

(SAMPLE)

HERB CLEARY MEANT NO HARM

A play in one act

By Craig Houk



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Synopsis

Cleary's Delicatessen has been the most popular dining destination in Clarksville, Tennessee for nearly fifty years. Nowadays the business practically runs itself. It's best-selling item? Grandma Cleary's potato salad. Three generations of Cleary men have reaped the rewards of its success. And now young Herb Cleary will be the next to take the reins. One minor problem, however. Herb ain't right in the head.

Characters

DERECK HICKS (Mid to Late 20s) Male identifying. Any race.

ERIN BARNES (Mid to Late 20s) Female identifying. Any race.

HARLAN CLEARY (Late 40s) Male identifying. Any race.

HERB CLEARY (Late Teens, perhaps Early 20s). Male identifying. Any race.

EMMA CAMPBELL (Mid to Late 50s) Female identifying. Any race.

Setting

Cleary's Delicatessen. Clarksville, TN. A smattering of tables, perhaps a grocery section, a service counter, display refrigerator and a cash register.

Time

Present.

SCENE 1

(Summertime. At rise, we see Dereck and Erin, likely on an afternoon date of sorts, sitting at a table in Cleary's Delicatessen.)

DERECK: This place's been around since 1975.

ERIN: Wow. That's a long time.

DERECK: Named "Best Deli" in Clarksville nearly every year since then. Others have won the title, here and there, but none have lasted as long. Ain't nobody better than Cleary's.

ERIN: I've only heard good things. Mostly from you, though.

DERECK: Best potato salad you'll ever have.

ERIN: Oh, is that right? Because honestly, Dereck, it's not that hard to make potato salad.

DERECK: Bite your tongue, Erin.

ERIN: Well, it's not. I mean, what does it take? You boil some potatoes, you throw in some mayo, maybe some mustard, some chopped onions and celery, and, I don't know, mix it up. Seriously, it's not that difficult. And so maybe you add hardboiled eggs or some bacon. But honestly, it's pretty damn tricky to fuck up a potato salad. Except if you add too much salt. That's about it, though. Otherwise, it's relatively simple to put together.

DERECK: Did you order the potato salad?

ERIN: I did not. I ordered the coconut rice and lentils.

(Dereck frowns.)

DERECK: Okay, well I did. So, you can try some of mine.

ERIN: Well, I'm happy to. And I promise to be totally honest about it.

DERECK: About how it tastes. You'll be honest about it?

ERIN: Of course. I've no doubt it'll be delicious. But I do doubt that it'll be the best potato salad I've ever eaten. Either way, I'll be honest.

DERECK: Fair enough. *(Beat.)* Oh, and see that guy over there?

ERIN: *(Looking off.)* Uhhhhhhh, yes. Middle-aged guy with the, uh - oh jeez - that is some interesting facial hair he's got going on there.

DERECK: Yeah, well that's the owner. Harlan Cleary. Inherited the business from his father who inherited it from his father. And let me tell you, Harlan is the nicest guy you'll ever meet.

ERIN: Oh, boy, here we go again. The nicest guy I'll ever meet. Are you sure? Because I mean, how do you actually know that he's the...

DERECK: All right, fine. Point taken but certainly not appreciated. Anyway, he's a really nice guy.

ERIN: I believe you.

DERECK: And by all accounts, his father, Hersh, and his grandfather, Herman, were really nice guys as well. Well, Hersh is still around; what I mean is, he's not dead. Herman is, though; dead, I mean. But not Hersh; he's retired; moved to Kiawah Island several years back. Anyway, both of them were and are really nice guys. Just like Harlan over there.

(A beat passes as Erin casually processes this.)

ERIN: Probably the reason they've been around so long.

DERECK: That and the potato salad. And their fine selection of deli meats.

ERIN: I ordered the tuna melt.

DERECK: Yeah. I'm aware. I'm starting to feel like you're trying to make me look bad in front of Harlan.

ERIN: It's on the menu, Dereck.

DERECK: Right. But it's not a classic, hearty deli meat, Erin, now is it?

ERIN: It's tuna. And tuna is a classic. And it's on the menu. And we're in a deli.

DERECK: You just don't get it, do you?

ERIN: I guess maybe I don't. *(Beat.)* Never mind then. Here comes your pal, Harlan, with our food.

(Harlan arrives with two plates.)

HARLAN: All right, all right. Here we go. One tuna melt with a side of coconut rice and lentils. And one beef schnitzel with horseradish cream and radicchio, and a side of the best potato salad you'll ever eat.

ERIN: You don't say.

HARLAN: I do say. I say it on the windowfront, on that sign over there, in all the menus, and all over social media. I also got it tattooed on my left ass cheek. My grandmother's recipe.

