

TOGETHERNESS

A 15-minute play

by

Julia Kennedy

Based on the memoir *Fire Escape*

by Julia Kennedy

CAST

NARRATOR (any age, race, gender)

JULIA/SUBWAY SERVER (firefighter/service worker, female identifying, white, 20s)

MITCH (firefighter, male-identifying, any race, 50s)

RAB (firefighter, Latinx or African descent, male, played by any gender, 20s)

JEREMIAH/CARY (firefighter/boyfriend, 20s, male, played by any age, race or gender, the person cast in this role plays both Jeremiah and Cary)

MANNY (firefighter, 20s, male-identifying, Latinx, should give the impression of easy, casual strength)

CAPT. STEVE/GOMES (firefighters, preferably bald/shaved head, 20s or 30s, male-identifying, any race, the person cast in this role plays both Capt. Steve and Gomes)

A note about stage directions: They can be modified, but the overall feeling should be of a tight-knit, well-oiled group, like a dance crew.

ACT 1
Scene 1

Setting: A wildland engine fire station near Shafter, California, May, 2000. Varying times, signifying months. The set is bare, except for a small whiteboard and marker to be used early on, then set aside.

(Narrator enters.)

NARRATOR: A long time ago - what seems like ages ago, really - I, an East coaster from a non-outdoorsy (except vacations) family, the kind that hired people to fix things and to landscape their home, decided to join a wildland firefighting crew in California. The year was 2000, seemingly a world away from now: pre-9-11, pre climate change emergency, or at least in my world. Fires were different, too. They burned hot, but didn't threaten to take out entire states. It was an innocent time for me. I had a lot to learn - and not just about fire.

(Actors emerge, three from SL, three from SR. They gather, pantomiming hauling boxes, taking inventory, cleaning.)

NARRATOR: In the early weeks of May, I began adjusting to Midway Engine Crew, at the brand new, never-used station about 15 miles east of headquarters, on a lonely stretch of road that shot through farmlands as far as the eye could see, near the oilfields where we'd put out fires.

CAPT. STEVE. We're midway between where we were and where we want to be.

(All acknowledge, laugh, keep at their work.)

NARRATOR: That's Capt. Steve. He was like Mr. Clean mixed with Alex, the boy I kissed when I was 10.

(All firefighters jog in place, pantomiming strain but

strength. STEVE and JULIA reflect the narrative, below, then all firefighters sit and watch as Steve writes "in are area" on the whiteboard).

NARRATOR: Steve marveled at me during training runs and told me to stop making him work so hard. He spoke the consummate firefighter language - to the point, technical, brief - the opposite of how I spoke. He may have made spelling mistakes on the whiteboard during a tactical lesson (which made me feel secretly smug), but he was the boss and he knew what he wanted from us. I decided I liked him when we had a challenging but respectful conversation about Mike Tyson being accused of rape.

(All but JULIA remain seated; she and STEVE face each other, standing.)

JULIA: I believe her.

STEVE: Nah. I think someone's trying to kill his career.

(Beat).

NARRATOR: We agreed to disagree, and I felt okay about it.

(All firefighters stand, dust themselves off, prepare to leave for the day, gather in a loose line in front of STEVE.)

CAPT. STEVE: I want us to be like a family. Anything you need, anything on your mind, you come to me. While we're at it, you can bring magazines to work, like *Stuff* and *Maxim*, but nothing X-rated. Betty Crocker is okay.

JULIA: Great, I can't wait to bring my Betty Crocker.

(Everyone cracks up, including STEVE. During the following narration, actors will pantomime the work in a series of choreographed movement pieces conveying strain, also fun and camaraderie.)

NARRATOR: We spent our days hiking hills, or running and weightlifting, then practicing drills. We rehearsed mobile attacks, in which the firefighter drags a hose, spraying the

fire, as the engine rolls alongside. Or, each of us carried hoses on our backs, having tied them into packs that unraveled as we walked. When we weren't training, there were endless maintenance chores - equipment care, shopping, weeding and lawn mowing. At lunchtime, we all sat around our station's break room table to eat. We were a diverse bunch - multi-racial, with four women of varying sexualities, and men who didn't mind having us there.

