

EVERYTHING YOU TOUCH

By Sheila Callaghan

Note: Throughout the play, the chorus of models will be used as furniture, wall-paper, lamps, decor, often in a humorous way, However, this occurs ONLY in the scenes that feature JESS. Also, let it be noted-- when not parading around the imagination of JESS or in a literal fashion show, they are ever-present objects, to be objectified at will.

Act Titles are projected throughout.

As the house lights dim, JESS walks across the theatre onto the stage. She is dressed like a slob. Her hair is unwashed, her skin is greasy, her posture is slumped. She grips a coffee mug. She is miserable. Maybe she scratches her ass. Looks around at her shitty surroundings. Then vanishes off stage.

PROLOGUE: PIPER

SLAM. Lights up on 1974.

PROJECTED: "Victor Cavanaugh, Spring 1974"

We witness an amazing fashion show. THE MODELS totter in wearing their furs, leathers, and animal prints. Extravagant, theatrical, perverse, treacherous, gothic, avant garde.

The final model struts down the runway. She trips and falls.

Lights up on VICTOR talking to the model who fell. He is skinny, odd, dramatic. He chain-smokes.

VICTOR

Piper

I am tired of your pretty, lyrical, thought-provoking face.

When I'm sitting elbow to elbow at a runway show

I want to see what television and film and a book and poetry can't deliver.

Immediacy. Fervor. Wreckage.

When the model spits with rage, I want to feel that spittle.
I want to smell your sweat.
I want to taste your bile.
I want my blood to boil.
And I want to feel too overwhelmed after the experience to speak.
This, to me, is the power of fashion.
It's ugly.
It's furious.
It creeps into my thoughts long after I've gone.
That's why I design.
I make clothes that are obsessive, anxiety-ridden, fast-talking.
I don't make antiques.
I don't sew for history books.
I love confusion.
I love to watch people flail with passionate intention.
I love to watch bodies fabricate themselves.
This is life.
It's a grotesque, furious, freakish pageant.

The model looks away. Victor snaps his fingers
in her face.

Pay attention please.
I see my profession as
the fraught dialogue of a naked woman with all the hexes and spells of my fabric
It's a lover's quarrel that ends in murder

Piper.
Piper.
Are you listening to me?
Are your big blinking eyes soaking this in?
Do you know what inspires me?
Poverty.
Terrible terrible poverty.
I spent time in Guatemala
They exist on avocados
They live in shacks with tin roofs
Buildings crumbling apart
Naked babies squatting in the road
Donkeys
But even there in the muck of mortal despair
There's an indefatigable humanity
It claws from the depths of pure anguish

THAT inspires me
THAT is what drives my impulses
THAT is what feeds my soul.
THAT is what you lack.

You are not a ruin.
You are youth and sex and butter
But I want gristle and grime.
Barbaric elegance.

You, Piper.
You are not visionary
You are not fearless
You do not have immense volume
Nor are you idiosyncratic.
You don a long-sleeved blouse and say "Wait! I can't see my watch!"
When you should be saying, "Why would I need a time piece? When I wear this garment,
time STOPS."

The person I'm looking for slumbers on a metal grate
Under a tarp of nails
And eats leather and roots and feces

Can you make the sound of an ambulance siren with your pupils?
Can you wear a steel cage like it's heat-crinkled silk organza?
Can you make a garment look like a Sunday suicide?
No. No no no.

So.
Where does that leave us?

The model vanishes.

Then. In silhouette. We see the model commit
suicide.

PART ONE: FUCK YOU FUCK YOU

JESS appears in her office. She is lit by the
glow of her computer screen.

LEWIS hangs over her shoulder. Both wear drab clothes. They are colored sickly beneath the fluorescent lights.

THE MODELS are the desks, the chairs, the bad art on the walls.

JESS

(to us)

I hit the down arrow on my keyboard hard several times. I am aware the force of my finger is excessive but I am still meekly satisfied by this gesture.. With my other hand I raise my coffee cup to my lips, knowing the coffee is terrible cold and also knowing it was terrible when it was hot. The coffee reminds me I am not made of pixels and page hits. I am capable of feeling wetness. I am human.

(to Lewis)

Okay. The overview is fine. The 'scope of work' is fine... You spent a lot of time on this.

