

PALEO

John Yunker

CAST LIST (3M, 3F)

STACEY	F, 20s
GREG	M, 20s
STELLA	Female voice (à la Siri)
NOG	M, 40s, tribe leader
GROG	M, 20s, tribe member, son of NOG
NAG	F, 20s, tribe member

TIME: Present Era and Paleolithic Era

SETTING: A studio apartment on one side of the stage represents the Present Era, consisting of a dinner table and two chairs. On the other side of the stage, a cave wall with period-specific drawings represents the Paleolithic Era; to one side grow a small number of vegetable plants. Downstage of each era are where scenes for the Zoo (present) and the Wilderness (Paleolithic) take place.

SCENE 1

(Present Era. GREG is seated at the dining table, which has been set for a meal. He fiddles with his digital watch.)

GREG

Stella? Stella?

STELLA

Yes, Greg.

GREG

Tell me what the weather was like in San Jose, California, on November 14, 1984.

STELLA

The weather was clear with temperature in the 70s.

GREG

Excellent. Now save that date, Stella.

STELLA

Consider it saved.

(STACEY enters carrying a casserole dish.)

STACEY

Who are you talking ... oh, your watch.

GREG

So what did I do to deserve this meal?

STACEY

Let's just say I experienced a life-changing epiphany today, and I wanted to celebrate.

GREG

You got a promotion?

STACEY

Of course not. My boss hates me.

GREG

You finished writing your novel?

STACEY

I've only just begun.

GREG

Right.

(Then)

You're. You're not pregnant, are you?

STACEY

No. Stop guessing. It will all become evident shortly. Now eat.

(STACEY serves GREG; he inspects his plate.)

GREG

This is baked chicken parmesan?

STACEY

Of course. Your favorite meal.

GREG

Why does it look ... different?

STACEY

It's not that different. I tweaked the recipe.

(GREG takes a cautious bite. He makes a face.)

GREG

Define tweaked.

STACEY

I veganized it.

GREG

Did you say veganize or bastardize?

STACEY

You didn't even give it a chance. Have another bite.

(GREG contorts face while swallowing bite number two.)

Oh, please. Give it time. It can be an acquired taste at first.

GREG

I already acquired a taste for the *normal* baked chicken parm. Why do I have to acquire a new taste?

STACEY

Because this is what I'm going to be cooking from now on. And I, for one, think it's wonderful.

GREG

I don't understand.

STACEY

I'm vegan. That was my big epiphany.

GREG

No meat?

STACEY

No meat. No dairy. No honey. No animal products whatsoever.

GREG

I'm beginning to wish you were pregnant.

(STACEY glares.)

How did this happen all of a sudden?

STACEY

It wasn't that sudden. Remember the last time I cooked this meal? The version with chicken?

GREG

Fondly.

STACEY

Well, I don't remember it so fondly. I remember thinking there was something very wrong about it.

GREG

You might have used a bit too much salt.

STACEY

That's not what I'm saying.

GREG

What are you saying?

STACEY

Two weeks ago I spent an hour with Ginger and Roxanne. I sat with them. Listened to them. I got to know them.

GREG

Who?

STACEY

The chickens. At the animal sanctuary. You were there too, remember?

GREG

I wasn't on a first-name basis.

STACEY

While you were out feeding the goats, one of the volunteers told me their stories. Ginger and Roxanne were on their way, along with hundreds of others, to the slaughterhouse when the truck they were in took a curve too fast and overturned. Most chickens were killed on impact or burned alive. But these two escaped. And by the grace of God someone found them and took them to the sanctuary, where they'll spend the rest of their lives in peace.

GREG

That's great then. A happy ending.

STACEY

So how can I eat another chicken, after spending time with Ginger and Roxanne?

GREG

Because you don't know the names of the other chickens.

STACEY

Don't think about it? That's your solution?

GREG

Stace, if you focus on all the suffering of the world, you'll never get out of bed in the morning.

STACEY

But what if *I'm* the cause of that suffering?

GREG

All you did was cook a meal.

STACEY

That's all anyone does.

GREG

Okay, so tomorrow we'll — I — will cook something different. Hamburgers.

STACEY

And what about Randall?

GREG

Randall?

STACEY

The cow!

GREG

Don't tell me you got to know the cows too.

STACEY

And the pigs. And the goats. And the ducks. Why would I eat some animals and not others?

GREG

Because some animals taste better than others.

STACEY

This is about compassion.

GREG

So you're quitting just like that, cold turkey. And does that include cold turkey?

(Another look from STACEY)

And you're doing all this because we spent one afternoon at Happy Acres Animal Sanctuary?

STACEY

In a way, it's your fault. You took me there.

GREG

No. Do not put this one on me. I was going to take you to the zoo.

STACEY

Why didn't you?

