

COOLER

A play
By Craig Houk

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Synopsis

Three-time Oscar winner, Jack Dunn, returns to Connecticut after being gone for nearly four years in McGrath, Alaska. His closest friend, Wade Henry, also an award-winning actor, has something Jack wants. After a long evening of drinking and poker with their pals, Jack and Wade, both eager to cement their legacies, face off one last time.

Characters

JACK DUNN (Age 60s/70s, Any Race)

WADE HENRY (Age 60s/70s, Any Race)

Setting

Wade's home in an affluent Connecticut neighborhood. A nicely furnished den set up for poker night. A Tony Award and an Oscar are on display among other theatrical awards. There are bookshelves filled with playscripts and movie scripts.

Time

The present. Well after midnight.

Note About The Play Title

In the game of poker, a cooler refers to a situation in which a strong hand, usually played correctly, loses to an even stronger holding. In a cooler situation you lose, not because you were outplayed, but because of the luck of the draw.

SCENE 1

Mid-September. Well after midnight. Jack is alone in the den. He is finishing a drink and may be smoking a cigarette or a cigar. He's looking at a lineup of awards on a shelf or mantel. The room is a bit messy from the evening. Empty drinking glasses, beer bottles, liquor bottles, plates, snacks, etc.

WADE. *(Off.)* Hey, Charlie! Take it easy! Watch where you're going there! Holy Christ! And down he goes! Can one of you guys help Charlie out of the bushes there, please? Unbelievable! Thank you! And don't let him drive! Leave the car here! I'll get it back to him tomorrow! Are we all sorted now? Good! Get home safe! *(We hear two or more cars pull away, perhaps tires squealing. A quiet moment passes before Wade enters the den.)* That was some shitshow, let me tell you. *(The phone rings.)* Oh, Jesus. And what do you know? There she is. Right on cue. *(Wade picks up the receiver.)* Hello...? I love it when you curse at me in Italian. It's downright sexy. And what can I do for you at this late hour, Mrs. Santangelo...? Uh huh. Well, technically, those bushes are on my property, so... I'm sorry, what...? Oh, shit... I see... So, your mailbox is completely gone...? Right... And how much fencing do you think you'll need to replace...? Christ. Okay, well that's a lot. So, listen. How about I write you a check? And I'll bring it over first thing in the morning...? Well, yeah, I guess if you want to take me to court, you can do that, but I'll just plead no contest and pay you what I owe you anyway. So maybe we can skip that part this time around. Save me a little time and some money. What do you think...? Right. Okay, well I'll wear my good suit this time. Maybe the judge will take it easy on me... Yeah, well don't worry about the noise. Everyone's gone home for the night... Thank you... Good night, Mrs. Santangelo. *(Wade replaces the receiver.)* We'd better keep it down, Jack.

JACK. I guess we'd better.

WADE. I put your bags in the guest room. Top of the stairs and to your right at the end of the hall. It's got a private bath. There's fresh bedding and towels for you.

JACK. Thanks, Wade.

WADE. Otherwise, if you're not too tired, I'd be more than happy to share a night cap with you. I'll probably have one either way.

JACK. I guess I'm still a little wound up from the evening, so why not?

WADE. Excellent. I'll get the good stuff.

JACK. What? No. No, you should save that for a special occasion.

WADE. What're you talking about? This is a special occasion. It's been way too long, my friend.

JACK. Agreed.

(Wade retrieves a bottle of nice whiskey and pours a drink for himself and for Jack.)

WADE. Hey, and I'm sorry about the impromptu poker game. The fellas caught wind of your visit and, well, my hands were tied. Anything less than a get together would've ended in a riot.

JACK. Not to worry. It was good to see the boys.

WADE. They're a bunch of idiots.

JACK. You and me included.

WADE. True.

(Beat.)

JACK. I was, uh... I was just taking a look at your trophies over there.

WADE. Oh, yeah?

JACK. I see you got that Tony front and center.

WADE. Yeah. That and the Oscar. You've got more than your share, though, right?

