

A CLOSE APPROXIMATION OF AN ORDINARY LIFE

a play in two acts

by

Meryl McQueen

Copyright © 2008 by Meryl McQueen

CHARACTERS

LEONARD PEARCE	Seventy, but looks much younger, very few wrinkles. Has Asperger's, a form of high-functioning autism. Precise in speech and movement, with a dry sense of humor.
LEONARD'S MOTHER	Mid-thirties when she first appears, casually dressed in jeans and a comfortable shirt. Bright & bubbly.
ROGER	School kid, aged ten. Typical bully.
LUCY	Len's speech therapist. Soft-spoken, patient and loves her job. Mid-twenties, smart and focused.
MAX (voice only)	Adolescent boy with Asperger's.
LIBRARIAN	School librarian, impatient and shrill. Thirtyish.
ALAN	Len's psychiatrist. Rotund and sharp-witted, 47. Treats Len as his own son.
JOYCE	Len's wife, 42. Outdoorsy, with wisps of long hair and warm eyes. Speaks directly and to the point.
MICHAEL	Nurse at the retirement home—tall and thin, 40s, with a narrow face & wide smile.

SETTING

Open in Len's room in a retirement home. And then as the scenes unfold, various settings from Len's earlier years.

TIME

Evening, today. Much of the story is told in flashback vignettes over the course of Len's life.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(A retirement home. Len sits in a faded though once brightly floral armchair, surrounded by a tight pool of light. There is a cardboard box at his feet, and books everywhere.)

LEN

When I was ten, my father bought me a tape recorder. Told me to rehearse, yeah, rehearse my conversations. Keep 'em locked up tight.

(Kicks the box gently, then reaches down and pulls out a tape.)

Conservation conversations, keep 'em all together with a label stuck on right. Len's tapes, that's me and that's mine and that's it.

(Pause as he twirls the tape in his hand and closes his eyes.)

I am ten now. Ten, two times five times one a million times over if I want. Or ten, ten ones are ten every time. Ten. Look look look. Follow me, do not follow, look. That is what they say. They: Mom, Dad, Lucy. Look. They want to know what I remember. I remember everything from before. Before today. Look. At me, Leonard Anthony Pearce, ten years old. Listen, right, listen to me. Len. I am Len. I am ten. Ha! That rhymes. Len, ten, pen. Say when, Len. I live at 61 Canterbury Court, Wolcott, Mass. I live here with me, Oscar my cat, my mom, my dad, and my twin baby brothers, Alex and Tom. They are very tiny, only twenty pounds total when Dad jumps on the scale with one in each hand. Alex's real name is Alexander Palmer Pearce, and the other brother is Thomas Stephen Pearce. Mom says they will get louder but I hope not. When they cry together I go for a walk. And it will be winter soon, and too cold for long walks around the backyard long enough to make them stop, stop, stop! So, I am Len. Ten. I used to go to Wolcott Elementary but not anymore. My teacher was Mrs. Bercroft and

she wore a gold cross on a silver chain and swishy skirts and bracelets up her arm almost to her elbow. I liked the swishy skirts but those bracelets, man. I told Mrs. Bercroft she should leave those mangle jangle bangles right at home, and my mom got really mad. She says I am not supposed to say truth, except when it is really important not to lie. That is not truth, lying. When if you think about it, it is not logical at all, because Dad says the truth will set you free, but in my experience with those pesky clanking bracelets the truth got me a week without TV. Free? No TV? No, not me. Anyway, after what I like to call 'Attack of the Killer Bracelets' there was the 'Roger March Affair.'

SCENE 2

(Stage right, another pool of light shows bookcase and long table with chairs. Roger sits in one of the chairs. Len stands up, crosses into the other scene and sits across the table. He starts to read a book.)

ROGER

What are you doing, bird boy? What is it with you and all those birds all the time, never anything else, same old, same old. Bo-ring.

(Roger crumples up a piece of paper and throws it at Len, intentionally missing.)

LEN

Five ninety-eight, that's right, hold tight, doing the Dewey Decimal System books on birds. Reading time is right time, six minutes each time, National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. Says so in my notebook, time to read, not other time, like eating time and family talking time and tutoring time and therapy time and later time for outside, outside play.

