

HERB CLEARY MEANT NO HARM

A play
By Craig Houk

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1711 11th Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
617-515-1838
hok1969@gmail.com

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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 (Early 50s) Male identifying. Any race.

HERB CLEARY (Early 20s) Male identifying. Any race.

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

JUDY BOYD (Mid 30s) Female identifying. Any race.

WILBUR HAZLEGROVE (Mid to late 60s) Male identifying. Any race.

REE REE TATE (Mid 20s) Female identifying. Any race.

ARLENE DANIELS (Early 20s) Female identifying. Any race.

BERNADETTE SWEETS (Early 50s) Female identifying. Any race.

SARABETH MILLARD (Late 20s, Early 30s) Female identifying. Any race.

REED CALLAWAY (Late 20s, Early 30s) Male identifying. Any race.

Suggested Cast Doubling

Emma and Bernadette

Erin and Sarabeth

Dereck and Reed

Setting

Cleary's Delicatessen. Clarksville, TN. A smattering of tables and chairs, perhaps a grocery section, a service counter, display refrigerator and a cash register. The swinging door behind the counter opens into a kitchen, except the only thing visible in that area is a small office with a glass window and door with glass panel. There is also a hallway serving as an exit to the restrooms.

Time

Present.

SCENE 1

Summertime. Noon. At rise, we see Dereck Hicks and Erin Barnes, likely on a casual date, sitting at a table in Cleary's Delicatessen.

DERECK. This place has been around since 1975.

ERIN. That's a long time.

DERECK. Named "Best Deli" in Clarksville nearly every year since then.

ERIN. Mm hm.

DERECK. 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 eat.

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 sesame garlic green beans.

(Dereck frowns.)

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

ERIN. Well, if it does have eggs or bacon in it, then I'll have to pass. Otherwise, I'm happy to give it a try.

DERECK. Oh. I see. *(Beat.)* And you'll be honest about it? About how it tastes?

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. Oh, and the guy that took our order...?

ERIN. The balding, middle-aged man with the unusual facial hair?

DERECK. Yeah, well he'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? I mean, he seemed nice enough, but 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. Never mind anyway. Here comes your pal, Harlan, with our food.

(Harlan Cleary arrives with two plates.)

HARLAN. All right, all right. Here we go. One tuna melt with a side of sesame garlic green beans. And one beef schnitzel with horseradish mayo and pickles, 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.

ERIN. No, I expect they don't.

HARLAN. Anyway, so I'm glad you ordered the sesame garlic green beans. 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 would be okay with sesame garlic green beans. 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 byproducts.

(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. 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 sesame garlic green beans.

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 sesame garlic green beans off the menu.

DERECK. Technically, it's not your sesame garlic green beans.

ERIN. I'm paying for it.

DERECK. Good point. 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. 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 Cleary appears with a bussing bin. He sets it down not so delicately on the table, takes Erin's dish and scrapes the sesame garlic green beans 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 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. Except there wasn't any hot water or--

ERIN. *(Distracted.)* Did you see that?

DERECK. No. What? What happened?

ERIN. That Herb Cleary punk just scraped my sesame garlic green beans into a bin and then replaced them 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.

DERECK. Yeeaaaaah, 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?

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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. 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?

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. 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 tell 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, now, aren't we?

HARLAN. And I will contend that that right there is an outright lie, Emma.

EMMA. Harlan!

HARLAN. 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. 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? 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, am I right? *(A quiet moment passes.)* So, is that my order right there?

HARLAN. Oh. Yeah, it sure is. 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. Said it tasted unusual.

HARLAN. Really? Unusual. Unusual 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. 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 suppose 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 really ought to keep my expectations in check when it comes to Herb. Asking him to help out with something as precious as my grandmother's potato salad recipe was a step too far. My apologies to you, Emma, and to your husband, and to his buddies.

EMMA. You don't need to apologize. (*She sighs.*) Darn it, Harlan. Now I feel just awful.

