MISCHIEF AT THE BEST WESTERN; OR, THE INDISPOSED SEX SLAVE OF VALDEZ

A playlet
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

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Synopsis

After closing his tab at a hotel bar in Valdez, Alaska, visiting playwright Elliot Rhodes is intercepted by an eccentric local couple, Mavis Hemingway, who claims to be related to Ernest, and her Wyoming transplant companion, Silas McCrea, who insists he met her while she was hunting bears by pretending to be one. Over one last drink, their stories grow stranger, their observations become increasingly personal, and their invitation becomes harder to dismiss. As Mavis and Silas reveal the peculiar life they've built together, and the unusual qualities they admired in the men who came before him, Elliot must decide whether curiosity is worth the risk. A dark comedy about loneliness, storytelling, and the irresistible pull of people who are just a little too interesting to ignore.

Characters

ELLIOT RHODES Male, Mid-50s, Any Race
MAVIS HEMINGWAY Female, Early 40s, Any Race
SILAS MCCREA Male, Early 40s, Any Race

Place

Valdez, AK

Time

Present

Setting

The lounge of the Wheelhouse Restaurant inside the Best Western in Valdez, Alaska. Late evening. The bar has nearly emptied. Outside, rain taps against the windows. Mountains disappear into darkness.

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*ELLIOT, very, very drunk (I mean **really** drunk), sits at the bar. A few stools away, MAVIS, with SILAS next to her, watches Elliot with a vague smile. Having finished his drink and settled his tab, Elliot leaves cash for the bartender. He rises to go, but before he can make his escape…*

MAVIS

Excuse me.

ELLIOT

(Looks around, then back to Mavis.)

Me?

MAVIS

Would you join us for a nightcap?

ELLIOT

Oh. Uh… I probably shouldn't. I'm… I'm pretty drunk. Think I oughta… head to bed.

MAVIS

Smart.

ELLIOT

Huh?

MAVIS

Knowing when you've had enough. That's good judgment.

ELLIOT

Oh, yeah?

MAVIS

We appreciate a man with good judgment.

ELLIOT

Well, if I spot one on my way out, I'll… I'll send him over.

(He starts off.)

MAVIS

Or you could just sit down.

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(Elliot hesitates, not because he's especially suspicious, though he is just a little, but because he's caught between exhaustion, intoxication, and the undeniable temptation to see where this is going.)

Come on. It's on us.

(Elliot sits.)

ELLIOT

Why the hell not? I mean… what's one more drink? And you know, with everything else I've had tonight, this one'll make…

(He studies his hands and counts on his fingers.)

Well, would you look at that. Ten fingers. You folks got ten fingers? Because not everybody does. I've met people with fewer.

MAVIS

Another bourbon?

ELLIOT

How'd you know?

MAVIS

That's what you've been drinking.

ELLIOT

It is?

(He considers this.)

It is.

MAVIS

Silas drinks whiskey. I drink beer. And you…?

ELLIOT

Elliot.

MAVIS

And Elliot drinks bourbon.

(To the bartender.)

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One of each, please.

ELLIOT

Well… I guess that settles that then. You two from around here?

MAVIS

Born in Valdez. Never been anywhere else.

SILAS

Moved here from the Lower 48. Wyoming. Wasn't planning on staying. Came up about thirteen years ago for a black bear hunt. Had it in my head that if I could learn to track a bear through the Chugach, maybe I'd figure out a thing or two about myself. Couldn't have told you what. Just seemed like a good enough reason to come north. Anyway, about the fourth day I saw something moving through the brush and thought… well, there it is! Raised my binoculars… and it wasn't a bear. It was Mavis here. Took me a second to be sure. She wasn't moving like a person. She stayed low, kind of rolling through the brush, slipping between the trees, moving through all that deadfall like it was nothing, like she knew exactly where to put her feet. Then she stopped at a spruce, stood up, and scratched her back against the trunk. Slow as you please. Just like a bear. Didn't seem to care who saw her. Then she dropped back down and kept right on going. I finally caught up with her and asked what the hell she was doing. And she said–

MAVIS

You don't stalk a bear. You let it think you're one of them.

SILAS

That's right. Anyway, that night she took me back to her cabin and said I could leave in the morning, but she didn't think I would. I laughed because it sounded like something folks up here might say. Turns out she was right. I never left. People ask if I stayed because of the mountains, the peace and quiet, or because of Mavis. I tell them it was all three. But mostly Mavis. For a long time, I figured I was the one who found her out there in those woods. Truth is… she'd already found me.

