

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

**a 10-minute play
by Tom Baum**

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ELEANOR, 60s

GRETCHEN, 40s, her daughter

The setting is a park. The time is the present.

(ELEANOR is sitting alone on a park bench. Crows are shrieking.
GRETCHEN enters.)

GRETCHEN: Ohmigod. Mom?

ELEANOR: Oh. Hello, Gretchen.

GRETCHEN: What on earth are you doing here? I've been driving around circles...I was completely frantic...

ELEANOR: I'm so sorry, darling. What time was I expecting you?

GRETCHEN: Three o'clock. The usual time.

ELEANOR: Oh dear, I guess I wasn't thinking.

GRETCHEN: Obviously not. I put away the groceries, I went upstairs, you weren't there. I searched the house from top to bottom.

ELEANOR: I should have left you a note. I was in one of my states.

GRETCHEN: Right. What happened?

ELEANOR: Well, nothing actually happened.... Someone was coming to repair the furnace, and I just didn't **feel** like seeing him, so I left messages on all his numbers, and then I thought...what if he comes anyway, am I just going to ignore the doorbell when **it** rings? I couldn't do that to the poor man.

GRETCHEN: So you left.

ELEANOR: Yes. I was shaking like a leaf...but yes.

GRETCHEN: So **how does it feel**? To be out here...out of the house...after so many years...

ELEANOR: I'm feeling a little sad.

GRETCHEN: It makes you think of Daddy.

ELEANOR: Well yes, it does. It's just such a...such a naked feeling...

GRETCHEN: That's appropriate, actually.

ELEANOR: Appropriate? What do you mean?

GRETCHEN: Never mind. Why don't we head back now?

ELEANOR: No, but it's such a nice park, isn't it? So peaceful, really. Except for those crows, or are they ravens? Why are they so huge? And so many of them. They're like a juvenile gang, aren't they. There used to be pigeons here. I wonder, do bad birds drive out good birds? (*pause*) And that man's been looking at me too.

GRETCHEN: Which man?

ELEANOR: Over there, in the, what do you call them, sweat pants. He was jogging around the path and he stopped to rest. Every time he sees me looking he takes a drink from his water bottle. There. See? He's looking. Look.

GRETCHEN: You know what? I think I'd better take you home.

ELEANOR: What, you're not happy I'm out here?

GRETCHEN: No no, why wouldn't I be happy... But I can't just leave you here alone...and I have a meeting.

ELEANOR: At the college?

GRETCHEN: No, it's a coffee date, actually, and I'm running late already...

ELEANOR: A date with a man?

GRETCHEN: Yes, with a man.

ELEANOR: Well. That's encouraging, isn't it. How long has it been?

GRETCHEN: Long enough. Come on. First time out, you shouldn't strain yourself.

ELEANOR: It was a challenge.

GRETCHEN: Oh I can imagine.

ELEANOR: All the way here I heard footsteps behind me. I kept looking over my shoulder. If anyone was watching, they must have thought I was crazy. You know what it reminded me of?

GRETCHEN: No, what?

ELEANOR: When we first lived in Manhattan. I used to take walks all the time.

GRETCHEN: Before I was born.

ELEANOR: Oh God yes. Years before. Wait, but there was a grocery store, don't you remember, just after we moved back here? I used to walk there. Before they delivered.

GRETCHEN: Crowley's. It was just around the corner. Not much temptation there.

ELEANOR: I'm sorry—temptation?

GRETCHEN: Nothing...it's just...Agoraphobia is fear of the marketplace. Literally. In ancient Greece, the only women seen in the agora were prostitutes.

ELEANOR: Really. That's interesting. But I don't see what that has to do with—

GRETCHEN: Your availability. Daddy was away, you were alone.

ELEANOR: Oh, I see. That sounds awfully glib, dear. And I wasn't alone. I had you to look after.

GRETCHEN: But we never went anywhere.

ELEANOR: Where would we have gone? There weren't any playgrounds in Central Park.

GRETCHEN: Right. Forget it, we're going home.

ELEANOR: Not when we were living there, there weren't.

GRETCHEN: Central Park was built with playgrounds. That was the whole point of Central Park.

ELEANOR: Well, all right, if you say so—

GRETCHEN: And you never scheduled play dates.

ELEANOR: We didn't have that expression. "Play dates."

GRETCHEN: Whatever. Let's go.

ELEANOR: Well, what was I supposed to do? Go up to someone and say, "Please play with my daughter"?

GRETCHEN: Just leave it alone. Come on, it'll be dark soon—

ELEANOR: You didn't seem to mind. You were a very sunny child.

GRETCHEN: Mom... I was a total geek. Don't you remember? You had to drag me kicking and screaming my first day of school....Literally kicking and screaming....I was terrified. So were you. I inherited your terror. I'm still terrified. Before every lecture I'm a basket case.

ELEANOR: Really. After all those years of therapy.

GRETCHEN: You needn't sneer. Especially since you've never tried therapy. Or rather, Daddy wouldn't let you.

ELEANOR: I never wanted therapy. I'm sure if I'd asked him—

GRETCHEN: He'd have told you it was useless. Don't you remember the fit he threw, when I switched from pre-med to psychology?

