HUNTING AND GATHERING

a comedy about finding your place

Brooke Berman

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HUNTING AND GATHERING
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Berman's other plays include: HUNTING AND GATHERING, SMASHING, THE TRIPLE HAPPINESS, UNTIL WE FIND EACH OTHER, SAM AND LUCY, PLAYING HOUSE, THE LIDDY PLAYS, WONDERLAND, AMAZING, OUT OF THE WATER, and THE JESUS YEAR.

Productions: The Second Stage, The Play Company, Steppenwolf Theater Company, Primary Stages, WET, The Humana Festival, The Ohio Theater, The Round Table Ensemble, and Naked Angels.

Readings and workshops: The National Theatre in London, The Royal Court Theatre in London; The O'Neill Playwrights Conference, M C C Theater, The Culture Project, Williamstown Theater Festival, ASK Theater Projects, Rattlestick, The Hourglass Group, The Women's Project, the Denver Center Theater Company, Soho Rep, HERE, Primary Stages and the Juilliard School. Brooke's play DEFUSION was included as part of Christine Jones's "Theater for One" project at New York Theater Workshop and has recently been published in an anthology of short plays edited by Craig Lucas. Her short film, *All Saints Day*, directed by Will Frears is currently on the festival circuit.

Awards and Fellowships: Berilla Kerr Foundation grant (2002), Helen Merrill Award (2000), two Francesca Primus awards (1998, 2000), Lila Acheson

Wallace American Playwrights Fellowship at the Juilliard School, two Lecomte du Nouy awards (in both 1998 and 1999), an Independent Artist Challenge grant, and a recent commissioning grant from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Originally a performer, Brooke wrote and performed autobiographical monologues for over ten years. As a performer, Brooke trained with Anne Bogart and Tina Shepard and originally, as a part of Piven Theater Workshop in Evanston, IL. As a playwright, she is a proud graduate of The Juilliard School, where she studied with Marsha Norman, Christopher Durang, and Jon Robin Baitz. Brooke also studied with Maria Irene Fornes and assisted her on the production LETTERS FROM CUBA at the Signature Theater.

Brooke is a resident playwright at New Dramatists, where she serves on the Board of Directors, as well as a member of the M C C Theater's Playwrights' Coalition, the Dramatists Guild, PEN and Rising Phoenix Rep. Brooke has taught playwriting and creative writing as a guest artist in the public school system, at assorted colleges, and through M C C Theater, where she spent four years as the Director of the Playwriting Unit for the Youth Company, a free after-school program for N Y C youth.

HUNTING AND GATHERING was first produced by Primary Stages (Casey Childs, Executive producer; Andrew Leynse, Artistic Director; Elliot Fox, Managing Director) with its first public performance on 22 January 2008. The cast and creative contributors were:

RUTH . . . . . Keira Naughton
ASTOR . . . . . .Michael Chernus
JESSE . . . . . Jeremy Shamos
BESS . . . . . Mamie Gummer

Director . . . . . Leigh Silverman
Set design . . . . . .David Korins
Costume design . . . . . Miranda Hoffman
Lighting design . . . . . Ben Stanton
Original music & sound design . . . . . Robert Kaplowitz
Production stage manager . . . . . Kate Hefel
Production supervisor. . . . . .P R F Productions
Casting . . . . . .Stephanie Klapper Casting
Press representative . . . . . .O & M Co
Director of development . . . . . Erica Raven
Director of marketing . . . . . Shanta Mali
Associate artistic director . . . . . Michelle Bossy

The play was developed through M C C Theaters Playwrights Coalition, New Dramatists, and Underwood Theater Company, with special thanks to Mandy Hackett, Emily Morse, Josh Hecht, and Daryl Roth.

CHARACTERS & SETTING

RUTH, *early thirties*
ASTOR, *mid to late twenties*
JESSE, *thirty-five*
BESS, *twenty*

New York City, present-day

NOTES

It's important that this play move like a coherent collage, a coherent, interwoven whole. Scene breaks are not meant to isolate any one "scene" or "monologue" or "sequence" and hence, they are noted as such. Each element should roll into the next, the new scene crashing in, demanding to be heard. The monologues are direct-address—bright, clear, and to the point. The characters are smart and think fast.

As far as design, it's entirely possible that these characters carry their worlds on their back or contain pieces that roll/unroll/pack up/get stored.

