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Dramatic Publishing

A Trick of the Light

A One-act Play

by

KENT R. BROWN

Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(A TRICK OF THE LIGHT)

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For my father,
Charles Crandall Brown,
who taught me how to live life with
dignity and great respect

The author wishes to convey his deep appreciation for the opportunity of presenting *A TRICK OF THE LIGHT* during the 1995 Sewanee Writers' Conference. Special thanks is also extended to Mr. Hudson Plumb who portrayed the role of the son, while the author read the role of the Father.

A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

A One-Act Play
For Two Men

CHARACTERS

DAD..... upper years

SON..... middle-to-late forties

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Eugene, Oregon

Note: *A TRICK OF THE LIGHT* does not advocate nor repudiate assisted suicide; nor does it advocate counsel for the elderly.

A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

AT THE CURTAIN: *The SON, standing a little outside the playing area, holds an overnight bag in his hand. He is wearing an overcoat. The DAD is seated looking out a large “picture window” waiting for the SON’s arrival.*

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). It had been an easy train ride. Four hours on Amtrak. I was able to find a window seat. Time to think. Very relaxing.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). He usually gets a window seat when he comes to visit. Lives in an office. Helps relax him to see the outdoors.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). I can watch the mountains in the distance. The sky.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). We have lovely scenery. Wonderful mountains. That’s why I moved here. Very restful.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). The wood mills. Smoke rising quietly. Smoke rises where I live, too, but it’s anything but quiet.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). I couldn’t live in a big city anymore. All that sound—Everything’s so messy. Don’t have to live in a big city so I don’t. Lots of energy in a city, though. Sometimes I miss the energy.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). I rented a car at the station. Gives us a chance to get out. Do a little shopping maybe. We usually don’t, though. They have a few guest rooms here for family

members. (*Looking at DAD.*) He looks good. Good color. Such pride in how he dresses.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). My father worked in the silver mine in Kellogg, Idaho. The Bunker Hill Mine. Tall man. Strong. Very long arms. Left every morning at 4:00 and took a lunch pail with him into the shaft. But he would shave. Every day. "Going to work is an important event, Son," he'd say. "Keep yourself neat." Always stayed with me.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). I knocked on the door. Dad was waiting for me.

DAD. Who is it?

SON. It's me, Dad.

DAD. Oh, good. You're here. Just a second.

SON (*as DAD moves to the "door"*). He took a moment or two. I could hear him approaching. Then he opened the door and gave me a handshake and then a big hug. (*DAD and SON embrace at the "door."*)

DAD. Well, OK. Here you are. You look good.

SON. So do you.

DAD. Well, well. Will you look at you. Is that a bit more gray I see up there?

SON. Maybe. Just a little more.

DAD. Make it all right? No trouble?

SON. No trouble at all. Got a window seat. Wonderful view.

DAD. Right on time?

SON. Right on time. Well, a few minutes late. No traffic, though. I got a window seat.

DAD. I thought so.

SON. This time of year, absolutely beautiful out there.

DAD. I thought maybe a few minutes late. A little trouble.

SON. No trouble.

DAD. Good, then. No trouble. You look good, Son.

SON. So do you, Dad.

DAD. I've been looking forward to our visit. So much to talk about.

SON. Me, too.

DAD. I've made some notes. (*DAD moves to the desk and picks up a few pieces of paper in an effort to get his bearings.*) They're here somewhere. Well, lots of time to cover the notes. Keeps things straight. Notes. Keeps me on track. Lots of time, though.

SON (*removing his coat and hanging it on the coat rack*). A beautiful trip, Dad. Sunset over the lake. I can't see the sunset out my window. Apartments go for miles.

DAD (*has found his notes by now and is refreshing his memory*). Over the lake, eh? Now that's a sight, isn't it? Sunset on the lake. I should catch that sometime soon.

SON. Well, we could do that tomorrow if you like.

DAD. Tomorrow?

SON. We could go up to Portland. Spend the night. I checked the schedule and—

DAD. Room service in the morning? I like that.

SON. There you go. My treat.

DAD. Well, first things first, what do you say?

SON. It's no trouble. I've got the car outside.

DAD. We'll talk about it later. (*An extended pause. DAD appears absorbed in his notes.*)

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). We usually began this way, a comment or two about how each of us looked, how the ride was. Dad would usually mention a desire to see a sunset or take a trip. But we never did. Time always took us by surprise, he would say.

DAD. You sure look trim, Son. Watching those fat grams? Those are all the rage now. In the old days it was all in the meat and potatoes and gravy. But not today!

SON. Well, I try to watch it on the road but it's a bit—

DAD. I've been watching my weight. Trying to anyway.

SON. Good. Any exercise? Walking a bit?

DAD. But the doctor says you can't be inhuman about it. You have to eat something tasty once in a while or you'll go off your nut. Just have to be smart. Hardest thing in the world to be, though, isn't it? To be smart.

SON (*now in the chair*). How about that exercise? Go for a walk later? Shag some flies, maybe?

