

# RAW PROVOCATIVE HUMANE PLAYS

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## **DIRTY BIRDS**

A new play by Jenny Kirlin

CLAIRE, mid-twenties, stands gazing up at a wall of paintings in an otherwise stark room at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. She wears a wrinkled, sky blue raincoat over a dark flowered dress with black boots that cover her calves.

BILLIE, also mid-twenties, stands next to her. She wears a fitted lined hoodie and jeans. She scans the wall and turns to Claire, studying her. A beat.

BILLIE

What do you think?

Claire continues to stare up at the wall. Billie watches her. After a minute...

CLAIRE

I don't think they're very good.

BILLIE

What do you mean?!

CLAIRE

I don't think they're very good.

BILLIE

But-

Billie points up at the different colored ribbons hanging off some of the frames.

BILLIE

(chuckling)

They've won awards.

CLAIRE

I got a ribbon for milking a goat once.

Billie cocks her head and stares at her incredulously.

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You don't believe me?  
 CLAIRE  
 No, I absolutely 100% believe you. But how--  
 BILLIE  
 I saw a picture.  
 CLAIRE  
 Claire starts to move away. Billie grabs her hand.  
 BILLIE  
 No, no. Please. Stay.  
 CLAIRE  
 I've already *seen* all of these.  
 BILLIE  
 But which is your favorite?  
 Claire sighs.  
 CLAIRE  
 My favorite of these ones I don't like?!  
 BILLIE  
 ...Yes. Sure.  
 Claire studies the paintings carefully.  
 CLAIRE  
 I kind of like the one with the planes.  
 Billie looks up at the painting of the two propeller planes  
 in a field.  
 BILLIE  
 That one didn't even win.  
 CLAIRE  
 (shrugging)  
 It's my favorite of the bad ones.  
 BILLIE  
 What about that one?

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I hate it. CLAIRE

Stop. BILLIE

Stop what? CLAIRE

*It's the winner.* BILLIE

It's a bunch of dirty birds. CLAIRE

Claire- BILLIE

Claire turns to her.

I just don't like these paintings. You paint them?! CLAIRE

No. BILLIE

Then what is wrong with you? CLAIRE

Nothing. BILLIE

You did. (realizing) CLAIRE

Excuse me? BILLIE

You painted this one. The winning painting. (pointing) CLAIRE

No response.

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It's really good.

CLAIRE

Claire. You painted it.

BILLIE

Claire continues to stare straight ahead at it.

Billie grabs for her hand. Claire pushes her hands deep into her coat pockets.

BILLIE

You used to paint.

CLAIRE

Poorly?

Billie laughs out loud, in spite of herself.

BILLIE

I mean, you're no Picasso.

Claire suddenly laughs out loud.

CLAIRE

Oh my god, I'm really, really not.

A beat.

BILLIE

Did you hear what I said?

CLAIRE

I did. You're crazy.

BILLIE

I'm not.

Claire turns away.

CLAIRE

Please take me home.

BILLIE

Your parents know that you're with me.

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I don't want to be here.

CLAIRE

Please just look at the painting.

BILLIE

*I didn't paint those birds.*

CLAIRE

They're not birds.

BILLIE

Claire spins back towards the painting and points defiantly at a harsh black streak.

That's a beak.

CLAIRE

That's not a beak.

BILLIE

Wrong.

CLAIRE

It's a toothbrush.

BILLIE

Claire shakes her head.

I don't see it.

CLAIRE

(pointing)

I see a beak and a wing.

Billie smiles.

That's an arm leaning against a door frame.

BILLIE

Claire stares at it for a long moment.

Is that a leg?

CLAIRE

Umbrella leaning against the wall.

BILLIE

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Claire opens her mouth to respond and can't.

CLAIRE

I thought those were the eyes.

BILLIE

Those aren't eyes.

A beat.

CLAIRE

Oh!

BILLIE

See. She's brushing her teeth.

Claire stares at the painting, searching.

CLAIRE

How can you see all that?

BILLIE

Look.

Billie raises her hand and slowly outlines the shape of the figure in the air with her finger. She continues in a loop until...

CLAIRE

Okay.

BILLIE

Yeah?

CLAIRE

Yeah.

BILLIE

Good.

CLAIRE

Why would I paint that? I don't paint.

BILLIE

You used to. You were one of the best at it.

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I used to do a lot of things.

CLAIRE

You see things differently than most people.

BILLIE

Saw.

CLAIRE

I think you can still see the same.

BILLIE

Claire shakes her head no. She looks around the room, the people filling in, walking by. She closes her eyes. Billie notices.

What's wrong?

