Oct. 6, 2024

The Root of the Matter
a Short Play by Warren Goldie

Characters:

Erin: A flustered, somewhat clueless attractive woman, late 40s (Meredith)

Zelda: An eccentric psychic given to flights of exaggerated storytelling (Tena)

Caleb: An earnest young man (Dustin)

Owen: A sensitive young man (Craig)

Paul: An older man (Lou)

Timmy: A boy of seven (Dave)

Scene:

A small, dimly lit room with eclectic decorations – tarot cards, candles, crystals, and other psychic paraphernalia. A small table with two chairs. *Erin* sits nervously in one chair. *Zelda*, a psychic, sits across from her, serene and composed.

Zelda
People call what I do a psychic reading, and yes, we will contact the Beyond. But we do not just (*she does air quotes*) "read"—we *interact*! *(points to the crystal ball)* You see this? This sacred object was handed down through the centuries, from one seer to the next, on and on. I use it to reach the other side. What is your name?

Erin
Erin.

Zelda
How can I help you, Erin?

Erin
(fidgeting with her hands)
Well . . . It's guys. I'm attracting guys who are just . . . wrong. I don't understand it. Every date I go on is a disaster. It's like I'm cursed or something. I just want to know what's going on.

Zelda
(softly)
Hmm. Tell me about these men. Let's see what their energy holds.

Erin
Well, there was Caleb. We went out a few times. Nice enough guy, but god, he just kept talking about himself, like *all the time*. I looked good, you know? Put some effort into my outfits—*great* clothes—and he didn't even notice! He looked at *his phone*. Isn't that the rudest thing you've ever heard? (*proudly*) Hey, I lived in Chicago 20 years, I was an actress. I don't think he's ever left Iowa.

Zelda
I see. Tell me more.

Erin
Then there was Bill. He was attractive and interesting. He'd traveled the world, had all these cool stories, but at the end of the date—which was going so well—he tells me he's already in a relationship!

Zelda
(raising an eyebrow, intrigued)
Interesting.

Erin
Yeah! I didn't know what to do, I just sat there with this weird smile on my face. Then he says, "Why don't you join us?" Jesus.

Zelda
(thinking)
You've had a hard time with relationships.

Zelda
Erin, is there any one who stood above the others?

Erin
Maybe Owen. We went out for two months. I mean, we were really doing well, we had a lot in common. I'm a designer. He was in sales. Then, this one time, he lets slip that I don't have the right body type. I mean, he *said* that. It was so hurtful, so judgmental. We broke up. I texted him. I just wanted to get it over with. There are all these happy couples out there. I mean, look at me. I'm a good, decent, nice person with lots to offer. Lots of guys think I'm good-looking.

Zelda
(nodding, considering this)
The two guys you mentioned: Caleb and Owen . . . Just a moment. *(Zelda closes her eyes, breathing deeply as she seems to enter a trance.)* I can feel those stories—those men, Erin. (*she lays her hands on the crystal ball*). Wait . . . Wait . . . I'm getting something. Someone is coming through . . . It's Caleb. The guy that you went out with. His energy. *(Zelda searches, then snatches her fist in the air.)* You see, Erin, the patterns of our behaviors exist in the ether - they live on – the energies. They can be grasped, they provide us with information. Do you feel him? His essence—a part of him—is right here.

Caleb steps onstage, close to Zelda.

Erin
(laughing nervously)
You're kidding, right?

Zelda
Caleb wants you to know something.

Erin
(scared)
You mean he's really—

Zelda
Wait! He's speaking.

Zelda leans over to listen to Caleb.

Caleb
(to Zelda)
I didn't "talk" the whole time! She's full of it! I asked her questions, she didn't want to share personal stuff. I was just trying to fill in the space until she loosened up. If you want to know the truth, she was kind of snobby. She was the one who didn't listen!

Erin
(confused)
What's going on?

Zelda
Shh!