LEWIS

Yeah.

JESS

(reading)

Sowuuuuuhhhhhhhh underlying architectural changes that will be implemented during this project right right right right future initiatives will be easier to implement and ultimately become more scalable God who the fuck told them we'd be done with this mess by December? Seriously?

LEWIS

We all decided that.

JESS

In the past three years they've done so many work-arounds and patch-ups it'll take five months just to slash through it. Did you talk to Lisa directly?

LEWIS

Yes.

JESS

(to us)

I become aware that several clumpy pieces of my unwashed hair are stuck to the eyelashes of my right eye. I realize I haven't showered in four days. I wonder if Lewis can smell the oil of my scalp.

LEWIS

You smell weird. I think Lisa has someone who knows HTML.

JESS

H T Fucking M L. You're serious.

LEWIS

No.

JESS

You're joking.

LEWIS

Have you eaten lunch yet?

JESS

No.

LEWIS stands and grabs the strap of the brown leather messenger bag from the back of JESS's chair, which may or may not be a MODEL. He hands the bag to JESS.

LEWIS

Beep beep beep. Burrito intervention. Let's go.

They are now in a burrito place.. A bassy African groove plays loudly above. The MODELS are now Chipotle furnishings, food, and etc.

JESS

(to us)

Chipotles is crammed full of broody office clothing with humans speaking in decibels several notches louder than hospitable. *(to Lewis, spotting a chair, loudly)* Oh oh oh, get it get it! *(Lewis grabs a chair)* I pinch at the folds of fat hanging over my waistband and apologize to my body in advance for what I am about to inject.

To LEWIS.

This place has a way of making you feel one rung lower in the cultural food chain.

LEWIS

What do you mean?

JESS

The music is globally responsive, the patrons are coiffed, and all the brushed metal trimmings and exposed ductwork and blond wood and track-lighting... it's like you're not just buying a sub-par Mexican meal, you're buying a lifestyle.

LEWIS

What are you talking about.

JESS

I'm just tired of the assumption that I need a chain restaurant to tell me who I am.

LEWIS

It's all natural farm fresh ingredients, Jess. You can stand to be awash in modernity for that.

JESS

(to us)

He doesn't know about the email I got this morning from my mother's neighbor. An elderly woman with one good eye, two good teeth, and posture like an elbow macaroni.

THE MODELS circle JESS. They speak in unison. It's eerie.

MODELS

You are so beautiful, Jess. And so *skinny*. Were you walking around in Mommy's high heels this morning?

JESS

Yes.

MODELS

You little peanut. Do you want me to buy you a new dress?

JESS

Yes.

MODELS

You are about a million times prettier than the other girls in your kindergarten class. I feel bad for them.

JESS

Me too.

JESS stabs the center of her burrito and shoves a forkful into her mouth. The models become the decor a moment.

JESS

GNNAGGGKKK...

She grasps her paper cup and begins sucking urgently at the straw.

LEWIS

Why get the hot sauce if you can't handle it?

JESS

I need to suffer for my food.

LEWIS

You need some time off. Chill for a week. Go to a spa. Do some yoga. Take some shrooms. Have a spiritual awakening.

JESS

My mother is dying.

Beat. The MODELS lean in slightly.

LEWIS

Really?

JESS

Yeah.

LEWIS

Should you go be with her?

JESS

Unclear.

They freeze/disappear.

Lights up on VICTOR and ESME in the 70's in Victor's boutique. They are smoking. ESME fusses with a gumball machine. She is a slim female protégé with a feathered haircut from the

70's and tons of black eyeliner. She is gorgeous and full of drama. She holds herself just so.

VICTOR

Suicide.

Really?

That is the most BANAL choice a human can make.

The world is maybe better off without such a BANAL choice-maker.

I didn't invent truth you know.

Should I have said "YES! PERFECTION! THANK YOU!

You shit rubies and I want to eat them."

Her one job in life is to walk in a straight line

Point A to point B.

One foot then the other then the other then the other then.... Done.

She failed.

Not my fault, am I right?

ESME

Also her ass was huge

VICTOR

I mean did you see that?

Should have its own zip code.

Fucking fuck.

