

PEKING ROULETTE

By

Ben Thompson

The first performance was given in the

Peng Hao Theatre, Beijing

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with

Ben Thompson as Tom and Gloria Su as Jessica



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Scene 1

Tom is pottering around in his living room. The doorbell goes. He opens the door and Jessica comes in. She is dressed quite neatly and carrying a violin case under her arm. Tom takes her coat.

TOM

Ah, you came. What's that?

JESSICA

My violin?

TOM

Are you going to play for me?

JESSICA

No, I just came from my lesson. Where can I put it?

TOM

Put it over there out of the way. Have a seat.

Jessica sits. She looks a bit uneasy. Tom pours green tea from a teapot on the table and pushes a cup over to her.

JESSICA

I can't stay long.

Tom doesn't answer but just looks at her.

JESSICA

What's the matter?

TOM

Nothing's the matter. Just that it ought to be illegal, that's all.

JESSICA

Illegal? What?

TOM

To look as good as you do. How is that fair on the male of the species?

JESSICA
(a bit alarmed)

Don't please.

TOM

Aren't I allowed to comment on how nice you look?

JESSICA

You promised you wouldn't.

TOM

What, promised I wouldn't comment on how nice you look?

JESSICA

Promised you wouldn't, you know ...

I think I should go.

She gets up.

TOM

No, don't go, please don't go.

JESSICA

I knew I shouldn't have come.

TOM

Don't go, I was just teasing you really, I know I've no chance, I'm not completely mad, you know.

JESSICA

I can't help it. I like younger men.

TOM

I know. You told me, and that's how it should be. I can't for the life of me understand why one of them hasn't snapped you up already. I would if I was young. What about that French boy, are you still seeing him?

JESSICA

No.

TOM

Oh? What happened?

JESSICA

I think he has another girlfriend. He said *you're not so young any more and you're not so beautiful*.

TOM

Well, FUCK HIM!

Oh, I forgot, you did.

JESSICA

(laughs uneasily)

TOM

You are young, and you are beautiful.

JESSICA

No I'm not, I'm thirty four.

TOM

Well, I'm sixty. You look young and beautiful to me. Anyway, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

JESSICA

What do you mean?

TOM

I mean, I'm not saying you're beautiful like a cover girl on Vogue, six feet tall with legs like a praying mantis, but because I know you, you're beautiful.

JESSICA

But if you just saw me in the street I wouldn't be?

TOM

I don't know, because I already know you. You know I had this friend once, just like you, always worrying about her looks. I made a big mistake, I said *you look beautiful when you take your glasses off.*

JESSICA

Was she angry?

TOM

Not at all, but she suddenly started going everywhere without her glasses. Like, as if I meant to say, *if you take off your glasses you'll immediately bump into an American boy who'll say "Hey, I want a baby that looks just like you!"*

JESSICA

And did she?

TOM

What?

JESSICA

Bump into an American boy?

TOM

No, she bumped into a lamppost and got a black eye since when she hasn't shown her face to anyone.

JESSICA

(laughs)

I'm sorry, Tom.

TOM

What's to be sorry about?

JESSICA

I can't support you the way you support me.

TOM

Well, I'm used to being old, it didn't just happen overnight.

JESSICA

I want you to be a father to me.

TOM

I can't.

JESSICA

Why? Why can't you be like a father to me?

TOM

Because I want you. Just because I can't act on my desire doesn't mean I can switch it off like a light.

JESSICA

I'm sorry.

TOM

What for? No need to be sorry.

He moves over towards her and tries to touch her hair. She pulls away.

JESSICA

Please don't. Oh, I hope we can be friends!

He gives up and goes back to his seat.

TOM

You said there was something you wanted to talk to me about?

JESSICA

I have a reading exam, I need some help.

TOM

Sure. Have you got some reading with you?

JESSICA

Yes.

TOM

Ok, let's have a look.

Jessica gets out a book of IELTS essays and starts to read haltingly. Lights down, reading continues over.

Scene 2

Tom alone again. Jessica comes to the door again. Change her clothes slightly so we know it's a different day.

Tom answers the door and lets her in.

TOM

Hi.

JESSICA

Hello.

TOM

What have you brought today?

JESSICA

Tomorrow is my oral, can we just talk?

TOM

With you? Anytime. Where's your violin?

JESSICA

What do you want the violin for?

TOM

Forget it. I'm teasing you.

They sit.

TOM

So, what's the format of this exam?

JESSICA

They ask me questions about myself, then I have to prepare a topic and talk about it for five minutes.

TOM

Okay, do you want to do that then? I'll ask the questions.

JESSICA

Okay.

TOM

What's your name?

JESSICA

Jessica.

TOM

Where is your hometown?

JESSICA

My hometown is Zhongshan, in Guangdong.

TOM

What's your ambition?

JESSICA

I want to go abroad and study, and I want to get married and have a happy family.

TOM

That's two ambitions, or maybe three.

JESSICA

Is it?

TOM

I think so. Why do you want to go abroad?

JESSICA

I think foreigners have more freedom. My mother never had any freedom or any education. She spent her whole life looking after children.

TOM

Oh, I see. But you want to have freedom and security and marriage as well. Do you think that's possible?

JESSICA

Isn't it?

TOM

What about your French boy?

JESSICA

They're not likely to ask me that, are they?

TOM

No, but I'm asking you.

JESSICA

He doesn't want me any more. Last time I saw him we took our clothes off and got into bed, but nothing happened.

TOM

Nothing? You took all your clothes off and got into bed with him and you call that nothing?

Why doesn't nothing ever happen to me!

JESSICA

Well, I mean there was no sex.

