

THE POTATO CREEK  
CHAIR OF DEATH  
[EXCERPT]

a play in one act  
by Robert Kerr

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## CHARACTERS

MICHAEL, who has run away from home  
VALERIE, an elderly woman  
CEDRIC, her son  
DIERDRE, who has also run away from home  
ELLEN, who owns a gift shop  
LINDA, a waitress  
a VOICE, which comes from above  
a crazy GUY

## SETTING

A gift shop  
A highway  
A diner  
Another highway  
A gas station  
Another highway again  
A motel  
A rest stop  
A back road  
A scenic overlook  
A telephone booth  
A barn  
Still another highway

All in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota

Sometime before the year 2000

SCENE ONE

(A souvenir shop. Afternoon. MICHAEL, CEDRIC and ELLEN. Separately, VALERIE sitting in a car.)

MICHAEL

This kid told me about it in like second grade--

CEDRIC

You got any of those dashboard things--

MICHAEL

I don't even know if it's real or not--

CEDRIC

Those little ladies with the titties that light up?

ELLEN

No, we certainly do not.

MICHAEL

It's like this chair--

CEDRIC

How about those tumblers, you know--

MICHAEL

And it's set up in front of this gun--

CEDRIC

You put ice in and the lady's clothes disappear.

ELLEN

What kind of shop do you think this is?

MICHAEL

This chair and this gun, you see--

CEDRIC

A souvenir shop.

MICHAEL

And the gun's hooked up to a machine--

ELLEN

What you are looking for are not souvenirs.

CEDRIC

Sure they are, if they say, "Hi from Cedar Rapids."

ELLEN

(to MICHAEL)

I'm sorry. It's something you heard about in second grade.

MICHAEL

Yeah. It's a chair, like out west somewhere, and there's this gun set up in front of it, and the gun's set to go off sometime between now and the year 2000, but nobody knows when exactly. And people pay money to sit in this chair.

ELLEN

Whatever for?

MICHAEL

I dunno. It's like Russian Roulette, maybe.

CEDRIC

You're tempting fate.

MICHAEL

Yeah. Something like that.

ELLEN

Well, I've never heard of such a thing.

CEDRIC

Sounds like the Potato Creek Chair of Death.

MICHAEL

You've heard of it?

CEDRIC

Been reading this travel guide, about the hundred weirdest tourist traps in America. I decided I wanted to see them all since I won the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes.

ELLEN

You won that sweepstakes?

CEDRIC

That's right. Quit my job, sold my house, and now I'm traveling around the country with my Mama. Want her to see all these weird things before she dies. Been to about twelve or--

MICHAEL

I'm looking for that thing, the Potato... whatever, Chair--

CEDRIC

In a place called Potato Creek, South Dakota. Or maybe North Dakota. Can't remember--

MICHAEL

Do you sell maps here?

ELLEN

If I can find them. My husband would know, but he left the other day. The bastard ran off with another woman. Girl, really. She's eighteen years old. Maybe nineteen. The ironic thing is that eight years ago he ran off from his first wife to marry me. We met at the University of Nebraska. I was a grad student looking after the rats in the psychology lab--

MICHAEL

Could I have that map?

ELLEN

Let me check the back room.

(ELLEN exits. MICHAEL goes to the window and looks out. He sees VALERIE. VALERIE senses MICHAEL's gaze. She turns and sees him. They regard each other for a moment.)

MICHAEL

Is that your mother out there in the car?

CEDRIC

Why do you want to know?

MICHAEL

No reason.

(Beat)

CEDRIC

That your car?

MICHAEL

Yeah.

CEDRIC

Piece a junk.

(ELLEN returns.)

ELLEN

He was on the grounds crew. I walked by him one morning while he was raking leaves. He smiled and said hi. I started telling him how I felt trapped, like the rats in the lab--

MICHAEL

Could you--

ELLEN

Don't worry. I haven't forgotten.

(ELLEN exits.)

CEDRIC

You from Ohio, then?

MICHAEL

How'd you know?

CEDRIC

Your plates. Boy are you jumpy. What are you doing in Iowa all by yourself? Run away from home?

MICHAEL

Never mind.

CEDRIC

All right.

(Beat)

Look at that. Iowa state patrol car pulling into the parking lot.

MICHAEL

Haven't you found that map yet?

ELLEN

(offstage)

I'm looking!

CEDRIC

He's having a pretty good look at your car. I hear Iowa state troopers are pretty tough.

MICHAEL

Really?

ELLEN

(offstage)

Found it!

CEDRIC

Wouldn't know, actually. Just making conversation.

(ELLEN returns.)

ELLEN

And he said, "Don't you see? You're not like the rats at all. Your cage is only in your head." So we eloped. Why we came to fucking Iowa and opened a gift shop I'll never know--

MICHAEL

Is that the map?

ELLEN

Yes, but I don't know if you really want it.

MICHAEL

Why not?

ELLEN

It's pretty old. It was in a box that's been here since we bought the place.

MICHAEL

I don't care.

ELLEN

The roads have all probably changed.

MICHAEL

Please. Just give me the map.

ELLEN

There's an Amoco just down the street. They'd have a new one.

CEDRIC

Looks like that trooper's going round to the front.

MICHAEL

(laying a bill on the counter)

Here.

ELLEN

Don't you want your change?

CEDRIC

Coming in the front door.

(MICHAEL exits.)

ELLEN

Wait, that's the back room! Employees only! Use the front— What's wrong with you?

[END OF EXCERPT]