

STARGAZEY PIE

By

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A short play entry for  
The King Lear Prize 2020

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A middle aged, ordinary looking man stands alone, behind the counter of a traditional English Wet Fish Shop. He wears the traditional white coat and white hat. This is FRED.

The bell over the front door tinkles. A man bursts in. He has greasy hair, stubbly beard and wears worn clothing. He wears a dirty coat, with the hood up. This is NIGEL.

FRED: We're closing. Sorry.

Nigel whips out a SMALL PISTOL from his coat. He holds it in both hands, like a policeman, so that only the end of the barrel is visible.

NIGEL: Hands up.

FRED: Don't shoot.

NIGEL: Is anyone else here? In the back?

FRED: No. There's no one. I work alone. Every day.

NIGEL: Okay. You're scared, now, aren't ya? Admit it.

FRED: What? Oh, yeah. Look, listen to me. There's no money.

NIGEL: What?

FRED: It's the truth. I've cleared the til. It's all at the bank.

NIGEL: Where's your cash float, for the morning?

FRED: It's in the safe.

NIGEL: Well, while I'm here, you can open the safe, can't ya?

FRED: That's just it. I can't. It's on a timer.

NIGEL: You telling me, you can't get at your own money?

FRED: Not until 9AM tomorrow.

NIGEL: Oh, well...What about your pockets? Anything in them?

FRED: It's not much.

NIGEL: Well, let's have it, go on.

FRED: Okay, okay. Please, don't shoot.

NIGEL: Be a good little fishmonger, and I won't. Put it on the counter. Hurry.

Fred does as instructed.

NIGEL: That's it? All your money?

FRED: I told you.

NIGEL: Nothing else in the whole shop?

FRED: Uh... I can give you a salmon?

NIGEL: What? I don't have a bed. How am I gonna cook?

FRED: How 'bout some smoked mackerel? Now, those you can eat cold.

NIGEL: You taking the piss?

FRED: No! I'm not. Don't shoot, please. I have a wife.

NIGEL: So what? I had a wife, once.

FRED: You did?

NIGEL: You think I was always like this?

FRED: How would I know? I've never seen you before.

NIGEL: You don't remember me? Try thinking a bit harder.

FRED: Did we go to school together?

NIGEL: You're full of jokes, aren't you?

FRED: I'm not. I'm trying to think.

NIGEL: You do that, Mr. Bigshot.

FRED: Bigshot?

NIGEL: Yeah. You and your cushy little fish shop.

FRED: Nothing cushy about it. It's hard work.

NIGEL: Pah! It's a piece of piss. I worked in a shop.

FRED: Is that right? Look, there's nothing for you. Why don't you go away?

NIGEL: Oh, no. You're not getting rid of me that easy.

FRED: I'm not. You can stay... for a bit. It's that gun...can you put it away? Please?

NIGEL: So you can run out and call the cops?

FRED: No. I promise. We're having a nice chat, aren't we?

NIGEL: I think maybe I'll keep this on you, anyway, just in case.

FRED: Okay. Fine. So, well, what can I do for you?

NIGEL: What can you...? How 'bout a job? What you say to that?

FRED: You want to work here?

NIGEL: Why not? I can do this. All I need is a break.

FRED: Are you serious?

NIGEL: Yeah. I'm not afraid of the Public. I can talk to anybody.

FRED: I can see that.

NIGEL: Well, then. When do I start?

FRED: Not so fast. We have to be professional. I've got to interview you, first.

NIGEL: Alright, then. Come on. Let's have it.

FRED: Okay, but... no gun, okay?

NIGEL: But, it's here in my pocket. Remember that.

FRED: How can I forget? Right, first question.

NIGEL: Ready. Fire away.

FRED: Can you respect the stock?

NIGEL: You mean... the fish?

FRED: I knew it. You won't do. Sorry. You've got that face.

NIGEL: Face? What face?

FRED: It's there, clear as day, that ... that sneer.

NIGEL: That's no sneer. That's just... surprise.

FRED: You can't fool me. I even see it on my wife.

NIGEL: What's her problem with fish?

FRED: She says she can't stand the smell. Every time I bring it home, she says: "You clean it, you cook it, you eat it."

NIGEL: No!

FRED: Just turns her nose at it.

NIGEL: Oh, that's too bad. She's crazy. Now, my wife, she would cook this fantastic fish pie. What's it called? You know, the one with the pilchards? With their heads poking up through the crust?

FRED: Stargazey pie.

NIGEL: Yeah, that's it... I tell you, that woman cooked fish like... like an angel...When she died... I couldn't...

Nigel breaks down into tears. Fred sees his opportunity, and slowly sidles to the door.

I just dropped the keys in mail box, and walked away.

He spots Fred moving, and snaps out of it. He whips out the gun.

NIGEL: Stop. Get back there.

FRED: Okay. Okay. Don't shoot.

NIGEL: And keep your hands up.

FRED: Don't do anything. Please.

NIGEL: Calm down. We haven't finished my interview, have we?

FRED: Oh. Okay. Say, that's... an interesting gun you've got.

NIGEL: Never mind that.

The phone on the wall rings. A pause.

FRED: I'd better get that.

NIGEL: Let it ring.

FRED: It's probably my wife. She'll know something's wrong, and she'll---

NIGEL: ----Okay. Slowly, now. I'm watching you.

Fred answers the phone.

FRED: (INTO PHONE) Melville's Fish... Hello... Yes, I'm still here... See you soon, then, 'bye.

NIGEL: Was that your wife?

FRED: No. The Police.

NIGEL: (LAUGHS) Yeah, yeah.

FRED: It's no joke. Look. Get out of here, quick. I'm warning you.

