

EPICENTER

**a play in one act
by Tom Baum**

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Sara, a professor of psychology and psychotherapist

Wendell, mid 20s, a PhD candidate in mathematics

Jeri, early 20s, Wendell's girlfriend, a student

The living room of Sara's house. The time is the present.

(The living room of a one-story house, modestly furnished. A couch, club chair, rocking chair, coffee table, cordless phone, desk. Books line two walls. A foyer is visible, including the front door.)

SARA, a woman in her 30s, is on the phone. Dogs are barking offstage.)

SARA:Are you absolutely sure he's coming? He's already a half hour late...Well, let's not go to the bad place right away. The word "paranoid" gets tossed around so much these days.....If you think medication is indicated, I'm sorry, I'm not your gal...Because I'm not an M.D....I evaluate the students and then I make the referral.....What makes you think it's an emergency?...Well, I'm certainly not competent to evaluate his PhD thesis. That's literally your department. *(Doorbell rings.)* That sounds like him now....Listen, you're free to call in a psychiatrist if you don't trust me to handle this case...I'm not offended....I'll do my best....Goodbye, Professor.

(SARA composes herself, plumps the couch pillows, goes to the foyer, disarms the burglar alarm, unchains the door and opens it.)

SARA: Mr. Dornbush? Welcome.

(WENDELL, mid 20s, remains in the doorway. He's cradling a laptop.)

SARA: Please. Come on in.

(WENDELL enters reluctantly.)

WENDELL: Those dogs!

SARA: Yes, sorry about that. My neighbors tend to leave them out all day. Have a seat.

(WENDELL doesn't see where she's pointing. He hasn't looked SARA in the eye. He may never.)

WENDELL: Do you believe dogs can predict an earthquake?

SARA: I'm not sure I have an opinion on that. Won't you sit down?

(WENDELL still doesn't take the offered seat.)

WENDELL: They can. Various animals. Bees flee their hives before a tsunami. Wildebeests stampede before a thunderstorm. The number of missing cats rises significantly two weeks before a seismic event. Do you have a cat?

SARA: No cats. No dogs.

WENDELL: I'm allergic to cats.

(SARA is trying to guide WENDELL into the club chair. He bristles at her near-touch, then sits. SARA sits opposite, in the rocking chair.)

SARA: Sorry we have to meet here. There's construction going on outside my office.

WENDELL: I know. The math department's across from the psych department.

SARA: So...Mr. Dornbush...how can I help?

(WENDELL starts rocking softly in the club chair.)

WENDELL: You can start by not calling me Mr. Dornbush.

SARA: I see.

WENDELL: Only my students call me Mr. Dornbush. To everyone else, I'm Wendell.

SARA: Wendell. And I'm Sara.

WENDELL: I'd rather not address you by your name.

SARA: That's up to you. It's your hour.

WENDELL: It's a form of manipulation. Using people's names.

SARA: I see.

WENDELL: Are you going to keep saying that? "I see"?

(A brief impasse. SARA gathers herself.)

WENDELL: That was rude. I'm aware of that. I'm apt to be rude again. You'll have to get used to it.

SARA: You don't seem to want to be here, Wendell.

WENDELL: You don't seem to want me here.

SARA: On the contrary, I want to help you. If I can.

WENDELL: You know very well Finerman forced me to come. If I don't consult a therapist, he's going to boot me out of the PhD program.

SARA: That's quite an ultimatum, isn't it.

WENDELL: He's afraid of me.

SARA: Professor Finerman's afraid of you? What's he afraid of?

(WENDELL rocks vigorously in the chair. Doesn't speak.)

SARA: Wendell?

WENDELL: How much do you know about the mathematics of Coincidence?

SARA: Not a thing.

WENDELL: Neither does Finerman. God, those dogs are worse than jackhammers.

(WENDELL bolts up from his chair, wandering over to the bookcase.)

SARA: They'll calm down eventually. They always do.

WENDELL: *(solemnly)* No. They're onto me. *(at the bookcase)* You're OCD, aren't you?

SARA: *(caught)* What makes you say that?

WENDELL: These books aren't just alphabetized. They're chronological by author. *This Side of Paradise, The Beautiful and Damned, The Great Gatsby, Tender is the Night, The Last Tycoon.* The odds are 119 to 1 against that random permutation.

