

THE SEESAW PRINCIPLE

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

©Tom Baum 2017

SPENCER, 50s, a playwright

MARCIA, late 40s, his wife

ETHAN, 20s, their son, a would-be playwright

NATE, 40s, a producer

JAMALI, 40s, a cabdriver

Nate and Jamali can be played by the same actor.

The locale is New York. The time is the present.

(Lights up on MARCIA, surrounded by tissues and medications. Her hair is going gray. She's reading to SPENCER from a laptop, sniffing now and then.)

MARCIA: "Age cannot wither your infinite variety. *If Winter Comes* is still my favorite, even if it did win the Pulitzer. XOXO, George." Who is George and why is he hugging and kissing you?

SPENCER: He's a backup reviewer for the *Times*. I wish you wouldn't read my email.

MARCIA: "Crow keeps well in the freezer. I plan to dine on some tonight. Stan." No kisses from Stan, whoever he is.

SPENCER: He panned *If Winter Comes* in '92. If these emails are annoying you so much, why don't you not read them.

MARCIA: "*If Winter Comes*, can Spring be far behind?" Oh kill me now, is that Spring Westerman? The diva you cast in *Border Disputes*? The one everyone said you were banging?

SPENCER: Why don't you try and get some rest.

MARCIA: I don't have time to rest. We're flying to Boston on the four o'clock plane.

SPENCER: Why Boston?

MARCIA: Because it's not New York.

SPENCER: Please come to the opening. I want you and Ethan both to be there.

MARCIA: Why? What are we to you, other than useless baggage? I'm fed up. So is Ethan.

SPENCER: Yes, I'm afraid it's the Seesaw Principle. If I'm up, you're down.

(Phone rings, off.)

MARCIA: That is such blatant nonsense! It's not a seesaw, it's a ladder, which you somehow manage to pull up after you. Ethan, sweetheart, who was that on the phone?

(ETHAN enters, dressed like a slacker.)

ETHAN: (to SPENCER) Nate says he'll meet you at Orso in half an hour. He says the *Times* is giving you half a page on Sunday.

SPENCER: You want to come along? You're welcome to.

ETHAN: Are you kidding? I'd just be in the way. I'll share a taxi though. On the way you can tell me what's wrong with *Reflected Glory*.

SPENCER: Happy to help if I can. I don't think I have that many notes—

ETHAN: Liar. I know you hated it. Cab!

(SPENCER and ETHAN walk to another area of the stage, where JAMALI, a Pakistani CABDRIVER, is waiting.)

SPENCER: Schubert Theater, please.

JAMALI: Oh yes? What is playing there?

ETHAN: *If Winter Comes*. It won the Pulitzer in '92. The revival opens tonight. And the man who wrote it happens to be gracing your taxi. My dad. Spencer Gordon. "The theater's greatest two-way threat since 1616." Can you believe the horseshit people write?

JAMALI: And you are what, his son?

ETHAN: Yes, I'm his son. Little Ethan. The One Who Walks in Shadow. So go ahead, Spencer, do your worst. No wait, don't say it. Those four soldiers coming back from Iraq. You're gonna tell me it's exactly like your Vietnam play. Hello? One of my soldiers is a woman! But sure, that's what they'll say: "*Reflected Glory* is no *If Winter Comes*, though it tries so embarrassingly hard."

SPENCER: Bad writers imitate. Good writers steal.

ETHAN: I knew you'd accuse me of stealing.

SPENCER: The lieutenant's speech? In Act One?

ETHAN: What about it?

SPENCER: It's...well, it's practically word for word.

ETHAN: OK, why don't you just go ahead and say it? I'll never be any good on my own. Not even the poor man's Spencer Gordon. (to JAMALI) You can let me out here. And then—dude, are you listening?—drive carefully. This is precious cargo you're carrying: the pride of Broadway, the playwright's playwright, the man who makes you laugh one night and cry the next, a great man and a great human being and the most terrifying role model any son could want!

