

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

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

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.

Time

Present.

SCENE 1

(Summertime. Noon. At rise, we see Dereck and Erin, 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. 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 coconut rice and lentils.

(Dereck frowns.)

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

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

DERECK: Oh. Okay. 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 guy with the unusual facial hair?

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? 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 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.

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 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 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. 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 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 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--

ERIN: *(Distracted.)* 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.

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?

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?

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. 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 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. 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 a newspaper. 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, hold 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 as a matter of fact.

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 ladies today?

ARLENE: Is Herb in?

JUDY: Well, yeah, he's in the back. Why do you ask?

ARLENE: No reason, I guess.

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.

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'm gonna 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 from you.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ THE FULL PLAY, PLEASE CONTACT
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