

FUNERALIA

a short play

First Draft
February 2022

CHARACTERS

WREN — Twentysomething. A prolific overthinker with a strange relationship to grief.

JACK — Wren's partner of the same age. The *c'est la vie* type. A determined optimist without much to be optimistic about.

SAM — Wren's cousin. In his mid-teens; confused, lost, and cynical, but trying to make the best of it.

All characters start the show in mourners' garb (black tights, black dresses/suits, etc.) unless otherwise specified.

SETTING

Small-town New England. This is a place where a trip downtown to grab groceries means preparing for a run-in with at least three people you know before you can even make it to the pasta aisle.

NOTE

The use of // denotes where a line is interrupted; / denotes the subsequent interruption.

ACT I, Scene 1

(A funeral home. There's an ancient floral sofa with drooping cushions on one end of the stage and a casket on the other. It's adorned with dozens of extremely artificial floral arrangements, and the lid is propped open. We can't see inside.)

WREN and JACK are seated on the hideous sofa, limbs intertwined, staring quietly across the stage. WREN is looking at the casket; she appears to be thinking about something really, really hard. JACK is taking in the flowers.)

WREN

I feel like I'm supposed to be sad.

JACK

Who says you're supposed to be sad?

WREN

(Making a sweeping gesture with her arm)

You mean other than, like, everyone here?

JACK

Just because *they're* sad doesn't mean you have to be.

WREN

I feel like I do, though.

(A MOURNER steps up to the casket. Peers inside. Weeps. Exits.)

WREN

(Pointing)

Like, come on! She doesn't even know him! // She — doesn't she work at CVS?

JACK

/You didn't know him, either.

(They reach over to play absentmindedly with Wren's hair.)

And you don't know whether or not she knew him. Maybe she was his pharmacist, and they talked every week about his... I don't know, his Viagra // or something.

WREN

(Starting to laugh)

/ Jack, hey, that's speaking ill of the dead. Don't talk about my uncle's // d—

JACK

(Chuckling too)

/ My *point* is, Ms. CVS over there is allowed to cry if she wants to. It's a wake, babe.

(Another MOURNER steps up. He turns over his shoulder to shoot WREN and JACK a look; their laughter isn't welcome here.)

WREN

(Noticing this and rearranging her features into something more somber:)

I'm not saying she can't be sad. It's that I — I can't *not* be sad.

(Once the MOURNER exits)

It's like — you're allowed to be upset at a wake, because you're *supposed* to be upset at a wake, right? Somebody died, and you're sad about it, because you were so *close* to them and you miss them so *much*. But if you're *not* sad about it, everyone thinks you're some heartless son of a bitch who doesn't miss their dead uncle as much as the rest of them.

And everyone else is, like, sad by proxy, you know? My mom invited a friend from work that she goes out for drinks with on Fridays, and this guy is feeding off of her sadness like a catfish in a suit. I just saw him cross the room with an entire box of tissues in his hands. If he can be sad for my mom that easily, why can't I? I'm the one who lives with her. Her being sad should make me sad, too.

JACK

I think the only person in this building who thinks you're too happy right now is you, Wren.

WREN

(No, that's not right)

I'm not happy! I'm very, very not happy about this!

JACK

Then what the hell are you?

WREN

I don't know!

(A pointed beat. Two MOURNERS, about to exit, jump at the sound of raised voices in such a quiet place. WREN and JACK let out a collective sigh, somewhere between embarrassed and indignant, and cast their eyes around the room for something else to talk about. JACK seems to land on one first: the casket.)

JACK

(Out the side of their mouth; almost as if they're not sure whether they should be asking this)

Have you looked inside?

WREN

Not yet. It kind of weirds me out. Have you?

JACK

Yeah.

WREN

How'd he look?

JACK

(A thoughtful pause, head cocked)

Dead.

WREN

I figured, genius. Wanna elaborate?

JACK

Uh... like a painted whore?

WREN

(Elbowing JACK in the side)

Dude!