JACK. Never won a Tony.

WADE. Maybe not, but what? Two Oscars?

JACK. Three, actually.

WADE. Oh, yeah. How could I forget? *(Beat.)* So, what're you complaining about then?

JACK. I wasn't complaining.

WADE. Sounded like maybe you were.

JACK. No. No, it's all good. I guess I just always fancied myself a stage actor. Always wanted a Tony.

WADE. Well, you're not dead. So, there's still time.

JACK. Right.

WADE. Cheers.

JACK. Cheers.

(They drink.)

WADE. So, what the hell's been going on with you, huh? You just fuck right off to the North Pole and don't tell anyone? I have to hear about it on the news?

JACK. The North Pole?

WADE. Alaska. Whatever.

JACK. I was up in McGrath. It's hardly the North Pole, Wade.

WADE. Okay, fine. McGrath. So, what made you go there?

JACK. Population of roughly three hundred and not a goddamn one of them knows who I am. So, I bought a cabin, did some reading, some fishing – a lot of fishing in fact – and spent most evenings at the only pub in town. Other than that, I just mostly kept to myself.

WADE. No offense, Jack, but that sounds shitawful. Please tell me you at least got laid once in a while.

JACK. I may have had a lady friend.

WADE. Or two.

JACK. Or two.

WADE. Okay, well there's that. Did they at least have a full set of teeth?

JACK. Come on, Wade--

WADE. Did they?

JACK. Of course, they did. Smart ass. And even if they didn't, I wasn't in a position to complain. I mean, technically, I was fresh meat. But, you know, when you're almost seventy, it's generally not suitable to describe yourself that way. So, I took whatever came my way.

(Beat.)

WADE. Three years, Jack.

JACK. Almost four.

WADE. That's a long time to be away.

JACK. So, what're you saying, Wade? You saying you missed me?

WADE. Of course, I missed you. Everyone missed you. Mostly, I was worried, though. I thought maybe you were gonna just wander off onto the ice somewhere and just, I don't know, wait for it to melt.

(Beat.)

JACK. You're kidding me, right?

WADE. What?

JACK. Are you serious?

WADE. What're you talking about?

JACK. You honestly thought I was gonna kill myself?

WADE. What? No.

JACK. Are you out of your fucking mind?

WADE. No. No, that's not what I meant at all.

JACK. Wait for the ice to melt? Like if I didn't freeze to death first, I would just let myself drown? That's fucking morbid, Wade. Jesus.

WADE. Now hang on a second--

JACK. I went away for some solitude. Okay? That's all. I needed some time to myself. To regroup. To refresh. Not to off myself. Jesus Christ. What's the matter with you?

WADE. Take it easy, Jack. It's not what I... I mean, it just came out wrong. I wasn't trying to suggest that... Look, just forget I said it. Okay? I'm sorry. *(Beat.)* Jack, I'm sorry. Are we good?

(Beat.)

JACK. 'Course, we're good. *(Beat.)* But you know, I was thinking about ways to kill you while I was up there. *(A moment.)* I'm kidding.

WADE. You're an asshole.

JACK. I'd argue that you're the asshole. But I prefer not to argue.

WADE. Me neither.

(Jack holds out his glass.)

JACK. I'll have another.

WADE. Same?

JACK. Sure. *(Wade pours himself and Jack another drink.)* How's Kate?

WADE. Oh. Well, uh... she's good.

JACK. I didn't want to ask in front of the guys.

WADE. Yeah, no. She's... she's good. She's uh... she's over in Europe shooting a film.

JACK. Oh, yeah?

WADE. Prague.

JACK. Beautiful city.

WADE. Yeah.

JACK. I thought she was gonna take a break from directing.

WADE. Yeah, well, she talked about taking a break. And then she took one. And then she spent several months with me. And then she went back to work. *(He chuckles.)* I guess she decided she had better things to do with her time than to hang out with an old fart.

JACK. She loves you, Wade.

WADE. Yeah, when she's not threatening to leave me.

JACK. Eh. She's young. She'll figure it out.