*(*RUTH*)*

RUTH: This is a list of all the apartments in which I have lived in the past fifteen years that I have been alone, I mean, an adult:
(She begins the list.)
340 East 9th Street
117 East 7th Street
600 Bergen
101 Thompson
45 Pierrepont
309 East 9th
258 West 72nd
66 West 9th
27 First Avenue
A month in Trump Plaza with that girl from Argentina
274 W. 19th (The roommate who forgot to mention he was in debt to the landlord. So. Evicted.),
131 Fifth Avenue (Brooklyn)
Four months in San Francisco:
22nd St. between Mission and South Van Ness, 2242 Union, squatting in graduate housing at Stanford—
"Escondido Village"—
A drive up the West coast to Seattle, Portland,

Back to New York:
25 Fifth Avenue
A month in Vermont
636 Washington
118 North 11th St (Brooklyn)
431 16th St (Brooklyn)
680 Manhattan Avenue (Brooklyn)
back to Manhattan:

345 West Broadway
205 West 103rd
Two weeks on Rivington, six weeks out of town, a week on a friend's sofa-bed, six weeks at 428 East 9th—that writer—
And now, here, this:
A housesit.
For someone very kind,
Someone out of town. Someone I recently kissed.
Someone entirely different from Jesse.
(Jesse who said "this is a beginning" but was married to someone else...)
But that was a year ago.
Fully behind me.
And here I am today in this apartment in Queens.
Because someone new said the magic word:
Stay.
He said, Stay.

(The Housing Fugue)

RUTH: HOUSESIT. A housesit is where you sit in someone's house while they're away. You get their mail, water their plants, make sure no one breaks in, and in exchange they let you live there, usually without paying rent, because paying rent would make it a "sublet". House-sitting and subletting both involve reading all of their books and copying their C Ds—sometimes eating their food, but mostly not. It's more a cultural exercise than a culinary one. I have been "house-sitting" for the last year. My friend Astor has been "couch-surfing" just as long.

*(*ASTOR *joins her on stage:)*

ASTOR: COUCH SURF. Couch surfing is when you stay with people for free and sleep on the couch. It is called "couch surfing" because you're riding a wave. You can't stay with any one person long enough for them to get sick of you. You have to keep moving and ride

with the times. For instance if one of them suddenly breaks up with their boyfriend and needs you to go away, or falls in love with you, or if someone suddenly has a cousin visiting from California, you may have to get off of their couch. Plus, and this isn't like, I mean I know it sounds crass, but you're always looking for a better situation. You are always sniffing out the place where you can stay without being in anyone's way at all. This can go on for months, really. You don't intend for it to, but it can if need be. If the need needs be. My friend Dave, he's that guy who moved above the porn store in Harlem—he doesn't go out too much anymore—but anyway, he lived like this, marginally, for a few years. I think it was bad. I think it messed him up. He kept on being marginal for like, a lot longer than a person can.

(JESSE *joins the others on stage.)*

ASTOR: My brother Jesse has never been marginal.

JESSE: I was always the person who moved in. Never the person who looked. When I was in college, I lived in the dorms. When we moved off-campus, someone else found the place. When I moved in with my wife, she already had a place. When we wanted a bigger place, she went out and found it. I don't even know how. I don't know how she did many of the things she did. I think she has a gift. And so, when I needed to find an apartment by myself, I had to seek help.

REAL ESTATE AGENTS.

Brokers. In New York City, these people are entitled to fifteen percent of the total rent, and yet, the only thing they have to do to earn that money is have keys to the apartment and show it to you. They don't stay involved. Even when you secretly wish they would. They show you the places, give you the paperwork and take a cut. Not all real estate agents are blood-sucking parasites. Some are quite nice.

The broker who showed me *this* place was motherly. I trusted her. She said, "Jesse, I'm telling you, take this place. You're not gonna find better," —and I believed her. I could tell she cared. I prefer female brokers to male. I believe they have some interest in whether I find the right home, how I get settled, how I will unpack and what to do if the plumbing breaks. Or whatever it is that plumbing does. I don't actually know very much about "plumbing".

ASTOR: CRAIG'S LIST. A website dedicated to helping people connect. I have this/ you need this/ I want that/ you have that/ let's email and meet. You can surf craigslist every single day. You can spend enough time on the site that you notice each fluctuation and catch every new post as it appears. I have been on craigslist A LOT.

RUTH: THE CLASSIFIEDS. Apartment shares.

You: Depressed, cat-owning vegetarian seeking invisible stranger to eliminate half the rent while leaving no trace, no dent, no impact and no scars. Single White Female remembers scary movies about psychopaths with good haircuts. Seeking someone clean who will do no damage and pay things on time.

