

Famine Plays

By

Richard Caliban

FAMINE PLAYS

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FAMINE PLAYS

Cast of Characters

FLEET, a business man

STOLEY, a small town railroad official

LESTER, his son

ROSIE, a mother, wet nurse

MRS KLINGER, college professor

KLINGER, her husband, college professor

EDIE, a small town teenage girl

STUB, a brutish behemoth

RUNNER, an orphan

Running time is approximately 90 minutes.

Setting: The play takes place in the near future as the U.S. is becoming an apocalyptic dust bowl. No specific set pieces are required.

Famine Plays, which began as several short one acts, was first produced in a unified full-length version at the Yale Cabaret in 1988. It was produced later that same year in New York at Cucaracha Theater and in a 1990 production by Under One Roof. It was produced again at Theatre of NOTE in Los Angeles in 2007.

FAMINE PLAYS

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Scene titles are projected.

EAGER TO EMBRACE HUMANITY

FLEET, a well dressed business man appears.

FLEET. Am I depressed?! No! Elated! Everyone speaks of weather systems so tragically. It is an opportunity! Yes, I've been canned. You can divvy up whatever you find in my desk like the pack of dogs that you are. Goodbye and good riddance to you and the savage little jungle you inhabit. I take to the open road with a wide open heart! I am eager — eager to embrace humanity! *(Strips off his clothing, tossing items in all directions as he walks triumphantly upstage, arms open wide.)*

SOLID AND TRUE

STOLEY, a small Southern town train station manager and his son, LESTER with golf clubs.

STOLEY. What you want, son, is a swing that's solid and true. Every guy and his brother will tell ya a different way to go about it so if you don't hang on to the basic principles you'll get yourself all twisted up. Remember that. Now — let's see your stance. *(Lester positions himself.)* Ok, son, the problem is — the Republicans and all that ride 'em cowboy, make America great nonsense. Just relax. *(Lester tries to relax his grip on the club.)* Right. Ok, son, the problem is — the spineless Democrats carryin' 'round water bottles and yoga mats all day. Hold that damn club like you meant it for god's sake. *(Lester tightens his grip on the club.)* Right. Ok, son, the problem is — the judicial system. See, what you're doin' is aimin' at a quagmire of appeals and corporate loopholes. Straighten it out. *(Lester re-positions himself.)* That's it. Ok, son, the problem is — oil dependency. Stand on your own two feet! *(Lester widens his stance, bends his knees.)* That's better. Immigration! Choke up on it. *(Lester shortens his grip on the club.)* Family values. You betcha.

FAMINE PLAYS

Global warming — keep your eye on it! Obama care! Muslim fanatics! Bible thumpin' conservatives! QAnon! China! Black Lives Matter! Equal pay in the workplace! and faith! — faith faith faith! You lose your faith, you give up. You give up and you're gonna double bogey every hole on this god damn golf course! (*Lester is a twisted knot at this point.*) Here, let me show you, son. (*Takes the club and positions himself.*)

EDIE, a wholesome looking teen appears, with a cook book and knife.)

EDIE. Cut little strips off. Marinate in sauce and voilà — an easy to prepare, delicious meal packed with nutritional value. (*Calls out.*) Mama? What time do you wanna eat? (*Wanders off as— Stoley swings. He and Lester watch the flight of the ball.*)

LESTER. Yeah...!

STOLEY. Come on!

LESTER. Yeah!

STOLEY. Come on!!

LESTER. YEAH!

STOLEY. COME ON!

LESTER. Great shot, dad.

STOLEY. Solid and true. (*They high five as —*

MRS. KLINGER, an old-fashioned looking professor, crosses on a bicycle. Separately, STUB, a behemoth, who appears to have had little contact with civilization, stalks a fly.)

DECENTNESS AND DIGNITY

ROSIE appears, holding a baby.