ELEANOR: Fine. Gretchen, you should go, you'll be late for your date.

GRETCHEN: We're talking about Daddy.

ELEANOR: Are you worried about this date?

GRETCHEN: Of course I'm worried. When am I not worried.

ELEANOR: Where did you meet this man?

GRETCHEN: We haven't met yet.

ELEANOR: Oh, an Internet thing. Isn't that a little risky, dear? And don't you think you should at least call him?

GRETCHEN: No, I don't. Why did Daddy ignore your problem, didn't you ever wonder?

ELEANOR: But he didn't ignore it.

GRETCHEN: Oh right. He prescribed Valium. They didn't get you out of the house, did they?

ELEANOR: No, they never had much effect.

GRETCHEN: And the amphetamines?

ELEANOR: Really, I'd rather not discuss this. Look dear, that man is looking again. See? He just gulped at his water bottle.

GRETCHEN: You were addicted, weren't you.

ELEANOR: Yes, dear, I was addicted. From the time you were born.

GRETCHEN: I used to hear you in the bedroom, talking to yourself. And those dents in the bedroom wall--you were throwing things, weren't you?

ELEANOR: Until you went away to school. Then I was able to quit.

GRETCHEN: Right. My arrival made you a drug addict... and my departure cured you..

ELEANOR: Gretchen, dear—don't give yourself all the credit.

GRETCHEN: It makes me so damn furious!

ELEANOR: About what, dear?

GRETCHEN: That you're not angrier!

ELEANOR: At what?

GRETCHEN: At Daddy! For keeping you prisoner!

ELEANOR: Oh come now, you're exaggerating.

GRETCHEN: You didn't have friends. You never talked on the phone. You never had parties. The only time you had people over was once a year, when he had the nursing staff in for Christmas.

ELEANOR: I dreaded those Christmas things.

GRETCHEN: And he didn't care if you did. All over the world, women were waking up, and he fed you drugs to keep you from rebelling.

ELEANOR: And now you're being glib again.

GRETCHEN: Forget it, Mom. You've pushed enough of my buttons for one day.

ELEANOR: Please, you're too old to have buttons. He was a difficult man, yes, everyone said so, even his patients, but he was so many other things, brilliant and kind and generous, and so much fun to be with! Oh goodness, he took me everywhere—before you were born. You ask why didn't I have friends? We didn't need friends. I was devoted to your father, he was devoted to me, the only way we could enjoy things was to share them with each other—

GRETCHEN: What did you have to share? Your days were all the same.

ELEANOR: My thoughts. My opinions. I had them. I still do, thank you very much. And of course, my petty grievances, but I never troubled him with those.

GRETCHEN: Of course not.

ELEANOR: Why do you say of course not? Do you unload everything on the men in your life? Maybe you shouldn't. Maybe that's why you don't have a man.

GRETCHEN: That does it. Let's go.

ELEANOR: Where? I'm not going anywhere.

GRETCHEN: I'm taking you home.

ELEANOR: I don't want to go home! For God's sake, Gretchen, stop mothering me! Go meet this man before he gives up on you.

GRETCHEN: He'll understand.

ELEANOR: He won't, dear.

GRETCHEN: Not all men are Daddy. They don't all explode when you defy them.

ELEANOR: Maybe they don't care enough to be angry. Gretchen, you made a date and you have to keep it. Don't be afraid to be happy. You're a grown woman, it's high time you gave up all these ridiculous grudges you have against me, against your father, God knows who else you blame, it's unworthy of you, dear, this childish, petulant attitude...Oh goodness, I'm shaking again. Look at that, I've even scared the crows away. Say something, Gretchen.

(Pause.)

GRETCHEN: I'm going to see my therapist on Monday....and I'm going to tell her we can wrap this up.

ELEANOR: Long overdue, I'm sure. Come here.

(ELEANOR unbuttons the top button of GRETCHEN's blouse, pats her hair into place, etc.)

ELEANOR: There. That's better. Now go on your date and have a good time.

GRETCHEN: You're sure.

ELEANOR: Yes, I'm sure.

GRETCHEN: I'll try and drop by tomorrow. Let me know if you're not going to be there.

ELEANOR: I might not know until it happens.

GRETCHEN: Then leave me a note this time.

ELEANOR: I will.

GRETCHEN: And promise you won't stay here too long?

ELEANOR: I promise.

GRETCHEN: Are you positive you can make it home all right?

ELEANOR: I do know the way, after all.

GRETCHEN: With a minimum of panic.

ELEANOR: Oh Gretchen, you're as bad as your father.

GRETCHEN: Good. Then this hasn't been totally in vain.

ELEANOR: Goodbye, Gretchen.

GRETCHEN: Goodbye, Mom.

(GRETCHEN starts to leave, hesitates.)

ELEANOR: Go! Now! Or you never will!

(GRETCHEN starts away, looks back to see ELEANOR waving. She waves back.)

ELEANOR: Oh. No, dear. I wasn't waving at you.

(Pause. GRETCHEN exits. The light fades on ELEANOR. Crows shriek. END OF PLAY.)