

No One Calls Me Mutt Anymore

a play by Garth Stein

Originally produced at Shorewood High School in Shoreline, Washington,
February 4, 2010. Barb Lachman, Artistic Director. Shelby Foote, Director.

Characters

Max, aka "Mutt"Kane Thomas
Jeff, his brother.....Alex Brock
Sara.....Marlee Cole
Maria, her sister.....Mirabelle Blech

Time

July. The present.

Setting

A campground in Eastern Washington.

Copyright © 2010 Bright White Light LLC
All rights reserved. For information about producing this play, please contact
mail@garthstein.com

There is a two-man tent, a sleeping bag in a stuff sack, a fire pit with grill, and a picnic bench. These things can be dressed as elaborately as the designer wishes, with red and white checked tablecloth, a cooler, camping pots and plates on the table, etc., or in a spare, minimal style. There is a wood-splitting stump as well, with some firewood and a hatchet: this is the preferred piece of business for Max to undertake—nothing like a little wood-chopping on stage to raise the audience's heart rate; however, if local laws or insurance premiums prevail, Max can be preoccupied with a whittling stick and a stage knife; perhaps he is sharpening sticks for a marshmallow roast. Still, there should be a stump and a stage hatchet for the "are you afraid" moment.

At rise, the sun is bright. By the end of the play, the sun should be golden, as dusk approaches. This should be an accelerated sundown for dramatic purposes, not real time.

MAX is chopping wood with grim determination; his movements are stiff and angry. He is wearing jeans and an outdoorsy shirt.

Soon, JEFF enters and takes a deep breath of the clean summer air. He is dressed like Max, with the addition of a neon orange hunting vest. He raises his arms as if to embrace all of nature.

JEFF

(Dramatically)

"I celebrate myself!"

(Max pretends not to notice)

JEFF (cont.)

(Again, with drama)

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself!"

(No response)

JEFF (cont.)

Remember that poem? Didn't you have to read it for Mr. Kelly's class? "I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass!" It's by William Carlos Williams.

MAX

It's by Walt Whitman.

JEFF

Ha! I got you to speak! I tricked you, and you fell right into my trap. What idiot doesn't know that William Carlos Williams writes about plums and wheelbarrows and Walt Whitman writes about grass? I forced you to correct me because I preyed upon your smug conviction that you are smarter than I am at all things—

MAX

Lay off.

JEFF

At all things, I say! With the possible exception of the use of loaded weapons, about which you are not so clever. I baited you with my own stupidity and got you to speak to me. *(beat)* I'm pretty proud of myself.

MAX

Clearly.

(Pause.)

JEFF

Did you walk to the lake yet? It's looking absolutely crystalline. I might take a dip.

MAX

I've been busy. Setting up camp. As you can see.

JEFF

All work and no play makes Mutt a dull boy.

(Max buries the hatchet in the stump with anger.)

MAX

Jeff, I know that you are part of my own personal hell, and that you will torture me like this for eternity, and I know that I brought it all on myself. I know. But could you just do me a favor and shut up for a few minutes?

(Jeff makes a locking gesture on his lips and throws the imaginary key in the bushes. Max shakes his head in disgust, grabs his sleeping bag and lays it out on the floor of

the tent. Jeff wanders over to the stump. He grabs the hatchet but it's stuck; he can't get it out. He pulls and pulls without luck. Max emerges from the tent, sees what Jeff is trying to do, approaches and easily removes the hatchet. He holds it out for Jeff, who doesn't take it.)

MAX

Afraid?

JEFF

You have no idea how afraid I am.

MAX

Me, too.

(He stabs the hatchet into the stump and busies himself with the cooking equipment.)

JEFF

(Sees something in the distance)

Mutt! They're here.

(Max joins Jeff, looking off)

JEFF (cont.)

I must say, Sara is looking exceptionally fine.

MAX

Maria's looking pretty good, too.

JEFF

Hey, Maria's mine!

MAX

I know, I know.

JEFF

Sara's yours, Maria is mine. It's been that way since we were kids. Don't mess with me, Mutt.

MAX

I know, I know.