ROSIE. It was just a year ago I was still bar dancin'. I swear, Lizzie, you pulled me outta the fire, honey. I always been dumber'n shit. From the time I been old enough to wear a bra I done nothin' but throw up beer into bar room toilets and get myself in'ta trouble in the back seats'a Fords. (*Kisses the baby.*) Thank the Lord for you, honey. You came outta me all bloody red screamin' and took a holda me so fierce and I felt so dirty and low it made me cry cry cry till I was a squeezed out sponge

FAMINE PLAYS

and I thought I was gonna die for sure but you led me to Jesus and he come to me and said: Rosie, I just delivered unto you an angel, so you best pull your shit together and get on up outta the gutter you been livin' in or I'm gonna let ya die right here and now. Yeah, that's what he said to me, Lizzie. And I heard him. And since that moment I have let the Lord into my heart and he has cleansed me. And protected me. Cause my word, the world is full of godless low life. Yes it is. And things is gettin' worse every day. Farmers shootin' themselves in the head. Nice families cookin' up cats and dogs. But don't you worry cause I got me a piece of heaven right here in my arms. That's right. Got me some decentness and dignity. First time in my life. And I ain't gonna let go.

(Stub crossing the stage, still stalking a fly.)

WE'LL HAVE TO THINK REALISTICALLY

KLINGER appears — a professor wearing a well-worn suit with bow tie. He is clipping his nails. Mrs Klinger arrives on a bicycle.

MRS KLINGER. Ho there! Out on the sidewalk? What for? Clipping your nails?

KLINGER. Things are looking up.

MRS. KLINGER. A job?!

KLINGER. Don't worry, we'll get our old jobs back.

MRS. KLINGER. I have not worked in ten months. You in eighteen.

KLINGER. The economy will adjust.

MRS KLINGER. The Ohio Valley is turning into the Sahara Desert.

KLINGER. Is this our street?

MRS KLINGER. Of course it's our street. Goodness. You're upset. Give me the nail clippers.

KLINGER. Let's eat out tonight.

MRS KLINGER. *(Putting her hand on his heart.)* Heart's racing.

KLINGER. Let's take a trip. A vacation. See the USA. I'll pack the car.

MRS KLINGER. We don't have a car.

KLINGER. Drive straight through the heartland. Get away from it all.

MRS KLINGER. Please be rational.

KLINGER. What will we do?

FAMINE PLAYS

MRS KLINGER. You are getting hysterical. Relax and put your clippers away.

KLINGER. Changed the lock!

MRS KLINGER. Damn the lock! What lock?

KLINGER. We can't get in!

MRS KLINGER. We're locked out? Yes... I see, I see. Knew they would eventually. Don't worry. We'll think of something.

KLINGER. No place to--

MRS KLINGER. YOU HAVE CUT OFF THE TIP OF YOUR FINGER!

(Snatching up his finger tip from the street.) We must hang on to your—

KLINGER. No place to live.

MRS KLINGER. —your finger. *(Wrapping his bloody hand with a handkerchief.)*

Goodness — what a mess you've made!

KLINGER. Where will we go?

MRS KLINGER. Leave it to me. Clear vision — that's the key! We'll have to think realistically. Yes. We'll have to think realistically.

YOU GONNA BE DRIPPIN' BLOOD

RUNNER appears. She is weathered and dirty; her clothes an odd assortment of found or stolen items.

RUNNER. Let me tell you how she go. Me da Runna. I fly by you face. You fuck me up you gonna be drippin' blood on da ground. Dat da way she go.

BUZZ BUZZ

Stub, crosses stalking a fly.

STUB. Buzz buzz. Buzz buzz. Buzz buzz. *(He leaps for it, catches it, eats it.)* Buzz buzz.

YOU COULD FORGET EVERYTHING

Edie appears speaking into a small recorder.

FAMINE PLAYS

EDIE. Me and mama packed up the car in the middle of the night and drove away. Don't know where we're goin'. We're just goin'. Like in a movie. Mama's asleep in the car. She cried all day. Not me. This is the adventure of a lifetime. I gotta save everything up inside me. I gotta remember everything — everything — so's I can sing true to life songs on one'a them TV shows lookin' really really hot. It's BEEN really really hot. I'm turnin' into a dust ball. Think my insides are gonna dry up. Oh well — save on Tampax. You could forget everything out here and just get swallowed up by the stars. Big empty world tonight. All for now. This is Edie. Edie the rock star. Edie the dust ball.

IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOU

Stoley straightening the tie of his bus company uniform, Lester watching.

LESTER. Dad, if it weren't for you I think the whole wide world would fall apart.

ENLIGHTENED

Fleet, crawling, beaten, naked. His eyes are black holes streaming blood.

