

## Animal Crackers

By Elly Zupko

The auditorium waited in darkness. No spot lights. No stage lights. No floor lights leading the way to expensive seats in the very front row. The seats weren't that great anyway, because the actors always looked over your heads, like you weren't really there. As if their whole existence didn't depend on you.

No lights, just a row of eight black light switches, positioned down, off; they looked like the heads of dreary eyed beasts of burden. Emily flipped them, one by one by one, until the grand room was flooded with an ugly glow that made it seem so vast and empty, so useless. That's why they shut off the house lights during productions. They're ugly, she thought.

It was five o'clock in the evening, and most of the students had gone home to hot meals and sitcoms. She didn't so much like to go home. Her meals were cold; the microwave was old and didn't penetrate all the way through the food anymore. And her television only got three stations, because the antenna was broken. There was nothing else in the house worth mentioning. The theatre was a big space, and even though it made her feel small, she felt like all that space belonged to her.

Emily flattened her hand against the switch plate and shut off all the lights at once. Although the carpet was worn and stained and out of fashion, the aisles were broad, and she could find her way to the stage in the darkness with ease.

The heavy books inside her canvas backpack thudded, echoing, as they hit the planks of the stage. It was a familiar sound, but this year she had bigger, heavier, and more books to carry, so the boom across the seats was louder. She pushed off her shoes, still tied, and swung herself up onto the stage. To her, the stairs were for decoration.

In her mismatched, once-white socks, she slid along the slippery floor between scenery, costumes, and mounds of junk called props, heading back to the tech room. The uncaring crew always left the door unlocked. She slid the dimmer switch for the red stage lights midway up and bathed the stage in a warm crimson. She'd tried all the colors, but red was her favorite.

The fall production had already started rehearsals, and there were grimy pieces of masking tape pressed onto the floor all over. Blocking. The edges of the tape curled up, the black yuck that settled down from the old vents smothering the adhesive. They had no stage furniture set up yet, and some of the tape was marked "couch" and "table." Emily was no actor, and she thought it almost silly to play make believe at the age of seventeen. There was no couch. Only tape that said "couch," and the lack of imagination required to establish the existence of a couch. If you think the couch is there, is it only there because you think it is there, she thought, or is there all the time? She stood in front of the "couch" and proceeded to sit very slowly,

concentrating on feeling her ass sink into the soft...green...velvet cushions... Suddenly, she let herself fall to the floor, giggling to herself. There was no couch. What were those existentialist lunatics thinking? Actors.

The red lights were beginning to make the stage hot. She pushed up the sleeves of her shirt, but consciously pulled her knit cap tighter onto her head. Trey always said the red lights made the stage like a vision of hell, especially when they got hot. Emily said everything was a vision of hell to him.

Suddenly, she heard a sigh, and there was Trey crowding the little doorway of the stage. He was a fairly small guy, but he still blocked most of the light coming in from the hallway. He looked dejected. He always looked dejected, as if he'd looked the word up and decided it was the way to be. And as always, he announced his arrival by a sigh.

Emily smiling brightly and looked up at him, not moving from her spot on the floor. "Hi," she said, hoping if she was happy, he would be too.

"I gotta shoot up before I die," he said, not looking at her eyes. "Come on."

It was Emily's turn to sigh. It didn't seem like two months had passed since they'd seen each other. In their world, time never passed. It was like one continuous grueling day. With a great deal of effort, she heaved herself to her feet and followed him. She was glad she'd taken off her shoes. Their height difference always bothered her a little.

He walked into the men's bathroom without pausing. Emily stopped at the door, as unconsciously as if there'd been a pane of glass there. "It's okay," he mumbled, words echoing on the blue tiles. "No one's in here."

"It's all right, I'll stay out here." She craned her head slightly to catch a glimpse of him standing by the sink.

"Well, at least keep talking."

First he rinsed out a little plastic syringe. "Ummm... Hmm... The pressure's on. Got to be entertaining." Then he took a vial of insulin from a baggie of ice cubes. "I finished that book I was reading. You know, Valley of the Dolls? The ending was pretty depressing." Holding the items close to his face, he filled the syringe with insulin. "I just wanted to strangle some of the characters." He dropped his pants. She turned away, just as he stabbed the needle into the back of his thigh, and began to hum what she considered to be "their song." Trey emerged from the bathroom holding his backpack in his right hand, looking at her with reddish eyes.

"You done?" she asked.

"Obviously," he groaned.

Her brow furrowed, and in a divided moment she wanted to kick the wall hard, but decided in her stocking feet it would more pain than it was worth. In the other part of the moment she wanted to kick Trey, but decided he might take it playfully, so she didn't do anything. "Be nice," she whispered. "I wasn't sure. Should I go, because if—"

He turned away, walking towards the theatre. "God, I hate this."