DAD. We'll see... Felt a little rough this morning. Right here. A little scratchy. (*Indicates his throat.*) Don't want to catch anything. (*Beat.*) Did you say shag some flies? Is that what you said? (*DAD chuckles at the memory.*)

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). There was a large field just below our apartment building and on Sundays he'd play catch with me. He'd change into his weekend trousers and one of his old work shirts and we'd walk down the path to the field.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). He had a good wing on him. Snapped it right in there from way out. But he couldn't stay in the batter's box. Always pulled back. Just a little. That'd slow his hips from coming around. I didn't blame him. Got hit once myself. Right in the face when I was eleven. Know how it feels.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). Said I had a good wing on me. Could send it into home plate on one bounce. Dad would hit fungos and I—

DAD. Shag fungos! That's what we'd do, remember?

SON. I was just thinking about that.

DAD. Hit fungos? Shag balls?

SON. Flies.

DAD. Flies?

SON & DAD. Shag flies. Hit fungos!

DAD (*laughs*). That feels better. Is that it?

SON (*enjoying his father's energy and laughter*). That's it. (*An extended silence. DAD begins to check his surroundings, pulling out an item or two from his pockets, walking to the "window" and looking out. It is his way of "kicking the tires," of keeping track of his life.*)

DAD (*appraising his son's trousers*). Nice pants.

SON. Thanks. Something comfortable to travel in.

DAD. Shoes, too. Good heels. I noticed right away. Let me have a look.

SON (*taking off one of his loafers and handing it to DAD. As DAD checks out the shoes, the SON addresses the AUDIENCE*). Dad was wearing a pair of trousers. Light gray. A crease you could cut your finger on. He had good taste. Not flashy. Just good quality. "You buy quality, you live quality." That was one of his favorite observations.

DAD. These are well made. Good looking too, You buy quality, you live quality.

SON (*still addressing the AUDIENCE*). And a crisp, white shirt. Sometimes he wore what he called "quiet" stripes. There wasn't much that was flashy about Dad.

DAD (*giving the shoe back to the SON*). Have you seen the new Florsheims?

SON. No, can't say I have. I need some new shoes, though. Maybe tomorrow we could go downtown and—

DAD. Just not the leather there used to be. Cutting back.

SON. Well, they shouldn't do that.

DAD. Cutting back all over. Quality's just falling off everywhere. Tomorrow we'll go downtown and have a look but you'll see...three steps and they fall right off your feet. (*DAD is distracted by looking out the "window."*)

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). When I was home from college in the summer he'd get out all our shoes and line them up on the back porch. Set out his brushes and his polish and "get a little

sun,” as he used to call it, while he put everybody’s best foot forward. I’d offer to help but he said he enjoyed it. Said it cleared his mind. And he’d ask me what I learned in school that year. And was I a better man for the knowledge.

DAD. Remember how I’d do the shoes sometimes? In the summer?

SON. On the back porch?

DAD. Your mom would make some lemonade. I’ll never forget. Bitter. Whew, she made some bitter lemonade. “Something to pucker you up, sweetheart,” she’d say—Why she thought I needed puckering up is a bit vague to me now.

SON. Maybe you were too sweet, Dad.

DAD. Me? Too sweet! I’m sure that was it. *(Both laugh.)* And you’d read some of those term papers you had to write in school. One was about the nature of truth...uh...a certain kind of value. That was it. Value. Does anything have...huh, well...I enjoyed them a lot.

SON. Intrinsic.

DAD. What’s that?

SON. Intrinsic value. Value unto itself.

DAD. Or do we determine the value of everything in our life?

SON. That’s it.

DAD. Well, that was a long afternoon, as I remember it. Good thing I had all our shoes out there, eh? Your mother would come out and just sit and listen to us talk things over. Said she loved watching her boys getting to know each other. *(Beat.)* I think we determine the value of things, don’t you?

SON. I guess we do, yes.

DAD. Sometimes they change as we get older, though.

SON *(to AUDIENCE)*. My mother died about fifteen years ago. One morning she was taking the sheets off the bed to put them in the laundry and fell straight to the floor. Cerebral hemorrhage. Dad found her when he came home for lunch.

(The sound of an ambulance is heard in the distance. As it gets closer it suddenly cuts out.)

DAD. Hear that? They called the ambulance people and asked them to cut the siren whenever they have to come here. Everyone gets a little..nervous...freaky. Isn't that the word? *(Laughs.)* You never know when, do you? *(Beat.)* So, you're set to go back on... uh...

SON. Saturday. Saturday afternoon.

DAD. Saturday, right. Saturday afternoon.

SON. Right. The train leaves here at 1:30 on Saturday.

DAD. Saturday. Got it.

SON. Then I get in to Seattle by—

DAD. The train, eh?

SON. Yes, leaves here on Saturday by 1:30...then in to Seattle by 7:30 or so. Spend the night. Saturday night. Then out by air on Sunday morning and home by "60 Minutes."

DAD. Got it. "60 Minutes." A good show.

SON *(to AUDIENCE)*. It's almost the first thing he asks. When am I leaving? We all like our own routine. That's all he's really saying. And he's right. After two or three days my mind is more and more back at the office. Calls to make. Things to do.