(ETHAN *exits the cab.*)

JAMALI: Your son, he was very upset.

SPENCER: You should have seen my wife this morning. Every time a play of mine opens, she runs a fever. My God, what use is my success, if I can't share it with my family?

JAMALI: Can a man be blamed if he's resented by his loved ones?

SPENCER: I shouldn't have let them go.

JAMALI: Go where, sir?

SPENCER: They're flying to Boston. On the night of my opening.

JAMALI: Ah yes. But this is not your problem.

SPENCER: It is my problem. I'd give anything to make my family happy.

JAMALI: Ah, in my cab, Mr. Gordon, you must be careful what you wish for. Here we are, Schubert Theater!

(*Lights up on a poster for a revival of FOLLIES. SPENCER looks around, befuddled. NATE enters.*)

NATE: Spence! My God, of all people. How are ya, what are you doing here, I was just on my way to Orso.

SPENCER: Yes, we're having lunch, aren't we, Nate?

NATE: We are? Since when? You look like shit, my friend. Problems with the new play?

SPENCER: What about *If Winter Comes*? What's happening here?

NATE: *If Winter Comes*? That's a title for a comedy?

SPENCER: My play! My Pulitzer Prize!

NATE: Spencer. It's good to aim high, but come on. Drama after all these years? The form is dead, good riddance if you ask me. Drama, what was it founded on? Trivial misunderstandings between the sexes and the generations. And what's left? Comedy. Your comedies, Spence. *Border Disputes, Let's Talk About the Money, Five'll Get You Ten*—the all-time comedy grosser, lest we forget—plus whatever you come up with next. *Ten'll Get You Twenty*—now there's a comedic title. See ya, Spencer!

(NATE *exits.*)

SPENCER: No! Nate! Wait up! Nate?

(SPENCER *hurries after NATE. Lights up on MARCIA at a restaurant table. MARCIA looks stunning. Cold all gone. Hair no longer gray. MARCIA greets NATE with a more than friendly kiss.*)

NATE: Ixnay on the ongue-tay. Hey, look who I ran into outside the Schubert. Sit down, Spence, we can spare a moment.

(SPENCER *sits.*)

NATE: Marcia, are you aware your husband is toiling away on a drama? Did you not warn him against this?

MARCIA: Oh please. Spencer's idea of tragedy is when the Knicks lose a close one.

NATE: I know, right? So, Marcia, what did you think of the latest draft? What would you cut?

SPENCER: (*to MARCIA*) You're reading scripts for Nate?

MARCIA: "Reading" for him? Well, OK, if putting it that way makes you feel less threatened. (*to NATE*) Sometimes I think Spencer wishes he'd married below his skill set. You know, one of those jealous, carping semi-invalids you see married to writers, up to my nostrils in Kleenex and Sucrets.

SPENCER: Yes, wouldn't that be horrible. Nate, will you let us have the table for a minute?

NATE: (*to MARCIA*) Don't be too long. We have tons to discuss.

(NATE *exits.*)

SPENCER: How long has this been going on? Is this your idea of revenge?

MARCIA: Revenge for what?

SPENCER: Marcia, come on. Spring Westerman...the actress...from *Border Disputes*?

MARCIA: What's *Border Disputes*? Spencer, you're not making any sense. Are you trying to confess something? Ohmigod, how...how unmanly. Well, all right, confession accepted. And now could you please leave us alone, like a good little boy? Nate and I are having a creative meeting.

(NATE *enters*.)

SPENCER: A creative meeting. I see. (*to MARCIA*) Marcia, I'll see you back at the apartment.

MARCIA: Don't wait up.

NATE: Nice running into you! Think funny, Spence!

(*Lights up on another part of the stage. ETHAN on a cell phone, no longer a slacker, hair slicked, designer clothes.*)

ETHAN: —It works better without the lieutenant's speech, I don't know why I ever included it. The producer is always right, I'll remember that, Nate. Say hi to Mom.

(SPENCER *enters*.)

