

BURNING VONNEGUT

Written by
Heath Houseman

This is for and because of: Adrian Holguin, Trevor Ireland, Gypsy Pantoja and, God bless you, Mr. Kurt Vonnegut.

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Author's Note

1.) Inline citations throughout the play are indicated by a superscript letter "V" and corresponding numbers. The source material, including book titles, Vonnegut quotes and other useful information, is assembled in the Compendium of Vonnegutisms, an annotated bibliography.

SETTING

A southwestern styled ranch house in the northeastern corner of New Mexico, near a town called Clayton.

The living room/kitchen.

The front door is in the Upstage Wall, Center.

There are two floor-to-ceiling, narrow picture windows in the Upstage Wall, the front door between them, creating a mirror effect--the entire set should exhibit a subtle duality.

The hallway is Left of Center.

Downstage Right is a stone southwest Kiva fireplace with an enormous, gaping maw. Its mouth is full of ashes.

A heavy looking bookshelf stands Downstage of the fireplace. It is filled with every book written by Kurt Vonnegut. The books appear well read and cared for. There are no other books on the shelf. An autographed photograph of Kurt Vonnegut giving a lecture rests on the bookshelf. The autograph says: "To Roamer. You haven't got a chance in hell. Keep reading anyway. All the best, Kurt Vonnegut."

A dark soot covers the bookshelf, Kiva fireplace and surrounding wall space. The soot has the appearance of an ever widening black hole. The books are free of dust and soot.

Downstage Left of the hallway is an out of tune upright piano. Every inch of the piano is beaten, bruised, scratched, gouged. It is hideous, mean and monstrous looking.

TIME

The unstuck present.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROAMER: 26, Hispanic, like a massive star following total gravitational collapse, a black hole so intense nothing can escape it, not even light. She has a habit of keeping her arms close to her chest, sometimes resting her hands around her neck.

RAQUEL: 36, Hispanic, Roamer's sister, a powerhouse of physical and sexual energy. She speaks with mind-numbing speed.

JESSUP: A cowboy, 30s, wearing blue jeans, cowboy boots, a heavy cotton Earnest Hemingway sweater, a Navy pea-jacket and a black cowboy hat. He glides when he walks, like he's skating on ice.

ACT 1

Setting:

In darkness: A bird chirps once, sounding like "Poo-tee-weet?"^{V1}

Lights up.

Downstage Center, below the couch and piano, is a coffin resting on a cart with wheels. The lid is open.

The front door is open.

An eerie wind blows, faint, lonesome. The piano keys tinkle, out of tune, then fade away.

Morning of the mother's wake.

At rise:

(ROAMER appears in the doorway. She holds a generic supermarket cake encased in a plastic cover. Stops at the threshold, unable to cross.

Long beat.

She enters, setting the cake on the table, then takes in the house. When she sees the bookshelf, she rushes to it, explores the books, then... freezes.

Turns and faces the piano. Crossing to it, she reaches a hand out, but pulls away as if the piano might bite her.

Backs Downstage toward the coffin.

Stops, turns, holds a beat, then takes a baby step toward it. Another step... another... another.)

ROAMER

(terrified)

Mama?

(She looks inside and touches the coffin at the same time--and screams.

Blackout.)

Setting:

Night. One year later.

Crickets chirp.

Occasional strong gusts of wind, storm coming.

The coffin and cake have been removed.

At rise:

(Roamer lies on the couch reading a Vonnegut book.)

A car is heard pulling up, followed by a toot from its horn.

Beat, then an explosion of unintelligible English/Spanish--it's RAQUEL, offstage.

A car door slams. Another honk.

Raquel enters, shouting unintelligible English/Spanish, throws her handbag on the floor. The car honks. Raquel shouts at it. It honks again. She shouts at Roamer, then races to the hallway.)

RAQUEL

I gotta go, I gotta go!

(Exits. Roamer continues to read.)

Another honk. Raquel shouts at it, offstage. The horn honks again. The toilet flushes.

Raquel enters, pulling up her waistline, stops, looks at her sister, unleashes a frenzy of wild gestures without making a sound, exits. The car honks.

Raquel enters with bags of groceries, dumps them on the table, picks up her handbag.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

Hey, estúpido? (to the handbag)

(MORE)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

(punches the handbag)

You speak English?

(punches it again)

Habla usted ingles?

(punches it again)

Habla usted anything?

(to Roamer)

What's it gonna take for me to get through to you, huh? Hey!

(softens, gentler)

Sweetie...?

(angry)

Roamer...?

(furious)

Stuppa!^{V2} A little help, por favor! That's all I ask! From the car to the kitchen... Que? What's that I'm hearing? Not your voice. Can it be possible? She speaks?

(car honk again)

You know, for a second there, I thought that was you, your actual, live voice. I thought the horn was you talking to me.

(another honk)

WWWHHAAATTT! What, what, what!

(Exits shouting unintelligible English/Spanish.)

Enters moments later, struggling with a cardboard box.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

Ha, ha! See? A television. Yeah, fat-ass TV. Real company! I can throw things at it, yell at it, treat it like poop, and no matter what, it will always talk 'cause I'll have it tuned to talk shows--all those yappy men and women talking out of their big fat yappy asses, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week!

