

SMALL TALK IN THE TERMINAL WARD

A One-Act Play

Written by Jordan Ramp

SCENE

Dimly lit. Centered are two facing armchairs separated by a coffee table. Occupying one of these is SARAH, mid-forties, dressed in a hospital gown. Incredibly frail and pallid, a headscarf partly conceals her blonde wig. To stage left, strewn papers, a computer, and Bluetooth speaker sit atop a work desk. Beside this, a fully stocked bar cart at which BOB, mid-thirties, slightly overweight, tie loosened, fixes himself a whiskey.

SARAH: How long do these usually last?

BOB: You're right, let's get started here.

BOB takes a swig, makes his way to the unoccupied chair.

BOB: Okay, so... you've thought about this?

SARAH: Thought about- what, assisted suicide?

BOB: Yeah, or what do they want us to call it? "Death with Dignity"?

SARAH: Well, let's see, I only sleep when I'm sedated, and otherwise, it's managing pain.

And the doctors say it'll only get worse. That's the kicker. So, yes, I've thought about it... I don't want my kids to see what the final days'll do to me.

BOB: (*Sips drink*) For the record, you don't seem any worse for being bedridden.

SARAH scoffs, shakes her head.

BOB: I'm serious. I've had people -- Christ, they're a sad sight.

SARAH: I'm a pile of bones.

BOB: Can I ask you something?

SARAH: Last chance.

BOB: What's the etiquette for second dates?

SARAH: Excuse me?

BOB: I just mean as far as who asks who or whatever, you know -- what's the timeline? I can't seem to get past the first one, so I'm just making sure there's not some unwritten rule here.

SARAH: Is this how these normally go? You talk about your dating history?

BOB: We can talk about whatever you'd like. Open forum.

SARAH: You know, I think I will take that whiskey.

BOB: Yeah? Okay, good. 'Cause guess what? For you, I got a heavy hand.

BOB stands and circles back behind the bar.

BOB: Mixer?

SARAH: I can't really taste anything.

A pause as BOB uncaps the bottle of whiskey and begins to pour.

BOB: So, what do you think?

SARAH: About?

BOB: The second date thing. Past five years, I've been on maybe twenty first dates, but it always dies after that. I mean, you show up -- and I've done it both ways -- I've tried curating everything, showing off my best qualities. And I've also tried the vulnerability thing. Just be yourself or whatever. But nope. Nothing. Then there's this woman the other night. I ask her on a second date, and she says she's busy. So, what then? Do I follow-up? Or how long do I wait?

SARAH: Asking for a second date's always the man's responsibility. And if I have to explain that to you, that's probably why you haven't gotten any.

BOB: *(Pause)* Was afraid that's what you'd say.

BOB returns to his seat and slides the whiskey over to Sarah; she takes a healthy swig.

SARAH: So, what's this, you humanize yourself and I dump everything at your feet?

BOB: Open forum, like I said.

SARAH: I suppose most patients drown you in their miseries. Each one, their own "Brian's Song."

BOB: Sometimes. Others just like to reminisce, you know? I tell everyone to think of this office as Memory Lane.

SARAH: *(Derisive)* Some time for nostalgia.

BOB: Look, I just try to steer clear of anything morbid, you know? You've had enough of that. All the closed doors, the hushed conversations.

SARAH: Yeah, well...

SARAH drains the last of her whiskey. Unsolicited, Bob retrieves her glass and returns to the bar for a refill.

SARAH: I'd rather not dwell, to be honest. That's all you can do in a hospital room. I think of all the mistakes I made. And most the time, I can't even place the details, I'm just left with this vague sense there was something I should've done differently.

BOB: Hey, no one's perfect. Apparently, not even me.

SARAH: Do any of your patients make requests? Like, for after they're gone, I mean.

BOB: Oh, yeah. One guy wanted me to tell his ex-wife she was what killed him.

SARAH: That's terrible.

BOB: I mean, yeah, but talk about a lasting memory. (*Re: Whiskey*) Three or four of these, see what you start saying.

BOB returns to his chair with two glasses of whiskey. He places one in front of SARAH; the two drink throughout.

