

Aw, Nuts!

a short play in one act

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(Lights up on a field of grass, swaying with the wind. Two pensive squirrels, sisters TALIA and BETTY, conduct an intensive search through the green blades. Something catches TALIA's eyes, or rather, her nose, and it brings them both to a halt.)

BETTY
What is it?

TALIA
I'm picking up a scent.

BETTY
You are?

TALIA
Hush.

BETTY
(quietly) Sorry.

(TALIA concentrates on the scent she's picked up.)

TALIA
Northern Red- no, White Oak.

BETTY
White Oak?! You're joking!

TALIA
Betty, please.

BETTY
Sorry, sorry, I'll let you finish.

TALIA
About two clicks east. Fresh. *Very* fresh. Probably grounded about three or four minutes ago, actually.

BETTY
Three minutes ago? Wow. Imagine how *sweet* it's gonna taste.

TALIA
Get a hold of yourself, Betty. We need to find it first. Follow my lead.

BETTY
Right. Two clicks east. Following.

(They scurry across the field until they find it - a beautiful, golden brown acorn, its cap fallen from the oak tree above. BETTY does a small, Irish-step-dance-esque jig of excitement.)

BETTY

White Oak! Just like you said.

TALIA

You're damn right it's just like I said. When have I ever been wrong identifying the Precious Cargo?

BETTY

And what number is this one?

TALIA

If my tallying is right, and it is, this makes...7,856.

BETTY

Is that a new record?

TALIA

Almost. We closed 7,906 by the first snowfall of '86.

BETTY

We can beat that, easy!

TALIA

Optimistic. But we've only got a few more days. Be realistic.

BETTY

I know. I just get so excited thinking about it.

TALIA

You always get excited thinking about the Stash. Just be careful we don't have a repeat of last Winter's Gathering.

(BETTY's tiny squirrel face turns beet red.)

BETTY

You hate it when I keep apologizing about it, but I really am-

TALIA

Being sorry doesn't keep us fed during the Winter, Bette. Leave the past in the past. Focus on the Gathering.

BETTY

Focus on the Gathering. Focus on the Gathering.

TALIA

Do you wanna try and find the next one?

BETTY

You think I can?

TALIA

I know you can.

(BETTY prepares to repeat the same intense hunt we saw TALIA perform, but then looks down contemplatively at the beautiful acorn.)

BETTY

Actually...do you think maybe we should-

TALIA

Betilda, we've talked about this.

BETTY

Yeah, yeah, I get it. We've talked about this.

TALIA

Then why do I need to remind you every time it comes up?

BETTY

Because-

TALIA

We need to be better about bringing the Precious Cargo along with us and making less trips back. Remember what Father used to say. "It's most efficient to gather nuts-"

BETTY

"When they're carried by all of us." I remember the saying. But...I'm just nervous.

TALIA

Why are you nervous?

BETTY

Well, this is one of the only White Oaks we've found so far. We really only have about a dozen more, you know.

TALIA

We've definitely found more than a dozen. There are nearly 8,000 nuts in that Stash right now, Bette. Plenty of them are White Oaks.

BETTY

Yes, but almost all of them are boring Canyons, Water Greys, and those gross California Black Oaks that taste like mulch. The White Oaks are special, and not just because they're delicious. It's because-

(BETTY stop herself. Thinking about why the White Oaks are important brings tears to her eyes. TALIA places a paw on her furry shoulder.)

TALIA

You're right. The White Oaks are special.

BETTY

She really liked them.

TALIA

They both really liked them. They always ate one on the first and last day of the season.

BETTY

I remember.

TALIA

So, I take it you want to bring this one back right now.

BETTY

Just this once.

TALIA

You said that with the last White Oak we found two weeks ago.

BETTY

Yeah...

TALIA

And the one before that, too.

BETTY

Yeah...

(BETTY looks pleadingly at her sister. Eventually, TALIA gives in.)

TALIA

Fine. But this really is the last time we're doing this.

BETTY

I know!

(BETTY eagerly begins scurrying back to their home.)

TALIA

I'm serious, Betty. We're running out of time here, we need to be wrapping it up with the Stash. The first snowfall is this Wednesday.

BETTY

Wise Teri says the first snowfall isn't for another week, actually.

(TALIA rolls her eyes at the mention of this "Wise Teri.")

TALIA

Wise Teri.

(There's a bite to the "wise" in his title.)

BETTY

Why do you always have to say his name like that?

TALIA

Because that's not his real name. He's ridiculous. You can't just insert an adjective into your name and expect it to reflect a quality of yourself. So stupid. When's he supposed to leave for migration again?

BETTY

(ignoring her question) But he really is wise, Talia.

TALIA

Teri is a con artist with feathers.

BETTY

He can look at the future!

TALIA

He couldn't look at his own ass.

BETTY

Well, who can?

(BETTY, curious, begins spinning in a circle, concentrating on making eye contact with her own behind. TALIA is unimpressed and continues walking.)

TALIA

Stop talking to Wise Teri, Bette.

