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*Dramatic Publishing*

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# Stranger with Roses

a science fiction entertainment  
in one act

by  
**JOHN JAKES**  
based on his short story



*THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY*

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(STRANGER WITH ROSES)

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STRANGER WITH ROSES  
*A Play in One Act*  
For Four Men and Two Women  
or Three Men, Three Women

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CHARACTERS

VINCENT DEEM..... *a stranger*  
SARI CHILDS..... *a young woman*  
DAVID CHILDS..... *her husband*  
ANDROID..... *a clerk*  
DR. STOCKHAUSEN..... *a scientist*  
WOMAN

Place: *The living room of the Childs home, on the outskirts of a large Western city.*

Time: *Summer of the year 1997.*

The play is divided into three scenes. The lights are lowered briefly between each, to denote the passage of time.

## Scene 1

SCENE: The living room of the Childs home. Entrances are DR, leading to a foyer and then outdoors; DL, leading upstairs to the sleeping quarters; and L, leading to the dining room and kitchen. The key pieces of furniture are a sectional sofa LC, a chair DL, and the communications console DR. On top of the console is a small vase of artificial flowers. At URC is a platform which represents a porch. An area ULC is used whenever someone appears on the console view-screen. For a fuller description and sketch of the setting, see production notes at back of book.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: The sound of a soft chime, twice. Lights come up on the platform and the backdrop--simmering yellow, to suggest the heat of full summer. DEEM is standing on the porch in his heavy black outer coat, his suitcase in hand. He is a trim-looking man for his age, and deeply tanned. But he is obviously hot and a bit nervous. He presses a bell in the imaginary wall in front of him, and the chime sounds again. In a moment, SARI is silhouetted as she enters from the kitchen, L. The lights fade up full stage illuminating the living room as she goes to the communications console, presses a button.)

SARI (speaking to the view-screen we cannot see).  
Yes?

DEEM (startled by the voice out of nowhere). Good morning. Ah--may I ask where you are?

SARI. Inside. Beyond that wall in front of you. I'm watching you on the view-screen.

DEEM. View - ? Oh - yes. I hope I have the right

house? One twenty Alpha Parkway?

SARI. That's correct. Can you hear me all right?

DEEM. Perfectly. I saw your notice in the paper -  
(By this time, DEEM has nervously shifted from his original position, prompting SARI to interrupt:)

SARI. Excuse me. Would you please move a little to the left? Nearer the lens?

DEEM. Lens?

SARI. The security camera is trained on the center of the porch.

DEEM. Oh, of course. (He moves.) Here?

SARI. That's fine. You say you've come about the advertisement?

DEEM. Yes. I'm hunting a place to stay. One that doesn't require a long-term lease.

SARI. We'd prefer a lease, of course. But it isn't absolutely necessary.

DEEM. Then you're an exception in - this city.  
(Frowning a little, SARI doesn't answer. The silence stretches until:) Pardon me - are you there?

SARI. I'm here.

DEEM. Is anything wrong?

SARI (recovering). No. Not at all.

DEEM. Do you still have the room for rent?

SARI. Yes. It's very nice. So it's not cheap -

DEEM. Price is no great concern. I wonder, Mrs. - ?

SARI. Childs. Mrs. Childs.

DEEM. Might I come in? The sun's extremely hot this morning. And it would be easier if we could talk face to face.

SARI. Of course, I'm sorry. I'll unlock the door.  
(She presses a button on the console.) There, it's open. Follow the arcade on your right, turn left, and come right on through the foyer.

DEEM. Right, thank you.

(DEEM exits UR, enters a moment later DR. His black fur-collared coat and battered suitcase are now distinctly visible.)

DEEM (setting bag down). Ah - that's heavy. Do you always keep your door locked, Mrs. Childs?

SARI. In a city of twenty million people, it's wise.

DEEM. But you live quite far from the center of town.

SARI. Didn't you take the monorail?

DEEM. Part way. I walked the rest. Frankly, I'm worn out.

SARI. Then please sit down, Mr. - ?

DEEM. Vincent Deem. Thanks very much. (Taking his bag to the sofa, he sits.) You know, while I was on the porch, I couldn't tell whether you really wanted to rent the room - (SARI seems to be staring through him. He reacts:) If you're not feeling well -

SARI. I'm fine. Really. (Beat.) Wouldn't you like to take your coat off?

DEEM. Yes, indeed I would. (He does.)

SARI. It's unusual for someone to walk even part way from the central city in weather like this. Or any weather.

DEEM. Unusual? Perhaps so. (A smile.) I wanted to get the feel of the place.

SARI. You just arrived here?