HARLAN. What? Now, why on earth would--? Hey now look, I didn't mean for you to feel that way. Confound it, I should've just kept my mouth shut.

EMMA. No. No. You were right to speak up. So, here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna go ahead and get some of that potato salad.

HARLAN. Come on, Emma, you do not have to--

EMMA. I don't want to hear another word about it. So, how much do you think we'll need? Hm? We're expecting upwards of forty people later this afternoon.

HARLAN. Forty people!? You're gonna have your hands full for sure. (*He thinks on it.*) So, I'd say right around ten pounds should do it.

EMMA. Make it fifteen.

HARLAN. All right then. You got it. *(He calls off.)* Herb! Fifteen pounds of potato salad! And make it quick! *(Judy Boyd enters from the kitchen. She's shivering and looking rough.)* Judy, you're late. Do you know what time it is?

JUDY. I arrived at seven this morning, Harlan.

HARLAN. I hardly think so. I expect I would've seen you at some point if that was the case.

JUDY. Well, normally you would've yes, except I've been in the walk-in cooler the entire time.

HARLAN. What the hell were you doing in the walk-in for five hours?

JUDY. Mostly just freezing my ass off and trying not to die. I was stuck, Harlan. Otherwise, I try not to spend too much time in there.

HARLAN. How do you mean stuck?

JUDY. Well, I went in first thing to pull some meats and some sides for the day, but then when I tried to get out, I couldn't.

HARLAN. Why not?

JUDY. Turns out, Herb stacked a bunch of delivery boxes against the door. I was hollering for help for nearly an hour, but then I just gave up. Spent the rest of the time carving my last will and testament into an eighteen-pound ham.

EMMA. Oh, that's awful, Judy.

JUDY. It sure was.

EMMA. Are you all right now?

JUDY. Other than the uncontrollable shivering, I seem to be doing okay.

EMMA. Well, I'm glad to hear it. Though I have to ask. How did you get out of the--?

HARLAN. The good news is she's out. And she's alive and well. *(To Judy.)* And do you know what might help warm you up?

JUDY. The afternoon off and a trip to the beach?

HARLAN. Not at all what I was thinking. I'd like to suggest that you put Emma's potato salad into a container and then help her carry her order to her car. What do you think about that, huh? That should get the blood flowing.

JUDY. I can feel my blood heating up already.

HARLAN. All right then! So, let's get a wiggle on! *(Judy exits into the kitchen.)* Potato salad is on the house, by the way, Emma.

EMMA. Oh, Harlan, you don't have to--

HARLAN. I most certainly do. So, listen, I'm just gonna check on my other customers. Judy won't be long.

EMMA. Sounds perfect. Thank you, Harlan.

(As Harlan heads away, Emma may get on her phone or perhaps she looks through the grocery section. Harlan arrives at Dereck and Erin's table.)

HARLAN. And how're we doing here?

ERIN. Well, since you asked, I wanted to talk to you about this potato--

DERECK. I noticed there wasn't any hot water or bar soap in the restroom, Harlan.

HARLAN. That's right. Trying to keep costs down.

DERECK. Oh, no. Things not going so well?

HARLAN. No. No. We're fine. Business is good. Just being cautious is all.

ERIN. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think you're required by law to have soap and hot water in your restrooms.

HARLAN. You really do have your hands full with this one, don't you, Dereck?

DERECK. I'm thinking about getting an extra pair [of hands].

(Dereck and Harlan chuckle.)

HARLAN. No, but seriously, we'd have to hike our prices a bit if we turned the hot water back on and provided soap.

ERIN. Well, I for one would be willing to pay more if it meant I might not get hepatitis.

HARLAN. *(Harlan chuckles again.)* You are a piece of work, young lady. A piece of work. Excuse me, now.

(Harlan crosses to Wilbur Hazlegrove, who has been sitting quietly at a corner table drinking coffee, nibbling on something, reading from an electronic tablet. Sometime during the following, Judy appears with Emma's potato salad and helps her carry her order to her car.)