BETTY

That's easier said than done. He's our neighbor, we see him every day. You just don't like him because his hooting wakes you up.

TALIA

It definitely doesn't do him any favors in my court.

BETTY

It's not Wise Teri's fault you're a light sleeper.

TALIA

We're done talking about Teri and his crazy ramblings, Betilda. The first snowfall is this week, and it's Wednesday, which only gives us two days to finish up the Gathering.

BETTY

Couldn't we just say we're finished today-

TALIA

No, we can't just say we're finished today. You know better than that.

BETTY

But you said it yourself, we're close to breaking a record! We're going to be fine for the Winter.

TALIA

That doesn't mean we can just take it easy these last two days. We've always made sure we have more than enough food in the event of some sort of emergency.

BETTY

But there's never an emergency! It's always the same old dreary Winter where nothing happens. We hide in the tree, we eat, and nothing goes wrong.

TALIA

Nothing goes wrong because we've spent three months making sure nothing *can* go wrong.

BETTY

And since we've been working so hard for three months, why can't we just give ourselves a little break? Start hibernating early?

TALIA

Betilda, you know that's not how we do things. Already we're making an extra trip just for this one little White Oak. We've broken enough rules now as is.

BETTY

We don't have to follow every rule, you know.

TALIA

Yes, we do.

BETTY

What's the point of setting a bunch of rules when we're the only two living in the tree?

TALIA

Maybe because the rules are what makes the hunt as successful as it always is? Because the rules keep that tree from being completely empty? Maybe because without them, we could end up just like Mom and Dad?

(TALIA was reluctant to say this, and for good reason. BETTY grows visibly upset thinking about their parents.)

It hurts to talk about, but it's true. We're good at the Gathering. We've always been good at the Gathering. But that's because we follow the rules. They're why we've managed to stay alive this long. They've kept both of us safe for *eighteen Winters*. We've outlived everyone in the family. There's a reason why we're all that's left.

BETTY

You didn't have to bring them up.

TALIA

I'm sorry. I know you hate talking about it. I'm just trying to remind you that we aren't playing a game. It's survival. Our lives depend on it.

BETTY

Yeah. You're right.

(The squirrels stop and gaze at the large oak tree they call home that towers into the sky. BETTY sighs.)

BETTY

(under her breath) I'm so lucky.

TALIA

Did you say something?

BETTY

I said I'm so lucky.

TALIA

Where's this coming from?

BETTY

I don't know. I just think about how good I have it sometimes. I get to eat White Oaks. I get to live up in a beautiful tower. I get to do it all with a great sister. I'm a lucky squirrel.

TALIA

Well, for what it's worth, I feel pretty lucky too.

BETTY

Really?

TALIA

Yes, really. I spend all day digging for nuts and going to bed only to wake up and do it all over again-

BETTY

Or to yell at Wise Teri to be quieter.

TALIA

That too.

(BETTY laughs, and for once, thinking about their annoying neighbor makes TALIA chuckle, too.)

TALIA

But, yeah. Despite all of that, I'd say I'm pretty lucky.

(They smile at one another. Another tender moment.)

TALIA

Now, come on. Let's go find a safe spot in the Stash for your White Oak and keep at it until dusk. I'm guessing we've got space up there for about a hundred or so more-

(TALIA is interrupted by the sound of a chainsaw that rips into their tree, followed by the sound of a loud crackle and thud. BETTY screams.)

BETTY

Oh my- Talia! That's our tree! They're cutting down our tree!

TALIA

My god.

BETTY

That's our home! Talia, please! Do something! Talia!

(TALIA doesn't answer, she's watching with her jaw to the floor as the tree falls to the ground.)

(The squirrels watch in horror as their food source and only refuge from the cold is hauled away in a large pickup truck.)

(They're both dumbfounded. The rug has been ripped from underneath their squirrel feet.)

BETTY

Holy shit. Holy *shit*.

(Heavy silence.)

BETTY

Did that just happen?

(TALIA doesn't answer, she's still processing what she just watched.)

Talia.

(More silence.)

Talia, please, at least tell me you know that-

TALIA

I saw what happened.

BETTY

That's our home.

TALIA

I know.

BETTY

That *was* our home.

TALIA

That was our food.

BETTY

7,856 acorns.

TALIA

Almost 8,000.

BETTY

It would've been a new record.

(More silence. TALIA is still processing the fact that they've lost their entire supply of food.)

BETTY

Talia-?

TALIA

Don't ask me what we should do, because I don't know.

BETTY

You don't know?

TALIA

I don't know.

BETTY

What do you mean you don't know? You always know what to do! You always have!

TALIA

You think I know what to do right now? After watching three months of work literally disappear? After watching our *lives* disappear?

BETTY

Don't think like that! You always say we shouldn't think like that.

TALIA

What else am I supposed to think about? Those acorns were the only thing that was going to keep us from starving to death when the snow hits us.

BETTY

What if we ran after the truck? We both watched it leave up that road. We could try that!

TALIA

Our feet are two inches! You think we stand a chance against a goddamn truck? And we're not going near road, you wanna end up turned into road pizza like Great Uncle Angelo?