She gritted her teeth and followed him. "What?"

"I couldn't shoot at work, and I'm four hours late, and I feel like I just want to die."

In the theatre, she tugged hard on a dry rotted armchair, dragging it to center stage. Trey immediately collapsed into it, shutting his eyes. He was wearing a white ribbed tank top with his navy blue uniform pants and he'd changed his polished black shoes to ugly brown boots. His clothes all looked too big for him, and the smooth muscles in his arms made it look as though he was trying to be bigger than he was. Beads of sweat were already above his blond eyebrows and at his close-cropped temples. Visions of hell. Emily looked at him for a moment, and pulled a metal folding chair out for herself.

"Why couldn't you do it at work?" She leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin in hands. She shut her eyes too, so she wouldn't have to look at him anymore. He was beautiful at the worst times.

"Fights and incident reports and a house blew up because of a propane leak." Trey was 22 and a rent-a-cop, as he called it. He'd never gone to college and never wanted to. He sighed again.

"Boy, that sucks." It was all she could think to say.

He opened his eyes halfway, smirking. "Yeah, sucks for them."

Emily continued, "I mean, you have to make time for that. It's really important."

"Don't preach," he growled, turning his body towards her. "Please." He drew out the word.

Emily stood up. "What the hell? Why are you such an asshole?" She suddenly felt small in the huge auditorium and sat down again, her face reddening. She couldn't predict his reaction, and it was one she would have least expected.

"I'm sorry. I just get that way when I'm late shooting..." Sinking into the chair, he looked even more dejected. Almost truly sorry.

She gained some courage. "Well, if you're going to be that way, talk to me some other time."

"I get mood swings..."

"I know you do. Sometimes I can handle it," she said quietly, looking away. "Sometimes I can't."

The fire returned to his eyes, and he sat upright in the chair. "Then don't. This is obviously one of those times." He fell back and rubbed his eyes.

Her body temperature was rising. She couldn't remember being so angry. Except for the last time she was with Trey. But she still couldn't yell, only whisper remarks in small weak breaths. "You can't handle me fighting back, can you?"

"No, I'm just saying..."

"You can talk to me like shit, but if I say anything back, that's it." Emily stood up and slid down to sit in the front row of seats. The lights were heating the stage like an oven and haunting Trey's face with a devilish glow.

He finally moved from the armchair, acknowledging her presence, and he sat on the edge of the stage dangling his feet. "I get like this when my BS level is low. And I don't mean bullshit level."

Emily couldn't help but crack a tiny smile. Embarrassed, she tugged her cap further down on her brow. She always tried so hard to stay mad. "And you can't control what you say?"

"I can't control what mood I'm in. I get real cranky." His face looked softer now, his eyes even a little apologetic, as if he left his anger behind in the red light and heat.

"Well, I was in a really good mood," she said. "I'm trying really hard to keep it that way."

In a flash he was back beneath the lights with eerie black and magenta shadows cast on his face: not so beautiful anymore. "Well, I'm sorry for bringing you down." He paused, and Emily did not react. "You don't have to talk to me if you don't want to."

"You know I want to."

"I'm not forcing you."

Then, in her smallest voice ever: "You know I love you."

He was looking through her, like an actor on stage. She was there, and he was looking in her direction, but she could tell from his eyes that she wasn't there to him. The blank stare lasted less than a second, but its imprint remained on her, burning white. She tugged again at her cap. Then he suddenly did look at her and said, "Come on. Let's get out of here."

He grabbed her pack and tossed it into the seat beside Emily, as best he could with its weight. She didn't move. He hopped from the stage and pulled her to her feet, grinning. "I said, let's go."

Still, Emily was motionless, trying desperately to remember how long she'd been in the auditorium, how long she had been alone before Trey arrived, how long before his mood had shifted, but the rest of the world and its clocks and its schedules and its binary measurements of time had stopped. The moments were continuous, molten, and she had aged twenty years since five o'clock.

She felt Trey lifting her arms and placing her pack on her shoulders and her sneakers in her arms. Her shoulders sagged, and her spine compacted. The weight jarred her body and her mind. Smiling with her mouth, she said, "So where are we going?"

Trey didn't seem to have any friends. He talked about "his boys" all the time, but their names were always changing, and they were never around when Emily and Trey went cruising. Eventually she stopped asking about them, wondering, if she had the chance to start over, if even she would be his friend.