DAD *(to AUDIENCE)*. I love to have him here. The talks. The stories. But I have my own routine. There's the extra effort. The scheduling. Working things out.

SON *(moving to his overnight bag)*. I brought you a little something, Dad.

DAD. What's the occasion? Did I miss my birthday?

SON. No occasion. Just thought you might enjoy a gift.

DAD. I know it's not my birthday. Just joking. I'm not around the bend yet. I see it coming but I'm not quite there yet.

SON. You'll outlive us all, Dad.

DAD. There's just the two of us, Son.

SON. The two musketeers. Right. (*Giving DAD a modestly-wrapped package.*)

DAD (*beginning to unwrap the package*). You need a wife, Son. You can't wrap a package to save yourself. (*The package is now open.*) Hey, how about that! A new belt.

SON. Real leather.

DAD. As it should be.

SON (*enjoying the repartee*). Yes, sir! Good quality. Try it on.

DAD (*begins to put on the belt*). Your grandfather loved his belts. Had a closet full of them. Salesmen would stop at the store and your grandfather would say "What do ya have in the way of belts?" And they'd pull out their latest. Hand rubbed. You could see the pride in the workmanship.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). My grandfather ran a general store. In Kellogg. The mine kept shutting down so he went into business for himself. Dad used to help out on weekends.

DAD (*ready to model the new belt*). Well, what do you think?

SON. Very nice. Very clean line.

DAD. When your grandfather died, your grandmother gave me all his belts. Ever tell you that?

SON. No, never did.

DAD. But none of them fit! They were too big. Damndest thing. I was up in his room after the funeral with belts all over the place and they wouldn't fit! I was skinny for my age... 14, 15...I was furious with him. Took a knife and cut most of them in half. Your grandmother found me crying. We're a very trivial species, Son. Petty. Awfully petty when it comes to things that really don't make a difference.

SON. What did you do with the belts?

DAD. Kept two of them, gave the rest to the town bums. Ole' and Johansen. Your grandfather used to hire them to do odd jobs around the store once in a while. They came to the funeral. Dad would have appreciated that.

SON. What happened to the other two belts?

DAD. They were a strange pair. Hardly ever saw them talking to each other. They'd just nod their heads and stare at each other like they were married.

SON (*beat*). Whatever happened to the other belts?

DAD. Um? Which other belts?

SON. The two you kept. Granddad's belts?

DAD. Don't know. One day they were just gone. Must have left them behind during one of our moves. Maybe the one from New York to San Diego...or that move after your mother's thyroid operation...

SON. From Cincinnati to Phoenix?

DAD. Yeah, that must have been it. (*Beat.*) Didn't look far enough back in the closet, I guess. I wonder where they are now? (*DAD is in his chair again and looking off as if concentrating on an object only he can see.*)

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). Each time we visit I learn more about his life. There are huge volumes about this man I haven't read yet. We spend most of our time talking about me or the children, or my job. "I know about my life, Son. I live with myself twenty-four hours a day." And then he asks another question about my life.

DAD. You doing OK?

SON. Yep. Doing just fine,

DAD. You look OK. You feeling OK?

SON. Thanks. Yes, I am.

DAD. You still like your job?

SON. Well, I don't mind going to work in the morning. Most days anyway. It's still a challenge. I'm getting better at it.

DAD. These are times to keep your job just in case you're thinking the grass is greener on the other side of the fence.

SON. I'm not.

DAD. That's good. Because it's not. It just looks that way.

SON. A trick of the light.

DAD. That's it. You settle in. Invest yourself. Take the highs and the lows. I took my hits, I'll tell you that. But you make do.

SON. I'm pleased where I am. We're beginning to grow. Good future.

DAD (*to AUDIENCE*). Every now and then he gets itchy feet. Thinks things may be a little fresher on the other side of the fence. They aren't. It's only a trick of the light. He's an analyst for a consulting firm. Don't really know what he does but he analyzes things. And they like him there.

SON. They like me there, Dad. I like me there.

DAD (*rising to his feet and pacing a bit. To SON*). Well, good. You can't spend more than a few hours doing all those other things we fill up our life with... eating, talking, sleeping, having sex, playing baseball...so you'd better like your work.

SON (*smiling*). I know. You're right. I do.

DAD. Work is the salvation of the soul, you know?

SON. I do.

DAD. Good. (*The "lesson" is over. DAD shifts gears.*) You getting hungry?

SON. No, not yet. Ate something on the train.

DAD. Think I'll celebrate your arrival. Have a beer. Then I'll check those notes and we can...care to join me? (*DAD exits to the "kitchen."*)

SON. No, none for me, thanks. Maybe later. Can I help?

DAD (*offstage*). I've been drinking my own beer for decades now, Son. But I'll let you know if I need any help.

SON (*to AUDIENCE*). Late in the afternoon around 4:00 Dad would get a beer, sit, cross his legs, take a sip...and look out the window again. "Nothing's changed since I left... but I keep hoping." On the last few trips I noticed he started drinking a bit earlier in the afternoons. A couple for lunch and—