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# **Strong Waters**

By

CLAIRE ZASLOVE

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

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*Strong Waters* received a staged reading at the Crown Hill Center (Seattle) in August 2022.

CAST:

EVELYN ADAIR ..... Maureen Hawkins  
JEFFREY MERRITT.....Bob De Dea  
JAMES MERRITT ..... Gordon Coffey

PRODUCTION:

Director ..... Arne Zaslove

The play was then presented as an Equity Member Project at the 12th Ave Arts Studio Theatre (Seattle) in January 2024.

CAST:

EVELYN ADAIR ..... Maureen Hawkins  
JEFFREY MERRITT.....Bob De Dea  
JAMES MERRITT ..... Gordon Coffey

PRODUCTION:

Director ..... Margaret VandenBerghe

# Strong Waters

## CHARACTERS

EVELYN ADAIR: 70s, an actress.

JAMES MERRITT: Late 70s, retired actor.

JEFFREY MERRITT: Late 40s, James' son.

SETTING: A well-kept floating home docked in a comfortable houseboat community. In addition to the living/dining area, there is a door upstage that leads to the kitchen and other rooms. To one side there is a staircase leading to an upstairs loft. At the very front of the stage, the apron serves as part of the deck.

TIME: The present.

The play is performed in four scenes without intermission:

Scene 1: Bourbon

Scene 2: Champagne

Scene 3: Brandy

Scene 4: Coffee



# Strong Waters

## Scene 1: Bourbon

*(A houseboat docked in a houseboat community. EVELYN is on the pier.)*

EVELYN *(calls across the gangplank)*. Permission to come aboard?

JEFFREY *(appearing from inside)*. Ahh, here you are. Let me help you across.

*(He meets her halfway and gives her a hand or an arm. She looks amused, but takes it.)*

JEFFREY *(cont'd)*. The footing's a bit uneven here. Just mind your step. Believe it or not, my dad won't hear of any railings.

EVELYN. Seems pretty stable, though.

JEFFREY. Oh, yes. Except when a large boat goes by, there can be a bit of a swell. Come on in.

EVELYN. Thank you.

JEFFREY. Let me hang up that coat for you. Please, take a seat.

*(She sits as he hangs up the coat. Then JEFFREY finds a pillow to settle behind her back.)*

JEFFREY *(cont'd)*. Here, allow me ...

EVELYN *(smiling)*. I feel like a teacup being settled on a saucer. I promise you, I'm not going to break.



JEFFREY. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to fuss.

EVELYN (*amused*). You take good care of your father, I'm guessing.

JEFFREY. I try.

EVELYN. Is he—?

JEFFREY. Afternoon nap running a bit late. Can I make you some tea?

EVELYN. Tea? I thought you invited me for a drink.

JEFFREY. I did. Sorry. I have some Pinot Grigio—

EVELYN. I wonder why it is that everyone thinks ladies drink white wine. You wouldn't happen to have any bourbon, would you?

JEFFREY (*laughing a bit*). I would indeed. How would you like—

EVELYN. Just neat, thank you. Don't tell me—Maker's Mark?

JEFFREY. You know my dad well, apparently.

EVELYN. I did.

*(JEFFREY and EVELYN continue to talk while JEFFREY prepares her drink.)*

JEFFREY. I'm kind of excited about this. Not often I get to surprise him.

EVELYN. Mmm.

JEFFREY. I'm sorry. I know the reason you're here isn't a happy surprise.

EVELYN. Well. It's what happens at our age. The friends, you know ...

JEFFREY. I know. I've watched it happen to him. One by one. My mom being the biggest one, of course.

EVELYN. Of course.

JEFFREY. To be honest, that's why I moved in here with him. It was hard watching him—you know, watching the isolation get deeper. And he would disappear into his studio. Claimed it was what was keeping him going. But I know that you need someone to talk to at the end of the day. Someone to have a drink with. Oh, sorry—here you go.

*(He finally gets the glass into her hand.)*

EVELYN. Thank you.

JEFFREY. Just someone to talk with about—what you're going to make for dinner. What to watch on Netflix. Whether the laundry basket is full enough for a load. Mundane stuff. But it's the little things that you can only share—well, you can only share with someone you're close to. Someone you live with. He lost all that when Mom died. And I just saw him, you know ... vanishing down a rabbit hole.