TOM

Well, perhaps he has another girl, as you said.

JESSICA

But, he told me he was looking for a wife, he told me he wanted children!

TOM

That's easy to say. Boys will say whatever gets them in.

JESSICA

Do you think I'll ever have a child? I'm thirty four and still not married, maybe I'll never have a child. I want a child!

TOM

In that case marry a Chinese man, why so keen to marry a foreigner?

JESSICA

Foreigners have more freedom. I don't want the sort of marriage my mother had.

TOM

Yes, but foreigners do things a different way. Usually people start a relationship and if it's good after a few years perhaps children come along. It's not, like, *I want a baby, RIGHT NOW, which of you bastards is going to drop everything you're doing and give me one?*

JESSICA

But if I do that, how do I know we will stay together, how do I know he will want a baby? If he doesn't, then I'll almost be forty and I still won't have a family.

TOM

Well, that risk is the price of freedom.

Hey, you could marry me! I'll give you a baby. I'm old, I'll be in a wheelchair soon, I'm not likely to run off after other women. Even if I did, you'd be able to catch me easily.

JESSICA

I'm sorry, I can't be attracted to someone who's old enough to be my father.

TOM

Well, you'd get used to me, I expect. Do all marriages have to be based on fantastic sex? I could bathe you. I could tuck you up in bed and read you House at Pooh Corner!

JESSICA

I can't, I'm sorry.

TOM

Never mind, I never thought you would. Let's get on with this exam, shall we?

JESSICA

Ok.

TOM

What are the main industries in your hometown?

JESSICA

My hometown is an important tourist destination because the father of the Chinese revolution, Doctor Sun Yat Sen, was born there ...

fade down lights

Scene 3

Tom alone again. Takes a telephone call. This could be done in the dark while the actors are changing clothes.

TOM

Oh, hello there. How did it go? Good. No, I'm sure they wouldn't mind about that.

Not still going on about babies are you - give it a rest. No, I'm sorry. Yes, tell me about it, yes, I do know what it's like when there's something on your mind and you can't think of anything else.

Look, okay, special offer, one day only. Buy one, get one free. Come round tonight and I'll pop twins in for you. Oh. Really. Well, don't say I didn't offer.

What's the next exam? Yes, come round. Tomorrow's not good, how about the day after? Okay, see you then.

Scene 4

Tom again, Jessica comes to the door.

She comes in and takes off her coat and sits down.

TOM

How's it going.

JESSICA

He's gone back to France to get married.

TOM

Oh, that's tough.

JESSICA

I wanted to meet him, but he shouted at me and told me never to contact him again.

TOM

He sounds like a bit of a bastard.

JESSICA

I feel so *humiliated*.

TOM

He's probably scared and doesn't know how to deal with you so he tries to deny you ever existed.

JESSICA

But we made love, how can he deny that I existed? How could he make love with me if he has no feelings for me?

TOM

Oh, believe me, men are experts at that.

JESSICA

How can you have sex with someone you have no feelings for, wouldn't you feel disgusted?

TOM

Not really, we're really quite shallow, you know. Like Woody Allen said, *sex without love is an empty experience, but as empty experiences go it's one of the best*.

JESSICA

I can't understand that.

TOM

Well, for a man, women are harder to understand than quantum physics and for a woman, men likewise I suppose. It takes a lifetime even to get the vaguest idea.

JESSICA

Is it really that hard? How can anyone live?

TOM

We used to have rules. They weren't perfect, but they worked some of the time. Now we've torn up the book and we just figure everything out as we go along. Surprise, surprise, it hasn't work out so well as we hoped. It turns out most people are happier if they have a few boundaries.

JESSICA

I think people are happier if they have more freedom. The rules didn't make my mother happy.

TOM

Unfortunately, sex seems to be a problem that has no perfect solution. You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. Just that ...

JESSICA

What?

TOM

It's a better class of damnation if you do, in my opinion.

JESSICA

Taoyan! Why are westerners so frivolous?

TOM

Perhaps we don't see sex as merely weakness and indulgence.

JESSICA

No, of course not, neither do we.

TOM

Well, as I was saying, there used to be rules, but we threw them out. But sometimes I get the feeling, from the way women go on, that it was all the fault of the men. It wasn't. It was men and women working together, a joint enterprise. And men and women together have to live with the result.

JESSICA

It seems unfair to women.

TOM

I think it's even harder on the boys, actually. The women get hassled more, that's true, but the boys lose the capacity for tenderness. And that's cruel.

JESSICA

You talk like that, like a preacher, but then you try and seduce me, so it's hard for me to think you are serious.

TOM

I'm just talking about the way things are. But I'm still flesh and blood and I still need a woman.

JESSICA

And I still need a child.

What you said last time, were you serious?

TOM

About what?

JESSICA

About us getting married?

TOM

I thought you didn't want to.

JESSICA

I don't know. I do want a home and a child. Do you think I will ever find someone?

TOM

If we could see the future everything would be easy. We could just sit tight and wait for it to arrive.

JESSICA

So were you serious?

TOM

I don't know either.

JESSICA

That means you weren't, then.

TOM

When I said it I was serious. But then again, I knew you'd say no. I just wanted to let you know that even if your stupid boys don't want you, I think you're great.

JESSICA

But you've changed your mind now.

TOM

What difference does it make, you're not going to change your mind, are you.

JESSICA

I suppose not.

TOM

You know, supposing you were forced to marry someone, you know, by some accident, and then it was done and you just had to make the best of it. Would that be so bad? Perhaps a lot of our problems come from having too much choice. If we left things to chance, what a huge burden would be lifted.