WADE. Or she'll file for divorce.

JACK. That's what I meant. *(He winks or cracks a smile.)*

(Beat.)

WADE. I'm guessing maybe you didn't take the time to work on your genial disposition while you were away.

JACK. Oh, now come on, Wade. What is it? Your third marriage? You think you'd be used to it by now.

WADE. Says the guy who's never had a wife. *(Beat.)* No. Sorry. I take that back. You almost had a wife once upon a time, right? Until you scared her off, of course.

(Beat.)

JACK. I think maybe I deserved that.

WADE. No. No, I'm sorry, Jack.

JACK. I'm the one who should be sorry.

(Beat.)

WADE. You know what? Fuck it. Let's not waste our time with apologies. Okay? You're my friend. And I appreciate your honesty.

JACK. Likewise.

WADE. We need to keep each other in check.

JACK. Agreed.

(Beat.)

WADE. So, why'd you come back then? Huh? You got something lined up?

JACK. Pfft. No. God, I wish.

WADE. So, what then? Are you really here for just a visit? Or maybe you're planning on moving back?

JACK. I don't know yet. *(Beat.)* I miss the work. A lot. Which is crazy because it wasn't that long ago, I couldn't wait to get away from it. *(Beat.)* My last play? The one I was fired from?

WADE. What about it?

JACK. I couldn't remember my lines, Wade.

WADE. Yeah, well, so what? We've all been there.

JACK. No. No, this was different. *(Beat.)* We'd just started previews. I was making my first entrance. And I gotta say, I was feeling pretty fucking confident in that moment. I mean there I was backstage, I was warmed up, I was limber, loose, ready to go, I was like a fucking freight train rolling on to that stage. 'Cept that as soon as I hit my mark, my mind went blank. And my body went hot. And I just stood there, in a haze. I could barely make out what was in front of me. I could hear the other actors breathing and the audience muttering. Outside that, it felt like someone'd just dropped a metal box over me. I could hardly move, there wasn't much air, and I had no goddamn idea what I was supposed to do or say. Seemed like forever before I could pull myself together. But I did. Eventually. And then we moved on. We got through it. And then the next night: Same shit happens but at a different spot, later in the show. And then the third night: Same as the first, 'Cept this time I just fucking walked off. I fucking walked off, Wade. I left everyone standing there. I went to my dressing room, I chugged some water, took a look at the script, steadied myself, and then went back onstage like nothing happened. But something did happen. Something big. I wasn't some cocky young actor anymore. I was a seasoned actor who was suddenly dealing with the gravity of the situation at hand, who was dealing with the responsibility of performing for an audience, of honoring the character I was playing, of sharing the stage with others who were depending on me. And I failed.

(A moment.)

WADE. Jesus, Jack. I had no idea.

JACK. Call it stage fright or call it a panic attack if you want. Whatever it was, it almost knocked me into retirement. It was awful.

WADE. That's rough. *(Beat.)* So, is that why you went away?

JACK. For the most part, yeah.

WADE. Fair enough.

(Beat.)

JACK. And what about you, my friend? How's things been for you?

WADE. Shit, I don't know. It's been pretty much a dry spell, I guess. Not much in the way of work. Hints of things here and there but nothing noteworthy.

JACK. Oh, yeah?

WADE. I try to stay optimistic. But who the hell knows? At our age, the last gig could very well be the last gig. You know what I'm saying?

JACK. I most certainly do. *(A moment.)* Hey, you wanna play another hand?

WADE. Oh, I don't know. I mean, it's pretty late. You sure you're up for it?

JACK. I happen to be the one who suggested it.

WADE. True. All right. Why the hell not?

JACK. Good. Have a seat. You deal.

(They move to the table and sit.)

WADE. Okay. So, what'll it be?

JACK. Five Card Draw.

WADE. Easy enough.

(Wade reaches for a deck.)

JACK. You got a fresh deck?