Black bubbles blemished the tinted surface of the windows of the black Tracker. Emily stared at each one, imagining boiling tar. The car smelled like jellybeans. "Trey," she said, "I've decided to stop shaving my legs until next summer. When the hair gets really long, it gets soft, and if I bleach it with that stuff from F&M, you can't even really see it. What do you think?"

"I think you're disgusting. That's the fucking skankiest-ass thing I've ever heard. I wouldn't touch you." He made a sharp turn into the Centertown Gas Station, throwing Emily against her door.

The Centertown Gas Station wasn't really at the center of town. In fact, there was barely a town to speak of in the western part of Accolip County. Acres of grass and corn and cows stretched out in stripes and dots, north, west, and south from the station. Eastwards the buildings began to crowd together until they eventually formed the town called Accoville. It really was just a jumble of buildings. Accoville was ugly, and it had no bakery. The people barely knew each other and couldn't care less.

Centertown Gas was a good twenty-minute ride from the school, which sat on the outskirts of Accoville. Even though she couldn't drive yet, Emily had learned the way by heart, each one of the eleven turns he made to get there. Trey could have taken Route 41 straight out of town and easily avoided about nine turns, but he enjoyed taking the complicated back roads at high speeds and scaring Emily. Trey had taught her what break-neck really meant.

He parked the car on the side of the building, but didn't get out. He let his seat belt snap up, and he turned to her. "What's with that fucking ugly hat? It's still like 75 degrees out. I've been wondering all day."

"It's nothing," she mumbled.

"Sure it's something." He smiled, eyes glinting like sapphires.

"No, it's nothing. I got a bad hair cut." She tugged at the cap again.

"Let me see," he said.

She tugged and didn't remove her hands. "No."

"What, are you going to wear it for the rest of your goddam life?" Emily opened her mouth to respond, but Trey's strong hand flew up and snatched the cap off her head.

Her black hair stuck out in little spines, like a porcupine or a wet Labrador. It was too long around the ears and too short on top. The wool cap had infused it with static electricity, and the strands flew off her head like black kite lines. Trey was roaring with laughter. "You look like shit."

Emily dove across the seat and grabbed her cap, the nail on her ring finger snapping painfully against the steering wheel. "Fuck!" she yelled. She fell awkwardly, neck bending against the driver door, tangled in the seat belt. Trey began tickling her prone body, lying across his lap. His fingers danced between her ribs, threatening her full bladder. "Stop! Stop it!" only encouraged him.

She giggled for a little while, then heaved herself away, breathless and angry, pulling her cap down to her eyebrows. "I just remembered, I have to make dinner tonight, so you should take me home now."

"Oh, I should? How about you get a license and drive your own fucking self around?" His voice didn't betray a hint of joviality. "What, you think I just came here for shits and grins? I am the diabetic in this relationship. I do need to eat."

"I'm sorry." She unfastened her seat belt. "Dinner can wait a little. Let's go in."

Trey walked through every aisle of the store twice before he decided to get a Coke Icee and a bag of crab-flavored potato chips. Emily picked up a chocolate milk and a box of animal crackers. Trey paid for everything, went outside, and sat on the curb in front of the store.

The parking lot was empty and smelled heavily of gasoline. The fumes made Emily nauseous, but she opened her box and began to eat anyway. If she had to throw up, she could make it around to the side of the building. Maybe Trey wouldn't move and wouldn't watch, and then he wouldn't make fun of her. But the nausea subsided, and the fumes made her feel pleasantly light-headed.

Trey shoved his hand into her box and grabbed several animal crackers. He stuck them in his mouth and slurped at his icee while he was still chewing. Emily looked at the tiny lion in her

hand and then ate it gently. Without looking at him, she said, "How come you never look at the animals before you eat them?"

"Huh?"

"You know what I mean. The animal crackers. I get them all the time, and you steal them from me." She admired an elephant, flat on one side, sculpted on the other, with a tiny pin hole through its middle. "You just eat them like they aren't anything. You don't care what they were before you got to them. Each one is a little animal. You know? People made them special to look like that, just for us."

"They're food, Em. Food. They're not even real animals."

She sighed, wanting to explain further, wanting him to realize what she meant. But she kept quiet until he decided it was time to go and drove her home.

Stopping the car in front of the house, engine running, Trey took off his seat belt and leaned in toward Emily's face. She caught herself staring into his blue eyes, finding the beauty that was so often hidden in times of anger, and then she felt his soft lips pressing against hers and his fingers playing with the hair at her nape. He moved his mouth slowly, and she felt little electric shocks going through her. The hairs on her lower back were standing on end. His tongue felt the front on her teeth and then dipped inside her mouth. She moaned quietly. He released and kissed her on the forehead. "Bye, sweetie," he whispered in her ear. She smiled mutely and left the Tracker. He pulled away before she reached the door.