WILBUR. Business is shit, Harlan, and you know it.

HARLAN. I suppose you're right, Wilbur.

WILBUR. It's that deli across the way that's stealing your customers.

HARLAN. Well, except for you.

WILBUR. What? No. I had a breakfast sandwich there this morning. Good stuff. Oh, and the owner? Bernadette?

HARLAN. Yeah. What about her?

WILBUR. Have you gotten a look at her.

HARLAN. Only from a distance.

WILBUR. Well, she ain't hideous, let me tell you.

HARLAN. Are you suggesting, Wilbur, that she's the opposite of hideous?

WILBUR. Polar.

HARLAN. I see. So, in addition to providing her customers with some damn fine food, you're saying she's nice to look at as well?

WILBUR. That's what I'm getting at.

(Herb arrives at the table with a bussing bin.)

HARLAN. And you think maybe I ain't got much going on in the looks department?

WILBUR. You're all right. I mean, maybe if you shaved whatever that is on your face and got yourself a decent haircut, one might say you're a reasonably good looking fellow.

HERB. Shave and a haircut--

WILBUR. Two bits! *(Beat.)* You here to bus my table, Herb?

HERB. I sure am, Mr. Hazlegrove.

WILBUR. Okay then. Everything except my coffee, though. I could use a refill. *(Wilbur picks up his coffee cup just before Herb drops the bussing bin with a thump onto the table. Dishes rattle inside and there is some splash back. Herb clears the table and then heads off to get Wilbur some coffee.)* He's a good boy.

HARLAN. He's no boy. He's a grown man.

(Sometime during the following, Judy reenters the deli and then exits into the kitchen or makes herself busy behind the counter.)

WILBUR. On the outside, sure. But up here... *(he points to his head)* he's still a boy.

HARLAN. That's exactly my point. I don't think his mind is ever gonna catch up with his body.

WILBUR. Well, the one ain't talking to the other, that's for certain. And you know, Harlan – and don't hesitate to stop me if you think I'm talking out of turn here – but I'm thinking that maybe you ought to find something else to keep Herb busy. Instead of working here, I mean. You know, before something happens.

HARLAN. Before what happens?

(Ree Ree Tate & Arlene Daniels enter the deli. They are in the middle of a conversation as they head to the counter.)

REE REE. And can you believe he ghosted me?

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ARLENE. Now, hang on a second, Ree Ree, I'm confused. Which guy are you talking about now?

REE REE. You really ought to keep up, Arlene.

ARLENE. Oh, is that so? I mean, you juggle more men than a circus clown juggles balls. That's a lot of balls, Ree Ree. A lot of balls.

REE REE. I'm talking about Wade Birdwell--

ARLENE. *(Taken aback.)* Wade Birdwell?

REE REE. Isn't that what I just said?

ARLENE. Oh, my.

REE REE. Anyway, he was supposed to pick me up last Saturday. We were gonna check out a matinee over at the Clarksville Regal.

ARLENE. Well, good Lord, Ree Ree, didn't you hear?

REE REE. Hear what?

ARLENE. Wade Birdwell is dead.

REE REE. Dead? You're lying.

ARLENE. I am not. He crashed his Chevy Silverado into a telephone pole. Didn't have his seat belt on, the air bag failed, so he just went flying into the windshield.

REE REE. Through the windshield?

ARLENE. No. Into it. The glass didn't break, but his neck sure did.

REE REE. Oh my God. When?

ARLENE. Just last Saturday actually.

REE REE. Well, Jesus, Arlene. Do you know what this means?

ARLENE. I've no idea.

REE REE. It means Wade Birdwell literally ghosted me.

(A seemingly somber moment passes before the two of them burst out laughing.)

ARLENE. You are something else, Ree Ree.

REE REE. Don't I know it.

ARLENE. "Literally ghosted me". That is just too damned funny.

REE REE. It surely is, isn't it?