JEFF

What I wouldn't give for one kiss, Mutt.

MAX

I know.

JEFF

“My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air...”

MAX

You’re in love.

JEFF

I can’t stand it, Mutt. How long since I’ve seen her? Two years! I don’t think you understand what it feels like. I see her and my heart swells up, it grows physically larger in size—my heart is bigger than your head right now.

MAX

Dude, chill.

JEFF

You’ve got to help me! Max! You’re the only one.

MAX

I can’t, Jeff.

JEFF

Help me, and I’ll leave you alone.

(Max hesitates.)

JEFF (cont.)

Here they come! Act casual.

(Jeff rushes over to the picnic bench and sits with affected nonchalance. MARIA and SARA enter.)

MARIA

(kissing Mutt on the cheek)

Hey, Mutt. Long time.

JEFF

Hey, Maria. Long time.

SARA

Hey, Mutt. Long time.

(Max doesn’t move, doesn’t speak; he’s thunderstruck.)

MARIA

Give her a kiss, Mutt, you dope.

(Maria shoves Max toward Sara.)

MAX

No one calls me Mutt anymore.

MARIA

Oh? What do they call you?

MAX

Max. It's my name.

MARIA

You mean your parents didn't actually name you "Mutt?" Who knew?

SARA

Hey, Max.

MAX

Hey, Sara.

(He tries to kiss her cheek, but she turns the wrong way and they do a funny head bob missed-kiss thing, and then he accidentally kisses her on the lips. They both pull back, embarrassed.)

MARIA

Thank God *that's* out of the way.

JEFF

(Laughing loudly)

You crack me up! And might I add, you look exceptional this afternoon.

(Maria rolls her eyes and sits next to Jeff on the bench.)

MARIA

Now maybe they can graduate to holding hands.

JEFF

How have you been, Maria? It's been a while.

SARA

I've missed seeing you--and your whole family, I mean.

MAX

I've missed you, too.

MARIA

(Standing)

I think I'm going to gag.

JEFF

Me, too.

MARIA

(Starts off)

I've got to get out of here.

JEFF

Let's go down to the lake. It's looking crystalline today.

(Maria turns, startled.)

MARIA

What?

(Max and Sara are confused.)

MAX

What?

MARIA

Did you say something?

MAX

I didn't say anything.

MARIA

I'm going to walk down to the lake. Are you coming?

JEFF

I'm coming!

MAX

I'm setting up camp.

MARIA

Whatever.

(She heads off; Jeff follows. Max and Sara fidget awkwardly for a moment; he busies himself with the camp.)

MAX

It takes longer to do it by myself. Jeff and I used to always do it together.

SARA

Yeah. *(beat.)* Where are you parents? I haven't seen them.

MAX

They're at the next site over there.

SARA

Are they doing all right? I mean. You know.

MAX

(shrugs, thinks)

My mom gets really sad sometimes. Like on our way in the car? It was so quiet. I could tell she was all busted up. I'm not sure why we came.

SARA

It was important for her. For all of us. Getting together is important.

MAX

But I mean, it's weird. Our parents have been camping here every summer since before any of us were born. It's like a legacy.

SARA

Everyone wants to get back to normal.

MAX

There is no normal anymore.

SARA

So maybe we should go ahead to normal.

MAX

(laughing)

Remember the bear attack? That wasn't normal.

SARA

When was that? I don't remember.

MAX

We were pretty little because my family was all in one tent and your family was all in another tent. The bear came into camp at night looking for the cooler, but it had a latch that the bear couldn't figure out, so it was sitting there tossing the cooler up in the air and letting it smash on the ground, trying to crack it open—

SARA

I remember! The bear didn't get it open, either.

MAX

My dad was in his pajamas and his boots, throwing rocks at it to make it go away.

SARA

It went away, though.

MAX

Yeah, but all the eggs were broken and the food was smashed. It was a disgusting mess. And the cooler had all these claw marks on it.

(beat)

SARA

How are *you* doing?

(Max doesn't answer. He looks around nervously, looking at everything but Sara. He struggles with his emotions.)

SARA (cont.)