EVELYN. So you reached in and pulled him out.

JEFFREY. Well, I'm not trying to say ... I mean, he's helping me out too. Divorce is expensive.

EVELYN. A roommate is always a good thing. Believe me, I think he's lucky.

JEFFREY. So you did a lot of shows together?

EVELYN. Back in the day. Quite a few.

JEFFREY. How long have you known my dad?

EVELYN. Ooh, now you're asking me to date myself. I'll tell you this, though—I used to babysit you when you were little.

JEFFREY. No ... whaaat? That's crazy.

EVELYN. Yes, you were just a little sprout. Your cheeks were really round.

JEFFREY. Oh, no—

EVELYN. It was adorable! And you were obsessed with those little ... logs that notch together—

JEFFREY. Lincoln Logs.

EVELYN. That's it! Always some structure on the go ... and you had these little figures that would sometimes live in these little ... compounds that you built.

JEFFREY (*not sure*). Ohh, yeah ...

EVELYN. You would make them talk to each other.

JEFFREY. Hmm.

EVELYN. And I remember thinking, "Oh, characters talking to each other. I can get into that."

JEFFREY. Huh. I guess so.

EVELYN. I'll never forget, there was one time when I picked up a figure and kind of animated it, made it walk into the middle of your world, thinking we could strike up a chat. And I kind of moved one section of logs so there was room for my little figure to go through, and you said "Don't you touch that!"

JEFFREY. Oh, no! Did I really?

EVELYN. It was so funny. Oh, my God, we laughed and laughed about that. It became kind of a watchword amongst the grownups: "Don't you touch that!"

JEFFREY. Oh my God, I'm so embarrassed right now.

EVELYN. No, no! You shouldn't be. You couldn't have been more than five or ... six, maybe?

JEFFREY. I'm so sorry. I have no memory of—

EVELYN. That's all right. I moved away. For quite a while. So I never got to see you grow up.

JEFFREY. Funny, that's one of those things about losing a parent. You suddenly lose access to all those stories, you know, to someone who remembers you as a child.

EVELYN. I'm so sorry about your mom.

JEFFREY. Thank you.

EVELYN. I did write to your dad when she passed, but I never—I guess one doesn't expect the bereaved to respond. They have enough on their plate.

JEFFREY. I'm sorry. Maybe it went astray. With everything going on in those final days, and then he moved here so soon afterwards.

EVELYN. Ahh.

JEFFREY. You're not supposed to do that. Too many stress points all at once. You're supposed to wait a year. But he said it would take more than a year to get the cigarette smoke out of the house. I think he was restless.

EVELYN. Mm. And when did you move in?

JEFFREY. Six months ago. *(A quick breath.)* So, did you find your Airbnb all right?

EVELYN. I did, thank you. I'm all settled in.

JEFFREY. Nice place? Good kitchen?

EVELYN. Kitchenette. I'll find a restaurant in the neighborhood. A good kitchen's important to you?

JEFFREY. Always the first thing I check on. My dad always says, "You cook for others, you feed yourself." But I think if I were stranded alone on a desert island, I'd still be cooking for myself.

EVELYN. Provided you had a gas stove and a good set of knives.

JEFFREY. Under the palm tree, in the sand. Right.

*(They share a laugh. JEFFREY pours them another bourbon but stops short. JAMES enters. JEFFREY and EVELYN are silent as they wait for him to take in the scene. JEFFREY looks happily anticipatory. EVELYN is hard to read. A moment passes.)*

JAMES. What are you doing here?

JEFFREY. Dad.

EVELYN. I came about a friend.

*(Pause.)*

JAMES. And to drink some of my good bourbon, I see.

EVELYN *(raising her glass)*. Cheers. *(Pause.)* I sent a few emails.

JAMES. The day I tossed my laptop overboard was what I call my Independence Day.

EVELYN. And a letter. I thought that might be less intrusive. But maybe it never arrived. Those mailboxes up at the end of the dock look kind of sketchy.

JAMES. No, I got it.

EVELYN. So ...

JEFFREY. Dad.

JAMES. Yes, Jeffrey?