We could get on with things instead of knocking ourselves out trying to find a perfect mate and probably failing after all anyway.

JESSICA

What, you mean, like an arranged marriage or something?

TOM

Yes, or one decided by chance, by the toss of a coin, or a computer, or whatever.

JESSICA

Doesn't sound like a great way to find a partner.

TOM

Maybe not, but then I chose all my own partners very carefully and never managed to settle with any of them.

Suppose there was an element of pure chance involved. Like, Russian roulette.

JESSICA

What's that?

TOM

You have a revolver and you put a bullet in one of the chambers and spin it and point it at your head. You have a one in six chance of blowing your brains out.

JESSICA

Don't! Don't! How horrible!

TOM

People did it because they were bored. Who was it, Graham Greene, is supposed to have done it six times.

JESSICA

What a horrible idea.

TOM

Does it really matter? Isn't the problem that we take our lives far too seriously? We surround ourselves with protective walls, then something happens along like a war or a Tsunami and we're swept off the Earth without ever having lived.

JESSICA

I don't see what you mean.

TOM

Well, we could just toss a coin. If it comes up heads, you stay the night with me, and if there's a child then it's decided. (Chinese) The wood has become a boat.

JESSICA

What a disgusting idea!

TOM

I don't see what's so disgusting about it.

JESSICA

I'm going.

TOM

Well, I'm sorry. Forget I mentioned it. Jessica!

She gets her coat and leaves
in a huff.

Scene 5

Tom alone onstage, gloomy,
drinking tea. Phone rings, he
answers.

TOM

Hey, Jessica. Long time no see. No, that's alright. Were you rude? I don't remember, I thought I was rude. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Where are you? Where? So come round! I've just made tea.

Tom's mood lightens. There's
tea on the table The door
goes. He opens and it's
Jessica.

TOM

Come in.

She comes in

TOM

Sit

She sits. He pours tea.

TOM

Where've you been?

JESSICA

I was busy. I got seven point five in the IELTS.

TOM

Clever girl. I knew you would.

JESSICA

I thought I should have got eight.

TOM

Oh, really? I thought seven point five was good. What's the scale, one to nine? Nine is Keats, one is the speaking clock. How are things otherwise? Any boys?

JESSICA

Don't say it like that.

TOM

No, I mean it. I'd like to see you find a nice boy, someone who'd actually care for you.

JESSICA

I thought you didn't want to be a father to me.

TOM

I don't. Does that mean I can't wish you happiness?

JESSICA

There was a boy, an American boy.

TOM

And?

JESSICA

He frightened me.

TOM

How?

JESSICA

He said *do you know how much I earn? I earn thirty thousand Yuan a month. The Chinese girls won't leave me alone.*

TOM

Pompous bastard. Did you sleep with him?

JESSICA

Yes.

TOM

Lucky pompous bastard. And?

JESSICA

Afterwards he kept saying did I think he was good in bed and did I have an orgasm.

TOM

And did you?

JESSICA

Tom! Don't! Then he told me I was frigid and should see a psychiatrist.

TOM

Sounds rather heartless.

JESSICA

Why can't I find someone who just wants to settle down and have a family?

TOM

Well, you have to ask yourself, what's in it for the boys?

JESSICA

I don't understand what you mean.

TOM

Modern urban living. A child means anxiety. A child means expense. A child means endlessly watching, you can't just let them run around outside on their own. A child means being tied to the city by the school year. And at the end of that process they've been turned from cute little angels into over-educated robots who curse you for ruining their lives and then leave.

I just think most boys don't feel confident they could support a child. They're afraid of being ground into the dust by boring routines, and for what? It's not as though the Earth is crying out for more mouths to feed!

JESSICA

So we should just stop having children. Is that what you mean?

TOM

No, not really. I'm just trying to put it to you from the boys' perspective. They don't walk around like you do thinking "I want a child, gimme a child!"

Where I come from, a lot of women get tired of waiting and have kids on their own. And the men become lone wolves like the foreign boys in Beijing, wandering around aimlessly looking for a free fuck wherever they can beg borrow or steal one.

Jessica thinks for quite a long time.

JESSICA

Ok, let's do it then.

TOM

What.

JESSICA

Toss a coin, play Russian roulette.

TOM

Toss a coin?

JESSICA

Actually, no. That would be too scary.

TOM

What about Russian roulette then? We could use a dice for a gun.

JESSICA

Do you have one?

TOM

I can get one.

JESSICA

Ok. When shall we do it?

TOM

Tomorrow?

JESSICA

(standing up and getting ready to go)

Ok.

TOM

Jessica.

JESSICA

Yes?

TOM

Will you do one thing for me?

JESSICA

What?

TOM

Tomorrow when you come, bring your violin.

JESSICA

Why? I haven't played it for ages.

TOM

Doesn't matter. You don't have to play it. Just bring it.

JESSICA

Oh. You're weird. Okay.

Jessica goes.

Scene 6

Tom is waiting, but this time he seems quite anxious. He's pacing the floor. There's a knock on the door and he goes quickly to answer. It's Jessica. She comes in with her violin case tucked under her arm. She puts the case down in the same place she put it in Scene 1.

TOM

You're here.

He moves towards her as though to embrace her but she pulls back slightly so he withdraws.

TOM

Oh, ok.

JESSICA

Have you got the dice?

Tom opens his hand and shows her a die on the palm of his hand.

JESSICA

What number do we decide on?

TOM

I don't know. How about six.

JESSICA

Six. Why six?

TOM

Or we could throw once and see what number comes up, then that can be the number.

JESSICA

All right, let's do that.

