

Bad Accents

A murder mystery in two acts

By Matthew Greene

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CHARACTERS

Conrad - The mysterious host

Michelle - The tortured soul

Brent - The golden boy

Danielle - The innocent one

Val - The femme fatale

Tatiana - The outsider

Gideon - The jilted lover

Nash - The wild card

ACT ONE

The living and dining rooms of a fancy Michigan lakehouse. Double doors leading out front, French doors opening to a terrace. An archway in one direction leads to the kitchen, a hallway to bedrooms and bathrooms on the other side.

Conrad, brusque and down-to-business, enters with a red envelope in hand. He is dressed in the black uniform and tie of an English butler. Very “Downton Abbey.” Very “Gosford Park.”

He heads to a bookshelf and hides the envelope between two books. He steps back, takes a look, and pulls the envelope out to be a little more visible. He triple checks-the table settings. Everything needs to be *just so*.

Conrad hurries back to the bookshelf to adjust the envelope’s position again when he hears a knock at the door.

The knocking grows more insistent, a steady pounding. Conrad straightens up, stepping into character as Withings, the stuffy English butler. He opens the door.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Good evening madam, so pleased you could make it.

Michelle looks at him a moment.

MICHELLE

You’re pulling my dick, right? You’re really wearing that, Conrad?

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Please, address me / as Withings.

MICHELLE

I swear to god, dude.

CONRAD
(dropping character)

You're supposed to be in costume, Michelle.

Michelle has a garment bag slung over one arm.

MICHELLE

You mean *this* monstrosity you sent over? I look like a haunted doll, I was gonna give our daughter nightmares. *You're welcome*, by the way, for arranging the sitter on what's supposed to be *your* night.

CONRAD

Well, since I'll be the one paying her...

MICHELLE

Don't get passive aggressive with me, I already got the grocery order this week.

CONRAD

Sorry, the *groceries* are passive aggressive?

MICHELLE

Soy milk, quinoa, *whole wheat pasta*? And kale chips, what the fuck am I supposed to dip a kale chip in, / Conrad?

CONRAD

Hannah actually likes those.

MICHELLE

You're gonna give that girl a complex.

CONRAD

You say "complex," I say "healthy metabolism."

MICHELLE

She's not fat.

CONRAD

I know, you're welcome.

MICHELLE

You know, we could move. I could take Hannah to California.

CONRAD

And I could sue for full custody, uh huh. This must be what *deja vu* feels like.

MICHELLE

Don't act like you've never had *deja vu*, you son of a bitch.

CONRAD

Whoops, we're not swearing, remember? Since someone can't hold her tongue around a *very* impressionable nine-year-old girl.

(holds out his hand)

I need your phone.

MICHELLE

Conrad...

CONRAD

(points down the hall)

And you can change in the guest room.

MICHELLE

Which guest room? This house is like a ghost town.

CONRAD

You're just mad it's finally out of escrow.

MICHELLE

Yeah, good luck trying to sell. The wiring's shit, the swimming pool is a frog sanctuary, and this neo-gothic thing isn't *nearly* as charming as your parents thought it was.

CONRAD

Look at how bougie those alimony checks are making you. *Phone*.

Conrad steps closer to her, almost menacing.

This is the part where I remind you what we agreed on.

MICHELLE

You're un-fucking-believable.

CONRAD

Whoops. Rules are rules.

Michelle sighs, takes her phone from her pocket, and hands it over to Conrad.

Conrad steps into character as Withings, the stuffy English butler.

(as Withings)

Why, thank you, dear lady. Now, if you'd be so kind as to dress for dinner...

Brent and Danielle step in from the terrace.
Both are dressed smartly in 1940s formal attire.

BRENT

I've got two words about that view, Conrad: Fuck. You.

DANIELLE

Honey!

(to others)

We forgot how nice it is out here. We wanted a terrace when we were house hunting, right Brent? But terraces and school districts never matched up.

MICHELLE

You're looking at school districts?

BRENT

No no no, I see those feminine wheels turning in there. No one's pregnant and no one needs any *ideas*. I'm still recovering from buying the house, like shopping for your own casket.

DANIELLE

Brent, that's not funny.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

I believe you mean "Nigel," Miss Levain. And I am Withings, your humble butler.

DANIELLE

Oh my goodness, we're already starting.

BRENT

(to Conrad)

So, you're the butler. Does this mean you have to fix me drinks?

CONRAD

(as Withings)

That entirely depends. Am I speaking with Nigel Levain, renowned polo player on holiday from London?

BRENT

Listen man, I put on the funny clothes, isn't that enough?

CONRAD

(as Withings)

I never knew Mr. Levain to back down from a challenge.