(JULIA slowly separates from the group, scuffing her feet, looking back at them, then looking down).

NARRATOR: I liked my fellow crewmembers, and they liked me. Still, the social environment was a perpetual challenge. I had adopted the unconscious goal of going through the entire season without being teased. This was as absurd as being a firefighter and hoping never to feel the flames' heat.

(In turn, each of the actors comes up to JULIA, pushes her playfully, shakes their head in disbelief, pantomimes howling laughter and laughter with others.)

NARRATOR: People were always making fun of me for something. Often, it was for the parts of my personality that I most wanted to hide - my earnestness, my naiveté, my desire to be liked by all, my lack of mechanical street smarts. One day, as I parked the light engine on our way back from a fire, a group of Kern County engine guys gathered outside of their station and watched me, taking bets on whether I'd shear off the side mirror. In spite of this, I managed to find some natural allies.

(JEREMIAH and STEVE step forward, the others, including JULIA, recede.)

NARRATOR: Jeremiah, a Baptist with the persona of an overgrown farm boy, got made fun of - and yelled at by Steve - more than I did.

JEREMIAH: I think my boots are back at the station.

STEVE: You're a fuckin' idiot!

NARRATOR. Jeremiah took most of it in stride, was never sullen or mean. He was like a good-natured horse. In stolen moments during engine rides to and from fires or just to PT, he and I talked about God.

(During the following narrative, actors create a chaotic scene with their bodies, lying in heaps on the floor.)

NARRATOR: Twice that season, we pulled up on hideous traffic collisions - one involving our crew (no one was hurt, but our light engine was totaled).

JEREMIAH: (grabbing JULIA) Jesus, please be with these people, Amen."

NARRATOR: I felt honored, during these times, to be Jeremiah's impromptu prayer partner.

(JULIA and JEREMIAH sit on floor, facing audience, appearing to watch a screen.)

NARRATOR: When we watched *The Horse Whisperer* while off duty at one of our overnight assignments, Jeremiah said he thought the relationship between the man and the horse was similar to the way a man has to earn a woman's trust. I saw wisdom in that.

(JULIA and JEREMIAH freeze as the narrator paces away from them, toward the rest of the crew, slowly rising and dusting off. Once standing, crew members begin a pantomimed training hike, joined by JULIA and JEREMIAH).

NARRATOR: Mitch, the dozer operator, was older than many of us and had conservative opinions on gun control and gay marriage. But he was funny - including his narrative one day during our training hikes.

MITCH: All you husbands to be, this is training for taking your wife to the mall.

(Firefighters laugh, fade from hiking into station busywork, while MITCH and JULIA sit center).

NARRATOR: Once, Mitch and I got into a conversation about women and the Bible. I was hoping for his insight on how to reconcile the verses about women's meekness with my chosen career, with the appealing idea I had always tried to live out - of a woman who is complete on her own, lives her life as she wants. He had no answer.

(MITCH gets up and walks away, RAB comes from the group and takes his place, sitting next to JULIA).

NARRATOR: Many times, though, I preferred the company of a fellow seeker, rather than someone who would guide me along a path - spiritual or otherwise. Robert Allen Brown (RAB) was like that. He had already spent a season with the Hotshots - an elite fire crew to which I aspired to belong. To me, RAB was a little like Jeremiah, without the certainty of a Baptist, but with an edge. He had an eye for cute animals that we saw around town, and would talk to them in baby voices.

(RAB points to something and uses a baby voice; he and JULIA giggle.)

NARRATOR: He used the phrase --

RAB: What's up, dawg?"

NARRATOR: --and at lunch, he would say --

RAB: Put some tuna all up in that.

(RAB and JULIA join other firefighters; all break into pantomime runs again RAB and JULIA in forefront.)