WADE. Uh, yeah. Right over here. *(Wade grabs a new deck from nearby. Jack pours the two of them another drink.)* Okay. Here we go. *(Wade sits again and starts to unwrap the new deck.)* So, listen, I don't mind opening a new deck. I got plenty. Just seems odd, I guess. I mean, I'm the guy who basically lost his shirt tonight. So, I'm thinking maybe the one we've already been using ought to bring you more luck.

JACK. Exactly. So, we start fresh with a new deck. It'll level the playing field.

WADE. All right. Fine by me. Anything to give me a chance to win some of my money back.

(Wade begins to shuffle. He's very adept at it.)

JACK. What's the ante?

WADE. Let's start with a C-note.

JACK. I think I can manage that.

(They both toss in a chip. Wade continues to shuffle and then offers the deck to Jack to cut. Jack taps the top of the deck. Wade deals five cards to each and then places the remainder of the deck on the table. They both manipulate their cards as they review their hands. Jack tosses in another chip. Wade follows with a chip.)

WADE. Call.

JACK. I'll take one.

(Jack discards one card and Wade deals one card to Jack from the deck.)

WADE. Three for me.

(Wade discards three cards and then deals himself three cards. A moment as they review their hands.)

JACK. Patrick McKinney.

WADE. What's that?

JACK. Patrick McKinney. He's a playwright. You familiar?

WADE. 'Course, I'm familiar. What about him?

JACK. Hard to say exactly. 'Cept I've heard some rumblings.

WADE. Oh, yeah? What about?

JACK. Heard he's working on a new play. Or maybe he's just finished one. I don't know. Sounds like maybe they're planning to workshop it.

WADE. Mm hm. *(Beat.)* So, you gonna bet here?

JACK. I understand there might be a role in it for, uh... a mature actor. A male actor. Around our age.

WADE. *(Focused on his cards.)* Okay, well, whatever you bet, don't go crazy. I'm running a little low on funds here.

JACK. The kind of role that might, you know, reignite a fizzling career so to speak.

WADE. Right.

JACK. I mean, McKinney ain't no slouch. Chances of one of his plays being a flop are slim to none. Am I right?

(Beat.)

WADE. You have something in particular you wanna discuss with me, Jack?

(Beat.)

JACK. Tell you what. Let's forget about the money. Hm? And maybe let's make this next wager interesting.

WADE. Uh huh. Interesting how?

(A moment.)

JACK. Anything of mine, it's yours. Anything.

WADE. Get outta here.

JACK. Assuming you win the hand, of course.

WADE. No way, Jack.

JACK. Why not? What're you afraid of?

WADE. Afraid? What, are you in grade school? Of course, I'm not afraid. It's just a stupid idea. And sometimes, when a stupid idea presents itself, the smart guy in the situation – that being me in this case – feels obligated to call it what it is: stupid. And anyway, I don't get the sense that

you're actually interested in what I want. So, why don't you tell me exactly what it is you're angling for here, Jack.

(A moment.)

JACK. I want that role in McKinney's play.

WADE. Oh yeah? And what makes you think I'm the guy who can help you with that?

JACK. Because you're the guy who has it.

(Beat.)

WADE. I think it's time for you to go to bed.

JACK. I'm serious, Wade.

WADE. I know you're serious. And that's why I'm here telling you that what you're asking for, you can't have.

JACK. Bullshit.

WADE. Everything's lined up, dipshit. Jesus. Contracts are signed, the money's in place... Everything's locked in. You remember how this works, right?

JACK. Contracts get broken every day. *(Beat.)* Now, listen Wade. You've had a good career. A damn good career. You're already gonna go out on top. So, why can't you find it in your heart to just step aside and let your old pal have this one.

WADE. You wanna know what really pisses me off about this? That you honestly believe you're owed that role by virtue of your... your what? Your sad little need to prove yourself? I mean, even if I did decide to step aside – which I will remind you is not happening – what makes you think they'd just hand it to you? Huh? You think you're better than me? Is that it? You think they'd be happy to have you instead of me? You're the coward who ran away because you couldn't hack it anymore. And just because you suddenly found your missing balls, you think you can come back here and take something from me that I earned through dedication and hard work? Well, fuck you, Jack. That role's mine. And you better steer clear because I will take you out.

