

Mechanics of Modern Dating

A One-Act Play

Written by Jordan Ramp

SCENE

The open-floor plan of an overpriced, cramped Santa Monica apartment. The upstage kitchen feeds into a downstage living area, separated by an island, two bar stools. Stage left, HARPER (mid 20s; brunette) in a chic red dress, sits at a desk and finishes applying setting spray. To stage right, CHLOE (also mid 20s, bleached blonde), blows up a gold number five balloon. A strung number two already floats in front of her, anchored by a vase of flowers. Downstage is a cheap, white Ikea couch, and a coffee table adorned with succulents. Perhaps an Audrey Hepburn poster. The door is upstage center left. As lights come up, Chloe takes a break from the balloon, gasping.

CHLOE: Fuck, these balloons are shredding my lungs.

CHLOE takes a rip off a vape, emitting a smoke cloud.

CHLOE: (*Positioning balloon*) How's this look?

HARPER: (*Glances back*) Oh, that's perfect, thank you.

CHLOE: Anything else?

CHLOE walks over and leans against the island, scrolling on her phone.

HARPER: Oh, no, you've already done too much. This has been the perfect birthday.

CHLOE: Uch. I don't wanna go on this Hinge date later. Should I cancel? I love Elephante, this guy kept winking the whole time on our first.

HARPER: Didn't you say he had retina surgery or something?

CHLOE: Still pretty annoying.

CHLOE notices a large rectangular present sitting on the kitchen counter, wrapped in tacky gray Amazon packaging.

CHLOE: Who's this from?

HARPER: Caleb.

CHLOE: (*Suppressing disdain*) It is? But, Harp, this... this is Amazon wrapping.

HARPER: I know.

CHLOE: *You know?* Jesus. I hope he saved money for the gift.

HARPER: I told him I didn't want much of anything.

CHLOE: (*Pulling out phone*) Hold on, what's his birth time?

HARPER: I don't know. June, I think?

CHLOE: You don't-- Harp, you haven't looked up his chart?

HARPER: I think it's June.

CHLOE: And where's his family from again? Michigan or something?

HARPER: Yeah, something. I've only met his brother.

CHLOE: Yeah, I can see that. I can see no real feminine presence.

HARPER, putting away her makeup, snaps her head over at CHLOE.

HARPER: I thought you liked Caleb?

CHLOE: Well, I did. But that's before I knew he'd use newspaper to wrap your engagement ring.

HARPER laughs and stands, making her way over to a barstool.

HARPER: It's been like a month and a half, I think we can relax.

CHLOE: (*Caressing knot on packaging*) Should we-- I mean, this *is* a loose string.

HARPER: What? No, stop, I'll text you right after I open. Promise.

CHLOE: I mean, you're gonna wanna rehearse your reaction. I've heard you fake it before.

HARPER: What? When?

CHLOE: Scottsdale. It sounded like you were gurgling salt water.

HARPER: Jesus Christ, I said no.

CHLOE: Well, that's not fucking fair, is it?! You can't dangle this right in front of me!

HARPER: He's on his way. He'll be here any minute.

CHLOE: So, what, you never peeled the corner off a Christmas gift before and then patched it back up? He clearly hasn't.

HARPER: Chloe, you're not opening it. (*As Chloe grips the string*) Chloe, no, stop!

CHLOE yanks on the knot; the bag falls open. The contents are still unseen.

CHLOE: Whoops.

HARPER: What the fuck? I said--

CHLOE: --You can't put me in this situation, you know that!

HARPER: Just don't look, okay! I'm serious! Close it back up!

CHLOE peers down into the open package; her eyes widen.

CHLOE: Oh my god.

HARPER: What?

CHLOE: Holy shit, dude. Holy shit.

HARPER: Oh, come on, it can't be--

CHLOE: (*Walking away*) I can't. I literally can't.

HARPER: What is it? Chloe?

HARPER considers the door for a moment.

HARPER: Alright, fuck it.

Stepping forward, HARPER peeks into the package.

HARPER: Oh. Okay.

CHLOE: That can't be right. That literally-- I mean, there's gotta be something underneath.

CHLOE extracts a Ninja Espresso Machine and sets it onto the counter, next to the now-empty bag. Her hand sweeps from an additional item, finding none.

CHLOE: That's it? Is he serious?

HARPER: I mean, it's nice. It is, it's nice. It's functional.

CHLOE: Harper, this is a fucking Father's Day Gift.

HARPER: Well, I'll use it at least.

CHLOE: Jesus, dude. This is why I can't date in LA. The whole city's playing a giant game of White Elephant.

