

COFFEE BREAK

A Ten-minute Play

by Robert D. Sutherland © 2008

Characters:

Darlene (age 24)

Rhonda (age 28)

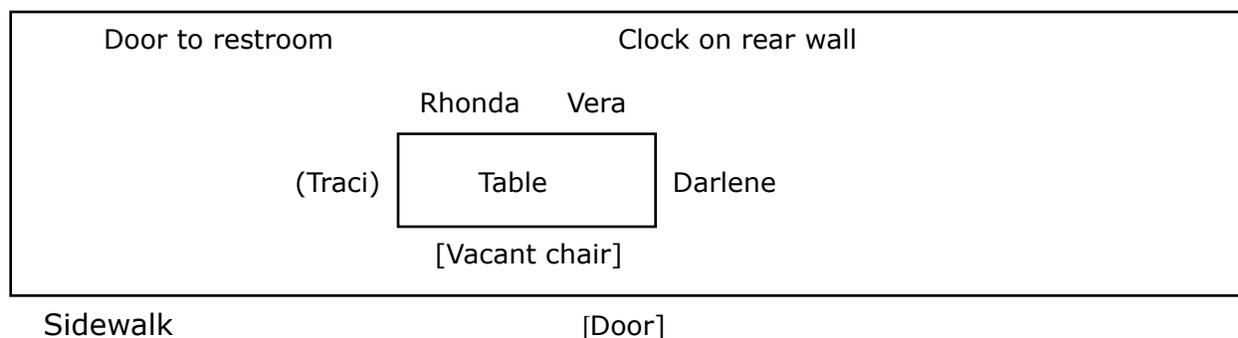
Traci (age 26)

Vera (age 35)

SCENE. An all-night coffeeshop in Midtown Manhattan slightly east and slightly north of Times Square. Late October, a few days before Hallowe'en. A working clock on the wall at the back of the stage reads 2:20. During the action, the hands move to 2:30.

When the lights go up, RHONDA, VERA, and DARLENE are seated at a table with coffee cups and plates with remnants of Danish pastries before them. An insulated coffeepot stands in the middle of the table beside two small, shallow bowls containing, respectively, packets of sugar and containers of cream. An empty cup (with no plate of Danish) sits on the table before the vacant chair at the stage-right end of the table. A second vacant chair, its back toward front of stage, faces RHONDA and VERA. DARLENE occupies the chair at the stage-left end of the table.

STAGE



Each woman has a shoulder-bag, and a light-weight jacket draped over the back of her chair. RHONDA (age 28) is wearing a knee-length skirt, calf-length boots, a long-sleeved sweater-blouse, a showy, multi-strand necklace, and large ear-rings. She has a purple bruise on her right jawbone. VERA (35) is wearing a low-cut blouse, skirt, fishnet stockings, and multiple bracelets on each arm. She has taken off her high-heeled shoes, which are lying on the floor beside her chair. DARLENE (24) is wearing a loose-fitting dress with a wide belt of dark leather or plastic, long dark stockings, and low-heeled shoes. A glittery beauty-mark (perhaps green) is pasted on her left cheekbone. The clock on the wall reads 2:20.

RHONDA

Oh, he was a real jerk. Married man. I already had one out, but he got all pissy and said hell no he wouldn't use a condom. Said, 'Shit! with a condom, what's the point?' So I put it away and said, 'Okay, Jack, your choice. No glove, no love. Let me out so I can get back to work.'

DARLENE

It's not just the married ones. Last week I had this eighteen-year-old football jock from Jersey, letter-jacket and all. Got real nasty. Said he wouldn't use condoms with his girlfriends, so why should he use one with *me*? Made a big point of saying *friend-z*. I said "A girl's got to take care of herself," and he made like he was gonna hit me. I thought I'd hafta use my pepper-spray. But he opened the door and shoved me out. Burnt rubber gettin' away. I hope one of those *girl-friends* burns him with a dose of clap.

VERA

Yeah, it would serve him right. Problem is, he'd just go out and burn somebody else.

[RHONDA pours a little coffee into her own cup, then holds the pot out toward VERA and DARLENE.]

RHONDA

Want some more?

DARLENE

Not for me, thanks.

VERA

I'll take a little. [As RHONDA pours, VERA nibbles the edge of her Danish, then sets the pastry down and gives a large sigh of resignation and fatigue.] Break's about over. I wonder if Traci's coming.

DARLENE

Last night she said she'd be here. But she's really been puttin' in the hours.

RHONDA

Well, beauty school takes a lot of money. But it beats me how she can save anything at all sharing a walkup with Teena J. and Miss-uppity Monique Fluff-ball, who've *never* carried their own weight.

