

THUNDER ONLY HAPPENS ...

A short play by Kevin T. Moss

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This play was originally produced on October 29, 30 of 1999 by the Michigan Technological University's Student Theatre Association in cooperation with the Michigan Technological University Fine Arts Department. It was staged at the University Theatre in Houghton, Michigan.

Written by Kevin T. Moss
Directed by Aaron Dykstra
Produced by Teresa Frusti

Cast:

Allen: Andrew Swartz
Spencer: Bill Binder
Beth: Emily Kerbleski

Technical Direction by Aaron Dykstra.

THUNDER ONLY HAPPENS

Characters:

Allen – A young man about 24 years of age.

Spencer – Another man about Allen's age.

Beth—Spencer's Girlfriend

Setting: A Remote Hilltop in the Midwest. Surrounded by trees and an amazing view of the landscape, about a 5 minute walk from any parking spot, but worth it, it is occasionally visited by many for varying reasons, from High-Schoolers looking for a place to “party” to hikers enjoying the countryside. The time is just a little before present.

(Allen appears on, seated with his head down between his hands. Near him is a small brown paper bag, as well as a beverage container. He appears to be having a conversation with himself. He stops as he hears the noise made by Spencer entering, carrying a personal cooler.)

Spencer: (noticing Allen) Oh, hello. I didn't think anybody would be up here. Did you come to enjoy the view, too?

Allen: Go away.

Sp: Huh?

Al: I'm trying to enjoy my privacy.

Sp: Oh, sorry, I'll just be a second... (He walks toward the hill side) God, look at that view, huh?

Al: Yep.

Sp: All those trees...

Al: Yeah. Wow.

Sp: You know, now and then I like to come up here, just to sort things out and clear my head. It's relaxing, and peaceful—

Al: Well, it *was* peaceful.

Sp: I just grab a sandwich and something to drink and sit up here and take it all in, you know?

Al: Yes, I know. (Spencer opens his cooler and pulls out a beverage, which he opens and begins slurping noisily. Allen is visibly annoyed.)
Could you do that somewhere else?

Sp: Oh, I'm sorry, am I bothering you? I'll just go over here a bit.

Al: Make it a large bit.

Sp: Well, I'll just sit here. I won't bother you, I'll be quiet.

Al: That's not the point! I came up here so I could be alone, because I wanted... to be alone, and now I've got to sit here and deal with a loudmouth idiot right next to me.

Sp: Whoa! You're upset about something, aren't you? (Allen fuming now, remains silent.) I can tell. You know, people tell me I'm really good at understanding their problems, at listening and helping them out. If you're upset, maybe you should talk about it.

Al: (trying to remain calm) If I wanted a moron to 'chat' with, I'd buy a dog. What I want is to be left alone. I don't want a counselor, I don't want a shoulder to cry on, I don't want someone to talk to and do my hair, I just want you to go **away**.

Sp: Jeez. (pause) You know, you don't own this hill.

Al: No, but now I'm considering buying it.

Sp: (pause) What the hell is your problem?

Al: (furious) Which part of shut the hell up and leave me alone don't you understand?

Sp: Fine. (sits) No problem. (talking to himself) Christ, guy acts like he owns the whole world. I just come up here to hang out and enjoy the view, and he has to be all . . . asshole. (takes a drink) You know the thing that really pisses me off about you?

Al: (sweetly) Please, tell me.

Sp: Shit. You think you're so fucking important 'cause nobody ever wants anything to do with you. You're afraid of ever trying to talk to anybody, so instead you're just an asshole all the time, so you can guarantee that they don't like you because they're "stupid" or "stuck-up" when the truth is, you're just a scared little kid that never took the time to grow up like everyone else in the world.

Al: Wow, you're a prophet, too. You need a name for that fortune-telling act. How about "Disgusto?"

Sp: Yeah, keep laughing, smart guy, you know it's the truth. When's the last time you went out on a date?

Al: (pause) El Disgusto the Magnificent strikes again. My girlfriend left me yesterday, Happy?

Sp: No. But I told you, I understand people, and I know all about people like you. I knew a guy in high-school, just like you. Richie was his name. He was always acting like he was so much smarter than everybody else, but you know what he's doing now? Nothing, same as before. He drives an ice-cream truck and parks it to read philosophy books that even he doesn't understand, so he can look down on everybody else.

