

Your eyes grow tired and you realize that you are done editing for the day. It's three in the afternoon, and you wish that you could stay up forever. Stay up all night long and into the next day and into the next and the next. But you're tired, and you could take a nap, because you're self-employed, captain of your own ship. But if you take a nap, you'll never wake up. Death stalks you this afternoon. It's time for coffee. It's time to go to Mitzi's Cafe.

WAITING FOR MARGOT

by James Banks

Starring You as You (Beth)

You as Julia

You as Brian

You as...

JACKSON: So Julia, what was it you said you did? I don't want to pry, but it's a first date, and I need to understand the basics about you.

JULIA: I'm a high school teacher. How about you?

JACKSON: I'm a high school teacher, too. Substitute teacher. Also, I drive for one of those gig taxi replacement companies.

JULIA: Which shall not be named.

JACKSON: No. In fact, I don't work for them.

JULIA: They don't exist.

JACKSON: We have good chemistry, Julia. So how did you become a high school teacher?

JULIA: When I was a little girl, I always struggled to understand math. I wanted to understand math so bad.

JACKSON: How badly?

JULIA: I hated, I mean, absolutely *hated* doing the multiplication tables. We would do timed tests, and I would be struggling. And that smart kid, Sam Miller, would already be done, and he'd be doodling on the paper.

JACKSON: What a jerk.

JULIA: No, Sam was nice. Kinda weird, though.

JACKSON: So then what happened?

JULIA: In my story? Okay, so when I got into junior high school, I had a teacher who was really good. His name was Mr. Lee. He was a very compassionate man. He was empathic.

JACKSON: How empathic?

JULIA: Not too empathic. People have different kinds of empathy. He had an empathy for how it is people can have problems relating to math.

JACKSON: So he was able to help you.

JULIA: Jackson, (Can I use your name? JACKSON: yes), Jackson, he had confidence in me. He did a con job on me. I was totally taken in. I was suckered into seeing my own potential.

JACKSON: We should all be such suckers.

JULIA: Jackson, we have amazing chemistry.

JACKSON: So you became a teacher because of him?

JULIA: I knew what it was like to struggle, and I was grateful for how he gave me the confidence to succeed. I never got to being the best at math, so now I'm an English teacher.

JACKSON: Were you a good writer when you were younger?

JULIA: Yes, but even more so, an actor.

JACKSON: So you connected with the way he connected with you, and got into your head in a good way.

JULIA: Absolutely. It was like he turned little dials in my head just by the way he looked at me. I had the ability in me the whole time.

You have been quiet, sipping your coffee, the whole time. This is the best part of the afternoon, when the leaves are blowing outside and the children are walking home, so cute as they shield themselves from the ash from the wildfires.

JULIA: So, Jackson, do you have any hobbies?

JACKSON: Well. I was going to save that for the second date. But since you bring it up. I'm a fire-breather.

JULIA: Oh wow, like the Kitchen Furnace Fire that's burning right now.

JACKSON: Yeah.

They acknowledge the death and destruction for a few seconds, then return to talking.

JULIA: Can you do a demonstration?

JACKSON: Yeah, sure, let's go outside.

JULIA: You have the lighter fluid with you all the time?

JACKSON: It's actually corn starch. Corn starch is safer.

JULIA: What's so dangerous about breathing fire? Can you die?

JACKSON: Yes.

JULIA: That's a serious hobby.

JACKSON: Yes, it's something that brings me meaning.

JULIA: Okay, so let's see some fire!

You see them go outside and you can see them through the window. Jackson starts to breathe fire a few times. A crowd begins to form, and just as it does, he stops. He and Julia come back in.

JULIA: Huh, that was impressive, but I didn't find it to be all that meaningful. It was just fire.

JACKSON: Yeah, maybe it's not meaningful. Maybe it's just fire.

JULIA: I didn't mean to depress you, Jackson, not

on a first date.

JACKSON: Maybe we aren't soul mates, after all, Julia.

JULIA: Maybe not. Well, what do we talk about now?

You come over and say hello.

YOU: Nice fire breathing.

JACKSON: Oh hello, do you know Julia?

JULIA: We met in this cafe recently. Maybe a few days ago?