FLEET. I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough. To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough. (*Stub crosses, sees Fleet, stops.*) To pass among them, or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment... I do not ask any more delights — I swim in it, as in a sea. There is something in staying close to men and women, and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well; all things please the soul — but these please the soul well. Well it doesn't please my soul, Mr. Walt Whitman!

STUB. More.

FLEET. Hello? Who's there? Don't be shy. I'm completely helpless. Bash my fucking brains in. I don't have anything of value except that I happen to be a human being. The last bunch made great sport of gauging out my eyes but I'm sure you can top that if you put your mind to it. Yes? No? Come on, don't feel guilty. I came out here of my own free will. I was warned. But for some romantic reason I thought I'd

FAMINE PLAYS

find brotherhood amid desolation. Do I sound bitter? Well, I'm not. Enlightened. Yes. I actually see quite clearly now.

STUB. En... lyyyyt... end...

FLEET. Yes, I thought so. Another human beast. The friendly and flowing savage. A child of nature. Nature's gone mad but she still has her children, doesn't she.

STUB. En-light-end...

FLEET. What are you waiting for?!

STUB. Enlight. End.

FLEET. Enlightened — a new perception, the acquisition of wisdom. Uh... to get... smart. To be — smarter. Understand? To learn.

STUB. Learn — ABC.

FLEET. ABC! Yes! That's correct! You've grasped the concept completely! Yes. Very good. Fleet is my name. And yours? I wonder if you might have anything to drink...?

(The Klingers crossing with bundles: he walking a few steps, stopping; she going back for him each time, bringing him along. He listens to opera on a small player he holds.)

MTV

Edie dancing, singing.

EDIE. I WANT MY
I WANT MY
I WANT MY MTV

LOSE YOUR PRIDE IT'S LIKE FALLIN' FROM THE SKY

Rosie appears holding her breasts, humming to herself. Runner sits nearby trying to play the same tune on a harmonica.

RUNNER. Hey — you got dolla? Come on, lady. Gimme dolla.

ROSIE. I have told you a dozen times I got nothin' to give you. Now please stop askin'. *(Stoley, in his bus company uniform, enters, sweeping.)*

FAMINE PLAYS

STOLEY. Y'all waitin' on the bus?

RUNNER. Mista. Dolla. Gimme dolla.

STOLEY. Hey! None'a that. I got no patience for beggars and such round here.

RUNNER. Fuck for dolla. Good deal, mista. Fuck you like crazy.

STOLEY. You watch your damn mouth, girl! *(To Rosie.)* Sorry bout that, mam. Used to be a nice town. Tramps and thieves comin' through all the time now. Gettin' worse every day.

ROSIE. Hard to blame her. I guess. We all gotta eat.

STOLEY. True enough. It's a complex issue — as they like to say on the news. But if you ask me, when people start toleratin' and excusin' behavior like that — well then, that's when you know the whole world's upside down.

ROSIE. She don't know any better, is all.

STOLEY. Yeah — nobody seems to know any better no more! And that is just how things fall apart. You let little things slide. Yeah. A little thing here. A little thing there... *(To Runner.)* Don't need ya here!

RUNNER. Gimme dolla — I go.

STOLEY. And don't think you're gettin' on the bus without no money! The bus. Ha! Used to be I had these buses runnin' like god damn clockwork. Now they break down every other day. Rampant incompetence. Can't trust the drivers not to steal their own vehicles. Nobody cares no more. That's what it is. Things get bad, folks give up. They just out and out give up!

ROSIE. I been here five hours. It's comin' ain't it?

STOLEY. How the hell should I know?

ROSIE. Just askin'. Thought you was in charge or somethin'.

STOLEY. Yeah. Yeah, I am. You hit the nail on the head, lady. It's a big fat mess and me — I'm in charge of it. *(Flings his hat off, undoes his tie and throws it away. To Runner.)* Come on, kid! You got yourself a customer. What do I care?! What the flying fuck do I care?! *(Runner goes off with him.)*

ROSIE. Soon hang myself by the neck than stoop that low. Lose your pride it's like fallin' from the sky. Livin' death. *(Holding her breasts again.)* Oh Lord, I swear I gotta get emptied or I'll go plum outta my mind. Come on bus! Come on! *(Lester enters.)*

LESTER. Bad time to be alive, ain't it. *(Waits for an answer.)* Said it's a bad time to be alive.

ROSIE. Beg your pardon?

