

DINNER DANCE

A playlet
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

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Synopsis

On the eve of his Supreme Court confirmation hearing, ambitious U.S. Circuit Judge Edwin Spratt and his wife Abigail share a tense, increasingly surreal dinner in their Bethesda home, where polite exchanges curdle into barbed interrogations and memory itself begins to fray. As allegations of sexual assault threaten Edwin's ascension, Abigail probes his late-night "walks," his evasions, and the truth behind a decades-old accusation in which his face – not just his name – has become synonymous with a woman's trauma. While a ticking grandfather clock underscores their unraveling, the couple spar over love, loyalty, ambition, and the cost of power, revealing a marriage built on denial, performance, and strategic silence. In this taut two-hander, what begins as a quiet marital dinner becomes a chilling reckoning with complicity, reputation, and the corrosive passage of time.

Characters

EDWIN SPRATT A US Circuit Judge (Mid 50s)

ABIGAIL SPRATT Edwin's Wife (Early 50s)

Place

Bethesda, MD

Time

Present

Setting

A dining room in the Spratt home.

Edwin and Abigail sit at opposite ends of a dinner table. A bottle of pills sits at Abigail's place setting. The faint ticking of a grandfather clock can be heard off. Edwin appears distressed as he stares at his plate. A moment passes before he looks up at Abigail. He forces a tender smile. Abigail smiles back dimly.

ABIGAIL

Are you going to answer me, Edwin?

EDWIN

I love you.

ABIGAIL

Where do you go at night?

EDWIN

I do. I love you very much.

(Abigail sips her wine.)

ABIGAIL

The wine is good. Dry. Not sweet. Just the way I like it.

EDWIN

Did you hear what I said?

ABIGAIL

Yes.

EDWIN

I said I love you.

ABIGAIL

I heard you. I love you too.

EDWIN

I mean it. This time.

ABIGAIL

This time?

EDWIN

Yes.

ABIGAIL

So, what exactly does “this time” mean? Were all the previous declarations meaningless?

EDWIN

No. Well... not meaningless. Just... less certain. I’ve come to a realization recently. It took me a long while, but I’m there now. I love you, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

So, you keep saying. Good to know.

EDWIN

That’s all you’ve got?

ABIGAIL

That’s all I can muster.

EDWIN

I tell you I love you and you respond with “good to know”?

ABIGAIL

Admittedly, I’m a bit thrown, Edwin. You’re generally predictable. And now this. How long have we been together?

EDWIN

I... I can’t remember.

ABIGAIL

Don’t look so alarmed. I can’t remember either. Which is why I asked.

EDWIN

It’s been a long time.

ABIGAIL

Has it?

EDWIN

I’m guessing.

(He pushes his plate away.)

I’ve lost my appetite.

ABIGAIL

I'm starving. Do you mind if I continue? Never mind. I don't know why I asked.

(She pokes at her fish.)

I'll ask again. Where do you go when it's late?

EDWIN

I don't know what you mean.

ABIGAIL

Sometimes I get up in the middle of the night. I pass by your room. You're not there.

EDWIN

You're not sleeping?

ABIGAIL

Rarely.

EDWIN

You're taking your pills?

ABIGAIL

Yes. They don't help.

EDWIN

Take them anyway.

ABIGAIL

Where do you go, Edwin?

EDWIN

For walks.

ABIGAIL

Where?

EDWIN

Nearby. Over in Battery Bailey.

ABIGAIL

It's risky.

EDWIN

A man can take a walk. To clear his head. To breathe.

ABIGAIL

To escape.

EDWIN

Yes. To escape. What's wrong with that?

ABIGAIL

You come back.

EDWIN

This is my home.

ABIGAIL

Our home.

EDWIN

Our home. I'm careful. Discreet.

ABIGAIL

You're risking your career. Your reputation. And in the middle of a contentious four-day hearing, Edwin. Is it your intention to humiliate me?

(The grandfather clock ticks. Edwin glances toward it.)

EDWIN

That sound—

ABIGAIL

If you bring that up again, I swear I will throw myself through that / window.