Me: Lovely single female, also vegetarian, not always single, but single right now, maybe, or maybe waiting for someone to come home. But, here's me, lovely and smart, moving a lot, very dynamic. Ruth without Naomi: wither thou goest, I will go, anyhow, me this Person seeking home. Long-term, short-term okay, sublet okay, own room a must, own room with door and window too and ideally a closet, a nice closet. I have read Virginia Woolf, and I need a room of my own. With a door, a window and a closet. Under a thousand dollars. In Manhattan. Close to subway.

ASTOR: Two bedrooms, three bedrooms, need roommates. Can't afford to live alone, need roommates. Good roommates, the right roommates, roommates who are clean but who won't be freaked out if I'm not clean. Roommates I want to come home to. Who like to cook on Sunday mornings but not too early and sit up on the roof late at night with a six-pack or two. A twelve. And some whiskey. And cigarettes. And the stars. Getting wiser. Cuz the weird thing about living with people is how you really live with them. You get to know them, you rely on them and they become part of you in some way that defies any of the words we currently use for who those people are.

(To the fugue, add BESS*, a pretty twenty year-old girl, separate from the others on stage.)*

BESS: Dear Mom and Dad,

School is great. I'm learning a lot. I've moved out of the dorms and into a house in Brooklyn with six other girls, but it's okay. We mostly all have our own rooms except for Lucy who doesn't need one because she has a boyfriend. I hope to be in Manhattan by summer. Otherwise, not much else to tell. Classes are fine. Glad you liked Paris. Thanks for the chocolate.

Love,

Bess

(End of fugue. Shift into:)

*(*JESSE*'s new apartment. A one-bedroom.* ASTOR*, his brother, helps him move in.)*

ASTOR: It's great.

JESSE: It's small.

ASTOR: Efficient. You have an extra bedroom.

JESSE: My office.

ASTOR: It looks like a second bedroom.

JESSE: But I'm using it as an office.

ASTOR: Gotcha.

JESSE: There's something so final about moving. The search is over! The movers dropped my things off this morning and left, and I thought, is this what it comes down to? These boxes. The table. The rug. Deirdre got everything else—the apartment, all the rest of the furniture, our furniture. I got the table and the rug.

ASTOR: So? You got the table and the rug. And an extra bedroom. Make a list of shit you need. Mom always told me to do that first.

JESSE: Mom never told me that. What shit do I need?

ASTOR: Windex. Garbage bags. Incense?

JESSE: No incense.

ASTOR: Okay. No incense. Lightbulbs.

*(*JESSE *starts making a list.)*

JESSE: It's temporary.

ASTOR: Everything's temporary.

JESSE: In a year, I'm going to find something and buy. You should think about that. It's a buyer's market. Everyone says. Why waste your money on rent when you can own? The market supports it, and you could probably find something in one of those neighborhoods you live in.

ASTOR: What neighborhoods I live in? The ones I can afford?

JESSE: The market supports buying. And some of those neighborhoods have deals. That's all I'm saying.

ASTOR: The market supports my asshole.

JESSE: Meaning?

ASTOR: Meaning, it just cracks me up when people are like "You should look into buying." Everyone who says that shit is either rich or knows someone rich or is married to someone rich or getting money from their parents or some combination of the above. I mean, if I don't have the credentials or money for a first and last months' rent, how do you think I'm going to get a bank loan? I mean, come on.

JESSE: I'm not getting money from Mom.

ASTOR: Well that's good because I couldn't even be in contact with you anymore if you were. Our whole adult sibling whatever you want to call it friendship or whatever, adult brother rapport—

JESSE: We've worked on that rapport.

ASTOR: Whatever. It would be out the window, decimated.

JESSE: Because I bought.

ASTOR: Because you were living off our mother. And not sharing your second bedroom.

JESSE: It's an office. Where are you living?

ASTOR: Oh. I can't talk about that.

JESSE: Why not?

ASTOR: Because it is too goddamned depressing, that's why not. It's just so all around dire. I'm looking for a place again, and it's—you know, looking, looking, looking.

JESSE: You should call Mom. Tell her where you're living, living, living.

ASTOR: I can't even begin to think about calling Mom so just get off my entire case about that okay? I am protecting Mom from needless worry. It's just too much to be like "Hi, Mom, it's me, and I'm here for the next

ten days, and then I'm there for a week but you can't call me there because... Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, Mom, blah, blah—" I mean, Come on, Man. Mom doesn't need to hear that shit. You know what she'll do with that shit? With my goddamned itinerary or whatever you call it? She'll worry. That's what she'll do. That is what moms do. They worry. It is their job to worry, their function. It's biologically determined. They are wired to worry so that the young don't die.