FAMINE PLAYS

LESTER. Brings out the worst in folks. My old man says folks should treat each other with respect. But see, I just don't have my old man's strength of character. When someone's abused me I have a real hard time treatin' 'em with respect. You know what I mean? I mean, I think folks that don't behave with respect oughta be spit on. You ever think that? (*Waits for an answer.*) You ever think that?

ROSIE. No. No, I don't.

LESTER. That's impolite.

ROSIE. Excuse me?

LESTER. Disagreein' with me point blank like that. What's it cost you to agree? Just makin' conversation. Could say — Yes, I've thought that many times. Interesting you brought it up. That's what I'd've said.

ROSIE. Sorry. Guess I'm just not in the mood for talkin'.

LESTER. Funny you say that. Cause you see, that's just what I was thinkin'. You're not in the mood for talkin'. Least not with me anyways. Know how I can tell? You don't look at me. Normally when people talk they look at each other. 'Cept when you don't wanna talk. Then you don't. It's kind of a quiet way of tellin' somebody you don't wanna talk. Most people would pick up on that and shut up. But not me. I'm not like that.

ROSIE. Don't really know you, is all. Other things on my mind.

LESTER. I see. You got concerns of your own. Responsibilities. Not me. I'm what you call a confused youth. Can't make sense of the world. Got a lotta pent up hostility in me. You sick?

ROSIE. No. No, I'm not sick. Thank you.

LESTER. Y'look sick.

ROSIE. I'm... uncomfortable.

LESTER. How come?

ROSIE. It... It really is none'a your business.

LESTER. What's the difference? Nobody here but you and me.

ROSIE. There's a girl here. And the bus company man. He'll be right back.

LESTER. Huh. You said that like you was warnin' me or somethin'. You know? Like the way you said — He'll be right back. Like you was sayin' — Don't try nothin'. That's impolite. I think. Personally.

ROSIE. Please leave me alone.

FAMINE PLAYS

LESTER. Yeah. Yeah, I sure do wish I was more like my old man. But I ain't. It'd just kill him if he knew what a rotten kid he had, don't ya think? Pow — solid and true. Oh well. *(Rosie cautiously picks up her bag.)* That your bag?

ROSIE. Yes.

LESTER. What's in it?

ROSIE. I asked you to please — *(Lester pulls a long fork out and grabs her bag. Simultaneously, they turn and face the audience, but behave as though they were looking at each other.)*

LESTER. I were you I'd be real quiet. Yeah. Now you're lookin' me in the eye, ain't ya. Funny how that works. Anything on ya?

ROSIE. You little shit, I —

LESTER. If I find somethin' I'll be real offended. I'll be hurt. I'll be pissed off.

ROSIE. I need it.

LESTER. This is embarrassin', ain't it. Little while I'll be goin' through all your personal stuff. Little notes stuffed in your wallet. Maybe things you don't even show your husband. You got a husband?

ROSIE. He's back home with my baby. I'm goin' to a job. We need the money, ya see. Real bad. Thing's ain't too good where we live.

LESTER. Things ain't too good where anybody lives far as I can see. Seems kinda selfish of ya to be thinkin' of yourself as some kinda special case. You know what I mean? Like the way you said — we need the money real bad. That's kinda redundant, kinda self-centered and impertinent, in my opinion. *(Waits for a response.)* I'm startin' to get pissed off now. *(He reaches out and grabs -- and her head snaps back as if being pulled by the hair.)*

ROSIE. Alright! Alright! Stop. *(She reaches under her dress, digs out a few bills and holds them out.)* I need that money for the bus. Please. I need it.

LESTER. *(Snatches the money as they return to normal, facing each other.)* You need your throat cut too maybe. You make a sound I'll come back and do it for ya, hear? Be my pleasure, mam. Kinda fella I am — big hearted. Afternoon. *(He casually exits.)*

STOLEY (OFF). Oh! Christ! You little bitch!

RUNNER. *(Running on, wiping a knife on her shirt.)* Ugly cock so small make me laugh! Ha!

FAMINE PLAYS

ROSIE. Oh, my god I was robbed! I was robbed! He came right up to me with a knife and took my money! Just now! Held it to my throat! Where's that bus company man?

RUNNER. He runnin' away. He drippin' blood on da ground. You don't pay you gonna be hurtin'. Dat da way she go.