It must be really hard for you. Do you want to talk about it?

MAX

(About to burst)

I can't do this right now. I can't--I just--

SARA

No, no, I didn't mean to--

MAX

I just--I can't--

SARA

It's okay. I'm going to walk down to the lake. Do you want to come?

MAX

(after a pause)

I need to set up camp.

SARA

Sure. See you at campfire?

MAX

(softly)

Yeah. Sure.

(She hesitates a moment, as if she wants to say something else. Then she thinks better of it and leaves. When she is gone, Max releases his frustration with a guttural shout and fist-swinging shadow-karate routine, the end of which is witnessed by Jeff, who rejoins his brother.)

JEFF

It's like Tai chi on Ritalin.

MAX

Shut up.

JEFF

You shouldn't talk to your brother like that.

MAX

You're not my brother. You're dead.

JEFF

Oh! Playing the death card? Mutt! Do you really want to venture down this road?

MAX

I want you to leave me alone.

JEFF

Because if you want to get into the whole "death" thing, little brother, I think a little introspection is necessary. And I'm not sure you're prepared for that.

MAX

Trust me, I know what I did. You've been following me around for two years, wearing that ridiculous orange vest to remind me.

JEFF

It's a safety vest.

MAX

I know!

JEFF

I wear it so I won't get mistaken for a deer.

(Tableau. This is well-worn ground between them. The scene darkens leaving them in a pool of light, as if they are isolated in their memory.)

MAX

You remember how foggy it was.

JEFF

It was a thick fog. You could touch it.

MAX

We split up to cover more ground.

JEFF

Dad and Uncle Brad went one way. You and I went another. And then you and I split up.

MAX

I heard rustling.

JEFF

I heard it, too.

MAX

It was right there. So close.

JEFF

I could smell it. The damp, wet fur.

MAX

The fog lifted for a second and I saw it. Right there. It was a buck.

JEFF

It was me.

MAX

And I shot it.

It was me. JEFF

And I killed it. MAX

You killed me. JEFF

(They look at each other intently, like they've gotten to this point before but aren't quite sure what's next. The lighting returns to before the tableau.)

So we have a deal, right? JEFF

Jeff-- MAX

She's almost here. I need you to kiss her for me. JEFF

I can't do it. MAX

Yes, you can. Kiss her with every bit of your soul, so I can feel it. That's all you need to do. JEFF

I won't. MAX

And then I'll leave you alone. I promise. You'll never see me again. JEFF

(Maria enters.)

Where's Sara? MARIA

She went to find you. MAX

Well, she didn't do a very good job of it, apparently. MARIA

MAX

I guess not.

MARIA

Because I'm right here. *(pause)* Getting your camp all set up? How's it coming together for you?

JEFF

You can do it, Mutt.

MAX

Look, Maria--

MARIA

Tell me something, Mutt.

MAX

I--I can't. I can't do it.

(Note: In the following speech, Maria relentlessly pursues Max around the stage. He tries to escape; she tracks him down. He has nowhere to go.)

MARIA

I have something to tell *you*, then. Do you know why they don't call you Mutt anymore? It's because there's no more Jeff. You can't be a Mutt if there isn't a Jeff. It's "Mutt and Jeff," like "bacon and eggs." It started as a joke. Wordplay. And now the joke is broken. Now it's like a knock-knock joke without the "who's there?" "Knock-knock--" *(a long pause)* We could wait forever. If there is no "who's there?" there is no joke. If there is no Jeff, Mutt might as well be dead, too. In fact, symbolically, Mutt *is* dead. Do you see that? I'm applying early admission to Columbia, and I'm going to get in because I have this kind of critical thinking skill. I can really break down a text: Symbolically, you are dead. Your persona died with Jeff. Your physical being didn't die like his did, so you were able to reinvent yourself as Max. But I'm telling you: *no one cares about Max!* You're toast without jam. You're a sidecar without a motorcycle. You sit pathetically in someone's driveway, no motor, no way to steer yourself. You collect rain-water and rust. You're worthless. Meaningless. You're nothing. *(She has worked herself into an emotional state; she is crying.)* Am I upsetting you?