Her mother tapped meekly on the bathroom door. "Honey? Em? Do you think you'll be long? I want to get the laundry started before it gets too late. Em?"

"Shut up! I'm taking a bath. I'll be done when I'm done. Goddamit, can't I have any privacy?" Emily wanted to throw something at the door, but everything within reach was either breakable or too soft to make an impact.

"I'm sorry sweetie. I'll leave you alone.... Thank you for making dinner." Then slipped footsteps walking down the stairs.

Emily sat naked on the edge of the toilet while the steaming water plunged into the tub. She ran her hands over the soft new fuzz that had grown on her legs. She was sort of fond of it, but wouldn't be sad to see it go. Soft, smooth legs would make her beautiful again. Likeable. Maybe even loveable.

The heat turned her foot and ankle bright red when she dipped it into the water. She pulled her foot out and sat down on the lip of the tub, turning the faucet hard towards the C. Using the same foot, she swirled the water around, mixing the icy with the steamy, and then slowly and carefully crawled in.

She bathed herself slowly, working from her hair—giggling as she gave herself a shampoo mohawk—to her feet, scrubbing with great intensity at the calluses and rough spots. Then, soaking wet, she tiptoed to the medicine cabinet and opened the fog covered door. She grabbed a hand mirror, her father's shaving cream, his razor, and a fresh blade. Men's razors were always sharper than the ones made for women. Women were too afraid of cutting themselves, so they settled for dull blades that left them with stubbly legs to cover over with pantyhose. Emily wasn't afraid of cutting herself. She just wanted to be smooth. After flicking the old blade into the wastebasket, she gingerly climbed back into the quickly cooling water.

The bubble bath left a soap ring around her body as the water drained from the tub. She turned the faucet to a slow trickle and splashed the water over herself. The foam came out of the can quickly, and she found herself with too much in her hands. She let some of it run down the drain and slathered the rest all over her legs and crotch. It made her feel like a dessert.

The razor was cold as it sliced through the thick white foam. She moved meticulously up the front of her right leg, but when she got around to the difficult terrain of the backs of her knees, the razor skipped one, two, three times up the tendon, leaving tiny bleeding cuts. The tears tried to come, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Blood ran down the foam, turning it pink.

Finishing both legs, not without more nicks and slices, she started onto her pubic hair. It was thicker and coarser than her leg hair. It was the worst hair on her body. With intense concentration, she held the hand mirror between her thighs and guided the razor slowly along each plane. The most difficult area was where her thigh met her ass, because there was a little crease there. But she contorted into every position needed to get all the stray hairs. When she was finished, she looked into the mirror between her legs and admired her work. No cuts. Just beauty, like the girls in Playboy.

After rinsing her legs, she stepped out of the tub and swiped the fog from the medicine cabinet mirror. Her mascara, the only make-up she wore, was smudged below her eyes. She looked as if someone had beaten her face.

A tap came at the door. "I'm fucking done, okay?" she shouted. "Do the stupid laundry." She wrapped herself in a towel and stalked to her room, never looking at her mother.

It was the dream where men were fighting over her, and she got to kiss them all. They were handsome and kind and they wanted her. The dream came once in a while, a comfort to her, but it always ended too quickly—ending too quickly meant ending at all. She fought to stay asleep when she heard the tapping on the window, but the faces of the men faded into black like Polaroid photos in reverse. She gritted her teeth, hoping they would return to her, but then she went to the window. They stood outside, a rose in his hand, grinning. It was 1:30am, and Emily hadn't seen him in four days.

Yanking open the window, she whispered harshly, "What the hell are you doing here?"

He stepped in and handed her the rose. A light drizzle had speckled his clothes. Flesh colored spots spotted his white tank top and his hair was wet and piecy. "They changed my



schedule. This is the only time I can see you now, since you're in school all day. I work three till eleven now."

He grabbed her suddenly and kissed her hard. She barely had time to catch her breath before he almost squeezed it out of her with his arms and stuck his tongue into her mouth. She could feel his erection against her thigh and his hands clawing at her clothes. He rasped in her ear, "I missed you so much." Emily didn't stop him when he completely undressed her, she didn't stop him as he undressed himself, and she didn't stop him as he pushed her down on the bed.

She told herself she wanted it, just like all the other times. He was a beautiful man, with a model's face and chiseled body. He was masculine and rough. He had high standards, and that was good. She felt proud to be with him. Maybe this time he would make love to her, instead of just fucking her.