BETTY

Well, maybe we should go find Wise Teri? He would know what to do!

TALIA

(*scoffs*) How could Teri help us?

BETTY

It was his tree, too! He'll want to find a solution.

TALIA

Teri's solution is going to be to flying south for the Winter and never seeing us again. He'll find a new tree to perch on and new squirrels to wake up with his god-awful hooting.

BETTY

Stop talking about Wise Teri like that! He likes me, and he can see the future!

TALIA

Oh, he can see the future? *Very* helpful. What's he gonna do, tell us which lumber mills are gonna cut up the tree that's been in our family for three generations?

BETTY

Well, there's got to be a way to fix this! You always have a way to fix things!

TALIA

I can't make three months of Gathering happen in two days, Betty! Working nonstop would probably get us enough food for a week into the Winter *at most*.

BETTY

Then what do we-

TALIA

We do *nothing*. We accept the end. We're squirrels. We aren't meant to survive shit like this.

BETTY

What do you mean?

TALIA

We're literally tree rodents. We're insignificant. We're tiny. We aren't supposed to have lived through eighteen Winters. We were brought into this world to be chased by dogs, eaten by hawks, and fawned over by six-year-olds that think we're cute until they get close to one of us and we bite the shit out of their hand. We're not gods, Betty. We're not indestructible. We were never at the top of any pyramid or food chain. No one is. We all meet our ends at some point. Mom and Dad did. So did Great Uncle Angelo. And Cousin Eunice. And Aunt Skyler. Everyone has their tree cut down at some point. And there are plenty of times you can fly south, or run fast enough to catch up to the truck, or do something, anything, that will find you a new tree. But sometimes, your tree gets cut down, and that's the end of your tree. That's the end of all the trees. It's getting squashed by a car, or nabbed by a coyote, or waking up and leaving your house one day and never coming back.

(BETTY grows visibly upset again. This must be how their parents died.)

Everyone gets their tree cut down.

(Heavy, sad silence.)

BETTY

So, that's it then.

TALIA

That's it.

BETTY

This is our last Gathering.

TALIA

This is our last Fall.

BETTY

So...what do we do now?

TALIA

We do what you wanted to do. Take these next two days easy, I guess.

(BETTY is quiet as she thinks about earlier, when taking a break from the Gathering was all she could possibly want. It feels like a death sentence now.)

BETTY

And, you don't even think it's worth trying to-

TALIA

It's not. Trust me.

BETTY

Ok.

(There's more silence as they accept the inevitability that their insignificant squirrel lives are coming to an end.)

BETTY

Talia?

TALIA

What, Betty.

BETTY

(quietly) I'm sorry.

TALIA

Why are you sorry?

BETTY

I'm sorry for when I made us take the White Oak home when we should've kept looking. I'm sorry I asked if we could stop hunting for the rest of the season. I'm sorry I talk to Wise Ter- to Teri so much, because I know he makes you really angry. I'm sorry I don't follow the rules as well as you do. I'm sorry I don't hunt as well as you, either. I'm sorry about last Winter's Gathering, when I forgot to cover the Stash with the leaves and that family of rabbits ate half of our supply.

TALIA

Bette, it's alright, it's-

BETTY

I'm sorry I say "I'm sorry" all the time about it, because I know you don't like it when I apologize so much. I'm sorry I cry every time we talk about Mom and Dad because I know you don't like that, either. I'm sorry when I cry harder than usual about it, too. I'm sorry our house got cut down, and it's gone, and I keep asking you for a plan even though I know you don't have one, but I always thought you had a plan for everything, and I'm sorry if I'm making you feel bad for not having one now. I'm sorry you don't sleep a lot. I'm sorry.

(As BETTY rattles on with her apology, she grows increasingly sadder, until, by the end of her apologies, she's a sobbing, emotional mess. TALIA says nothing and lets her cry into her shoulder.)

(Time passes. As BETTY pulls herself together, an idea strikes TALIA.)

Hey, Bette? TALIA

Yeah, Talia? BETTY

Do you...wanna look for some White Oaks? TALIA

Why would we do that? BETTY

I don't know. TALIA

I thought you said it's not worth it, trying to rebuild the Stash. BETTY

It's not. TALIA

(Some silence.)

You know, a few White Oaks probably won't last us through Winter. BETTY

They definitely won't. TALIA

Then, what's the point in looking? BETTY

(More silence.)

What's the point in not looking? TALIA

(BETTY thinks about this for a moment. Then, she flashes her a defeated, but sincere smile.)

Okay. Yeah. Let's find some White Oaks. BETTY

Lead the way, then. TALIA

You think I can find them? BETTY

I know you can find them. TALIA

(TALIA and BETTY smile before slowly assuming their positions in the hunt that we saw at the beginning of the scene, but with reversed roles. BETTY begins looking feverishly as TALIA follows behind, both looking for a White Oak that probably won't save them from starvation in the Winter, but will make for a nice meal to enjoy with each other on these last two days of their last Fall. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY