

BETWEEN MARS AND ME

A one-act drama by
Rose Helsinger

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROLAND, male. In college. Suffers from severe depression and paranoia.

JAIME, female. In high school. Roland's sister.

Productions may change the characters' genders. If so, please update gender references as necessary (e.g. "he" to "she").

SETTING

December, 2001. An overcrowded, unclean apartment.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

I started this piece in the annual Play In A Day event with Beth Marshall Presents, where twelve playwrights come together to write short pieces in twelve hours that are performed the following night. My piece was directed by Chris Yakubchik, and featured Cody Moss and Bennet Preuss. I expanded the short two-page script into a full one act for District 5 Thespian Competition where it won Best In Show. It was later staged at Boone High School's New Works Festival where it was directed by Sofia Deler, with myself as Jaime and Matthew Roman as Roland.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An immense thank you to my family and friends for their endless encouragement and insight. Thank you to Beth Marshall, and all of my original Play In A Day team. Thank you to my theatre teachers for providing their students meaningful opportunities to grow as artists and as people. And thank you to Sofia and Matt for believing in this script and bringing your whole hearts to the production. This script would not be possible without you.

SCENE 1

(The second Tuesday in December. Roland's apartment.)

(Lights up on ROLAND reading from War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells.)

ROLAND: "No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own; that as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and —"

(JAIME enters.)

AH! God.

JAIME: Sorry, I didn't mean to —

ROLAND: You scared me there. You didn't — um, knock. You usually knock.

JAIME: You gave me a key. Remember? I let myself in.

ROLAND: Will you knock next time?

JAIME: Sure.

ROLAND: I'm just scared of being crept up on.

JAIME: Yeah, I know. Look, I brought you more food.

ROLAND: Can I check first?

JAIME: I promise I'm clear.

ROLAND: I know you are.

JAIME: Then there's no problem.

ROLAND: But there's a chance they infected you and you don't know.

JAIME: The Martians did not —

ROLAND: Please, for me. Can I check?

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JAIME: Fine.

(Roland feels for a lump at the back of Jaime's neck and spine.)

ROLAND: Clear.

JAIME: What are you even looking for?

ROLAND: Their eggs implant themselves under the skin. Like a botfly. They use you as a human host until they're ready to hatch out of you.

JAIME: How do you know that?

ROLAND: I checked out this tape from the university library a while ago. They show a botfly burrow itself into the gut of a cow. I think there's a link between that species of botfly and the Martians. If I can figure it out, then we can unlock the key to their reproduction.

JAIME: That sounds big.

ROLAND: Colossal. It's extremely important and delicate research. I'm watching the tapes I have. Reading my book. Searching for connections. I'm also working on my computer monitor. I've been rewiring it and making changes to the mainframe, I think I can get it to run faster on a smaller platform.

JAIME: That's really good, the computer stuff. I'm glad you're working.

ROLAND: Of course I'm working. This kind of research and the theories I have on processors, if they turn out to be accurate, could revolutionize how we think about computers and what they could be capable of.

JAIME: You don't know how much of a relief it is to hear you say that. If you make some sort of breakthrough then I can show your professor. Your friends from school really miss you.

ROLAND: Please, don't lie to me. I know they're dead.

JAIME: Right. I didn't mean to upset you.

ROLAND: It's okay.

JAIME: I brought more food.

ROLAND: Thanks.

JAIME: Should last you through the week, yeah?

ROLAND: There's more than enough. You really don't have to do this for me.

JAIME: I do. I mean, I want to.

ROLAND: It's dangerous getting this stuff.

JAIME: It's the soup aisle, Roland.

ROLAND: Don't joke. It's not funny.

JAIME: Okay. You know, I can bring more than canned food.

ROLAND: No, this is plenty. You scavenge enough.

JAIME: I'm serious. I can pick up that coffee cake you like, the one that comes in a box.

ROLAND: What did I say about jokes?

JAIME: I bet there's at least one left.

ROLAND: There's not. Food like coffee cake has expired by now.

JAIME: I don't think so. I think that if you can bring yourself to ask me for coffee cake, then I'll get it.

