

# **Puzzles and Borderlines**

A short play

by Micki Shelton

## **CHARACTERS**

PETER                      Male, 34 or older, solid, pensive, supportive

JANE                        Female, 28-46, of Asian descent, an astronaut

## **SETTING**

Somewhere. Sometime.

**SCENE 1**

(JANE stands alternately bewildered and staring off into the distance, as music plays until PETER enters.)

JANE

Peter is it? So, I really am—?

PETER

Yes dear. And you are Jane.

JANE

How is it possible to travel all the way to the moon and back, endure all the perils of space travel, and have it be this tiny thing that brings me down?

PETER

Baffling, isn't it? So . . . welcome!

(PETER offers his hand. JANE pulls hers away.)

PETER (cont.)

Oh, it's quite alright here.

(PETER looks in the direction JANE's been gazing.)

PETER (cont.)

I know it's been some time, but what was it like seeing it from that tether while you floated soundlessly, and rather helplessly I might add, in space.

JANE

It transformed me. Wouldn't it anyone?

PETER

I suppose so.

JANE

It was . . . it was . . . this fascinating little pearl. Floating there all alone. Cobalt. Iridescent. Lonely, I guess.

(Beat.)

If you look closely at that famous painting by Vermeer, you see that the pearl is not attached to her ear at all. You have to ignore the whole rest of the painting to see it. Your eye is drawn into the darkness just off center. And there it is. Alone.

JANE (cont.)

Earth is like that—isolated in the dark.

(PETER and JANE stare at Earth.)

PETER

A single orb suspended in space.

JANE

I hadn't seen it that way before I traveled into space.

(Beat.)

When I was little, my parents gave me a puzzle—a map of the earth, each colored piece, a country. The U.S. was orange, red was China, Saudi Arabia was purple, Niger—brown. I thought the lines our governments drew were real. I could organize the whole world. Those borders were so thoroughly imprinted in my mind that I imagined colors on the globe with my eyes closed.

PETER

Because it was a *geopolitical* map.

JANE

Yes.

PETER

With imaginary lines. Shifting all the time, I suppose.

JANE

Yes! A *topographical* map would've shown *natural* features—mountain ranges and seas, elevations and trenches. It would've had one great piece for the Ring of Fire, one for the Nile Delta, another for the Amazon Basin. What a different focus I'd have had.

(Beat.)

The colors are different from space. Real. Blue and green and white with a bit of red splashed on, like blood-red paint. And when the night side faces you, there's this congregation of lights where the cities are. And, you *know* there are people down there—heading off to work before the sun rises, taking their children to day care before they've had breakfast, coming home exhausted, barely able to make it to their door and climb the stairs. But then there's dinner to cook, and kids to read stories to, and laundry to do. Why do we make things so hard? Why don't we just stand in awe?

PETER

Ahhhh. Yes.

JANE

Awe of what I knew was down there. Crystal caves and wild flowing rivers. Canyons and mountaintops. Trees changing color in autumn.

JANE (cont.)

Or just *one* place. The path I took to the pub that one evening in midsummer, that narrow trail hemmed in by blackberries and honeysuckle. Or just the ale. Just that. Held in my hand. Gazed at. Then drunk.

PETER

There's a theory going around that God loves things by becoming them.

JANE

Was that God? Ale in hand, sitting at the pub?

PETER

Who else?

JANE

Laughing. Flirting. A few coarse words.

(Silence.)

PETER

So, here you are now, standing at the gate.

(Beat.)

What exactly brought you here? They don't tell me, you know.

JANE

It had to do with borders and that they don't exist.

(Beat.)

They don't see them.

PETER

Who doesn't see them?

JANE

Viruses. Because they don't actually exist.

PETER

Viruses?

JANE

No. Borders. Viruses exist all right. Now I'm not a scientist. My graduate degree is, was, in mathematics. But astronauts have to know *something* about science—certainly that viruses and bacteria don't recognize borders. Neither does CO<sup>2</sup>, but that's another matter.

(Beat.)