SARAH: So, there's really never a second date?

BOB: What can I say? I'm pitching a shutout.

SARAH: Ryan, my husband, know what he did? Our first date, he took me to a movie and made sure we arrived just before the previews. That's how he gamed the system.

BOB: I don't get it.

SARAH: Well, it limits the window for small talk. You only have to bank a few clever lines, then the movie begins. Then afterward, if the movie's good, in your mind, you remember the date going well, even if he said only a couple things. And there's your pathway toward a second date.

BOB leans back in his chair.

BOB: Jesus.

SARAH: Worked on me.

BOB: I'll keep an eye on him for you, your husband. He won't pull none of that shit. I'll make sure he never gets a "Golden Bachelor" audition.

SARAH: He'll be fine -- his fight's over. No more bills, appointments. There's an argument for going at it alone, you know.

BOB: Speak for yourself. You know how depressing it is when your plane lands and you've got zero notifications?

SARAH: I'm serious. I just... I've already given so many people a pain that'll last forever.

BOB: Sarah, I wouldn't --

SARAH: --No, it's true. I have, it's true. That's why I don't want my funeral to be a big thing.

BOB: Okay, and I say bullshit. I say we put a Powerpoint together right here. Make everyone sit through sixty slides detailing your every achievement.

SARAH: *(Smiles)* Think there's enough for sixty?

BOB: Fuck yeah, run the bill up, who cares? I'm talking puddles of tears, paramedics on hand. You're a big fucking loss to this world -- that deserves a ceremony.

SARAH: Having a one-time client -- suppose that's why you can be so forward.

BOB: Yeah, you'll have a hard time reaching internal affairs.

Pause.

SARAH: So, what do the others think happens after this? I assume most believe in Heaven.

BOB: For the most part, yeah. There was this one guy, Tommy, this Catholic guy, he told me he'd send me a postcard when he got there. And I will say, ever since then, my window's had a tremor. I don't know if that's him or not, but it's one Hell of a tremor.

SARAH: I have to admit, I had-- well, I had some trepidation walking in here. I mean, you offer me a drink, the tie and everything. But I have to say, this feels good. Really. This is good for me -- not having a conversation that's all odds and medications.

BOB: Oh, yeah? I'm glad. *(Pause)* But, so, you really only want a small funeral?

SARAH: *(Nods)* Will you be attending?

BOB: Oh, no, I can't.

SARAH: What, date night plans?

BOB: No, I'd just like to preserve this. Right here. When people say "Sarah," I want to think of only this moment, with this beautiful woman right in front of me.

SARAH: There's the opener for your dates.

BOB: It's worked more as a closer.

SARAH: What do you mean? The women you're going out with don't like being called beautiful? Are you saying it creepy?

BOB: It's more of a neutral response, I guess.

SARAH: What, you expect them to leap across the table?

BOB: A fast walk would be appreciated even.

SARAH: The "what do you do for work" conversation's gotta be bleak.

BOB: I don't know, I'm having a nice time. People leave my office and, yeah, their file gets tucked away. But I don't see it as bleak. Every patient I'm lucky enough to talk to, I carry 'em with me. Which, before we go any further -- I wanted to say, I'm glad to have met you.

SARAH: (*Smiles*) I'm glad to have met you, too, Bob. Now go pour me another drink.

BOB stands and obliges.

SARAH: So, you won't go to the funeral. Can I at least have you in the room with me?

BOB: Nope.

SARAH: Why not? I'd like there to be at least one face in the crowd that isn't a reminder of what I'm leaving.

BOB: That's what the physician's for.

SARAH: I mean besides the man handing me death pills.

BOB: Sorry.

SARAH: And there's nothing that'll change your mind?

BOB: Depends. You notarize your will recently?

BOB sits back down, hands SARAH her drink.

SARAH: Suppose you can't get too attached.

BOB: Yep, completely devoid of all emotion. That's why I'm so qualified for this job. A steel trap.

SARAH: And you say you keep striking out with women?

BOB: Maybe love's just unattainable for me, you know? I felt it one time, briefly. Maybe that's all you get.

SARAH: Who was the heartbreaker?

