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PERDU

By Katherine Koller

CHARACTERS

PEARL, nineteen, a SUPERSAVE fulltime employee

JERRY, late twenties, a longtime SUPERSAVE employee

KONSTANTY, as old as possible, European, with a cultured French accent

CONSTABLE, thirties, neighborhood foot patrol police officer

SCENE 1 THE PET FOOD AISLE, SUPERSAVE

Music: MUZAK. PEARL slams dog food cans on to her display. When she runs out of cans she sits on her stepladder, waiting for JERRY to unload another case of cans.

PEARL: People will go right for it. They'll stroke it and then take a can. Even if they don't have a dog. I'd suggest black, for contrast.

JERRY: That's what I mean right there, Pea. You're so artistic.

PEARL: It's just how people are. About dogs. You've got a dog. When your family comes to pick you up, you go straight for the slobbering dog hanging out of the car window before you kiss your wife or hug your kids.

JERRY: Yeah, well, you should go in for merchandizing.

PEARL: That's just a big word for moving it around.

JERRY: So it will sell faster.

PEARL: I'm already doing that.

JERRY: There's just lots of room to grow in this company. I mean, after two years already, you could do some exploring. Like read the bulletin board.

PEARL: Like you.

JERRY: Yeah. I'm always looking for new opportunities.

PEARL: I don't think my future is in SuperSave.

JERRY: So, where, then?

PEARL: If I knew that, I wouldn't be here, Jer. I guess I'm waiting to see the light.

JERRY: I couldn't do that. I've gotta be doing something.

PEARL: Like what?

JERRY: I'm doing a course, at night. Computers. Gives me a focus.

PEARL: How do you stay so happy, Jerry? Do you take drugs?

JERRY: I always try to have a good day. Being busy is good. I've got growing kids. I do what I can do.

PEARL: And your wife, Jerry, why does she always have a runny nose?

JERRY: She does?

PEARL: Whenever she's driving that little fogged-up car, with the kids and the dog, her nose is running.

JERRY: She leaves the window open. To defog, because of the dog, and so what if her nose runs.

PEARL: It's gross.

JERRY: You're sunshine today.

PEARL: I'm dying in the dog food. If this is as artistic as I get, then I'm dead meat.

JERRY: You keep up the good work, you could be in line for pet food manager.

PEARL: Death! Death to the max!

JERRY: I can think of worse things.

PEARL: So can I. You could make me your pet.

JERRY: You're just not that cuddly.

PEARL: Bow-wow?

JERRY: Hey, here comes the Daily Dog Food Man. Maybe he will cheer you up. You know how he loves you.

PEARL: Not the Dog Food Man! Not now! I've got to finish my display!

KONSTANTY enters.

JERRY: I don't think he sees very well anymore. Look at him. He's gotta be half blind.

PEARL: Don't go. He spits when he talks.

JERRY: He never talks to me. He only talks to you.

PEARL: Sometimes, if I stand really still, he doesn't notice me. I'll be the dog, in my display.

JERRY: Be nice.

JERRY exits.

PEARL: Yes. If I was a dog, even my Frankenparents would fuss over me. And if I was a dog, my friends would be nicer. I'd do what they say. Bow-wow? And listen, with interested eyes, about the nasty knot in the Louis Vaton necklace, or the lack of a tanned bum, or the pomegranate spot on the white fur jacket.

KONSTANTY throws down his empty grocery basket on to the floor like an ancient regret, and hooks it with his cane, pulling it as he shuffles right up to PEARL, sniffing and hacking, really close to her face.

KONSTANTY: Ah- hah! *C'est vous!*

PEARL: Hi.

KONSTANTY: Do you have a dog?

PEARL: No.

KONSTANTY: Huh.

PEARL: How come you never take a cart? Do you want me to get you a cart?

KONSTANTY: *Non.*

KONSTANTY takes cans from PEARL's display and throws them into the basket on the floor. He doesn't miss. She replenishes the display with fresh cans from the box.

PEARL: You could dent the cans.

KONSTANTY: Huh.

PEARL: So then you can't return them, like if you get tired of this brand.

KONSTANTY: I like this kind.

PEARL: It's the most expensive one.

KONSTANTY: I spend a fortune.

PEARL: A whole basketful, every single day.