ETHAN: Whoa. Dad, you startled me. Hey, guess what.

SPENCER: Good news?

ETHAN: The best. Nate has committed to produce *Reflected Glory*. Couple of notes, nothing major. He and Mom want me to take out a speech in the first act. They think it might get laughs.

SPENCER: The lieutenant's speech.

ETHAN: Yes, how did you know.

SPENCER: I'll miss that speech.

ETHAN: It's yours.

SPENCER: Well, that's what I mean. Any author hates to lose an *hommage*. Especially from one's own flesh and blood.

ETHAN: You're losing me, Dad.

SPENCER: Well, the fact that it resembles—what the hell, the fact that it was lifted, almost word for word, from my Act One of my play.

ETHAN: From *Five'll Get You Ten*? Are you serious? I defy you to show me any resemblance.

SPENCER: I don't mean from *Five'll Get You Ten*.

ETHAN: Then what the hell do you mean? Seriously, just because you only wrote one play in your life, one ridiculous comedy, anything I attempt is an imitation? OK, Dad. Have it your way. I'm forever in your debt. (*starts out*)

SPENCER: I'm being punked, right?

ETHAN: What do you mean, "punked"?

SPENCER: You and Mom and Nate...you're trying to bring the old man down a peg. I don't blame you. I've neglected you. I've put my career first...and my...my professional relationships. You've made your point and I promise from now on the family comes before everything else.

ETHAN: Dad? Don't change a hair on our account. We love you just as crazy as you are.

(ETHAN *exits*. *Lights up on another part of the stage*.)

SPENCER *walks over to his computer, sits down. Closes his eyes.*)

SPENCER: *If Winter Comes*. A drama in two acts...by Spencer Gordon.

(SPENCER *types. Blackout. Lights up. SPENCER still typing. Blackout. Lights up. A very weary SPENCER still typing. Blackout. Sound of a printer. Printer stops. Lights up. SPENCER is typing.*)

SPENCER: "Hi Nate. You asked for another play. It's attached. I'm bringing a hard copy to your office. Love, Spencer."

(SPENCER *picks up the printed copy. Lights up on MARCIA. More glam than ever.*)

MARCIA: —No no no. I don't care if Madame Westerman wore it during dress, the hat hides her face and they won't hear her past the seventh row. Spencer, what is it? I'm on my way to the airport.

SPENCER: I brought you and Nate a new play.

MARCIA: You did what?

NATE: (*off*) Ethan, is that you?

(NATE *enters.*)

NATE *Oy.* Spencer.

(SPENCER *hands NATE the script.*)

SPENCER: Hot off the press. Please? I promise you won't be disappointed.

MARCIA: Nate, go ahead. I'll deal with him.

(NATE *takes the script and exits.*)

SPENCER: (*calling after him*) I think I smell Pulitzer! (*to MARCIA*) So where are you flying to?

MARCIA: Where are we flying to? Boston, of course. Hello? The opening of Ethan's play? My God, this is really a new low. Barging in here, the day before Ethan's first play opens...like a pathetic old dog with a script in his teeth.... Can't you see the guilt you're inflicting? Don't you realize how hard it was for Ethan to finish this play, because you've tried so many times and never succeeded, not once in your entire non-career? Don't you know, finally, after all these years, what you're doing to your son?

(ETHAN *has entered.*)

ETHAN: He knows exactly what he's doing. The bloody sadist.

MARCIA: Ethan, darling, go downstairs and get us a cab. Our plane's in, ohmigod, an hour.

ETHAN: I'm supposed to take a plane? With all the rage I'm feeling? I'll short out the engines!

(NATE *enters with the script.*)

NATE: Leave the boy alone, Spence. (*hands play to SPENCER*) I assume you want this back.

SPENCER: No, I want you to read it!

NATE: Spencer...we're in the 21st Century. The world has come a long way since Vietnam.

SPENCER: I know, but history doesn't just vanish, does it—or does it?