JACK

He did! Makeup caked on, like, an inch thick. They even gelled up his hair — did he ever wear it like that when he was alive?

WREN

I feel like you're not taking this seriously.

JACK

(Genuinely puzzled)

I thought you didn't want me to.

WREN

It's a wake!

JACK

A wake *you* told me was total bullshit the entire ride here. You said it'd be funny if we made out in front of the casket just in case he was secretly a homophobe. I'm trying to match your vibes here, babe, but I really can't tell what you want from me right now.

WREN

I want you to stop trying to make me laugh. This is exactly what I'm talking about — I shouldn't be *letting* you make me laugh. I should be, like, weeping into some cheap funeral home tissues. I should be sad.

JACK

Do you *want* me to make you be sad? Because I could, like, talk about Old Yeller // or someth—

WREN

(Exasperated)

/ I don't know! I just — My mom's crying, and my cousins are crying, and everyone here is crying, because apparently my uncle was this really cool, fun guy. But I don't know him! I saw him once a year on Thanksgiving, and he'd watch the football game while he ate olives off the charcuterie board that nobody else wanted because olives are fucking gross, and he'd sign the card when my aunt sent me birthday money without even knowing how old I was.

(Her voice is heavy)

And it's like, should I be bummed that I never got to know him enough to be sad about him dying, or should I just be glad I don't give a shit?

JACK

(They think on this one for a bit.)

You don't *have* to do anything.

WREN

I know. I get that. But — how do *you* feel right now?

JACK

(Softening up a little; they reach for WREN's hand.)

Worried about you. A little sad for your mom. A little excited that I got to look at a cadaver. Did you know morticians actually thread the mouth shut to make sure it stays? They use this weird little — Sorry. Super not the time.

WREN

(Distant. Distracted.)

It's fine.

JACK

(They turn to face WREN properly, draping their legs over hers.)

Hey. This thing only goes on for, what, another half hour? We'll tough it out, and then we can go get some shitty pizza down the street and stop thinking about this whole thing.

(WREN disentangles herself from JACK and pushes up off the couch. She starts to walk toward the casket. Very, very slowly. She stops halfway, still looking at the box.)

WREN

Until tomorrow, when we have to think about it for several hours at an extremely Catholic funeral, which I will also not be sad enough for.

JACK

This is what I'm talking about, Wren. You're working yourself up about something that hasn't even happened yet. Stop worrying about what you're gonna feel tomorrow, or how you should be feeling at some stupid wake.

(They get up and follow WREN across the room, taking her hand and threading their fingers together.)

How do you feel right now? You, Wren, standing here in this musty ass funeral home. How do you feel?

WREN

Honestly?

(She takes one final step forward, but at the last second, she turns her back on the casket instead of looking inside. After a long, heavy pause:)

I don't feel anything.

Act I, Scene 2

(A sparsely decorated kitchen in a cheap apartment. WREN is pacing; JACK is perched on a table or countertop. Both are still in mourning black, but they've changed into something new; this is the day of the funeral.)

WREN

(Clearly mid-rant)

And then the priest raises his hands up, and he looks at the big, fancy ceiling, and he says *thank you*. He *thanks God* for taking my uncle to his *heavenly kingdom*. And everyone around me is nodding, dabbing at the dollar store mascara on their cheeks, and I'm just sitting there like, what the fuck? Why are we — we're supposed to be *thankful* for this? He was forty years old, and he's *dead*, and we're *thanking God* for that.

JACK

(Seeming to choose their words with care)

It's how they cope, babe. They feel better thinking everything happens for a reason — even if that reason is objectively dumb as hell.

(WREN drops into a chair and buries her head in her hands.)

WREN

I wish they'd stop making me cope with them.

JACK

Nobody says you have to go to these funerals. Especially not if they're screwing with you this badly.

(Sensing WREN's heated interruption:)

I know, I get it, there's expectations and whatever, but nobody's holding you at gunpoint like, "*Come to church or we'll be burying you next.*" Putting yourself through this is just making you miserable, // it's not worth —

WREN

/ But I'm miserable for the wrong *reason*.