Al: What's wrong with not making a lot of money, Mr. (looks at Spencer) "does all his shopping at Wal-Mart"? Maybe that's all he wants to do.

Sp: I don't have any problem with people who say that they don't need money, and that it isn't that important, but its always those same people that ask you to cover them when you go to a movie, or want to borrow 5 dollars at dinner, and then whine constantly about how they'll never make any money. The way I see it, you get two choices: Admit that you need money as much as everyone else does, or quit whining.

Al: Is this supposed to be another insult? Or have we taken a break from talking about my faults and moved on to making predictions on a global level?

Sp: I'm not insulting anybody. You seem to be the one who's afraid of the truth.

Al: Afraid of the truth? (chuckles) That's good. That's fantastic. (pause) You know, I gotta admit, you're at least good for amusement, in a chimpanzee-wearing-a-sweater kind of way....

Sp: You've got so many good insults stored up. Every time someone upsets you, you just sit at home and think up what you could say. Lucky you, finally get to use them.

Al: Hey, enough Pop Psychology, ok Dr. Laura? You've read one too many self-help books. Why don't you just go ahead and announce yourself the winner and then leave me alone so I can take care of my business?

Sp: I don't want to leave, I like it up here. What the hell is so important anyway, you have to be an asshole and kick everybody out?

Al: It's personal, and I sure as hell don't need to tell you.

Sp: Well, if you expect me to leave sometime soon, you'd better at least give some hints. I came up here for a reason too, so I could enjoy the view, before I head off to lunch. I'll only be here a little while. So what's so special?

Al: (tense) It's none of your business. (All through this next section Allen is becoming more and more reserved, almost dazed)

Sp: No, I think it is. C'mon, something is obviously bothering you. So, what's up?

Al: (quietly) Nothing. I just want to be alone, that's all.

Sp: Fine. (pause) If you don't want to talk about it. (beat) You know, I can see through you a lot better than that. What is it? Is this a special place or something? (eureka) Your girlfriend, right? This was where you two hung out or something?

Al: No, she'd never even been up here. Kelly would've hated it up here.

Sp: So what is it? Why'd you come up here? (pause) Childhood memories?

Al: No.

Sp: Your parents?

Al: No.

Sp: Field Trip?

Al: (Starting to become more and more agitated) NO.

Sp: Buried Treasure? You and the gang buried the loot up here and you came to collect?

Al: No, will you . . . ?

Sp: Demonic Ritual?

Al: No!

Sp: Horticulture?

Al: Shut the fuck up! (pulls revolver from bag and jumps to his feet) To die! All right? I came up here to fucking die, and you're ruining my last moments of peace, which, honestly just about fits in with the rest of my life. Jesus! (Stands fuming for a second and then collapses back to ground with the revolver in his lap)

Sp: (long pause) Oh. (pause) Uh... (pauses, waiting for Allen to speak)

Al: (pauses, realizing Spencer is waiting and holding it just long enough to make sure Spencer is uncomfortable.) Finally, you're fucking speechless.

Sp: (pause) Wow. Umm... wow. (pause) I'm not sure what to say.

Al: How about "goodbye?"

Sp: No. Although I sort of told you you're an asshole, I do kind of feel obligated to stay and make sure you're doing the right thing, you know?

Al: Great. More Pop Psychology, just what I need. Listen, Pal, don't do me any favors.

Sp: (indignant) I have to.

Al: Wonderful, well, could you make it quick and go away, there's only 9 hours of light left.

Sp: Why are you doing this?

Al: (as if speaking to a dog) Because my life is falling apart, and I don't have the strength or interest to watch it collapse completely.

Sp: Well, what's so bad?

Al: (Snorts) Ha!

Sp: Well?

Al: I don't have to answer this, especially not to someone who can't even tie his own shoes.

Sp: You know, you really like insulting my intelligence, but you don't even know me, you don't know anything about me. I've gone to college, I know what I'm doing. Why don't you just answer the question?

Al: Yeah, I'm sure you're a regular genius. What did you study, Einstein?

Sp: Engineering--and you're changing the subject --

Al: Christ, it's worse than I thought.

Sp: What? What the hell is wrong with that?

Al: The last thing I need is a deep soul-searching conversation with an engineer. What are you gonna tell me? (imitating) "Well, Gee, why don't you just stop being upset?"

