

**All rights (including but not limited to performance rights) reserved by the author.  
Contact Robert Kerr at RKerr@robertkerr.net for more information.**

THE CROOKED MANSION

[EXCERPT]

by

Robert Kerr

Robert Kerr  
2117 Foster Avenue  
Apt. C2  
Brooklyn, NY 11210  
(718) 916-4792  
RRKerr@aol.com

## CHARACTERS

NED	Early to mid-40s. White.
HOLLY	15 years old. White.
COREY	17 years old. Ambiguous ethnicity, but probably appears to be of South Asian descent.
SUSAN	Early 40s. White.

## SETTING

The living room of a single-story house next to a lake in northern Wisconsin. The kitchen, open to the living room, is upstage. There are doors to the front- and backyard, and a hallway upstage leading to the rest of the house. The furniture is in disarray—the couch and chairs face in more or less random directions, a dining table has somehow found its way into the corner; it's as though everything has gradually migrated out of place over a long time. There are also magazines, pieces of unopened mail, pizza boxes, empty beer bottles, etc., scattered about. Along one wall are numerous plastic milk crates filled with old vinyl LPs, and in a corner an old stereo system with a turntable.

## TIME

Summer.

## PRESHOW

(The following happens after the house has opened but before the play proper begins:

(Early morning twilight. NED enters from the back of the house, goes to the record collection, consults a notebook that sits on top of the records. He flips through the records, pulls one out, and puts it on the turntable. It is *Maggot Brain* by Funkadelic. The record plays from the beginning of the first side.)

(As the record plays, NED goes to the refrigerator, takes out a bottle of beer, and exits to the unseen part of the house.)

(The record continues to play. At some point NED passes through the hallway into the bathroom. Through the open door, we hear him urinate, flush the toilet, and wash his hands. He reemerges, goes to the kitchen, gets another beer, and goes back into the unseen part of the house.)

(The record reaches the end of the side; perhaps a gentle popping or crackling once the needle settles into the run-out groove. This is the only sound [and the stage remains empty] until Scene One is about to begin.)

(At this point, NED re-enters, carrying tweezers and wearing a smock and a pair of magnifying eyeglasses with attached lights pushed up on his head. He sets down the tweezers, picks up the notebook, makes a mark in it, turns the record over. Side B of the album starts to play. NED picks up the tweezers and exits into the unseen part of the house. Side B continues to play. The stage is once again empty.)

(Lights down and music out when Scene One is ready to start.)

## SCENE ONE

(Lights up. NED, in his everyday clothes, stands in the middle of the room. HOLLY stands by the door leading outside, a bag over her shoulder, other bags and a big suitcase on the floor next to her. The front door is just closing.)

(A moment.)

(NED goes to the window, pulls back the curtain and looks out. Off, a car starts and drives away.)

NED

They're gone.

(A moment.)

Have a seat.

HOLLY

Um... Thanks.

(Leaving her bags, except for the one over her shoulder, by the door, HOLLY goes to a chair and sits.)

NED

But it's not like you have to wait for me to offer. You're not a guest. You're a member of the household.

HOLLY

Okay.

NED

So. What now?

Your room's going to be at the end of the hall. It's the big one, I could have taken it when I moved back, but I guess I just felt more comfortable in my old room. And anyway, that room, my parents' room, *your* room, it's got a bunch of my stuff in it. So I've got to clear all that out before you settle in. What else?

(pointing to the various areas)

Living room. Kitchen. Dining area. Or it will be, once I move that table back.

HOLLY

Aunt Lana said there was a lake. Behind the house?

NED

Oh, yeah. You can see it, through the trees.

HOLLY

Could I go swimming?

NED

Sure. Oh, you mean right now?

HOLLY

I don't want to be rude...

NED

No, no. Member of the household. But wait, maybe it's not such a good idea.

HOLLY

Aunt Lana said she used to go swimming there all the time. I remember my dad saying he did, too.

NED

Well, see, that lake gets all the runoff from the golf course up the road. They slather the whole thing with fertilizer in the spring, and then all that phosphorus washes into the lake and turns it into this giant pit of algae. See?

HOLLY

Gross.

NED

It happens every year. But usually it clears up.

HOLLY

When?

NED

By the end of June. Middle of July at the latest.

HOLLY

Lana made it sound like this lake would be good for doing laps. I wanted to keep in shape, in case they'd let me try out for the team in the fall.

NED

Sorry, I... There's Miller's Lake. That's where the tourists go swimming, so they keep that one pretty clean.

HOLLY

Oh. Okay.

(A moment, which turns awkward. HOLLY starts to text.  
NED starts to straighten things up.)

HOLLY

Do you want help?

NED

No, it's okay. Sorry about the mess. I was expecting you guys at four.

HOLLY

I guess we got a really early start. Sorry.

NED

No, no, it's not your fault, or... You weren't the one driving. I just... First impressions, you know? Or George and Lana, what they must have... Did they, uh... What did they tell you, about me? Did they say anything?