JESSE: Call her. She wants to know where you are.

ASTOR: Thanks. I'll make a note of it. Call Mom and freak her shit out with a list of the couches I'm staying on and why and for how long.

JESSE: You could be settled.

ASTOR: I'm settled. I'm just always in flux. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find real estate in this City without a regular job, without corporate sponsorship in the form of "salary", while trying to pursue alternative lifestyles like education, technology and music? All of this is objectively hard, and "the market" is competitive. So right now, for me, it's just all about subletting and couches. But that's fine. For me, for now.

You don't get it.

JESSE: I'm an academic.

ASTOR: You work for major institution that also happens to own most of the real estate north of 100th Street.

JESSE: You could get a real job.

ASTOR: I have, like, ten "real jobs". Besides, I'm looking for something—a way of life, an experience, an existential contract. Like Henry David Thoreau.

JESSE: Henry David Thoreau brought his laundry home to his mother the entire time he lived on Walden Pond. And I don't work for a corporation.

ASTOR: You work for Columbia University.

JESSE: It's a university.

ASTOR: It acts like a corporation.

JESSE: Fine.

ASTOR: Mom isn't doing my laundry.

JESSE: Fine. *(Lament, off the apartment:)* It's not where I thought I'd end up.

ASTOR: Stop that. Nothing in your situation implies "ending up". You left your wife.

JESSE: She left me.

ASTOR: Whatever.

JESSE: I cheated. With Ruth.

ASTOR: You weren't happy

JESSE: I wasn't? When I try to think of that time, or any of the times leading up to that time, it all goes blank. *(Then, re: the apartment)* Do you like the floors?

ASTOR: What do you mean blank?

JESSE: Blank.

ASTOR: Really?

JESSE: Yes. Really. Blank. Washes of color blank. Like looking at a Rothko. With this vague sense that Deirdre is looking at the Rothko with me, and she's really mad. And then, all of the sudden, I'm single and looking at apartments. Deposited on the other side of this MESS that I never really saw myself participating in, and then, then, I see myself participating and then, guilt. Just guilt. Did I mention the guilt?

ASTOR: I love the apartment. And I never liked Deirdre. Mom never liked her either. We thought she was cold.

JESSE: She's not cold. She's just from Maine.

ASTOR: *(Reaching into a box)* What the fuck are these?

JESSE: Cassette tapes.

ASTOR: Obsolete, Brother Man. Obso-lete. If you hold on to the archaic forms of preservation, you do not empower yourself to move forward.

JESSE: I like them. Are you in touch with her?

ASTOR: Mom?

JESSE: Ruth.

ASTOR: I'm in touch.

JESSE: Is she okay?

ASTOR: You know how the lotus is able to blossom even though it lives in all this mud? It thrives in a hostile environment

JESSE: She's in a hostile environment?

ASTOR: Queens.

JESSE: What's she doing in Queens?

ASTOR: I'm not entirely certain.

JESSE: She hates me. Does she hate me?

ASTOR: I'm not entirely certain. We don't talk about you.

JESSE: She should get her act together. She's a great person, but lost. Right? Like you. Right? She should, you both should—

ASTOR: I should go. I'm helping a friend move.

(Scene: ASTOR *helps* RUTH *move into her place.)*

RUTH: Thanks for helping.

ASTOR: You have no stuff.

RUTH: Most of it's in the storage space.

ASTOR: Ah, the storage space.

RUTH: I visit sometimes. Just to say hi. Like, "Hi, Stuff. How are you?" I open the metal door and pull out my one big armchair, and I sit down and look at all my stuff. It's weird. And strangely liberating. To be without stuff. The storage space has helped me enter this cocoon, from which I will emerge, a butterfly.

ASTOR: Cool.

RUTH: I know, right? *(Then)* How is he? You were with him, right? I can always tell.

ASTOR: Who?

RUTH: —

ASTOR: He's okay.

RUTH: You know, one of the major reasons why not to sleep with someone else's spouse, besides the Bible and all that, is the way they take up psychic space in your life. And you dream about the wife.

ASTOR: You dream about Deirdre?

RUTH: Even now. Every woman over a certain age on public transportation is her. To me. Every one. I ride the bus and think, did you used to be married to the guy I used to sleep with? The one who shattered my heart into eight million pieces?