GREG

You know what the zoo costs these days? It's like Disneyland without the rides.

STACEY

For once, I'm glad you're cheap. Years from now, we are going to look back on that afternoon as a life-changing experience.

GREG

What do you mean *we*?

STACEY

Well, I was hoping we could go vegan together.

GREG

This isn't fair, you know. What if I decided tomorrow that I wanted us to live off the grid?

STACEY

Do you?

GREG

Yes.

STACEY

You do not.

GREG

I do. I really do.

STACEY

But you're a software developer. You're so connected to the grid your body starts to convulse whenever the Wi-Fi goes out.

GREG

Just because I'm fluent in code doesn't mean I want to live the rest of my days speaking it. Why do you think I've been spending nights and weekends hands-on with Stella?

STACEY

You do realize how odd that just sounded.

GREG

All it takes is one bestselling app, and I can write my own ticket. Quit the job, the commute, buy some land in the middle of nowhere. Live simply.

STACEY

I didn't know this about you.

GREG

Ditto.

STACEY

Your food's getting cold.

GREG

Maybe it will taste better that way.

STACEY

Cute. You know what you are—a hypocrite.

GREG

I am not.

STACEY

You're the first one to get on me about not using the latest smartphone app or not falling in love with your so-called smartwatch. And yet when I throw a little disruption into your life, you turn into my uncle Ralph.

GREG

Do not group me in with Ralph. He watches VHS tapes from the library.

STACEY

I bet Ralph wouldn't complain if I served him a home-cooked meal, vegan or otherwise.

GREG

So I am engaged to a *vegan*.

STACEY

Yes. So?

GREG

I'm just trying to get acclimated to the idea.

STACEY

It's not a big deal, Greg.

GREG

I beg to differ. It's a very big deal. What do I tell my friends, my parents?

STACEY

Tell them you're engaged to an evolved, health-conscious woman.

GREG

And our wedding reception? Is that going to be vegan as well?

STACEY

I hadn't considered that. Sure, why not?

GREG

My old man will throw a fit if he doesn't get roast beef.

STACEY

He can live without meat for one night. We all can. Why don't you give it a shot, starting now? One week. It will be fun.

GREG

I can't do that.

STACEY

Can't? Or won't?

GREG

You forget that I'm on the paleo diet.

STACEY

Right. My fiancé is taking dietary advice from cavemen.

GREG

Why do you think we still have our canines? To drink smoothies? I know you mean well with this plant-based meal, but deep down we are all meat eaters. We may be living in the Internet age, but genetically we're still living in the Stone Age.

STACEY

Some of us, maybe.

GREG

It's in our DNA.

STACEY

Adaptability is also in our DNA. And I believe humans can evolve. Even cavemen. Like yourself.

(STACEY exits.)

GREG

What about fish? Can you eat fish?

SCENE 2

(Paleolithic Era. Lights dim on the dining table and rise on the other half of the stage. A cave wall, positioned in the background, features crude drawings of people and animals. Off to the side is a small “garden” of vegetable plants. NOG enters triumphantly, followed by GROG. They are both carrying small sacks, presumably filled with the spoils from their hunt. They are dressed in animal-print loincloths.)

NOG

I am Nog.

GROG

I am Grog.

(NAG enters, attired in a fashionable animal-print.)

NAG

I am Nag. And you're late.

NOG

We traveled far.

GROG

We got lost.

NOG

We traveled the crooked hills. The animals were few. We continued on. Past the endless sands.

GROG

Then we got really lost.

(NOG glares at GROG, who takes the hint and saunters over to the vegetable garden.)

NOG

Gather 'round. We have returned from the hunt. We bring animals, so we may have meat. Tonight, we feast. We eat. We eat meat!

NAG

(Points at the food NOG is carrying)

Feast? That's not even a snack.

(GROG, now on his knees, tends the vegetable plants.)

NOG

It will suffice.

NAG

Until tomorrow. Then what? Back to gathering nuts?

NOG

We are not staying long.

NAG

Let me come next time. I can help.

NOG

The wilderness is no place for a woman.

NAG

You took Grog along, and we all know he's useless.

NOG

Grog has a strong eye for spotting animals — just a weak heart for killing them.

NAG

That's why you need me. I will not hesitate to take down an animal.

NOG

I'm glad to hear. You can get started cooking *this* animal.

(NOG hands food off to NAG, then notices GROG.)

What is he doing over there?

NAG

He told me he was working on a new invention.

(GROG and NAG approach.)

NOG

This doesn't look like a new weapon, son.

GROG

It's not.

NOG

We need you to invent a new spear.

GROG

What you need is a new food source. *This*, father, is the future of our people.

NAG

Weeds?

GROG

(GROG holds up a carrot; hands it to NAG.)

This is no weed. Try it.

(NAG handles the carrot like a knife.)