Tom picks up a plastic cup from the table, puts the dice in it and shakes it, then rolls the dice onto the table. They both peer over it.

TOM

Six it is.

JESSICA

Okay. It's not all sixes, is it?

She picks up the dice and examines it.

TOM

Now why didn't I think of that!

JESSICA

So what do we do now? Throw it again?

TOM

Yes.

JESSICA

I feel quite nervous.

TOM

You throw it.

You realise that if it's a six you have to stay the night with me?

JESSICA

Yes.

TOM

A deal is a deal.

JESSICA

Yes. What will you do if I change my mind, rape me?

TOM

No. I'll probably rape myself. But I'll be very mad. A deal is a deal.

JESSICA

I know. I'm not a child.

TOM

Got your toothbrush.

JESSICA

Toothbrush?

TOM

Never mind. I have a spare toothbrush.

JESSICA

I feel quite nervous.

TOM

You already said that. You can change your mind if you want.

Jessica looks at him, stares at his face for quite a while. Then she quickly and decisively picks up the dice and the plastic cup and shakes and throws. They both stare at the dice and exhale loudly as though they have been holding their breath.

TOM

Four.

JESSICA

Well, I won't need your toothbrush.

TOM

God, we must be mad. What did we just do!

JESSICA

I know.

TOM

I mean, talk about desperate, how desperate is that!

JESSICA

I know.

TOM

What must you think of me. A middle-aged nobody desperate to get laid.

JESSICA

You're not a nobody.

TOM

I am. I'm a nobody. I've never been famous, I've never been rich. I've never even been punched by Amy Winehouse.

Jessica gets a bit closer and puts her hand on his arm.

JESSICA

Don't say that!

Tom stares at her hand on his arm in amazement.

TOM

Well, anyway, that's that then. I suppose that means I have to be your father from now on. Very well, then, run along home my dear, what are you doing in a strange man's apartment at this time of night.

JESSICA

You're not strange.

TOM

Well, I feel strange.

JESSICA

Anyway, I thought we had to do it six times.

TOM

Six times? No, that was Graham Greene. I thought we were just doing it once.

JESSICA

Oh.

TOM

We can do it again if you like.

JESSICA

No. Well, I'll be going now, father.

TOM

I'll give you a bath if you like.

JESSICA

What?

TOM

I always used to bathe my daughter. Not when she was as big as you, though.

JESSICA

Taoyan!

Jessica picks up her violin and goes.

Scene 7

Tom alone on stage in a shabby dressing gown.
Distraught. Pacing.

TOM

What a bitch. What a bitch! It means nothing to her. Young people are so heartless! Still, I was heartless at her age. You don't know what you're doing until it's too late.

No, she's not a bitch. I started it. It means a lot to her, poor little thing. I'm the one who's playing games.

Jesus, thank God that dice didn't come up six. What if it had? What if I'd put a bun in her oven and had to marry her and she moved into my spare room and never touched me again? What a nightmare!

Goes over to a mirror on the wall.

Know what, mate, you are disgusting. You look like the guy in Death in Venice, the one who covered himself in makeup trying to look young again. Your teeth are yellow, your nose is purple, and yet you still like the same kind of women you liked when you were eighteen. You're a pervert, that's what you are, hardly better than a kiddy fiddler.

Suppose it really happened, you'd live your whole life having night sweats wondering when she was going to go off with some boy half your age and leave you with the bill for raising the kid.

Jesus, thank God that dice didn't come up six. I mean, Russian roulette, if you win at least you'll never know. Or do I mean if you lose? That's a point, is it winning or losing if the gun goes off? Never thought about it. At my age it'd be winning, that's for sure. I suppose it depends on who you are and what you've got to lose.

Door goes. He is surprised, not expecting anyone. Opens, it's Jessica (of course)

TOM

Jessica, what are you doing here? It's almost twelve o'clock.

JESSICA

I want another throw.

TOM

No. Once, that was the deal. Are you horny?

JESSICA

Horny?

TOM

Sorry, I forgot, you're Chinese.

JESSICA

We have to do it six times.

TOM

No we don't.

JESSICA

But I thought that was the game.

TOM

Then you misunderstood.

JESSICA

A deal is a deal.

TOM

That wasn't the deal.

JESSICA

Well, I thought it was.

TOM

Look, Jessica, it was a really stupid idea. Go home now, please.

JESSICA

No.

She forces past him to the table where the dice is and the cup and picks them up. He grabs her wrists to stop her making a throw. She looks angry, determined.

TOM

Look, Jessica, no. Not now. We already did this once today. Go away. Think about it. If you really want to we can do it again, but not today. Think about it!

Jessica wrenches her hands away and throws the dice and the cup angrily on the floor. She sulks for a moment. Then an idea occurs to her.

JESSICA

Hey. What did I throw?

She makes as though to read the dice, but Tom steps on it.

TOM

No. Not like that.

JESSICA

All right then. I'll be back tomorrow.

Her mood seems to have
lightened a bit. She goes.
Tom removes his foot from the
dice and looks. Expression
alarmed. Lights out.

Scene 8

Tom in his dressing gown.
Morning. He is drinking
coffee when the phone goes.

TOM

Wei. Oh, hello Brian. What, no I didn't see your email,
Hotmail's blocked at the moment. It happens every so often,
it'll be okay in a couple of days.

Still much the same. How's dad? Amazing the way he goes on,
can he still get about on his own? Oh, really, when? Well,
give him my love.