Sp: Well, that is a good start— (Allen offers another derisive snort) Well, maybe you're a mind reader, too, but what's wrong with that? Your life is what you choose to make of it. You can choose to be happy, or you can choose to be pissed off and hate everything. Its obvious at this point what your choice has been, but why don't you consider stepping out of self-pity for a second and see what "fun" is like.

Al: Yeah, its just that easy. That's great, you're right, I feel much better. I think I'd just like to sit up here and think about how happy I am. Thanks for your help, you can go now.

Sp: Have you taken Sarcasm classes?

Al: Bite me.

Sp: Why isn't it that easy? What's so difficult?

Al: I just decide to be happy? And then I can be just like you? Joy!

Sp: I'm happy.

Al: Ignorance is bliss.

Sp: There you go again—

Al: Go? I haven't gone anywhere, I've been here the whole time. I've been sitting casually over here in **reality**. (pause) You should try it sometime.

Sp: Wow. You're so much smarter than me that you're pissed off at everything all the time. That must be . . . super.

Al: (explodes) What's not to be pissed off about? The whole world is going in the shitter.

Sp: I don't think its that bad....

Al: Then you're not paying attention! You've got kids killing each other at school, all our rights are being taken away, everyday we get closer to completely poisoning our planet, if we don't blow it up with nuclear weapons first, we have terrorists blowing up buildings and its only a matter of time before AIDS or a recurrence of Smallpox wipes us all out. Not to mention, my girlfriend of 4 years left me yesterday, my life is going nowhere, I've got a shitty job, a shitty house and I've got a blister on my thumb so I can't even please my self. Not to mention, I finally decide on a way out and I have to put up with a drooling idiot. What the hell is there not to be pissed off about?

Sp: (patiently) There are plenty of reasons to be happy in your life. Count your blessings. If you stop being so negative all the time, I'm sure you'll find lots of reasons to be happy that you are just not seeing because you don't want to look.

Al: Like what?

Sp: I don't know, you tell me. Puppies, for Christ's sake.

Al: I'm allergic.

Sp: Sunrise?

Al: I'd rather sleep.

Sp: ... Baywatch?

Al: You're trying to cheer me up with David Hasslehoff?

Sp: No, I'm trying to cheer you up with Pamela Anderson.

Al: Why bother screwing her when you can't even talk to her before or after?

Sp: You're not making this easy on me.

Al: Good.

Sp: (pause) Presents on Christmas morning?

Al: I'm Jewish.

Sp: Oh, come on!

Al: Are you done yet?

Sp: You think you can get rid of me that easy? (defiant) Don't bet on it. (pause) I don't give up without a fight.

Al: (thoughtful) I'm tired of fighting.

Sp: What are you fighting against?

Al: I don't know. Life. Everything. (pauses, reflecting) Waking up in the morning. Going to bed. (epiphany) Breakfast. I hate eating breakfast.

Sp: I don't understand. (Allen removes the gun from the bag and begins handling it distractedly)

Al: Neither do I. There's just ... something ... When you first wake up in the morning and you have nothing to do, when you have no real **life** to speak of, breakfast is just so depressing. Its like doing warm-ups to sit on the couch. (chuckle) And that's what my life has been. No meaning, no purpose, no anything, just exercise after exercise preparing me to start over again the next day, with the same damn eggs, the same damn toast, and a lukewarm cup of instant coffee.

Sp: You could buy a coffee-maker....

Al: (sigh) I'm sorry, for a second there I assumed you were a real person. I think we left off at, "Are you done yet?"

Sp: I'm sorry. It was insensitive of me. Please continue . . .

Al: (annoyed) What's the point? (returns gun to bag) What's the point of any of it? It's just another stupid conversation. None of this changes anything.

Sp: How do you know? Have you talked about it with other people?

Al: My parents and half a dozen shrinks that I've been made to go to, and they all look at me like you are right now, which makes me sure that nobody really understands at all what I'm feeling, no matter how many times they say they do. So lets just cut the bullshit. This isn't an experiment, it isn't a "cry for help," and it sure as hell isn't because of problems that will go away. I came up here because every other time I've been here I was completely alone, and I knew I'd be able to kill myself in peace. This is one of the few decisions I've ever made that I actually felt right about, after years of wishing, and now you want to ruin it. Why? You

don't even like me, and the feeling is mutual, believe me. So, what the hell does my life matter to you?