HOLLY

They said you're nice. Easygoing.

NED

Really. Did they say it like it was a good thing?

HOLLY

It's hard to tell with Aunt Lana sometimes, you know? She probably meant that I'd like living with you better than with them.

NED

Let's hope so.

(A moment.)

Wait, did that sound, what I just said... That sounded... something. Or am I just crazy?

HOLLY

Yeah.

NED

Yeah, I'm crazy, or yeah that sounded something?

HOLLY

Do I have to choose?

(A moment.)

God. Lighten *up*. I thought you were supposed to be easygoing.

NED

Oh.

(NED forces a laugh. He forces another laugh. A moment. HOLLY returns to texting. NED returns to cleaning, but soon loses his steam.)

NED

Who the hell am I kidding? I straighten up now, in a few days it'll just go back to the mess it was before. This is how I live, you're going to find out sooner or later, so you might as well just get used to it.

(Pause.)

Ee-zee-going.

(goes to kitchen, takes a beer from the refrigerator)

Are you thirsty?

HOLLY

Kind of.

NED

You want a beer? Wait, shit, shoot, I can't do that. What else is... There's water. From the tap. See, that's another thing, I was expecting you guys at four, so in addition to straightening up I was going to go to the store and get—

HOLLY

Sure.

NED

What?

HOLLY

Sure, I'll have a beer.

NED

In six years, maybe.

HOLLY

Just one. I won't tell. No one will ever know.

(A moment.)

NED

Would it be the first time you've ever had a beer? Because I wouldn't want to start you down the road to... whatever.

HOLLY

It wouldn't be my first. God.

(A moment.)

NED

Just one. It's a special occasion.

(NED opens two beers and slides one across the counter. HOLLY gets the beer and sits. NED and HOLLY sit in

silence, occasionally sipping from their beers. At some point HOLLY turns sideways in her chair, her back to NED. She starts texting.)

NED

You comfortable like that?

HOLLY

Like what? Oh. Yeah, pretty much.

NED

Do you want to go to your room?

HOLLY

What did I do?

NED

What?

HOLLY

I'm just texting and you want to send me to my room?

NED

No, I'm not... I'm just getting this vibe from you, like maybe you want to be alone.

HOLLY

I thought you still had your stuff in there.

NED

I can clear it out. It'll take like five minutes.

HOLLY

I'm still drinking this.

NED

So take it with you.

HOLLY

You want me to drink in my bedroom?

NED

I don't *want* you to, but I don't care if you do.

HOLLY

It just seems sad, drinking in your bedroom. Pathetic.

(Beat.)

Why? Do you? Drink in your bedroom?

(Beat. NED rises, goes to the kitchen, prepares to dump his beer in the sink.)

HOLLY

Wait, Uncle Ned, don't. I didn't mean it. Honestly, I didn't mean anything. Sometimes, just the worst shit... or crap, or stuff or whatever comes out of my mouth. I don't know why. I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry. I'm a horrible person.

NED

You're not horrible.

HOLLY

I'm such a bitch sometimes. I don't mean to be, but I am. Just, please, don't kick me out.

NED

No one's kicking you out.

HOLLY

Promise me you won't. Because you know Aunt Lana's never going to take me back, not now. And there was this one girl I knew who was in foster care, she'd always come to school wearing like guys' sweaters that were three sizes too big and full of holes, and her hair was always stringy, and she was always hunched over like she wanted to shrink into herself and disappear. I don't want to end up like that.

NED

You won't.

HOLLY

Do you want help cleaning up?

NED

You just got here.

HOLLY

Like you said, I'm not a guest.

NED

I'm forty-four years old. I should be able to clean up after myself.

HOLLY

I'm a citizen of this household or whatever.

NED

*No.* It's my mess, and I'll clean it up.

(Pause.)

HOLLY

Uncle Ned, I want this to work. I just don't know how we're supposed to *be* in this house together.

(A moment.)

NED

Look, this is how I thought... how I'm thinking it's going to be. I'm not your father. I'm never going to be. I've seen you maybe twice in my life, once at your parents' funeral and once at my dad's. So I can't say I, I don't know, feel great love for you or whatever, but... and I'm not trying to be an asshole by saying that, but I get the sense you feel the same way. Right? I know you've been through a lot, and on top of that, you've been living with Lana. She can be overbearing. I mean, I *know*, I grew up with her—Mom was the final authority, but I was freaking *scared* of Lana.

So, now you're here. And I know I can't just walk into your life after fifteen years and expect us to instantly have some kind of relationship. If we do happen to have one, great, but I think it would just be counterproductive to try to force things. You with me so far?

HOLLY

Um, yeah.