BOB: Just this girlfriend I had. You remind me of her, actually.

SARAH: Ouch.

BOB: No, it's just-- you're happy. I mean, still happy. Even now, when you should be lashing out at the world. Resentful and bitter and fucking screaming at everything until your last breath. But nope, not you. Dealer flips an ace-king, and you see no other choice than to be happy.

SARAH: And that means you can clear me for suicide.

BOB: I clear everyone. I mean, even if you are depressed, who gives a shit? What, you can't be depressed, but a teenager who watched too much "Euphoria" can be?

SARAH: I'm guessing you don't get many teenage clients.

BOB: No, but still. It's like that girlfriend I was talking about -- one time she had me move this plant to the center of the room, right? So, while she's at work, I move it where she wants. And it bugged the shit out of me 'cause every time you walked in you had to weave past the thing. It was ridiculous. But it took *her* like three weeks to even notice. She just blew right past it, like this giant fucking obstacle didn't even enter frame. So, it's like that, you know? I bet you're the same way.

SARAH: So, that happened then? With you two?

BOB: Nothing, I'm talking about myself too much. *(Pause)* Actually, know what? I just thought of something.

BOB pulls out his cellphone and taps the screen. Ernest's "Ain't as Easy" -- or some equally melancholic song -- plays over the Bluetooth speaker. BOB approaches Sarah, offering his hand.

BOB: Dance with me?

SARAH: Oh, absolutely not.

BOB: Gimme your hand.

SARAH: I can't. No way.

BOB: Sure, you can.

SARAH: No, I can't! I can't! I can barely walk even, you saw me.

BOB: C'mon, it's two-step, it's nothin'. I can't dance to anything more complicated than this.

SARAH: I'm not in any shape.

BOB: Better shape than me.

After a moment of deliberation, SARAH sighs and reluctantly takes BOB'S hand. As he helps her lumber to her feet:

SARAH: Fine.

BOB: Yes! Thank you. Here we go, I got you. Yep. We'll just take the center here. No problem.

With SARAH in BOB'S arms, they dance the two-step for a few counts, gently swaying in place. Eventually, BOB presses a button on his iPhone, lowering the volume of the music.

SARAH: What'd you turn it down for? *(Pause)* Hey, I can hardly hear it.

BOB: I wanna hear your steps. *(Pause)* I wanna remember what it sounded like to hear your steps.

SARAH: *(Holding up empty glass)* Won't miss this sound. Ice rattling at the bottom of an empty glass.

With a smile, BOB breaks their embrace. As he does, SARAH loses her balance and stumbles down to one knee.

BOB: Oh, shit! Shit, are you okay?!

SARAH: Of course, I'm fine.

BOB: I'm sorry. Shit. That's my fault.

SARAH: It's okay. Really, just help me sit a minute.

BOB guides SARAH back into her chair.

BOB: You sure? Nothing's broken? Everything's alright?

SARAH: I'm fine. My ankle's a little bruised there, but that's it.

BOB: It's-- oh, um...

BOB thinks, then palms the ice cube from the empty whiskey glass and holds it to Sarah's afflicted ankle.

BOB: Here. That help?

SARAH: I just need to sit a minute.

BOB: Okay, you just let me know. I'll hold it long as you need.

SARAH: Jesus, I'm out of breath. Isn't that pitiful? Look at me. *(Pause)* Why'd you have to pick such a sad fucking song, anyway?

BOB taps his iPhone, silencing the music.

BOB: I don't know, AC DC's the other playlist.

SARAH wipes away tears. Shakes her head at the sight of her ankle.

SARAH: Icing down a swollen ankle. It's like putting duct tape on a rotten engine.

SARAH dumps the ice cube back into her glass. BOB scoops them both up and heads to the bar.

BOB: Okay. I'll admit, that was a dumb idea, but thanks, anyway. This means a lot.

SARAH: What does? Talking to someone on the brink of death?

BOB: Dancing.

SARAH: Oh. *(Pause)* A man who likes dancing and can't get a second date.

BOB: The other problem is the apps. It's hard for someone like me on the apps.

I used to hope I'd meet someone out in the world, you know, like a dog park or something. Sit down, say, "*Which one's yours?*" But that doesn't exist anymore.

