

# **AN UNLIKELY PROPOSITION**

A short play

By Brett Steel

Melbourne  
April 2007  
4th Draft

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CAST

**Dominic:** Male, 60, landlord. A working-class European man, who has worked his way into a small fortune but still retains his middle class values.

**Samuel:** Male, 27, tenant. Young and quietly assured of himself. He considers his rational and polite manner a strength and virtue of his character.

SETTING

The dining room of an inner-city suburb.

TIME:

The present. One Sunday afternoon.

SCRIPT

**Int. Dining Room. Day**

*An ageing man, sixty, sits at a domestic dining table. In front of him lays a glass ashtray and in the centre of the table sits a vase of wilting flowers. He reclines in his chair and a lit cigarette lingers between his grubby fingers.*

*The stage lighting echoes the intensity of the outside heat and suggests a feeling of unreality. There is the sound of knocking at the door. The old man takes a last drag and stubs the cigarette in the tray. A beat. The knocking is heard again.*

DOM: (agitated) Who is it?

SAM: (off stage) It's me, Sam.

DOM: Well come in boy, I'm not getting up.

*Enter Sam, obviously familiar with the surroundings but he remains polite, awaiting hospitality, he stands by the table holding a small white envelope.*

SAM: Sorry Dom, I wasn't sure if you'd be home.

DOM: Course I'd be home, think I'm going anywhere in this heat?

*Dom looks at Sam still standing.*

DOM: Well take a seat. You want anything? Glass of water? I know – glass of wine, house special! That’s your order isn’t it? I don’t mind getting up for wine, (*getting up*) Pinot noir man aren’t you. Don’t tell me you’re one of these merlot drinkers?

SAM: No, not merlot.

DOM: I can’t stand that sort. Bloody James Hardie, that’s where the problem is. Nothing like the wine in the old country. Nothing like squashing grapes with your own toes. You ever done that? My brother, he’s got some vineyards in the Yarra Valley, we go up there every vintage at crushing time. We all do, me, Ada and Lotti. Been going every year since Lotti was six. We leave most the crushing to her now, she gets a bit of weight behind it you know, squashes the skins real well, makes for a good drop.

*Dom returns to the table with two clean-skin bottles of red wine and two glasses. He opens one bottle and begins to pour the wine.*

SAM: So how is Lorretta these days?

*Dom looks at Sam with a harsh smirk.*

DOM: She turned thirty-four last weekend. Celebrated it with me and her mother. Still living here in the same house she was born in. No motivation, no charm, though surprisingly she has bore a little wit from somewhere. Never been on a date but she wants nothing more than to have a baby of her own. She thinks it will suppress the loneliness, but she’s wrong about that. You never do stop loving your kids though Sam, you want everything you can get for them. You get crafty as you get older, you’ll learn about that soon enough. Then you get wise and then when you get to be my age you get sinister. Oh it’s a great feeling when you realise that you can be. I don’t know if it’s fatherhood or old age that does it, but one day you wake up and you see you can mould your world whichever way you want it. It’s a beautiful thing!

SAM: Well, that’s something to look forward to then.

DOM: It is my boy, it is! Now about that money you brought me.

*Sam picks up the envelope and counts the cash onto the table.*

SAM: Fifty, a hundred, one fifty, two hundred, two fifty, three, three fifty, four, four fifty, five, five fifty, six, six fifty, seven hundred and twenty, thirty, forty. Seven hundred and forty.

*Sam picks up the notes and hands them to Dom. Dom focuses on counting them again in his hand as he speaks to Sam.*

DOM: So how about your pretty wife Carol, how’s she getting along?

SAM: Karen.

DOM: What’s that?

SAM: Karen, her name's Karen is all.

DOM: What did I say?

SAM: You said Carol.

*Dom looks sharply at Sam and pauses while counting the cash, Sam recognises his cue to move on and Dom resumes.*

SAM: Oh, she's well, ballooning by the day though. Goes on maternity leave in three weeks, says she's not going back either, twelve months she's taken, but she's already talking about going back to back, they say that's the way to do it these days, have them one after the other.

*Dom begins writing on a receipt book.*

DOM: (not listening) Muh-huh. What's the date today?

SAM: Uh, the third I believe.

DOM: (*he writes*) The third. And her breasts they're still getting bigger?

SAM: Ahh, excuse me?

DOM: Her breasts, they getting nice and large by now right? That's the best part of the pregnancy Sam, end of second trimester. The breasts are big and full, less sensitive now, you can take whole handfuls of them and with the right woman, during pregnancy she can have an unprecedented number of orgasms. Of course Ada just stuck to her regular one, that's her all round, likes to keep it regular. What's Carol been like?