KONSTANTY: *En cas.* In case I get sick.

PEARL: So what does it taste like?

KONSTANTY: What? This dog food?

PEARL: It's all you ever buy. I call you the Dog Food Man.

KONSTANTY: My name is Konstanty, and I don't eat the dog food. *Jamais.*
(He kisses her hand.) And what is the charming name of this
 charming girl?

PEARL: Pea.

KONSTANTY: Your mother named you Pea?

PEARL: Well, actually, no.

KONSTANTY: Like Sweet Pea? The blossom?

PEARL: No, Pea is short for Pearl.

KONSTANTY: What is shiny and precious from the sea you've shrunken to a
 dried up ball forgotten in the dirt? To me, you are Pearl. What
 a discovery. *(He takes her hand again in his, patting it.)* Here is
 a treasure before my eyes. *La perle!*

PEARL: I'm just going to have to redo this.

PEARL works on rearranging her
 display, which Konstanty keeps on
 dismantling.

KONSTANTY: But you are the one! *La perle!* I've seen you before! *Mon Dieu,*
 I've found you!

PEARL: You're making a mistake. People tell me I look like someone
 they know all the time. I'm not who you want. Really.

KONSTANTY: But it is not for me! It is for you!

PEARL: What?

KONSTANTY: It is plain. You need a dog.

PEARL: My display needs a dog.

KONSTANTY rearranges a few cans,
randomly but with verve.

KONSTANTY: It is very good. A dog would improve it. But you, you must have
my dog.

PEARL: Your dog.

KONSTANTY: I must find a special one for my dog before I die. Or she is lost.
If I don't come for dog food, you know I am dead in my steps,
and you must come and rescue her.

PEARL: I'm sorry. I'm not someone you can count on.

KONSTANTY: Oh, yes. You are a pearl in an angry sea. You shine from the
inside. You have the capacity for great love.

PEARL: You don't know that.

KONSTANTY sits on the stepladder.
MUSIC of the past.

KONSTANTY: Ah! You don't know. I see what I see. You remind me of a little
French shop girl I knew, when I was a young man, when all of
Europe was my playground. She tried to hide her light, like you.
But I saw it. I uncovered it. I released it. I admit, I was not very
good to her. Although I loved her well, I lied. I hurt her. And
now I must make it up. To you.

PEARL: Why me?

KONSTANTY: Because I must. When you are old, you will find that your
greatest pleasure is in correcting as many past digressions as
possible. It is the purpose of old age. It keeps you young.

PEARL: You can't give me a dog I don't want.

KONSTANTY: When you see her, you will want her.

PEARL: What does the dog have to do with the French shop girl?

KONSTANTY: The dog will bring you blessings. She will bring you luck. This is what the little French shop girl did not get from me. *Tant pis.*

PEARL: What did she get?

KONSTANTY: A bundle. *(He rocks his arms to demonstrate.)* And, I fear, there were others, with other girls, along the way. *Combien, je ne sais pas.* I was a bad father. *Le plus mauvais!*

PEARL: Why should I help you?

KONSTANTY: I am in need. And you have the power.

PEARL: You give me the creeps.

KONSTANTY: Ah, you see, the dog will protect you.

PEARL: I can take care of myself.

KONSTANTY: You can touch her, that's a comfort.

PEARL: I don't like fur. I'm probably allergic.

KONSTANTY: She watches me. This is not a very good neighborhood, here, where I live.

PEARL: They don't allow pets in my apartment.

KONSTANTY: My dog thinks she is a person. Very polite.

PEARL: I don't want to clean up after a dog.

KONSTANTY: It may sound strange, but she needs no clean-up. She is very discreet. A princess of dogs. Maybe a hair or two, here or there, to pick up, that is all.

PEARL: I don't want to take a dog for walks.

KONSTANTY: She needs no exercises. She is sedentary, like me. *Moi*, I take an hour to get up in the morning.

PEARL: That must be pretty.

KONSTANTY: She loves music, as do I.

PEARL: Not my kind of music.

KONSTANTY: She loves . . . the music of the street. She is quite magnanimous.

PEARL: Whatever that means.

KONSTANTY: Open to anything, with a generosity of spirit. I think you are, too. Your eyes tell me. They have that sweet innocence of youth.