ROGER

Len is a loser, Len is a loser!

LEN

No talking, slow walking, no talking in the library.

ROGER

I can talk if I want.

(Roger starts to whistle.)

LEN

Time out, cut it out...sh, sh, sh.

(Len covers his ears.)

ROGER

You can't make me.

LEN

Three, six, nine, twelve, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one.

(His voice gets louder as he counts.)

Twenty-four, twenty-seven...

(Librarian runs on.)

LIBRARIAN

Enough with this noise, both of you!

LEN

Roger the Dodger, loud in a crowd, would not be still, I will, I will, I want to kill!

(Librarian touches Len's arm to pull him out of the chair.)

LEN

Too bad for you I'm glue, sticky and picky and-

(Librarian pulls harder. Len screeches and bites her hand, stumbling out of the chair and back into his armchair stage center.)

SCENE 3

LEN

Everyone knows too much touching is not fine, my arm is mine, mine, mine. Didn't go back to school. Home, home, home. But there was a time before the open door, before my words could be heard with the birds. Before when I was four. Lakeside Clinic for Pediatric Neurology. I did not know its whole long name until I could read, which was later, but I knew that it smelled very good in there. I wondered who baked cinnamon cookies in that clinic, because it smelled like it every time. Mom and I went there a lot while I used my inside voice, the one that didn't even peep out, didn't ever squeak out, didn't want to speak out. Big windows in the waiting room, I waited and I watched the birds. I did not have names for any of the birds then, except geese and ducks. Now I know them all, all the water birds who flew into my view on those long mornings waiting: wood ducks, black ducks, Canada geese, mallards, mottled ducks, horned grebes, red-necked loons, ring-necked ducks, harlequin ducks, and even a double-crested cormorant. First time around, wondered why they call it a waiting room, when we only had a minute or two before the birds disappeared. And then it was rock, rock, rock around the clock until the world was wet with red and gray, my blood like mud, a flood of blood and red and gray that day.

SCENE 4

(Stage left, another pool of light shows a doctor's waiting room with a low glass table. Len's mother sits watching her son. Len stands up, crosses over, and sits on his hands in a chair.)

MOTHER

Look, Len, look at the lake! Do you see the birds out on the lake? Ducks, and a goose, look! Aren't they wonderful?

(Mother stands up.)

MOTHER

Okay, time to go. Doctor's waiting.

(Len starts to rock in back and forth, moaning. No distinguishable words. His cries get louder and he bangs his head against the implied wall, then slumps. Mother rushes to his side, stage goes dark. Sirens. Lights come on up Len's armchair where he sits.)

LEN

Lakeside Clinic Disaster, LCD for short, for sure. All I had was my inside voice, and even that got very, very quiet. Because the ER is the loudest place I have ever been. Louder than the grocery store, louder than the Wolcott Elementary School cafeteria, and much louder than the Lakeside Clinic for Pediatric Neurology. All the different kinds of noise, all at once. There was people noise—talking, crying, screaming noise. There was machine noise—beeping, siren whistling, phone ringing noise. There was building noise—air blowing, toilet flushing, shoes-on-floor squeaking noise. And those three kinds of noise made it a lot more difficult to deal with than one at a time kind. I did not like it one little bit. All the voices around me in the ER were the same. All the voices were sharp, tippy-top volume voice. I did not appreciate being pulled away from those

birds, and they had to give me a shot to do the stitches. Mom took me back to that clinic with the birds, but it was different the third time. As we got out of the car in the parking lot, Mom took my hand. "Len," she said, "let's go see those birds in the lake. We have a little while before our appointment. Sound good?" Without the glass between me and the birds, they were even better. I could see the colors, red and gold and green, shining on the water as they swam around. There was a gray wooden boardwalk around the lake, and I did three rounds clockwise, three rounds anti-clockwise to see all the birds from every angle. I had a lot of comforting inside talk that day. All about my birds. The doctors talked a lot, too. While their voices talked from high up in their chairs, I made up rhymes for my birds. Little ducks, all black and blue, why do not you all fly away too? Geese with long necks, and swans too, who are you who who who who? The grownup voices never stopped. Otherwise there would have been space for me to use an outside voice. Not then. Not yet. The birds were a good part of the Lakeside Clinic for Pediatric Neurology. Lucy was the other good part.