SAM: Karen.

DOM: Karen, of course, you said that.

SAM: Um, I don't know that I can talk about that with you, Dom.

DOM: Ah, still a man of honour, rather protective about those issues are you, don't want other men talking about your wife's breasts! I like that, you remind me of myself at your age. You're a good man Sam, I feel like I can be frank with you and that you'll give me an honest answer.

SAM: I try to...where appropriate.

DOM: Good, because there is something I wish to discuss with you, something you will no doubt consider delicate, but there comes a time Sam, when a man sees that a delicate existence is considered somewhat a primitive way of living, a novelty for the youth and innocent only. Do you still think yourself young and innocent Sam?

SAM: No Sir, I don't.

DOM: I wouldn't expect you to. But you are. I can see it in your eyes, the way you still apologise to the waiter when you call him to your table. You know what I'm talking about, don't you Sam? Hell, you apologised to me when you came in and you were bringing me money!

SAM: *(a little offended)* What is this all about?

DOM: Ah yes, the impatience that's a sure sign of it right there.

*Dom lifts the bottle of wine and fills both his and Sam's glass. He picks up the pen and writes the remainder of the receipt.*

DOM: February third to seventeen, one fortnight's rent at seven hundred and forty dollars, signed and delivered.

*Dom hands the receipt to Sam.*

DOM: You know that place has been in the possession of the family for forty-five years now. Didn't cost more than a few shilling back then for a place like that in Richmond. Sturdy and sufficient. There's been changes now though, haven't there? Some of those properties reach upward of a million dollars now in that area.

SAM: The prices are astronomical. Not something you like to think about.

DOM: Not really viable for young families to buy in the city any more, is it? Certainly not on one wage and certainly not as a printer's clerk. *(He lets loose a sly and patronising chuckle)*

SAM: A press operator.

DOM: Well... even a press operator I imagine would have a hard time of it. *(he laughs again, this time at Sam)*  
*(a beat)*

You see Sam, I had a look at the books and you know as well as I do that I haven't raised the rent price on that property for over five years now...

SAM: *(Sam appears forceful for the first time)* Look Dom, I know what you're going to say, but there's no way we could afford to pay any more than we're currently paying...

DOM: Whoa!...Steady on Sam, I said I'm a sinister man, but I'm by no means cruel. *(he chuckles again)* I don't want your money, what I require is, how do I say it... more long term.

*Dom lights a cigarette with poise and allows Sam a minute to consider.*

SAM: What is it you want then?

DOM: There you go getting all impatient again.

SAM: I don't know what it is you want from me, you obviously want something.

- DOM: Are you enjoying your wine?
- SAM: Yes, the wine is fine, but for God sake tell me what it is you are talking about.
- DOM: I have devised a plan, a scheme in-fact that will benefit us both. Do you know the difference Sam between the rich and the poor, and don't you dare say money. That is only an outcome.
- SAM: Then no, I don't. Is that what you want me to say?
- DOM: The difference, is the ability to capitalise upon choice. The poor stammer and debate while the rich simply proceed.
- SAM: What has this to do with me?
- DOM: I'm about to offer you your chance to simply proceed. Do not answer without thinking, that is the most common mistake of the poor, the other is that they think too much. So, what do you *think* of my daughter?
- SAM: Lorretta? I hardly know her. (*suddenly aware, he becomes cautious*) I think the right man is out there waiting for her.
- DOM: Ah, very diplomatic. But I'm a man Sam, I know we're all bastards on the inside, the worst are those that pretend they're not. You and I both know Loretta is nothing to look at, in fact if I wasn't her father, I would go as far as to say she was utterly unattractive, if not totally undesirable. I know the comments and the snickering men make at bars and pubs and so does she. She's not deluded. I said she was without charm, but not without wit. Cruelty creates desperation Sam, desperation that manifests itself in unrequited love. Only a mother awaiting a child can know of such things.
- SAM: This isn't serious, you're not really talking about this, about...I just came here to pay you the rent, like I do every fortnight.
- DOM: This is wonderfully serious. My daughter wants a child. You want to live in my house.
- SAM: Dom, this is absurd, you're an old man, but now you've gone and lost your head completely! (*Sam pushes his chair back from the table*)
- DOM: In exchange I'm willing to offer you and your wife, residence at the property free of charge until the child turns sixteen, at which time ownership of the property will be turned over to him, or her, whichever it be.
- SAM: What are you talking about for God sake! (*change of tact he turns to face Dom*) What does Lorretta think about this, have you told her of your ridiculous plan?
- DOM: Sam, my boy, please... She chose you.
- SAM: What?