ROLAND: I don't believe you.

JAIME: Level with me here. If you'd just try, then, I don't know. Maybe there's a chance if I came by with Mom's cake you'd actually accept it.

ROLAND: Don't talk about her.

JAIME: You know, she bakes nothing but that now. I come home and there's a fresh cinnamon coffee cake sitting there on the counter, and she's already cracking eggs for the next one.

ROLAND: That's not true.

JAIME: She keeps handing them to me every week I come see you. She says, "Give this to your brother, Jaime. It's his favorite." But I can never get them to you, can I?

ROLAND: That's not fair.

JAIME: The last time I brought one over you flipped out. You said it was an alien trick.

ROLAND: It was.

JAIME: You kept screaming, just screaming—it wasn't even words. I thought you were going to hurt yourself—or me.

ROLAND: I would never. But the Martians? They will climb into your skin and eat you from the inside out if you don't stay here with me, where it's safe.

JAIME: How would you get food then?

ROLAND: I don't know, but we'd figure it out. The world out there is dangerous, and it's only a matter of time before they get you and you stop coming back. You'll just disappear all of a sudden, and I'll never know how you died—only that you're dead.

JAIME: Look at me. I'm not leaving you. I'm not dead. Everything is going to be okay.

ROLAND: I don't believe you.

JAIME: I'm sorry.

ROLAND: It's not your fault.

JAIME: It is. I brought up Mom. I won't talk about her anymore.

ROLAND: Thank you.

JAIME: Don't think about it, okay? If that's easier for you, then, just don't think about what's out there.

ROLAND: Okay.

JAIME: Do some breathing, all right?

ROLAND: All right.

(Jaime breathes in for a count of eight and Roland joins her on the exhale for another count of eight.)

JAIME: Yeah? Now, on your own.

(Roland breathes in and out each for eight counts.)

Better?

ROLAND: No.

JAIME: At least a little?

ROLAND: Yeah.

JAIME: All right then. You got your breathing, you got lots of food, you're going to be fine.

ROLAND: Jaime, don't leave.

JAIME: I'll be back next week. Like every Tuesday.

ROLAND: Can't you stay a little longer?

JAIME: I've got a curfew.

ROLAND: Don't go.

JAIME: I have to. Mom needs – I mean, I have to.

ROLAND: Come back then.

JAIME: I will. Keep working on the computer. I'll see you soon.

(Jaime exits.)

ROLAND: Okay. Okay.

(He begins breathing like Jaime taught him.)

(Lights down.)

SCENE 2

(The third Tuesday in December.)

(Lights up on Roland reading from a copy of War of the Worlds.)

ROLAND: "It seemed indeed as if the whole country in that direction was on fire—a broad hillside set with minute tongues of flame, swaying and writhing with the gusts of the dying storm, and throwing a red reflection upon the cloud scud above. Every now and then a haze of smoke from some nearer conflagration drove across the window and hid the Martian shapes. I could not—"

(Jaime knocks at the door. Roland lets her in.)

ROLAND: Thanks for knocking.

JAIME: Of course. I have food.

ROLAND: Thank you.

JAIME: I tried to call you to tell you I was going to be late, but it wouldn't go through.

ROLAND: I unplugged the phone.

JAIME: What?

ROLAND: Someone tried to call me and I was afraid they were tracking me through the landline. They could use a tone to brainwash me.

JAIME: How long ago was that?

ROLAND: Maybe two or three months ago.

JAIME: You've had the phone down all this time? Oh my God, what if something serious happened and I couldn't get ahold of you? I can't believe I didn't call you until now.

(Jaime climbs behind the couch to fix the landline.)

ROLAND: Don't plug it back in.

JAIME: I'm not. I'm just fixing the wires so you don't set the place on fire.

ROLAND: Okay.

JAIME: Hey, did you work on the computer since I was here?

ROLAND: No. It's not worth it. The electricity will go out for good soon, and it won't matter what theories I have or what improvements I make.

JAIME: That's not true. You went to NYIT for the computer program. That's the whole reason you're here.

ROLAND: Things are different now. I just want to read.

JAIME: That book again. It's so banged up.

