

PERFECT STRANGERS

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Peter Snoad

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SYNOPSIS: Robert climbs a mountain in search of peace and quiet. Instead, he meets an engaging stranger who convinces him to make an unusual commitment.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 MAN, 1 WOMAN)

ROBERT (m)..... Mid to late 30s.

BETSY (f)..... 44.

SETTING

A mountaintop. The present.

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AT RISE:

A bare stage. ROBERT enters. He's reached the top of the mountain. He's panting. He sits down on the ground, facing front, breathes deeply and closes his eyes. He sighs, takes another deep breath, exhales and opens his eyes. He surveys a breathtaking scene: a valley below bathed in a shifting patchwork of sunlight and shadow, and a range of majestic peaks in the distance. A pause. BETSY enters. She goes over and sits near to ROBERT but at a discreet distance. He acknowledges her with a brief smile but says nothing. They admire the view together. There is the echoing sound of a loon calling.

BETSY: Forty million years. *(Beat. He looks puzzled.)* The loons. That's how long they've been around. The valley's like an echo chamber, any sound from the lake, it's clear as a bell up here. *(Slight pause.)* It always takes your breath away, doesn't it? *(ROBERT takes a water bottle from his backpack. He drinks. She watches him. He offers her the bottle.)* Thanks. *(She drinks and hands it back.)* Do you go by Robert or Bob?

ROBERT: Excuse me?

BETSY: I've been spying on you.

ROBERT: Spying?

BETSY: Your credit card. I looked over your shoulder at the convenience store.

ROBERT: Really.

BETSY: Yup. Real cloak and dagger stuff. I'm Betsy, by the way.

ROBERT: Hi.

BETSY: Just one question.

ROBERT: Look, er—

BETSY: Why are you a tax accountant? *(ROBERT eyes her warily.)* I Googled you.

ROBERT: You Googled me?

BETSY: My laptop's in the truck. It's just that all those forms and deductions and crunching numbers, it's not you. Right? And you have never stopped regretting it. *(He gets up as if to leave.)* Tell me I'm wrong.

ROBERT: Betsy. I'm going to go now.

BETSY: What did you really want to do with your life? No, no, let me guess, something adventurous and cerebral. An archaeologist! You wanted to go dig in the dirt and find shards of ancient pottery and bones and jewelry and stuff. You wanted to be there, you wanted to be in that other place. *(Beat. ROBERT stares at her. He shoulders his pack. He starts to exit.)* Ask me about my life. *(He hesitates.)* No, really. Anything, anything at all. I will be completely honest.

ROBERT: How old are you?

BETSY: Forty-four.

ROBERT: Married?

BETSY: Twice, both assholes.

ROBERT: How long have you been in therapy?

BETSY: Seven years.

ROBERT: What do you do?

BETSY: For work? Baker, butcher, candle-maker. A bit of everything like a lot of people round here.

ROBERT: You're from here?

BETSY: Born and raised, bred in the bone. I'll die here, too.

ROBERT: That's not very adventurous.

BETSY: Sometime in the next three months. *(Beat.)*

ROBERT: *(Putting down his pack.)* Oh God, I'm sorry, I—

BETSY: Don't be. It happens.

ROBERT: What exactly—?

BETSY: Cancer. Esophagus. At least that's where it started. What about you? How's your health?

ROBERT: Fine. Well...

BETSY: By comparison.

ROBERT: Yes.

BETSY: You can help me.

ROBERT: I can?

BETSY: You, Robert, are one of my perfect strangers.

ROBERT: I'm sorry, I don't...

BETSY: After my diagnosis, I made a pledge to myself. I would go out and meet people. It doesn't sound very adventurous, but the fact is that I've never really...I've never been a very sociable person. I'm one of those people who prefers their own company,

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likes to curl up with a good book, go on solitary walks, immerse herself in some obscure and lonely hobby. Like brass-rubbing. I've been to churches all over Europe making impressions of dead people on paper. The thing is, I liked it. I liked my self-contained life. Never thought I was missing much—even kids, which as it turned out, I couldn't have anyway, luck of the draw. And then along comes the Big C. Suddenly, the clock is really ticking, and it made me think about what I hadn't done, all the people I'd never met. It wasn't that I suddenly craved company, but I realized that I'd never really, truly, given of myself. To anyone. And that seemed wrong—well, not wrong exactly, but a waste. So I decided to reach out and get to know people. Starting with George down the street. George Stavros. Heavy accent, seventy, seventy-five, lived by himself, looked kind of gray and pasty and depressed, like he'd smoked way too many cigarettes. We were neighbors for ten years, and in all that time, I don't believe I said more than fifty words to him. Hi, good morning, how you doing, gorgeous day, happy new year. Who was this guy? What was he about? Maybe he was—I don't know—maybe he'd lost the love of his life in a boating accident or he was a Cold War spy or the inventor of cling wrap or something real important, like a teacher. Teacher of the Year. Well, I went over to introduce myself, finally, but he didn't answer the door. And he wasn't in the yard polishing the chrome on his monster truck. Turns out he'd died two days before. They found him out back, face down in his strawberry patch. Heart attack.