PEARL: You've got me all wrong.

KONSTANTY: Oh, *non, non, non. Je sais. Je vois.*

PEARL: Read my lips. No, no, no.

KONSTANTY: Pearl. My life, my soul, my conscience depends on you.

PEARL: No, it doesn't.

KONSTANTY: The little French shopgirl. My forgiveness. My impending death.

(Coughs)

PEARL: (*Pause.*) What kind of dog?

KONSTANTY: Standard poodle.

PEARL: Ugh!

KONSTANTY: Not fussy.

PEARL: She eats the most expensive dog food on the market!

KONSTANTY: Oh, she doesn't eat much and, as you know, I've been stockpiling.

PEARL: Like it's the end of the world.

KONSTANTY: Ah, the world, it opens for you.

PEARL: What?

KONSTANTY: You have only to be open to it.

PEARL: Why.

KONSTANTY: To go to Europe.

PEARL: Why would I do that?

KONSTANTY: *Je pense*, to become enlightened. To be a woman of understanding. To flower and find yourself in a mature world, as opposed to this unsophisticated, dehumanized, culturally deficient wasteland! Ah, Europe, where people adore *l'espace vert*, and all the arts, and live with relish and flourish!

PEARL: They do?

KONSTANTY: *Absolument*. But maybe, the tarnish of superficiality, mediocrity, and yes, youthful disdain has made this impossible for you.

PEARL: Europe. I thought of Old Strathcona. But I never thought of Europe.

KONSTANTY: You must go there some day.

PEARL: Churches and museums. I don't think so.

KONSTANTY: *Non, non!* You must walk, and explore, and listen to life. By the rivers, in the cafés –

PEARL: I could just go to Starbucks on Whyte.

KONSTANTY: *Non, non*, not the same. You won't find her there.

PEARL: Who am I looking for? The shop girl?

KONSTANTY: *Ma chère*, you are looking for *toi-même*.

PEARL: Really.

KONSTANTY: But of course.

PEARL: This is me. This is all I am.

KONSTANTY: You are the little French shop girl! Like her, you have a special way of seeing.

PEARL: How do you know?

KONSTANTY: The way you hold your head. You are just like her. You have . . .
. . . artistic potential.

PEARL: (PAUSE) Okay, that's it, I'm done. Did you eat today? Here, have some more dogfood. Have you noticed? I'm not French. I work in a big box store, not a shop. And I don't do art, I do merchandizing.

KONSTANTY: But you are what she could have been, without my ungracious interference. She . . . she was my model, for my sculpture. But she wanted to be an artist herself, and I . . . I was selfish. I put an end to her career by leaving her destitute and with child.

PEARL: You're not offloading your dog on me.

KONSTANTY: My dog is a gift. Pull. *S'il te plait.*

KONSTANTY offers his hand but
PEARL does not take it.

PEARL: If Europe is so hot, how did you end up here?

KONSTANTY: Ah, here is where my heart was broken and, you see, I deserved it.

PEARL: Well, no, no one deserves that.

KONSTANTY: You are *si jeune*. So idealistic.

PEARL: You are *très* wrong.

KONSTANTY: A pearl. A white, shining light to an old man's eyes.

PEARL: You're blind.

KONSTANTY: Pull.

PEARL takes his extended hand and
pulls him to standing. He keeps her
hand and holds her close for the
following.

I see what I see. Here, a photograph. See, my Christmas card I made. I didn't have anywhere to send it. Only my Meals on Wheels ladies, and I get a new one almost every day. I never know their names. It's very confusing. They make sure I

breathe, and then they go. But my dog, she is loyal. She never runs away. Here she is on my doorstep, with the Christmas wreath on the door. You see?

PEARL: She's black. I like the color black.

KONSTANTY: She is Perdu. Here is my address, on the card. You will recognize my house from the photo. It's just down the street. The key is hidden under the mat.

PEARL: Konstanty . . .

JERRY enters.

KONSTANTY: Keep me close to your heart. I will remember you. *La Perle*. My little saint. *Au revoir*.

KONSTANTY bows and exits, pulling his basket with his cane.

JERRY: That was random. Little saint?

PEARL: He's got me confused. With a girl he knew in France.

JERRY: He probably knew lots of little saints.

