

DEVIL OF A TIME

By Fred Dennehy and Lisa Black

Name: Fred Dennehy

Where are you from: Cranbury, NJ

Bio: Fred Dennehy is a writer, an actor and an attorney. He is husband to Anne and father to Sarah, Owen, Maureen and Caitlin. His "Homecoming" was selected by the Red Bull Theater in 2018 to be performed at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in Greenwich Village, and His "A Visit in the Afternoon" was performed at Symphony Space in New York City as part of "The Best of the Strawberry Festival." He is a frequent collaborator with his dear friend Lisa Black, with whom he has written a number of One Acts that have been performed all over New Jersey as well as in New York City.

What keeps me positive? The generosity and humor that people show in the face of fear.

Email: fred.dennehy9@gmail.com

Yes, you can publish this.

Name: Lisa Black

Where are you from: Westfield, NJ

Bio: Lisa Black is a writer, actor and director, and a 2019 Perry Award winner for her costume work on "The Importance of Being Earnest" that she also directed for The Lord Stirling Theatre Company. When she isn't involved with theatrical pursuits, she is a wife to Hans, mother to Nicholas and Emily, an attorney with a practice in Westfield and a frequent collaborator with her dear friend, Fred Dennehy, with whom she has written a number of one acts that have been performed all over New Jersey and in New York City.

Email: lmb.blacklaw@gmail.com

What keeps me positive? What keeps me positive is seeing the creativity and kindness of people through challenging times.

Yes, you can publish this.

CHARACTERS

Beauregard Dinwiddie - early 20's

Margaret Warren- early 20's

Erebus Jezebeth - Older gentleman

Felicity - Margaret's best friend, early 20's

Lilith Jezebeth - Wife of Erebus Jezebeth

Mr. and Mrs. Matthews - additional party guests

SETTING

1920's in Southwestern Virginia. Back porch of the home of Mr. and Mrs. Warren.

Scene opens with Beauregard wearing a light pinstriped suit and skimmer straw hat and Margaret wearing a flapper dress, pearls and flapper headband. Neither of them notices the older gentleman sitting in a rocking chair in the corner. (Zoom frame for Beauregard and Margaret; Erebus – can be heard, but not seen)

MARGARET

Oh, Beauregard, isn't this a wingding! The band is just the bee's knees, but it was so warm inside. I'm glad you suggested we take a break from the dancing.

BEAUREGARD

Yes, you do look a bit piqued, Margaret. I can't have my best girl fainting on the dance floor. *(Erebus clears his throat)*

MARGARET

Oh! I didn't realize anyone else was here on the back porch.

BEAUREGARD

Please accept my apologies. We didn't mean to interrupt.

EREBUS *(Camera on)* *(Erebus is wearing a dark suit, bow tie, his hair is slicked down)*

I beg your pardon. Would one of you be so kind as to hand me my ear trumpet? It's over there on the railing.

MARGARET

Of course. Here you are. *(Handing him the ear trumpet)* I don't believe we've met. My name is Margaret, Margaret Warren.

BEAUREGARD

And I am Beauregard Dinwiddie. An honor to make your acquaintance, sir.

EREBUS

Yes, you two should be just fine.

MARGARET

I'm sorry, I missed that.

EREBUS

I said, you two could keep such time! I watched you doing the Charleston.

BEAUREGARD

I didn't get your name, sir.

EREBUS

Erebus Jezebeth. My wife, Lilith, is here somewhere. I've managed to escape her watchful eyes for a few moments, so I thought I would enjoy some evening air on this lovely porch.

BEAUREGARD

I was going to get a glass of punch. May I get one for you Mr. Jezebeth?

EREBUS

That would be greatly appreciated, thank you very much.

BEAUREGARD

Three glasses of lavender punch coming right up. Margaret, will you be alright?

MARGARET

Of course, Beauregard. Mr. Jezebeth can entertain me while you're absent. *(Beauregard's camera goes black)*

MARGARET

Mr. Jezebeth, do tell me about yourself. I must say you look vaguely familiar.

EREBUS

Oh, I've been around these parts forever. But I am far more interested in you, little lady. Tell me about you and Mr. Dinwiddie. Are you two an item?

MARGARET

I'm just goofy over Beau. We've been seeing each other for almost a year, but I don't know if he's serious or not. He's the one for me, but I'm not sure he feels the same way. Oh, dear, I'm so sorry. I have no idea why I am burdening you with my concerns.