ARLENE. You are out of control.

(They arrive at the counter. Judy is there.)

REE REE. Oh, hey Judy.

JUDY. Hey, Ree Ree. Arlene.

ARLENE. Hi, Judy.

JUDY. So, what can I get for you two today?

ARLENE. Is Herb in?

(Herb enters with a coffee carafe. He is focused as he passes by the three women and heads directly to Wilbur's table to give him a refill.)

JUDY. Well, yeah. As a matter of fact, he is. Why do you ask?

ARLENE. No reason, I guess. *(She giggles.)*

REE REE. *(To Arlene.)* Do not tell me that you have a crush on Herby Cleary.

ARLENE. Oh, now come on, Ree Ree--

REE REE. You know that boy ain't right in the head.

ARLENE. I do not have a crush on him. I just asked if he was here. It's hardly an indication that I'm smitten with him.

REE REE. You seem pretty uppity about it.

ARLENE. Yeah, well maybe you oughtta shut your fat mouth.

(Beat.)

JUDY. Anyway, so we have one featured item on the menu today. It's a wedge of cheddar delicately positioned between two slices of whole wheat, evenly buttered, and pan fried served with hand-shredded iceberg lettuce tossed fervently in a modest bowl with oil, vinegar, and a pinch of pepper.

REE REE. So, a grilled cheese sandwich and a side salad.

JUDY. Yes, but on whole wheat, Ree Ree. And I made the dressing myself.

REE REE. I think I'll pass.

JUDY. All right then. And how about you, Arlene?

ARLENE. I'm really not that hungry. We just had a fantastic lunch across the way at Bernadette's.

JUDY. Oh, you did, did you? Well, then what the hell are you two doing here?

REE REE. Jesus, Judy. You're in a mood. Did somebody cram an icicle up your fart box this morning?

JUDY. That's nearly what happened. But you do make a good point. I expect I should probably adjust my attitude a bit. What I should've said was, if you're not gonna eat here, then get the hell out.

(Harlan has just arrived at the counter.)

HARLAN. All right, all right. Thank you, Judy. I think maybe you're overdue for a break, am I right? Why don't you head out back and have yourself a smoke?

JUDY. Sounds like a great idea.

HARLAN. And don't be letting Herb bum any cigarettes off you.

JUDY. *(As she exits into the kitchen.)* Herb! I'm going out back for a quick smoke! Wanna join?

(Herb is just returning from refilling Wilbur's coffee.)

ARLENE. Oh hey, Herb.

HERB. *(Without looking at her.)* Hey, Arlene. *(Arlene giggles as Herb follows Judy into the kitchen.)*

HARLAN. So, ladies. What can I do for you today? Seems you already had a nice meal over at Bernadette's. Maybe you left room for dessert?

REE REE. Thanks, Mr. Cleary, but no thanks. We actually stopped by to see if you might be interested in sponsoring our women's softball team. The Clarksville Cluckers. *(Beat.)* Now before you ask, we're pretty sure we don't have any lesbians in the group. Unless of course you prefer we have lesbians, then maybe we can try to recruit some, or perhaps see if any of our current members might be willing to out themselves. We don't want to shut down any potential funding sources. We're inclusive that way.

HARLAN. I see.

ARLENE. Our sponsorships start at one hundred dollars, with the top tier sponsorship starting at twenty-five hundred dollars.

HARLAN. Gotcha. Well, maybe I can take a look at the sponsorship levels? Hm? To check out the perks for each.

REE REE. Well, of course. Show him the QR code, Arlene.

HARLAN. I'm sorry, the what?

ARLENE. The QR code. *(Arlene pulls out her mobile phone, manipulates it and then points the screen at Harlan.)* Go on. Scan it.

HARLAN. Scan it? Scan what? I'm not even sure what the hell I'm looking at here. *(He squints.)* Is that a crossword puzzle?

