

THREE SMALL MEN
(WITH THANKS TO EDWARD ALBEE)

A Play in One Act

by

David James

David James
PO Box 721
Linden, MI 48451
Email:
dljames@oaklandcc.edu

Cast of Characters

MAX: 20-year old, confident, brash, ready to
conquer the world

JERRY: 37, married, two kids, drinker, works under-
the-table

FRANK: 65, divorced, lives alone

Scene

A backyard in a working-class suburban neighborhood.

Time

The present.

ACT AND SCENE

SETTING: A campfire in Jerry's backyard.

AT RISE: Max and Jerry sit, empty beer cans piling up behind them. They drink, throw their cans throughout the play, and place logs in the fire.

JERRY:
Who says you can't? That's bull.

MAX:
I heard some guys talking.

JERRY:
Your friends?

MAX:
Yeah. Donnie down at the docks says it's illegal. And Mad Dog says I'll get screwed in the end when I retire.

JERRY:
This, coming from two losers.

MAX:
I know I can beat the system. This job is all under-the-table. Twelve bucks an hour, no taxes. I'm putting in breakwalls, outside in the sun all day. Done by 5 or 6:00. Heaven, man.

JERRY:
Sounds like a no brainer.

MAX:
I'll be a millionaire by the time I'm 25. New truck. A big house. Women knocking on my windows trying to get in.

JERRY:
I'll drink to that.
(*They toast and drink.*)
I like the way you think, boy.

MAX:

I figure, why pay the government? It's my money. I worked my butt off for it. Why give it to a bunch of liberals who'll hand it out for free to people sitting on their asses.

JERRY:

Some live their whole lives that way.

MAX:

I figure, if you work hard, you can play hard. And if you play hard, you have a helluva lot more fun, if you know what I mean.

JERRY:

Oh yeah, I know. I'm doing it. I've been working under-the-table for over fifteen years now.

MAX:

And look at you: a house, a wife, two kids. The American Dream.

JERRY:

Yeah, that's me, living the dream.

(A beat.)

Sometimes the dream sucks.

MAX:

What do ya mean?

JERRY:

The money's good, sure, but there's no health care. Or dental. Every time a kid's sick, it wipes out my bank account.

MAX:

But you can buy insurance with all the extra money you make, right?

JERRY:

You'd think so, but something always comes up. A car repair. The furnace. Your lawnmower craps out. I haven't told anyone yet, but a month ago, I lost my job at the plumbing company. They fired me for no reason.

MAX:

Take the bastards to court.

JERRY:

Can't. Technically, I'm not "employed" there. Not in the union, blah, blah.

MAX:

Well, that won't happen to me. I'm the best worker they got. And they love me.

JERRY:

I'll find another job, for sure. Just taking a break. Enjoying this little vacation while Lila works. And the beer's going down mighty good.

MAX:

Ain't that right.

(They toast. Drink. Pause.)

They really fired you?

JERRY:

Hell, I didn't like the job anyway. I'm going to get back into house painting. I'll call Ernie again. He might need somebody. Max, don't mention this to Lila, okay?

MAX:

She doesn't know?

JERRY:

I'll tell her. Eventually. She'll be pissed and I don't need that. It would ruin my vacation!

(Frank walks into the circle.)

FRANK:

I'd tell her.

JERRY:

Frank. Have a seat. You want a beer?

FRANK:

No thanks. Got my trusty diet Coke.

JERRY:

You know Max?

FRANK:

Can't say we've met.

JERRY:

He's a friend of mine.

(Frank and Max shake hands. Frank sits.)

FRANK:

As I was saying, Jerry, I'd tell Lila you lost your job.

MAX:

Why?

FRANK:

Because she's his partner. If you don't tell her this, she'll wonder what else you keep from her.

JERRY:

Yeah, yeah. I'll tell her...after I get a new job. I don't want her to worry.

FRANK:

Right.

MAX:

It's your life, man. You can do what you want. Anyway, it's none of her damn business.

FRANK:

You're not in a relationship, are you, Max?

MAX:

Nope. Free as a bird.

FRANK:

And you drink a lot?

MAX:

As much as I can.

JERRY:

Me, too.

(They toast and drink.)

FRANK:

It'll get you in the end.

JERRY:

Hell, everything gets you in the end.

FRANK:

Not like this. You've got time to change—make things better.

MAX:

How can you get better than this? Drinking around a fire in your backyard? Making money hand over fist?

JERRY:

Screwing The Man on taxes?

FRANK:

You guys are assholes.

JERRY:

Come on, Frank, lighten up.

FRANK:

You think you're big stuff, but you don't know shit.

MAX:

I know I'm living large, man.