(Sets the box on the table, then another honk.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

NO ME ROMPAS LAS BOLAS!

(Exits, growling English/Spanish.)

Roamer puts the book down, crosses to box, examines it, crosses back to the couch. Reads.

Raquel enters. A car is heard driving away. It toots its horn for goodbye. She waves, then unpacks the groceries.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

Ah... he is the light of my world.

(She digs into a bag that has a local clothing store logo on it, shaped like a cow, the name of the store above the logo: All Things Moo. Pulls a new raincoat out of the bag. The raincoat has cows embroidered on it.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

No, no. I take it back. He knows I hate cows and la vaca gorda tonta buys me a raincoat with cows on it. ¡Ay!

(Tosses the raincoat over a chair and goes back to the groceries.)

RAQUEL (cont'd)

His car is the light of my world. He's like... some sort of murky light, like light filtered through a stagnant pond of green floating moldy poop. 'Bout as bright as he gets in my world: Poopie underwater light. Drink it, you poison yourself and die, like those stupid settlers did at Rabbit Ear Mountain:

(thick Texas accent)

"Well, if it's flowing by the Santa Fe Trail it's gotta be good!"

(back to normal voice)

Slurp, slurp, slurp, die, die, die. Pretty much sums up Norman, a poopie, stagnant pond of poison. Only good thing 'bout him is his '77 Ford Ltd., which I wouldn't have to depend on if you let me drive your pedazo de caca, but noooo. It's Norman and his Ford. Si, si, light of my world. He kissed me today 'cause the odometer turned again. He kissed me 'cause of that...

ROAMER

A fat-ass TV.

RAQUEL

Hooo-lee cow!

ROAMER

You let Norman kiss you?

RAQUEL

You're talkingtalkingtalking! Yay! Oh, I missed your voice, Roamer!

ROAMER

I'd given up on you guys. Psycho Norman finally gets his kiss. Wow. And wee.

RAQUEL

Thought your vocal cords broke or something!

ROAMER

(been through this a thousand times)

I was reading.

RAQUEL

Can't you talk and read at the same time? Felt like forever.

ROAMER

When I talk I have plenty to say--you'd know that if you listened. When I'm reading I have plenty to read--you'd know that if you read. It only felt like forever because you're the one who's afraid of silence, not me. Hi ho.^{V3}

RAQUEL

Sweetie, listen, listen, listen, you gotta talk more. I know I do! People are like dogs. We gotta bark, sometimes at nothing even, just bark, bark, bark! Dogs go crazy if they can't bark. Their brains swell up and push up against their skullcaps. Why you think they bark all the time? They're trying to stay sane!

ROAMER

Well, now that you've got your fat-ass TV you won't have to worry about me talking more often, will you? Your world will be filled with talking fat-asses. You'll be in one, big, fat yappy ass heaven.

RAQUEL

It wouldn't kill you to put your book down and acknowledge my presence, kay?

ROAMER

OK. I'm putting my book down and I'm acknowledging your presence: So what'd Norman do when he kissed you? Swallow his tongue?

RAQUEL

Choked on his spit a little when I bit his lip, went gahhgh!

ROAMER

Scary.

RAQUEL

Oh, come on. He's a good guy.

ROAMER

Norman's not scary because his mother named him after a fictional character from a mad slasher movie.

RAQUEL

So she was a big fan of Psycho, so what?

ROAMER

Norman owns a motel. That's why he's scary. You think he's got his mummified mother sitting in the office by the fish tank, greeting customers like a dirty, well weathered road sign?

(imitating Anthony Perkins'
psycho mother voice)

Noorman! Noorman? Triple A rates!

RAQUEL

I kissed him with my tongue tonight, Roamer. What you think about that, huh?

ROAMER

Oh my god. I'm going to try not to.

RAQUEL

A tongue kiss is saved for special guys, special moments. That's 'cause it means something importante, 'cause I have something to uuuh...

ROAMER

To uuuh what?

RAQUEL

Say.

(beat)

Now that I think about it, for a stagnant pond of poopie poison, was a pretty good kiss.

ROAMER

RaqueL, you're as scary as he is.

RAQUEL

Oh, that's not nice. You know, if you're gonna be so pedantic about this, you should go back to wherever it was you were reading.

ROAMER

Pedantic?

RAQUEL

Impressed? Been listening to one of those sleep depraved learn how to speak like a million bucks self-help thingys. Keeps you awake all night repeating subliminal words? You know, like you use?

(singsongy)

It's working.

ROAMER

No doubt. How long have you been listening to this thing?

RAQUEL

A Million Dollar Mouthful: How to talk like a rich güera. Only three nights.

ROAMER

You haven't slept for three nights straight?

RAQUEL

Not really, not much anyway, no, not at all. Put my headphones on and boom! I'll be talking like you faster than Clayton Psychiatric can lock you up and throw away the key.