REE REE. Right. Well, don't worry, Mr. Cleary. We came prepared. We printed up a few brochures for those who might be a teensy bit technically challenged. *(She hands him a brochure.)*

ARLENE. *(Aside to Ree Ree.)* Bernadette knew what a QR code was.

REE REE. She sure did.

HARLAN. Bernadette bought a sponsorship?

REE REE. Oh yeah. She got the grand slam package. She'll get her restaurant logo on the front and back of our jerseys.

ARLENE. And guess what color they are?

HARLAN. Pink.

ARLENE. *(Overlapping.)* They're Pi... *(Deflated.)* Yes, they're pink.

(Erin races by the group and exits towards the restrooms. She is on the verge of vomiting. Dereck trails her.)

HARLAN. Jesus. She okay, Dereck?

DERECK. Uh, no. No, she's not okay. And I ain't feeling so good myself. Excuse me.

(Dereck cups his rear end as he exits urgently towards the restrooms. Judy enters from the kitchen and crosses to Dereck's and Erin's table. She begins to clear it.)

HARLAN. Hey, Judy. When you're finished clearing that table, can you go to the office and make a check out to the Clarksville Cluckers in the amount of--? *(To Ree Ree.)* How much did Bernadette give you?

REE REE. Thirty-five hundred.

HARLAN. *(To himself.)* Jesus Christ. *(To Judy.)* Four thousand.

JUDY. Four thousand!?! Have you lost your mind?

ARLENE. That's very generous, Mr. Cleary.

REE REE. It sure is. Though I expect Bernadette's not gonna give up that jersey logo without a fight.

HARLAN. Make it forty-five hundred, Judy.

JUDY. One straitjacket coming right up! *(She has joined the group. To Harlan, referring to Erin and Dereck.)* Looks like those two did a little eat-it-and-beat-it.

HARLAN. No. No. They're both in the restroom.

JUDY. Oh yeah? What's the matter with them?

HARLAN. Nothing's the matter with them.

JUDY. You sure? Because you're looking pretty damned anxious right about now.

HARLAN. They're fine. Now go get me that check.

JUDY. *(To herself as she exits into the kitchen.)* Forty-five hundred dollars. I hardly make that much in three months.

(During the following, we see Judy enter the office and close the door behind her. She will have a very difficult time finding the check book since the office is a mess.)

HARLAN. Ree Ree. Arlene. Why don't you two have a seat at one of the tables? I'll bring you a soda while you wait. What'll you have?

REE REE. I'll have a diet, thank you.

ARLENE. Regular's fine for me. I'll burn those calories playing softball.

REE REE. You're the substitute left fielder, Arlene. You'll be spending most of your time on the bench.

ARLENE. Well, then maybe I'm allergic to aspartame.

REE REE. Whatever you say.

ARLENE. You know, I'm beginning to think that Wade Birdwell crashed his truck on purpose.

REE REE. And what's that supposed to mean?

ARLENE. It means maybe he'd rather snap his neck than go on a date with you.

REE REE. You better watch your--

HARLAN. One diet and one regular coming right up!

(Harlan heads behind the service counter. Arlene and Ree Ree settle in at a table. At the same time, Bernadette Sweets enters. Wilbur perks up, perhaps runs his fingers through his hair, straightens his shirt.)

BERNADETTE. Well, good afternoon, neighbors!

WILBUR. Good afternoon, Miss Bernadette.

BERNADETTE. Wilbur Hazlegrove! You handsome devil. Did you enjoy your breakfast sandwich this morning?

WILBUR. I sure did.

BERNADETTE. One egg over easy, bacon – extra crispy, Swiss cheese, arugula, hillbilly tomato, and extra mayo on a lightly toasted sesame seed bagel.

WILBUR. Now how in the world did you remember all that?

BERNADETTE. Because I'm the one who made it.

WILBUR. Well, I'll be. Best breakfast sandwich I ever had.