HARPER: (*Scanning box*) Ninja. Aren't those expensive?

CHLOE: Here lies the male brain, in all its glory.

HARPER (*Searching on phone*) Yeah. Yeah, these are like two hundred bucks.

CHLOE: And in sentimental value, it's free. I mean, Jesus, Harp, we gotta unpack this.

Did you read the copy of “Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man” I gave you?

HARPER sets the machine back into its original packaging, retying the string.

HARPER: It’s on my Kindle. But didn’t Steve Harvey roofie a bunch of people?

CHLOE: Okay, but what kind of message does this send? Like, is this some sick attempt at turning you into a tradwife? Like, “Oh, here you go, you’re just here to make my coffee.”

HARPER: Stop.

CHLOE: This is how it starts, I’m telling you. (*Doing impression*) Here I go with my briefcase, doing business. And when I get home, make sure to have a steak waiting. You just flip through your *Ladies Home Journal* and hand me my espresso on my way.

HARPER: Caleb’s not like that. He told me *Little Women’s* one of his favorite movies.

CHLOE: Oh, wow, *Little Women*. Really dug deep. And let me guess, he has one of those pink pussy hats in his room, conveniently displayed. Pfft, please. He’s just leaning in the charade. (*Slaps outside of box*) But with every cup poured, he tells you who he really is -- just like the rest of ‘em.

HARPER: Look, I know it’s not the most romantic gesture--

CHLOE: --Like, is this an inside joke or something? Do you guys have inside jokes?

HARPER: I don’t-- no, I don’t think so.

CHLOE: And you haven’t met his family.

HARPER: (*Defensive*) They’re on the East Coast.

CHLOE: Okay, and what, they don’t have FaceTime?

HARPER: I’m in the background sometimes.

CHLOE: Oh, wow, so like a Christmas ornament.

HARPER rolls her eyes, shakes her head.

CHLOE: Is he in therapy?

HARPER: Not that I know of.

CHLOE: (*Counting on fingers*) Doesn’t introduce you to his family, doesn’t buy you romantic things. I’m not even gonna ask if he made a “Happy Birthday” grid post.

HARPER: I think you’re overreacting.

CHLOE: And I don't think you're reacting enough! I mean, Jesus, Harp, I'd freak out if when my boyfriend thought of me, he thought of a kitchen appliance.

HARPER sighs and sits on the couch, head swimming.

HARPER: Okay. Okay, it's not my favorite gift, alright? But it's been a while since he's been in a relationship.

CHLOE: Well, there ya go. And why do you think that is?

HARPER: I don't know, I mean, it's LA. Nothing's serious.

CHLOE: Okay, and if this was a situationship or whatever, that's one thing. But you said you guys had the conversation.

HARPER: We did.

CHLOE: And doesn't this say the opposite? I mean, doesn't this say he's only got one foot in? Like he thought, oh, I can't get her something too good in case this doesn't work out? *(Pause)* I'm just saying: is this a project you wanna invest in, or are you gonna wait till you got a full fucking barista kit?

CHLOE loosens the string again, reading the top of the box.

CHLOE: I mean, this doesn't even come with the froth thing.

There's a knock at the door.

HARPER: Fuck, that's him.

CHLOE: Oh, I gotta stay and watch this.

HARPER: What? No way.

HARPER starts toward the door.

CHLOE: Fuck. Please, Harp, I need this!

HARPER: He can probably hear you.

CHLOE then leaps past HARPER, scurrying for the door.

CHLOE: No, let me get it! Here, I'll get it -- you don't answer the door on your own

birthday.

HARPER: Since when?

CHLOE: Okay, ready?

HARPER slinks into the kitchen. CHLOE opens the door upon a smiling CALEB (mid 20s).

CHLOE: Go away.

CALEB: *(Smile vanishes)* What?

HARPER: She's kidding. Come in.

CALEB: *(To CHLOE)* Oh. I didn't know you'd be here.

CHLOE: Well, I'm here.

CALEB: Where's Harper?

HARPER moves behind CHLOE, now in view of the doorway.

HARPER: I'm here, hi!

CALEB slides past CHLOE, who doesn't budge.

CALEB: *(Noticing)* Whoa, nice balloons.

CHLOE: Yeah, is it someone's birthday?

CALEB: Huh? Oh, yeah. *(To HARPER)* Hey, Happy Birthday.

He gives HARPER a hug.

CALEB: *(To CHLOE)* I texted her earlier.

CHLOE: Uh-huh.

CALEB: So, what's up? How you been?

CHLOE: Oh, you know, just dropping off my birthday gift.

