

SNOWBOUND

a play in one act

by Brent Englar

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CHARACTERS

SHERRI BLOUNT, mid-50s

CLIFF, late-20s; her boarder¹

ANDY BOWDEN, 50

TIME

The present; late January. During a blizzard.

PLACE

Baltimore. A rowhouse owned by Sherri Blount. The power has been out since dawn. A fire burns in the fireplace.

Windows in the stage-right wall flank the front door and vestibule and reveal a narrow street blanketed with snow. Through the vestibule—the sides of which mask actors from the audience—a small parlor opens into the dining room, which connects to an offstage kitchen by a door in the stage-left wall. Upstage of the parlor, the stairway to the second floor winds out of sight.

Furnishings, modest yet tasteful, include a well-polished table in the dining room and four or five chairs. A mirror with an ornate frame hangs on the upstage wall, alongside pictures of Sherri at various stages of her life; in most, including the large portrait directly behind the table, she is embracing a heavysset man with a boyish grin. Above this portrait is a framed needlepoint quoting chapter 19, verse 5, from the book of Matthew: “And they twain shall be one flesh.”

¹ Cliff may be played by a woman. Simply change the character’s name to “Chris” (“Christine” when Sherri says “Clifford”), and feminize all masculine pronouns. Feel free to leave Sherri’s line on p. 28 (“Lord, if I had a dollar for every new girl I’ve seen at breakfast”) as is.

(Lights up on SHERRI, wrapped in a shawl and seated at the dining room table. She holds a cup of tea in both hands and close to her face for warmth. Her accent is unmistakably but not comically Baltimore, and when she speaks, her voice is full of easy laughter.

For a long moment she sits, the picture of contentment, softly humming old ballads and taking an occasional sip of tea. At last CLIFF knocks open the front door and shuffles into the vestibule. We hear him stomping his boots and brushing snow from his coat; then he crosses into the parlor)

CLIFF

Hey, Sherri—

SHERRI

—Clifford, I swear, you don’t take off them boots—

CLIFF

—I stomped them. You swear what?

SHERRI

And wipe up, while you’re at it.

(She sets the tea on a coaster and throws CLIFF a towel draped over a nearby chair. He catches it, grinning, and returns to the vestibule. We hear him struggling to pull off his boots, followed by a crash)

SHERRI (Cont’d)

What on Earth was that?

CLIFF

(calling from the vestibule)

Snow shovel. I’m fine.

(His boots and coat removed, CLIFF strolls back into the parlor. He pauses to wipe the floor clean of slush, then tosses the towel into the vestibule and joins SHERRI at the table)

CLIFF (Cont’d)

It’s a real mess out there.

SHERRI

Still coming down?

CLIFF

I’ve never seen anything like it.

SHERRI

Then what are you doing shoveling the walk for? Just have to go back out and shovel again.

CLIFF

So I’ll shovel again.

SHERRI

Only person I know looks for an excuse to shovel the walk.

CLIFF

Did you know if somebody slips and falls on account of your icy walk, they could sue you?

SHERRI

Nobody’s suing me. Who’s even outside?

CLIFF

I didn’t see anyone.

SHERRI

You should be working on your dissertation.

CLIFF

The power fixed?

SHERRI

What do you need power for? Take a pen and some paper and finish the thing.

CLIFF

My notes are on my computer.

SHERRI

Clifford, you’re obviously stalling.

CLIFF

I have till June.

SHERRI

You’ve had six years.

CLIFF

I'll tell you what—if I could have those six years back, I'd select an entirely different field of study.

SHERRI

What's the matter with your current field of study?

CLIFF

Nobody ever told me there were so many books written on it. I'd have found something original.

SHERRI

Original like what?

CLIFF

Seriously?

(standing)

Hold that thought ...

SHERRI

Where—

CLIFF

—To get a book.

(CLIFF crosses to the stairs. SHERRI stands)

SHERRI

Just a minute, Cliff, while you're up there—

CLIFF

—Yep?

SHERRI

Check in on Mr. Bowden for me.

CLIFF

Who?

SHERRI

My new boarder.

CLIFF

The man from last night? How long is he staying?

SHERRI

(shrugging)

He’s been in his room all morning—didn’t even come down for breakfast. Just give his door a knock and see that he’s all right.

CLIFF

What if he’s not?

SHERRI

You know CPR, don’t you?

CLIFF

No.

SHERRI

For what little I charge you each month, you don’t know CPR?

CLIFF

Was I supposed to?

SHERRI

Just make sure he’s all right, Cliff.

(CLIFF nods, slightly confused, and bounds upstairs. SHERRI takes a long sip of tea. From the street comes the groan of shifting gears and squealing brakes. SHERRI crosses to the window and peers outside)

SHERRI (Cont’d)

(calling upstairs)

CLIFF, IT’S THE SNOWPLOW!

(watching for a moment)

WHY’S HE NOT TURNING DOWN THIRTIETH?

CLIFF (O.S.)

WHAT?

SHERRI

HE’S IGNORING THIRTIETH!

CLIFF (O.S.)

SIDE STREET!

SHERRI

WHAT?

CLIFF (O.S.)

WE’RE A SIDE STREET!

(ANDY enters from the second floor. He is trimly dressed in suspenders, a jacket, and a tie; liberal amounts of gel fix in place his thinning hair)

SHERRI

(still peering outside)

CLIFF, YOU SEE THEM POWER LINES?

CLIFF (O.S.)

WHAT?

SHERRI

THEY LOOK LIKE WHITE TOOTSIE ROLLS!