Sp: (defensively) I have to help! I can't just let you kill yourself.

Al: Why not?

Sp: It's not right.

Al: What isn't right? C'mon now, you're gonna have to do better than that. What is so damned wrong about it?

Sp: (desperate) I don't know! But how could I come up here, find you about to kill yourself and just walk away? How could I let that happen? How could I live with myself after that?

Al: Aha! So, you're doing this for you, not me.

Sp: No! (pause) Maybe. I just know that I can't let you do this without being sure that it's really what you want. It's my duty, whether I like it or not.

Al: Do you like it?

Sp: Not much, honestly. I'm supposed to meet for lunch in a few minutes, and somehow I don't think we'll be finished by then.

Al: I'll try to hurry.

Sp: Please, don't feel rushed. I can reschedule.

Al: Just for me?

Sp: Yeah, well, don't let it go to your head. (pause) Ok, maybe this whole thing hasn't worked out real well, but could you do me a favor? Give me the gun.

Al: It's fine where it is.

Sp: You know its kind of hard trying to talk to you when I know there's a gun in the bag.

Al: You could quit and go home...

Sp: C'mon. I know enough about you to realize that you wouldn't want to be a murderer and I can tell you've been thinking about shooting me just to shut me up.

Al: No, I wasn't, but now that you mention it –

Sp: Exactly. So, because this is a fairly emotional moment for both of us, I'd like it if you would give it to me.

Al: How do I know **you** won't shoot **me**?

Sp: It's pretty safe.

Al: I don't know. How 'bout I just put it here. (Allen removes his hand from the bag and places the bag to the side.) Ok?

Sp: Ok. (He visibly relaxes) Where were we?

Al: Well, you were wasting time engaged in the fruitless pursuit of comforting someone you don't know, and I was having my last moments of peace interrupted by a braindead psychology flunkie. Ring any bells?

Sp: Brain-dead psychology flunkie is nice, but my name is Spencer. Friends call me Spence.

Al: Spence. How very Abercrombie of you.

Sp: Just out of curiosity, are you always like this, or just when trying to get people out of your way?

Al: You have me there, I admit, I'm nicer to you than I am to most people.
(Beat)

Sp: Looks like rain. (Silence) You know, a few years ago I was having some really tough times. My sister was really sick, leukemia, and my whole family was having trouble, it really caused problems in my life. I couldn't concentrate in school, I was distant to my friends, it was really tough. And just when things got to be their worst and I started feeling really sorry for myself I realized that it was up to me to be strong, that I wasn't about to die, and that the better person I could be, the better I could help Sara. She needed my support, but I was too busy worrying to give it to her. And I realized that I had been extremely lucky to have her there for any time at all and I needed to make the most of it. So after that I spent every minute I could with her, when she was feeling ok. (pause) And we talked, I mean, really talked about things, about her life and how scared she was. We'd go out to movies, or just out for walks in the hills. (reflecting) We'd watch the thunderstorms together, Sara loved that. Just sitting on the porch amazed by nature's power. (pause) You know, I became even closer to her once I realized that I could lose her. Its too bad I hadn't paid more attention earlier. But I'm glad I got the time I did. (pause) There aren't any guarantees. Sometimes wonderful people wander in and out of our lives and we don't even notice. We take them for granted.

Al: (thinking) Did she . . . (trailing off)

Sp: What?

Al: Your sister.

Sp: Yeah, two years ago today. (pause) Couldn't find a donor in time.

Al: (awkward) I . . . I'm sorry.

Sp: Well, like I said, I still miss her a lot, but I'm grateful for the time we did have.

Al: How can you be grateful? That's so unfair!

Sp: Who says the universe revolves around me? It wasn't what I wanted, but maybe it served some other purpose.

Al: Oh, come on! This is exactly what I'm talking about! This sort of horrible thing happens to **you**. You're like perfect, you're nice all the time, even when an asshole like me is doing his best to piss you off. You probably donate time to orphans and sing Christmas carols and give all your money to charity, and yet, these horrible things happen, even to you! How can you stand to live in a world like this?

Sp: (getting angry) Get real! You want me to believe that Sara's death was a punishment? Life just is. Things happen, good things, bad things: its all just part of it. Everything that happens is not about **you**.