EREBUS *(confidentially)*

I seem to have that effect on people. But I must tell you that your Mr. Dinwiddie does seem to be possessed of the common affliction of young men.

MARGARET

Common affliction? Is he ill?

EREBUS *(leaning into her very close and whispering)*

No, my dear. The wandering eye. Perhaps I shouldn't say this...

MARGARET

Say what?

EREBUS

You see, when you two were dancing before oh, now, it may only be my fancy.

MARGARET

What do you mean?

EREBUS

Well, it seemed to me...But what do I know? (*Leans back from the camera*)

MARGARET

What "seemed" to you?

EREBUS

It seemed to me that although you were his partner...oh, did I say what a lovely dancer you are?

MARGARET (*growing more agitated*)

Although what?

EREBUS

Although his arm was around you, his eye was elsewhere.

MARGARET (*angrily*)

And just where was his eye, precisely?

EREBUS (*leaning in very close and pointing at another guest*)

Do you see that little bearcat in the red dress over in the corner? She was the one catching his eye.

MARGARET

What are you saying? That's Felicity! My very best friend, Felicity!

EREBUS

I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, my dear, but your very best friend was returning the compliment. More than returning the compliment from where I was sitting. Oh, but hush now.

(*Beauregard returns – camera on*)

BEAUREGARD (*punch glasses in hand*)

Lavender punch, everyone.

MARGARET (*ignoring the offered glass*)

Would you gentlemen excuse me for a few minutes? My nose requires a touch of powder. (*Margaret exits – camera off*)

BEAUREGARD (*handing the glass to Mr. Jezebeth*)

Mr. Jezebeth, you said your wife was here somewhere?

EREBUS (*Irritated*)

Yes, yes. That woman makes my life here a living hell.

BEAUREGARD

She what?

EREBUS

I said, “my wife’s as clear as a ringing bell.” That woman is so extravagantly opinionated! But tell me about you and Miss Warren, my boy.

BEAUREGARD

I’ll tell you a secret, sir, but you must promise not to reveal it to anyone.

EREBUS

Oh, I won’t tell a *living* soul.

BEAUREGARD

I’ve been saving up to buy Margaret something special. An engagement ring! But sir, you would not believe how expensive a ring is these days! Every carat is worth three full months of bond trading!

EREBUS

My boy, I’d like to confide in *you*. When I was only a young devil – a printer’s devil, you understand, that’s what we in the trade were called in those days – I found myself in your very predicament. And a tragic predicament it was. I waited too long and my little Sheba found someone else. That’s when that cursed Lilith happened along. Yes, yes, she was quite young and attractive, so without any thought I plighted my troth. On the rebound, as they are wont to say. Wooed Sheba and settled for Lilith. What an infernal mistake! From the very first day of our marriage she has opposed me at every turn! But to my point. I swore that if I ever encountered a young man in a similar quandary, and I could help, I would. Well, Beauregard, I have and I will.

BEAUREGARD

Sir?

EREBUS

I just happened to have come into some funds of late. It has been my experience that *money* is the root of all ...good fortune. So please oblige me, my boy. Don't let what happened to me happen to you. Take that girl of yours to wife now!

BEAUREGARD

All this is very kind of you Mr. Jezebeth, but I couldn't accept.

EREBUS

Oh, now, I insist. (*He peels off a number of bills from his money clip*). We'll call it a *loan*. I'll determine some way for you to repay me later.

BEAUREGARD

Thank you, sir. This is amazing! It's *exactly* the amount I need!

EREBUS

Ah, but the ring! The precise choice will be critical to your future and you are going to need advice from someone who knows Margaret very well. You see, Beauregard, we men are just pikers when it comes to jewelry! Do you know anyone close to Margaret who is aware of her tastes?

BEAUREGARD

Margaret's best friend, Felicity! She's right over there in the red dress.

EREBUS

Her best friend – perfect choice. Shh! Mum's the word!

(*Enter Margaret – camera on*)

MARGARET

So what are you two men talking about?

BEAUREGARD

Just this and that. Please excuse me, pet. (*Beauregard hands punch glass to Margaret and exits hurriedly*)

MARGARET

That was odd.

EREBUS

So, Miss Warren, I have not as yet had the opportunity to show you my ear trumpet. I'm sure you've been waiting with bated breath.

MARGARET Oh, no. I noticed it before – it is... quite unique.