It's not so much fun as it used to be. When I came here
there were hardly any private cars, now everyone's got them
and they all drive around in circles hooting their horns
all the time, it drives me nuts. I reckon when a Chinese
guy goes to buy a car, the only thing he tries is the horn.
Parp, parp, no, sorry, do you have a louder one? I tell you,
Brian, most of the drivers in this city think the brake is
that thing in the middle of the steering wheel. They'd be
astonished at the idea you could actually slow the car down
instead of leaning on the horn. It's chaotic, too. Just
lately there was an apartment block in Shanghai that fell
over. That's right, just fell over. No, fortunately nobody
was living there but all the apartments were sold. I mean,
if you were the builder, what would you say? *Dear Sir, we
are sorry but the block in which your apartment was located
has fallen over. We can either offer you a refund, or
another apartment in a lower, wider block we are planning
to try and build.*

No, no girl friend at the moment. I have this rather
strange relationship with a young woman who seems to want
to use me as her father confessor. What can I say? *Hey, I
don't want to hear about your sins, I want to be in one of
them, please!*

Anyway, the girls here are getting wise to us. Ten years ago they all thought they could marry a foreigner and have as many kids as they like, now they know the foreign boys just want to fuck and go. Sure, of course, some do. But you look on the lonely-hearts websites and you see page after page of pasty faced heartsick middle aged tossers who think they can get a young bird just by being white. Wanted open-minded girl, that's what they say. By which, by the way, they don't mean someone who's willing to consider the thesis that Bacon wrote the plays of Shakespeare. I don't know, I don't know if anyone answers their ads, probably whores and practical jokers answer their ads.

What, no prostitution in China? Brian, where do you get this stuff? Anyway, what can I do for you, or did you just call for a chat?

December? No, I won't be in the UK in December. Can't make it I'm afraid. But congratulations anyway. I'll write to you, I'll write to you in a couple of days when the email gets unblocked. Ok, bye now.

Scene 9

Tom's apartment later the
same day. Tom is dressed now.
Jessica comes round.

TOM

Hi, come in. Where's your violin?

JESSICA

My violin? What do you want that for?

TOM

Never mind. It's not important really.

JESSICA

I'll bring it later, when I've got something to play for you.

TOM

I don't want to hear you play it, I just want you to bring it.

JESSICA

You're mad.

TOM

Very possibly. So, what? Is this a social call or do you really want to do the thing with the dice again?

JESSICA

I want to throw the dice.

TOM

Actually, the more I think about it, the more I think it was a pretty stupid idea.

JESSICA

Chicken guts.

TOM

We normally just say chicken.

JESSICA

I brought my toothbrush.

TOM

All right then. My turn to throw, isn't it?

JESSICA

Yes. Ok.

Tom hesitantly takes up the dice and the cup, shakes and throws. They both peer over the table.

TOM

(relieved)

One.

JESSICA

That's that, then.

TOM

Is it?

JESSICA

Only four more times to go.

TOM

Are there?

JESSICA

Tom?

TOM

What?

JESSICA

Do you want to stroke my hair?

TOM

Not just at this moment.

JESSICA

(getting up close and leaning against him)
Stroke my hair. I thought you wanted to.

TOM

Jessica, this is painful.

JESSICA

Maybe we don't have to throw the dice? It seems a waste to keep bringing my toothbrush and taking it home again.

TOM

Actually, no, the more I think back to bringing up my kids the more I think I don't want to go through all that again.

JESSICA

Well, that's alright, you can leave that to me, or we can get a baomu.

TOM

Yes, right. Where have I heard that before?

Tom draws away.

JESSICA

Anyway, I might not get pregnant.

TOM

Well, you certainly won't if you go home and sleep where you should be sleeping.

JESSICA

Chicken guts.

TOM

We usually just say chicken.

JESSICA

Good night, then, old chicken guts.

She goes. Tom picks up the die and the cup. Lights down.

Scene 10

Empty room. Door goes. Tom comes on and opens. Jessica on. She has a carrier bag.

JESSICA

I brought you some fruit.

TOM

Fruit?

Jessica opens the carrier and takes out apples, pears, oranges, any fruit and puts them on the table.

JESSICA

You don't eat enough fruit.

TOM

That's probably true.

JESSICA

Fruit is good for you.

TOM

That's probably true.

JESSICA

Tom, your apartment is so dirty. Let me clean it up!

TOM

That's not necessary.

JESSICA

Look at the floor! Do you have a brush?

TOM

I ...

Jessica doesn't wait for him to respond, but goes off stage (presumably to the kitchen) and comes back with a brush and dustpan and

starts sweeping the floor.
Tom watches, rather
embarrassed. It's a small
floor, soon done.

JESSICA

There. That's better.

TOM

There was no need, really.

JESSICA

So how often do you sweep the floor anyway?

TOM

Twice, usually.

JESSICA

What, twice a week?

TOM

No, once when I move into a place and once when I leave.

JESSICA

Tom! You definitely need a woman! Get out the dice.

TOM

Haven't we done enough, we've done it six times already,
surely?

JESSICA

No we haven't.

TOM

Haven't we? It feels like six times.

JESSICA

What's the matter, Tom, getting cold feet?

TOM

It was exciting the first time, now it makes me nervous.

JESSICA

I was nervous the first time, now it makes me excited!

TOM

I've opened Pandora's box here.

Jessica spies the dice and
grabs it, shakes it in the
cup and throws it. They both
peer at it on the table.

TOM

Four again.

JESSICA

What are the chances of that?

TOM

I think the chances are the same each time you throw.

JESSICA

It seems God doesn't want you to marry me and give me a
child.

TOM

I doubt God has any opinion on the matter, but I'll take
his word for it anyway.

JESSICA

Don't you believe in God, then? I thought all foreigners
were Christians?

