

A Deal in the Desert

by
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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to Rod Serling, Richard Matheson, and many other
writers who taught me what fun can be found
in the shadows.*

STORY OF THE PLAY

Two married couples pool their resources to buy a diner in the middle of the desert. Excited and enthusiastic at first, they come to realize their dream isn't turning out to be the success they wanted. Unable to afford to fix the diner's broken sign or pave the dusty parking lot, the hoped-for customers continue to drive by without stopping. Inside the diner, with failing equipment and dwindling funds, the two couples discover they can't even sell the building for a portion of what they paid for it. They are about to give up in desperation when a handsome, charming stranger walks into their lives. Suddenly, things turn around for them. But they soon find that there are tradeoffs on everything, and everything comes with a price. A moody, atmospheric drama filled with suspicion, tension and chills.

ACTING NOTE

It is always hot; the cast should act accordingly. When they can, they should fan themselves with menus, wipe their foreheads, do little subconscious things we all do in relentless, unforgiving heat.

LIGHTING NOTE

Unless otherwise specified, the lights will not go completely out in between scenes. Instead, they will dim; the actors will take their places for the next scene in full view of the audience, but in deep shadow. During these "passage of time" interludes, some moody, eerie music will play. The "Today's Special" board and the calendar or the clock will change during these times to indicate different days. These changes can be made by your tech crew or by the actors themselves.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

4 m, 3 w, 2 children, extras

RUSSELL BALES: A sensible man, the thinker of the group.

CASSIE BALES: Russell's wife, also level-headed.

JOEY KILBOURNE: Their friend, a man accustomed to getting the short end of the stick in life.

MARIETTA KILBOURNE: Joey's supportive wife.

BILLY RAY: A handsome, charming young country boy.

POLICEMAN: Can be doubled with DAD.

A FAMILY: consisting of a DAD, a MOM, and TWO KIDS of indeterminate age and gender.

VARIOUS CUSTOMERS: Any age and gender; speak a line or two. They can arrive alone or with non-speaking extras.

SETTING

The action takes place current day in a roadside diner located on a stretch of highway in the deserts of the Southwest. It is a typical American roadside diner; nothing fancy, but cozy and comfortable. A couple of large fans are running. There is a window at upstage right that shows a partial view of a dusty desert. At stage right is the front door, complete with a little bell attached to it to signal a customer's entrance.

Downstage left is a door presumably leading to the back of the building. In the upstage center area there is a counter with a cash register and behind the counter is an open cutout leading to the kitchen, where we will occasionally see someone working at an unseen grill.

A calendar, one of those that say "TODAY IS" with a large date on a tear-off pad, hangs somewhere visible to the audience.

The rest of the place is filled with tables covered with cheap tablecloths, salt and pepper shakers, and napkin holders, the usual accoutrements for a roadside diner. There is a white board on the wall announcing the special of the day.

ACT I

(AT RISE: The diner. The calendar is set to August 15, and a large clock set to 4:20. There is a white board on the wall with the handwritten words: "Today's Special -- Chicken sandwich + fries and drink \$4.75." CASSIE BALES sits at one of the tables. She looks drawn and haggard, as though she hasn't slept in days. There are dark circles under her haunted-looking eyes. She is smoking. She is the very picture of someone at the end of their rope. We hear background noise of someone in the kitchen, busy at the grill. It is BILLY RAY, although at this point the audience doesn't see him; his back will be turned, or his head will be down, or he will simply disappear from their view after a moment. He is working in the kitchen while whistling a tune. Cassie finishes her cigarette, and puts it out in the ashtray at her table, an ashtray heaped with cigarette butts. She has been writing in a journal of some kind. She takes a glass of ice water on the table before her and runs it across her forehead and cheek; it is miserably hot here. She rubs her eyes, stares desperately into space for a moment, then begins writing. As she writes, we hear a recording of her voice, speaking what she is writing.)