SARAH: Well, what's your type?

BOB: Uh, I mean, I guess...

BOB sits back down with the replenished whiskeys.

BOB: You know what I want? Honestly? It's funny, I was thinking about this last week, 'cause I was walking through the park and there was this old couple sitting on a bench. Like in their seventies, maybe. And it's the middle of the day and they're sitting there, she's got a crossword in her lap and she's studying it all determined, you know? And he's next to her, pointing things out, helping her.

“Hey, look, fourteen across, right there.” And that was it. Simple. I mean, they’d been married, what, fifty years? You imagine? So, I guess I want something like that, you know? Just sitting on a park bench next to someone, middle of the day. Nowhere to be.

SARAH: And the old girlfriend wasn’t that?

BOB: She-- well, I don’t know. (*Shrugs*) Nothing lasts forever.

SARAH: Don’t I know it. (*Takes drink*) You bringing up the pool reminded me of something.

BOB: Yes, please, tell me.

SARAH: Well, this one time, we took my daughter when she was like five or so maybe.

She had her water wings on, and my husband was in there, but she kept shouting how she couldn’t swim. The other kids were all giving her looks, but she was too upset to even notice. She just kept on, *“I can’t do it! I can’t swim!”* (*Eyes well*) Finally, I walked over there with her still yelling, *“Mom, I can’t do it! I can’t!”* But I pretended like I couldn’t hear. That might’ve been the best stunt I ever pulled as a parent. That might’ve been my best day. ‘Cause she started thrashing and thrashing until finally she was clinging onto the edge. And she looked up... and realized she *could* do it. You know? She realized she could swim.

BOB: Wow. Jesus, Sarah, that’s beautiful.

A pause as Sarah wipes away tears. BOB maintains an impassive expression.

SARAH: Nothing, really? Still nothing?

BOB: Told ya -- steel trap. You want sad, I--

Just then, there’s a knock at the door by an unseen NURSE.

BOB: (*Calling off*) Yeah, we’re still working! (*Then, to Sarah*) You got any others? Any other memories?

SARAH: Oh. Uh, well, let me think...

Another KNOCK.

NURSE: Doctor Hayes? You guys still in there?

BOB: (*Calling off*) Yeah, we’re still going!

NURSE: Alright, well, I gotta get Ms. Patterson to her physical.

BOB: (*Calling off*) We're not done, thanks!

SARAH: Should I just go? God knows my blood alcohol's gonna set off some sensors.

BOB: No, it's fine, fuck 'em. You stay.

SARAH: Oh, what's this? Finally, some emotion? A little anger maybe?

BOB: No, it's just these people -- I mean, what's the fucking rush?

The NURSE knocks again.

BOB: Jesus, fuck.

NURSE: Doctor Hayes? My supervisor just radioed. He said time's up.

BOB: (*Calling off*) No, time's not up! I say when time's up!

Bob scans the room for a reason to stall; settles his gaze on her ankle.

BOB: I mean, look, your ankle's still swollen. You can't move like that. I gotta-- I gotta fill out a form at least.

As Bob moves toward his desk, there's another KNOCK.

BOB: I heard you! I said we're not fucking done!

Bob rifles through drawers, producing a form.

BOB: Yeah, see, here we go! This is it. we gotta add this to your medical record.

SARAH: You do? Why?

BOB: It's for the psych department. Plus, you're drunk. You can't go out there, you're drunk.

SARAH: (*Slightly befuddled*) Whatever you think.

BOB: (*Scanning form*) Shit, actually, know what? I got the wrong one.

Another KNOCK, this one more aggressive.

NURSE: Dr. Hayes, my supervisor said I really need to get Ms. Patterson back to--

Over the above, BOB storms to the door and rips it open, revealing the NURSE. He lowers his voice slightly, intending for SARAH not to hear, but his drunken nature makes the volume aplenty.

BOB: Look, tell Dr. Pace I'm not done with my assessment yet, alright? This isn't fucking marriage counseling. And if he wants to abbreviate the process and's willing to deal with the fallout, then I'll release her. But short of that, I need time to make my decision. Can you radio that to him? Or better yet, go down and see him.

