVIER: Your gut's telling you something's off?

RHONDA: How... how did you know?

SAM: Because you're what we look for. Someone who has that instinct, but thinks it's just nerves.

MARK: We're not out of control, Rhonda. We just want you to think we are. The truth is, we're all about control.

BILL LOOKS AT THE CLOCK.

BILL: Hey, I gotta run. Gotta call my kid.

CHARLIE: On that note, then, thank you all for coming. I'll see you next week.

EVERYONE RISES. THE MEN LEAVE, THOUGH SAM PAUSES.

SAM: Rhonda, seriously, whoever the guy is, leave him. Leave him now.

RHONDA LOOKS LIKE SHE'S ABOUT TO PUKE.

CHARLIE TURNS OFF THE COFFEE URN AND DUMPS THE FEW REMAINING COOKIES INTO A ZIPPY BAG AND OFFERS THEM TO RHONDA.

CHARLIE: Cookie? (beat) You okay?

RHONDA: I have to end it with Jake, don't I.

CHARLIE: You don't *have to*.

RHONDA: But you won't bring me ice packs if he hits me again.

CHARLIE: You're my little sister. Of course, I'll bring you ice packs. But I'd rather I not have to.

CHARLIE WRAPS A BROTHERLY ARM AROUND RHONDA'S SHOULDERS.

CHARLIE: Come on. You can crash with us tonight. Eileen won't mind, and Sarah and David will be so excited to see their Aunt Rhonda at breakfast.

RHONDA: Any other night, I'd argue with you.

CHARLIE: But...

RHONDA: But tonight... they all seemed like normal guys.

CHARLIE: They are.

BLACKOUT.