ROBERT: That's...that's sad. I mean—

BETSY: Yes.

ROBERT: So now you're getting to know some perfect strangers.

BETSY: I don't want people to be left wondering about me. Remember that wacky woman we met on the mountain who wouldn't stop talking? Who was she anyway? Who cares? (*He bursts into tears. She moves to comfort him, but he holds up his hand and quickly recovers his composure.*) Are you okay? What is it?

ROBERT: How have people responded?

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BETSY: Mostly they don't want to know. They think I'm crazy or it's some kind of scam. The cancer thing always works though, they perk right up. *(Beat.)* It helps to talk.

ROBERT: What's your tally?

BETSY: Tally?

ROBERT: How many perfect strangers have you befriended so far?

BETSY: Twelve in two weeks.

ROBERT: You move fast.

BETSY: I don't have much time.

ROBERT: A cougar on the prowl. Oh God, I'm sorry, I don't know where that came from. I'm...I'm sorry.

BETSY: *(With an ironic swooning sigh.)* You are my first tax accountant.

ROBERT: And hopefully your last. Oh God.

BETSY: Don't worry about it. You're talking to the queen of gallows humor here.

ROBERT: Yeah, but—

BETSY: Trust me, I'll take as many laughs as I can get.

Beat.

ROBERT: Who else besides me?

BETSY: All sorts. There's Carl the botanist, he deals with invasive species and has bug eyes—I kid you not. Gladys. Five grandchildren, three great-grandchildren, hates cooking. She says she doesn't cook anymore, she warms. And goes to Denny's. Let's see...Angus, the champion caber-tosser. It's a Scottish thing. He throws telephone poles around for fun, very intense. And he's a Buddhist, which is kind of counterintuitive. Rosa! She works at the dry cleaners in town. Every time I walked by, she'd flash me this beautiful smile. I didn't know what it meant, but it's just her, she's a very giving soul. I invited her out for coffee. She's from Honduras, her whole family's back there, she sends them money, they send her pictures. And then there's this guy Robert, a tax accountant, kind of mysterious. Tell me about you. *(Beat.)* Look, I am your perfect stranger. No baggage, no agenda, and your secrets will go to the grave with me in three months or less guaranteed. *(Slight pause. He remains silent.)* Kiss me.

ROBERT: What?

BETSY: You won't be disappointed, I promise you. I am known far and wide for my tender kisses. *(Beat.)* What? You're going to refuse a dying woman?

ROBERT: Okay. A peck.

BETSY: A peck?!

ROBERT: Fine, whatever.

BETSY: And no guilt. Guilt is not allowed. *(She takes the initiative, and kisses him with languid luxury on the mouth. It is a loving but non-sexual kiss.)* Mmm. Tuna.

ROBERT: Sorry.

BETSY: *You're* sorry. I just gave you the kiss of death. *(She laughs lustily. He joins in.)* Okay, in exchange for that kiss....

ROBERT: Wait a minute...!

BETSY: In exchange for that kiss, you have to make me a promise.

ROBERT: But it was you who—

BETSY: You're going to refuse a dying woman?

ROBERT: Okay, okay, what?

BETSY: Come to my funeral.

ROBERT: Why?

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BETSY: Because I want you to be there. I'm inviting all my perfect strangers. There should be at least thirty of you at the rate I'm going. Plus family, of course. And this is not about making up the numbers.

ROBERT: What is it about?

BETSY: It's about you. You and all the other strangers who won't talk about yourselves because you're isolated or afraid or you don't think anyone will be interested in who you are or what you want or what you have to say. You can talk to each other. Be open. Honest. *(A pause. He is silent.)* How often are we honest?

ROBERT: I'll be there.

BETSY: Good.

ROBERT: You'll need my e-mail or—

BETSY: I have it.

ROBERT: Right. Where will the service be?

BETSY: Here. You can listen to the loons.

ROBERT: Thank you.

BETSY: You're welcome. Thank you. Stranger.

She smiles and exits. He sits, looking out over the valley, deep in thought. A loon calls. Lights fade.

THE END