JEFFREY. I met Evelyn up by the mailboxes earlier in the afternoon. And I invited her for a drink.

JAMES. Oh, you did, did you?

JEFFREY *(firmly)*. And given that she is a guest in our home, it seems like it might be polite for you to sit down.

JAMES. Does it. Well then, I guess you better pour me one of those.

*(JEFFREY does so and gives it to JAMES, who sits. EVELYN holds her ground.)*

EVELYN. Steve isn't well.

JAMES. What would you like me to do about it?

EVELYN. I just thought that ... perhaps you might like to know.

JAMES. So now I know.

EVELYN. I just thought ... I just thought that perhaps you might want to see him.

*(Beat.)*

JAMES. And why would I want to do that?

EVELYN. Isn't it time, James? Time to take the longer view? The perspective of eternity, in this case? Do you really want to leave things unresolved?

JAMES. I thought I might, yeah.

JEFFREY. Dad, this isn't like you.

JAMES. How do you know?

JEFFREY. After Mom passed ... all that spiritual talk. About resolving the past, healing, letting go ...

JAMES. That was grief talking, I'd imagine. One of the stages, anyway.

JEFFREY. Wow.

EVELYN. Jeffrey's right. I've known you a long time, James. I've never known you to be ... quite so closed.

JAMES *(moving as if to go)*. Well, if this little intervention is over, I think I'll go back to my work.

JEFFREY. Dad, please.

JAMES. Of all the things I find weird in this situation, the weirdest is trying to figure out your stake in it. You find some random woman lurking around our mailboxes, evidently trying to figure out which boat she's looking for, so she can bust in here uninvited—

JEFFREY. Come on, Dad. Evelyn is not some random woman. She's an old friend. Here with news about another old friend. How many times have you told me that the toughest thing you keep having to go through—the toughest thing except Mom—is losing old friends.

*(Pause.)*

EVELYN. Jeffrey seems very committed to taking care of you.

JAMES. Well, you two seem to have developed quite the bond, here. How long was I asleep?

JEFFREY. Dad.

JAMES. Here, pour me another, would you? *(Beat.)* Looks like the lady's glass is empty too.

EVELYN *(to JEFFREY)*. Thank you.

JAMES. All right, then. How is he?

EVELYN. Very thin. Very weak. *(Beat.)* He sleeps ... a lot. You can be in the middle of a conversation, and he'll just—doze off. I think he's piercing the veil.

JAMES. Piercing the veil?

EVELYN. Between worlds. He spends a lot of time ... not here.

JEFFREY. Mom did that as well. She was in and out.

EVELYN. He had a conversation the other day with someone sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. I didn't see anyone.

*(JEFFREY nods, recognizing the experience. JAMES is hard to read.)*

JAMES. Pancreatic, you said?

EVELYN. That's right.

JAMES. And he's taking visitors?!

EVELYN. You wouldn't be just any visitor, James.

JAMES. He was already dead to me. I have nothing to say to him.

EVELYN. What if he had something he needed to say to you?

*(JAMES sits with this. JEFFREY stands up, decisively.)*

JEFFREY. Evelyn, you'll stay for dinner.

EVELYN (*after a beat*). Thank you.

JEFFREY. My dad will show you his sculpture studio upstairs. Great view of the harbor. Not too bad for sunsets. And, of course, there's his work. Meanwhile, I'll go and see what I can rustle up.

*(JEFFREY heads to the kitchen, leaving JAMES and EVELYN looking at each other.)*

## Scene 2: Champagne

*(JAMES, JEFFREY and EVELYN are seated around a table, with appetizer plates in front of them. Each has a wineglass, with varying levels of white wine. EVELYN's is the most full. The conversation is in full swing and fairly good-humored.)*

EVELYN. So, you're my witness—did he really pitch his laptop overboard?

JEFFREY. Yes, indeed. But not before smashing it up a bit.

EVELYN (*looking steadily at JAMES*). Good heavens.

JAMES. Very satisfying. I'd do it again.

JEFFREY. Of course, that means he's always jumping on my computer to look things up.

JAMES. I am not.

JEFFREY. You know you are.

JAMES (*holding up his phone*). Got everything I need right on this little device here.