PEARL: I touched him. I pulled him up, Jerry, and he's like, hollow, so light, a piece of driftwood. Or a balloon on a string.

JERRY: How does he carry those cans?

PEARL: His house is close by, but still . . .

JERRY: He got you, didn't he?

PEARL: No. He didn't get me. No one gets me.

JERRY: You've got like a shiny look.

PEARL: I do not.

JERRY: It looks like you're more awake or something.

PEARL: That's just artistic glow. From my dog food display.

JERRY: I'll clear this for you. They need you at customer service.

PEARL: Oh, yippee.

JERRY: You're good with people. Especially problem people. You just don't know your own strengths.

PEARL: People all want something for nothing. Even you. You probably get a bonus if I stay and take a step up the Supersave ladder. Even the Dog Food Man. You know what he wants? He wants me to love his precious French poodle!

MUSIC.

JERRY exits with cartons and stepladder.

SCENE 2 CUSTOMER SERVICE

PEARL is at the Returns Desk. The unheard part of her conversation with the customer is displayed in brackets below.

(Thank you.)

PEARL: Thank you for shopping at SuperSave.

(Bye.)

PEARL: Next?

(I wanna return this.)

PEARL: Do you have your bill?

(In the bag.)

PEARL takes out the bill, and then ten cans of dog food.

PEARL: *(Groans)* My favorite.

(Gross. You eat that stuff?)

PEARL: No. I just . . . display it.

(There's ten.)

PEARL: You bought these today. On special. Do you know that some of these cans are dented?

(So what.)

PEARL: You're supposed to give dented cans to the food bank.

(Fuck off.)

PEARL: Right. Reason for returning? Were they the wrong kind? It's supposed to be the best.

(The dog died.)

PEARL: Too bad.

(Yeah.)

PEARL: How did he die?

(He just fell down and died.)

PEARL: Sorry to hear that. Um . . . (looking at the bill again) When did it happen?

(Just give me the money.)

PEARL: Okay. That's forty-nine, ninety-nine with tax. Enough for a new dog?

(It's never enough.)

The unseen customer takes off, leaving his bill. PEARL looks after him, holds up his bill to call him, then looks at it again and then pulls off her store apron, slowly. MUSIC.

SCENE 3 NIGHT LIGHT

PEARL goes out into the night, running, until she finds CONSTABLE under a lamp post by a set of stairs.

PEARL: I'm Pearl. Did you find him?

CONSTABLE: Yeah. Here.

CONSTABLE takes her to the back of a set of steps, which he turns, revealing KONSTANTY fallen on them.

PEARL: Oh, no! Konstanty! Did he fall?

CONSTABLE: Oh, he fell. He had help.

PEARL: Pushed?

CONSTABLE: Clubbed to the head. Something metal.

PEARL: A tin can?

CONSTABLE: Could be.

PEARL: The dead dog guy had marks on the back of his hand.
Konstanty fought.

CONSTABLE: They usually do. Tough old buzzards, been through a lot.
Usually seen war, famine, bombs, the works. Stuff we see on
TV, they were there.

PEARL: So, is he. . . dead?

CONSTABLE: Done like dinner.

PEARL: He knew. He knew today was the day. Did he say anything
before . . .

CONSTABLE: Yeah. He mentioned you. You're supposed to take his dog.
And the dog food.

PEARL: Did you tell Konstanty that I called the police? Did you say my name?

CONSTABLE: Yeah. He said you were his little saint.

PEARL: That's all?

CONSTABLE: That's all. If you'll stay with him, I'll go inside and get the dog.
The truck is on the way.

PEARL: The key is under the mat.

CONSTABLE: It usually is.

PEARL: The dog's name is Perdu.

CONSTABLE: Oh. I hope not.

PEARL: Yeah.

CONSTABLE: I hate chasing dogs.

PEARL: I know.

CONSTABLE: Just don't touch anything. I'll be right back. You okay?

PEARL: Yeah.

CONSTABLE exits.