BRENT

I see what you're doing, but come on: *role play?*

CONRAD

(as Withings)

I thought we all might enjoy a little escape from reality tonight.

(dropping character)

Unless there's something *else* you want to talk about.

BRENT

(rolls his eyes)

God, you're the worst.

Brent sighs and assumes the role of Nigel Levain, a refined and slightly foppish English gentleman.

(as Nigel)

Pip pip, old chap, if you'd be so kind as to fetch me a whiskey sour...

MICHELLE

(to herself)

Good lord.

Conrad goes to fix Brent a drink over the following.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

I live to serve, of course, Mr. Levain.

BRENT

(as Nigel)

Well then, good show. I must say, this whole situation is terribly mysterious.

Danielle, who has been watching with interest,
has raised her hand.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Ah, would the lady care for a drink / as well?

DANIELLE

No, I'm sorry, just...a question?

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Yes, by all means.

DANIELLE

But not for the butler, I just...I'm sorry, I didn't know we were starting / and I wanted to ask...

BRENT

Jump right in, it's fine.

Danielle fishes a card out of her purse for
reference.

DANIELLE

On the card you sent it says she / never met the lady...

CONRAD

(dropping character)

No no no, don't reveal anything!

DANIELLE

I think everyone knows this part, right?

(to Brent)

I never met the lady who died.

MICHELLE

Gasp!

CONRAD

Alright, *no more*.

DANIELLE

But that means I didn't do it, right?

Danielle tucks the card into her cleavage as
Brent pulls his own card out of his pocket.

BRENT

Since we're paused, how about we make my guy American? You know, change "polo" to "football?"

CONRAD

Nigel? No, it doesn't make sense. His father was in the House of Lords.

BRENT

We could say his father is, and I'm just spitballing here, a hedge fund manager with a drinking problem.

CONRAD

Nigel's British, *god*, it's all there on the card. He's a celebrated polo champion who grew up with all the privileges the upper class had to offer.

BRENT

(re: the card)

Holy shit, word-for-word.

(reads)

"All the privileges the upper class had to offer. But he harbors / a terrible secret..."

CONRAD

Don't *read* it, are you serious? That's how the whole thing works. Everyone has proverbial skeletons in their proverbial closets and they *don't read them aloud*. This was all *pretty* clear in the instructions.

MICHELLE

Don't you guys know better than to show up to a party without reading the *manual*?

CONRAD

Michelle, I swear to Christ.

Danielle has raised her hand again.

Yes, Danielle?

BRENT

You can *just talk*, / honey.

DANIELLE

(to Conrad)

Is there a prize if we solve it?

BRENT

Yeah, for real, if we're gonna go to all this fucking trouble for *no prize...*

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Trust me, solving the mystery will be its own reward.

Conrad hands Brent a drink, turns to Danielle still in character.

And would *Mrs.* Levain care for a drink?

Danielle takes a deep breath before she speaks, affecting a shrill and shoddy English accent in her role of Jane Levain, smiling trophy wife.

DANIELLE

(as Jane)

Cheerio, then, I'll have a vodka soda, Sir Butler. Spit spot!

Brent and Conrad share a glance, both trying not to laugh. Danielle drops character.

Oh no, was that not right?

CONRAD

(as Withings)

I believe the seltzer is in the kitchen. If you'll excuse me.

Conrad exits quickly, holding in his laughter. Michelle tries to keep herself from smiling.

MICHELLE

I swear to god, Danielle, if I close my eyes it's like I'm in Buckingham Palace.

DANIELLE

I knew I wasn't gonna be good at this.

BRENT

Look at it this way, honey, the sooner we finish the game the sooner we can take off these fucking costumes and go for a swim.

MICHELLE

Don't tell me he cleaned the pool.

Michelle goes to the window to look out,
surprised by this.

BRENT

Course he did! It's the whole reason we were friends with Conrad in the first place!

DANIELLE

Brent, be nice, that's not *why*.

BRENT

You're right, it was the free beer and occasional cocaine.

DANIELLE

Oh my god, that was *one time*.

MICHELLE

(looking out the window)

Well, he knew how to keep us coming back. Still does, it looks like. Because here we
fucking are again. Oh, that's right, I'm not supposed to swear. Another one of his rules.

DANIELLE

Really?

MICHELLE

Listen. That pool's been untouched for ten years, back to nature, basically. You weren't
around to see him, but Conrad wouldn't go near it after / what happened.

DANIELLE

No no no, okay? Let's not talk about that.

BRENT

(to Michelle)

Wait a second, do you think Conrad's up to something?

MICHELLE

"Up to something" is like a Tuesday for him. But you know that better than anyone, right
Brent?

BRENT

I think you have a costume to get on, I mean, before you get in trouble.