TOM

No, personally I had an education. What about you, are you
a Christian?

JESSICA

No, a Buddhist.

TOM

So what do you believe?

JESSICA

(thinks for quite a while)

I'm not sure, really, I would have to ask my grandma.

TOM

That sounds like a good system. So you believe in
reincarnation and the life to come?

JESSICA

Not really. I think I'd better make the most of this life.

TOM

And how do you plan to do that?

JESSICA

I want a home and a family.

TOM

Don't you have anything else, though, something you really want to do?

JESSICA

I want to have a better life.

TOM

What, you mean more money?

JESSICA

Just a better standard of life.

TOM

Yes, but the people who manage to make family life work are usually the people who have something they love doing, something that keeps them sane. Don't you have anything like that?

JESSICA

I don't know what you mean.

TOM

Well, something you'd really like to study or something you'd really like to do, like painting or anthropology or, I dunno, cooking, designing clothes, breeding hamsters, anything.

JESSICA

Those things don't make any money.

TOM

What use is money if you're miserable? And if you're happy, who needs it?

JESSICA

You're mad.

TOM

Quite possibly, but I've survived so far.

JESSICA

How can you stand to live like this?

TOM

I'm used to it.

JESSICA

Don't you miss having a wife, someone to talk to?

TOM

Not really. I can always find someone to talk to in Beijing. And if I miss married life I can always go out and find a woman I don't like and give her all my money.

JESSICA

Don't you like children?

TOM

Children are great. I love children. It's the world we have to bring them up in that makes them a pain in the butt.

JESSICA

What about your special offer?

TOM

What special offer?

JESSICA

Buy one, get one free.

TOM

Er, that was a strictly time limited offer.

JESSICA

Couldn't it be extended if a customer came along?

TOM

No, sorry, twins out of stock I'm afraid.

JESSICA

Oh? Who bought them?

She's getting close to Tom and trying to rub up against him, he's not so sure if he wants her to, now.

TOM

I sent them back. Nobody wanted them.

JESSICA

In that case can't I just have one?

TOM

Jessica. Please, stop. This is very painful! I wish I'd never started this now. I mean, we can sleep together, sure, but we ought to use birth control.

JESSICA

No!

TOM

Well, then, stop it.

JESSICA

Dirty old man!

TOM

Touché.

JESSICA

This isn't about fun.

TOM

Well, I knew *fun* wouldn't be allowed.

JESSICA

We still have to throw the dice three times.

TOM

That wasn't the deal.

JESSICA

If that wasn't the deal, why have we already thrown it three times? You can't change your mind and back out now.

TOM

Well, alright then, but another day. Another day, Jessica.

She stares angrily at him and goes.

Scene 11

Apartment empty. Tom comes in, a little out of breath. He takes a die out of his pocket and picks up the die on the table and compares them, then puts the die from the table into his pocket.

TOM

Haha! Why didn't I think of that before! You can get anything made in Beijing. A die with two ones and no six, looks just like a normal die unless you look very closely. She'll never look. She hasn't looked yet, well, except the first time. I'll be able to sleep at night again. Gotcha.

Checks the time on his mobile
(or watch)

She should be here soon.

Takes the kettle out into the kitchen and fills it, comes back and puts it on, while he's waiting for it to boil the door goes. He opens it and Jessica comes in.

JESSICA

Hi. Been out?

TOM

Out?

JESSICA

You've still got your coat on.

TOM

Oh yes, I forgot.

He takes his coat off and goes into the other room. While he's out there, Jessica takes a die out of her pocket and swiftly exchanges it with the one on the table. Tom comes back.

Tea?

JESSICA

Yes. Hey, don't put boiling water on it!

TOM

What?

JESSICA

You should let it cool first. If the water is boiling it spoils the perfume of the tea.

TOM

Really? I never knew that. No wonder other people's tea always tastes better than mine.

JESSICA

It should be about 75 degrees. Leave it for a moment. Let's throw the dice. Believe me, it will taste a lot better after we've thrown the dice.

TOM

Or a lot worse.

It's Tom's turn to throw. He throws and feigns interest in the result. Actually the result is a complete shock to him.

JESSICA

Six!

She throws herself on Tom and wraps her arms around his neck. Tom struggles, his arms waving in panic, finally pushes her off. He's left panting with panic and (maybe) desire.

TOM

Six? It can't be. Let me look.

The die is still on the table. He peers at it, then picks it up and examines it closely.

TOM

Jessica - you cheat!

JESSICA

Ha ha, well, you didn't say we always had to use the same dice.

TOM

Give me my die back.

JESSICA

Ok.

She takes the swapped die out of her pocket. Just about to return it to Tom when she decides to give it a quick look over. Needless to say she discovers the ruse.

JESSICA

Tom. You bastard. How long have we been throwing this?

TOM

Oh, er, we haven't. I just got it made today. I'm sorry.

JESSICA

I don't believe you. You are a cheat. Do you know that, a filthy cheat.

TOM

Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it? Coming from someone who just switched it for a die with six sixes on it?

JESSICA

That was a joke, Tom, do you think I really expected you not to notice!

TOM

Yes, well, a joke's a joke, but what if I'd, you know, if I'd ...

JESSICA

If you'd what, Tom?

TOM

If I'd lost control and got you pregnant?

JESSICA

I wouldn't have let you. Well, I probably wouldn't.

TOM

Maybe, but you had yourself pretty well wrapped around me there.

JESSICA

Isn't that what you want?

TOM

I thought that was what I wanted.

JESSICA

What made you change your mind?

