

FourPlay  
by Nance Crawford

Close friends Frank and Lee have retreated to her secluded mountain cabin to write next season's Broadway blockbuster. They hope.

FRANK

"What's the use? You'll never change. Never!" He walks out.

LEE

She throws pillows after him. "I loved you. I lied because I love you!"

FRANK

He comes back in. "There's no point in running away. Not this time!" He pulls her up, throttles her.

LEE

Struggling as he begins to choke her. "Marco, no!"

FRANK

"Bitch! Whore! Brazen hussy!"

LEE

She falls behind the sofa.

FRANK (Horrorified)

"Oh, God! I'm sorry! We can put it behind us! We can put two lifetimes behind us: yours and mine! Marta? Please! Marta!"

LEE

He kisses her passionately and reprises his half of the duet.

FRANK

I don't think so.

LEE

That's the way it happens, Frank. "You've Made This A Night to Remember."

FRANK

He's just killed her. It has to be a whole new song.

LEE

He's got to kiss her, first! It's poignant. Heart-wrenching.

FRANK

Lee, I love you. You know I love you. I wouldn't hurt you for the world.

LEE

I know.

FRANK

It's buffalo chips. Cow puckies. Sorry. It'll slow the pace. This is where they hit the iceberg and it throws him off-balance!

LEE

Half the passengers didn't feel it and the other half picked up chunks from the deck to drop in their drinks! It's too soon to kill her.

FRANK

So maybe he waits until the ship is going down: The whole liner is tilting into the stage, people are running around singing something in counterpoint to "Nearer My God, To Thee" – and he strangles her while they're struggling to lower the lifeboats!

LEE

That's not only ridiculous, it's preposterous.

FRANK

It's commercial! Broadway is about movement! Effects! Majestic hydraulic lifts! What's going to sell in the theater today? A formerly frustrated virgin being throttled by her jealous husband as the Titanic goes down! On the deck!

LEE

Not the deck. We'll lose the sextet with the steward in the shower, the valet in the steamer trunk, the chauffeur in the closet, the faith healer in the bedroom and the purser at the porthole. They've got to hear it, or there goes the second act.

FRANK

We'll work it out.

LEE

"Brazen hussy" has got to go. But I do like, "We can put two lifetimes behind us: yours and mine!" Good. Really good.

FRANK

It's never failed.

LEE

You've actually said that?

FRANK

A man will say anything if he's horny enough. I hope the weather turns, soon.

LEE

Not at this time of year. Great for writing, though. Nothing else to do.

FRANK

This has got to work. I don't know what I'm going to do, if it doesn't.

LEE

Your agent will call.

FRANK

You ought to have a phone. You're the only person I know who thinks a satellite dish is an essential, a telephone is a luxury and vacations in a dead zone.

LEE

I don't mind driving down to the Ranger station a couple of times a week for messages.

FRANK

You get through to Lori, all right?

LEE

Yeah. Three more months. God. Me, somebody's grandmother. Do I strike you as somebody's grandmother?

FRANK

Grandmothers go to rock concerts on Harleys, these days, in spandex. You need a phone. Not that it should matter to me. I doubt that my agent kept the Ranger's number. When I called before I left town, I got the distinct impression he had no idea who I was.

LEE

Don't worry. The Ranger will let us know. It will be another fabulous commercial and you'll have to rush back to L.A.

FRANK

Something's got to happen. I am sure as hell not going to go back to driving a cab, not at my age. I've made my modest living as an actor for nearly thirty years and I am not going back to driving a cab. I am going to write my way up out of this mess.

LEE

I know you will. You're a good writer.

FRANK

Three pieces for episodic TV doesn't prove anything.

LEE

In under two years? And that "Tiger Squadron" script got you an Emmy.

FRANK

I'm the most successful failure in town. Can't get arrested as an actor and Emmy killed "Tiger Squadron."

LEE

Ten years and running out of story lines killed "Tiger Squadron." Be thankful it was your script that did it in.

FRANK

I should have stayed in New York. Broadway should have been my beat. I want a standing ovation at Sardi's so bad I can taste it.

LEE

So rent the room.

FRANK

You've become a cynic.

LEE

Impossible!

FRANK

Well, then, blasé. You don't have the same, deep, burning, consuming need for success that I have.

LEE

Wait a minute, you're not the only one here with significant artistic passion. I can still remember the effect of that Christmas pageant I wrote in high school. The play's the thing because the sweetest reward in life is hearing hundreds of people roar out a laugh at something that came from inside your

LEE (Continued)

own head. I know. It's better than anything. Anything! Better than sex.

FRANK

No wonder you've done four trips down the aisle.

LEE

It is a testament to my lack of cynicism that I write romance novels in spite of that.

FRANK

All they take is a rococo imagination.