(JACK hops down from where they sit and moves to WREN, reaching for her hand or squeezing her shoulder. They seem to realize something.)

JACK

You're mad at your brain. Not what people are thinking about you.

WREN

I mean... yeah. I guess that's it. I don't know. Everyone's sad, and I'm not. And it feels like I'm doing something wrong.

JACK

Would it help if I said that the way your brain works isn't your fault?

WREN

Not really.

JACK

I could get you a bagel.

WREN

Not hungry.

JACK

You know I love you, right?

WREN

(Trying and somewhat failing to put on a brave face)

Okay, don't go getting all sappy on me. I love you too, dingus.

JACK

Is there anything I *can* do for you? What's something that could help?

WREN

(Defeated)

Maybe a new prefrontal cortex?

JACK

(Pretending to check their phone)

I hate to tell you this, but those are, like, super backordered on the black market. Anything else I can get for you?

(WREN groans, burying her face in her hands. She takes a long, deep breath before surfacing again.)

WREN

I don't *know*. I appreciate that you wanna help, I appreciate it so much. It's just — it's stupid. All of it is stupid. I know it doesn't matter what I'm feeling or not feeling in the long run — I probably won't even remember this in, like, a few years. But being around all those people, everyone crying and praying and thanking god for making my uncle fucking OD, it's just so obvious that my brain's not doing it right, you know? The mourning. The sympathy. I don't want my uncle's ghost or whatever to think I don't care that he bit it, but everyone's so worked up about coping with the loss, and I don't even have anything to cope with. I didn't *know* him.

JACK

(After a heavy pause:)

Shit.

WREN

Yeah.

(There's a long silence. WREN and JACK both take a moment to breathe, to think, to fidget. We can almost see the gears turning in JACK's head as they try to figure out what to say next. They reach across the table again, and WREN takes their hand.)

JACK

Well, hey — if I kick it before you do, you can cope however the hell you want. I'm giving you express permission. You don't even have to show up to the wake if you don't want to. I promise my ghost won't give a single shit.

WREN

I'm obviously not gonna skip out on your wake.

JACK

Then consider this a free pass to feel everything in the world or nothing at all. You can even jump in the casket with me if you want. You know, like Hamlet. Really start a scene.

WREN

(Finally cracking a smile)

Only if you promise to do the same for me — you know, if I keel over first instead. Either that, or you gotta wear the ugliest shirt you can possibly find. No black. I want you to look like a clown.

JACK

You mean more than usual?

WREN

I'm talking the most hideous, abhorrent shirt you own.

(JACK nods intensely. They were made for this moment.)

WREN

And no flowers, okay? Flowers smell, like, supremely bad, and they die way too fast. Toss a Milky Way in there or something so I have a snack for the ferry ride.

JACK

(Mock-serious, holding up a Boy Scout salute.)

Scout's honor.

WREN

You weren't a Scout, babe.

JACK

Alright. Pinkie promise, then.

(WREN rolls her eyes.)

JACK

C'mon, this is as legally binding as we can get without doing a blood pact. Promise?

(WREN smiles, then sticks out a pinkie and reaches for JACK's.)

WREN

Promise.

(They lock fingers.)

(Lights down.)

Act I, Scene 3

(The same funeral home as in Scene 1. There are different flowers and a different casket, but the same hideous sofa sits stage right. WREN is perched on it, alone.)

There's a MOURNER standing over the coffin. He's staring into it with a familiar blank look on his face. WREN watches as he steels himself to speak to whoever is inside.)

MOURNER

Uh, hey. I don't know if — do people normally talk like this? At wakes?

WREN

Depends, really.

(He doesn't seem to notice.)

MOURNER

Whatever. I just wanted to... to say hi, I guess. Or... this is a goodbye, actually, now that I'm thinking about it.

Anyway. Uh... It's been a while. Since last Christmas, I think? At Aunt Kathy's?

WREN

(Getting to her feet — this seems to have sparked recognition. She's not quite talking loud enough for him to hear.)