SARA: You must be a fan.

WENDELL: Of what?

SARA: F. Scott Fitzgerald.

WENDELL: I've never read him. I don't read fiction. Or non-fiction. What a stupid word, non-fiction. Why don't they just call it truth? Because it isn't, that's why. They should call it non-science.

SARA: Wendell, why don't you sit down. What did you mean, the dogs are onto you?

(WENDELL *sits, starts rocking back and forth again.*)

SARA: Did you hear me? (*no answer*) Wendell? If I ask you a question, I expect some kind of answer.

WENDELL: Aha. The confrontational approach.

SARA: What do the dogs know about you, Wendell?

WENDELL: That gets into the area of my thesis. And if it's over Finerman's head, it must be over yours.

SARA: I'm sure it is. Maybe if you explained it in simple terms.

WENDELL: Impossible.

SARA: Why don't you try.

WENDELL: All right. The simplest problem in Coincidence is to calculate the chances of two people meeting, given certain boundary conditions. The non-trivial approach is to count the number of k-step walks within the chamber of a Weyl group. Are you with me so far?

SARA: I think you know I'm not.

WENDELL: Are you menstruating?

SARA: Why do you ask that?

WENDELL: Women lose 10% of their intelligence while they're menstruating. Jeri read that in *Psychology Today*. Which means it has about a 50% chance of being true.

SARA: Who is Jerry?

WENDELL: We lived together. Did I say “lived”? We live together.

SARA: Wendell, I have a suggestion—

WENDELL: That’s five times now you’ve used my name—

SARA: —You’ve proved you’re the smartest person in the room.
Why don’t you tell me what the problem is?

(WENDELL hangs his head. Rocks harder. After a moment, he shuts his eyes and sings:)

WENDELL: “Everywhere you go...Sunshine follows
you...Everywhere you go...Skies are always blue...Children love
you...They seem to know...You bring roses out of the snow...”
(opens his eyes) Do you know that song?

SARA: I don’t think so.

WENDELL: Either you do or you don’t. My mother used to sing
it to me. As a lullaby. *(sings)* “The whole world says
hello...Everywhere you go.”

SARA: She must have loved you very much.

WENDELL: She was dead wrong.

SARA: She was wrong to love you?

WENDELL: I’m talking about the dogs! Earthquakes. Natural
disasters. And unnatural. Now you can say “I see.” If you do see.

SARA: No, I don’t see. I haven’t the vaguest idea what
you’re talking about.

WENDELL: *(wincing, under his breath)* Bitch.

SARA: Are you calling me a bitch? In what way am I a bitch?
Wendell, from what Professor Finerman told me, you’re going
through some kind of crisis, and I’d really help you before...
(a distant fire truck siren)
...before you leave here today. Wendell? Did you hear me?

WENDELL: I can hear you, yes. Were you saying something important?

SARA: Do you realize you're rocking back and forth?

WENDELL: You're hardly the first to notice that. Jeri usually leaves the room.

SARA: It does look like a private activity. I'd like to hear more about Jerry.

WENDELL: It has nothing to do with masturbation, if that's what you're implying. And you needn't look so smug, as if I'm protesting too loudly. When a Jew communes with God, he rocks back and forth. He *davens*. When I'm working on a problem, I sit on my bed. The closer I get to the solution, the faster I rock. I've videoed myself, so I know that's true. The ancient Jews were no fools.

(The fire truck is approaching. SARAH sniffs the air.)

WENDELL: What are you smelling the air for? The fire's not here in your house. The event never comes that close. God, you must be the world's jumpiest shrink.

(Two sirens doppler past.)

WENDELL: Two alarm fire.

(WENDELL quickly opens his laptop.)

SARA: What are you doing now?

WENDELL: Entering the fire. It's a data point for my thesis.

(A graphic comes up on WENDELL'S computer screen, which we may or may not see—a street map with scattered dots. He zooms in on one area, makes some keystrokes. SARA rises for a closer look.)

SARA: And what exactly is your thesis?

WENDELL: Oh, this is so hopeless. You're just spinning your wheels, you can't do a thing for me. You're just a teacher. Oh sure, a student gets the "blues," the proctor sends them to you. You see them once or twice. Never actually do anything for them. You're to psychotherapy what a school nurse is to medicine.

SARA: You have me pretty well sized-up, don't you, Wendell?

WENDELL: Uh-oh, and now you're getting downright hostile.

SARA: Everybody has their limit. Therapists are no exception. And I'm about to reach mine. What do those dots represent?

WENDELL: Unusual occurrences.

SARA: And your theory about these occurrences is what?

WENDELL: That certain people, under certain conditions, can be catalysts. For extraordinary events. Which otherwise appear as accidents.

SARA: And you're one of these people?

WENDELL: Hello. What have I been saying?

SARA: Your wishes have power?

WENDELL: My witches?

SARA: Wishes. S-H.

WENDELL: I heard a "chuh." It's not a question of wishing. If only I had that sort of control.

SARA: You're a set of accidents waiting to happen.

WENDELL: Yes. A secret terrorist, if you like. What? What's that look? Were you mocking me just now? You don't think people have the power to influence events?

SARA: Who did you blame for 9/11, Wendell?

WENDELL: Who did I blame for 9/11? Al Qaeda.

SARA: Al Qaeda. Not yourself.

(WENDELL *leaps up from his chair.*)

WENDELL: You must be having your period. 9/11 was a multifocal event. Planes heading in different directions. One hit the Pentagon, though I'm deeply skeptical it was a plane. One hit the World Trade Center. I was nowhere near either of those places. No. That's just...silly.

SARA: Silly?

WENDELL: Now she's repeating everything I say. The most retarded form of therapy ever invented.

(Chopper noise sweeps over the house. WENDELL tenses.)

WENDELL: We don't have any time to lose. Are you good with dreams?

SARA: Why, did you want to tell me one?

WENDELL: Nah, it's useless. Arranging books, that's what you're good at. You must be a very angry person.

SARA: You're doing everything you can to make me angry.

WENDELL: See, there you go. Blaming me. Typical obsessive thinking. You're not the angry one. You're not the bad one. It's those burglars and rapists out there. That's why you keep the alarm on and the door chained. You're afraid of everything except the thing you should be afraid of.

SARA: Do you want me to be afraid of you, Wendell? Will that make you feel more powerful? Wendell, sit down.

WENDELL: Tell Finerman anything you like. I'm not delusional. I know what I know. I shouldn't be wasting my time and you shouldn't be entrusted with the future of this school.

(SARA tries to grab his arm as he goes.)

WENDELL: Don't touch me! You're completely incompetent! Heal yourself, Dr. OCD!

SARA: Stop it! That's enough of that! Sit down and behave yourself!

WENDELL: I get it. Now you're pretending to be my mom.

SARA: Sit down, Wendell. Now!

(WENDELL obeys.)

SARA: You are not leaving this office. You will stop trying to turn the tables on me. You've zeroed in on my...peculiarities, which proves to me you're capable of insight. I'm going to try to get to the root of your problem—

WENDELL: That'll be a first. For you.

SARA: What did I just say? We are not talking about me. I want to hear about your mother, I want to hear about your father—

WENDELL: He's out of the picture. Ancient history.

SARA: —and I want to hear more about Jerry.

(WENDELL shudders and rocks, eyes shut. The dogs start barking again.)

SARA: Wendell? Does it scare you to talk about Jerry?

WENDELL: I'm asleep.

SARA: You're asleep now?

WENDELL: No! In the nightmare! I dream that I'm asleep!

SARA: What happens in the nightmare?

WENDELL: I wake up. I feel my feet hit the floor....

SARA: And then?

(WENDELL snatches up a pillow from the couch.)

WENDELL: I pick up the pillow... I walk around to the other side of the bed....where Jeri's sleeping...

SARA: *(uneasily)* Um, Wendell, just talk...you don't have to act it out...

WENDELL: I stand there with the pillow. Holding it...Holding it over Jeri...

(WENDELL looms ominously over SARA, as though about to smother her.)

SARA: Wendell!

WENDELL: (*coming to*) Then I'm back in bed again.

(WENDELL *sits back down, cradling the pillow.*)

SARA: (*carefully*) And what makes it a nightmare?

WENDELL: Sometimes when I wake up...there's no pillow under my head.

SARA: Where is it?

WENDELL: On the floor. On...on Jeri's side of the bed.

SARA: Wendell...I think I'd like to speak to Jerry.

WENDELL: Why?

SARA: In fact I'm going to insist on it.

WENDELL: Oh great. So much for confidentiality. You think I'm a danger to Jeri, why don't you call the whole campus while you're at it? Why don't you call Security right this second? That's what you're thinking of doing, isn't it? Lock me up, keep me from buying a bunch of guns, and blowing the whole school to kingdom come?

SARA: Wendell, where is Jerry now?

(WENDELL *claps his laptop shut and heads for the front door.*)

SARA: Wendell, where are you going—Wendell—I'm ordering you not to leave!—

(*Front door slams. The lightbulb by SARA's chair blows with a hideous sizzle. SARA tries the light. Unscrews the bulb, holds it to her ear, shakes it. Chopper noise sweeps over the house.*)

JERI: Did that just happen? Did the lightbulb just blow out?

(SARA *wheels, startled. JERI, who has just entered with WENDELL, isn't Jerry after all. She's in her early 20s and shockingly attractive. And frightened.*)

SARA: Yes. Just now.

JERI: Happens all the time at our place. We go through a dozen light bulbs a month. I called an electrician, he said there's nothing wrong with the wiring.

SARA: You're Jeri?

JERI: Uh-huh. Are you OK, Professor?

SARA: Yes. Are you?

JERI: Yes. No. I don't know. Why?

SARA: Please...please have a seat. (*Chopper noise.*)
Anybody know what those choppers are about?

JERI: I just heard it on campus radio. Some burglar broke into the Provost's house. They took the guy to jail but they're making sure he was working alone.

SARA: Right. I see.

(*SARA quickly activates the burglar alarm.*)

JERI: You don't recognize me, do you.

SARA: Should I?

JERI: Not really. I always sat in the back row. Psych 100. I gave you a great eval. I didn't know you did therapy. You never mentioned it in class.

WENDELL: She's got nothing to show for it, that's why.

SARA: Were you waiting outside the whole time?

JERI: Uh-huh. I drove him. I drive him everywhere. You see, Wendell? I didn't leave. I stayed. He's always afraid I'm going to leave him. (*pointedly*) Which I would never ever do.

WENDELL: That's not true. She's lying. She thinks about it all the time.

(*WENDELL's chin falls on his chest. He starts rocking.*)

SARA: Is that true, Jeri? Have you been thinking of leaving him?

JERI: Um, I'd rather not talk about it?

SARA: OK.

JERI: When he Weebles like that, you think he can't hear you. But sometimes he can.

SARA: He's been tough to live with lately?

JERI: Why, was he barking at you too? He's so on edge. Totally demanding. Well, OK, he's always been that way. He got so much attention as a baby it spoiled him. You should get him to show you his mother's diary. From the time he was born she kept a daily record—his weight, his height, every new word, everything he did and said. It's like thousands of pages.

WENDELL: (*still rocking, eyes shut*) Four thousand seven hundred and forty-two.

SARA: How long did this go on?

WENDELL: Until three days before my thirteenth birthday.

JERI: That's when his dad left them. You don't expect a rabbi to divorce his wife, do you? I guess he got sick of competing for attention. They were like an egg, Wendell and his mom. She kept him from his dad. Wouldn't let anybody near him. He didn't have any friends growing up. I'm kind of his first friend. Plus everything else I am to him.

SARA: You drive him places.

JERI: Yeah, well, he doesn't have his license.

SARA: You take care of him in other ways.

JERI: In every way. Oh listen, I don't mind. I'm happy to. I love taking care of him. He's a genius, and he calls me his goddess. How many girls can say that?

SARA: What else have you been fighting about?

JERI: This new habit he has? Wendell, is it OK if I say this?

WENDELL: How do I know until you say it?

JERI: He's always saying "bitch." He'll be slaving away at his thesis and suddenly his face gets all scrunchy and he goes, "Bitch."

SARA: Wendell, are you aware you do this?

WENDELL: Of course I'm aware. How could I not be aware.

(WENDELL *rises, starts to pace.*)

SARA: How else does he show his anger? Wendell, sit down.