HARPER: She got me a bag.

CHLOE: Yeah, it's Prada. Re-edition nylon.

CALEB: Oh, very nice.

CHLOE: You know, it was nice. After all, it's a birthday gift.

CALEB: *(Noticing his gift on counter)* Oh, they delivered mine, too.

CHLOE: Wow, yeah, it that hand-wrapped?

CALEB: No, it's--

HARPER: (*To CHLOE*) --So, I'll call you.

CHLOE: What? What do you mean? I wanna stay and see you open your enormous gift.

HARPER: No, I'll think I'll just call you.

CHLOE: You sure? I can film it for your story?

HARPER: That's fine. Off you go.

CHLOE: Fine. Fine, alright.

As CHLOE heads for the exit:

CHLOE: (*To CALEB*) Can't wait to hear what you got her.

CALEB: (*Oblivious*) Oh, yeah, cool, thanks.

CHLOE exits, slowly guiding the door closed behind her.

CALEB: Didn't mean to rush her off.

HARPER: No, it's fine.

CALEB: (*Nodding towards gift*) So, you wanna open it?

HARPER: Oh, uh, now? I mean, up to you, we can bring it to dinner, or...

CALEB slumps onto the couch longways, putting his feet up.

CALEB: Well, I actually thought we could stay in and hang, you know? Get Prince Street or something.

HARPER: Oh, uh, yeah, sure. I can change.

CALEB: (*Nodding towards gift*) C'mon, go 'head, open it.

HARPER: Okay, yeah. (*Affecting*) Wow. Humungous.

HARPER unwinds the string, pulling out the espresso machine and setting it on the island.

HARPER: (*FEIGNING SURPRISE*) Oh, wow! An espresso machine, nice!

CALEB: Yeah, it's a Ninja. Like you said you wanted.

HARPER: I said that?

CALEB: Yeah, remember? When we were walking through Macy's?

HARPER: Oh... right.

CALEB stands and joins her at the island.

CALEB: These things are great; they've got like six settings.

The door swings open and CHLOE storms back inside.

CHLOE: I'm sorry, I can't, I can't. An espresso machine? Are you fucking kidding me?

HARPER: Chloe! Stop--

CHLOE: --No, okay, I'm sorry. That's a fucking terrible gift, Caleb. And I'm sure you're an okay guy, but this is giving platonic.

CALEB: Well, how'd-- you were outside. How'd you know what it was?

CHLOE stiffens, face blanches.

CHLOE: Well, 'cause... actually, know what? Fuck it. I looked early, alright? That's my right as best friend.

CALEB: But that's what she wanted though. (*To HARPER*) Right? Isn't this what you wanted?

HARPER: I-- I mean, I guess. I don't really remember.

CALEB: Well, I'm confused then.

CHLOE: No shit.

HARPER: Chloe, stop, you need to go. Please. Give us a minute.

CHLOE: Yeah, okay, fine. I just had to say something. (*Heading for exit*) And you guys should've made sure the door was shut.

CHLOE exits again, closing the door firmer this time.

CALEB: Jesus.

HARPER: (*Sighs*) I know, it's a lot.

CALEB: And she can't find a guy on Hinge? Wonder why.

HARPER: (*Snapping*) Don't say things like that.

CALEB (*Immediately retreating*) Sorry. I just meant... like, it's not even her gift.

HARPER: Well, she's not totally wrong, if I'm being honest.

CALEB: What do you mean?

HARPER: It's a small thing, you know. Like, really, an incremental thing, but it's just not what I expected.

CALEB: What, you don't like it?

HARPER: It's just not what I expected.

CALEB: Okay, then what'd you expect?

HARPER: I don't-- that's the thing, I don't really know. But it's just not something you dream about getting from your boyfriend, you know? I mean, it's not -- and I know this isn't the best metric -- but it's not something I'd be excited to tell my friends about.

CALEB: But it's a nice, isn't it? I kinda thought spending over a hundred bucks was commendable, honestly.

HARPER: Okay, but see? Setting up some random budget isn't a great way to buy gifts. I mean, what was the thought? Once we make it six months, it increases by fifty dollars? I'd rather you get me a custom bracelet off Etsy or something than a two-hundred-dollar kitchen appliance.

CALEB: So that's what you want? A bracelet?

HARPER: I meant something like that.

CALEB: So, not a bracelet?

HARPER: No. *(Pause)* Or, I mean, maybe. I don't know.

CALEB: Well, help me out here. How am I supposed to fulfill whatever expectation you have in your head if you don't even know what it is?

CHLOE: *(Offstage; through door)* 'Cause that's a boyfriend's job!

