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Dramatic Publishing

Answers From the Center of the Universe About Things Unknown

by

KENT R. BROWN

Dramatic Publishing

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(ANSWERS FROM THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE ABOUT
THINGS UNKNOWN)

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**ANSWERS FROM THE CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSE
ABOUT THINGS UNKNOWN**

A Play in One Act
For Two Men and One Woman

CHARACTERS

J. J. MYERS in his early 40s
JENNIFER ROSS in her late 30s
WILLIAM CANBY in his middle 40s

TIME: The present.

for Crandall and Elaine Brown

ANSWERS FROM THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE ABOUT THINGS UNKNOWN

AT CURTAIN: *Back lighting silhouettes all three characters while area lights serve to accent each character. As the piece progresses, more light remains on all the characters. As the resolution of the play approaches...each character returns to his/her original position...tagging off with fading light and silhouettes.*

J.J. I had gone into the pharmacy to pick up a few things ...Thursday night just before closing...some shampoo ...a notebook for my daughter. I was helping her draw a weather chart ...temperatures...rainfall...that sort of thing. She wanted one of those notebooks with wide lines so she could make the numbers real big. So I decided to kill a minute or two and walk over to the magazine rack...past the self-help guides and the working woman section ...to the girlie magazines. What the hell! She always got her homework done on time. And Frank comes up to me...the pharmacist. "Caught you this time, J.J.," he says. From ear to ear he has this big smile on his face. "Don't turn me in, Frank," I tell him ...my hands are in the air now. "I've got my 'dirty old man' card here somewhere." And he gives out with a belly laugh and tells me to look on page 83.

JENNIFER. I'll never forget the evening my father fell in love with another woman. I was tearing up some let-

tuce to make a salad. Daddy had just finished stirring the creamed peas...and *Star Trek* reruns were coming on. We always ate together...Captain Kirk...Spock... my father and me. Sometimes we would talk about how our day went...who was hating me at school...did Bobby push me against the locker after third period... the usual teen-age stuff. And he would tell me if he was going to tell off his boss in the morning...or ask him for a raise. The usual adult stuff. Nothing major. Just our lives.

WILLIAM. When I got the call I was in conference with the other movers and shakers in Development. Something about graphs and costs per hour...per minute... per second. Martha, my secretary, opened the door and silently walked to my desk. She held out a piece of paper folded in half with "Urgent" written across it. I took the note and nodded...but she didn't leave. Someone...I think it was Harold...the new man in sales...was telling a joke...something original about a traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter. "Thank you, Martha," I said, with both ears on the punch line. But she just stood there looking at me with a strange expression on her face. (*Pause.*) I read the note and excused myself. "You're missing the best part," someone said.

J.J. So I start flipping through the pages. Frank's right... old 83 is some looker. And I feel Frank's hand on my shoulder. "You and your lovely daughter doing O.K.?" he asks. I tell him we're hanging in there...that her teachers were very understanding...that all the kids had signed a sympathy card. "Wonderful," he says. "Glad to hear that!" And then he puts his other hand on my shoulder. "And how about you?" he asks. "You

doing O.K.?" I nod and say everything is fine ... that I'm staying busy at work...that my daughter and I might take in Disneyworld this summer. "Terrific idea," he says. "Take those trips while you can." You could hear it in his voice ... anxious...strained.

JENNIFER. I was fourteen and boys had begun to phone me a lot. When Bobby called ...Daddy would say, "Jennifer ...the locker boy is on the phone." But when a lot of boys started telephoning he just said, "How old is he?" or "Sounds like a wimp." Once, after a long call, I found him sitting on the edge of his bed ...his head in his hands. "You O.K., Daddy?" I asked. He nodded and put his arms around me. "You're growing up so fast." Then he kissed me on the forehead and said, "Your turn to do the dishes. I won." (*Pause.*) So ...after he finished stirring the creamed peas Daddy asked how they looked. "Terrible," I said. He just laughed and pulled my ponytail. They always looked the same. He never really stirred them ...more like ...beat them to death. He didn't do much better with hamburgers either. I called them Mystery Chunks. But I loved him anyway.