There was more press about the suicide than the clothes

Did anyone even *see* the clothes?

ESME grabs a newspaper and reads.

ESME

September 10, 1974. Victor Cavanaugh, a local designer with a small but fierce following, has presented a Spring line that is garishly delectable, and his solid/architectural

VICTOR

"It's all UN-FUCKING-WEARABLE."

(then)

So she couldn't walk, so what! Must be a hundred other jobs in this city for tiny women with saucer eyes and weak ankles. I shouldn't have said any of that stuff to her. I was imitating a self that no longer exists.

ESME

(calming)

Shhhhh. Where are the matches?

VICTOR

Over there.

ESME grabs matches and lights a lavender candle.

ESME

Landlord is still burning that filthy sulfur oil. Makes everything smell like boiled eggs.

VICTOR

I stopped noticing.

ESME

'Cause you never leave the store.

VICTOR

I want to *see* my customers. I want to understand who is interested in what I make. If anyone. I don't feel well, Esme.

ESME

Fine, I'll pull for tomorrow and you can spit some ideas for Fall.

VICTOR

I have none.

ESME

Don't make me pity fuck you. I'm too high right now.

VICTOR

You're high?

ESME

That dead model had a hippie boyfriend who passed out dime bags before the show. Speaking of chumps, we're supposed to get some bunny shipped in this week from like, Little Rock.

VICTOR

Why is she coming *here*?

ESME

For that promotion we did with the NBC radio affiliate. VIP fashion treatment. Tour of your workroom and maybe a free headband. You said you wanted more attention from the middle.

VICTOR

I said I wanted the mainstream to catch on to my ideas. As in, have them make their way to me on their own. Not yank them from their sofas and ram my designs down their gullets.

ESME

Some folks need to be bludgeoned into awareness. What's that quote, "fashion must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us?"

VICTOR

That's Kafka. He was talking about literature.

ESME

Art is art.

VICTOR

Art is shit. Who wears a fucking \$9000 jacquard chiffon blazer cut for someone six foot three and 92 pounds? In the worst fucking economy since the depression? As if the 16th Century will *ever* come back into fashion?

He begins arranging the jackets on the rack.

VICTOR

They are stunning, though. If I'd gotten my start in the 60's I'd be ten years younger and a household name. Not drowning in a sea of F.I.T. infants in their parent-funded shops. You spit.

ESME

So the other day? I'm thinking about Vietnam, right? And I get this vision.

She reveals something distinct and representative of the line she imagines, which will absolutely be remembered when it emerges again later on in the play.

ESME

A G.I. Jezebel cabaret show
Military tailcoats
metal-epaulettes

shrapnel holes
Rusty bullet belts
sequined camos
And... septum rings made of hanging garnets!
Nosebleed chic!
These bitches will fight for our love
Because our love is war, man

What do you think?

VICTOR

I think it's gonna piss a lot of people off.

ESME

It could be our fall line. The troops will be out by then. And even if they aren't-- it's protest art! Co-opting the bloody spectacle and cranking it through the glamourizer. You don't think the kids will eat that shit up?

VICTOR

I think the kids a) couldn't afford it and b) are tired of the war being commodified and sold back to them.

EMSE

I got a feeling about this--

VICTOR

Is that pity-fuck still on the table?

ESME drops her panties and bends over the work table in her dress.

ESME

Don't get me sweaty. I want to wear this to the Missoni dinner tonight.

Freeze on them.

Lights up on JESS in a bar. Alone. THE MODELS are the bartender, the bar, the neon beer sign.

JESS

(to us)

My mother is dying

My mother is dying
I say it over and over
Waiting to feel something
Nothing comes

So
Instead of purchasing an economy seat
On a budget airline to the South
To watch a dying woman who hates me
Take sips of oxygen
From a nose tube
I'm waiting for someone I haven't met yet.

We don't have an appointment.
He may not even exist.
But here are his stats:

One.
He is skinny
The kind of skinny that makes people nervous
It's partially genetic
But mostly he just smokes a lot
And forgets to eat
I'm so jealous of that.

Two.
He wears gorgeous clothes.
Clothes I've only seen in photos.
The kind I could never bring myself to buy.
He spends every penny he makes on them
He'd rather be poor than have an unfit garment touch his skin
But he isn't superficial
He just loves himself
Some people do.

