

# **THE TEST**

A one-act play

by Paulina Shur

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**Characters:**

Alice, in her twenties

Marge, in her twenties

Bob, in his twenties

Rick, in his twenties

## THE TEST

*(Setting: stage indicates four rooms; however, the walls between the rooms don't exist; they are invisible. In every room, there is a chair and a small table (or coffee table and sofa) with a cordless phone and an answering machine. From left to right, Bob, Alice, Marge, and Rick, are in their respective rooms, talking on the phone)*

RICK

*(On the phone with Bob)* All I'm asking is for you to tell Alice exactly what you've told Julie. Is that too much to ask?

BOB

It is. I don't feel like reciting the same lines again. To be or not to be.

RICK

Funny. You told Julie this abominable lie about me without even discussing it with me, without having asked my permission. Now I am asking you to tell the same lie to Alice, and you refuse. Why?

BOB

Because I felt that Julie wasn't right for you. I mean it's fun to have her as a girl friend. But a wife . . . You can't live with a woman who expects to go through her marriage like the grasshopper.

RICK

What grasshopper?

BOB

From Aesop's fable. The Grasshopper and the Ants. Don't you remember it?

RICK

Vaguely.

BOB

Then I'll explain the connection. For Julie life has to be perpetual fun. A party. Like for the grasshopper. So I wanted to see what Julie would do if winter comes, just like in the fable. Metaphorically speaking, of course. What if you get into a car accident and become a cripple? What if you get very ill? I mean, seriously ill? Naturally, I wanted to know the extent of Julie's commitment. After all, I only have one brother: you.

RICK

All right, Julie didn't pass your test. I don't understand what's changed. I'm still rich. Strictly between us -- handsome. I have connections, family connections and my own, too. Why are you so reluctant to talk to Alice?

BOB

Because Alice is the one for you. Why should I put her through such an inhuman test if I don't even know how *I* would react? And, by the way, I have no doubt that Alice's metal will survive any mettle. Why test her?

RICK

Mettle, metal. Shakespeare?

BOB

Yes. Measure for Measure.

RICK

Oh, God. Anyway, I don't want to test her either. I love her. But you made me doubt Julie's integrity . . . you pointed out that maybe she had subconscious motives for marrying me. And sadly enough, you were right.

BOB

You don't think Alice has the same subconscious motives, do you?

RICK

No . . . even though we're from different walks of life. No.

BOB

Then?

RICK

I don't know. I guess I'm just curious.

BOB

All right, I'll do it for you -- since it was my idea in the first place. But I have a bad feeling. I feel guilty.

RICK

Nonsense. Remember, I'm your only brother. If you ask me, I'll do the same for you.

BOB

You wouldn't need to. You know that Marge and I belong to the same class; same income, same circle. Her family is as well off as ours. She's not interested in my money or connections. She has her own.

RICK

I know, I know. All right, make the call.

BOB

Hang up.

*(RICK hangs up, sits down, waits for the phone call from BOB. BOB walks, drinks coffee, smokes. He is not in a hurry to call ALICE. Meanwhile, we hear a phone conversation between ALICE and MARGE)*

MARGE

I think you should. You must.

ALICE

But why?

MARGE

You didn't see his family yet. You don't understand how different they are.

ALICE

I'll see them tonight.

MARGE

Oh, really?

ALICE

Yes. Rick wants to introduce me to everyone. It'll be a big gathering. To tell you the truth, I'm a little nervous. Old money, new money . . .

MARGE

That's exactly what I meant! One more thing . . . You know, Rick had a girl friend, Julie, before I introduced you two. Julie and Rick had lots of fun together. Yet Julie broke off the engagement right before the wedding. Nobody knows why. Bob refuses to tell me. I think it had something to do with Rick's dark side.

ALICE

You mean, there is a dark side to Camelot?

MARGE

I don't know. I haven't had a chance to see him in times of trouble. I'm not sure if he is fit to face any problems, financial or psychological. Life has always been easy for him. The road to paradise was paved with a prep school, then an Ivy League college, then . . .