EREBUS (*Holding the device up before her*)

My little imp, I call it. It is *very* highly tuned, Margaret. In fact, if you simply turn it toward a conversation you choose to hear, any conversation at all, at any distance, you can ascertain what is being said with impeccable precision. Would you care to try it?

MARGARET

That seems improper -- to listen in on what other people are saying.

EREBUS

Oh now, it's just for a lark. Here. (*Hands her the ear trumpet*). Point it toward that couple over there.

MARGARET (*Takes the ear trumpet reluctantly*) They are the Matthews' - they are the nicest people you would ever want to meet. Never say a bad word about anybody. (*She aims the ear trumpet toward them*)

(*Production note: Mr. and Mrs. Matthews can either be on or off camera. If on, they should be costumed appropriately*)

VOICE of MR. MATTHEWS

This is one of the worst get togethers I've ever had the misfortune to attend. A convention of imbeciles.

VOICE of MRS. MATTHEWS

Can we make up an excuse to leave?

VOICE of MR. MATTHEWS

We'll say your mother is ill.

VOICE of MRS. MATTHEWS

The last time we said she was dead.

VOICE of MR. MATTHEWS

Then we require a respectable illness. Heads it's your lumbago. Tails it's my gout. (*Camera/sound off for both*)

MARGARET

Maybe they are just having a difficult day. I really shouldn't listen anymore (*handing the ear trumpet back to Erebus*)

EREBUS (*pushing the ear trumpet back toward Margaret*)

Try again. What about that young woman in the red dress whispering with Beauregard?

MARGARET

That's my friend Felicity. (*Looking off toward the dance floor*) She and Beau seem to be awfully secretive.

EREBUS

Wouldn't you like to know what they are talking about?

MARGARET

I really shouldn't.

EREBUS

I'm sure it's all very innocent. Just for a minute. It will put your mind at ease.

(*Margaret takes the ear trumpet and points it in the direction of Beauregard and Felicity.*)

(*Production note: Beauregard and Felicity can either be on or off camera. If on, Felicity should be in a red dress*)

BEAUREGARD

She mustn't know!

VOICE of FELICITY

Believe me, I know Maggie. She's without a clue.

VOICE of BEAUREGARD

Good. Then we'll meet behind your house at 8:00 tomorrow.

VOICE of FELICITY

Now, Beau, this is going to cost you a pretty penny. I have *very* expensive tastes.

VOICE of BEAUREGARD

Don't worry. I have more than enough money. And it will be worth every penny.

VOICE of FELICITY

I'll make sure of that!

VOICE of BEAUREGARD

Till tomorrow!

MARGARET

I can't believe this – Beau and my best friend. I had no idea. Dear god, am I the only one who doesn't know?

(Enter Lilith wearing a seductive flapper dress, cloche hat, bright geometric scarf – camera on)

LILITH

Erebus, you snake. I've been looking all over for you. What are you up to out here?
(Noticing Margaret – immediate change of tone) And who is this young lady?

EREBUS

Lilith, I was just enjoying the evening air when fate crossed my path with Margaret here and her friend Beauregard.

LILITH

Giving her trumpet lessons, I see.

(Margaret quickly hands the ear trumpet back to Erebus, and nods sheepishly to Lilith.)

EREBUS

Lilith, why don't you go back inside and practice your prudery on the dance floor. *(To Margaret):* My wife wields a deft tape measure, Margaret. She sees to it that every couple on the floor preserves enough space between them for Saint Swithun and his entire congregation to dance, too.

LILITH

You think you've won the game, don't you, Errie? That you've choked their little seed before it's even sprouted.

MARGARET *(extending her hand to Lilith):*

My name is Margaret. I didn't realize you were a gardener, Mr. Jezebeth. I feel like I'm intruding...

LILITH

Not at all, Margaret. My husband and I like to play this little party game. We take opposite sides and we play to win. I'm afraid the rules do not permit me to tell you more.

MARGARET

Oh, Mr. Jezebeth has been most kind to me. He's so very wise. I don't know how I can ever repay him.

EREBUS

You see, Lilith? Now why don't you just run along. Perhaps you could persuade the band to play "The Old Rugged Cross" in the next set.

LILITH

For the time being I will. Margaret, will you promise me not to do anything rash tonight before you consult me?

MARGARET

I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Jezebeth. But yes, I promise.

(Lilith exits – camera off.)

EREBUS

Oh, pay her no mind, my dear. But tell me, was the conversation between your friends enlightening?