NARRATOR: When we ran, he flicked his hand by his side, motioning for me to catch up.

(The others recede into station busywork again, while JULIA and RAB walk and talk.)

NARRATOR: We talked about his girlfriend, other women too.

RAB: I think she needs more confidence. More female friends. You got female friends? Hey, there was puller at firecamp, yo. She looked like a bulldog. She was kinda hot though. She slept with some guy in the back of a truck..

NARRATOR: He didn't censor his content with me, but he spoke of it the way another woman might - conspiratorial, curious. Non-predatory.

(RAB and JULIA join JEREMIAH, who has separated from the rest of the crew, and all three dance their goofiest: flossing, disco moves, robotic vogue-ing.)

NARRATOR: Once, after RAB, Jeremiah and I finished making hose packs, we synchronize danced to the radio. *We are the wackies of the crew, I wrote in my journal, with Manny coming in close after...but he's too cool.*

(At the mention of his name, MANNY saunters out from the rest of the bunch, stands at ease, attentive, appraising the audience.)

NARRATOR: Nobody made more of a lasting impression on me than Manny. He was my brother, my envy, my competition, my fascination all in one. Manny laughed easily, always had a story, and was never offended.

(Firefighters gather in a loose semi-circle, around MANNY, as he pantomimes telling stories that get crazier and crazier.)

NARRATOR: He was a male version of Kate Adams from sleepaway camp when I was 11, a blonde, tan, easy-limbed girl who laughed throatily and came from Brooklyn - not New Canaan, Connecticut, the town whose fussy privileges had rubbed off on the clique-ier girls. Like Kate, Manny had been raised far from New Canaan. He told stories with such masculine relish, that it didn't matter when he recalled being afraid. Near-death experiences surfing the tubes of waves. Driving blind drunk across the Mexican desert. Snowboarding on a half-pipe, getting beat up in Tijuana. I wanted to be the way he appeared to me - someone who wore his experiences like a royal robe, who presented himself without self-consciousness or doubt.

(MANNY and JULIA separate from the group, who recedes to pantomimed sitting around, talking, at a down time at the station. Sometimes MANNY and JULIA talk and walk, sometimes drift apart from each other, but keep track of each other, as the other firefighters do station business - cleaning, weightlifting, looking at maps - all pantomimed. At some point, enact the following, or similar: fight for the same engine seat, push each other, he grabs his balls too hard and hurts himself, she grabs her boob too hard and hurts herself).

NARRATOR: Although I don't think we would have admitted it to each other, Manny was kind of like my home base. The one I'd pick if we were told to partner up. The one I could pull aside and mumble dumb questions to. Although I admired him, I didn't have a romantic interest, because he lived with his girlfriend and their son, and I was happily dating my boyfriend at the time. Even he, with all his bravado, was still in awe of the Hotshots like I was. Like me, he wanted to play it cool when they were around, hoped to soon join their ranks.

(MANNY and JULIA enact the following narrative as it's happening - the goofy wave, and his response.)

NARRATOR: When we passed by one of them at the Bakersfield station, I'd attempt a wave - a little flash upward of the hand, gone almost before it could be detected. Manny pointed it out instantly, relishing my awkwardness. Throughout the season, he helped me laugh at myself, and gave me a rare place to feel safe while doing so - at least sometimes.

(CARY separates from the talking group and joins MANNY and JULIA center stage. They all pantomime drinking beer, playing pool, for the next few lines).

NARRATOR: One night, after the crew celebrated a birthday, Manny, my boyfriend Cary, and I continued partying until late. We visited Britannia, then Sports and Spirits, then the Chalet. Whenever we asked if Manny was willing to go somewhere else, he'd say --

MANNY: Eyen'tgivfug!

(CARY and JULIA pat him on the back and drag him to new place, slowly recede to the other firefighters, who are sitting cross-legged, backs to the audience.)