MICHELLE

I can't handle him bitching at me in that *accent*.

Michelle heads for the hallway, turns back.

And don't tell him I said "bitching."

She exits. Brent waits a moment to see that the coast is clear.

BRENT

Jesus Christ. Is it still called "whipped" if I'm talking about a girl?

DANIELLE

What did she mean by that? "You know better than anyone."

BRENT

Come on, it's Michelle, she's always trying to stir shit up.

DANIELLE

Did you see her face when she thought we were having kids?

BRENT

Like she's one to talk: Miss Teen Pregnancy 2006, getting all judgy with my beautiful wife.

Brent closes in on Danielle and puts his arms tenderly around her over the following.

DANIELLE

I look fat in this dress.

BRENT

You look like Eddie Haskell's wet dream.

He kisses her.

DANIELLE

See, I don't even...

Another kiss.

...get that reference.

As Brent goes in for another kiss he reaches for the card stuffed in Danielle's cleavage.

Brent, what are you...

Brent pulls out the card and quickly steps back to look at it.

Brent!

Danielle tries to snatch the card back but Brent pulls it from her reach.

You are such a cheater! What if I'm the killer?!

BRENT

(as Nigel)

Now, Jane, I know you better than that.

DANIELLE

Conrad's gonna freak!

Danielle takes the card from Brent, tucks it back into her cleavage.

The doorbell rings.

BRENT

Would you relax? We're supposed to be having fun!

DANIELLE

I hope you didn't see anything.

BRENT

(mocking)

"Jane Levain is a cold-blooded killer who has the voice of Bridget Jones and the rack of...Bridget Jones."

Conrad hurries in from the kitchen with a bottle of seltzer, sipping from a drink of his own.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Would you look at that, it must be the others. Do remember to keep your secrets to yourselves.

BRENT

I don't think the butler is supposed to be drinking.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

As I said, all will be revealed in time, Mr. Levain.

Conrad downs the rest of his drink and opens the door to reveal Val, a powerful woman in a stunning black dress. She has both eyes on her Blackberry as the others see her.

Well, if it isn't another / of our guests...

VAL

(eyes down)

One second, sorry.

BRENT

Val? Holy shit. I didn't think you were coming.

DANIELLE

Oh my god, you look *amazing*.

VAL

(eyes down)

Ssshhh...Almost there, and...

(looks up)

Here. Sorry I'm late. Craziest day.

CONRAD

We were all just getting into character.

VAL

You're really serious about doing this?

CONRAD

You were serious enough to wear the dress I sent.

VAL

Of course I did. I look like liquid sex.

DANIELLE

What are you, even, a slutty witch?

VAL

No, I am...

Val pulls a card from her purse.

(reads)

“A fierce German businesswoman who values her privacy above all else.”

DANIELLE

Better not read any more of that.

BRENT

(as Nigel)

The butler *simply* won't have it.

VAL

Oh yeah, I've been to enough of these things. Two years ago everyone was doing them in Washington. It was like our dirty little secret. There is no rush in the world like accusing a congressman of murder, believe me. One second.

Without missing a beat Val turns back to her Blackberry, reading an incoming message.

CONRAD

(as Withings, to Val)

Now, Ms. Von Braun, I have already collected all cellular devices from the others, as per the rules you agreed to. It is imperative that we maintain absolute focus no matter what distraction there may be.

A hand catches the front door as Conrad starts to close it. He steps back as Tatiana, a very pregnant woman in an ill-fitting French maid's outfit, steps inside.

TATIANA

Sorry...bathroom, *bathroom!*

CONRAD

(points)

Uh...down the hall, just past the...

Before Conrad finishes what he's saying Tatiana disappears down the hall. The others are quiet for a beat.

BRENT

Um.

DANIELLE

Everyone else saw that, right?

With a flourish, Val presses the “send” button and looks up from her Blackberry.

VAL

And *done*. God, I have an inbox that’s about to explode.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

Might I trade your phone for a drink, madam?

VAL

Alright, Conrad, but if I’m doing this “Velma Von Braun” thing I am *do-ing it*.

CONRAD

(as Withings)

We shall attempt to prepare ourselves.

Val reluctantly trades her phone for a gin and tonic from Conrad.

DANIELLE

This is fun. We’re having fun now, you guys. I can’t even believe it’s been ten years.

VAL

Only *ten!* But you know what they say: time flies when you’re being wildly successful for your age. *Joking*, of course.

BRENT

Good one.

VAL

I’m speaking at the reunion tomorrow night. If you were wondering *how* they convinced me to slip away for the weekend.

Gideon has slipped in unnoticed.

GIDEON

Bet they really twisted your arm.

The others turn to see Gideon, amiable and unpretentious, closing the door behind him.