

FISH

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Eric Appleton

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SYNOPSIS: Alex and John brave an ice storm and power failure to check on John's niece's aquarium. While stuck in the house, John's increasingly desperate efforts to keep the fish alive cause the couple to deal with the recent stresses and strains of their relationship.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 MEN)

ALEX (m)Early thirties.

JOHN (m).....Mid-thirties.

SETTING

Present day during the month of October. The first blizzard of the year has struck Buffalo, New York. Alex and John are in the family room of John's sister's house.

AT RISE:

Two men, standing next to an aquarium. The aquarium is dark, the filter is not on. It is snowing heavily outside. ALEX and JOHN address the audience.

ALEX: Xiphophorus maculatus.

JOHN: Mary, Bill, Little Mary, Becky, Tammy, and Roger.

ALEX: Mickey Mouse Platys.

JOHN: She named them all. She knows their names.

ALEX: So?

JOHN: There are six Mickey Mouse Platys, and she knows which is which. Candles. We need candles.

ALEX: The Mickey Mouse Platy requires a tank of at least 15 gallons that is densely planted with hardy plants like Java Fern and Java Moss. Tank should be kept between 64-77 degrees Fahrenheit with a pH of between 7 and 8.2.

JOHN: *(Peering in at the thermometer in the tank.)* 68 degrees.

ALEX: I'm not going out for candles.

JOHN: We need candles.

ALEX: We're not going anywhere. We barely got here.

JOHN: There's a Tops three blocks away.

ALEX: I'm not walking to Tops through that.

JOHN: Then you stay with the fish. I'm going. *(JOHN exits.)*

ALEX: Pterophyllum scalare. Semi-aggressive. Angelfish prefer a well-planted tank of at least 30 gallons, with soft, slightly acidic water. Temperature – between 75 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit; pH, 5.8 to 7. One's Alexander. The other's Jonathan. His niece named them after us. *(JOHN returns with candles and begins to set them around the tank and light them.)*

JOHN: Last four candles they had.

ALEX: Lucky us.

JOHN: The whole street's blocked off now. Trees down. Power lines. Like a war zone. We got here just in time.

ALEX: What you're saying is we can't get out. *(Beat.)*

JOHN: Yes.

ALEX: Botia almorhae. Yo-yo loaches are avid diggers that appreciate a sand substrate to protect their delicate barbels. Avoid over-feeding these fish, as they are greedy. pH 6.5 to 7.5. Water temperature between 76 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit. Hall and Oates. His brother-in-law hasn't bought new music since the eighties. I often fear for the child.

JOHN: They're from India.

ALEX: Hall and Oates?

JOHN: The loaches. They're found in streams in India and Nepal.

ALEX: What, they catch them there and bring them here? What's your sister doing letting her have such expensive fish?

JOHN: They're only about three bucks apiece.

ALEX: How do you know that?

JOHN: I was with her when she bought them.

ALEX: When was that?

JOHN: We had the fight. I came over here for the week, remember?

ALEX: I could have gone to a motel, you know.

JOHN: No, you couldn't.

ALEX: Oh, that's right. I haven't found a job yet. I have no money.

JOHN: I brought you here. I wasn't going to kick you out on the street.

ALEX: Do you know how guilty I felt, sitting around the empty apartment, knowing you were right? Your plan worked.

JOHN: It was not a plan. I just... You couldn't afford a couple days in motel. I could go to my sister's. There it was. Is.

ALEX: Cardinal tetra. *Paracheirodon axelrodi*. pH 4.5 to 7.0. Temperature, 75 to 84 degrees Fahrenheit. Prefers a planted tank, and tankmates should be other peaceful species, with no cichlids. The cardinal tetra is from northern South America and is found in the tributaries of the Rio Negro and Orinoco rivers. Pedro, Luis, Chita, and Maria. Who knew these fish were such travelers?

JOHN: They're tropical.

ALEX: What?

JOHN: They're tropical fish. From the tropics.

ALEX: Thank you, professor. What I meant was, do they catch them there and bring them here, or do they breed them in captivity?

JOHN: I don't know. We should start a fire.

ALEX: I don't see any firewood.

JOHN: It's in the garage. Meg thinks the wood's full of bugs, and she doesn't want them coming in the house.

ALEX: What, does she vacuum it before she brings it in?

JOHN: Yeah. There's one of those hand vacs out there.

ALEX: I really don't understand your sister.

JOHN: You hate bugs.

ALEX: Yeah, but not so much I'd vacuum firewood.

JOHN: Let's just get some wood. (*JOHN exits.*)

ALEX: Carnegiella strigata. Marbled hatchetfish. They hang out at the top and are great jumpers, so you need a good lid or they'll fly right out of the tank. They look like upside down fish. pH, 5.5 to 7.5. Temperature, 75 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit. Found mostly in small forest streams in Guyana and the Amazon River basin. Bambi, Thumper, and Stitch. His sister has a Disney thing, too. (*JOHN returns with firewood.*)

ALEX: She's going to kill us.

JOHN: I'll pay her back for the window.

ALEX: I'll never understand why people build garages without doors.

JOHN: Well, it was built before electric garage door openers.

ALEX: I ripped my jacket.

JOHN: I'll buy you a new jacket.

ALEX: I liked this jacket.

JOHN: Scars give character.

ALEX: You and scars. I really liked this jacket.

JOHN: I will find the exact same jacket, and I will buy it for you.