YOU: My name is Beth.

JACKSON: I'm Jackson.

YOU: So are you two still on a date?

JULIA: I don't know, Jackson, are we?

JACKSON: I guess if I get to know your friends, then I get to know you. It's not like we were going to kiss or anything. So yeah, she can join us.

JULIA: But we did have great chemistry...

JACKSON: True. But it's possible for three people to have chemistry, of a different sort.

YOU: I tend to slow down reactions.

JACKSON: That's good. We have to have some ballast to this ship of conversation. What do you do for a living?

YOU: I'm a freelance editor.

JACKSON: Wow, what kind of editing?

YOU: A lot of copy editing, but I do more complicated things sometimes. One time I helped someone put their autobiography together.

JACKSON: Okay, okay. I'm a substitute teacher. And I drive for one of those gig economy taxi substitutes.

YOU: Huh. I guess we're all gigging.

JACKSON: Julia isn't. She's a high school teacher.

YOU: That's interesting. I guess she is.

JACKSON: You mean she isn't?

YOU: When I met her, she said she was an actor.

JULIA: I was an actor, but now I'm a high school teacher.

JACKSON: So wait, after a few days now you have a completely different career?

JULIA: Jackson, Beth, come close. I have a secret (she whispers:) I'm a past-shifter.

JACKSON: A "past-shifter"?

JULIA: Uh huh. I can have different pasts, can tap into them. It's like a super power except... it's not really under my control.

YOU: But you're aware that you have different pasts? How does that work?

JULIA: What do you mean?

YOU: If you change pasts, how do you know that you've had different pasts before that? Wouldn't your current past not contain the memory of the other pasts?

JULIA: I have two memories. My "Julia-memory" and my "universe-memory".

YOU: "Universe-memory" because the universe provides the memories?

JULIA: Not just the memories, though, the actual past. So one part of the past is memory, and another part is what's stored up in the present. Like, if I have a past as a ballerina, I can do ballet, and I also have all the memories of ballet instructors pushing me and pushing me and pushing me. As a high school teacher, I can teach high school, and, I also remember the teacher who inspired me.

YOU: Okay, that makes sense now.

JACKSON: Wow, so does that give you meaning?

JULIA: I don't believe in meaning. I believe in human happiness.

JACKSON: Oh, does human happiness give you meaning?

JULIA: No, it's just human happiness. Does meaning make you happy?

JACKSON: No, it's just meaning.

JULIA: We have amazing chemistry.

YOU: Is it possible that what we want as people is both happiness and meaning?

JULIA: Like if I got married to Jackson, we'd have normal kids? No way, Jackson and I are eternal principles, swaying over the ocean, carving up the sky into my stars and his stars. Meaning versus human happiness. There is no compromise, only eternal struggle.

JACKSON: I agree. It's too simple, too happiness-oriented, for the two to be reconciled.

JULIA: And I agree, too. It's too logical, too meaning-oriented, for the two to be understandable to each other.

YOU: They tend to go together, meaning and happiness. Think of all the depressed people out there in the city right now, who aren't experiencing either meaning or happiness. You two must both be feeling good, to be able to oppose one to the other.

JACKSON: We're flourishing. That's how it is that we're on a first date.

YOU: How strange it is to be in one life rather than another.

JULIA: I know! Some of my pasts are really terrible and for a whole week, I feel awful. But I don't know how long I'll have a past, so I never know.

JACKSON: Wow.

JULIA: And the worst thing is, when you have a past, *it comes with its own future.*

YOU: I think I read somewhere that Shakespeare must have been all men to be Shakespeare.

JULIA: What? How does that make sense?

YOU: Have you ever read Shakespeare? In English class, or as an actor?

JULIA: Oh yeah, today I taught *Romeo and Juliet*.

YOU: Okay, I think the idea behind what I read was how Shakespeare has these philosophical statements worked into his plays about what it's like to live a particular aspect of life. And how did he understand all this? He must have "been all men".

JULIA: But he wasn't actually all men.

JACKSON: Yeah, he was just observant.

YOU: Right. I think he was observant, but he also must have been able to see deeper into things.