His right hand was between his thighs, pulling on a condom, then all his weight fell against her on the bed. He wasn't heavy enough to crush her, but he was heavy enough to be uncomfortable. She wouldn't move, though; she would never be on top. Slowly, she wrapped her legs around his, rubbing against his hairy thighs. Maybe he would notice how meticulously smooth they were, how she had shaved them every day since she last saw him.

He breathed tiny romances in her ear as he pushed into her. "You are so sexy.... You're all mine.... I want you so bad...." She wasn't wet, but the lubrication on the condom was enough to get him inside. It hurt worse than she could remember, but she thought to herself, it hurts a lot of women the first couple of times. A lot of women don't orgasm during sex. But she wondered just how many was a lot. She'd never seen a magazine say a lot of women don't enjoy sex with their boyfriends.

When he finished, he kissed her neck, then rolled over and fell asleep on her bed. Emily closed her eyes and tried to imagine the men who were in her dreams. But all she saw was Trey's face, grinning at her. When she heard his breathing deepen, she pulled on panties and a shirt and got back into bed. He was done with her nakedness.

For the next several hours, Emily's eyes remained painfully open. She'd memorized the pattern on the stucco ceiling, the one that would pop her balloons as a child. She closed her eyes and drew the white peaks and valleys in her mind, then looked up to see if she was right. Trey hadn't stirred once during the night. When he got up to leave at five, Emily pretended to be asleep so he wouldn't bother trying to make a good-bye. After the window slammed shut, and the roar of the Tracker engine faded down the road, she got up and went to the bathroom. The drops of blood on her panties looked like the blood on the shaving cream. All for you, Trey.

When the sanctity of dreams finally recaptured Emily, it stole her for eight hours, and she awoke at one-thirty in the afternoon, having completely missed school. She whisked the sheets off her bed and started her day with a sense of purpose, a new feeling for her. She made herself as beautiful as she thought she could and put on Trey's favorite outfit. Grabbing a plain English

muffin on her way out the door, Emily pulled her bike from the shed and rode eight miles to Trey's house. She arrived just as he was leaving for work.

"Trey," she called, as she approached the house. "Wait, I need to talk to you."

"I've gotta go to work," he called back.

Emily through her bike to the lawn and ran up to the door of the Tracker. "No, now."

"I don't have time," he growled, glaring at her, and drifting the truck slowly in reverse.

"Fine, you have Friday off, right? Like always?" She was just beginning to catch her breath.

"Maybe. I don't know. We'll see." Emily had to pull her hands quickly from the door as he sped down his driveway and out onto the road. Friday was several days away, and she wondered if he'd come.

School went by like a movie. She wasn't a participant, only a spectator, as teachers and students talked at her, around her, and through her. At last final bell rang, and Emily ran to the auditorium. She prayed there would be no play practice today, and someone must have been looking out for her, because it had been cancelled.

The stage was set with real furniture now: a green velvet couch that matched the easy chair, a coffee table, and various other living room amenities. This time, Emily picked the blue lights to flood the stage, making it look underwater. She lay down on the couch and grabbed a bag of animal crackers from her pack. One by one, she examined the animals. A monkey, then a lion, then two elephants. Each a little different and special, all deserving at least a shred of attention and respect before it was devoured.

Her mother had taught her about animal crackers when Emily was four. It was their own mythology. "You can tell a lot about a person by the way they eat them," her mother told her. She might have become lost to her mother, but Emily never let herself lose their stories.

Trey arrived around five, although the time waiting passed quickly. He came in through the main doors and strode right up to the stage, as if he wanted to make it quick. He looked small.

Emily greeted him, still lounging on the couch and offered him her crackers. He leaned over the stage, took several, and shoved them all in his mouth at once. "Trey, do you love me?" she asked, with a casualness that was absurdly difficult to muster.

"Well, wasn't that the jump?" he asked, with mock surprise.

"Do you love me?"

He chuckled. "You must have missed me, huh. I should spend more time with my little doll."

Emily sat upright on the couch. "Trey, do you love me?"

He still stood on the floor, looking up at her. "Em, hon, you know I love spending time with you. I love your body. You're great."

She stood up and looked down on him with hard eyes. "Do you love me?"

"Em—"

She screamed as loud as she could so that it reverberated in the back of the auditorium, hitting every wall, so she could be sure that Trey heard with every fiber in his body: "Do you love me?"

He looked shaken, yet did not flinch. He stood statue-like before her, with immovable lips, and stone eyes looking nowhere. His rocky shoulders seemed to crack beneath the weight of something huge. He said nothing and seemed to shrink as she stared at him.

Halfway down the aisle, she turned and looked at his back. "I hope someone devours you like you devoured me. You don't even deserve to be looked at before they eat you up."