MARGARET

Most enlightening. But they are *not* my friends.

EREBUS

Oh, dear. I hope I have not unwittingly been the cause of any pain to you.

MARGARET

Please excuse me, Mr. Jezebeth, but I see someone I'd like to have a word with.

(Margaret exits – camera off.)

EREBUS *(sotto voce)*

No need to reply, actually. There was nothing unwitting about it. *(He aims his ear trumpet at a spot on the dance floor.)*

(Production note: Felicity and Margaret can either be on or off camera. If on, Felicity needs an experienced water thrower to throw a glass of water at her. Margaret needs an empty glass that she can "throw" water on Felicity)

VOICE of FELICITY

Oh, Maggie. So good to see you! I ...oh!! Why you spilled that punch on my dress deliberately!

VOICE of MARGARET

Oh, it won't be wasted, Felicity dear. I'm sure you can persuade Beau to lap it up for you.

EREBUS (*sotto voce*):
Excellent! Excellent!

(*Lilith enters – camera on*)

EREBUS
Well, for goodness sake, come back to congratulate me on my handiwork?

LILITH
Goodness has nothing to do with it, and you know it. I detest goodness. I'm only promoting it here to keep to the rules of the game. And this game is not close to being over.

EREBUS
Yes. I have precisely one hour to be devil may care. To be delightfully evil. To destroy beyond repair the destinies of two young people. And you are bound for the same period of time to be a perfect prig. A little goody two shoes. To do your utmost to save the poor young couple. But by the pits of Tartarus, it's worth it just to see you squirming to behave against your nature. But the game goes on. For we must both run in such a way as to get the prize.

LILITH
Yes. Even the devil can quote scripture. Now give me that trumpet.

EREBUS (*holding the ear trumpet above his head and out of reach*)
Not likely, my angel.

LILITH
That's alright, I know you have another. (*Reaches deftly into his pocket and produces another ear trumpet.*) The guiding principle in our relationship has always been that you strive to make others miserable and I strive to make *you* miserable. "Settled" for me? I think not. I look forward to watching *you* settle for a few moments of helpless rage while I undo all of your hard work.

EREBUS
Curse you!

(*Margaret enters – camera on*)

MARGARET

Oh, Mrs. Jezebeth. I promised you I'd tell you if I was going to do anything rash. Well, (*wielding a salad fork*) I'm about to plunge a salad fork in Beauregard's left eye. I think that qualifies as rash.

LILITH

Before you do, I think you ought to have another listen.

(*As Erebus fumes, Lilith hands Margaret the ear trumpet and points it for her at Beauregard and Felicity, in fervid conversation at the other end of the dance floor.*)

(*Production note: Felicity and Beauregard can either be on or off camera.*)

VOICE of FELICITY

If you think I'm going to help you purchase an engagement ring for that hussy, Beauregard Dinwiddie, you've lost what little sense you were born with.

VOICE of BEAUREGARD

But...

(*Cameras off*)

MARGARET

Our engagement! Oh, Beauregard! How I've misjudged you! I can't thank you enough, Mrs. Jezebeth!

LILITH

Don't mention it. Look, Beauregard is coming here to the porch. Dear me, he is a handsome fellow. Someone worth settling for, eh, Erebus?

(*Beauregard enters – camera on, arms outstretched.*)

MARGARET

Oh, Beau! I am so lucky to be your girl!

BEAUREGARD

Margaret, who is this lovely lady you're with?

MARGARET

Oh, her name is Lilith. She's Mr. Jezebeth's wife and my new friend.

BEAUREGARD (*entranced looking at Lilith*)
Yes, I can see that.

MARGARET
The band is playing again, Beau.

BEAUREGARD
May I have this dance, Lilith?

LILITH
It would be my pleasure, Beauregard.

EREBUS (*a broad smile looking at his watch*)
We're within the hour, Lilith. You still have to be good.

LILITH (*a deep sigh of resignation*)
I must decline, Beauregard.

BEAUREGARD (*coming to his senses and looking at Margaret*)
On second thought, if you don't mind, Miss Lilith, I would be simply enchanted to dance with Margaret.

(Beauregard and Margaret link arms and walk toward the dance floor – cameras off)

EREBUS (*looking thoughtful*)
You know, I'm not at all certain who won our game.

LILITH (*an enigmatic smile*)
I know you aren't, which makes it all the more satisfying.

(Cameras off)

END OF PLAY