LEE

Wrong. Desperation and a thesaurus. I defy you to come up with more than six similes for "heaving breasts."

FRANK

Whatever. But playwrighting is the ultimate creative challenge! I just want to know I'm capable of writing a decent play!

LEE

My God, Frank, does a dog have fleas?

FRANK

Not in my part of Beverly Hills.

LEE

It's okay to be scared.

FRANK

But not terrified – and I think that's what it is: sheer, unremitting, craven terror.

LEE

You haven't got a craven bone in your body.

FRANK

You don't know my bones.

LEE

(Begins rubbing his shoulders.)

Well, maybe not in the biblical sense, but what I do know is, you've got to relax. You couldn't be in a better place. Papa's primeval paradise is perfect for writing.

FRANK

Perfect. Quiet. Peaceful. Remote. Really boring.

LEE

It's ideal! Think about something else. Clear your mind.

(Rubbing his shoulders.)

Tell me again that you love me.

FRANK

I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you.

LEE

That's nice.

(Working on his shoulders.)

How's that? Better?

FRANK

I don't know. I'm making my mind a blank.

LEE

Whatever turns you on.

FRANK

What would turn me on is barely post-adolescent.

LEE

That's reasonable. Although a mature and responsible person such as I would never consider anyone a day over — or a minute under — twenty-five.

FRANK

Oh, nineteen for me. And blond: Jayne Mansfield, Bridget Bardot, Marilyn Monroe, Betty Buckley —

LEE

I can't tell you what a thrill it is to hear that. They're all older than I am and at least two of them are dead.

FRANK

There you have it. What in the world would I do with a nineteen-year-old girl?

LEE

Presumably, you would hope to boff her brains out or die in the attempt.

FRANK

But what would we talk about, after?

LEE

You want her to talk, too?

FRANK

We'd bore each other to death.

LEE

Give serious thought to someone older. Twenty-five is right on the money.

FRANK

Over the hill, Lee. Are you sure you wouldn't be interested in a nineteen-year-old?

LEE

No, thanks. I want someone who's old enough to fall asleep, in between, so we don't have to talk.

FRANK

We are equally shallow. You know what stands between me and any woman in the world I might want?

LEE

Lack of taste.

FRANK

No, really. What stands between me and any woman I might want is the lack of a ninety-foot yacht.

LEE

My ex rents his out during the off-season.

FRANK

I'm serious! Nothing is sexier than mind-boggling amounts of money. I need a great show in the Big Apple. Broadway. Times Square. Forty-second Street. The Great White Cliché.

LEE

I have no one to blame for this but myself. I'm the one who said, "Come on up to the cabin, Frank. Let's write something together, it'll be fun!" I said that. I, myself, two weeks ago. Now murder seems like a better idea.

FRANK

You have unplumbed depths. I may not have any theatrical depths to plumb.

LEE

What is the matter with you? There are only twenty-six letters to deal with, here! It's not insurmountable!

FRANK

You're right. If we sink the Titanic at the end of act one, what do we do for a finale? We have to find another disaster. How about the Hindenburg? Or Krakatoa. Native drums. Oriental mystery. Are we married to the Titanic?

LEE

You're the one who wanted big and bold. I've never thought it was a musical.

FRANK

It has to be, that's where the money is.

LEE

Come on, Frank, what are you trying to do, here?

FRANK

Send them all up! They've gotten so out-of-proportion, the only thing left is to laugh at them.

LEE

How can you send up something that's already a parody of itself?

FRANK

Not this parody! This is going to have everything: action, romance, a title you can walk out humming. And contemporary as hell.

LEE

(Wearily:)

Okay. How about New Age. Two people who keep slamming up against each other – he keeps killing her and they keep coming back.

FRANK

My God, that may be brilliant! Every time they do, it's during some horrendous event! Krakatoa, the Titanic, the Hindenburg – And there's our title: "Catastrophe!" With an exclamation! They're both slaves to her hormones as she seduces everything in sight –

LEE

That's sexist.

FRANK

No, spirited. Any man in his right mind will pay four hundred bucks, front row center, to watch the lustful little paprika do it.

LEE

That's sexist and racist.

FRANK

There's no such thing as a selective bigot.

LEE

Think of all the different styles of underwear she can strip down to! Did they wear underwear in Java, then?

FRANK

That's sexist.

LEE

No, sexist would be fifty chorus boys in string bikinis. Let's take a break. I'll cook tonight.

FRANK

(Appalled.)

Oh, God, no --

LEE

I'm a good cook. I have living children to prove it.

FRANK

So what? Billions have survived McDonald's.

LEE

And desert. After dinner, we can try more improvisation, to see where the characters really want to go.

FRANK

I deserve that for having a frustrated actress as a writing partner.

LEE

There's no such thing as a frustrated actress. They can get laid.

End of Scene One