FRANK:

No, you're shrinking into a pool of tears.

JERRY:

Frank, you're a poet.

FRANK:

I've been there. Can't you see? What do you get by working under-the-table?

MAX:

Tons of money. My money.

FRANK:

For now. But there's no record of you working. No social security in the future. No savings because you spend it all. And they can fire you any time they want. Right, Jerry?

JERRY:

They're bastards.

FRANK:

Yeah, they're *all* bastards.

JERRY:

I'll find another job.

FRANK:

There's always someone willing to pay you for shit jobs, give you no bennies, and no security. What a great future.

JERRY:

I'm doing fine, old man.

FRANK:

Right. Until they stop hiring you. Until you get hurt on the job. Until your liver goes. Until your wife divorces you for being an alcoholic who can't hold down a minimum wage job. Until your own kids are embarrassed by you. You're just fine.

MAX:

That won't happen to me.

FRANK:

I didn't think it'd happen. When I was your age, Max, I was on top of the world, great job (under-the-table), drinking like a sieve. When I was your age, Jerry, same thing—married, kids, a house, losing one job after another and drinking myself stupid every day.

So, I am your future.

JERRY: Y

ou had some bad breaks, I'll give you that.

FRANK:

On disability. Alcoholic. Living alone. My kids resent me because I was drunk all those years when I should have been there for them.

Now I'm trying hard to make ends meet. No car. House temp at 64 in the winter. Eating spaghettios. Ramon noodles. Praying I shoot a deer so I can have some meat in the house.

MAX:

I like Ramon noodles.

FRANK:

Every day of the week? Look, you guys can do better. That's all I'm saying: there's still time.

JERRY:

Just because your life sucks, doesn't mean our lives will. Max here, he's strong and a good worker. So am I. We're just enjoying a few brewskis, relaxing under these glorious stars.

MAX:

Now you're sounding like a poet.

JERRY:

I am, but I don't know it.

MAX:

And your feet are Shakespeare's.

FRANK:

No, his feet are Longfellow's. You guys do what you want—I'm just warning you. No harm in that, right?

MAX:

(raises his glass)

Here's to being warned.

(They toast and drink.)

JERRY:

I feel better.

(Pause.)

Can you believe those stars. Billions.

MAX:

If you see a shooting star, make a wish, man.

FRANK:

So what would you wish for, Max?

MAX:

I don't know. Maybe a Silverado. Or to meet some hot chick. Maybe to get a beach house right on a lake somewhere.

FRANK:

How about you, Jerry?

MAX:

What, he's got everything.

JERRY:

An unlimited beer keg built into the back side of my house.

MAX:

That would be so cool. I would love to see that. What about you?

FRANK:

Me? I'd wish for another chance, you know, to go back and do it over. Everything would be different.

JERRY:

Like hell it would. People always say that but—

FRANK:

Honest, it would.

JERRY:

You're blowing hot air out your ass, Frank, and you know it.

FRANK:

Maybe you're right. But I miss my boys. It's eating me alive, you know, because they won't even answer my calls.

MAX:

You should text them.

JERRY:

Max...

FRANK:

It wouldn't matter—text, FaceUp, Twit-type, whatever kids do—they don't want me around.

JERRY:

Yeah, life's a bitch.

(Long pause.)

MAX:

You drank too much and treated us like dirt.

FRANK:

(not hearing what Max and Jerry say.)

Even after I've been sober for eleven years and seventy-three days.

JERRY:

You couldn't hold a job for more than two weeks—just long enough for the boss to get to know you and fire you.

FRANK:

You'd think in their heart of hearts they could forgive me. Give me a second chance.

MAX:

We gave you a hundred chances growing up and you pissed on us every time.

FRANK:

I swear to the good Lord above, I'd be a great father and husband; I'd work and provide for my boys. I'd be there.

JERRY:

The almighty bottle was your god and you worshipped him above all others.

MAX:

You missed every one of my soccer games.

FRANK:

I wish I could take it back, swallow it, and start over.

JERRY:

I swore I'd never follow you anywhere. Ever.

MAX:

Missed my birthdays—7, 8, 11, 12 and 15—too drunk to bother.

FRANK:

But I can't go back and I have to live with that.

JERRY:

I can't go forward without seeing the empty bottles and cans, and you, passed out on the couch.

MAX:

I don't even remember your face because I don't want to. You're dead.

*(Frank throws his soda bottle
in the fire and walks away.
Long pause.)*

JERRY:

I hate when he does that. It creeps me out.

MAX:

And it won't change a damn thing.

JERRY:

Nope. We're screwed.

*(Max and Jerry throw their beers into the fire, open
another, and drink it down as the lights go out.)*

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT AND SCENE)