That's what credit is for. Start the fire.

ALEX: You start the fire.

JOHN: I'm no good at starting fires.

ALEX: What would you do if I hadn't come with you?

JOHN: Not taken the job.

ALEX: No. Now. If I hadn't come with you to your sister's.

JOHN: Called you. Had you talk me through it. But you're here, so please, start the fire.

ALEX: Where does she keep matches? And newspaper. We'll need some newspaper. (*JOHN exits.*)

ALEX: Not taken the job? *(To the audience.)* Corydoras schwartzi. Schwartzi cory cat. Also known as the twin bar cory, a catfish with a silver body and two distinct black horizontal stripes. They require a well planted tank with plenty of hiding places. pH: 5.8 to 7.0. Temperature 72 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. They enjoy being in numbers, so a small school of six or more is ideal. Knowing that, it's a little sad seeing her lone little Schwartzi rooting away in the gravel. *(JOHN returns. Firelight.)*

ALEX: We would have had sex. The fire, the carpet and all.

JOHN: Made love.

ALEX: Been naughty.

JOHN: Nothing naughty about it.

ALEX: But even with the fire it was too cold.

JOHN: And even if it wasn't, we didn't bring any—

ALEX: Lubrication.

JOHN: Yes.

ALEX: Say it.

JOHN: But I wasn't about to rifle through my sister's nightstand.

ALEX: Yech.

JOHN: So with the fish flitting around in candlelight, and the fire crackling in the grate, we, in our coats, snuggled together under a pile of blankets and fell asleep in each others arms. Most romantic night we'd had in a long time.

ALEX: We have sex a lot.

JOHN: Romance.

ALEX: It's still the two of us, isn't it?

JOHN: That's why I love you.

ALEX: Someone has to.

JOHN: But in the morning, the fire was out, and we could see our breath in the air. Two of the platys had sunk to the bottom, pale, in unnatural positions. Dead.

ALEX: Shit. I think that's Bill and Becky.

JOHN: We need a generator.

ALEX: Maybe the power will come back on today.

JOHN: Alex, the wires have been pulled out of the house. The power is not coming back on today. We need to get a generator.

ALEX: Can we even get the car out?

JOHN: We'll move the branches.

ALEX: Where are we going to get a generator?

JOHN: A store! I don't know! Wherever they sell generators! Sears!
Home Depot! Wal-Mart!

ALEX: We can't afford a generator!

JOHN: I'll steal one out of someone's yard!

ALEX: They're fish!

JOHN: They're living creatures! They're helpless! They're my niece's
fish and I gave my word. They stay alive. I'm buying a generator.
You build a fire. Throw your body on the tank. Keep them warm.
No one else dies. *(JOHN exits.)*

ALEX: They're just...fish. No TV. No radio. I defragmented Meg's
laptop, cleaned her registry, ran all the virus protection software
because she never does it. Three Trojan horses. Months of
cookies. Then I played minesweeper and solitaire until the battery
gave out. Kept the fire going. Stared at the fire. Mixed random
cocktails out of what I could find in the liquor cabinet. Which wasn't
much. Stared at the fire some more. *(The sound of a generator
turning over. ALEX walks on, trailing an extension cord.)*

ALEX: Where the hell did you go?

JOHN: I found a generator.

ALEX: Where, Timbuktu?

JOHN: It's like a war zone out there.

ALEX: You were gone ten hours!

JOHN: Driving was not easy.

ALEX: Ten hours!

JOHN: I'm back. Undo those cords.

ALEX: You always make it back.

JOHN: Plug in the filter, will you?

ALEX: Will you stop!

JOHN: Here's the cord for the heater.

ALEX: I'm trying to talk to you!

JOHN: I know.

ALEX: Then listen to me!

JOHN: First, we save the fish.

ALEX: They're fish! They're not even expensive fish! They're just
plain old tank fish!

JOHN: They're Cindy's fish, and I gave her my word! I'm taking care of her fish! This is what I do for my family. This is what I do for those I love. Do you want this? Because this is what I'm offering. You get all this. You get all this. If you say yes. I just want you to for once say yes. *(Beat.)*

ALEX: It's too much. *(JOHN throws up his hands, turns away.)* What do I get to give you? What do I have to give you? Why do you want me?

JOHN: Isn't it enough that I do?

ALEX: No. No.

JOHN: It's your choice. 'Cause I'm not going to go away until you tell me to.

ALEX: That's not fair.

JOHN: Love sucks, doesn't it.

ALEX: Yes. *(Beat.)*

JOHN: Is that a yes it sucks or a yes in general? *(Beat.)*

ALEX: It's a yes. *(They look at each other. JOHN kisses ALEX.)*

ALEX: On the third day, the streets were clear enough that the power company could get through. They came on the fifth day. John flagged the truck down, the workmen reconnected the house. I made them all cocoa. Very domestic. His sister's family came home from DisneyWorld on the eighth day. We told Cindy about the loss of Bill and Becky. She took it well, asked if we'd buried them in the backyard with the rest of the past fish.

JOHN: We said – yes.

ALEX: They'd heard about the storm on TV – a quick blurb, oh, unseasonable snow in Buffalo, what else was new. Meg said she hoped watching the fish through all that hadn't been too much trouble.

JOHN: No, not too much. And we're better prepared for next time.

ALEX: We own a generator.

BLACKOUT.

THE END