ERIN: I'm sorry. You have your grandmother's potato salad recipe tattooed on your left ass cheek?

HARLAN: No, no, no. Just the phrase, "The Best Potato Salad You'll Ever Eat".

ERIN: On your ass cheek.

HARLAN: That's right.

ERIN: Okay, well not taking into account the obvious miscalculation of the placement of that tattoo... Who, may I ask, has actually had the opportunity to see it and then therefore benefit from its intended purpose? Which I assume is to promote the potato salad?

HARLAN: Well, they don't call me "Half Moon Harlan" for nothing.

(Beat.)

ERIN: No, I expect they don't.

HARLAN: Anyway, so I'm glad you ordered the coconut rice and lentils. It's very popular right now. Very popular.

ERIN: Haven't had a chance to try it yet, but it looks tasty.

HARLAN: Oh, it is. It's very tasty.

ERIN: Well, I'm looking forward to trying it.

HARLAN: Good because it's coming off the menu tonight.

ERIN: Coming off the menu? I don't understand.

HARLAN: Well, our regular customers don't like it. They think it's a little, I don't know, froufrou, I guess. It's real popular with the, uh, vegetarians or the vegans, I think. Never was able to tell the difference between the two.

ERIN: Well, there is a difference, though I suppose either a vegan or a vegetarian would be okay with coconut rice and lentils. And while I am neither of those, I am a pescatarian, so I can appreciate a meal that doesn't come from animals or animal biproducts.

(A beat passes as Harlan casually processes this.)

HARLAN: Looks like you got your hands full with this one, Dereck.

DERECK: Ain't that the truth.

(We're hear a set of dishes crashing to the floor off. All are startled, except Harlan.)

HARLAN: *(Calling off.)* Goddamit, Herb! Take it easy back there! Those dishes don't come cheap, you know! *(Back to Erin and Dereck.)* Sorry about that. That's my son Herb. He's a little clumsy, but he means no harm. *(Beat.)* So, anyway listen. While I certainly want to make sure that all of my customers are taken care of; that they're getting what they want; getting their needs met so to speak, I've come to realize that it's best to just stick to the way we've always done things. We've been in the deli business for nearly fifty years and frankly, at this point, this place practically runs itself. So, why fart around with it? And that's why I'm eighty sixing the coconut rice and lentils.

DERECK: Well said, Harlan.

HARLAN: Thanks, Dereck. Though it looks like I've taken up way too much of your time. And I want you to both enjoy your meals, so I'm gonna get out of your hair now. And anyway, sounds like I got some broken dishes to clean up.

(Harlan chuckles and exits.)

DERECK: Like I said. Nicest guy you'll ever meet.

ERIN: That is what you said, yes.

DERECK: Hey, listen, I'm gonna go wash my hands.

(Dereck rises out of his seat.)

ERIN: What? Noooo. Our food's here and it's been sitting now for about five minutes because the "nice guy" wouldn't stop yammering on about his ass tattoo and about how he's decided to yank my coconut rice and lentils off the menu.

DERECK: Technically, it's not your coconut rice and lentils.

ERIN: I'm paying for it.

DERECK: Good point. *(Beat.)* And anyway, I'll only be a minute.

ERIN: No. Now sit down and eat with me. I've got some hand sanitizer in my bag here.

(She reaches for her bag.)

DERECK: It's not the same. There ain't no substitute for good old fashioned bar soap and hot water. *(Beat.)* I'll be right back. You go ahead and start without me.

ERIN: Oh, don't worry, cowboy, I will. *(Dereck exits. Erin shakes her head and then prepares to dig in. But before she can, Herb appears with a bussing bin. He sets it down not so delicately on the table, takes Erin's dish and scrapes the coconut rice and lentils into the bin, but leaves the tuna melt. He replaces her dish and walks off with the bin.)* This can't be happening. What the hell was that? *(She looks off to see what Herb is up to. A moment passes before he returns with a bowl of potato salad. He scoops out a large portion of it and essentially slaps it onto Erin's plate before he walks off again.)* That little son of a...

(Dereck enters.)

DERECK: Here I am. And it took me nearly no time at all.

ERIN: Did you see what just happened?

DERECK: No. Why? What happened?

ERIN: That Herb Cleary punk just scraped my coconut rice and lentils into a bin and then replaced it with that goddam potato salad.

DERECK: You're shitting me.

ERIN: I am not. And I'm gonna say something about it to your good buddy, Harlan.

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DERECK: Yeah, well I do get that what he did might be a tiny bit upsetting, but you know what? Maybe you should just let it go. What do you say? Hm?

ERIN: Let it go? That little jerkoff took a very large serving spoon, dug real deep into that potato salad, and then slapped it onto my plate without my consent. And you want me to let that go?

DERECK: Yes, Well, what I mean is... So, listen, the thing is...