ASTOR: She doesn't really ride the bus.

RUTH: Another reason: the married person does not have enough time in the day to devote to two partners. Maybe in polygamous households where this is publicly condoned, but in our society, it doesn't work. One needs too much.

ASTOR: One does.

RUTH: And people don't have that much time. And I think that's part of what the Bible was getting at anyhow. The things that are right just make more sense. The things that are wrong are harder to sustain.

ASTOR: I'm glad you're over that.

RUTH: Me too. Me too.

ASTOR: *(Changing the subject)* Queens freaks me out. People say this is a "real" neighborhood like that's supposed to mean something. Like Greek bakeries make it "real"?

RUTH: Oh come one. It's nice.

ASTOR: It isn't.

RUTH: The Museum of the Moving Image is nearby.

ASTOR: Have you been there?

RUTH: I just moved in.

ASTOR: But do you plan to go there?

RUTH: There's a sculpture park.

ASTOR: Do you plan to go there?

RUTH: I plan to go to the Greek bakeries.

ASTOR: Ah. But do you really think you will go anywhere else in the borough of Queens?

RUTH: They say it's "up and coming". And I have a job in Long Island City. An after-school program in the projects. Working with teenage girls. They're fierce. I told them not to sleep with married men too. I told them, "Girls, a man who does not give you his home phone number does not live alone!" I said, "Beware!"

ASTOR: *(Teasing)* I bet they love you.

RUTH: They do!

ASTOR: Whose place is this again?

RUTH: The Canadian. An actor. We met at the public library.

ASTOR: He sounds random.

RUTH: If you believe in that.

ASTOR: You could have stayed with me.

RUTH: Where?

ASTOR: I have an air mattress.

RUTH: Exactly

ASTOR: I'd have taken the air mattress.

RUTH: I can't stay with you. You may not know this yet, but after thirty, air mattresses are not charming.

ASTOR: Okay, old lady.

RUTH: Don't call me old. This is good. And who even knows what'll happen.

ASTOR: What'll happen?

RUTH: Who even knows. That's what I'm saying. Who even knows? This is my favorite part. Before anyone gets seriously injured.

ASTOR: Are you and he... *(?)*

RUTH: Well. I don't know. We kissed.

ASTOR: Before or after he offered his place?

RUTH: I don't remember.

ASTOR: Great.

RUTH: He calls. Late at night. For messages—

ASTOR: Romantic.

RUTH: And I call him back, and his cell phone, the one he is carrying, lights up blue. It says HOME,

because I'm calling from his home number, and he says, "Hello, Home".

ASTOR: Can I vomit now?

RUTH: What if this is where I belong?

ASTOR: Sweetie. This is not where you belong.

RUTH: Have I told you about the sheets? Go. Look at the sheets. I bet they were woven by really special genetically engineered silkworms. Getting into bed is like—

ASTOR: Gross.

RUTH: No. Seriously. We have a lot in common.

ASTOR: Like the same address?

RUTH: No, no, no. We share a belief that things can be good.

(Scene)

BESS: Dear Mom and Dad,

Today, Lucy and her boyfriend broke up which means now she wants her own room and very suddenly has "issues" with sleeping on the futon in the living room while still paying her sixth of the rent. I think this is an existential dilemma since she agreed to the terms when we signed the lease and her inability to hold onto a man is not any of the rest of our problem. I think it's incredibly selfish to ask the rest of us to change our entire domestic arrangement just because her situation has oh so suddenly changed. I bought her a copy of that book that was on Oprah last month. I hope that she finds peace. And I don't plan on giving up my room to help her.

P S: They have this thing in Brooklyn called The Food Co-op. It sounds like a good idea only it involves this mandatory work detail, and they don't let you do it just once for the whole house, but all six of us have to take

our own shift. The other girls are all about the Food Co-op, but I'd rather shop at the grocery store, pay more and not work once a month. I'm not sure how this will resolve itself. But I have no intention of showing up on a weekend to—whatever it is you do on work detail at the Food Co-op. Shelve things? Take inventory? Check people out? Oh no. This will not be happening. Park Slope is this really funny part of Brooklyn where everyone pretends they live in Woodstock, only they don't and there are like twenty Starbucks already. It's basically a white liberal ghetto for Wesleyan grads with Asian babies. Honestly, I'm over the entire borough. It takes way too long to get anywhere and you have to act like you care about communal food. Anyway, I have to go. It takes like eight years to get into the City and I can't be late for class.

Bess

(Scene: JESSE *teaching.)*