

CHANGING HATS

By Abigail Lill

AT RISE:

A windowless conference room of Indiana Polytechnic University. An American flag on a pedestal stands against the wall. The room is empty aside from a flag, a trash can, some pieces of rubbish on the floor, and the hopes and dreams of future graduates. BARNEY, a recent graduate of Indiana Polytech, quickly enters. HE is wearing a maroon graduation cap and gown. HE is upset and paces the room. HE stops, faces the wall, takes off HIS cap, and holds it in HIS hands, staring at it. HE starts to walk toward an offstage closet when HIS wife, BARBARA, enters.

BARBARA

Barn, where'd you go? I was getting a plate, turned around, and you were gone.

BARNEY doesn't answer.

Barn?

HE turns to HER.

Barn, the kids wanted to take a graduation picture with their dad. Everyone is out there to say congrats.

Pause.

BARNEY

I need a minute. Tell the kids to grab another drink. I just need a minute.

BARBARA

(SHE senses something is wrong) Are you sure? I can grab you some pulled pork, your favorite.

Pause.

They also have a coupla kegs of Bud Light, I bet I can sneak a second cup into my purse without the servers noticing.

Beat.

BARNEY

The bathroom is out of toilet paper.

Pause.

BARBARA

(Confused) No, I just bought some last week.

BARNEY

No, not at home. The bathroom down the hall.

BARBARA

So what if the bathroom is out of toilet paper, Barn. I'm sure there's more somewhere.

BARNEY

No, I know there is.

BARBARA

Did you check in the other stalls? I didn't see you go to the bathroom.

HE turns to her.

BARNEY

I don't need to check the other stalls. The point is we're out, and I need to get more.

HE turns away from HER and starts to walk toward the closet, offstage.

BARBARA

Now's not the time! You just crossed the stage not fifteen minutes ago and you're worried about the toilet paper situation in the bathroom? Let's go back out there and get your picture taken. Judith will be ready for her nap soon.

BARNEY doesn't move. Pause. SHE walks toward HIM.

We can worry if there's more tp later. Let's go!

HE turns to HER.

BARNEY

(HE bursts) That's the point, Barbara! There is more toilet paper! And you know how I know? Because I ordered more toilet paper, that's why. I ordered it. I received it off the truck. And I stocked it. *(HE points to closet)* It's on the left hand shelf in the conference room storage room. I could unlock that room with my eyes shut just by finding the key with the right grooves. But I wouldn't have to. I always keep the door unlocked because the key sticks. I've looked at toilet paper longer than the back of my own eyelids, Barbara.

BARBARA

(Calmly) Calm down, Barn. Why is it important to know where the toilet paper is?

BARNEY

[In hysteric] That's the point! I don't wanna know! I don't wanna know any of this anymore. But it's important because it's my job. I went back to school after working all these years because it wasn't an option before. I thought it was going to mean something!

BARBARA

And you just graduated magna cum laude, Barn! You just got to introduce the dean of students for his speech, for Christ's sake!

BARNEY

And yet I'm asked by that same dean who watched me introduce him not thirty minutes ago . . . he just asked me to fill the toilet paper in the men's restroom because I should know where it is. Can you imagine the stares I would get wearing a gown and refilling the toilet paper so other people can wipe their ass?

BARBARA

Oh.

BARNEY

Can you imagine looks I would get restocking the bathroom with booze on my breath because we had just toasted my college graduation two minutes prior? *(HE lets that sink in)* You can guess what people would think seeing a grandfather wearing a gown in the men's bathroom assuming that I have alzheimer's and confused on where I am.

BARBARA

Now Barn . . .

BARNEY

(Interrupting) Wouldn't you? I certainly would. I'd probably even offer to help the poor bastard find his family.

BARBARA

You're being ridiculous, Barn. He probably just assumed you're willing to help.

BARNEY

(He scoffs) Willing to help? Of course I am.

Pause.

This guy watched me from the moment I stepped into orientation. Ever since the university started this work-to-learn program all the higher-ups kept their eyes on me. It's like they wanted me to fail in the first place.

BARBARA

They watched you because you were special. They didn't want you to fail. You're so hard-working. They knew that. . .they know that.

BARNEY

(Ignoring HER) Do you know how hard it was?

BARBARA

How hard?

BARNEY

How hard it was to sit in class every night after my shift sitting next to the kids who knew I mopped their resident hall floors each morning? The same people who I know wondered if I read their crumpled pieces of paper from their trashcans the morning after our exams to see if I got a better grade than them.

BARBARA

I'm sure they didn't. . .

BARNEY

(Interrupting) I wouldn't do that, Barb! We don't touch anything in the trash unless we think it's illegal or harmful to other students.

BARBARA

I know that. . .

BARNEY

Not even Abraham Lani's notes from the midterm.

Pause. HE looks at her.

They were face up in the can. I could see whose they were. It was an accident.