JULIA: Okay, yeah, like how intuition is when you see deeper into things and then you can grasp something. That's what Mr. Lee did for me when he taught me math in junior high school. You know about Mr. Lee, Beth. I saw you eavesdropping.

YOU: Thank you for seeing me as I really am, Julia.

Brian enters, starts ordering.

JULIA: Brian! Hello!

BRIAN: Uh, hold on, I'm busy ordering. Uh, yes,

I'll have honey with that, thank you.

Brian comes over to the table where Julia and Jackson are sitting, stands next to you standing.

BRIAN: I have some studying to do, but first I can say hello to you all. Hello, my name is Brian.

JACKSON: Hi, I'm Jackson.

YOU: He's a fire-breather.

BRIAN: A fire-breather?

JULIA: He breathed fire out in front of the cafe before you came. It's a serious hobby of his.

BRIAN: Oh, wow. What brings you to this, uh, cafe, Jackson?

JACKSON: I'm here on a date with Julia. But we decided just to hang out after all. We have chemistry, though.

BRIAN: Ah, yes... chemistry.

JACKSON: Sounds like there's a story there.

BRIAN: I know about chemistry. Mitzi's is famous for its chemistry.

JACKSON: Really? Did you know that, Julia?

JULIA: Everywhere I go is famous for its chemistry. It's another aspect of my superpower slash supercurse. Or it's something related.

JACKSON: Your environments fit you?

JULIA: My environment always fits me, whether I choose them or they bend to me.

JACKSON: So do you think we would have chemistry if we went somewhere else, Julia?

JULIA: Is it possible for us to exist anywhere other than here?

JACKSON: (pause) No. I see your point. Oh... you just got me, didn't you? You set me up...

JULIA: ...To say "the moment is only here and there's no meaning so let's just be happy"... yes! Ha ha! Score one for team human happiness!

JACKSON: Oooh! Well, guess what, saying "the moment is only here and there's no meaning" -- itself has meaning! Deal with that, happiness-lover!

JULIA: Okay yeah, the score is settled. What happy conflict this, what chemistry!

JACKSON: How meaningful this all is, how deep our shallow words! What chemistry indeed.

You see a man walk in and order iced coffee at the counter, get it and then go and sit at a table by himself.

JACKSON: So Julia, I know we aren't going on a second date, but if we did, would we go to a restaurant?

JULIA: Yes, I think that would be nice. What kind of restaurant would you have in mind?

JACKSON: I would have in mind Chulin's.

JULIA: Oh, a Mexican place...

JACKSON: A fancy Mexican place.

JULIA: That would have been a good choice, if you would have chosen it.

JACKSON: Oh, I would have. I would have been trying to send a message by doing that.

BRIAN: You're doing that thing politicians do, when they give a speech and the people know the politician is trying to convince them they're a certain kind of person, and it still convinces them.

JACKSON: I would have been doing exactly that. I will have, Julia, if you would.

JULIA: Exactly. What's that smell? It smells like marzipan.

MAN: That would be my cyanide you're smelling.

JULIA: Cyanide? Are you going to poison us?

MAN: No. (sadly) Just myself.

JULIA: Don't drink it!

YOU: Yeah, you don't have to kill yourself.

MAN: It's too late, I already drank it. I put it in my iced coffee. I drank it.

YOU: Should I call 911?

JULIA: I'm calling 911.

YOU: Wait, let the man speak.

MAN: With the dose I took, there's no hope. In fact, I'm surprised I'm not dead yet.

YOU: Oh, right. You're in Mitzi's Cafe. Nobody dies in Mitzi's Cafe. Please, before you go outside and try again out there, let's talk. You might not have to kill yourself.

MAN: Hello, my name is Tom.

YOU: I'm Beth.

JACKSON: Jackson.

JULIA: Julia.

BRIAN: I'm Brian.

TOM: The reason I want to kill myself is because there's no meaning anymore.

JULIA: Are you depressed?

TOM: As in unhappy? No, I lack meaning. Happiness is my problem.

JULIA: Isn't it better to be happy? I think you should be happy.

JACKSON: No, Julia, it's not all about happiness...

JULIA: Keep your chemistry out of this, Jackson...

YOU: You two need to argue this out. Go over to the other table and figure things out.