The governments weren't prepared. They'd bought into the foolish notion that viruses could be stopped at the border like immigrants and refugees.

PETER

What are they exactly? The science in my day was rather—

JANE

Primitive, I expect.

(Beat.)

Viruses? Infective agents made of a nucleic acid molecule wrapped in a protein coat. Too small to be seen even by light microscopy. They can only multiply inside living cells of a host, like an animal or a human. They corrupt systems and destroy data.

(PETER finds this incomprehensible.)

JANE (cont.)

Little tiny things that get into your body and make you sick. If it's a new, unknown virus, your immune system doesn't know how to fight it.

PETER

Viruses. Immune system. So complicated.

JANE

Technology hasn't saved us! Understand, I loved living on the space station, making plans for a trip to Mars. They say technology is the mark of civilization—where has it gotten us? People are dying as fast as they did in 1918. If things don't change, they'll be dying as fast as they did during The Black Death.

PETER

I see.

JANE

People say civilization began when humans first used tools. Do you know how Margaret Mead defined the beginning of civilization?

PETER

I seem to recall something about bones.

JANE

Margaret said that the first sign of civilization was a femur, a thighbone, that had been broken and then healed. In the animal kingdom, she explained, if a leg bone is broken, the animal dies. It becomes food for scavengers.

(Beat.)

I learned the same thing in space. Civilization requires community, not tools. It begins when we care for one another. A healed femur is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell. Someone has bound up the wound. Someone has carried that person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone through difficulty. That's where civilization began.

PETER

And it has, of course. Begun.

JANE

Yes. And many people were trying to help, trying to “bind up the wound” so to speak. Still are. Searching for the correct anti-viral. But, in the meantime, since this is an unknown virus, the only thing they can really do is wait for the patient’s immune system to get up to speed and fight it off. Tell them to drink plenty of water. Wear a mask. Down that Vitamin D. Pray.

PETER

An inscrutable process at best.

JANE

Yeah, so how come that doesn’t always work?

PETER

What?

JANE

Prayer.

PETER

Beats me. I’m just the doorkeeper.

JANE

I’d have thought St. Peter would’ve been given a bigger job than that.

PETER

It’s a pretty important door.

JANE

But why?

PETER

Why what?

JANE

Why doesn’t prayer always work?

PETER

I could tell you, but it would feel like preaching.

JANE

I want you to preach! You're St. Peter! I'm in need of some answers. Why, otherwise, are you here?

PETER

To open the door.

JANE

(Not finding that satisfactory.)  
Oh. Well.

PETER

Look, even my master prayed, "If this cup can be taken from me, let it be so."

JANE

And?

PETER

His prayer was answered; it was answered with a "No."  
(Beat.)  
So you—your immune system—I presume, didn't get up to speed quickly enough?

JANE

Oh no. There was nothing wrong with my immune system. Astronauts have to be extraordinarily healthy. Anyway, I never caught the virus.

PETER

But you said—?

JANE

Said what?

PETER

You said it had to do with borders and the virus.

JANE

It does. The first person to be infected with the virus lived in China. It spread from there, and so after a while, people in the West started calling it the Chinese virus and vilifying us. I was simply walking down a city sidewalk when a man started calling me names. I guess I looked Chinese to him or something. I was trying to get out of his way when he pushed me into the street . . . and the streets—while generally empty because of the quarantine—well, a garbage truck couldn't get out of the way fast enough and neither could I. It was so quick.

PETER

I see.

JANE  
I don't qualify, do I? I have absolutely no history of going to church.

PETER  
Qualify for what?

JANE  
For getting past the gate.

PETER  
Oh don't be silly. Everybody gets in.

JANE  
Then why are you here?

PETER  
I told you. Someone has to open the door. Just takes a lot longer for some folks.

JANE  
What about . . . you know . . . what about . . . that other place?

PETER  
I thought you were a scientist!?

JANE  
As I said, just an astronaut.

PETER  
Oh, just an astronaut.

JANE  
I have *some* scientific understanding.

PETER  
And some geophysical understanding? Basic geology?