Al: That's what you think? Do you think? I mean, look around you! This shit happens every day. If you really think about it--

Sp: (furious) Yeah, well maybe that's the problem, maybe you think too much. Listen to yourself! You sound like a spoiled little kid. Yeah, you have problems. Big Deal, so does everybody else, but you spend so much time sitting around feeling sorry for yourself that you don't even notice anybody else. There are a lot of people a lot worse off than you, but you can't stop thinking about yourself long enough to see it. I was thinking you should talk to a counselor, but honestly, I think that would make you feel too important. What you need to do is talk to real people. Real people with real problems that learn how to deal with it rather than blame the universe. Visit a Nursing home, volunteer at the homeless shelter, talk to people at an AIDS hospice, but for god's sake, Stop Whining! I swear to god, all this self-important crap makes me sick! Get over yourself. (He turns away)

Al: (long pause) I guess I figured out how to make you angry.

Beth: (off) Spencer! Are you there?

Sp: Shit. What time is it? (Allen shrugs)

(Enter Beth. She doesn't notice Allen sitting on the other side of Spencer)

Be: Where the hell have you been? I've been waiting for a half-hour!

Sp: I'm sorry, I just stopped by, and I met . . .

Al: Allen. Allen Stein. Nice to meet you. (He stands and offers his hand)

Be: (surprised) Yeah, nice to meet you.

Al: Well I should probably get going (pause) Spence. (he chuckles slightly to himself)

Sp: Ok, Al. (Allen winces at the shortening of his name)

(Allen and Spencer stand at opposite ends, with the brown bag in between them. Allen looks at it then at Spencer.)

Al: I'll just grab my stuff--

Sp: I don't think so.

(Moment of Silence as Allen and Spencer size each other up)

Be: What's going on?

Sp: Nothing. Allen was just leaving.

Al: With my bag.

Sp: No.

Be: What's the big deal, Spence? (Beth begins talking to Spencer. As he turns to speak to her, Allen steps forward and retrieves the bag and then turns around to leave) Let him have the --

Sp: Wait! Don't--

Al: Gotta go, Spence. It's time. (pause) But, thanks. Thanks for talking to me. It was a nice way to spend an afternoon. (He turns to go)

Sp: Wait! Are you . . . ? (Allen turns back.)

Al: What?

Sp: Your decision.

Al: I'm not sure. Not right now. I need to go someplace . . . quiet. (He turns away again)

Sp: (desperate) Wait! (Allen shows no notice, exits)

Be: Hey! What the hell is happening here?

Sp: (turning to follow) I have to go talk to him--

Be: Hey, Spence. I love ya , but being stood up twice in an hour is a little more than even I can take, ok? Part of the reason I like you so much is that you are so giving of yourself to people, anytime they need it. However, it would be a **little** more charming if **I** was one of those people every now and then.

Sp: I know, I'm sorry, but--

Be: Come on. I'm not stupid, you just met this guy, you didn't even know his name. Let's go to lunch and we can talk about it. But don't desert me for someone else again. I'm trying to be patient, but its becoming very difficult.

Sp: Ok. I— (His speech is shortened by a loud report from offstage, and he turns to look in the direction of the sound, jumping) What was that?

Be: I don't know. Probably, nothing. (pause) Just a car back firing or something.

Sp: (hoarsely) Yeah. Probably.

Be: Are you Okay? (Spencer turns to face her and reaches out to hug her)
What's wrong? You're shaking.

Sp: Not right now.

Be: We should talk about this.

Sp: We will. But not right now. (He stands there for a short while longer
and then finally releases the embrace. Then, softly) It isn't fair.

Be: What?

Sp: Nothing. (Beat) (cocking his head) Did you hear that?

Be: Hear what?

Sp: (listening) I don't know. There! There it is again.

Be: What is it?

Sp: I'm not sure. Laughing, maybe. (pause) Or wind. (Beat)

Be: Looks like rain.

Sp: (pause) Yeah. (pause) We'd better go. (They exit.)

Properties:

Allen: Brown Paper Bag, Revolver, Beverage Container

Spencer: Beverages, Personal Cooler

Costuming:

Costumes should be minimal and should accurately represent the characters and the setting.

Author's Note:

There are a few references to pop culture within the this play, which, given the nature of pop culture, will likely be outdated a short while after this manuscript was finished. Directors should feel free to update the references made to something more cosmopolitan.

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