TOM

Well, let's face it, Jessica, even if I did manage to get you to marry me, we'd never be happy. How could a bright young thing like you be happy with an old misery-guts like me?

JESSICA

Well, I want a home and a baby and a husband, two out of three isn't bad.

TOM

Exactly.

JESSICA

So, where is it then?

TOM

What?

JESSICA

The real dice.

TOM

Can't we give it a rest? I wish I'd never started this.

JESSICA

In China, if you make a deal you have to stick to it.

TOM

But that was never the deal.

JESSICA

Well, I thought it was.

TOM

Oh, okay then.

He gets the real die out of his pocket and gives it to Jessica who examines it closely.

JESSICA

You throw.

Tom takes the die resignedly and puts it in the cup and throws half-heartedly. They look at the result and Tom heaves a sigh of relief.

JESSICA

One again. That's two ones and two fours.

TOM

I think this dice is trying to tell us something.

JESSICA

Next time it will come up six.

TOM

So now you're a fortune teller, is that it?

JESSICA

Gut feeling.

TOM

Wishful thinking.

JESSICA

I can't come tomorrow, I have an exam.

TOM

That's okay. Actually I won't have any time next week.

JESSICA

Tom! You think if you put me off for a few days I'll forget all about it? You won't get away so easily.

TOM

All right then, come the day after tomorrow, if you must.

She goes.

Scene 12

The day after tomorrow. Tom is reading an English language newspaper. Door goes.

TOM

Comes in. Door's open.

Jessica comes in.

TOM

Managed to get a Sunday paper. Lots of interesting stuff.
Do you know what the world's number one health problem is?

JESSICA

No, what?

TOM

Depression.

JESSICA

Depression? I thought it was easy to treat now.

TOM

It is, that's just the problem, there's far too little of it.

Jesus, what a mess we're making of the world, how anyone could want to bring more children into it is beyond me.

JESSICA

Children don't know it's a mess.

TOM

No, I suppose not.

JESSICA

Maybe they can clean it up?

TOM

I doubt it, somehow. Greed, that's what the problem is, the root of all these problems is greed. We'd all be happier if money had never been invented.

JESSICA

Who invented money anyway?

TOM

I don't know, the first person who went to the shops I suppose. Anyway, do you want to throw the dice? I'm sorry, I won't make tea, I'm a bit busy today. Let's just throw, shall we?

JESSICA

Tom, I can't.

TOM

What do you mean, you can't?

JESSICA

I can't, you know.

TOM

No, I don't know, I thought it was you who definitely had to throw it two more times. If you don't want to throw it that's fine by me.

JESSICA

No, I mean, it's my time of the month.

TOM

So?

JESSICA

So, even if I throw a six I can't sleep with you, and even if I did I couldn't have a baby.

TOM

That's your problem. This was never part of the deal.

JESSICA

That makes no sense.

TOM

This whole thing makes no sense.

JESSICA

Tom!

TOM

Throw. If it comes up six you'll just have to keep your panties on all night. I'll read you The House at Pooh Corner.

JESSICA

Tom, I thought you were a gentleman.

TOM

No. A barbarian. Glad we got that sorted out.

Jessica looks at him for a long time and then gets up and angrily storms out. Tom is somewhat taken by surprise, he stares at the door for a moment and then pursues her.

TOM

Jessica, Jessica, wait!

We hear Tom calling her OS,
after a minute they both come
back in.

TOM

Jessica, I'm sorry!

He's holding her arm, she
struggles free, then they
suddenly embrace.

TOM

Jessica!

JESSICA

It hurts!

TOM

I know.

JESSICA

You don't know.

TOM

I do know.

They stand like this for a
while, then sit down next to
each other on a sofa.

JESSICA

You're a good man, Tom.

TOM

No better than I should be.

JESSICA

Why can't I find someone like you but younger?

TOM

I wasn't so good when I was younger.

JESSICA

I'm frightened.

TOM

There, there.

Puts his arm round her shoulders, she leans against him.

JESSICA

I don't want to spend the rest of my life on my own.

TOM

There, there. Hey!

JESSICA

What?

TOM

You could get a little dog!

JESSICA

Taoyan!

TOM

When I feel like that I just think of all the people who would have liked to have lived but didn't get the chance.

JESSICA

But I feel like such a failure. In China for a woman to be single at thirty four, to have no children, is terrible.

TOM

Don't let yourself be trapped by the past. Every age is different, you have to find your own way.

JESSICA

But a woman is still a woman, and a woman's duty is to have a child.

TOM

It's a potential, not a duty.

JESSICA

You don't understand.

TOM

Look, Jessica, I really am a bit busy today. Do you want to throw the dice or don't you?

JESSICA

I told you, I can't today.

TOM

Well, throw the dice today, if it comes up six you can come back later when you can, you know ...

JESSICA

Ok.

She throws. They look at the die.

JESSICA

Six.

They look at each other, stunned, as though neither expected this to happen. Then they speak together.

JESSICA

Tom!

TOM

Jessica!

Jessica laughs, slightly.

JESSICA

Tom.

Tom just stands there and doesn't reply.

JESSICA

(laughs nervously)

Does that mean we can't throw it again?

TOM

I suppose.

JESSICA

It's addictive. It's going to be hard to give it up.

TOM

Huh. I realize now I've been throwing dice all my life. Looking back, how little I knew when I made those vital decisions, I might just as well have thrown dice, what really is the difference?

JESSICA

Which decisions?

TOM

Eh? Oh, sorry, just thinking aloud.

JESSICA

When shall I come back then?

No reply. She waits a while, but Tom seems deep in thought so she puts her arms lightly around his neck, kisses him on the cheek and goes.