ALICE

But here our differences end.

MARGE

No, you're self-made. He's ancestrally-made. So allow me to make just one phone call, to prove his mettle, so to speak. Before you introduce him to *your* family.

ALICE

All right, have your way. Just keep in mind that I am against all of this. Oh, there is a call on another line. Bye.

MARGE

Bye.

*(MARGE starts dialing Bob's number, but Bob doesn't respond.  
HE is talking to ALICE)*

ALICE

Hello.

BOB

Hi, it's Bob.

ALICE

Hey, how are you? What's up?

BOB

Listen, do you have a second? I have to tell you something important.

ALICE

You sound so grave. I'm listening.

BOB

Nobody knows this except me. He's only told me because I'm his brother, and we're pretty close, you know. Even our parents don't know anything about it.

ALICE

About what?

BOB

*(Slowly, with an effort)* Rick is sick. He only learned about his conditions a few days ago. And then he told me.

ALICE

What is it? Don't torture me.

BOB

He has MS. He's in the very early stages of this chronic, crippling disease. He might have a full, happy life for the next fifteen years, or he might end up in a wheel-chair in five. I feel I'm betraying him, but I also feel you have the right to know. Before you make any commitment. Before even going to the dinner tonight.

ALICE

*(Slowly, shocked)* Thank you very much, Bob. I think you're right. I should know. I'm glad I know. It changes everything.

BOB

Bye, Alice. Hope we'll remain friends even if we don't become relatives.

ALICE

What? Oh, you're such a fool. When I become your sister-in-law, I'll de-friend you for thinking so low of me! Bye! And don't ever tell Rick you told me. See you tonight.

BOB

*(Beat)* Bye. *(HE hangs up, starts jumping with joy, then runs to the phone. The phone rings)* Hello.

*(Meanwhile, ALICE dials MARGE'S number, but MARGE doesn't answer her second line)*

MARGE

Hi, dearest.

BOB

Hi, darlingest. I haven't talked to you yet today. It feels wrong.

MARGE

Listen, I have to tell you something very important, but you must promise to keep it a secret.

BOB

I promise. What is it?

MARGE

I've been torn between telling you and not telling you. But I couldn't keep it any longer from my -- who knows? -- maybe husband-to-be.

BOB

You're absolutely right. There should be no secrets between me and my -- who knows -- maybe pretty wife-to-be. I'm all ears.

MARGE

It's about Alice.

BOB

Yes?

MARGE

She is . . . half Jewish. (*Silence on another line.*) Bob? Hello!

BOB

I hear you.

MARGE

I think it's silly to hide such things. What difference does it make, right?

BOB

Absolutely. You're absolutely right. It doesn't make any difference.

MARGE

I'm glad we think alike. You lifted a weight off my shoulders. Listen, I have to go. Will I see you tomorrow?

BOB

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

MARGE

I prefer today. Oh, someone's on the phone. Kiss you. Bye. (*SHE switches to another line*) Hello.

ALICE

Marge, I definitely don't want you to tell Bob anything you've invented. Things've changed in the past ten minutes. I don't want to test Rick's dark side. I don't care if he has one.

MARGE

Too late. I've just told Bob. And since he and Rick communicate with each other by the minute, when they need to, Bob is telling Rick as we speak. But you sound so worried. What's happened?

ALICE

Just . . . a family thing. In my family. I cannot tell you yet, but right now all our little games seem very silly and childish compared to real life.

MARGE

Oh, God, it must be something serious. Can I help?

ALICE

No, no, thank you. I'll handle it. It's not a life or death situation.

MARGE

All right. Still, I'll call Bob and learn how Rick's reacted. I'll let you know if I hear anything . . .

ALICE

Bye.

*(THEY both hang up. MARGE dials BOB'S number. Meanwhile, BOB is calling RICK)*

RICK

Hello.

BOB

It's me.

RICK

Did you tell her?

BOB

Yes.

RICK

So what did she sound like? *(Silence on another end)* Bob? Was I right? Were you right? Why aren't you saying anything?