(Drinks arrive. They toast.)

MAVIS

To finding people.

ELLIOT

To Alaska.

(They drink.)

MAVIS

Do you travel alone, Elliot?

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ELLIOT

Uh… Depends. I'm here for a… for a conference. By myself this time. I'm a…

(He belches.)

… Excuse me. A playwright.

MAVIS

Ah. That explains it.

ELLIOT

Explains what?

SILAS

You watch people.

MAVIS

All evening, as a matter of fact. Studying them. Tucking away little details you'll steal for one of your plays.

ELLIOT

I'm… I'm not so sure I've… paid attention to much of anything tonight, to be honest. I've mostly just been drinking, making conversation, trying to unwind a little. I'm not always looking for a story. Doesn't mean I mind stumbling into one, though.

MAVIS

I'm not a writer…

ELLIOT

A lot of writer's aren't.

MAVIS

… But I come from people who were. Last name's Hemingway, if you can believe it. Family always said we were related. Cousins. Distant enough nobody could prove it, close enough nobody questioned it. My grandmother used to say every Hemingway inherits something. Some inherit the stories. Others inherit the drinking. She took me into the woods once a week. We'd sit for hours without saying a word. If I asked what we were doing, she'd say, "Waiting." "Waiting for what?" "The story." And that was it. Sometimes we'd sit there all afternoon and leave without another word. Other times she'd suddenly stand up and say, "There it is!" Then we'd head home, and by the time we got back she'd have a brand-new story to tell. Truth be told… most of them weren't very good. But every now and then she'd tell one that'd keep you awake for a month. Grandma always said Ernest would've approved.

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SILAS

(To Elliot.)

We've been looking for someone like you.

(A quiet moment. The two men study each other.)

ELLIOT

(To Silas.)

Are you gay?

SILAS

Come again?

ELLIOT

Are you gay? I mean, you keep looking at me like you're about to wrestle me to the floor and have your way with me.

(Silas slaps Elliot across the face. Elliot immediately slaps him back. To Mavis.)

So… your… husband. I assume he's your husband. Is he into me or what?

MAVIS

He's not my husband, but we do share a bed. And yes… I'd say he's interested.

ELLIOT

I see. All right. All right.

(To Silas.)

I mean, you're not a bad-looking man. So… if you're really interested… go ahead. Kiss me. Right here. Right on the lips.

(Silas slaps Elliot across the face again. Elliot immediately slaps him back. To Mavis.)

He always like this?

MAVIS

He has a curious way of expressing himself.

ELLIOT

Well… first off, those couple of slaps sobered me up a little, so thanks for that. And second… if you two are messing with me, you're messing with the wrong guy. I mean, I'm perfectly happy to sit here, finish

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this drink, and listen to you tell stories about bears and Hemingways and whatever else you've got rattling around in those heads of yours. But sooner or later this night's gonna end, I'm gonna head back to my room, and that'll be that.

MAVIS

We've been looking for a friend.

ELLIOT

Running a little short on those, are you?

SILAS

We don't ask just anyone.

ELLIOT

Aren't I just anyone?

MAVIS

Our last friend… couldn't quite settle in.

(Elliot waits for her to continue. She doesn't.)

ELLIOT

Oh. Uh… So… what happened?

MAVIS

He missed home. Seattle.

SILAS

He was always griping about something.

MAVIS

It's hard to enjoy someone who complains.

ELLIOT

I imagine so.

MAVIS

So… he just… disappeared one day.

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ELLIOT

Of his own accord, I assume.

SILAS

He went away.

ELLIOT

Right… well… I guess that clears absolutely nothing up.

MAVIS

We had a room set aside for him. Made it up real nice. In the cellar.

ELLIOT

Sounds cozy. And cool.

MAVIS

Cabin's about twenty miles outside town. No neighbors. No cell service. Nothing but quiet and solitude.

SILAS

I have needs.

ELLIOT

I'm sorry, you have what?