Pause. HE notices a piece of paper on the floor. HE picks it up and throws it in the trash.

DAMNIT!

Pause.

BARBARA

This isn't about the toilet paper is it?

BARNEY

Yes.

Pause.

I mean, not really.

HE turns to HER.

I've been working here for 30 years and finally, finally I had the opportunity to get my life together. To continue our dream to get a move on with our goals. So I take that opportunity to get a free education if I still worked my 40 hours a week.

BARBARA

And you did it in four years, Barn!

BARNEY

I did. And every day I sat in class with kids 40 years my junior after I scrubbed the puke out of the hallway rug from the eighteen year-old kid sitting next to me that partied too hard the night before. And he knew it. And I knew it. The white elephant in the room was always sitting on my shoulder as I took freshmen lit as a fifty-five year old.

Pause. SHE's silent and lets HIM vent.

Do you know what it felt like to always get called on to read the part of King Lear when we read Shakespeare? My professor said it made the play seem "life-like" and made the class "flow" better. The kids laughed. It was always a silent joke that I was always a part of.

HE puts HIS head in HIS hands.

Did you hear what I said? The other kids. Christ. It makes me realize all the years wasted and the things I could have done.

BARBARA

Wasted?

SHE walks to HIM.

BARNEY

Yes, wasted. You know why they let me into the program, Barb? You wanna know? Because I'm a janitor. Because they probably thought I didn't have the motivation to make it to graduation. They knew that if I didn't keep my promise and get passing grades, I'd have to pay back my free tuition dollars. Just another way of them hitting attendance records and making their annual bonuses.

Pause.

I'm past retirement. They probably thought I was going to die before finals, anyway. And now I'm getting asked to work during my own graduation ceremony? It's even my day off, for Christ's sake.

Pause.

And that's what I mean by wasted, Barb.

BARBARA

Wasted? Barney, we've lived a good life. We've worked hard. And your hard work got you an education that you always wanted. We raised three kids. We own our house. And now you've stood in front of the whole graduating class to prove that success comes not from what you've learned, but what you've accomplished. None, none of any of your classmates can say the same.

BARNEY

I want respect, Bar! I thought that maybe, maybe, I would have a chance to talk with the dean about something other than changing the lightbulbs in the dining halls. But this damn place proves to me that I'll never be more than I am.

Pause.

You know what the funny thing is? I walk past his front row spot every day to and from the pay lot. His spot says "Dean Smith" like some hot shot. And you know what?! It's always empty. I'm in and out of this place every day before and after this joker with the only proof he shows up to work is from the granola bar wrappers in his garbage pail.

Pause. HE sighs.

Maybe this was all a mistake.

BARBARA

But now you have a degree! You're eligible for management position now, Barn! 'Member how we talked about that? Now you can move past being a custodian, if you want!

BARNEY

(Angrily) Don't call it that!

BARBARA

What?

BARNEY

Please. Custodian? People try to glorify it with that term. Don't glorify a job that doesn't deserve it. When it comes down to it, we clean up shit, that's it. Whether it's actual shit or having to take shit, we clean it up. No matter what you call us, that's what we are and what we do. You know that.

HE sits. Pause.

I was so excited to be a student at Indiana Tech. Not just a dumb janitor from Howe, but an actual Polytech Peacock.

Pause. SHE sits next to HIM and rubs HIS back. Pause. SHE stands.

BARBARA

Where's the damn toilet paper?

BARNEY

What?

BARBARA

Where's the damn toilet paper? We're givin' a roll to the dean.

BARNEY

Bar, no!

BARBARA

Yes, you're not giving up now. Not after working 10-hour days and then going to school every night. Studying for countless hours, giving up time with me, and the kids. Yes, you are going to show that man that you still have your pride, but he knows where the toilet paper goes, too. And you will give it to him, and he can shove it where he wants it.

BARNEY

Bar . . .

SHE walks to HIM.

BARBARA

I don't have a degree. I'm a mother of three with two grandbabies. I stayed at home and watched while my husband killed himself 60 hours a week at a job he hates and then he started school so he could work a 40-hour-a-week job. I don't give a damn! The dean needs more toilet paper? Well, maybe he used it all to wipe his tears when he saw a fifty-nine year old grandfather walk across that stage. Barney, you tell me where that goddamn toilet paper is. The dean's ass is getting itchy.

BARNEY

(HE points across the room, flabbergasted) Through that door, on the left, second shelf.

SHE exits to the offstage closet. SHE returns with two rolls of toilet paper and goes to BARNEY, SHE hands HIM a roll.

BARBARA

Here, take this. I'm proud of you. The rest can go to hell.

SHE places the cap back on HIS head. SHE moves the tassel to the correct "Graduate" position. SHE puts HIS face in HER hands SHE smiles at HIM. HE smiles back. THEY hold hands and exit.

(Offstage) Hey, dean-o! You needed some toilet paper for your ass?

LIGHTS FADE.

BLACKOUT.

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