BILLIE

I want to leave.

CLAIRE

Why?

BILLIE

I don't know.

CLAIRE

You used to love this.

BILLIE

I feel trapped.

CLAIRE

Billie looks around, confused.

Please. Not yet.

BILLIE

*But why?*

CLAIRE

Because you worked hard for this. I know you don't remember that, but you did. And it's a big fucking deal, this exhibit. And it means something.

BILLIE

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CLAIRE

It doesn't mean anything to me.

BILLIE

But it *did*. Before the accident. When you won -- I've never seen you so excited. And you didn't just get a ribbon. It also got you a scholarship.

CLAIRE

For what?

BILLIE

Grad school. Wherever you want to go.

Claire blanches.

BILLIE

It's okay.

CLAIRE

Well, I can't *go*.

BILLIE

You don't have to now. You can defer it until next year.

Claire turns back to the painting.

CLAIRE

It looks like my hands got muddy and I smudged it around on a canvas.

BILLIE

You would have punched me in the mouth if I ever said that.

CLAIRE

Maybe?

Claire and Billie continue to stare straight ahead. After a moment...

CLAIRE

I don't know why I painted her naked. I don't like being naked.

BILLIE

No, you don't. But, it's not you. It's me.

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Claire instinctively looks away from Billie.

CLAIRE

Why would I paint you naked?

BILLIE

Because you used to see me naked all the time. It wasn't a big deal.

A beat.

CLAIRE

Why?

Billie doesn't say anything.

CLAIRE

*Why.*

BILLIE

(cautiously)

We lived together.

Claire closes her eyes.

CLAIRE

That doesn't make sense.

BILLIE

We'd been a couple for three years. We lived together for a year...

CLAIRE

No.

BILLIE

I'm not making this up.

CLAIRE

Why didn't you say something?

BILLIE

I haven't left your side in seven months.

CLAIRE

I just thought you felt guilty.

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BILLIE

For what?

CLAIRE

That it didn't happen to you. We were riding together.

BILLIE

I felt guilty for a long time. I still do. I re-lived every second of our bike ride that day. Kept thinking of places I could have passed you, could have turned us down a different path. But that's not why I haven't left your side.

CLAIRE

You didn't *say* anything.

BILLIE

For the past seven months it's been killing me. They told me we need to give you your own time. To remember things at your own speed.

CLAIRE

Then why are you telling me?

BILLIE

Because I can't anymore. I can't not try. I can't have you miss this. You're missing too much. And I miss you.

CLAIRE

You've been pushing me. My mom is so uneasy with you.

BILLIE

I know.

CLAIRE

I just thought she was being overprotective.

BILLIE

I'm sorry.

CLAIRE

I don't know what to do.

BILLIE

You don't have to do anything right now. You don't have to know.

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CLAIRE  
I don't think I can love you.

BILLIE  
Of course you can.

CLAIRE  
I don't even know you.

BILLIE  
That's not true.

CLAIRE  
It's true for me.

BILLIE  
But you could try. We could try together.

CLAIRE  
Try what though?

BILLIE  
Being a couple again. We were great together.

Claire shakes her head.

CLAIRE  
It doesn't feel right. It feels really wrong.

BILLIE  
That's just your mother talking. It's not you. It's never been you.

CLAIRE  
But I don't know me. I don't know anything anymore.

BILLIE  
Don't say that.

CLAIRE  
You keep telling me things. Everyone keeps telling me things. But I don't know what's true.

BILLIE  
Just let me help you. We have all the time in the world to figure it out. We don't have to jump right back in. We can date. My treat.

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CLAIRE

That's not fair to you.

BILLIE

We have no other choice but to start fresh. You don't even remember the things that annoy you about me.

CLAIRE

That's not funny.

BILLIE

I would give anything for you to remember how much you hate it when I leave the dishwasher full without running it. When I balance a soda like it's Jenga in the recycling can instead of emptying it. How I spatter the mirror every time I brush my teeth.

A beat.

CLAIRE

I don't think I'd like those things.

BILLIE

How do you not remember loving me?

CLAIRE

I can't remember.

BILLIE

And I can't forget.

CLAIRE

I don't remember.

Billie turns to go.

BILLIE

I can't be here anymore.

CLAIRE

Billie.

Billie turns back to her.

CLAIRE

I don't remember how to get home.

A beat.

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BILLIE

I'll be downstairs by the information booth.

Claire watches her go. She looks around and notices how empty the room is now.

After a moment, ALLISON, mid-twenties, enters the exhibit, wearing a loose dress covered with a cardigan, her hair done up in a slightly too elaborate updo. She sees Claire standing by the paintings and smiles, approaching.