JEFF

(to Max)

Do this for me, and then I'll go.

(Max steadies himself.)

MAX

Maria, do you believe in ghosts?

MARIA

What?

MAX

Do you believe in ghosts?

MARIA

I can if I need to.

MAX

I need you to believe.

(Max stands center, closes his eyes and extends his hands. Suddenly, the lighting changes; we are back in the tableau. Jeff steps toward Maria; she sees him and gasps.)

MARIA

Oh, my God!

JEFF

Maria. Long time.

(Maria runs into Jeff's arms; they embrace.)

MARIA

You're here. You're real! Jeff!

JEFF

Being here isn't that far from being there.

MARIA

I can't believe it!

JEFF

Remember when we promised we would be each other's first kiss? I haven't kissed anyone else.

MARIA

I haven't either! I've missed you so much!

JEFF

Give me your first kiss. And then we can move on.

MARIA

But I don't want to move on. I want to stay with you.

JEFF

We *have* to move on. We can't let fear stop us.

(He kisses her; they hold each other and share a powerful moment.)

JEFF (cont.)

I'm going to go now. But I'll be watching, and if you don't have a fantastic life, I'll be really disappointed.

MARIA

Okay. I'll have a fantastic life.

(Jeff backs away from Maria as the lights change back to the scene. Max opens his eyes and lowers his arms.)

MARIA

(sniffing)

Was that real? How did he?--

MAX

(nods)

He's been harassing me for two years to help him do that.

MARIA

I'm sorry for everything I said. I didn't mean it--or, I meant it but I was angry.

MAX

Now you're not angry?

MARIA

(surprising herself)

No!

(She give Max a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.)

MARIA (cont.)

Thanks, Max!

(Sara enters.)

SARA

Max?

MARIA

(with a mischievous smile)

Go for it, dude.

(Maria rushes off. Sara approaches Max.)

SARA

Did I just see you kissing Maria?

MAX

No. I mean, yes. I mean, she kissed me. But it wasn't really--

SARA

Why did she kiss you?

MAX

Because.... Two years ago, after I shot Jeff--by accident--

SARA

It was an accident Max, we all know that!

MAX

I ran to him after it happened. There was blood everywhere. He grabbed me and he said, "Tell Maria I will wait forever to get my first kiss." *(beat)* I've never told anyone that.

SARA

Oh, Max! Thanks for telling me!

(Sara embraces Max. The lights shift. Max and Sara separate. Sara moves to the front of the stage. Jeff and Max address each other directly.)

JEFF

I guess it's true: no one calls you Mutt anymore.

MAX

You still call me Mutt.

JEFF

I'm the only one.

MAX

I wish I could trade places with you, Jeff. I'm sorry it happened.

JEFF

I am, too. But we're moving on, you know? It's ahead to normal, or it's no normal at all.

MAX

What's it going to be like?

JEFF

I don't know. I'm thinking pearly gates, vestal virgins. Maybe I get real lucky and end up with a universe all to myself.

MAX

Are you afraid?

JEFF

You have no idea how afraid I am.

MAX

Me, too.

SARA

(looking off)

Max? Can we sit and watch the sunset and not really talk?

(Her interruption begins a lighting transition from the tableau tunnel to a sunset feeling, golden, soothing.)

JEFF

Yeah. Do me a favor and go do that. Go hold hands and watch the sunset and be nice to her, because she's really sweet.

MAX

But I miss you.

JEFF

There's nothing to miss, Mutt. I'm right here.

(Max sits with Sara and they look off toward the sun.)

JEFF (cont.)

(raising his hands in joy)

I celebrate myself!

MAX

I celebrate you, too, Jeff.

(Jeff drifts off and is gone.)

SARA

Hey, Mutt. Oh, sorry--Max?

MAX

It's okay, you can call me Mutt.

SARA

It doesn't bother you?

MAX

Not any more.

SARA

Mutt, will you sit next to me at campfire tonight?

(He takes her hand and she leans into him).

MAX

I'd like that, Sara. I'd like that a lot.

(Lights fade.)

End of play