WENDELL: (*ignoring her*) She wants to know if I'm ever violent.

JERI: Wendell? He won't even swat a fly. Literally. I have to kill them myself, and ohmigod, there've been so many lately. I've called exterminators, they come, they spray, it doesn't do any good. The next day? Flies everywhere.

SARA: And Wendell blames himself.

JERI: He takes credit for it, yeah. But violent? No. (*uneasily*)
Only in my nightmares.

SARA: You're having nightmares too?

(WENDELL *starts toying with the couch pillow.*)

JERI: Yeah. Sometimes I dream he wants to smother me. But he never goes through with it. I wake up. I force myself. The tenth time you have a dream, you kinda figure out it's a dream.

SARA: Are you sure it is a dream? Wendell, put the pillow down.

JERI: What do you mean, am I sure it's a dream?

SARA: Wendell, do you want to tell Jeri anything?

WENDELL: No.

SARA: Put down the pillow, Wendell! And take your seat.

(WENDELL *doesn't budge. Stares at the pillow in his hand.*)

SARA: This instant.

(WENDELL *sits. Doesn't let go of the pillow.*)

WENDELL: What she's trying to say is keep away from me.

JERI: I couldn't do that. Not while you're going through this crisis.

WENDELL: *(to SARA)* You hear that? She's just like you. She's afraid I'll go all Columbine on everybody. That's the only reason she stays with me—

JERI: Wendell, no, that's not true—

WENDELL: Don't you get it? I don't have to have to do anything that drastic! The drastic comes to me!

(A screech of brakes outside. The sound of tearing metal. The dogs start to bark.)

WENDELL leaps up from the chair, tosses the pillow back on the couch, and bursts out the front door, setting off the burglar alarm.)

JERI: Wendell?!

(SARA rushes to the panel, punches in the code. The burglar alarm stops ringing.)

JERI: Should I go after him? I'm so scared.

SARA: No. Sit down. I don't want you alone with him right now.

(The phone rings. SARA picks up.)

SARA: It's Sara. The password's Winnicott. Yes, everything's...everything's OK. Don't...don't send anyone. It was an...an accident. Nobody broke in.

(The front door bursts open. WENDELL enters, holding a shattered outside car mirror.)

SARA: *(into phone)* Hold on, please.

WENDELL: This ridiculous SUV sheared it off. It was too far up the block, I couldn't read the license plate.

JERI: Ohmigod. Think if I'd still been in it.

WENDELL: (*shudders*) In some other universe you were. You're bleeding now. You might even be dead. (WENDELL *abruptly clutches his head.*) Bitch.

JERI: (*to SARA*) Help him. Please. Before something really awful happens.

(*SARA considers. Hangs up the phone.*)

SARA: Who's the bitch, Wendell?

WENDELL: You. You're the bitch.

SARA: I'm the bitch. Not the woman who's always in your head. Watching your every move, recording everything you say and do.

WENDELL: I know what you're implying. My mother's the reason I'm a scientist!

SARA: You're telling your mom to leave your brain. Go away, bitch. Get out of my head.

(*The dogs start to bark. Sound of sirens. WENDELL's rocking madly, eyes tightly sealed.*)

SARA: (*desperately improvising*) She doted on you to distraction. Your dad hated that, so she drove him away... Wendell, listen to me, are you listening?... You needed a father figure in your life... She wouldn't let you have one... no friends, no mentors, what could you do... you took yourself as a father figure... Wendell? Can you hear me?

(*WENDELL starts to moan, loudly.*)

JERI: Wendell, listen to her—

SARA: You gave yourself all kinds of powers. You were a total whiz at math, that fed the fantasy. You started to think you were all-powerful... a... a malignant god, a source of disaster, yes, all stemming from that first disaster... the day your dad left... OK, so years later along comes Jeri. She loves you, she looks after you... you let her treat you like a baby... Wendell?

JERI: Wendell?

SARA: Wendell, wake up.

JERI: Baby, wake up.

SARA: Wendell!

JERI: Did you hear what she said?

(WENDELL *opens his eyes.*)

WENDELL: I know why the pillow was on the floor!