WILLIAM. Mother had been in for a check up...or a check down...or a hand holding session ...or maybe she was there because she knew she needed to be. In the midst of it all...she just fell to the floor. An irregular heartbeat had come down on top of all the other irregular heartbeats in her life and just ...stopped... everything. "Froze the heart"...that's how the desk nurse described it when I called. (*Pause.*) It's now midnight and Mother has been in intensive care for seven hours by the time I step inside the cubicle ...with glass all around. Bellows pump air in and out of her lungs

through a corrugated tube extending into her mouth. Like she's being vacuumed. Eight metal tripods stand guard around her bed with bottles hanging from them. Plastic tubes are going everywhere. She looks like an experiment in an old Frankenstein movie...blinking red lights...blips...and electronic sounds. In the corner ...on the window sill...sits Dr. Bermann. "Things just ...accumulate," he explains. "They sneak up on you when you're doing your taxes or driving home on the freeway. You can't stop them." He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. I walk across the room and join him on the window sill. For the next several moments we both just sit there...our feet not touching the floor ...like two little boys perched on the edge of a bridge looking at the water below. (*Pause.*) "How was your flight?" he asks.

JENNIFER. I could hear "To boldly go where no man has gone before" playing in the background. "Hey, Daddy...we're going to miss the Klingons." I'd done my social studies homework...about how humans need shelter and food and companionship...and all the rest of it...and was all set to ask Daddy if I could go to the Waffle King with Bobby. No one went anywhere except to the Waffle King...or maybe the parking lot in front of Montgomery Wards...just sit on car hoods and play cassettes for hours. Cops didn't mind. Kept all the kids in one place. Daddy had allowed me to go a few times before...but only after he'd met Bobby first. Daddy was in his nervous stage. Had to screen all the boys who wanted to take me out. When Bobby came over Daddy burned some Mystery Chunks and smiled a lot and talked about basketball...and summer camp when he was a kid...and asked what Bobby's mother

and father did for a living. I was embarrassed. Bobby held his own pretty well. His mother handed out license plates all day at the county revenue office...and his father ran a dry cleaning store in Minnesota. "I was just trying to make conversation, Honey." (*Pause.*) I know better now. It wasn't that he wanted my friends to have parents with money. He was just concerned that there was a family in the picture somewhere. He felt it helped stabilize the kids. A few days later Daddy asked me if Bobby missed his father. I told him Bobby never said much about it. Daddy looked at me and then gave me a big hug.

J.J. And then Frank leans in to me real close.

JENNIFER. He seemed to be trembling all over.

J.J. "Do you have a minute, J.J.?" he asks. He's almost whispering now. "Won't take long...I know you're busy." Suddenly he steps back real quick and starts fussing with the shaving cream cans, putting them all in neat rows. "Sure, Frank, I got a minute. What do you need?" Then he just stops and stares at me...a bottle of hair coloring in his hand...you know the stuff I mean...comb it through your hair and look like Apollo. (*Pause.*) "What advice do you have for someone who's been diagnosed cancerous?" (*Pause.*) The look in his eyes! Advice? Jesus! What advice could I give? Be sure your premiums are paid up! Take your wife in your arms and tell her you love her...need her. That you're sorry for all the pain you've caused.

WILLIAM. Mother's blood pressure is down into the 60's...

J.J. "I don't know what to tell you, Frank."

WILLIAM. ...her heart rate well over 150. Dr. Bermann was with another patient when he heard his name

paged over the speaker. "One moment you're on your feet and you're a wonderful human being," he says, "and the next moment you're on the floor and you're not so wonderful anymore. You're just...there." Then he gets down from the window ledge and excuses himself. He has other patients, he says. In the doorway he stops and looks back at Mother. "She was a fine lady... a bit stubborn...but good God!...who's perfect!" And then I'm alone with the blinking red lights...and the blips and the sounds that tell me everything I don't want to know. (*Pause.*) I wanted her with me again...to talk to me...to take away my guilt. I didn't think my love for her could keep her alive...you lose those romantic notions when you've been around the block a few times. But I felt selfish. My mother was leaving me and I wanted her back. It made no difference that I had stolen my life from her years before...the way a child steals quarters from a piggy bank high up on a closet shelf in his parents' bedroom...and that I had so rarely, if ever, repaid...the debt.

J.J. "What do I do, J.J.? You'd think I'd understand the terms. I've been hearing them long enough!" His fingers flex all of a sudden. "We're almost out of these," he says, pointing to the Clairol bottles...or the Wella Balsam...I can't remember. "Inventory for a place like this'll kill you!" Then he starts laughing...and then I'm laughing. Both of us...just standing there in the middle of the store laughing our heads off. (*Pause.*) I was scared.