Caleb
I totally opened up to her . . . about my interests, my life, my family . . . a lot! But she got bored. What am I supposed to do? You know what? She's self-involved. She looked at her phone. Can you believe that? We didn't sync up—that's fine, but you can still have a conversation. You can be civil.

Zelda
(to Erin)
Erin, he says he opened up to you, but you were—I'm sorry—into yourself. You weren't his type.

Erin
(shocked)
What? You mean he just said that?!

Zelda casually points behind her, indicating Caleb.

Zelda
Yes. I mean, he's not *really* here, but . . . well, you understand … energy.

Erin
(frowning, defensive)
Well, I never! It was him, not me, who was the asshole!

Zelda
He said you checked your phone. He says you didn't want to listen. You were rude. I'm sorry, I'm just the messenger. You seem like a lovely person.

Erin, shocked, mulls this over.

Erin
Holy shit, you may be right.

Caleb
(quietly)
Wow, I can't believe my ears. That woman, you want know what? She's a royal—

Zelda
(to Caleb)
Hey! Easy there, pardner.

Erin
(confused)
What?

Zelda
No, no, not you.

Caleb
(to Erin, contrite)
Hey, things didn't work out. It's fine. It's not that big of a deal, not in the greater scheme. We all have our expectations. I hope things go well for you.

Erin seems to be thinking hard. She makes some nervous movements.

Erin
(fanning herself)
Gosh, is it warm in here? I'm kind of warm right now.

Zelda
(sounding a little weird)
Erin, do you want to know what happened? What really happened? You didn't want to reveal your flower to him. The flower was closed. Do you understand? Tell me, honestly, you didn't open the flower, did you?

Erin
Is he saying that?

Caleb
Hell no!

Zelda
(to Erin)
You must open the flower to release the fragrance (*grinning*). Then the bee comes!

Erin
I don't . . . (*thinking*) Well. That's not how I remember it. I wasn't rude. I was very open.

Caleb
(to Zelda)
She had daddy issues.

Zelda
(to Erin)
He's says you had daddy issues. (*she holds her hands up, defensively*) *I'm* not saying that!

Erin
Daddy issues?! The fuck!

Zelda
You know: the emotional and psychological baggage that comes from a problematic or absent father. Was your father—

Erin
I know what it means!

Caleb exits, looking satisfied.

Erin
This is too weird. It's actually *very* hot in here. You know what?

Erin stands up.

Erin (con't)
I think I've had enough of this.

Zelda
Wait! I'm sensing another energy . . . It's Owen.

Erin hesitates, then sits back down.

Erin
What do you mean?

Zelda
Your last boyfriend, right? He wants to speak to you . . . his energy.

Owen appears beside Zelda.

Owen
Erin, I was honest with you. I was really into you.

Erin
What's he saying?

Zelda
(to Erin)
He says he wanted your flower.

Erin
He said that? I don't think so. He said I had the wrong kind of body. I remember that: "The wrong body."

Owen
I never said that! I said you had a *strong* body. (*intensely, to Zelda*) She was always down on herself, thinking she was unattractive. She had low self-esteem. She blames things on others.

Zelda
He said you had a strong body. He said you put the blame on others.

Erin
I don't believe this. He was obnoxious.

Owen
No, I wasn't! You said you were open-minded. But you weren't. I felt like I was dealing with all the bad things every guy had ever done to you. You were hurt a lot. I get it. You got hardened. You were standoffish. You had armor around you.

Zelda
(to Erin)
Owen says there was a shell around the flower—a hardening. You hurt him. He felt he was getting the brunt of every bad thing every guy had ever done to you. You were bitter.

Erin
… the fuck I was! … Am! Was!

Owen and Erin yell over each other:

Erin	**Owen**
That's total bullshit! I wasn't that way. It was you!	You were so mean to me. But I really liked you!

Zelda
Enough! Enough! Shut up! You people don't pay me enough for this!

Owen whispers into Zelda's ear.