ROLAND: It's not really.

JAIME: Buddy, the pages are falling out. I'll buy you a new copy.

ROLAND: There aren't any new copies.

JAIME: Don't do this.

ROLAND: Come here—I need to check you.

JAIME: I'm fine. I promise, I'm fine.

ROLAND: Let me check.

JAIME: Don't.

ROLAND: It'll only take a second. Just hold still.

JAIME: Don't touch me.

ROLAND: Okay, okay.

JAIME: I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm just really tired.

ROLAND: What's wrong?

JAIME: Nothing.

ROLAND: I'm not stupid. What's wrong with you?

JAIME: It's this pre-calc test on Thursday.

ROLAND: That's it?

JAIME: I already have a D in the class, so, I'm gonna be up for the next two nights studying. And I was already up all night last night, and I don't think I even understand what I'm cramming in my head.

ROLAND: A math test has you this freaked out.

JAIME: Not all of us can be born trig geniuses.

ROLAND: Is trigonometry what you're struggling with?

JAIME: Don't gloat.

ROLAND: I'm not. I skipped to calculus, but I think I can explain the basics. What section do you not understand?

JAIME: All of it.

ROLAND: Do you have any homework or a textbook I can look at? I'll go over it with you.

JAIME: You'd really do that?

ROLAND: Of course.

JAIME: You don't have to.

ROLAND: What else are born trig geniuses for?

JAIME: Thank you, oh my God, thank you. Here, I have a study guide in my backpack somewhere.

(As she rummages through it, Roland reaches over to check her neck.)

JAIME: What is wrong with you?

ROLAND: I had to make sure.

JAIME: So you lied to me?

ROLAND: You were the one lying about still going to school. Do you think I'm dumb? I would never fall for a Martian trick like that. If you were infected then –

JAIME: That's it. I will see you next Tuesday.

ROLAND: You're being unreasonable.

JAIME: Do you have any idea how hard it is to stay patient with you? You come at me with your apocalyptic garbage everyday, and you never ask me how I am, or how school is, or say thank you. I have to ride the subway from Brooklyn to get here. I only have one day off practice a week and I spend it with you. Do you know how much crap the other girls on the soccer team give me for that? Do you know how much Mom gives me for that?

ROLAND: Don't.

JAIME: She asked me four times today when you're coming home. She's out of her mind worrying. She thinks staying in Manhattan and being so close to all this is bad for you. It is bad for you.

ROLAND: I don't want to hear this.

JAIME: She says I'm enabling you. And she's right, I mean, I am.

ROLAND: You're not.

JAIME: I can't keep lying to her for you. That's the only reason she hasn't broken down that door. Because I keep saying that

every week you're getting better, that you're almost there, that you're almost ready to see her.

ROLAND: I can't see her.

JAIME: Because you know she wouldn't play along like I do.

ROLAND: Because she's dead.

JAIME: That's really easier for you to think isn't it? You want Mom to be dead.

ROLAND: I don't want any of this to have happened. But it did. And it was real. I saw them, the Martians. They lit those buildings on fire. It was their invisible heat ray, just like in the book.

JAIME: God, I need to go home.

ROLAND: The aliens got you, didn't they? Didn't they?

JAIME: There aren't any aliens. They aren't real. All of this is in your head.

ROLAND: You're lying. They got to you.

JAIME: You've been here for almost three months. Mom wants you home. We want you home.

ROLAND: This isn't you. The Martians snatched your body out there where it's all burned to nothing. They implan—

JAIME: You're behind on your rent, your bills are piling up, you're flunking out of school—is that what's keeping you here? Every second you sit here it just gets worse. That's what's real.

ROLAND: Everything's gone. Everyone's dead.

JAIME: Two buildings, Roland. That's all it was.

ROLAND: No, I watched it from my window. I saw this huge pillar of smoke and these little dark shapes falling out of high windows faster than paper could fall and maybe they were

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just office chairs, but there were so many, and they weren't pieces of paper and they weren't chairs—they were people. They were falling or—or jumping out of the frying pan, but the frying pan was the fire and all they jumped into was the ground. I shut the curtains. I can't open them again. I can't leave my apartment; it's safe in here. Everything else in the world besides this room is gone. We are the only two people on earth.