Hold up. No way. Sammy? Tiny little cousin Sammy?

(Maybe she holds up a hand by her side to indicate this tininess.)

SAM

It was kind of a hike to get here. We moved last month, so now we have to go over the Tappan Zee — or, sorry, it's the *Governor Cuomo* Bridge now. Traffic's still a nightmare, I don't know why they bothered redoing it.

WREN

Shit, that's a drive...

(She moves a little bit closer, watching him intently.)

God, Sammy, you got *tall*.

SAM

And I go by Sam now, by the way. You probably don't care. Or maybe you do, I mean, I don't know how dead people feel. But, uh... yeah.

(He drums his hands on his legs.)

I liked your Instagram story. Those videos of your cat, they were... they were cute. Wish I'd swiped up on them more. Talked to you more.

WREN

(She chuckles. There's no mirth in it.)

I mean, shoulda, woulda, coulda, you know?

(SAM stares into the casket for a long while. It looks like he's going to leave. Then he starts to speak again, rapid fire, suddenly riled up.)

SAM

It's just — am I supposed to be, like, mourning you? 'Cause — listen, if I'm being totally honest, I don't know you. I'm missing French for this, which is fine, I hate French, but I think I'd actually rather be learning how to conjugate in the imperfect than wearing this stupid suit right now. I'm here for you, and I have no idea who you are. I didn't even know you cut your hair.

(WREN takes a step toward the casket. Then another. Then another. She reaches up absently to touch her hair.)

SAM

(Taking a deep breath)

I shouldn't be getting pissed at your corpse. Sorry. It's just weird. It all feels weird.

WREN

(Softly, to herself — her eyes are far away)

It doesn't stop. It just gets weirder.

(She and SAM are both pulled from their thoughts as JACK enters, wearing the most hideous, abhorrent shirt they own. They look like a clown. They walk right past WREN to stand beside SAM at the casket.)

JACK

Hey. You're Sammy, right?

SAM

Sam.

JACK

Sam. Sorry. I'm Jack.

SAM

I know.

(There's a brief, somewhat awkward silence.)

JACK

Can't believe they put her in red lipstick. She hates that shit.

SAM

I mean, I doubt she cares now.

JACK

She totally cares.

(Something about this makes SAM shift where he stands.)

SAM

What, you think she's here? Watching us all look at her corpse to see if we're reacting to it right? Or, I mean — I don't know what I mean.

JACK

(Turning to try and catch SAM's eye)

If she is here, I can guarantee she cares more about that lipstick than about whether you're making a sad enough face. Kicking yourself over this is just gonna hurt. It'll be over soon, anyway. It's better to just ride it out.

(SAM doesn't respond.)

JACK

I — listen. I tried to have this same talk a dozen times over with her, and it never stuck, but maybe — maybe now she gets it. You're allowed to feel whatever you're feeling, and you're allowed to not feel anything, too. It doesn't matter. Shit happens, and I'm — I mean, I'm pretty messed up over it. Have been for days now. But that doesn't mean you have to be. Hell, it makes *sense* that you're not. You didn't spend a ton of time with her, so you didn't know her. That's not her fault, and it's not your fault, and it's not anybody's fucking fault. It just is.

(Pausing; they got a little more worked up than they meant to.)

It just is.

(They pull a Milky Way bar out of their pocket. Consider it for a moment.)

So let it be what it is.

(JACK places the candy bar gently inside the casket. They give SAM's shoulder a squeeze. Then they leave.)

(SAM is alone again with the casket. Something JACK said really hit home with him, but he can't tell which part.

A long, slow breath in. A long, slow breath out. SAM lets his head fall down toward his chest. He opens his mouth, maybe about to say something more — then he walks away.)

(The path is finally clear for WREN to stand beside the casket. It's unclear for a moment whether she's going to look; she shifts her weight from foot to foot, fidgeting with her jewelry. Right when it looks like she's about to leave, she turns back around and approaches it.

She leans forward and stares inside. There's silence. Then:

Blackout.)