(WENDELL *grabs the pillow from the couch.*)

SARA: Wendell, put it down!—

JERI: Wendell, no!—

WENDELL: No! Don't be afraid! I wasn't going to smother you!

JERI: You weren't?

WENDELL: I was sleeping there! On the floor! Next to you! (*to SARA*) Like when I was little. Yes. Oh God. The bad dreams. I was afraid to crawl into bed with her. I took a pillow and I slept on the floor. One time my mom woke up. "What are you doing there?" "Having a bad dream." "Oh Wendell. That makes me so sad. Don't have bad dreams." (*to JERI*) You see? You get it? I never wanted to smother you! I just wanted to sleep at your feet!

(SARA *prompts her to agree.*)

JERI: I think so. Yes. I see.

WENDELL: Oh God.

(WENDELL *flings the pillow aside, frantically opens his laptop.*)

JERI: What's the matter? What are you doing?

WENDELL: Something I didn't account for.

JERI: What?

WENDELL: The WMDs.

SARA: What WMDs?

WENDELL: The Weyl Multiple Dirichlet series. It's hard to study the Whittaker coefficients directly. I overlooked the non-stable case!

JERI: Wendell, we don't understand a word you're saying.

SARA: Wendell, where are you going?

WENDELL: To call Finerman. My thesis has a major flaw.
Goodbye, doctor.

(The choppers return.)

SARA: *(to JERI)* Here come those choppers again. *(to WENDELL)*
We still have a few minutes—

WENDELL: *(closing laptop)* No, this won't wait. Gotta go.

(Sound of fire engines.)

SARA: I think we should definitely meet again. Does this hour work for you?

WENDELL: Can't you lie to Finerman, say I'm symptom-free?

(Sound of distant gunfire.)

SARA: I'm afraid not, Wendell.

WENDELL: I know! I was joking! *(to JERI)* Did I ever make a joke before?

JERI: Never.

WENDELL: I'm talking to you and I'm looking you in the eye and my brain isn't freezing over isn't that amazing?

JERI: I don't want to be your mom.

WENDELL: Of course you don't. You're not my mother. She understood me.

(Sound of police sirens.)

JERI: But I've been treating you like a child. And that's not fair to you. The first thing I'm going to do, I'm going to teach you how to drive a car.

WENDELL: And do laundry. And work the dishwasher, and make the bed, and pour my own cereal... This is so great! *(to SARA)* Was that the best interpretation you ever made?

(Sound of car alarms.)

SARA: *(warily)* Yes. Yes, it was.

WENDELL: Beginner's luck? I'm joking again! It was genius!

SARA: *(to WENDELL)* So I'll expect to hear from you.

WENDELL: Yes, you'll hear from me—*(darkly playful)* one way or the other.

(Sound of thunder.)

WENDELL: Come on, Jeri. Let's start the driving lessons.

JERI: Bye, Professor.

SARA: *(uneasily)* Take care.

WENDELL: *(at door)* Relax, Sara. You proved yourself. You don't have to be OCD anymore.

(WENDELL and JERI exit. SARA starts to chain the door. Stops herself. The phone rings.)

SARA: Hello? Oh. Yes. Professor Finerman.... Yes, he did show up for the session.... I think it was productive, yes.... Can't really say for sure yet... Yes, I'll hold....

(Chopper noise, directly overhead.. SARA chains the door.)

Yes, I'm here.... Really, that was Wendell, he called you right away? Did he say he'd found a flaw in his thesis?... That is a good sign, I guess... Tell me, are you hearing helicopters where you are?... The Provost's house was burglarized, yes, I know... The fire engines, yes, where was the fire?... The psych department... Really... My end of the building, wow...

(The power goes out, plunging the room into darkness.)

SARA: Dr. Finerman, did the power just go out at your place?....Maybe it's just this block...No, I am going to see him again, absolutely....Oh, it's much too soon to talk about a "cure"....Knowing what makes people tick doesn't always keep them from ticking, does it.... That's very kind, Dr. Finerman, but I wouldn't call myself a miracle worker....No, I think the jury's definitely out on that one....

(SARA's voice fades out, replaced by a deafening crescendo of choppers, fire engines, gunfire, police sirens, car alarms, thunder, distant explosions, and barking dogs. END OF PLAY.)