MAVIS

What Silas means is… I'm not always… enough… for him. Sometimes we're lying right beside each other, and I can still feel the distance between us. He just gets a certain way. You know? Doesn't say much. Walks outside and stares off into the trees like he's waiting for somebody else. It always passes. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't notice. Funny thing about love… people think it's supposed to be everything. I don't. I think it's supposed to leave room for all the things it isn't. Silas has room in him for another man. Truth is, so do I. Listen. We've done all right for ourselves. Everything's paid for. More land than we know what to do with. We don't need much. Haven't for years. What we do need is somebody new to talk to. To be with. And now here you are. I bet you look at the world a little sideways. Writers do that. Seems a shame a man with good stories in him should spend his life worrying about a roof over his head or bills to pay. Wouldn't it be nice if all you had to do was wake up, drink your coffee, sit on the porch, tell us what you'd been thinking about, and write it down every now and then so we'd all have something new to enjoy? Sounds like a pretty good life to me. Don't you think?

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ELLIOT

I fly out tomorrow. But for what it's worth… that was one hell of a sales pitch. Free room. Free meals. No bills. No rent. Though I am curious… would I be sleeping mostly in the cellar, or rotating between there and your bed? Actually, don't answer that. Otherwise, what? I get to sit on the porch, drink coffee, write a little, and every now and then keep Silas from wandering into town looking for… for my replacement. Honestly, it's a better retirement plan than the one I've got. But I've got a boyfriend waiting for me back home. And he's more than I deserve, to be honest. I've got a day job I love to bitch about. I've got a landlord who's been promising to fix the closet door since April. It's not much to you, maybe, but it's mine. And the truth is… writers don't get much done when everything's easy. We need missed flights, shitty bosses, stupid arguments, that one relative with a hoard of assault rifles who's quietly working on his manifesto… All the little disasters that make life such a glorious pain in the ass. That's where the stories come from. So… as generous as your offer is… I think maybe I ought to stick with my own messy little life.

SILAS

"I think maybe I ought to stick with my own messy little life."

ELLIOT

That's... yeah. That's… that's what I just said.

MAVIS

I think what Silas is getting at is this… part of you wants to come with us. Otherwise, why "maybe"? Why "messy"?"

ELLIOT

Oh. Well… I was just being fa… facetious. My life's not actually that messy.

MAVIS

I think maybe it is.

ELLIOT

Ok. Well, I think that's really my call.

MAVIS

Maybe. But people have a way of telling on themselves. We do appreciate a good subtext.

(Mavis reaches into a worn canvas sack and removes a faded Polaroid. She hands it to Elliot. He studies it.)

ELLIOT

Who's this?

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MAVIS

Walter. He knew how to sit still. Until he didn't.

(She hands him another.)

Frank. Never once said he wanted to go home. Saved us the trouble.

(Another Polaroid.)

Dale. Knew when to stop asking questions. Didn't have much choice, I suppose.

(Another.)

Lloyd. Didn't care what day it was. Lost track altogether.

(Another.)

Keith. Didn't scare easy. Put up a fuss at first.

(Another.)

Miranda. I'd hoped she'd stay. But Silas had other ideas.

(She gently gathers the photographs, tucks them back into the sack, and smiles.)

We've had a few over the years? We do hope you'll be next.

SILAS

And I probably oughta mention… we ain't gonna kill you.

ELLIOT

Oh. Right. Okay. Good to know. Probably should've led with that, Silas. Because, between the creepy Polaroids and Mavis's… colorful commentary, I was getting a very different impression.

(Mavis reaches into the sack again and slowly removes an old Polaroid camera.)

MAVIS

I'd really like to get a photograph of you. We always take one once someone decides to stay with us. It's nice to remember how they looked when they finally made the right decision. There's always a little uncertainty in their eyes. But it doesn't last long. So… it's settled then. You'll join us. The truck's outside. It's a beautiful drive this time of night. You don't have to keep carrying around the life that's made you look so tired. Because you do look tired, Elliot. Leave all that behind. You were meant for a different kind of life. One where nobody's asking anything from you except to be… present. Always in the moment. Silas and I can give you everything you need. So… let's get that photograph, then. What do you say?

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ELLIOT

You two crazy kids. What do I say? I say… let me just hit the john first. Freshen up a bit. Make sure I'm camera ready. Wouldn't want any uncertainty in my eyes. So… I'm just gonna…

(He points off. Silas narrows his eyes. Mavis smiles.)

I'll be right back.

(He exits. Mavis and Silas sit in silence for a moment.)

MAVIS

He's a keeper.

(Silas lets out a grunt. End of playlet.)

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