Three.
He looks like my father.
Who died when I was two so I can't call upon his face with any precision but that's
probably okay 'cause now I can make my small inventions around the parts I do know
such as his body type, his complexion, his hairline.

Four.
He'll have no qualms about allowing a tipsy degenerate to take him home.

Five.

We're gonna have some crazy epic drunk sex. Slamming against walls and tearing up bedsheets, et cetera. Someone will probably get a black eye. It'll go on for like, ever. And eventually his particles will become mine and we'll shrink down all microscopic. We'll travel into the corpuscles of strangers, in and out of cells and cilia, through mucous membranes, beneath fingernails, then out into the earth, through the roots of a grass blade, through the hard shells of Amazonian insects, onto the tongues of termites, and oh then we'll get fucking HUGE! We'll billow upwards into the galaxy and cloak the constellations, wrap 'em up like wedding gifts. And then we'll collapse in the pull of our own gravity and reconstitute as a white, heatless star, and wash the universe in our ghostly glow.

Yeah, man.

That's how rockin' our sex will be.

Six.

This is more me than him but he'll fall asleep right after and I'll just stroke him and talk to his sleeping body like people do on TV.

I'll tell him this:

"I am stroking the space between your ear and your shoulder
I am stroking the space between your hip and your thigh
I am stroking the space between your spine and your navel
I am consumed with your spaces between"

And from these I'll build out my father. Shape him from dust and aromas and smoke and breath and everything else in the invisible world.

And later on I'll wonder if I raised my father from the dead just so I could fuck him. Which is pretty dark, right?

But

First he's gotta walk through that door.

VICTOR walks through the door, looking much as described. He wears gorgeous clothes. He immediately lights a cigarette.

VICTOR

Hey.

Hey.

JESS

Pretty dead in here

VICTOR

All the hipsters are across the street doing 90's karaoke
That's a hell of a jacket

JESS

It's really fucking hot out
But I can't take it off
It's a perfect reflection of my id right now

VICTOR

You look thirsty
Can I buy you a drink?

JESS

Don't you want my name first?

VICTOR

Not a requirement.

JESS

Fair enough. Dry martini please. With a twist.

VICTOR

Not really a man's drink.

JESS

I'm not really a man.

VICTOR

I'm a filthy, bratty, terrible baby.

VICTOR

Nice sales pitch.

JESS

Something tells me you don't need the hard sell

VICTOR

The MODEL serves him his drink.

VICTOR

What do you do?

JESS

I work for an upstart dotcom. I dream in pixels.

VICTOR

How very modern.

JESS

I'm the bleeding edge of culture, man. Except I want to kill myself.

VICTOR

Oh please. Suicide is the most BANAL choice a human can make.

JESS

Except when one's life is even more banal than the choice to end it. Which in my opinion is less of a choice and more of a way to quiet the noise.

VICTOR

Yikes.

JESS

My father died of self-inflicted wounds. Um. So. What about you? What's your "deal?"

VICTOR

I'm all over the place. Right now I drive a gypsy cab.

JESS

Are you a prostitute?

VICTOR

Should I take that as an insult or a compliment?

JESS

Or a trust-fundie?

VICTOR

Now I'm insulted.

JESS

Just trying to figure out how you got the cash for those sick duds.

VICTOR

I made these.

JESS

Made.

VICTOR

Sewed. Cut. Fitted. Et cetera.

JESS

Color me dazzled.

VICTOR

I have aspirations. Also it's difficult to find things in my size for grown-ups.

JESS

You don't eat I assume.

VICTOR

Food is for the weak and for women who hate themselves.

JESS

Here's to low self-esteem.

They clink glasses and drink.

VICTOR

Your ass is kind of huge.

JESS

Well.

VICTOR

It's like two trashbags filled with sadness

JESS

How could you be that drunk already?

VICTOR

I'm not. I'm just an asshole.

JESS

Good thing I dig assholes.

VICTOR

I guess you're the chick whose friends tell her she should date better dudes.

JESS

I don't have friends. And I don't date. I just fuck.

VICTOR

People don't "just fuck." That's a movie dream.