DEEM. This very morning. Despite the summer heat, I find your city extremely pleasant. So many splendid towers! I'm hoping to stay a good long time. (A short sigh.) My, it's comfortable in here. Now, about the room -

SARI (pointing DL). It's upstairs. Large - almost thirty by thirty, with a marvelous view. The



- windows are shielded glass. There's a health ray over the bed, a three-D set -
- DEEM. Do you have any other rooms for rent?
- SARI. No, just the one.
- DEEM. Excellent! I'm looking for privacy.
- SARI. I mentioned that the rent is high. Fifty credits a month -
- DEEM. Perfectly agreeable.
- SARI. You're sure - ?
- DEEM. Mrs. Childs, is there some reason you don't want to rent me the room? Have I offended you in any way?
- SARI. Of course not. Forgive me if I said anything wrong.
- DEEM. You didn't! You seemed a bit - disinterested that's all.
- SARI. I - I'm rather tired. I haven't been too well recently - (A vague gesture: her hand passed across her face. Again she recovers:) I'll be happy to show you the room.
- DEEM. Does the price of fifty - (Hesitates.) - fifty credits include meals?
- SARI. It does.
- DEEM. Good. I know I'll enjoy dining with you and Mr. Childs.
- SARI. David.
- DEEM. A fine old name. Are there children?
- SARI. Not so far.
- DEEM. What does your husband do?
- SARI. He works in the War Claims Bureau, at the government park next to Metro Hospital.
- DEEM. Far from here?
- SARI. Less than a mile.
- DEEM. That's lucky, having a hospital so close. (Beat.) In case of emergency, I mean -
- SARI. David should be home for lunch soon.
- DEEM. You say he's in War Claims. An unusual

occupation.

SARI. David is a claims adjuster. After seventeen years, you'd think that everyone who claimed damages from the bombings, and the riots afterward, would be taken care of. But you've no idea of the legal complications -

DEEM. I'm sure I don't. Seventeen years. I sometimes forget it's been that long -

SARI. Just locating all the witnesses in each case is a major undertaking. Of course, the global computer network makes finding one individual easy - (Goes to console.) I'm still amazed that I can give this console someone's name - someone who lives anywhere in the world - and probably be speaking to him on the screen in a few seconds.

DEEM. That is astonishing, isn't it?

SARI. What makes David's work time-consuming is the large number of witnesses in a given case. Especially cases involving riots. He says the Bureau will probably operate for another seventeen years at least. There's no escaping the war, it seems.

DEEM. War is a strange, contradictory business. In the struggle to kill the enemy, there are always great developments - breakthroughs - in the most unlikely places.

SARI. In weapons.

DEEM. And elsewhere. More humane areas. Medicine -

SARI. I see what you're getting at. Yes, there were a lot of remarkable advances as a side effect of the fighting. I sometimes wonder if the price is worth it.

DEEM. To people whose suffering has been eased by those advances - yes.

SARI. Are you in the medical field?

DEEM. No, but I'm intensely interested in it.

SARI. What is your field?

DEEM (seeming not to hear). Would you like a month's rent in advance, Mrs. Childs?

SARI. If you don't mind.

DEEM. Not at all. Here - (Fishes in his pocket.)

Ah, I'm afraid I have nothing but very large bills. Is there a place nearby where I could have them changed?

SARI. There's an underground shopping arcade just two blocks - (Points.) - that way. Try the market.

DEEM. I'll go along and do it right now.

SARI. Unless you want to see the room first -

DEEM. No, that isn't necessary.

SARI. All right. (Reaching for his bag.) I'll take this upstairs for you -

DEEM (stepping in front of her; quickly). Please - leave it there. (Beat.) I couldn't permit a lady to carry my luggage.

SARI (giving him a puzzled look). Whatever you say.

The room will be ready when you come back. (DEEM nods, moves his suitcase partially out of sight upstage of the console, puts his coat down on top of it. About to start DR, he pauses by the vase of artificial flowers.)

DEEM. Very pretty. (Touches flowers.) Oh. Artificial.

SARI. Why, naturally.

DEEM (touching the console). A most unusual piece of furniture.

SARI. It's just the economy model for private homes. Surely you've seen one before.

DEEM. Of course, Mrs. Childs. (Smile.) Why would you think I hadn't? (She stares at him a moment, then shakes her head and smiles, too. But the smile is forced. DEEM exits DR.)

SARI stands looking after him, a puzzled frown on her face. She walks to the console, touches it, her frown deepening. We hear DAVID's voice off L:)

DAVID (off). Hey, Sari. I'm home -

(DAVID enters L, putting his key case in his pocket. He moves downstage to her, as:)

SARI. You're early.

DAVID. Because I'm starved. (Kisses her cheek.) We wrapped up that nuclear poisoning business.

SARI. The Armstrong case? (He nods.) Oh, David, that's a big relief. It seems as if you've been working on that one claim forever.