JACKSON: Okay.

JULIA: Alright.

They go back across the cafe where they had been sitting before, and try to keep their voices down as they argue and gesture.

YOU: Okay, Tom, tell us the story.

TOM: My wife and I were out hiking near the beach, and there was a storm. The storm surge was making it difficult to come around the headland to get where the beach was wider. We just barely made it through and then I could hear a man calling for help in the water behind us. I started to move to try to rescue him but my wife put her hand on me. "Wait", she said. So I just stood there, and then the cries for help stopped. And we stood there for a while and then walked on down the shore, in the rain and wind.

YOU: Your wife did that.

TOM: She loved me.

YOU: So then what?

TOM: So then I got to thinking. Is there anything I would give my life for?

YOU: It looks like you would give it for the sake of life.

TOM: Yeah. And I forgave myself for what I didn't do. And my wife. You have to keep living, right? That's the number one thing. But I thought about that... you have to keep living... that's the number one thing... And I realized that I didn't believe in anything.

Julia and Jackson return.

JULIA: You don't believe in anything? Why does that matter? You're alive.

TOM: If I was in the right circumstances, I would do anything to survive. My wife is pregnant right now. In times of war, when people were trapped in cities without any food, do you know what some people did? They ate their own children. I would eat my own child.

JULIA: No, you wouldn't. That's terrible. How can you say that?

JACKSON: Yeah, maybe you would be one of the people who didn't eat their children.

TOM: Maybe. But I let the man drown. So why would I be different with my child? Same me, different circumstances.

JULIA: Okay. I have a thing to tell you. I've been in many different circumstances. You are who you are. There's no comparing you with anyone else. Don't compare yourself with stories from a book. You are you. You are not the sort of person who would eat your own child in a time of famine.

TOM: You might be right. I might find it easier to starve than to kill, just as I found it easier to stand than to try to save.

JULIA: Exactly. Don't think about the things that will make your life worse. Thoughts that don't make your life better aren't true.

TOM: That's an interesting thought. Isn't there a real world out there, regardless of my own self-interest? I want to connect with that world. I don't want to be sunk into my own self-interest. That's

what I realized my whole life was, me being sunk into my own self-interest, my own resources, my own limitations, my own tastes, my own anxieties, my own satisfactions, my own pleasures, my own comforts, my own fatigue, my own anger, my own apathy. All just me inside myself.

JULIA: But you're married.

TOM: And what do you think all my conversations are like with my wife? *Our* self-interest, our resources, our limitations, our own tastes, our own anxieties, our own worries, our own pet names, our own fights, our own comforts, our own lovemaking, our own enemies, our own TV shows to watch. We were sunken into our own relationship, two sunken-in people sunken-in to each other. Is that love?

YOU: Where's your wife now?

TOM: She's back at home where I left her.

YOU: If you kill yourself, you're going to leave her alone, and then she'll have to raise your child alone.

TOM: Yeah, it is selfish to commit suicide, isn't it? Life is pointless, but it's selfish to leave it. So then our child can grow up and deal with this problem all over again.

BRIAN: So... there's a law, an absolute, don't be selfish. So, that's meaningful.

TOM: But it's not the kind of meaning I want.

JULIA: No. That's not good enough. You need to live for life's sake, not for a law's sake.

TOM: That's another thing. Putting life on a pedestal. That's like putting survival on a pedestal.

JULIA: Life and survival are two different things. Absolutely different.

TOM: But there has to be something better than life.

JULIA: No, that's stupid. Don't hold out for anything better than life.

Julia walks away, forcefully and dramatically, to the other table.

TOM: Maybe so. (He looks sad)

YOU: Why are you sad?

TOM: Now I don't know what to do. Being opposed to life gave me something to live for. Now what?

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: I don't know, either. But I don't think it's stupid to hold out for something, better than life. I've been looking for God all these years, for years and years, and all I've ever gotten from people is... life. That's all there is. Life. As though God doesn't need to exist. And... just now... I realize... that talking about this, complaining, outcry... this is more life, this is more nothing-but-life. If I want God, I have to pray.

TOM: So pray. You know how, after years and years.

BRIAN: Okay...

Tom stands and they put their arms on each other's shoulders.