JAIME: Here. I'll show you.

(She starts toward the window, which is the fourth wall. He tries to stop her.)

ROLAND: Jaime, no. I don't want see it all burned up. I don't want to see what's outside. No, you can't. It's all gone, it's all—

(Jaime makes a motion toward the audience like she's opening drapes.)

(A light brightens the stage the same way the sun would a dark room.)

JAIME: See.

ROLAND: It's there. It's all still. There.

(A breath.)

But the towers. Gone. I could see them from my window. Gone. Like God just picked them up and lifted them into the sky.

JAIME: No. I saw it on the news. They crumbled down on themselves.

ROLAND: What burnt them?

JAIME: Planes.

ROLAND: Oh. It felt real. Deep down I guess I knew it wasn't. But it made sense, somehow. To have the whole world be gone after something like this.

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JAIME: But the world's not gone. Is that better or worse?

ROLAND: Both. How did people react? When they saw the buildings burning? What did they do?

JAIME: They started like this; everyone afraid, holding their breath. But then after weeks and months they. We. Could almost start breathing again. We went back to school. We walked down to the memorial. Then, slowly, we stopped wearing black. We walked our dogs down the street and bought coffees and complained about teachers and dates and movies. We danced at parties again. We lived.

ROLAND: They didn't. The people there. They didn't get to.

JAIME: Yeah. I know that.

ROLAND: It's all so messed up. It doesn't matter if you're good or bad or somebody's waiting for you or if you have kids, a family. Doesn't matter.

JAIME: I think it does. The way people remember you when you're gone.

ROLAND: What would you care what they think of you? You're dead. You don't care about anything—you can't. It's all nothing.

JAIME: I don't think so.

ROLAND: What?

JAIME: I think there's something.

ROLAND: Something?

JAIME: God—I mean God.

ROLAND: You can't be serious.

JAIME: I am. Mom and I, we've been going to church together.

ROLAND: Does that make you feel better?

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JAIME: It's comforting. To know there's a higher power than us.

ROLAND: I'm glad you have that. You and Mom.

JAIME: You mean it?

ROLAND: Yeah.

JAIME: Praying helps the most I think. We pray for the dead, for their families, we pray for you too.

ROLAND: What do you pray for me?

JAIME: That you'll find the strength to overcome your fears. That the sadness in you will disappear.

ROLAND: It's not sadness. Sadness is easier. It's a feeling because of something specific: you cry because your grandma died, that's sad. This, what I feel, it isn't sad. It's heavy, like a weight right here between my chest and my stomach, and it's a comfortable weight. It's something you can sink into. A place where you just can't leave your bed because the weight makes you feel like right where you are, curled in on yourself, is the only place you're warm, the only place you're safe.

JAIME: We can get you back on your meds. They seemed to help.

ROLAND: They didn't. They weren't the right ones and I don't want to spend forever trying new combinations and strengths. I'm tired.

JAIME: I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I think, maybe, I think you need to face it. You need to go outside. Maybe, today is –

ROLAND: I'm not going outside. I'm not – not there yet. I'm not sure I'll ever be there.

JAIME: That's okay.

ROLAND: I might never get better.

JAIME: Okay.

ROLAND: Don't leave. Stay with me.

JAIME: All right. I won't leave yet.

ROLAND: Don't leave.

(After a moment, Jaime begins to exit.)

JAIME: I'm sorry. I can't.

ROLAND: Please don't go, please—

(She's gone.)

(Lights fade.)

SCENE 3

(The fourth Tuesday in December, Christmas Day.)

(Lights up on Roland reading alone.)

(The curtains are shut again; meaning the previously lit section of the stage is back to the original dim.)

ROLAND: "They began to meet more people. For the most part these were staring before them, murmuring indistinct questions, jaded, haggard, unclean. One man in evening dress passed them on foot, his eyes on the ground. They heard his voice, and, looking back at him, saw one hand clutched in his hair and the other beating invisible things. His paroxysm of rage over, he went on his way without once looking back."

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