(ANDY crosses to the window and stands behind SHERRI, who does not sense his presence. The sound of the snowplow fades away)

ANDY

(finally)

It’s very pretty.

(SHERRI gasps and turns. ANDY steps back, equally startled)

SHERRI

Mr. Bowden—

ANDY

—Andy—

SHERRI

—Please don’t do that again.

ANDY

I’m sorry.

SHERRI

How’d you sleep?

ANDY

I didn’t.

SHERRI

Something wrong with the room?

Room’s fine.
ANDY

SHERRI
(crossing to the stairs)
Let me get you an extra blanket.

ANDY
You asked to see me?

SHERRI
Pardon?

ANDY
Young man said—

SHERRI
—I asked Clifford—

ANDY
—Didn’t even knock first.

SHERRI
I’m sorry, Mr. Bowden, let’s start over. Would you care to sit down?

ANDY
Not particularly.

SHERRI
You know, with age, they say, comes wisdom, but with every year that passes I’d trade some of that wisdom for what strength I had back when I was young and dumb. Seems like every time I stand up, I need to sit down again. If you’ll excuse me ...

(SHERRI crosses to the table and sits facing ANDY, who remains standing in the parlor. A long moment passes as each waits for the other to speak)

SHERRI (Cont’d)
(finally)
Your first time in Baltimore?

(ANDY nods)

SHERRI (Cont’d)
It isn’t usually this bad.

ANDY

Snows in Cleveland too.

SHERRI

That where you're from?

ANDY

Yep.

SHERRI

Be some time yet before they clear the roads. Baltimore never could handle a snowstorm. I swear, you put a little snow on the ground, something slips inside us. Some of the sweetest people I know, I've seen 'em go at it like pit bulls, and all for a parking spot.

ANDY

It's like that most places, in my experience.

SHERRI

Well, I'm sorry for your experience.

ANDY

Just human nature. Hey, you know something?

(crossing to the mirror)

I believe I've got this same mirror in my bedroom. Where'd you get it?

SHERRI

Lou bought that for me ... must've been fifteen years ago. On the boardwalk in Ocean City.

ANDY

Lou your husband?

SHERRI

(nodding)

Used to spend every summer down the ocean. Not so much the past few years.

ANDY

Since he died, you mean?

SHERRI

That's right.

(ANDY crosses to the large portrait behind the table; he leans forward to study the grinning man)

That him? ANDY

Yes. SHERRI

You look very happy together. I bet Lou made you very happy. ANDY

Mr. Bowden ... SHERRI

Yep? ANDY

I'm not sure this is a conversation I'd like to have. SHERRI

I'm sorry ... ANDY

I don't mean to sound unpleasant— SHERRI

—No, you're right, I overstepped. ANDY

What about you? SHERRI

Me? ANDY

Got a picture of your wife? SHERRI

I say I was married? ANDY

Aren't you? SHERRI

Don't recall saying I was. ANDY

SHERRI

Isn't that a wedding band you're wearing?

(ANDY glances at his ring finger and smiles, conceding the point. He sits at the table)

ANDY

Understand, this isn't me pressing ... not trying to press. I was just asking last night to know who else was living here—just making conversation, really, while you were checking me in—and you mentioned your husband had died. You said it kind of casual, if that makes sense—at least, you sounded so to me ... but maybe you've had more time to come to terms. My wife, Karen—my deceased wife ...

SHERRI

I'm sorry.

ANDY

Diagnosis was a lifetime ago, but she lingered, and weakened, and regained strength, and weakened some more ... When did your husband pass?

SHERRI

Three years ago November. It was a heart attack.

ANDY

I can't help thinking that suddenness would have been better.

SHERRI

Better for you?

ANDY

For us both. She died in March ... I'm still not sure how to feel about it.

SHERRI

Mr. Bowden ... Andy. There's no one way to feel.

ANDY

For a long time I left everything just as it had been. Even now ... haven't thrown anything out. But with the new year—seemed I should at least get moving in that direction. I found a packet of old letters, back of one of her drawers, letters I hadn't written her ... from another man. See, I traveled a lot. I was a reporter—no longer—laid off. I was on the road a lot, and during one of my trips, it seems, about fifteen years back, she took a lover. That sounds tawdry. I don't know why I'm telling you.

(He stands and wanders back upstage. SHERRI watches him but says nothing)

ANDY (Cont'd)

Technically I'm not laid off. They call it a voluntary buyout. If you decline to volunteer, then they lay you off.

SHERRI

That must have been—

ANDY

—Awful. Shocking. Got his address from his letters. That's why I'm in Baltimore. I'm here to confront him.

SHERRI

What do you mean?

ANDY

Knock on his door. Look him in the eye. Say, “That was my wife you were fucking all these years.”

SHERRI

Why?

ANDY

I can't confront her.

SHERRI

I don't think—

ANDY

—Anyway, doesn't matter. Can't do it now.

SHERRI

The snow's going to stop, Mr. Bowden. And when it does, if you take my advice, you'll get back in your car and drive home to Cleveland.

ANDY

Why is that your advice?

SHERRI

What do you think this man will say to you? I'm sorry? What if he's not? What will you do then?

ANDY

Punch him.

SHERRI

You ever punched a man?

ANDY

No.

SHERRI

What if he's sorry? What do you gain?

ANDY

Nothing much to lose.

SHERRI

Lou and me—we were together thirty-three years, and in that time we learned things about each other neither of us wanted to know. You accept that as a part of what it means to be married. You learned a terrible thing about your wife, but what's worse is you don't know if your marriage would have survived the learning. Confronting this man won't change that.

ANDY

Neither will driving home.

(CLIFF enters from the second floor, carrying an armful of books)