PEARL: Konstanty. You are so dead. Konstanty. So light. (*She lifts his hand.*) Even dead. How did you know? Like there was a signal or something. A sign? My stupid display. Konstanty, why do I feel, I feel new somehow. . . . I've never felt more alive! And I'm sitting with a dead guy. Little saint. I don't know what that

means. (*Pause.*) I want people to be like trees, you know, always there, maybe not talking to me or touching me, but just there. Like a green space I walk through every day. Where I'm safe. A private forest. Like you said, *un espace vert*. Oh, God, the dog! What am I going to do about the dog? Konstanty? *L'espace vert* has lost the Dog Food Man, and a blank space has opened up, and it's full of air, and movement, and light, and it's where you used to stand in my forest. Konstanty.

CONSTABLE returns.

PEARL: Uh . . . did you find her?

CONSTABLE: Yeah. On the front landing, at the front door. Watch-dog position.

PEARL: What am I going to do with a dog?

CONSTABLE: Have you met this dog before?

PEARL: No, I just have a picture of her.

CONSTABLE: The thing is, it's dead.

PEARL: Perdu, too?

CONSTABLE: Yeah. Well. The dog has been freeze-dried or something. I've heard of it. Costs like a grand. Preserves the pet from the inside out, dries everything intact so you get the natural toned musculature, no shrinkage. You choose the position you want. New age taxidermy. Great specimen. I'd like to do it with a wolf

trophy some day. You know, with the yellow eyes staring out at you, like king of the forest?

PEARL: Perdu is dead?

CONSTABLE: Been dead for a long time.

PEARL: *Pauvre Perdu.*

CONSTABLE: The thing is, there's like one ton of dog food in there, and nothing else. There's cans stacked everywhere. In the cupboards, on the counters, under tables, in the bookshelves, in the sink. Like one of those freaky art installations.

PAUSE.

CONSTABLE: So, how did you know him?

PEARL: He discovered me. (Someone offstage, behind CONSTABLE, catches her eye.) Hey, that's the guy!

CONSTABLE: Back for more. Sooner than I thought.

CONSTABLE exits.

CONSTABLE: (OFFSTAGE) Gotcha!

PEARL: (TO KONSTANTY) And now you've set me free.

PEARL gently replaces KONSTANTY's cane in his hand. The stairs are pulled off.

SCENE 4 SUPERSAVE ME

PEARL pushes a cart from the street into SUPERSAVE, to the customer service desk. It is full of dog food cans.

JERRY: Is that the last one?

PEARL: That was a whole day of loading and carting.

JERRY: The old guy sure had a creative way to bank his money.

PEARL: He was an artist.

JERRY: This must represent his old age pension for thirty years.

PEARL: A lot of the cans are dented.

JERRY: Oh? I didn't notice. Supersave thanks you for two years of service; maybe you'll come back.

PEARL: I don't think so.

JERRY: You're young.

PEARL: That's why.

JERRY: Your parents are here.

PEARL: Landmarks.

JERRY: You'll come back. Roots and all that.

PEARL: Maybe. Someday when I'm curious.

JERRY: What about your friends?

PEARL: Jerry. I don't have any friends. You're my best friend.

JERRY: *(Pause.)* What did you do with Perdu?

PEARL: I put her in the display room. Use her next time, 'kay?

JERRY: I'll send you a picture. So, here you go. Twelve hundred and fifty-three cans, at full price, sale's over, at five forty-nine a piece, makes six thousand, eight hundred and seventy-eight dollars and ninety-seven cents. Wow.

PEARL: How did he carry them all?

JERRY: Brick by brick, like an Egyptian slave.

PEARL: I'm not sure about this.

JERRY: Look what he did. You have to do this.

PEARL: What did he get?

JERRY: He got to be your patron.

PEARL: Patron saint.

JERRY: Almost as good as best friend.

PEARL: (PAUSE) I'm supposed to be looking for me. That's what he said. What if I'm grotesque, like a gargoyle?

JERRY: There's a murderer in jail who's scared of you.

PEARL: He's not afraid of me. He's afraid of life without drugs.

JERRY: Well, you scare me. A little. A lot. Because you could do anything.

PEARL: I'm the one who's scared here.

JERRY: Not you. Not Pea.

PEARL: I'm scared of Pearl.

JERRY: She's out there. Go find her. *Bon voyage.*

JERRY exits to the back.

The blank space on stage gradually lights, with dapples of tree light, and PEARL begins to move through it.

PEARL: *Attends! J'arrive!*

PEARL exits.

MUSIC: full vocal version of
"Desiderata."

THE END.

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