CASSIE: *(Recorded.)* It all started with that damn sign. That was five years ago. Here we were, out in the Texas desert with our dream, a dream that we'd been trying to keep afloat for some time. "Our dream" was this diner. *(There is a pause. When the recorded voice pauses, CASSIE will stop writing and pause as well. Then she will return to her writing as the recording continues.)* Our dream. How would we know our dream would turn into something like this? Before that business with the sign, we got together with our friends Joey and Marietta Kilbourne. That was our first step down into hell.

(The LIGHTS dim. SHE exits, taking the journal with her. If BILLY RAY is still seen in the kitchen, he will disappear from

view. The specials board is erased. The calendar reads July 12. There will be a moment or two of some ominous MUSIC. Then, the LIGHTS come back up to full. We hear JOEY offstage talking to someone.)

JOEY: ... And once this parking lot gets paved, it'll be a lot more inviting to travelers, you know? Right now that dust just kicks up a mess.

(JOEY KILBOURNE enters. He is a man accustomed to getting the short end of the stick in life. He talks with a slight Southern accent, and his speech betrays his lack of education. Right now, he is very excited. MARIETTA KILBOURNE follows him in. She is his wife; she loves him in spite of his flaws.)

MARIETTA: *(Looks around the room.)* Ooh, look at this! It's really cute, hon!

JOEY: Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you about this place? Like a picture out of a magazine! An All-American diner!

(RUSSELL BALES enters, coughing from the dust outside.)

RUSSELL: *(Coughs.)* Geez! Does that dust ever settle down?

JOEY: Oh, sure it does, Russell. But that's what I mean about the parking lot. We'd want to get that paved first thing. Can you just imagine coming down that road and seeing a beautiful new parking lot inviting you in?

RUSSELL: Yeah, I suppose. *(HE takes a good look around.)*

JOEY: So ... what do you think?

RUSSELL: *(After a moment.)* It's nice. It really is nice, just like you said.

JOEY: *(Smiles and breathes a sigh of relief.)* I did, didn't I? You see, Marietta? He thinks it's nice.

RUSSELL: *(Calls outside.)* Hey, Cassie, come on in here. You should see this place.

JOEY: Told you it was nice.

MARIETTA: It is nice, Joey.

(JOEY enthusiastically hugs HER. CASSIE enters, looking considerably healthier and in better spirits than when we first saw her. In fact, she is attractive and full of life. She looks around with a big smile.)

CASSIE: Well, butter my buns and call me a biscuit! Check this place out!

JOEY: Truth be told, it didn't look quite this nice a few days ago. I kind of spruced it up a bit. You know, to make it presentable to you. Dusted, picked up the room, put some tablecloths down. You know, make the place look good.

MARIETTA: Joey, you bought these tablecloths? But we haven't even bought the place yet!

JOEY: *(Quickly.)* I know, honey, I know. I should have cleared it with you first, but I just wanted it all to look good for you when you first saw it. And besides, if we buy the place, we'd have to buy the tablecloths anyway, right?

MARIETTA: Well ... I guess ...

JOEY: And anyway, I got a good feeling about this, I really do. I think this is my big break.

CASSIE: Well, Joey, I think you're right. With a little bit of work, this little diner could be something big.

JOEY: That's right! That's right, Cassie, it could!

RUSSELL: Well, I'd say with a *lot* of work.

JOEY: Well, yeah. But we've never been afraid of hard work, right, Russell?

RUSSELL: That sign out there has seen better days. And big old clunky billboards like that aren't cheap to fix.

JOEY: Oh sure, I know that, but that would be one of them projects we work towards, you know? We save a little money for a while, and we get our parking lot paved. We save a little for a while, we get the sign fixed. *(Pause.)* Unless you want to do the sign first. I'd let that be your call.

RUSSELL: No, it's fine either way.

JOEY: I mean, if the four of us are going to be business partners, we'd all have an equal share in the decision making. I don't want to sound pushy.

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