DAVID (relaxed, smiling). I talked to the last witness this morning. Finally located him in Ceylon. I felt so damn good, I wanted to celebrate. (Kisses her lips lightly.) By bringing you a present. Something special. Unbelievable! Like flowers.

SARI (warm laugh). You're a treasure.

DAVID. I'd have gone anywhere on earth to find you a real bouquet - paid anything to have walked in with a replacement for these - (Flicks the artificial flowers; smiles.) At least you know my intentions were good.

SARI. We had a real garden when I was small, have I ever told you? (He shakes his head.) Jonquils, asters, tulips, lilacs - and roses. The smell was indescribably sweet. (For a moment she is lost in reverie. Then:) How did the Armstrong business come out?

DAVID. The Bureau is going to find for the plaintiff. A million and a half in damages.

SARI. So much!

DAVID (sitting). The Armstrongs lost

three children. And the fourth is still crippled. Their lawyers proved conclusively that the workers at the government substation near the Armstrong home did in fact riot that day. The workers damaged the shields - releasing all that radiation - (Beat.) I keep asking myself how long it will take to lay the ghosts of the war. Our own people did more harm than the enemy's bombs. (Beat.) Anyway, the case is closed. And I'm still starved.

SARI. Lunch is almost ready. I'm running a little behind this morning.

DAVID (concern). You still feeling all right?

SARI (emphatic nod). Three months in the hospital was quite enough. I don't intend to be sent back.

DAVID. Do any work on your new painting?

SARI. No time. I had to call in the week's order to the market. Then Mr. Deem arrived.

DAVID. Mister who?

SARI. Deem. Our new boarder. (Points to suitcase behind console.) I rented the room.

DAVID (going upstage to look at suitcase). Terrific! We can use the extra income.

SARI. He's a rather odd man.

DAVID. Odd? How?

SARI. A few moments after he walked in, I had - call it a peculiar reaction. He says he's a stranger in the city. But that doesn't really explain the way he studied everything - the furniture - my clothes - as if he were curious - even a little astonished. A stranger in the full sense of the word.

DAVID. I'd like to have a look at him.

SARI. He just went to the market, to change some bills.

DAVID. What's his line of work?

SARI. I tried to find out. No luck. He didn't even bother to see the room. He was more concerned about whether we had other boarders.

DAVID. Look, we don't need money that badly. If he upsets you, we can get rid of him -

SARI. He didn't upset me, exactly. I just felt - uncomfortable. (Tries to laugh.) I suppose the whole thing's ridiculous. Probably a flare-up of the kind of wild fancies that put me in the hospital in the first place. The loneliness of this house seems to breed them -

DAVID. Plus that over-active artist's imagination of yours. Did this Deem actually do something questionable, or suspicious - ?

SARI. Nothing.

DAVID. Was he rude?

SARI. If anything, he's overly polite. He speaks softly, but - (Beat.) Let's forget it.

DAVID. I'd like to. (Beat.) But I wonder if I should.

SARI. What?

DAVID. I care about you, Sari. You mustn't let the phantoms start deviling you again -

SARI. I couldn't help my reaction! I looked at him and I was - uneasy.

DAVID. Try to give me a specific reason.

SARI. In heaven's name - why?

DAVID. Because the doctor said you had to confront your anxieties, remember? Confront them constantly - and completely -

SARI (nodding). All right. Let me see - (Beat.) For one thing, he acted as if that console was unfamiliar. As if he'd never laid eyes on one before. I don't know an urban home that doesn't have one.

DAVID. Could he by chance come from a rural area?

SARI. He doesn't act or talk like it. His clothes

are expensive - or at least not cheap. But they struck me as strange, too.

DAVID. You mean faddish? Bizarre?

SARI. Ancient! When he arrived, he was wearing - (Points.) - that black coat. It looks twenty years old - and almost brand new! Besides that, the sun was broiling -

DAVID (shrugging). Perhaps he's eccentric. Or just cold-blooded.

SARI. I'm not inventing any of this, David. Believe me, I don't want it to start again. I realize that all the fears that put me in the hospital had no real basis except - in my mind. But somehow, his clothes are - wrong!

DAVID. You'll have to be more definite -

SARI. I can't be!

DAVID (a gentle warning). Sari -

SARI (quickly). Small differences! So small, they nearly go unnoticed. Look at that coat. The style isn't contemporary. It's almost as if he reached into some twenty-year-old refuse bin and put on the first thing he found.

DAVID (after a considered pause). I hate to say it. But I wonder if a call to the doctor might be in order.

SARI. I am not imagining - !

DAVID. A moment ago, you virtually agreed you were.

SARI. I know, but -

DAVID. You said your suspicions were unfounded. You even used the word "ridiculous." It's essential for you to keep admitting that your mind can conjure - unrealities. That's the only therapy that'll help in the long run.

SARI. You're right -

DAVID. So say it out loud. There's nothing really wrong with Mr. Deem.