NURSE: My orders are to stay right here--

BOB slams the door, locks it, and heads back to his chair.

SARAH: Everything okay?

BOB: Oh, yeah, it's fine, don't worry. *(Examining whiskey bottle)* Shit, except we're under the label here. I gotta-- actually, know what? I'll call someone and have 'em pick something up.

BOB steps over to his desk, lifts the phone.

SARAH: Bob?

BOB: *(Distracted; as he dials)* Yeah?

SARAH: Bob.

BOB: Yeah, what?

SARAH: Will you sit down, please?

BOB: There's a 7-Eleven on the corner.

SARAH: I gotta leave at some point, Bob. Sooner or later--

BOB: --They're supposed to give us time! That's what they say, take as much time as you need! There's no clock-watching in here -- the one fucking place!

SARAH: *(Firm)* I need you to sit down. Now. Please.

Wilting, BOB gingerly sets the phone down. Plops in the chair across from her.

BOB: I just have a feeling this is really important, you know?

SARAH: Can I speak?

BOB solemnly nods.

SARAH: This job, sitting here, it's a lot of weight you carry. You recognize that, don't you? You think I'm happy -- I'm just tired of people feeling bad for me. I mean, jeez, the number of turned gazes. But the others -- I've walked these halls. I know they come in here and hold onto that last bit of desperation. You know what I'm talking about. They think someone's gonna rush through that door with a magic cure. And delivering no recourse, that's gotta weigh on you. It'd weigh on anybody.

BOB: I don't think--

SARAH: (*Overlapping*) Tell me it makes you angry! (*Pause*) Go on, just say it! Tell me anything in the world that makes you angry!

BOB: Alright.

SARAH: I'm listening!

BOB: Know what makes me angry?

SARAH: Tell me! Yes, please, tell me!

BOB: Okay, well... (*Pause*) Okay, so you go through these situations, right? You work hard, you do the right thing. Woman with a stroller's heading for the exit, you're in a hurry, but you hold the door open anyway. And I wanna believe so badly that the universe helps out people like that, you know? That there's a basis for all this, that's it's not just blind fucking chance. But if anything, most the time, the evidence slides the other way. I mean, you see these dickhead politicians, right? These guys, all self-serving. So why is it they get treated to steak dinners while kids in Gaza wake up to grenades? I mean, how the fuck does that make sense? And now here's you: a wife, mother. Completely innocent. I read your file, thirty years as a third-grade teacher. And I bet you were one Hell of a teacher. So why do you get robbed of your golden years then? Why don't you get to see your daughter prove to her own that she can swim?! I mean, how do you explain that? And I know-- okay, I know it's not an original fucking question. But this one has a face, and this one's right here! So that, okay?! That's what makes me angry!

The fervor builds in his speech, and over the final words, BOB hurls the whiskey bottle at the wall, causing it to shatter. They sit in silence for a beat. Bob's rage subsides; sorrow takes its place.

BOB: And I-- and I only just met you, you know? We only just met.

Pause.

SARAH: You ready to tell me what happened?

BOB: When? I don't... (*Trails off*)

SARAH: You don't wanna say? (*Pause*) That old girlfriend... she passed away, too, didn't she?

BOB: (*Pause, then, nodding*) Yeah. Yeah, she, uh--

SARAH grabs her whiskey glass and hucks it at the same wall, but due to the low velocity, it merely glances off with a thud.

SARAH: Hand me that again. (*Pause*) Come on, hand it to me. I at least gotta break the thing.

BOB retrieves the glass and hands it back to SARAH. This time, she rears back and chucks the glass; it breaks against the wall.

SARAH: There we go, that's better.

A KNOCK at the door.

NURSE: Hey! You guys okay?! What happened?!

SARAH: (*Calling out*) We're fine! You can leave! (*To Bob*) Feel better now? Can we continue?

BOB: Yeah. Yeah, of course, sorry.

BOB sits back down, unleashes a long SIGH.

BOB: Okay. (*Pause*) So, anyway, Sarah, what is it you'd like to talk about today?

CURTAINS.