NARRATOR: (Moving closer to the audience.) The evening with Cary and Manny, I let Manny into my world a little bit, the world where I didn't have to be tough or cool or know what was going on. My girl world - where I could be easily and obviously awed by what was around me, where I could laugh giddily and cry, have big emotions. I was glad Manny - and eventually some of the other firefighters - saw that side. Truthfully, Manny also

pressed some of my deepest men-are-pigs buttons. It started out harmlessly, with my observation that he was quick with a good comeback. Case in point: ordering lunch one day at Subway.

MANNY (voice from the group, still seated): I can't decide if I should have the garlic bread.

SUBWAY SERVER: (voice from the seated group) Have some balls, try it.

MANNY: (voice from the seated group) I'll show you my balls later.

NARRATOR: He didn't miss a beat. I thought it was funny, but I was glad he hadn't said it to me. As the season continued, I gravitated to those on the crew like RAB - who would safely help me answer my most pressing personal questions: Why were men the way they were? What is the nature of love? Who can one trust? Is it truly best to judge someone not by what they say, but what they do? Often, this was where certain men showed their limitations. Manny talked about strippers and how he thought it was degrading, but he still watched them. *A man cannot truly condemn the bad girls if he enjoys them*, I declared in my journal. My whole life, I'd assumed I was surrounded by coworkers like me - often in terms of race, but almost always in terms of background - our educations, perhaps even the incomes of our families. Fire was different. Often, we were connected only by our current circumstances - the challenges of physical pain from hard work, of being part of a family unit from which we would often be separated while on fires. We had a youthful hunger to understand the world, to develop and proclaim a philosophy. I was often surprised at how quickly conversations got down to the real. Perhaps it was all we had left, without much else in common.

(During the next narration, JULIA emerges from the group, stands, to the side, and one by one, RAB, MANNY, and JEREMIAH each come over to her and make their statements, then sit back down. JULIA nods, taking each in.)

NARRATOR: Almost everyone, when the timing was right and it was just the two of us, admitted something to me.

RAB: I think you really gotta work to stay married.

JEREMIAH: I hate horror movies. All that blood and gore - too much.

MANNY: Spiders scare the shit out of me. I hate it when she asks me to kill one.

NARRATOR: During these precious unburdenings, I saw people take on different identities depending on who they were with, and these multiple identities, rather than being insincere, helped me to understand each more.

(GOMES approaches JULIA from the seated group.)

NARRATOR: Gomes who had at first appeared young and haughty to me, grew on me. I liked his innocent proclamations, such as --

GOMES: I love eating.

NARRATOR: -- and how he talked - fast and mumbling, like he was always about to laugh. One day, we were sitting in the parking lot waiting for Ruth to run an errand in Smart and Final. "Boys Don't Cry" by the Cure came on the radio.

GOMES: Why do you think boys don't cry?

(JULIA looks surprised then pantomimes giving a lengthy response as the narrator continues).

NARRATOR: I gave him my best feminist analysis -- society doesn't allow them to, etc., etc. He took it in, thoughtfully. It was nice to be asked, and to answer, finally, with something about which I actually had an informed opinion. In spite of how I tried to tone down my feminine side, it may have actually been welcome.

(During the closing narrative, each of the crew gets up, walks slowly to a place on stage where they face the audience, looking out, in neutral, being seen and remembered.)

NARRATOR: These men are thousands of miles away from me now. Some of them, like RAB, I still keep in touch with on Facebook. Manny, however, is lost to me. I wonder what it would be like if we met again. Maybe we would just pick up where we left off. If I could do that summer over again, I would be a little less afraid of what people thought, a little less worried about getting thrown off the island. I thank that time for teaching me the complexities of people - how men - and I, for that matter, could be jerks and heroes at the same time. It began my lifelong quest to learn an important, self-preserving skill - seeing a bit less black and white, a bit more gray. As in: I have faults, and am still wanted. I have weaknesses, and am beloved. I am

obtuse, and can learn. I thank these guys, and that crazy fire season, for teaching me.

END