VERA

Well, you gotta hand it to her for tryin'. I shoulda done sump'm like that when I was her age. She's always been one to think ahead.

[As VERA is speaking, TRACI (age 24) enters the auditorium and passes quickly in front of the apron to its central point. She is wearing a visored cap, boots, knee-length skirt, and, beneath her tightly-zippered jacket, a sleeveless blouse with large buttons down the front. She is clutching her shoulder bag close to her body, and, while on the sidewalk, walks as though she is very cold.]

DARLENE (seeing TRACI on the sidewalk
through an imaginary plate glass window)

Oh, here's Traci. She made it after all. [TRACI opens the imaginary door and steps onto the stage.] Hi, Traci. We thought you weren't coming.

TRACI

Well, you know how it is, Darlene. Sometimes it's hard to get away. I've been hung up with a guy who wanted to talk. He was decent, just lonely. Talked and talked about his job, and how he wanted to leave New York and go back to California. I told him about my plans for beauty school. He added on a nice tip for the extra time.

[While speaking, she goes to the chair at the stage-right side of the table, takes off her shoulder bag, unzips and drapes her jacket on the back of her chair.]

Brrr! It's gettin' cold out there. A front's movin' in, and it's gonna get a lot colder.

[While TRACI is speaking and hanging up her jacket, VERA takes from her bag a brown plastic vial containing prescription medicine. She shakes one pill out into her hand, caps the vial, drops it back into her bag, and swallows the pill with her coffee.]

RHONDA (to TRACI)

Hey, you've got a new bag. Really nice!

TRACI

Yeah, I bought it this afternoon. My old one was falling apart. They're havin' a sale at Trimble's. You might want to check 'em out. Oh, thanks! you got me a cup already. [She sits.]

[While RHONDA is filling TRACI's cup from the pot, TRACI gestures toward the vacant chair.]

TRACI

Where's Betty? I've brought the coupons she wanted.

VERA

Haven't you heard? Betty's sick. Just after noon she finally went to the clinic to find out what was wrong. It's hepatitis, and pretty bad, I guess.

TRACI

Oh shit! Last night she looked terrible, couldn't hardly hold her head up. Said she felt rotten. Is she in the hospital?

DARLENE

No, I heard she's at home. She won't go to the hospital, not after all the trouble she had last time. She thinks if she goes to the hospital, she won't come out alive.

TRACI

Hell, she's liable to die *at home*. She doesn't take *care* of herself. Never has. *Damn* Tony and his dirty needles! [Takes a deep swig of her coffee.]

VERA

Did you hear about the big fight Nicole and Sandy had at Seventh and Forty-third?

TRACI

No, When was this?

VERA

Just before ten o'clock. I got to see some of it. A big crowd was watching, and nobody tried to stop 'em. The men were havin' a great time. Takin' sides, eggin' 'em on. It was the worst fight I ever saw, and I've seen quite a few. They were kicking and screaming, and scratching, and crying, and grabbin' handfuls of hair, and rollin' around on the sidewalk. Sandy tore off Nicole's wig and threw it in the gutter, and somebody grabbed it and ran off with it. Nicole took Sandy by the shoulders and slammed her up against the building hard enough to loosen her teeth. Then the cops moved in and broke it up and arrested 'em both.

TRACI

What was the fight about, Vera?

VERA

I don't know. They've never liked each other. Nicole always felt Sandy went around bad-mouthing her and makin' fun of her behind her back.

DARLENE

I'd like to have seen Nicole's wig come off. She's so full of herself. But I'm sorry they got arrested. That's a bummer.

RHONDA

Well, at least the cops have somethin' to charge 'em with. Disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace. Not like last week, when they arrested Little-Bits for nothing at all.

VERA

That was just harassment, Rhonda, plain and simple.

DARLENE

Or else they thought it was time for Little-Bits to make a payment on their protection racket. They never did charge her with anything. They were just doin' what they're hired to do: protect and serve. Serve *themselves*, that is.

TRACI

Yeah, we know all about protection and service. They'll protect the girls, and the girls will service *them*.

[They all laugh at this. Then RHONDA looks around at the clock.]

RHONDA

Uh oh! Break's about over. I better hit the toilet before movin' out.

[She gets up, takes her shoulder bag, and exits by the rear door stage right. The others watch her go.]

TRACI

Rhonda looks awful. That bruise on her jaw!

VERA

Last time it was a split lip. I don't know why she stays with that bastard.

TRACI

Maybe she doesn't have a choice.

VERA (with a touch of bitterness)

Hey, she's still young. Still has her looks. She could get herself another man if she tried. Wouldn't have to give up free-lancing or be taken over by one of the pimps.