JEFFREY. You hate that thing. For looking stuff up.

JAMES. Well, the print is so damned small.

JEFFREY. I keep telling you I can fix that.

EVELYN. You should let him do that. Cursing your phone is one good way to give away your age.



JAMES. Hmmmph.

EVELYN. Jeffrey, these golden beets are delicious. Did you roast them first?

JEFFREY. Takes too long. Parboiled and grilled.

EVELYN. Oh my. I should try that.

JEFFREY. You've barely touched your wine, Evelyn.

EVELYN. Is this that Pinot Grigio you keep trying to serve me?

JAMES (*mock horror*). Oh, Jeffrey, you didn't!

JEFFREY. Guilty as charged.

JAMES (*turning to EVELYN*). I imagine the lady would favor a nice Sauvignon Blanc?

EVELYN. If you have one open ...

JAMES. Nonsense, I shall find one and open it.

*(JAMES takes her glass and heads for the kitchen.)*

JEFFREY. Dad, just pour that over the scallops in the pan.  
And turn the heat down.

JAMES. Aye-aye.

*(He exits.)*

JEFFREY. I never heard how the tour of the studio went.

EVELYN. Well, we had to have a thorough introduction to the pieces in this room first. It was only when I had oohed and aahed sufficiently that he consented to show me the inner sanctum. He's very good.

JEFFREY. Right? I think so too.

*(From the kitchen, we hear a loud splash and a sizzle as the wine hits the pan, and JAMES exclaims "Whoa!")*

JEFFREY (*cont'd*). Much better sculptor than a cook.

EVELYN (*laughing*). Some things don't change. He was always a much better *actor* than a cook. (*Beat.*) What about that figure ... you know, the woman with—

JEFFREY. I know. The one with no face. I don't think it's meant to be ... as unsettling as it is. He's been working on that one for a while.

EVELYN. The body is very accomplished. Well observed. It's just—

JEFFREY. Yes, it's a bit disturbing. Especially on a first viewing.

*(JAMES re-enters with a bottle of champagne tucked under one arm, holding three tin camping mugs/cups by their handles.)*

JAMES. As it turns out, this was the only white I could find ...

EVELYN. Oh my.

JEFFREY. And ... no champagne flutes?

JAMES. Are you crazy? Do you think, when I downsized to the live-aboard life, that I brought champagne flutes?

EVELYN. I think champagne from a mug sounds delightful.

*(JAMES has placed the mugs on the table and draped a cloth napkin over one arm. He begins to clown around, playing the sommelier—we can start to glimpse the actor in him. He makes a great show of presenting the bottle before JEFFREY for approval.)*

JEFFREY. Oh no, I insist that the lady approve the choice.

JAMES (*with a flourish*). Madame?

*(EVELYN looks at him archly.)*

JAMES (*cont'd*). Oh, please forgive me. *Mademoiselle ... ?*

(*Playing along, EVELYN deigns to look at the bottle and nod her approval.*)

JAMES (*cont'd*). I'm afraid I assumed that the young gentleman here was your ... *monsieur*.

EVELYN (*coily*). Ahh, no. We are just ... *des amis*.

(*JAMES tries to continue the improv by suavely uncorking the bottle—but he is foiled by the foil.*)

JAMES (*dropping the sommelier persona*). Now if I can just get this foil off. Damn it, I have no fingernails!

(*EVELYN steps in to help him. He takes the napkin from his arm, covers the neck of the bottle with it and twists the cork out with the air of a man who has at least managed this part of the job before. JAMES pours, and they toast. Murmurs of "Salut" all around.*)

JEFFREY. Dad, Evelyn was just mentioning your lady upstairs—the one with no face ...

JAMES. Oh, that thing. I've been struggling for months. Keep shaping a face and then smushing it flat again.

EVELYN. Mm. Is that as satisfying as smashing a laptop?

JAMES. Not remotely.

EVELYN (*changing the subject*). You know, I've been wondering about this intriguing collection of objects.

JAMES. Ahh, Jeff's shelf! Had to cede him a bit of real estate in this room. Since he's a collector.

EVELYN. Looks like ... vintage toys?

JEFFREY. That's right. Mainly salvaged from my childhood.