CALEB: Do you have a doggy door?

HARPER: The walls are thin, it's Santa Monica.

CALEB: I'm sorry. I just thought I'd get you something useful, you know? And maybe that's stupid. But this one time when I was like twelve, maybe, I got my mom this DVD of "Inception" because it was such a good movie, and I thought she'd like it. And then a few weeks later I saw it in the closet and it hadn't even been taken out of the plastic wrapping. So, I guess that's why I always try to gift people something they'll use.

CHLOE: *(Offstage; through door)* Don't fall for that!

CALEB: *(Calling off)* Fuck off!

HARPER: *(To CALEB)* Hey! *(To CHLOE)* Chloe, go! *(Back to CALEB)* And see, I wouldn't know the context 'cause I haven't met your family yet.

CALEB: Well, they're back East, so...

HARPER: But even on FaceTime, I get hidden away. It's like, this whole thing, I don't know, it kinda feels like you're taking protective measures, you know? Like you're not fully into this.

CALEB: No, I am! I am. Really. I don't-- shit, I don't know. I'll make it up to you.

HARPER: Well, that's the other thing: you didn't make any plans? I told my friends I couldn't go out, thinking we'd do something.

CALEB: You said you don't really like birthdays.

HARPER: That's what everyone says!

CALEB: Well, how the fuck am I supposed to know what to take literally then?!

HARPER: You just know.

CALEB: Yeah, well I fucking don't!

Pause.

HARPER: This just feels like one of those things, you know? Like pulses or connections or whatever. It feels like we have different lines of thinking.

CALEB: So, what, you want me to take the gift back then? That's fine, I can get you a new gift.

HARPER: I don't want a new gift.

CALEB: You said you don't this.

HARPER: I do want it! I just didn't want it from you!

CALEB: So what the fuck are you talking about then?!

Pause.

HARPER: Okay, look, this wasn't the birthday I expected, and maybe that's my fault. But for now, I think you should just go.

CALEB: No, I'm sorry I yelled. I'm good now, I'm calm. What do you wanna do?

HARPER: Can you just go please? I don't even wanna think about this. It's-- I don't know what to think.

CALEB: Yeah, well, I'm sure Chloe'll do that for you.

HARPER: Excuse me?

CALEB: This just doesn't sound like you. And that's what I hated about modern dating.

On the apps, it's the same girls, same pictures. It's Catch, it's Bungalow, on a hike at Runyon or whatever. And you weren't like that. You had your own voice, and this doesn't like it.

HARPER: Well, then you should have no doubt this is my voice, and this me telling you: I'm done.

CALEB: (*Taken aback*) You're done? Because of what-- because of an espresso machine? Are you serious?

HARPER: Honestly, if it wasn't this, it'd be something else. The way this snow-balled honestly just tells me my subconscious was looking for a way out.

CALEB: (*Shakes head*) You're being rash.

HARPER: No, actually, the more I think about it, the more conviction I gain.

CALEB: This is crazy.

HARPER: Okay, then give me one reason you want to stay with me.

CALEB: Harper--

HARPER: --No, I mean, really, name one reason. (*Pause*) You know what? Just get out.

CALEB: Harper--

HARPER: --No, you need to get out! Now!

CALEB hangs for a second, dumbfounded, then scoffs and heads for the door. As he pulls it open, we see Chloe standing on the other side. As he shoulders past her:

CALEB: And fuck you, too.

CHLOE: Yeah, real mature. That'll give her something to think about.

CHLOE rushes past in. HARPER slumps at the island.

CHLOE: Shit, are you okay? Harper, I'm so sorry.

HARPER: It's fine.

CHLOE: I can't believe he'd do this to us!

HARPER: I know, it's-- I mean, that was the right thing, right? Fuck, I feel kinda sick. I need something. I feel sick.

CHLOE hugs HARPER from the side, consoling her.

CHLOE: No no no, you were amazing. You stood your ground. You just sit, we'll unpack.

HARPER: On my birthday.

CHLOE: We're gonna make the most of this, alright? I'll get-- is there wine, or...?

CHLOE sifts through the fridge.

HARPER: I might be out.

CHLOE: Okay, well, there's water, or... (*Gets idea*) Actually, would this be crazy?

HARPER: What?

CHLOE: Well, I mean, we have a lot to unpack and... I had to get up early for Pilates, so... and aren't Ninja's supposed to be nice?

A pause as they consider CALEB's gift.

HARPER: Fuck it, break it open.

They laugh, and as CHLOE begins to tear open the packaging, the lights FADE TO BLACK.

CURTAINS.