

One Good Thing by Allston James

Cast: Jana, 30-45 Cooper, 30-45

Time & Place: Present - Living room, San Francisco.
Cooper has rung door bell, Jana comes to door.

Cooper

Hi. You might not remember me. *[extends hand, which Jana accepts]*. Cooper Loften. We met at Clara Walker's New Years Eve dinner? I was next to the guy whose bolo tie kept dipping into his squash soup?

Jana

[light laughter]

Oh, yes, of course. Would you like to come in?

Cooper

[hesitating]

Look, I know this is odd but I was just down the street shopping for a birthday gift for someone and—

Jana

[curious but non-defensive]

How'd you know I live here?

Cooper

Well, I saw your car and remembered you said you lived on Walnut.

Jana

Oh, of course, we talked on the way out. Thanks again for helping me with the door lock. Actually the tricky door latch is the most reliable aspect of that old Jaguar.

Cooper

It's useful to remember British cars are produced by a nation of tinkerers. I was just passing by and thought . . . look, this is not like me, really. I mean—

Jana

No, no stay. . . relax. I just put some coffee on. It'll only be a minute. I was on the verge of running a couple of errands and decided, nope. Time to pause for the cause.

Cooper

[mild discomfort]

Well, OK. Thanks. I don't make a habit of cruising neighborhoods. It's just . . . you know that feeling when you find yourself shopping for a gift for someone, stressing over what to give them? Or, how much to spend? Or what's appropriate?

Jana

Are you serious? Christmas was just last month. I think I hit my bottom with all that two years ago. This year I dropped off a couple of acres of brownies at the Food Bank and sent friends funny postcards. *C'est fini*.

Cooper

I like that. Yeah, well. I was in a shop around the corner and I asked myself, what am I doing? I'm trying to figure out a birthday gift for someone who hasn't returned a phone call in three months, has never even remembered my own birthday? Am I insane?

Jana

Oh, yeah . . . I know that neighborhood. Not a very nice place to live.

Cooper

I thought, God, get me outa here. It was one of those moments of clarity.

Jana

Sounds like the gods granted you a mini-epiphany.

Cooper

A mini-epiphany. Yeah. I suddenly felt weightless, free. I just sat there in the car for a few minutes savoring the . . . release.

Jana

And that's basically how you found yourself here?

Cooper

Pretty much. I'm not sure where I was headed, actually, anywhere but toward that, that. . . that gift, you know? I just saw your lime-green Jaguar, circa 1964, excellent but not mint condition, in the drive, remembered you said you lived on Walnut and, well, spontaneously pulled over.

Jana

I think it's cool you stopped. Listen, I spent the first half of my life resisting spontaneity. Myself, I'm working in the *other* direction from here on out. Besides, what good's temptation if you don't give in to it once in a while? So, you were with someone, weren't you, at Clara's?

Cooper

Kelly. A former girlfriend I've stayed in touch with. She's engaged to a good friend of mine in Portland. I introduced them actually.

Jana

That must be nice . . . to be on friendly terms with an ex. If I'd not observed it a few times, I'd not believe it possible. Me, I've never quite been able to pull off that particular hat trick.

Cooper

No?

Jana

Ask me how many pages a County of San Francisco restraining order has.

Cooper

I see. . . So, I forget, how you and Clara—

Jana

Stanford. We got our MBAs the same time. And you, how do you know her? Shit, we've probably been over all this, right?

Cooper

[light laughter]

Yeah, déjà vu zone ahead.

Jana

Oh, well. What good's spontaneity if it doesn't trash memory? Actually, now that I think about it, that might be the best argument *for* spontaneity.

Cooper

Hmm. You may be on to something. [looking toward ceiling] Now, who was that birthday gift for?

[they both laugh]

Cooper

To answer your question, Clara was married to a sailing buddy of mine.

Jana

Oh, Jesus. Michael. I can't recall anything shocking me quite so horribly as turning on the news that night and hearing he'd drowned. Awful, truly awful.

Cooper

Yeah. Michael. He was a good man. Incredible ocean sailor. Sure loved Clara, that's for sure. They were kind of a model for me.

Jana

[hesitantly]

And you . . . you weren't with him that day.

Cooper

Indeed I was.

Jana

Maybe we should change the topic.

Cooper

No need to on my account.

Jana

How, uh. . . how—The *Chronicle* said he drowned, got swept overboard?

Cooper

Yeah . . . well.

Jana

Well, what? That's not what happened?