ROSIE. All my money! Oh sweet Jesus. What am I gonna do?

RUNNER. Dis a bad town. Lotta ugly people.

ROSIE. I got a job. Wet nurse. I'm expected. What am I gonna do? Sons of bitches better let me on that bus. I'll explain. And my bag. All my clothes. Shit. (*Holding her breasts.*) Gonna lose my mind if... Oh Jesus...

RUNNER. Got milk? Inside?

ROSIE. Yes.

RUNNER. Too much?

ROSIE. Yes.

RUNNER. Wat you savin' it for?

ROSIE. I'm not... I'm not savin' it.

RUNNER. You squeeze, squeeze squeeze — like a cow. Moo. Come on.

ROSIE. No. Really. Doesn't work that way for me. Hurts.

RUNNER. Gotta suck it?

ROSIE. Maybe there'll be a baby on the bus. Oh, come on bus, come on! I'll tell 'em I'll send the money.

RUNNER. Dat bus don't even come maybe. Come on, lady. I eat plenty nothin' all week.

ROSIE. Beg your pardon? (*Runner kneels next to her.*) I ain't your mama, honey, so you go get the hell outta here.

RUNNER. Not gonna hurt. Come on.

ROSIE. I told you...

RUNNER. Do it just like baby.

ROSIE. No... Really... It's... indecent... I appreciate your concern but...

RUNNER. Come on. Suck suck suck like little baby. Not gonna hurt.

ROSIE. Well... if it would... No. I mean... well, if you took just a little... very gently... just to.... just to relieve some of the... I'd be grateful. (*Rosie unbuttons her dress and slowly draws Runner to her breast.*)

HOLLOW SPOTS

FAMINE PLAYS

Edie, with a recorder.

EDIE. I had this idea yesterday... I mean, a dream... Anyway — I had a leak in me. Everything was slowly drippin' outta me. I was gettin' emptied. What else... Mama's in the car praying. Told her I had to go pee. But I'm not gonna pee no more cause even if it's just my imagination my insides do feel kinda funny. I swear to God I got these little hollow spots and... *(Gets lost in thought for a moment.)* Recycle your saliva. That's what this guy who helped us change our flat kept saying. Big joke. Gotta recycle your saliva. Ha ha. Mama's got a wooden spoon she holds on to all the time now. Won't let go of it even when she's drivin'. *(Sings.)*

I DON'T WANNA PICKLE

JUST WANNA RIDE MY MO-TER-SICKLE

That's another one of them old songs I know from my Dad. That's what Mama says. I don't remember him. I mean, I never remembered him. Even before this leak thing started. *(She scans the horizon.)* Sun's goin' down. It's gonna be dark soon. Gotta get back in the car. I'm gonna sleep in the car from now on. It's the stars. Last night — swear to God — it was like the stars had magnets in 'em or somethin'. They were pullin' at me somethin' fierce. I'm just kiddin' by the way. I know the stars don't have magnets in 'em and I know I don't really have a leak. But stuff like that could be good material for my singin' career. Seems like I had more stuff to say but I can't think of it now. This is me — Edie. Edie the pickle.

(Rosie and Runner trotting in place.)

BEAT THEM

Stub cleaning and dressing Fleet.

FLEET. If you can't —

STUB. If you can't —

FLEET. Join them —

STUB. Join them —

FLEET. Beat them.

STUB. Beat them.

FAMINE PLAYS

FLEET. What will you do?

STUB. Beat them!

FLEET. Again!

STUB. BEAT THEM!

FLEET. Yes, perfect! Very—

STUB. BEAT THEM BEAT THEM BEAT THEM!

OBJECTIVITY

Klinger sits on a pile of bundled up belongings. Mrs Klinger stands before him as if delivering a lecture.

