

BLACKTOP JUNGLE

A short comedy by
Jared Goudsmit

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

LINDA SHARPE, a cynical, hard-boiled kindergartener.

BECKY BUCHANAN, her bubbly classmate.

KURT MARINO, a schoolyard bully.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Is the concept ridiculous? Yes. But each character must be played as sincerely and seriously as children take themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This play was first performed in a staged reading at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. The director was Jenny Mercein. The cast was as follows:

LINDA SHARPE.....Dreaa Baudy
BECKY BUCHANAN.....Michaela Brown
KURT MARINO.....Michael Maloney
STAGE DIRECTIONS.....Genevieve Corkery

The play was originally produced in The Blank Theatre Young Playwrights Festival in Los Angeles, CA. The director was Richard Tatum. The cast was as follows:

LINDA SHARPE.....Toks Olagundoye
BECKY BUCHANAN.....Fiona Gubelmann
KURT MARINO.....Lenny Jacobson

(In darkness, film noir jazz sets a mysterious tone. Gradually, lights rise to reveal the sketchy back corner of a school playground. Equipment is strewn about: A jump rope here, a hula hoop there. LINDA SHARPE, donning a dusty purple jacket and menacing shades, gazes out at the mass of frolicking children with disdain.)

LINDA: *(Addressing the audience:)* Look at them. Look how they smile, playing their little games. Hiding. Seeking. Hopped up on hopscotch. Kickin' the can 'til they kick the bucket. They act like...like children.

(She raises two fingers to the cigarette-like white stick in her mouth and pulls out...a lollipop. She peers deep into its Tootsie Roll center, just as Hamlet might stare into the eyes of Yorick's skull.)

Are they really so oblivious to the cruelty of life? Or do they mock hardship with their glee? Either way, they're as soft and artificial as the rubber mulch on which they tread.

(She brings the lollipop to her teeth, biting down with a sickening crunch.)

I'll never be welcome here. Not really. See, I was raised in the Pre-K across the tracks. And you just can't change a person's nature — mine or theirs. Not at this age.

(Enter BECKY BUCHANAN, chipper and carefree, in all-pink attire.)

BECKY: Who are you talking to?

(Linda jumps. She turns, annoyed.)

LINDA: What do you want?

BECKY: I'm actually playing a game right now! It's called "Runaway Becky."

LINDA: Oh, yeah?

BECKY: Yeah! I play it with my best friends. The rules are, I look to see where they are on the playground, and wherever they are, I have to run away! (*Beat.*) My name's Becky.

LINDA: Sounds fun.

BECKY: Yeah, we play it every day! It isn't too hard, though, so I can talk if you want.

LINDA: I'd rather not.

BECKY: I just know you're new and all, and you looked kinda lonely over here.

LINDA: Lonely? You think I'm lonely?

BECKY: Oh, uh—I didn't mean to—

LINDA: I *choose* not to pine for affection. You understand? I refuse to sacrifice any part of myself for your validation.

BECKY: Oh! Sure, that makes sense to me—

LINDA: I can't imagine your classmates would agree, Becky. (*To the audience:*) They wear their hearts on their sleeves. No, worse: They break their own heart in two and give half away. A common custom: The ceremony of the "BFF necklace." The splitting of the soul. The destruction of the individual spirit, glorified and praised. It makes me sick.

BECKY: You seem really smart. I like you!

LINDA: (*Sighing to the audience:*) If I really have been forced into another schoolyard, with the likes of these sheep...I might as well learn their customs. And in this merciless world? It'll be good to know someone so...expendable. (*To Becky:*) ...Gee. Thank you.

BECKY: So what do you want to talk about?

LINDA: I want information, kid. Gimme the rundown on this place. Who's irritating, who's tolerable, who should be avoided at all costs. The whole shebang.

BECKY: Wait a second — I don't even know your name. I wanna learn about you if we're gonna be friends!

LINDA: We're not going to be — Okay, fine, my name is Linda. Anything else?

BECKY: Uhh, what's your favorite...color?

LINDA: Indigo.

BECKY: What's your favorite animal?

LINDA: The lamprey.

BECKY: I don't know what that is, but it sounds awesome!

LINDA: It is.

BECKY: What's your favorite book?

LINDA: I'm actually finishing *The Prince*. By Niccolò Machiavelli. His name's been smeared throughout history. But his words, on war and power and human nature? Timeless.

BECKY: Ooh, *The Prince*! Does it have a princ-ess?

LINDA: No, it does not have a princess.

BECKY: Well...is he gonna write a sequel?

LINDA: What?

BECKY: With a princess?

LINDA: (*To audience:*) Ugh.