EDWIN

/ I've asked you repeatedly to have that monstrosity / removed.

ABIGAIL

/ It is not a monstrosity. It is a grandfather clock. And an heirloom. And it stays.

EDWIN

I can't bear it. The endless ticking—

ABIGAIL

(She rises.)

Should I throw myself off the roof instead? Would that be more convenient?

EDWIN

Sit down!

(She doesn't.)

Please.

(She sits.)

How old are the children?

ABIGAIL

What on earth does that have to do with—

EDWIN

Our children. If I knew how old they were, I might know how long we've been married.

ABIGAIL

I don't know.

EDWIN

Think.

ABIGAIL

When I say, "I don't know," what I mean is "I don't care".

EDWIN

I'm talking about our offspring. Our flesh and blood. Our son and our daughter.

ABIGAIL

Sons. We have two sons. Not a daughter. One from your first marriage. And one from... well, somehow you and I managed to—

EDWIN

You're mistaken.

ABIGAIL

No. Look. There. On the sideboard. A photo of the four of us. On vacation... somewhere.

EDWIN

(He looks.)

I'll be damned. Two sons?

(She nods.)

No daughter?

(She shakes her head.)

I'll be damned. You're sure?

ABIGAIL

No. Perhaps the photograph came with the frame. Listen, Edwin. I need you to stop going—

EDWIN

Why do you think you're not sleeping?

ABIGAIL

I didn't say I wasn't sleeping. I said I rarely sleep. Sometimes, I pass out from the anxiety. If I stay unconscious long enough, that counts as sleep.

EDWIN

You should see your doctor.

ABIGAIL

Yesterday I passed out in the garden. I'd just planted the last rose bush when everything went black...

EDWIN

You should have that checked.

ABIGAIL

... And while I lay there unconscious in a pile of composted manure... I slept.

EDWIN

That's awful.

ABIGAIL

I strongly suggest you stop your late-night walks.

EDWIN

Enough. Put it out of your mind.

ABIGAIL

All men are the same, aren't they?

EDWIN

That's not true.

ABIGAIL

Maybe not physically. Some are well-endowed. Some are underdeveloped...

EDWIN

Enough.

ABIGAIL

... but emotionally? Intellectually? All men are underdeveloped in those areas. And now, thanks to modern medicine, women can be that way too.

(Abigail pops a pill.)

EDWIN

Just one more day of hearings, Abigail. I need you to be patient. And supportive.

ABIGAIL

What do you think of this necklace?

EDWIN

I think it's lovely. That's why I bought it.

ABIGAIL

I was thinking of wearing it tomorrow. For the hearing.

EDWIN

It may be a bit extravagant.

ABIGAIL

You think so?

EDWIN

Perhaps something less flashy. Or no necklace at all. We wouldn't want the public getting the wrong impression.

ABIGAIL

I think I'll wear it. And when things get tense – and they will – I'll just put my hand to my neck to remind myself of how you've provided for me. You'll appreciate that, won't you?

EDWIN

Whatever makes you happy, my dear. But there's nothing to worry about. The Senate will confirm.

ABIGAIL

Despite the allegations.

EDWIN

A partisan attack. And anyway, it's not true.

ABIGAIL

Of course it isn't. Technically speaking. She's not your type, after all. But you were there that night. You saw what happened.

EDWIN

What difference does it make? It wasn't me.

ABIGAIL

But it was you. Because when they asked for a name, she gave them yours. Your face is the one she remembers. The pain. The fear. The shame. It was real. It happened. And what does it say about your character that when she relives that nightmare, all she sees is you?

EDWIN

She's a liar.

ABIGAIL

All men are the same.

EDWIN

She'll be forgotten in a week.

ABIGAIL

Your name will be forever tied to hers. Your face will be forever tied to her anguish. History will not be kind to you, Edwin. And neither will I.

EDWIN

I don't need you to be kind. I need you to be quiet.

(The grandfather clock ticks.)

I want that thing gone by tomorrow.

ABIGAIL

It stays. It reminds me that time is still moving forward. And that one day, you and I will come to an end.

(End of Play.)