BOB

She's even more determined to marry you. I was right not to test her. Meanwhile, something new has just come up. Something unanticipated.

RICK

What?

BOB

Alice is half-Jewish.

RICK

What?

BOB

Marge has just told me. And Marge knows it. They've been close friends for years. Marge used to spend vacation with Alice's family. They're like her relatives.

RICK

*(Slowly)* Well, I guess I'm not the first person to marry a half-Jew. Humphrey Bogart married Laura Bacall, who was 100 percent Jewish. So did Diane Keaton.

BOB

Married Laura Bacall?

RICK

No, Woody Allen.

BOB

Rick, this is not a joking matter. In our family, you'd be the first one to marry somebody who isn't Protestant.

RICK

Will, not would.

BOB

Are you crazy? You'll be disowned. You'll be ostracized. Don't you want your wife to be part of the family? Don't you remember how Mother dreamed that when we marry, she'd finally get two girls? Two daughters. Alice is already different from you, especially from our family. Her nationality will deepen this gap.

RICK

But why advertise it?

BOB

Are you out of your mind? You can't keep it a secret! She'd want to have a wedding in a synagogue. A Jewish wedding. With Jewish music. (*Sings from Fiddler on the Roof: "To Life, To Life . . ."*) Do you know that when a male -- of any nationality -- enters a synagogue, he must wear a yarmulke.

RICK

So what?

BOB

Do you see Father in yarmulke? Grandfather?

*(THEY both start laughing)*

RICK

You said she's half a Jew. How do you know she'd want the wedding in a synagogue?

BOB

Because her last name is Christian, not Jewish.

RICK

That's how you know that she'd want the wedding in a synagogue? Because her last name is Christian? Bravo! Bravo!

BOB

I don't believe, my brother is so illiterate. OK, try following my logic. Since her last name is Christian, and we, in America, take our father's last names, that means that Alice's father is Christian, and mother is Jewish.

RICK

I still don't see how you can figure out . . .

BOB

According to the Jewish religion, you are Jewish if your mother is Jewish. That means Alice is Jewish. And that, in turn, means, she'd want to have the wedding in a synagogue. (*Sings: "Sunrise, sunset . . . "*)

RICK

Why is that?

BOB

Why is what?

RICK

That you're Jewish if your mother is Jewish?

BOB

I don't know how it all started, but actually, that is very smart and should work for every nationality. We, men, can never be sure about our fatherhood. Remember how in the past we used to be crusaders, disappearing from our homes for years in order to convert pagans to Christians. Nowadays, we go on business trips, leaving our wives behind. Our wives now go on business trips, leaving us behind. How can we, men, ever be sure? And if a woman has two boy-friends at the same time, even she doesn't always know who the father is. But there is no doubt about who the mother is. So it makes perfect sense to say you are who your mother is. That's why Alice will have a Jewish wedding. And to spare you any disappointments, I want to inform you now that your children will be Jewish, too. Even though there might not be any doubts about your fatherhood. Times change, but religion doesn't. That's the beauty of it.

RICK

Listen, she is willing to live with a person who has MS, who might be in a wheel-chair until the rest of his life, and you're telling me to leave her because she is half Jewish? Beautiful, smart, loyal, loving . . .

BOB

You speak as if you really have MS. Remember, you don't. She was the one that hid something from you.

*(Silence)*

RICK

I love her. I don't care if we have a Christian wedding, a Jewish wedding, a tribal wedding . . .

BOB

You loved Julie, too. You'll meet someone else. The world is full of young women who would be glad to marry a young wealthy lawyer with family connections. Damn it, I should have never interfered in your affair with Julie!

RICK

People are not replaceable. Alice is not.

BOB

Do you mean to tell me that in the whole of the United States of America you can't find a young, smart, and beautiful girl who is a wholesome American? Father would doubt it. At least, don't bring her to dinner tonight. Cancel it. Talk to the parents first.

RICK

So if someone tells you now that Marge is half a Jew, or that she didn't pass your test on MS, you wouldn't marry her?