- DOM: You think I devised this just now, that it's suddenly come to me, a future generation, a tenant and a grandchild all wrapped and parcelled into a passing conversation?
- SAM: Christ, why doesn't she have IVF or get drunk and get knocked up at the pub?
- DOM: Boy, watch your manners! That's my daughter you're talking about.
- SAM: My manners! Here you are getting her weaned and ready for market!
- DOM: (serious) It's not like that at all. IVF is unreliable, and what can we tell about a man from his papers? You, on the other hand, why you pay me rent even fortnight without fail and always between two and three pm on a Sunday. From the conversations we've had over the years, you are from a gene pool of educated men. You know how to love and you have prospects, but most importantly you've already proved yourself par for the course. We are precise in our methods Sam. This was devised over months, years even. We had to wait for the right time, until you were most vulnerable. You're not ideal, but you are... sufficient for our needs.
- SAM: You are *serious*. This is ridiculous, I'm going to forget we ever discussed it. (*Sam gets up from his chair and is about to leave*)
- DOM: If you walk out that door, the rent jumps to nine fifty a fortnight as of next payment.
- SAM: Fine, we'll move.
- DOM: Sam, you're not listening to what I'm saying. The truth is I could rent that place at twelve hundred a fortnight and I'd have couples cueing at the door to sign the lease. What do you think you could do with that sort of money over *sixteen years*? This isn't about you, it's about your family, just as it is about mine. You think this is uncommon, unique, an unlikely proposition?
- SAM: A ludicrous proposition!
- DOM: No, it is no different than the way mankind has behaved for centuries, the courtesan, the arranged marriage, the patron aunt, think of it, if you like, as a Henry James novel only more crude and in keeping with the twenty-first century. If you prefer, consider it a preposterous time in which to be alive.
- SAM: How do you propose this would even happen? You plan to draw up a contract, send it into the residential authorities, with what a... a sperm sample for bond!
- DOM: (*Throughout this speech Dom moves slowly closer to Sam becoming more intense and more threatening as he goes, until he erupts at the end*)  
You see, this is the reason we picked you, you're predictable Samuel. You're like every other hot-headed, young, drop-to-your-knees for a woman man out there. First you think you've got a fine job, it's not where you hoped you'd be, but you're convinced there's opportunities on the horizon. You've got a nice girl, the sex is great cause you still respect her and she can still make you come just by whispering dirty in your ear, that's honeymoon love – enjoy it, because it doesn't last. Next you find out you're a family man, you're going to be a father, sacrifices have to be made. You know, you've

started making them already. Deep down the bitterness is growing in you, you're not prepared to admit it, but your cynicism is evident, even to yourself. You think I'm a bitter old man, angry at the world, a heartless son of a bitch, but how wrong you are! I've heart enough to lay your desperation out on the table for you to pick through, to scrounge through the scraps, you think that's easy, for a man to dissect another! Oh you may not be clutching just yet, but you know you're reaching, soon you'll be grasping and here I am fucking handing it to you!

*The room is silent. Dom returns to the table.*

SAM: (slowly) You've handed me nothing. Nothing but your own failings and misgivings of your own misspent years. The world's not as you see it, not anymore, this isn't the *old country*. You can't buy a man. This isn't about your family, it's about you! The end of your bloodline terrifies you, so don't tell me it's out of love for your daughter!

DOM: You're wrong about that, this is about love, love in all its vilest and purest form, selfish and self-sacrificing. I love my daughter. If you love Karen, then do this for *her* child, for the both of you. Do you really know the opportunity you've been given?

SAM: (*thinking, then sternly*) I just couldn't do something like that.

DOM: Why not?

SAM: What about Karen, she's having *our* baby.

DOM: That is most likely why you will. It is not difficult, your thinking about it only makes it that way.

*Sam returns to his seat at the table*

SAM: Then what other way is there?

DOM: (*exhausted*) There is the common way, Sam. Stay poor.

*Dom slides the other full bottle of red wine across the table to Sam, who upon catching it, is awakened from thought.*

Take that with you. Nine-fifty. I'll see you next fortnight.

*Dom lights a cigarette, while Sam studies the bottle for a moment and then stands and crosses to exit carrying the wine. Before leaving he puts the bottle down on a nearby shelf. Sam turns back to face Dom.*

SAM: Sixteen years?

DOM: Sixteen years, nine months and two weeks... to be precise.

*Exit Sam.*

**END**