Cooper

The *Chronicle* didn't exactly get it right, but on the other hand they were only repeating what I said. [*sighs, pause*] Michael, Burt Caldwell and myself were out on Mike's big racing sloop, the *Chandelier*. Forty-eight feet of serious boat . . . Odd. . . I've never told this to anyone else and, and—

Jana

You don't have to tell *me*, you know. . . Really. Honestly, I don't want to stir up—

Cooper

No . . . [*pauses, introspectively*] I think I'd like . . . Mike and I had fifty years of sailing between us. Burt—I think he said the only other boat he'd been on was the Sausalito Ferry. We were a couple of miles due west of the Gate and Mike asked Burt to take the wheel—The *Chandelier*, a real beauty, 48 fuckin—excuse me, 48 feet of grace. A real lady of a boat. Anyway, Mike was working on a loose cleat with a screwdriver, telling Burt to just hold the wheel steady. It's a great feeling if you're new to it, hands on the wheel of that much sail. Nothing quite like it. I stepped down into the cabin to look for my binoculars. I think I was below maybe five minutes, maybe not even that long. The

boat sharply lurched once, nothing too big. When I came back up, Burt was sitting there at the helm, the wheel in his hand so tight I could see his knuckles were white. I didn't see Mike, no big deal, figured he'd gone forward to set the spinnaker. Burt's face had turned into this awful white mask and his lips were trembling. I thought he might be sea sick.

Jana

The news said it was pretty rough that day. Said the wind was really high, poor visibility.

Cooper

A strong northwest swell running, but it was wholly manageable, not dangerous. I asked Burt if he was alright but he didn't respond. He just pointed with his finger toward the bow. I couldn't see Mike, thought maybe he was blocked by the main sail. But he wasn't there. He simply *was not there*. I grabbed Burt by the arm so hard I could feel my thumb against the bone. All he could say was, 'He fell off . . . he fell off.' What the hell you mean, he *fell* off? He fell off . . . he fell off. . . the guy was in total shock. I couldn't see Mike in the wake anywhere behind the boat. I grabbed Burt and shoved him so hard against the cockpit his glasses bounced overboard. The boat began to fall off the wind and I grabbed the wheel and started to come about. I kept screaming, *When did he go over?* But he was speechless. Mute.

Jana

Oh, Jesus. What a nightmare, a waking nightmare.

Cooper

Five minutes may not seem like a long time, but under sail, it can be an eternity. I put in a mayday. The Coast Guard choppers were on station in less than 15 minutes. I did my best to backtrack to where he may have gone over, but . . . five minutes . . . in rolling seas. His safety harness was forward up near the bow. Must've unsnapped it to get at the spinnaker. Anybody else do that on the *Chandelier*, Mike would have banned him for life. Never found him . . . never found him. A good man. He and Clara were absolutely devoted to each other. Rare, huh?

Jana

It's like, like he was there, and then. . . then he was *gone*. And, and when you got back, you didn't tell anybody this? didn't share it with anybody—

Cooper

No, no . . . I thought I would. But when I docked the boat at the St. Francis Yacht Club, there was this woman and boy, obviously Burt's, and they grabbed onto him like he was, well, they weren't gonna let go of him for a long time . . .

Jana

But . . . How did you . . . you must have wanted to. . . I don't know what to say. I know my heart would've been on fire, totally on fire.

Cooper

It was completely out of my character to not say anything. Believe me. On another day I might've tied that guy to the back of my Mercedes and dragged him to the top of Fillmore Street, but . . .

Jana

But what . . . I mean, how'd you control your rage? Or, or your . . . I mean, you must have wanted to tell Clara. But then, I guess that would have only made things even worse for her, if such a thing is possible. Her love stolen like that. Kiss him good bye in the morning, kiss him good-bye forever.

Cooper

I guess my grief was bigger than my anger. And . . . Look. I don't have kids . . . Burt's son. A boy, maybe seven, eight.

He was standing there so frightened and confused. He had this look on his face, this fear but also this love, this strong, blank kind of love.

Jana

Blank kind of love. . . a child. The man's *boy*.

Cooper

This love . . . And he held onto his father's fingers with both his hands, as if he was . . . as if he was hanging onto a goddamn rope above a pit of snakes.

Jana

I'm afraid I can all too easily picture it.

Cooper

Sometimes, maybe people don't need the whole truth, maybe not even any *part* of it, you know?

Jana

Well, this Burt . . . I imagine he had to tell someone about it. . . maybe his wife. I don't believe people can carry that

kind of guilt around in silence forever. It would eventually just eat you alive, gnaw its way out into the sunlight. Trying to contain it . . . sounds like a walking death sentence.

Cooper

Perhaps it is. But that kind of truth would do a young boy no good, no good at all . . . [*abruptly*] Hey, Jana . . . This was terribly intrusive of me—

Jana

[*adamantly*]

No . . . Please stop with that. Please? . . . it's OK. [*places her hand on top of his*] I'm glad you stopped. I'm glad you told me about this . . . Listen . . . Cooper . . . Would you mind if we just sat here for a while, just sat here in silence?

Cooper

[*abruptly voicing over her as if not having heard her*]

I have this feeling every now and again, this thing where . . . and maybe this is age or something, I don't know . . . I feel like my desires, yeah that's the word, my life's desires are somehow slipping off the back of my boat . . . and I fear I'm not going to get the sails switched around fast enough

to go after them, you know? It's, it's like . . . not wanting to let one good thing, even if it's a total unknown, not one good thing slip out of view. Urgency.

Jana

I'm glad you stopped. I really am.

Cooper

[looking toward high sash window]

Hmm. . . It just started raining . . . What you said. About just sitting, sitting here in silence? Could we do that now? I'd really like that. I'd like that a lot.

Jana

I would, too.

Curtain