ALLISON

I think these are great.

Claire nods. Allison stands next to her and sticks out her hand.

ALLISON

I'm Allison. I'm one of the painters.

Claire shakes her hand.

CLAIRE

Claire. Congratulations.

Allison quickly glances over at the board next to the paintings.

ALLISON

Claire Livingston?!

Claire nods.

ALLISON

Wow. *I* should be saying congratulations.

CLAIRE

No-

(beat)

Which one is yours?

ALLISON

The planes in the field.

Claire brightens up a little.

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CLAIRE

That one's my favorite.

ALLISON

Thanks. You don't have to say that.

CLAIRE

No, no, really. I actually said it before-

ALLISON

God, I'm glad you're here. I thought I was the only one. I felt silly seeing it again. But how often will I have a painting at the Brooklyn Museum?!

CLAIRE

Right.

ALLISON

My grandpa grew up in Brooklyn, so I'm actually really proud of this. Better than MoMA!

Claire smiles.

ALLISON

I didn't see you on opening night.

CLAIRE

No...

ALLISON

I came with my parents and my aunt. It was nice. They made a big deal of it. They passed around Prosecco and some small foods, but it's really hard to eat anything when you're talking and meeting people, you know?!

CLAIRE

Sounds nice, though.

ALLISON

I ended up getting really tipsy and hooking up with...  
(pointing to the third place winner)  
"City Life"

Allison grimaces. Claire laughs. A beat.

CLAIRE

This is actually my first time seeing it.

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Hanging up?!

ALLISON

Yeah.

CLAIRE

What do you think??

ALLISON

It's weird to just stand here and look at it. I feel really distant from it.

CLAIRE

How long ago did you paint it?

ALLISON

Claire thinks for a moment.

CLAIRE

Last year, I guess.

ALLISON

Mine looks small to me.

CLAIRE

Small?

ALLISON

On this giant wall in this room. Feels really insignificant.

CLAIRE

I've never seen anything I've done hanging up before.

ALLISON

You've never gone to an opening? Is that like actors who don't like to watch themselves?

CLAIRE

Yes.

(putting out her hand)

Jennifer Lawrence, by the way. I don't think we've met.

ALLISON

You're funny.

Claire looks up at the painting.

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CLAIRE

I don't think I like it.

ALLISON

To be honest with you, when my aunt came here on opening night and saw which painting got first place, she said it was bullshit. That it just looked like someone had smeared paint around a canvas. But then the more I looked at it the more I saw. I saw you. One of my professors once said that a true artist can make the viewer feel looking at the painting what they felt painting it. And I look at this painting and I just want to reach out and touch her. I just hope someday I can see things like you do. And I hope someday someone sees me like her. Maybe it's Mr. "City Life."

CLAIRE

It scares me.

ALLISON

I wish my work scared me.

CLAIRE

Why?

ALLISON

Look at yours. It's intimate and vulnerable. It's so true. I painted planes and some grass. The most intimate thing I've ever painted is a giraffe.

CLAIRE

You're selling yourself short.

ALLISON

No one is leaving this gallery talking about anything more than my skill or technique.

Claire opens her mouth to protest.

ALLISON

NO. It's okay. For real. I'm really proud of it. Fuck, my technique is going to let me go to school. I'll take it.

CLAIRE

Where are you going?

ALLISON

Pratt.

CLAIRE/ALLISON

BROOKLYN.

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They both laugh.

ALLISON

I'm scared to death.

CLAIRE

Why are *you* scared?

ALLISON

They're going to destroy me until I can paint something truthful like you. I'll be crying every night. Digging furiously into my notebook during lectures, scrambling to accurately quote the brilliant words of my professors wearing paint smocks. That's what I imagine grad school is. I just hope it works. What are you doing with your scholarship?

CLAIRE

I think I'm going to defer a year.

ALLISON

I'm afraid I don't have anything to say. I don't think I've ever had anything that was that important to me. How did you find it?

CLAIRE

I think it finds you.

ALLISON

I sure hope you're right. Fallback is we team up in a couple years and design grumpy unicorn screen prints for t-shirts.

CLAIRE

Deal.

(beat)

Do you know the way to the information booth? I'm supposed to find someone.

Allison turns and points out the exit.

ALLISON

It's down the hall, take a left. Bottom of the stairs.

CLAIRE

Thanks.

Claire turns to go. She turns back.

CLAIRE

Allison?

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Yeah.

ALLISON

You're going to be great.

CLAIRE

I don't know.

ALLISON

You see things too.

CLAIRE

Allison smiles. Claire leaves.

END OF PLAY