BECKY: My favorite book is *Henry and the Biggest Cookie in the World*. It's about this boy. Named Henry.

LINDA: Uh-huh.

BECKY: And he bakes the biggest cookie. In the world.

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LINDA: Uh-huh.

BECKY: It's really good.

LINDA: *(To the audience:)* I don't get it. Usually, I manage to scare 'em off by now. Why doesn't she go away?

BECKY: *(Digging though her pockets:)* I found some really cool sand earlier – do you want some?

LINDA: Wait a second. I understand. You never went to Pre-K, did you?

BECKY: No. My parents were thinking about homeschooling for a while, but then they listened to a podcast about the importance of socialization! So now I'm here.

LINDA: You remind me of me, Becky. On my first day in the Yard. So...irrepressible. So naive.

(She gazes into the distance.)

You know what I wanted, that very first day? More than anything?

BECKY: More lunch.

LINDA: A friend.

BECKY: Oh. That's also good.

LINDA: Some kids called me over. They were playing tag. I was so happy. To be a part of something. For a moment, I...I really was.

BECKY: That's beautiful.

LINDA: There was one girl in particular. Chloe. Nice laugh. Freckles sprinkled across her nose. Knew how to braid. Seemed like Grade-A BFF material. Boy, could she run.

BECKY: So, what happened?

LINDA: They tagged me, Becky. They tagged me, and I couldn't tag them back. I couldn't run like them, so I was "It." I was "It" for the entirety of recess. I was "It" for the rest of the day. Stripped of my own humanity.

BECKY: What about the freckle girl?

LINDA: Chloe wouldn't even look at me. Whenever I drew near, she ran away.

BECKY: Just in general, or because you were...playing tag?

LINDA: Naturally, the teacher approached me, asked what was wrong. That's when I made my fatal mistake: I told the truth. Tag was banned from the schoolyard, and I was condemned to be "It" forevermore.

BECKY: Wow.

LINDA: Yeah. Being the "It" girl isn't all it's cracked up to be. (*Laughing wryly to herself:*) They looked at me and saw something less than human. So that's what I became. And they learned to fear me.

BECKY: (*Thinking solemnly, then:*) Well, thanks for opening up to me!

LINDA: Thanks for— What?

BECKY: That's the sign of a true friend.

LINDA: (*To the audience:*) What have I done? (*To Becky:*) I, uh— I'm gonna go...stomp on that sandcastle.

(Linda starts to leave as KURT MARINO, an intimidating fourth-grader in a heavy brown jacket, lumbers in.)

KURT: Becky! Where have you been? I've been lookin' all over for you.

BECKY: Oh, uh...hi, Kurt!

KURT: Tax day. You know the drill. Pay up.

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BECKY: Sure thing!

(She rummages through her pockets and pulls out a wadded-up dollar bill. Kurt opens a small sack of money, and Becky drops her dollar in.)

KURT: Who's the new kid?

BECKY: That's Linda. She's really friendly.

KURT: I'll fill her in on how things work around here tomorrow.

BECKY: Uh, that's okay. I'll just...I can pay double.

KURT: Huh?

BECKY: I want her to like this school. Better than the last one.

KURT: Okay, moneybags. Let's make it triple.

LINDA: *(Stepping in:)* Ex-cuse me?

KURT: Ah, looks like Linda here is perfectly capable! All right, new kid. Tomorrow is tax day. As is the next day. Also the day after. You get the idea.

LINDA: And what do we get from this exchange, Kurt?

KURT: ...Protection.

LINDA: *(To the audience:)* "Protection." Ridiculous. Threats, intimidation, sheer force. And for what? A dollar?

KURT: What...is she doing?

BECKY: Honestly, I'm still not sure.

LINDA: *(To the audience:)* And yet, my frustration with a brute like Kurt cannot compare to my loathing for the masses who appease him, who permit his reign of terror. The root of inaction is fear, plain and simple. And fear is weakness. I refuse to be weak.

KURT: She's kinda freakin' me out. Is she from that other Pre-K?

LINDA: *(To Kurt:)* Listen to me, Kurt: I have no sympathy for these kickball-playing clowns. Do as you wish with them. Rob, and terrorize, and...such, all you want. But you will not demand a penny from me, and you will return Becky her dollar.

BECKY: It's okay, Linda—my mom always packs me an extra dollar.

KURT: It's practically tradition at this point.

BECKY: She was gonna talk to his parents about it, but they're honestly kinda scary too.

KURT: I learned from the best.

LINDA: You don't want to get on my bad side, friend. I've let cartoned milk expire just to slip it on a rival's lunch tray. I've whittled plastic spoons into prison shivs. Ever heard of the tetherball incident?

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