NAG

You can't kill anything with this.

GROG

(Snatches it back)

It's not a weapon. It's food. I raised it.

NOG

How does one raise food?

GROG

While out gathering acorns and berries I discovered this root and I brought it home. It was only a hunch but, over time, I figured out how to reproduce it. And now, as you can see, there are others growing. All producing food. For us.

(GROG hands carrot to NOG.)

Go on. Eat.

(NOG cautiously takes a bite.)

Well?

NOG

Would go well with woolly mammoth.

NAG

And when's the last time you brought home a woolly mammoth?

NOG

Too long. When I was your age, the hills swarmed with mammoth. They did not fear us. They did not run from us. I did not even need the spear Grog invented.

GROG

I wish I had not invented it.

NAG

But I love your spear.

GROG

Yes, well, thank you, Nag.

NOG

You honestly expect us to give up hunting? For this?

GROG

Our days of hunting are numbered. You should know that by now. Haven't you noticed that you're killing them all? That's why you don't see mammoth swarming the hills.

NOG

The other tribes. They're poaching our animals.

GROG

And when there are no mammoth left, then what?

NOG

We will hunt bear. And buffalo. And boar.

GROG

Until they too are gone. Then what?

NOG

You will invent something. You always do.

GROG

Don't you see? I *have* invented something. This is our solution. It is time we stopped chasing animals to all corners of the land. It is time we settled down in one place and raised our own food. Think about how much free time we will have to advance our society, to evolve.

NOG

You play in the dirt like a child, and you call that evolving? What exactly will we will do with all this free time?

GROG

We could make art. Like this.

(GROG leads NOG and NAG to the cave wall.)

This is the story of our people. Over here, we celebrate a birth, over here, we mourn a death. And here, a hunt. The blood-red ochre marks the animals that have fallen. The woolly mammoth, the bison, the tiger. A record of all that we have accomplished. Someday people will gaze at this wall and they will remember us and our civilization and they will know us beyond our bones and our weapons. They will know us for our art.

NOG

You realize what you've done?

GROG

Set onto stone the first visual representation of our culture.

NOG

You've made a mess of a perfectly good cave wall.

GROG

That's a matter of opinion.

NAG

I hope you don't expect me to clean this. That is *not* my job.

GROG

Nobody is cleaning this wall. This is for eternity.

NOG

You'll have to take that up with the C.O.A.

GROG

C.O.A.?

NOG

Cave owners association. We're not the only ones who use this cave. And I don't want to lose our deposit when we move out, which might be sooner than I'd like.

GROG

I'll be staying behind with my plants.

NAG

That's news to me. I hope you don't plan on me joining you.

NOG

Nag, why aren't you preparing dinner?

NAG

Why do I always have to prepare the food around here?

NOG

We catch the food. You cook the food. That's how this tribe works.

NAG

(Holds up sack of food)

By the looks of this, it's not working all that well, now, is it?

NOG

You're the woman. Now go.

NAG

Neanderthals!

(NAG exits.)

NOG

(to himself)

This is no way to run a tribe.

GROG

What do you mean?

NOG

Each of us has a role to play. We can't wake up one day and decide to play someone else's role. Nag is not a hunter any more than you are a—a—whatever this is. My father hunted. His father before him. Hunting is our tradition. You can't walk away from it.

GROG

I can't continue it, father. Tradition is the enemy of progress.

NOG

Are you accusing me of not being progressive?

GROG

If the loincloth fits.

NOG

Who put an end to human sacrifice?

GROG

Like that was a tough decision.

NOG

And who was it that mandated casual Fridays?

GROG

This isn't about a dress code. It's about the future of our civilization.

NOG

Let's suppose I gave the word. No more hunting. From this day forward, we will only eat food from the dirt. What if you're wrong about this food? What if we grow weaker and weaker, until we are not strong enough to defend ourselves from the neighboring tribes?

GROG

I have been living on these plants and nothing else for three moons. I'm as strong as ever. These plants will free us from the animals. They will free the animals from us.

NOG

And do you have enough to feed everyone? Right now?

GROG

I need a little more time.

NOG

Time? I look around, and all I see is hunger. Hunger does not have the luxury of waiting around for your future.

GROG

But your present is killing my future.

NOG

When I hunted with my father, I did not enjoy killing. The way a woolly howls when you pierce the gut. It is bloody work. I understand how you feel. But I learned at a young age not to see the blood. To focus instead on the happiness in the faces of our people when I returned with food. Empathy is well and good, but it doesn't fill the stomach.

GROG

Maybe not. But empathy can fill a heart. And there is a hunger there too.

NOG

Care to bet on which hunger wins out tonight?

(NAG returns, gives an exaggerated curtsy.)

NAG

Dinner will be served shortly. Happy?

NOG

We won't be staying for dinner.