BERNADETTE. Well, we source everything locally. And we make our bagels onsite. (*Harlan brings Ree Ree and Arlene their sodas.*) And my goodness, Ree Ree Tate and Arlene Daniels. I expect the two of you are up to no good. Are you trying to start a rivalry between me and Mr. Cleary over here? You are Harlan Cleary, I assume.

HARLAN. I am indeed.

BERNADETTE. So, how much did you give these ladies for their softball team?

HARLAN. Oh. Well, uh... Forty-five hundred.

BERNADETTE. Forty-five hundred!?! Well, my goodness.

REE REE. Which means Cleary's Delicatessen will have their logo on the front and back of our jerseys.

HARLAN. (*To Bernadette.*) Sorry about that.

BERNADETTE. What? No. There's nothing to be sorry about. (*Beat.*) I'll tell you what, though. How about I match your forty-five hundred and then maybe we can get both our logos on that jersey? What do you think? (*To Ree Ree and Arlene.*) Can we make that happen, ladies?

REE REE. I don't see why not.

ARLENE. (*Overlapping.*) That's a great idea!

BERNADETTE. Well, it's settled then. (*Beat.*) Front or back, Harlan?

HARLAN. Come again?

BERNADETTE. Front of the jersey or back of the jersey?

HARLAN. Oh, I don't know. It doesn't matter, I guess. Whatever works best for you.

BERNADETTE. How about you take the back then? Hm? That way, everyone behind the backstop can get a really good look at it.

HARLAN. Sounds good.

(During the following – or perhaps starting earlier depending on timing – we see Herb enter with a cigarette between his lips. He stands outside the office, smoking and watching Judy for a moment. Unbeknown to Judy, he then grabs a chair and wedges the back of it into the door handle, trapping her inside. He then grabs a wastepaper basket, which sits nearby, and tosses his lit cigarette into it. The contents catch fire as Herb picks up and walks off with the flaming basket.)

BERNADETTE. *(To Harlan.)* I would've come over sooner to introduce myself, but things have been absolutely nuts at the deli since we've opened. And I feel awful leaving my staff to fend for themselves at lunch time, except it was important that I make time to meet you, Harlan.

HARLAN. Well, that's very kind of you – and of course you're welcome here anytime – but you know, you could've waited until things slowed down across the way.

BERNADETTE. *(She laughs. A kind-hearted laugh.)* If I waited for things to slow down, I'd have never made it over here. We are busy morning, noon, and night.

HARLAN. You're open in the evening too?

BERNADETTE. Oh yeah. Some bar food, beer, and wine. And live entertainment – local talent. Nothing too fancy, though.

HARLAN. Right.

(A moment. Bernadette scans the deli.)

BERNADETTE. Listen, Harlan. I hope you don't mind me saying but it seems a bit slow over here. And it's barely even one o'clock.

HARLAN. Well, you're right about that. I'm gonna fix that, though. I'm planning on doing some renovations and, you know, spruce up the place a bit--

WILBUR. You've been saying that for the last five years.

HARLAN. Oh, now come on, Wilbur. That ain't true.

WILBUR. Come to think of it, it's been more than five years.

HARLAN. Okay, well that's enough out of you. *(To Bernadette.)* Yeah, so anyway, I'm gonna start making some changes to the menu and--

WILBUR. What the hell are you talking about? You just told that young lady you were getting rid of those sesame garlic green beans--

REE REE. He didn't mention green beans to me.

ARLENE. Me neither.

WILBUR. No, not you two. The young lady in the restroom.

REE REE. Oh, right. She's been in there a long time.

ARLENE. Her boyfriend too.

REE REE. I hope they're okay.

HARLAN. They're fine!

BERNADETTE. Do I smell smoke?

WILBUR. She's right. Something's burning.

REE REE. Doesn't it always smell like that in here?

HARLAN. *(He sniffs the air.)* Oh, shit.

BERNADETTE. Everything okay?

HARLAN. Of course, of course. I'm sure everything's just fine. Excuse me for just a minute.