TRACI

Well, maybe she's afraid of what Dennis will do if she tries to leave him.

DARLENE (emphatically)

Maybe she *loves* him, for crissakes. In spite of it all.

VERA (derisively)

Love! [She drains her coffee cup.] Oh, come on, Darlene, get serious.

DARLENE

Sure, I'm serious. I *been* there, Vera. When I left Ron two years ago, it tore me up. It was hardest thing I ever had to do. I really loved the guy. But he was so jealous and controlling he wasn't leaving any space for *me*—or for Yolanda. He was squeezin' the life out of both of us. Hell, Yolanda was only three, and already she was so beaten down she'd pulled into herself and almost stopped talkin'. And he was drinkin' so much, I was really scared. I *had* get us out of there. But God, it was hard. Ron *needed* me. He said I was the only thing that made him feel good about himself. If it wasn't for Yolanda, and for the rages he went into when he was drunk, I prob'ly woulda stayed and tried to help him get himself together.

VERA

Well, I've lived with seven men since I was sixteen—one of 'em for over three years—plus four or five guys just for a place to stay—and not one of 'em—not *one*—was worth a bucket of shit. So you can talk about love all you want. I *ain't* been there.

TRACI (to DARLENE)

Isn't Yolanda in pre-school this fall?

DARLENE

Yeah. Mom says she likes it and is makin' friends. I get to Brooklyn to see her Saturday and Sunday afternoons. I figure that's Yolanda's time, and nothin's gonna get in the way of it. The school's gonna have a Hallowe'en party next week, and Mom's makin' her a cat costume to wear. It's really cute! It has a long tail, and pointy ears, a black button nose, and great big whiskers. Oh, that reminds me: I've got to buy a pumpkin so we can make a jack-o'-lantern.

[RHONDA enters from the restroom doorway and returns to her chair.]

RHONDA

It's just about that time. Traci, you say it's gettin' cold out?

TRACI

Really cold.

RHONDA (grimly)

Well, that means a heavier coat tomorrow.

[VERA reaches down for her high-heeled shoes and, during the next two speeches, struggles unsuccessfully to put them on.]

DARLENE (gesturing to the partially eaten Danish on her plate)

I wonder where Gino gets these Danish? They're really bad! Is there any coffee left?

RHONDA

No, it's all gone.

VERA (trying to twist a shoe onto her foot)

Damn!

TRACI

What's wrong, Vera?

VERA
(the admission costing her a great deal,
and her voice betraying a note of panic)

I can't get my shoes on. My feet's all swollen. And they hurt sump'm awful.

TRACI

Maybe it's the high heels that's the problem. You're on your feet so much. Maybe low heels would be better.

VERA (snapping)

I've always worn high heels! That's my thing!

RHONDA (quickly)

Here, let me help.

[She leaves her chair and, with one knee on the floor, tries to work VERA's shoes onto her feet. The other two women watch for a moment, then DARLENE takes a comb from her jacket pocket and begins combing her hair. TRACI reaches into her shoulder bag, extracts a small hand-held mirror and tube of lipstick. She applies color to her lips and finishes just as RHONDA straightens up.]

Okay, Vera. It was a struggle, but they're on. How do they feel?

[RHONDA dons her jacket and slips on her shoulder bag.]

VERA

They're tight, but I think I can walk on 'em. [She stands up, grimaces, puts one hand on the table for support, then clamps her lips and shrugs into her jacket.] Thanks, Rhonda. Now don't you worry about me. I'm gonna stop in at the clinic tomorrow. I gotta be able to walk. And there's a few other things I want to check out, too. Be on the safe side.

RHONDA

Good idea. You do that.

DARLENE (putting on her jacket).

Well, back to Sixth Avenue!

TRACI (putting on her jacket)

Good night, ladies. Take care of yourselves. If any of you hear anything more about Betty, fill us in tonight.

[They all move downstage center to the imaginary door, TRACI, DARLENE, RHONDA, in that order, with VERA—walking with obvious pain and difficulty (but this is not to be overdone; she's putting up a good front)—the last in line.]

RHONDA

See you then.

DARLENE

Same time, same place!

VERA

But tonight we won't have the Danish!

[They exit by the imaginary door in the same order as above, huddle more deeply into their coats when they hit the cold air of the street, and walk away from the coffeeshop in different directions without looking back. The wall clock reads 2:30. Lights go down.]

THE END

SYNOPSIS

Four female sex-workers share their nightly coffee break at a 24-hour coffeeshop in Midtown Manhattan. They gossip, talk shop, track each others' lives. Their friendship is genuine but shallow, for intimacy is difficult on the streets. Their concerns are both immediate and long-term. The clock's hands advance; winter approaches.