*(At that moment, MARGE dials BOB'S phone number again)*

BOB

Good question! Wait a second, there is a call on another line. It might be very important. Hold on. *(Switches to another line)* Hello?

RICK

It's still me.

*(ALICE is calling MARGE; MARGE tries to switch to ALICE)*

MARGE

Hello?

ALICE

It's me.

MARGE

Hold on, I'm still trying to reach Bob.

*(BOB tries to switch to his other line, but he switches so many times, he thinks he is with RICK again, while he is with MARGE)*

BOB

Well, first of all, I would never subject Marge to such a test. It's like the crucible. Now I understand it was unfair and cruel to do that to Julie and Alice. I'll never forgive myself for ruining your marriage with Julie. Now let's talk about the reality. Yes, if Marge were half a Jew (which she is not), I wouldn't marry her. It's inconvenient. It would cause a huge family conflict. You know that father would disown and disinherit me. And it will be even worse when children come. What school should they go to on Sunday? Should we exchange Christmas presents or Hanukah presents? What should I tell them about the conflict between Christians and Jews if I myself don't understand it?

You see where the inconvenience comes in? No, no, I wouldn't marry her, and I don't advise you to continue your relationship with Alice. There are lots of problems in life, why add more? Don't you agree with me? Hello? Rick? Rick? (*BOB switches to another line. MARGE slowly hangs up.*) Hello?

RICK

I'm still here.

BOB

Don't you agree with me?

RICK

Agree with what? You were on another line.

BOB

What do you mean? Whom was I talking to?

RICK

I don't know.

BOB

O my God. I hope it wasn't Marge. If it was, I'm ruined. I have to call her. Don't make any decisions without having consulted me first.

RICK

Bye.

*(THEY both hang up. ALICE dials MARGE'S phone number. MARGE is looking at the phone, dumbfounded. SHE doesn't answer)*

## MARGE'S ANSWERING MACHINE

Hello, you've reached Marge. Please leave a message, and I will return your call as soon as I can. Have a great day.

ALICE

Marge, I'm nervous. Did you talk to Bob? Call me as soon as you can.

MARGE

*(Answers)* Alice, I didn't talk to Bob. Something else has come up. Something very serious. You were right. We shouldn't have started these silly games. I'll talk to you later. Bye.

ALICE

Now you made me really worried. What's happened?

MARGE

I'll tell you later. Bye.

ALICE

Bye.

*(THEY hang up)*

BOB

*(calls MARGE. SHE doesn't answer. Her answering machine delivers the same message:*

*"Hello, you've reached Marge. Please leave a message, and I will return your call as soon as I can. Have a great day.")* Hi, love, it's me, your maybe lucky husband-to-be. Where are you? Call me as soon as you can. Maybe we will do something tonight, after all. Love you. Kiss-kiss.

ALICE

*(calls RICK. HE doesn't answer. He just looks at his phone. She hears his answering machine. "Please leave a message for Rick Townsend. I'll call you back as soon as I can")* Hi, darling, it's me. What time will you pick me up? I can't wait to meet your family. Love you. Bye.

*(ALICE hangs up. BOB dials ALICE'S number)*

ALICE

*(Happy)* Hello!

BOB

Hi, Alice, this is Bob.

ALICE

Oh it's you. Hi again.

BOB

Listen, do you know if Marge was at home five minutes ago? She doesn't answer the phone.

ALICE

She is at home. She was on the phone with you when I called her a minute ago. Maybe the connection didn't work. Try her again.

BOB

Thanks. Bye.

ALICE

See you tonight?

BOB

Bye.

*(THEY both hang up. BOB calls MARGE again. MARGE looks at the phone, doesn't answer)*

MARGE'S ANSWERING MACHINE

Hello, you've reached Marge. Please leave a message, and I will return your call as soon as I can. Have a great day.

BOB

Marge, it's me. If you're at home, please answer. It's very important that we talk. Please. *(Pause)* Please.

*(MARGE doesn't answer. BOB hangs up. BOB, RICK, ALICE, and MARGE walk, sit, think, pace, all greatly disturbed)*

THE END