(Harlan races into the kitchen. By this point, Judy has discovered that she's trapped in the office and is desperately trying to get out. Harlan grabs a fire extinguisher and disappears off. We hear the extinguisher go off and eventually the fire goes out. Harlan reappears and frees Judy from the office.)

JUDY. Where the hell's that little bastard? I'm gonna kill him.

(Judy races into the kitchen and out the back of the deli.)

HARLAN. *(Calling after Judy.)* Leave him be, Judy! I'm sure he meant nothing by it! *(Harlan has a very constrained temper tantrum.)* Shit, shit, shit! *(He calms himself and then returns to the deli area.)* All right, well, that's all taken care of.

BERNADETTE. What happened, Harlan?

HARLAN. Oh, just a small grease fire. Nothing serious.

REE REE. I'm thinking maybe me and Arlene should come back for that check, Mr. Cleary. Sounds like maybe you got your hands full at the moment.

HARLAN. No, no, no. Everything's under control. You just hang tight. Judy'll be right out with your money. And while you wait, let me grab a complimentary potato salad for the two of you. We've got some freshly packaged just behind the counter here.

(Harlan heads behind the counter and grabs the potato salad.)

REE REE. That's very sweet, Mr. Cleary. I'll pass it along to my grandmother. She loves your potato salad. Says it's delicious and easy to chew.

ARLENE. My stepdad likes your potato salad, too. I guess maybe I'll give mine to him.

REE REE. Your stepdad's disgusting, Arlene.

ARLENE. You don't know the half of it, Ree Ree.

(Harlan hands the potato salads to Ree Ree and Arlene.)

HARLAN. Okay, well, here you go. You do whatever you want with these. As long as someone's able to enjoy them.

(Herb comes racing through the front entrance of the deli pursued by Judy.)

JUDY. You're a dead man, Herb Cleary! You hear me? A dead man.

HERB CLEARY MEANT NO HARM by Craig Houk

(The two of them carry out a cat and mouse routine around the deli until Herb exits into the back of the deli and then off followed by Judy. Harlan calls off after them.)

HARLAN. Judy! When you and Herb are finished horsing around, do you think maybe you can get that check for these young ladies here? *(We hear a crash off.)* You know what? I'm gonna go ahead and get it myself.

(Harlan starts off.)

BERNADETTE. Oh, and Harlan?

HARLAN. Yes, ma'am?

BERNADETTE. I'd really like to speak to Herb if he's not too busy.

HARLAN. I'm sorry, you wanna speak to Herb?

BERNADETTE. Yes. If he's not too busy. I was hoping to thank him.

HARLAN. Thank him? Thank him for what?

BERNADETTE. Well, he's a sweet young man. Earlier this morning, he dropped off several large containers of your world-famous potato salad – I gotta say, you all are way too generous with that potato salad. Anyway, so I decided, wouldn't it be a great idea to promote your deli by sharing samples of your potato salad with my customers. So, we've been adding a small container to each of our takeout orders. The intent being of course to drum up some additional business for you over here. A little cross-marketing of sorts.

HARLAN. Oh. I see. Well, that's very kind, Bernadette.

BERNADETTE. It was Herb's idea.

HARLAN. Nonetheless, I appreciate it.

BERNADETTE. Well, it's certainly my pleasure. *(Beat.)* So, do you think maybe I could see Herb? I didn't have much time to chat with him this morning.

HARLAN. Right. Well, I'm not sure if you could tell, but Herb's kind of shy. Really shy in fact. And frankly, I'm surprised he paid you a visit this morning. It's certainly out of character for him. So, maybe another time? And anyway, I gotta get these ladies their money and it sounds like I may need to clean up some kind of mess in the back as well.

BERNADETTE. Oh. Right. Of course, of course. My apologies, Harlan. I certainly don't want to be a nuisance.

HARLAN. A nuisance? What? No, ma'am. Not at all. Like I said, you are welcome here anytime--

BERNADETTE. It's all right, Harlan. You've got things to take care of. All I meant to say was, I think it's time I got outta your hair...