NIGEL: And, I suppose the Police usually give you a little ring, just to tell you they're dropping by?

FRED: Right then. Don't believe me. Stay here, with your gun out. Go to prison.

NIGEL: Okay, I'll go. But, don't try anything. Stay there. Keep your hands up.

Nigel backs away slowly to the door,  
watching Fred.

Then Nigel stops. He looks lost.

A beat pause.

FRED: What's the matter?

NIGEL: I'm going. Don't rush me.

FRED: They'll be here soon. Get out of here. Go home.

NIGEL: I got no home. You still don't recognise me, do you?

FRED: Uh... No.

NIGEL: You pass me by, every bloody day.

FRED: I can't think...not with... that gun... Can you put it away, please?

Nigel returns the gun to his coat pocket.

FRED: Thanks.

NIGEL: Okay, now. Think. Where is it you see me?

FRED: Every day, you say? But, I'm here in the shop, all day. I only go out to the bank.

NIGEL: You got it.

FRED: You work in the bank?

NIGEL: No. I'm outside the bank. On the pavement. By the cash machines.

FRED: By the... Is that you?

NIGEL: What do you know! So, you do see me.

FRED: You don't understand. I can't stop. I'm carrying the day's takings.

NIGEL: And you do the same thing, when you come out of the bank. Like you think I'm some kind of---

FRED: ---But, I have to hurry. There's no one minding the shop.

NIGEL: Don't give me that. I say "Hello". I get nothing. You come out. I smile, 'Nice weather'? You ignore me, then. Every bloody time. You think that doesn't hurt? Well, let me tell you. It does. It bloody hurts.

FRED: Be reasonable. I would help. But, you people are everywhere.

NIGEL: Yeah, but, I'm special.

FRED: You?

NIGEL: Yeah. Because you're gonna remember me. For the rest of your life.

FRED: Okay, you're special. And I'm telling you one more time. The Police really are coming. I won't tell anyone you were here. Just take the money and... hit the road.

NIGEL: You think I'm some sort of a... stray dog?

FRED: Well, I don't know what to say... go to prison, then.

NIGEL: I'm no criminal.

FRED: What do you mean? You come in here, waving that gun around... You try to rob me.

NIGEL: Yeah, but I didn't, did I? Gimme a break, will you?

FRED: You still want a job?

NIGEL: Yes. Come on. Look, I'll work for nothing. Just let me kip down here.

FRED: That's ridiculous. You can't live here.

NIGEL: Why not?

FRED: You'd...you'd... lower the tone of the place.

NIGEL: Here we go. The same old middle class, namby pamby--

FRED: ---And you have just described my customer base.

NIGEL: Okay, I'll clean myself up. I'll buy new clothes. You never know, I could be your golden opportunity.

FRED: For what?

NIGEL: Well, I... I... I can teach you stuff.

FRED: What can you teach me?

NIGEL: Well, how about... empathy? Yeah. That's it. Empathy.

FRED: Look, I have a business here---

NIGEL: ---Ha! You don't even know what it is.

FRED: I don't need the likes of you telling me---

NIGEL: ---Prove it, then. Go on. Show me. Show me your empathy.

FRED: Okay. Here you go. Take the money, go back to your cash machines. We'll forget this ever happened. And I won't tell a soul. How's that?

NIGEL: That's not empathy. That's what you scrape off your shoe. I ought to...

Nigel points the gun at him.

FRED: Put it away. You're not going to shoot me.

NIGEL: Don't count on it.

FRED: How can you? That isn't even a real gun.



NIGEL: You want to find out?

FRED: Okay. Shoot that picture of Mrs. Thatcher, there, on the wall.

NIGEL: I... I wouldn't waste a bullet.

FRED: Because you don't have any.

NIGEL: Don't be so sure.

FRED: Will you stop this? The police are coming. Why don't you believe me?

NIGEL: Tell me then. Why would the Police come here, to this particular fish shop, knowing you'd be closed?

FRED: To get some sardines.

NIGEL: Sardines?

FRED: Oh, yes. The police are very partial to a fresh sardine.

NIGEL: Yeah, yeah. Pull the other one.

FRED: They're a donation, for their charity barbeque.

Fred looks out his front window.

NIGEL: You're giving away free fish?

FRED: The Police are good customers. Oh, you're too late, now. They're here.

NIGEL: Where?

FRED: Across the road. See their car?

NIGEL: Is there a back door?

FRED: The van's blocking it. There's no way out.

NIGEL: Oh, no! I'll get a record. Then, I'll never get a break.

FRED: Get it into your head. Call it what you like, but you tried to rob me!

NIGEL: Yeah, but... you started it. It's your fault.

FRED: How's that?

NIGEL: Because, you hurt my feelings. And you made me mad. Mister High and Mighty, treating me like I'm---

FRED: ---Alright. I'm a bastard, I admit it. Quickly now, take off your coat. And gimme the gun. Come on, hand it over.

Nigel hands over his coat and the pistol.

FRED: I knew it. A bit of copper tubing and some Duck Tape. What were you thinking?

NIGEL: They're crossing this way. What'll I do?

FRED: Put this on.

He helps Nigel into his white coat. He puts his white hat on Nigel's head.

FRED: What's your name, by the way?

NIGEL: Nigel.

FRED: I'm Fred. Now, get behind the counter.

NIGEL: What do I say?

FRED: If anyone asks, you're my new assistant.

NIGEL: Am I? Really?

FRED: Well... First, let's see how you serve these policemen.

Nigel and Fred stand behind the counter. The bell over the front door tinkles. They turn to the door, putting on their best shopkeepers' smiles.

THE END.