ROAMER

Let me cue you in on a couple of important facts: It's called sleep deprivation? Not sleep depraved. You'll reach a point, because of the lack of sleep, where you'll hallucinate, emotions go haywire, lose consciousness. Sound familiar? I know it does. And if something's subliminal it means it exists outside the area of conscious awareness, so you won't be able to hear it, and by that I mean, it won't keep you awake all night because it's subliminal.

RAQUEL

Seguir adelante, make fun of me, frotar mi nariz en él. Geez, you can be so stuck-up sometimes. You and your books, so, so... toplotical.

ROAMER

Wow. I don't even know what that means. And I thought you missed my voice?

RAQUEL

Yeah, I thought so too.

(beat)

Listen, why don't you come with us sometime, with Norman and me, into Clayton, hang out at the Ecklund, have a beer, play some pool--talk. We really need to talk, you know.

ROAMER

I've got my toploftical books. Besides, we are talking, aren't we?

RAQUEL

Ug! You've read every one of those darn books I don't know how many times. Don't they get boring?

ROAMER

No.

RAQUEL

Why don't you read a romance novel? God knows, you could use it. Look at yourself: All you do is read Vonnegut, Vonnegut, Vonnegut, sleep and eat Vonnegut, and you never get fat and I hate that. It's not fair. Does Vonnegut make you barf or something, is that why you're so skinny? He's a weird form of bulimia, isn't he? A book bulimia. Vonnegut anorexia nervosa. You know what you need? A life. Make some friends. Have fun. Fall in love. Get laid. Holguin's still got the hots for you, call him. He likes skinny chicks who read and don't eat.

(singsongy)

If you don't do it sometime, sweetie, you're gonna go crazy.

ROAMER

I don't have to have sex to stay sane. I'm a masturbator.^{V4}
Keeps me in the road.^{V5}

RAQUEL

Sister Margarita Maria Juana Ines de Asbaje y Ramirez of the Congregation of Handmaids of St. Margaret and Mary and the Poor would kick your ass if she heard you say that. I asked somebody 'bout your books. Know what she said?

ROAMER

Burn them?

RAQUEL

That's what they used to do.

ROAMER

That only happened in Drake, North Dakota--in 1973.^{V6}

RAQUEL

Well, that's because he's muy sucio. Vonnegut uses the F word.

ROAMER

He wrote a short story called The Big Space Fuck, the first story of literature to have the word fuck in its title--so, yes, he uses the fuck word.

RAQUEL

Don't say that. Don't. Please. I told you a thousand times.

ROAMER

Fuck? Or fuck word?

RAQUEL

Hm! Think you're smart. Think you're funny. Think your Vonnegut's funny? My friend, Sylvia, at the library? She's the one who said his books are obscene, and know what? She's right, 'cause I read your favorite one, you know, the one about five cows in a slaughterhouse or whatever?

ROAMER

You read Slaughterhouse-Five?

RAQUEL

Yeah, well, first couple of chapters, I mean, OK, pages--talk about stupid. Wasn't even close to being funny. It was offensive and rude and science fiction-y, you know, uh, like... uncanny. It was uncanny and I don't like uncanny.

ROAMER

His books may be all those things, Raquel, maybe even uncanny, but regardless, they are a true and faithful portrayal of nature and humanity. Of the absurdity in life. A duty-dance with death.^{V7}

RAQUEL

A duty what with what?

ROAMER

Dance. With Death.

RAQUEL

¡Ay Dios mio! Roamer. The things you say.

ROAMER

Me? You're the one who brought up book burning.

RAQUEL

I wouldn't do that. Of course. I wouldn't burn your books, not even if you asked me to, all right? Are you asking me to? 'Cause, if you are, if you want me to, I... Just wanted to make sure. Look, all I'm saying is, you're a barkless dog. I'm living with a barkless dog. And you know what they say about barkless dogs.

ROAMER

No. I don't. What do they say?

RAQUEL

Barkless dogs are crazy. Barkless dogs are dangerous. Barkless dogs should be put down. It's a mercy killing. Bark. You should bark. You need to bark some.

ROAMER

You are such a freak. You make it sound like I never talk to you. We do this all the time, this talking thing, you realize that, don't you? I just don't talk to you when I read.

RAQUEL

But you read all the time. And you never go out. Barkless dogs never go out either. See? That's how you know they're sick. I swear to God, you haven't stepped outta this house, I mean, not since mama's wake. Seriously. Where do you think you are, Northeastern New Mexico Detention Facility? You a member of the Clayton jail book club? Prison inmates get out more than you do, sweetie.

(beat)

No... ¡Ninguna manera...! Look at me. Mírame. Roamer, look at me. ¡Oh mi Dios! Es cierto... This upsets me, Roamer. I am...

(spells this out)

...w-o-r-r-i-e-d and that spells concerned. You're sick in the head. I knew it. My sister's a barkless dog that never goes out.

ROAMER

I'm not sick and I'm not a... I am not a dog! A little reclusive, yes...

RAQUEL

A little?

ROAMER

Among other things, but...

RAQUEL

Other things? What other things?

ROAMER

Well, oh, for example, I'm in a constant state of stage fright because I never know what part of my life I'm going to have to act in next.

RAQUEL

Wh-what...?