WILBUR. *(Quietly, aside.)* What's left of it.

BERNADETTE. ...I will certainly be back. And I hope you'll stop by for a visit soon. I'd love to show you around.

HARLAN. You bet.

BERNADETTE. Have a wonderful afternoon, everyone!

(Each offers their goodbyes as Bernadette exits.)

HARLAN. *(To Ree Ree and Arlene.)* All right, ladies. Forty-five hundred smackaroos coming right up.

REE REE. Thanks again, Mr. Cleary.

HARLAN. My pleasure.

(Harlan exits into the back and goes into the office. As he does, Judy enters the deli from the front entrance.)

JUDY. Is that little son of a bitch in here?

ARLENE. Last I saw Herb, you were chasing him out the back.

REE REE. Looks like he's got you running in circles, Judy.

JUDY. The only circles I see are the ones under your eyes, Ree Ree.

ARLENE. Well, that's not very nice, Judy...

REE REE. No, it is not.

ARLENE. ...I mean, it's not Ree Ree's fault. I think it's just genetics.

REE REE. You are the absolute worst, Arlene.

(Harlan enters from the kitchen area with the check.)

HARLAN. All right, all right. And here you go.

(Harlan offers the check to Ree Ree but Judy intercepts it.)

JUDY. Gimme that.

HARLAN. What the hell are you doing, Judy?

JUDY. I've had just about enough of this nonsense.

HARLAN. Last I checked, you weren't the one in charge around here.

JUDY. Last I checked, neither were you. *(Beat.)* Ree Ree. Arlene. I think it's time for you two to skedaddle.

REE REE. Of course, Judy. So, if you don't mind, I'll just take that from you--

(Ree Ree reaches for the check, but Judy pulls it back.)

JUDY. I'm gonna give you five seconds to get outta here.

ARLENE. Come on, Ree Ree. Let's go. Oh, and thank you for the potato salad, Mr. Cleary. That was very generous.

REE REE. Was it, though? *(Arlene grabs Ree Ree by the arm and pulls her out the door.)* Bye!
(They're gone.)

JUDY. Have you checked the restrooms lately, Harlan?

HARLAN. I have not. Why do you ask?

JUDY. You know damn well why I-- Never mind.

(Judy grunts and then exits down the hallway to the restrooms.)

WILBUR. Uh, Harlan.

HARLAN. Yeah, Wilbur?

WILBUR. *(Referencing his electronic tablet.)* There's something here that's just popped up on my news app that might be of interest to you.

HARLAN. *(Moving to Wilbur.)* What is it?

WILBUR. Here, I'll just play the video clip for you.

JUDY. *(Knocking on a door off.)* Excuse me? Young lady? Is everything okay in there?

WILBUR. Damn it. I just lost the page. Hang on a second.

JUDY. *(Knocking on a door off.)* Young man? Are you all right? You've been in there for quite some time now.

WILBUR. Here we go.

(Wilbur hits the play button. During the following, Judy will appear from the hallway and head to the office to retrieve keys to the restrooms. She will then return to the hallway with the keys.)

NEWSCASTER. *(Prerecorded.)* We have some breaking news of a mysterious possible mass poisoning of approximately forty people at a picnic just outside of Clarksville. Reports indicate that the home belongs to Floyd and Emma Campbell who were entertaining dozens of friends and relatives in their backyard when – one by one – their guests began to fall ill. No deaths have yet been announced, though we are aware that several are in critical condition and some of those are not expected to survive. We will of course provide further updates as they become available.

HARLAN. Oh, shit.

WILBUR. Oh, shit indeed.

(Judy appears from the hallway.)

JUDY. Harlan...

HARLAN. Not now, Judy. We've got a big problem on our hands.

JUDY. Oh, yeah? Bigger than a pair of corpses in the restrooms?

(End of scene.)

WORK IN PROGRESS. MORE TO COME.