Zelda
(to Owen)
Hmm. I see. Yes, thank you.

Owen leaves, looking sad.

Erin
This is really strange. I don't know what to think.

Zelda
(slowly, in that strange voice)
Many things seem like what they are not. And sometimes, *we* think we are something that we are not.

Erin
So, what you're saying is that I'm hopeless. Man, this is one depressing psychic reading! I mean, I've been in therapy for like 30 years, this whole thing with guys probably started with a play date I had with Timmy next door, when I was 7. We argued over the Legos.

A boy, Timmy, steps on stage.

Zelda
(surprised, confused)
Timmy?

Timmy
(to Erin)
You hogged the Legos! Control freak!

Zelda
(*flicks hand at Timmy)*
Shoo! Git! Get out of here!

Timmy exits. Zelda picks up the crystal ball and shakes it very hard.

Zelda
Come on now! Sometimes . . . this thing! I don't know, it gets clogged or something. Listen, Erin, the important thing is that Owen saw something in you. He thought you could fit into his life.

Zelda pauses.

Erin
Yes?

Zelda
He loved you.

Erin
(moved)
He did? Oh my god, really?

Erin sniffles. Zelda looks on.

Zelda
(her expression softening)
What's a matter, dear?

Erin
What's a matter? *I'm* the asshole.

Zelda
No, no, no! (*kindly*) Not at all, not at all. We all have our roads to travel. Sometimes we don't see things clearly until we step outside of ourselves.

Erin
I was standoffish, self-protective, aloof. I blamed it on the guys, when it was just as much my fault. I mean . . . maybe I did get hardened.

Zelda senses something.

Zelda
Wait . . .

Erin
What is it now?

Zelda
I feel something different. It's—

Erin
Yes?

Zelda
Paul. Do you know a Paul?

An older man steps on stage. Erin's eyes widen in shock.

Paul
Erin?

Erin
Dad?

Zelda
You can *hear* him? *(nods to herself)* He's broken through! He pierced the veil!

Paul
(choked up, directly to Erin)
Erin, I'm sorry. I wasn't there for you. It was my fault.

Erin
(emotional)
Yes? No.

Paul
When your mom and I divorced, you were just a kid. I didn't realize how much you needed me. That day you asked me to come to your school play, and I didn't show up . . . I'm so sorry, sweetheart.

Erin
(starting to cry, voice cracking)
I waited for you. I kept looking out into the audience, thinking you'd be there.

Paul
I know. I should've been. I should've been better. I wish there was something I could do for you.

Erin
(softly)
I just wanted to know that I mattered to you.

Paul
You've always mattered to me. You always will. I was too wrapped up in my own world to see how much I was hurting you. I'm so sorry, Erin.

Erin
(nodding, sniffling)
I . . . I didn't think I'd ever hear you say that.

Paul exits.

Erin (con't)
(a mix of sadness and relief)
I feel . . . lighter. Like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders. I'm so embarrassed.

Zelda
Oh, no, dear! No need. No, no, no. We're all human. (*eyes twinkling*) At least, most of us are.

Erin
I haven't seen my father since he died 20 years ago.

Zelda
I'm so glad that happened for you. That is very rare.

Erin let's that sink in.

Erin
Oh, man. I'm exhausted. This was . . . I don't even know what it was.

Zelda
A lot is what it was.

Erin
Geez, wow. This is going to take some time to digest. (*she takes a moment to collect herself.*) What do I owe you?

Zelda's face takes on a strange look. Her voice turns dark and scary.

Zelda
Just your soul.

Then she laughs – a maniacal, bone-chilling howl. Erin stares, petrified.

Zelda
(grinning)
Sorry. Just kidding.

She takes a moment to enjoy Erin's shocked expression..

Zelda
Two hundred bucks should do it.

Erin
(freaked out)
Right, okay. Sure. Yeah. No problem.

Zelda
(smiling and shrugging)
Hey, it's Halloween, right?

The End