(Len rises, returns to the waiting room and sits down. His mother is there with Lucy, who kneels down to Len's level.)

LUCY

Hello, Len. My name is Lucy. We are going to have some fun together today. Can you say hello, Len?

MOTHER

He doesn't talk at all. That's why we're here, to work on peripheral communication skills. His father and I have been working on signing as well, but so far—

(Lucy's eyes don't leave Len's face as she speaks.)

LUCY

Mrs. Pearce, I understand your concern. He's your son, and autism has locked him away inside his head. For now. Let's see how this first session goes, and we can talk more at the end of the hour. I can see that Len and I are going to be great friends, isn't that right? Sometimes, there's a voice on the inside waiting for the chance to jump out. We're going to figure out how to do that together.

MOTHER

It's just that we've seen speech therapists before, since he was two, and they've all said the same thing, nothing wrong besides the Asperger's, why should it be different this-

LUCY

(Interrupting.)

Probably best if you wait in the car, Mrs. Pearce. Len and I will be just fine.

(Mother leaves. Lucy pulls a bucket of Legos from under a chair and dumps them out at Len's feet.)

Don't you worry about it. We are going to play together, and if there is a time when you would like to say a word, then you go ahead. There is plenty of time, and plenty of quiet, and plenty of fun to go around.

(Reaching down, Len pulls out all the blue Legos and points out the window.)

LUCY

Blue, for the lake? That's right, Len. Blue. How about green for the grass?

(Len grabs the green piece and hurls it away. He gathers up the blue pieces again and piles them in his lap. He looks out the window.)

LUCY

Okay, I see what you mean. Grass isn't interesting, grass can't fly away. But those ducks out on the lake, out on the smooth blue lake, they're a different story. Quack, quack, quack. You like the birds, words for birds? I've got a book in my office that's perfect for us to share.

(Lights out, Len returns to his center chair.)

LEN

I had a lot of inside words before I let any into the world. I waited a long time, longer than most kids to say my first words, because there was never a long enough space in between everyone shouting and pointing at me to put my thoughts together. I had a lot of rhyming talk before I decided to say it all out loud. I would stand very still, hands on my ears, feet on the floor, if there was ever quiet. Never quiet enough. There was my house, and a book that said quiet as a mouse but there is no quiet. No quiet as a mouse in my house. When I was four, I had long conversations with myself, inside, with my small voice. Now it can take a little while for me to string all the words in a row, but when I was four I did it all in my head. All the names for different kinds of voices—whisper, shout, soft and super-loud—and I only used one voice, my inside voice. My father said that once I discovered my outside voice, I had to share it all the time.

(Closing his eyes and leaning back in his chair.)

When I was five years old, there was a big rainstorm. Not with any thunder, because thunder makes it impossible to hear my brain cells snapping messages to one another back and forth. Rain, piled on top of itself, drops and drops and drops. Mom and I were at home by ourselves, and we had just finished breakfast. She had under-boiled my egg, and the gooey yellow yolk stuck to my chin, and I was deciding on a meltdown with the thrashing and the

thumping and the throwing the bowl across the kitchen, when she opened the door for us to sit on the porch in the rain.

(Len rises and walks stage right, where his mother is sitting on a bench. He sits next to her without looking at or touching her, his knees up to his chest. Sound of heavy rain falling, then tapering off until it's only the steady sound of water dripping. Everything in this scene seems to happen in slow motion. Len's mother glances at her son, but doesn't reach for him.)

LEN

(Slowly)

Loud without a crowd kind of rain. Splish, splash, splosh, from the gutters and the flowers.

(His mothers holds very still, her eyes wide but her mouth shut.)

LEN

Plop-plop-plop from the top of the maple tree to the bottom of the prickly-sticky red rose bush.

(Len turns to face his mother and taps her on the shoulder. She pivots to face him.)

LEN

Tumble, stumble, rumble down. Mommy? I want it to always rain just like this, rain, rain, down the drain, up and down and there is no pain.

(His mother smiles as tears threaten. She mimics Len's shoulder-tapping gesture, softly.)

LEN

Your teeth are white, bright, light. Water
running down your face. And now there's
quiet space. Okay, that's the way.