(A moment.)

JACK. All I'm asking for is an opportunity to win it from you.

WADE. You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you?

JACK. So, there isn't anything I have that you'd want?

WADE. Are we having the same conversation here?

(A moment.)

JACK. Wade--

WADE. Your property. In Goshen.

JACK. I'm sorry, what?

WADE. You asked me what I want. And I'm telling you. I want your property in Goshen.

JACK. You serious?

WADE. You bet your ass I am.

JACK. What the hell do you want that for? It's a fucking run-down cottage on three acres of land. It's not worth much.

WADE. You said whatever I wanted, Jack.

JACK. Yeah. Okay, I did say that but--

WADE. But nothing. If you really wanna do this. If you really wanna settle this with a poker hand, then you're gonna have to wager that property.

(A moment.)

JACK. I won't do it.

WADE. Is that so? You care to tell me why?

JACK. You know why.

WADE. I don't really give a shit about that cottage anyway. I'd probably just tear it down and put something nice up.

JACK. Fuck you.

WADE. Does that mean we're done with this nonsense? *(The phone rings. Wade picks up the receiver.)* Hello...? *(Aside.)* Jesus Christ. *(Into the phone.)* Mrs. Santangelo! What can I help you with, my dear...? I did say that the fellas went home, yes... I'm sorry, you can see what...? *(Aside.)* Oh, Fuck. *(Into the phone.)* Yeah, well hang on a second. *(He puts down the receiver and goes to the window. He closes the curtains fully and then heads back to the phone.)* I just closed the curtains. So, maybe you should go back to bed and mind your own business... Yeah, well maybe I'm over here yelling into the void. You ever think of that...? There's no one here but me... Okay, well, I'm a whackadoodle who likes to talk out loud to himself and you're a nosy cow whose eyes and ears don't work very well. So, moo to you and good night. *(He replaces the receiver.)* That lady's got nothing better to do.

(During the previous, Jack has poured them both another drink. He offers the drink to Wade who takes it. A moment.)

JACK. We agreed: no apologies.

WADE. I wasn't planning on offering one.

(Beat.)

JACK. Cheers.

WADE. Cheers.

(Beat.)

JACK. So, what's the deal with the zesty tomato next door?

WADE. Oh, Jesus. Don't get me started on Cecilia. Though you best not call her by her given name if you know what's good for you. She's in her nineties, 'cept you wouldn't guess it. And she doesn't like anyone in the neighborhood, though she does maintain a special level of hatred for me.

JACK. You should change your number.

WADE. She'd just show up at the front door. *(Beat.)* Her father was a lawyer and then later a politician. If I remember correctly, he was a member of the New York State Senate back in the 1950s. He also made a fortune renting goats.

JACK. I'm sorry, what?

WADE. Yeah. He had this huge goat farm. And if you just happened to have a surplus of weeds growing on your land, you could – you know – rent a bunch of goats to eat those weeds. You didn't have to deal with pesticides or worry about brush fires or anything like that. So, between that and the goat milk, the Santangelo's were very well-to-do. *(Beat.)* Anyway, so, Cecelia inherited all that money and decided to move here. Which makes me the guy who drew the short straw when he bought the house next to hers. And to make matters worse, there's no house on the opposite side, so I've got her full attention day and night.

JACK. Wow. Well, the upside is, at her age, she'll be dead soon.

WADE. That's not very nice, Jack. *(Beat.)* I mean, it's an appealing thought but maybe we should keep those sentiments to ourselves, don't you think? *(Beat.)* Hey, listen, I gotta take a piss.

JACK. Thanks for the update. *(Wade hesitates as if he has something to say.)* So, are you gonna do it here or--?

WADE. What? No. 'Course not. I pride myself on my indoor plumbing, so I will take advantage of one of the many toilets on the premises.

(Wade exits the den.)

WORK IN PROGRESS. MORE TO COME.