BRIAN: Lord, we knew you from when we were born in the garden, playing with leaves, every leaf knew you, every stone from your hand, the animals could not have run with their sinews and bones without your design, you spoke in every drop of water. We started to ask, to doubt, to distrust the meaning of everything. Lord God, why are we trapped in this life, this life of ours? Why do you not save us? We cry out to you to save us, Lord, come into our lives, Lord, save us, God, you saved us in times past, O Lord, what do we have now? We have perfection, we have life everlasting without you. We made a life for ourselves without you and this life will never end. We are never going to end. There is no death. You are gone, Lord, save us.

TOM: Save us, God.

BRIAN: Save us from empty happiness. Speak to us, God.

TOM: Speak to us.

(They fall silent.)

TOM: Thank you.

BRIAN: You and I are not alone.

TOM: Now what?

BRIAN: I, guess, you can go out and live. And you can come back here. I'm here all the time.

TOM: Okay. Will the cyanide kill me when I go outside? How does Mitzi's work?

BRIAN: You may have to stay here until all the cyanide gets out of your system. I'll talk to Alicia to see if you can stay the night.

(Alicia overhears all.)

ALICIA: Yeah, that's fine. You guys can play Scrabble.

(silence)

BRIAN: (to Jackson) So when you went off to talk to Julia, did you come to an understanding about meaning and human happiness?

JACKSON: No. I'm still on Team Meaning, and she's still on Team Human Happiness.

BRIAN: Okay.

JACKSON: I thought your prayer was nice, but isn't meaning more important than God? Why have God in the picture, why not just meaning?

BRIAN: How do you think meaning works?

JACKSON: What do you mean?

BRIAN: Well, if I say, "that table is meaningful", why is it meaningful?

JACKSON: What do you mean by that?

BRIAN: Okay, maybe it's meaningful because God made it and put it here.

JACKSON: But God didn't make it and put it here. Human beings did. And we're the ones who find the table meaningful. It's meaningful to us.

BRIAN: Is the table itself meaningful?

JACKSON: Yes, to us.

BRIAN: Does the meaning come from the table to us?

JACKSON: I guess so. Yeah, where else would it come from?

BRIAN: Does the table know it's a table? After all, isn't it just wood that's screwed together?

JACKSON: No, the table doesn't know it's a table. Okay, so that is a puzzle.

BRIAN: The table has to know what you're looking at, how you conceptualize it, in order to communicate the meaning.

JACKSON: That's weird, because tables are just dead wood put together arbitrarily. So how can the table have meaning? How can we get meaning from it?

BRIAN: It's fairly simple. What if the table knows your mind?

JACKSON: How could that be?

BRIAN: What if the table is part of God's body? So everything you look at, you're looking at God. And God speaks to you through himself.

JACKSON: Huh. I have to think about that. It does

seem to solve the puzzle. But now I have to wrestle with the thought that God might exist. Should I start trusting the universe now? I don't know if that's such a good idea.

BRIAN: You have a serious hobby, Jackson. You already trust the universe. You're always trusting the universe.

JACKSON: I don't know... I'm still not convinced.

JULIA: (coming back from a trip to the bathroom) What're you guys talking about?

JACKSON: God.

JULIA: Oh, are you guys religious?

JACKSON: No.

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Oh, I knew you were religious, Brian, after that prayer. But as for you, Jackson... you're on Team Meaning, right? You should be religious. Or, are you some kind of existentialist?

JACKSON: I will have been an existentialist at Chulin's next Saturday night, and you are free to temporally displace yourself over there right now and see for yourself.

JULIA: Ha! You're funny, Jackson. You're a good first date.

JACKSON: The chemistry is mine, Julia.

You stay for a while. Julia and Jackson leave, separately. Brian and Tom talk,

and then go look at the board game selection. Eventually, you decide to go home, and they're reading magazines from the pile on the coffee table by the overstuffed chairs.

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
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COMMENTS

1. According to <http://firetothemax.com/paraffin-vs-white-gas-fire-spinning-fuel/>, a certain kind of paraffin is good for firebreathing but corn starch is safer. (Recommending corn starch as safer does not take away from the inherent danger of firebreathing.)

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