JANE  
Yes.

PETER  
Now where do you think that "other place" would be?

JANE  
(She knows it's lame.)  
Under the ground?



Uh huh.

PETER

(Frustrated.)  
Well, I don't know!

JANE

PETER  
And this? In outer space I suppose? Did you ever see it?

JANE  
It is true I don't see a physical door.

PETER  
No pearly gates?

JANE  
The only pearl I see is there. Right there.

PETER  
You see. That's all it takes.

JANE  
What's all it takes?

PETER  
Awe. Astonishment at the astounding beauty!

JANE  
That's it? Awe?

PETER  
That followed by a healthy response. But you see, that's always the result if it's true awe. The standing at the window watching the snowflakes blanket the city. Counting all the kinds of cacti, or corals, or conifers, or chrysanthemums that God had the pleasure to create. The sky's array from the bottom of a canyon. If one truly experiences a moment of genuine reverence, how can one not respond in love, in borderless compassion, for simply everything?

JANE  
Did God cause this pandemic?

PETER

Oh, goodness, no. God doesn't cause such things—earthquakes, hurricanes, cataclysms, pandemics.

JANE

A lot of people think God is in charge of everything.

PETER

Well they are wrong. However, and it's a big however, God can *use* things; in this case, perhaps to build global solidarity. It has been said that connection with God comes either from deep love or deep suffering. Maybe this pandemic will finally convince people that, as you said, there are no real borders. It doesn't hurt either for people to have time alone while they self-isolate. Did John of the Cross a lot of good. It's one's response that counts.

JANE

Well, finally some much-needed preaching! It's . . . this . . . it's all very confusing. Anyway, I can't do much from here.

PETER

There's a whole lot you can do from here.

JANE

How?

PETER

I haven't a clue. But I will tell you this: Don't think for a second that you can't make a difference. Whether you are here or there, everything you do makes a difference.

(JANE gazes at Earth.)

PETER (cont.)

Do you know the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt? The ten plagues?

JANE

Will I get in if I do?

PETER

Maybe they were meant to be taken metaphorically. Maybe they actually happened. Some say that they were all, in sequence, caused by the eruption of that volcano in Santorini.

JANE

How can you not know?

PETER

Let's say you *do* take it metaphorically. In Egypt, the first thing that happened was that the rivers turned to blood. What's happened to your rivers? Your skies? Hurricanes. Fires. Tsunamis. Drought. Floods. The melting of the ice sheets. Volcanic eruptions. Seas dying from pollution of many kinds.

JANE

That's ten.

PETER

Oh my, we're already up to ten. The fiery storms outside were not enough. The storms had to come into your bodies. Pestilence. Like the death of the first born. Frogs and locusts, weren't enough, neither was darkness. It isn't God who caused those by the way, as I said. What did? The earth itself? These cataclysmic events have always existed, but they've been happening in such quick succession. You have to have noticed the difference. Use whatever name you like, but something is fighting back—or bringing you a message. Think of it as a letter from Mom. It's time for a complete about-face. A metanoia. A complete change in one's way of thinking.

JANE

Will things turn around? Will they, down there, listen?

PETER

I don't know. I've been watching for a long time. Lots of possibilities.

(PETER takes out a kind of "heavenly" spyglass or performs an action to show a new way to look on Earth.)

PETER (cont.)

Here, look through this lens.  
(Helping her.)  
You can focus wherever you like.

(JANE uses the "spyglass.")

PETER (cont.)

Astonishing, isn't it? God appears in the smallest of details.

(JANE continues using the "spyglass.")

PETER (cont.)

Every snowflake has an entirely different pattern. There are over 1,000 kinds of succulents.

(JANE focuses it on something else.)

JANE

And there! Oh look!

(They continue looking through the new lens.)

JANE (cont.)

Oh, yes, yes. It is just, just beautiful over there.

PETER

There are all kinds of possibilities.

(Fascinated, they continue gazing through the lens as  
"Space Oddity" by David Bowie or other celestial music  
plays.)

(End of play.)