Scene 13

Tom is in his dressing gown sorting out a pile of papers on his desk. Most of them are photographs. Every so often he picks one up and looks at it as though savouring the memory. There is a light tap on the door. He turns round but before he can go to answer it, Jessica comes in. If possible (time) she should be dressed more formally, maybe in a qipao or something. She is carrying her violin.

TOM

Oh, hello Jessica, come to collect your winnings?

JESSICA

Come to deliver your winnings. What are you doing?

TOM

Looking at old pictures.

JESSICA

What of?

TOM

My kids when they were young.

JESSICA

You must miss them.

TOM

Sometimes. I miss those days. What's that you've got?

JESSICA

My violin.

TOM

Are you going to play for me?

JESSICA

(laughs a little)

No - you asked me to bring it, remember?

TOM

Oh yes, that's just me being sentimental.

JESSICA

Sentimental?

I also brought my toothbrush. Where do you sleep?

TOM

I think we should talk first.

JESSICA

We've already done a lot of talking.

TOM

Have a drink.

He pours two glasses of
whisky.

JESSICA

What is it?

TOM

Whisky.

JESSICA

No thanks.

TOM

Drink!

He pushes a glass over to her.
She looks at it uncertainly,
then takes a sip and screws
up her face.

JESSICA

Ugh.

TOM

(drinking himself)

Good for you.

God, you look beautiful tonight. You look beautiful whatever you wear. I remember the first time I met you and we did that bit of language exchange, you were wearing a tank top and I could see an inch of your midriff. Just to see that inch of your tum was worth walking across town for.

JESSICA

A tank top? I don't remember.

Anyway, it doesn't matter now, does it? My midriff is still there. Want to see it again?

She goes over to him and puts her hand on his shoulder. He takes hold of it and grasps it.

TOM

I don't think I can.

JESSICA

You've got to. You promised.

TOM

I'm too nervous.

JESSICA

How can you still be nervous? (Chinese) old horse who knows the road.

TOM

I remember the first time I had sex. The fact that we might make a life seemed overwhelming. I was terrified.

JESSICA

And what happened?

TOM

Nothing. That is, I fell in love, of course. But to her I was just another boy. She left almost as soon as she had come.

JESSICA

I'm sorry.

TOM

Well, like I said, sex is a problem with no solution. We all have our own work-arounds. What does it matter anyway?

JESSICA

What if she'd loved you? Perhaps your life would have been different?

TOM

I've often wondered about that.

There was a girl who loved me, a girl at my school. I loved her too, but I was too shy to say. One day she came to my house with her violin case under her arm. I stood on the doorstep and chatted to her but hadn't the guts to invite her in.

All my life I've wondered what would have happened if I'd asked her in.

JESSICA

Funny, I can't imagine you being shy.

TOM

I am.

He tightens his grip on her hand.

Jessica, let's not do this.

JESSICA

Why? I thought you wanted to?

TOM

Every old man wants to live his life again. But you only get to live once.

JESSICA

Don't you love me?

TOM

Yes, I do love you. And the way to love you is not to do this.

JESSICA

A deal is a deal. I might have known not to trust you.

TOM

I'm not breaking my word, I just want to be sure you know what you're doing.

JESSICA

I know what I'm doing.

TOM

Do you? I had a strange dream last night. In my dream I saw an old friend, we shared a couple of rooms about thirty years ago now I guess. He was a difficult guy to get on with, usually drunk, but he said one thing that stuck in my mind. He said *the further you go the more you think we're involved in something very strange here.*

JESSICA

So what happened, in your dream?

TOM

Nothing. I was just aware that he was there. Perhaps because I've been thinking lately about what he said.

They tell us the Universe started from a blip, a fluctuation in the void. But they don't know whether it was the first universe or one of an infinite chain. In fact we know absolutely nothing about why we exist, about how such a thing as us can exist. But without knowing how we are somehow given, for one brief instant, the chance to open our eyes and see. And this seeing is really all there is.

We've farmed, fished, fought, fucked and raised our kids on this planet for hundreds of millennia. Up until a hundred and fifty years ago there were no cars, no planes, no computers. Until less than a hundred years ago, we had no idea of the scale of the Cosmos, absolutely no idea. Now, look around you, look at the world we've thrust ourselves into. So much of what we take for granted exists for the first time in the history of the Earth, and for all we know of this whole universe or indeed all universes.

I've been lucky. I've got to a good age. A lot of people didn't get so far. All I want to do now is look at this strangely inhabited world of lemmings who all think they know exactly who they are and what they're doing, rushing towards their own painted horizons, oblivious of the cliffs beneath them.

JESSICA

You don't want me around, that's what you're saying, isn't it?

TOM

I want you around in a different way. A way I can't seem to make you understand.

I don't want you to drag me back into all that, babies and schools and rules and routines and deception of oneself, deception of others, deception, deception, deception.

JESSICA

So how do you want me, then?

TOM

I want you free. I want you with your eyes open. I want you not blown around by, by guilt, desire and instinct like a leaf in a storm. I want you to escape from the insane delusion that anything that went before can be a guide to what's around the next bend. I want you out of the trap.

JESSICA

I am free. I know what I want.

TOM

Forget about having a baby. Have an affair with me. You might surprise yourself, you might be happy. It might even be fun. Then we could have a child.

Checks his watch / mobile

I should have at least five minutes left to live.

Jessica stares at him,
incredulous, for about a
minute.

JESSICA

Taoyan!

She gets up and leaves in a huff. Tom goes over to his CD player and puts on a Beethoven quartet and goes back to his seat, puts his feet on the table and returns to drinking his whisky.