NATE: You want another opinion? I think you need a psychiatrist. And
 Ethan: I don't want you showing a script of yours around, without my
 permission. That means to anyone.

ETHAN: I never did! You mean to my dad? No! Deliberately!
 Oh for God's sake...you mean he plagiarized it?

NATE: The lieutenant's speech in Act One—word for word. I can
 recommend a lawyer.

MARCIA: Spencer, do you know how truly disturbed you are?
 Do you really understand? *(to ETHAN)* Ethan darling, if we miss
 this plane we're toast. *(to NATE)* Nate darling, we'll see you up there.

(MARCIA gives NATE a lingering kiss, then exits with ETHAN.)

SPENCER: Goodbye, Marcia. Have a safe flight. Goodbye, Ethan.

ETHAN: Goodbye, you flop!

(ETHAN and MARCIA exit.)

NATE: I meant that about a psychiatrist. Get thee to one, pronto.

(NATE exits. Blackout. Lights up on SPENCER, sitting in a chair, staring miserably into space. Blackout. Lights up on SPENCER, asleep in the chair. He opens his eyes. He's come to some sort of horrible decision. Blackout. Lights up on another part of the stage. SPENCER is hailing a cab.)

SPENCER: Taxi!

(Lights up on JAMALI.)

JAMALI: Where to, sir?

SPENCER : That depends. Do you know any tall buildings in the
 city without protective barriers?

JAMALI: Sir, wouldn't you rather go home?

SPENCER: I don't have a home. Well, that's not entirely true. My
 wife has a home. My son has a home.

JAMALI: Sir, you sound weary of life.

SPENCER: No, my life is weary of me. It appears to have gone somewhere else. Like my wife and son. They're on their way to Boston. Opening night. *Reflected Glory*. My son's first play.

JAMALI: So you're all alone.

SPENCER: Completely alone.

JAMALI: They're up, you're down.

SPENCER: That's how a seesaw works.

JAMALI: They're down, you're up.

SPENCER: It's a horrible thing. .

JAMALI: Like those poor people on TV.

SPENCER: What people.

JAMALI: Oh, you didn't see? It was all over Times Square. A plane at JFK—it crashed on takeoff.

SPENCER: Where was it going?

JAMALI: Boston, Massachusetts.

SPENCER: Boston.

JAMALI: Huge explosion. No survivors. All dead.

SPENCER: All dead.

JAMALI: So have you decided on your destination?

SPENCER: Yes, I think I have.

JAMALI: A minute ago you were looking for a roof.

SPENCER: I was, wasn't I.

JAMALI: Let that be a lesson to you. Here we are, sir, Schubert Theater.

(SPENCER *exits the cab.*)

JAMALI: Break a leg, Mr. Gordon!

(Lights up on a poster: IF WINTER COMES BY SPENCER GORDON. NATE enters.)

NATE: Spencer. Oh God. I'm so sorry.

SPENCER: Hello, Nate.

NATE: It's so horrible. I'm devastated. You heard, of course?

SPENCER: Just now. In the cab.

NATE: Why weren't Marcia and Ethan here? Why did they fly to Boston? Why didn't they come to your opening? Spencer, where are you going?

(Lights up on a row of theater seats.)

NATE: Spence, what is this, we don't have to go in there—

SPENCER: Do you mind if I take the aisle?

(SPENCER starts to sit. Sound of scattered applause.)

SPENCER: Thank you. Thank you all for coming.

NATE: *(aside)* He's in shock. *(to SPENCER)* Let me take you home.

SPENCER: Home? Why would I go home? What's there for me? What was ever there for me? Nothing. Here is where I need to be...sitting in a gorgeous Broadway theater... the lights going down... the cellphones blinking off...the curtain going up...waiting in a breathless hush for the audience to hear my precious words....

(Sounds of "Shh!" The lights have dimmed. Spotlight on SPENCER. He looks at the audience. He brightens.)

SPENCER: ...I wouldn't have missed this for the world.

(Blackout. END OF PLAY.)