NED

As long as you're here, your needs will be taken care of. Food. A place to sleep. Clothes, school supplies, lady stuff, whatever. And after six years with Lana, I suppose what you need is some space. Some breathing room. So. If you've got problems, my door is always open. But I'm not going to pester you to tell me about your day—though if you want to tell me, go right ahead. All I ask is one thing: that you stay out of trouble. Well, two things. If you're going to have friends over, or whatever, whoever, let me know. It's not a problem, I just want to know in advance who's going to be in my house and when. I've got sort of a routine going, and I've got to be prepared if it's going to be disrupted. Any questions?

HOLLY

Can I have another beer?

NED

I said you could have one. Because it's a special occasion.

HOLLY

I was *kidding*.

Oh. Any real questions? NED

Which room was my dad's? HOLLY

It's in back, at the end of the hall. NED

Could I see it? HOLLY

It's private. NED

Sorry. HOLLY

No, I didn't... I mean, it's my workroom now. I cleared all his stuff out, so it's not really his room anymore. NED

Oh. (A moment.) HOLLY

Do you have a computer? NED

Um, yeah... HOLLY

Could I check my e-mail? NED

Well, see, I had to get rid of the Internet. HOLLY

Oh. Why? NED

To save money, and... To save money. HOLLY

And what?

NED

I decided there were better things to spend my money on. And my time. I was getting kind of sucked in, so, phhht. Sorry. I could take you to the library, in town. They're hooked up there. Speaking of which, I should probably go in. Get some food, some other stuff.

(stands, goes to door, is about to exit when it occurs to him to ask:)

You want to come with?

HOLLY

No.

NED

You sure?

HOLLY

Yeah. I'm fine.

NED

If you need anything, call my cell. See you in a bit.

(NED exits. HOLLY goes to the window and watches him go. Off, we hear a truck start and drive away. HOLLY checks her phone. She writes and sends a text. She waits, watching her phone, growing more and more distraught. She dials the phone.)

HOLLY

Hey, it's me. I've texted you like twenty times and you still haven't answered. Are you all right? Call me. Bye.

(She ends the call, exhales. She prepares to dial again, thinks better of it, puts away the phone. She looks around the living room. She lifts things up to look underneath, carefully, as though they may be contaminated. She picks up a piece of trash—maybe a pizza box—and takes it toward the kitchen. She stops. She takes it back to where it was, sets it down; changes her mind again, picks it up, takes it to the kitchen and throws it out. She looks around, selects a piece of furniture and shifts it almost, but not quite, into alignment. She surveys the room. She opens the door to NED's bedroom and looks around inside. She closes the door. She wanders upstage into the hall to the unseen part of the house. She opens the bathroom door, looks inside.)

HOLLY

Ugh.

(She closes the bathroom door, disappears around the corner. Perhaps we hear a door creak open in the unseen part of the house. Off, HOLLY screams. A door slams. She runs back into the living room.)

HOLLY

Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus.

(She manages to get her phone out of her pocket, nearly fumbling the phone as she dials. She waits for an answer.)

Dwayne? Dwayne, it's me. IT'S AN EMERGENCY! Don't hang up!

They sent me to live with a psycho! He just left, so I was looking around, and he's got this *room*, his "work" room, and it's the one room in the house that's neat. Not just neat, like serial-killer neat, and guess what he's got in there.

Animals. Dead animals. Like chipmunks, or badgers. I don't know, I can't tell because it's just the *skins*. They're dried out and clothespinned to these wires over this table. And on this table there are these instruments, like a scalpel and scissors and a needle and thread, like he's going to do surgery on—

Wait, what?

You think he's a what?

But he's doing it in the *house*. I have to sleep in the next room. I am not being hysterical!

What I *want* is for you to come get me.

You *have* to. I'm out here in the middle of nowhere with this creepy secret taxidermist, I don't know anyone here, and I'm right next to this lake I can't even go swimming in because it's poisoned, and— Dwayne, please, I'm trying to— Dwayne, stop talking to me like I'm a child.

Am I a child when I'm sucking you off?

Wait, don't hang up. You're right, I'm being hysterical. I just needed to hear your voice. I'm better now. When are you coming out?

You have to, you promised. Listen, my uncle works the night shift a lot, so you could leave Woodbury at ten, get here by one, we could hang out and stuff for a couple hours, and you'd be back before dawn. Tanya and the kids wouldn't even know you were gone.

Just slip her three Ambiens before she goes to bed. She'll never—

HOLLY (*continued*)

I'm *joking!* Why can't anyone tell when I'm joking?

No. No. No. Why would I tell anyone?

Obviously nobody knows, because if they did, you'd be in *jail*.

No, wait. I was just saying...

You know that's the last thing I want. You're my rock, you're my anchor. You keep me from drifting out to sea. You will come, won't you?

Do you mean "yeah," you will, or "yeah," you just want to get off the phone?

That's what I thought. Miss you. Love you.

Bye.

(HOLLY hangs up. She takes a deep breath. She rises, goes to the kitchen, takes a beer from the refrigerator, opens it, and takes a swig.)