ERIN: What? What is it? Come on now. Spit it out.

DERECK: You see, Herb Cleary... Well, he just can't help himself.

ERIN: Oh yeah? And why's that?

DERECK: Because, well... Listen, to be honest, I don't exactly know what's wrong with him as such, but I guess the best way to describe it is - and maybe this isn't the most PC way to describe it - but well... I would say that he's a little touched in the head. You understand?

(Beat.)

ERIN: Ah.

DERECK: So, I'm sure he meant no harm by it.

ERIN: I see. Well, okay then. That does explain it. And you're right. I should just let it go. It's always good to have context. Thank you, Dereck. That's very thoughtful.

(Emma Campbell enters the deli. She is jovial but in a bit of a rush. During the following, Erin and Dereck will dig into their meals and chat quietly.)

EMMA: Good afternoon, Harlan!

(Harlan appears at the service counter.)

HARLAN: Good afternoon, Mrs. Campbell!

EMMA: And what did I say to you about calling me "Mrs. Campbell"?

HARLAN: You said you did not want me to call you "Mrs. Campbell".

EMMA: That's right. Because we're practically the same age.

HARLAN: And I will continue to insist that that is an outright lie, Emma.

EMMA: Harlan!

HARLAN: No, now you let me finish. What I mean to say is, there ain't no way we're the same age because I got at least fifteen years on you.

EMMA: Get outta here. *(Emma giggles coyly.)*

(During the previous, Herb has arrived at the service counter with a very large, packed to-go order for Emma.)

HERB: You look just like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, Mrs. Campbell.

HARLAN: Herb!

EMMA: Aw, well isn't that sweet. Thank you, Herb.

HARLAN: Herb, get back into the kitchen.

(Herb exits.)

EMMA: Now hold on just a second.

HARLAN: What's the matter, Emma?

EMMA: Wasn't Julia Roberts a hooker in that film?

HARLAN: What!?! Noooo. Noooo. Maybe more like a high-class escort, but certainly not a hooker. And if I remember correctly, she really wasn't a hooker at all. I think maybe everyone just confused her for one. An escort I mean.

EMMA: Hm.

HARLAN: Doesn't matter anyway. I'm sure Herb meant it as a compliment. Julia Roberts is indeed a fine-looking lady. As are you of course.

EMMA: Oh, now you stop. *(Beat.)* Anyway, you're right. Herb's a good boy. *(Beat.)* And do you know what? Good for you for giving your son the opportunity to make something of himself. I mean what else is he gonna do with his life except work here? *(Beat.)* And can you believe there was a time when parents used to have their children locked up for behavior less unbecoming? I mean, can you imagine that?

HARLAN: I imagine it all the time.

EMMA: And I expect Herb's next in line to inherit the business, right? *(A quiet moment passes.)* So, is that my order right there?

HARLAN: Oh. Yeah, it sure is. *(Beat.)* I gotta say, though, I'm a little disappointed, Emma.

EMMA: What do you mean disappointed?

HARLAN: Well, I noticed that you didn't ask for any potato salad this time.

EMMA: Ah. Right. Well, to be honest, Harlan... So, listen, my husband and his guy friends were in for lunch just the other day.

HARLAN: Oh yeah. Fun group. Bunch of jokesters. They come in pretty regularly.

EMMA: Yes, they do. And of course, they all ordered the potato salad.

HARLAN: Of course.

EMMA: But they just didn't like it. (*Beat.*) Said it tasted weird.

HARLAN: Really? Weird. Weird how?

EMMA: Not sure exactly. Just said it didn't taste the same. Something different about it, I guess. But they didn't want to say anything to you because it's your signature dish.

HARLAN: I see.

EMMA: So, if you don't mind, we're gonna pass on the potato salad this time around.

HARLAN: Understood. Though I do think I know what the problem is.

EMMA: Is that so?

HARLAN: Yeah, well I've been letting Herb help out in the kitchen lately.

EMMA: Oh my.

HARLAN: And I guess I figured if he just followed the recipe... Well, between you and me, it's pretty hard to fuck up potato salad - excuse my language...

EMMA: No, it's fine. (*Beat.*) Well, perhaps it isn't my place, and of course I don't know the actual extent of Herb's... issues, but maybe he has trouble reading.

HARLAN: Well, you're right about that. His reading comprehension skills are lacking for sure.

EMMA: You see. So, there's your answer.

HARLAN: Except that's not what happened in this case.

EMMA: Oh, really? So, what do you think happened then?

HARLAN: I didn't write the recipe down. And in fact, it's never been written down. I expect you can imagine why.

EMMA: Well, of course. Top secret.

HARLAN: Exactly. So, I guess what I'm saying is, if anyone's to blame, it's me. I need to keep my expectations in check when it comes to Herb.