JESS

I do. I'm like your mom's worst nightmare. Self-employed self-destructive and omnivorous. Speaking of mom's. Mine's dying.

VICTOR

I'm sorry.

JESS

I haven't talked to her in seven years. Her neighbor just sent me an email yesterday saying it's gotten serious. She thinks I should go out there.

VICTOR takes a dramatic drag of his cigarette.

VICTOR

Listening.

JESS

My mother is a smoker too. She buys Parliaments by the carton and lights up before her bowl of Special K every morning. She holds her cigarette high up in her knuckles and gestures casually it's like the cigarette is a sixth finger. She likes to guess how much weight I've gained just by looking at me. When I was growing up she filled my closet with beautiful, expensive clothes that were always a size too small, hoping I'd feel inspired to fit into them one day. I'm not sure why I'm still talking.

VICTOR

Because you need something ineffable and I'm standing right here?

JESS

Maybe. And maybe you're not even real. You're made of pixels. Or dust.

VICTOR

I don't know whether to hold you or to ask you to take me home.

JESS

Both. Please.

VICTOR holds JESS.

VICTOR

Take me home.

He does.

Lights up on JESS and VICTOR in bed together.
VICTOR sleeps.

The MODELS are the bed. The walls. The take-
out containers.

JESS

(to us)

We lay in my queen bed for three straight days, stopping only to eat and watch DVD's and have sex on my tartan sheets. The salesgirl at Bed Bath and Beyond begged me not to buy them because they looked "mannish", so of course I had to.

Turns out he's a pretty selfish lover. It isn't epic at all. But at least it's real. More or less.

For breakfast we have museli and rice milk. For lunch we make pizza bagels in my toaster oven. And for dinner each of the three nights we order thai food. He of course eats nothing. But he smokes. A lot.

My phone rings constantly at first. It's my job. I only answer it once.

She answers the phone.

Hello?

LEWIS

(on the phone)

They said the Saratoga---you know the Saratoga? The big war ship? They said the Saratoga is actually sailing today. Sort-of.

JESS

Get out.

LEWIS

Ya. It's being dragged by tugboats across the river so they can renovate it. It hasn't moved in twenty-four years. Did you know that thing survived five kamikaze suicide attacks in World War II? And a port attack in Vietnam.

JESS

Did you see that on the Who Gives a Shit network?

LEWIS

You sound better. Are you?

JESS

Nope. My ass is still two russet potatoes sitting in a scarf.

LEWIS

Don't *you* like to hyperbolize to make yourself seem compelling.

JESS

Don't *you* like to violate your therapist with a frozen turkey frank.

LEWIS

I told you that in confidence.

JESS

How are you?

LEWIS

Neutral. Although last night I made the grave tactical error of attending an after-work happy hour. Cara made a hostile play for me.

JESS

That girl drives me batty. Always wants to know what your "deal" is.

LEWIS

She was *relentless*. "Why haven't we hung out yet? Why don't you ever go for drinks with us?" Bwak bwak bwak. I was slowly inching away the entire time.

JESS

She's using you to score nerd cred. You'd better not make out with her.

LEWIS

I'd rather gag myself with an insulated chip insertion/extraction clipper. Oh Jesus. Kevin G. from MDP just IMed me. The secure server is not processing orders correctly. Something to do with variables.

JESS

Forward me what he sent you, then ask him to send the EXACT error message his customers are receiving--

LEWIS

Nope. You're going on a trip to visit your dying mother.

JESS

I'm not ready.

LEWIS

Do it.

JESS

No! I'm trying to preserve what little dignity I have.

LEWIS

It's a "cusp-of-mortality" visit. There a loophole in the dignity rulebook for that.

JESS

I need a more convincing argument, dude.

LEWIS

Um, how 'bout you don't need another massive regret careening you into another random penis?

JESS

Too late maybe?

LEWIS

Is he there right now?

JESS

Maybe?

LEWIS

What does he look like?

JESS

The usual. Emaciated. Caffeinated. Perforated with angst.

LEWIS

Don't let him stay more than four days. He'll sell your bike and leave pit stains in your T-shirts.

JESS

This one's different.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!!

**Please check samuelfrench.com
for the published version.**

Thank you for reading!