MRS KLINGER. Fingers on my hand. Do you see? Count them. I'll count them for you. Five. A refusal to observe what is. A resistance. To the point where you have cut yourself off from the tangible facts of existence — i.e. me, for one. Let me elaborate. And by the way, it is this very same phenomenon that paved the way to the present disastrous state of our nation — i.e., pretending such things don't happen to nice countries like ours. That's not really dealing with reality, is it! Blink if you are listening. Hmmm. Might have been accidental. Blink twice in rapid succession. As I thought. Is it useless for me to continue? No. I shall pound away. Hungry? Chilly? Here. *(Takes her jacket off and puts it over his shoulders.)* Where was I? Yes. The forces of nature. The forces of nature are frighteningly democratic; profoundly indifferent to our frail, insignificant, hopes and dreams. You must learn that. It is the lesson which I must infuse your very flesh with. Now — case study. New York City. Bursting at the seams with vagrants. What to do? Your response — wait for things to get better. Ha! Perhaps you thought we would get our old jobs back? Miraculously find the key to our apartment suddenly worked? Objectivity! You could not deal with our predicament because your vision is clouded by what you want, not by what is. Why is that important? Why? Reality! That is why. Getting carried away? Short break. *(Sits beside him.)* I know you're in there. Must hear me... comprehend me, I mean. I miss you. Your good influence. You know how I tend to alienate people. That swift poke in the ribs when I'm hogging a conversation. I miss that. What I would give to see your half amused smile as you peruse the book reviews. Your ugly old dangling cock as you step out of the shower. *(Stands.)* In other words, by looking at our predicament realistically I can at

FAMINE PLAYS

least give us a fighting chance — i.e., I can deliver us from death. How? By accepting — and I stress that word deliberately — accepting the reality of our condition. And if you can do that — if you can hold tightly to that — then you have an anchor, a base, a foundation from which no amount of emotional stress can topple you. Breathe deep the—

KLINGER. (*Sings the old commercial jingle.*) SEE THE USA
IN YOUR CHEVROLET

MRS KLINGER. Goodness... I... For a moment I thought... I thought you had said something. But you can speak. I know you can. If you'll just grasp hold of what's real! Do it! Now! Speak to me! Speak! Let me see your eyes come to life! Open your mouth and speak! Feel me! Do you feel me? Feel my face! It is real! It is me! Burst out! A leap is all it takes! A leap! Take that leap! Take it! Into my arms! Grasp what is — (*Suddenly looks around as though other people are present.*) Goodness... My husband generally warns me when I'm becoming obnoxious. He's my elbow in the ribs, so to speak. Hadn't realized, that's all. Speaking too loud in all likelihood. Bad habit. My apologies. (*The sound of a subway roaring into the station. Mrs Klinger gathers Klinger and their belongings. The sound of the subway doors opening. They step into a square of light. The sound of the doors closing and the train rumbling away. Fade to —*

Rosie nursing Runner. Separately — Stoley, as if looking in a mirror. He has a bandaged wound and scratches on his face.)

THE CEREBRAL MAN IS OUT OF HIS ELEMENT HERE

Fleet and Stub appear. Stub holds a rusty piece of a muffler over his head like a club.

FLEET. Alright! From the beginning.

STUB. Hello. Do you know wh —

FLEET. Stub.

STUB. What?

FLEET. I sense something is wrong. What do you suppose that might be?

STUB. Nothing wrong, Fleet.

FAMINE PLAYS

FLEET. What is the first thing? The very first thing. Before you get close. Before you say anything. (*Stub thinks.*) The checklist. (*Stub thinks.*) Hint?

STUB. No hint.

FLEET. Stub?

STUB. No hint! (*Stub thinks.*)

FLEET. There is no need to spend an hour on this. We are not trying to teach you to think. That would be counterproductive. The cerebral man is out of his element here. Not that there's any danger of you becoming cerebral, but why play with fire?

STUB. Ceebral.

FLEET. Intellectual in nature.

STUB. Hint.

FLEET. Appearance.

STUB. App ear dance

FLEET. Yes. Appearance. The way you look. To the person. They will run if you frighten them. You are not fast. We have proven that.

STUB. Get close! Have to get close!

FLEET. Precisely. And to do that you must....?

STUB. Appearance. Get close...

FLEET. To get close you must do what to your appearance? (*Stub slowly grins as he has a revelation and puts the club behind his back.*) Ahhh. I sense a breakthrough. Yes? Ready? From the beginning.

STUB. Club behind back.

FLEET. Check. And...?

STUB. Smile. Friendly smile.

FLEET. So far so good. And...?

STUB. Hello.

FLEET. Hello there, stranger.

STUB. Do you know what state this is?

FLEET. No, I'm afraid I don't. (*Stub reveals his club and beats the imaginary person with it.*) Brilliant! (*Stub runs to Fleet like a big happy dog and hugs him, lifting him up.*) Absolutely brilliant!

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