

The Whip-Poor-Will

A short play by Gemma Watson

It's a crisp late-November evening in the woods, around 5:00 pm. The stage is empty save for a few scattered trees and stumps. The sound of birdsong is incessant. Two middle-aged bird-watchers enter. These are George and Faith. Both are dressed in comfortable hiking clothes for the temperature. Each has binoculars attached to their waist; field guides and maps pop out of their jacket pockets. We catch Faith mid-monologue.

**FAITH**

(all in one breath, absent-minded fast-paced prattle while she looks up at various trees) -I mean with her getting her hair stuck in the ja-coozy jet like that even though I told her... (eye roll) so Laura asked me to rush inside and find the pair of green scissors in the kitchen drawer and so I did and so... well I did what I had to do, George and let me say, oh I am going to hell for saying this, but let me say there is some part of me that really enjoyed snipping through her hair, making sure Mary couldn't flaunt those locks of her's and make the rest of us ladies feel bad. Well, anyway if you see Mary walking around with that Pixie cut she's got, she's trying to play it off like it's *chic* and *French* but nooo now you know it's because she didn't listen to ol' Faith Meyers!

(beat. It is obvious George is not listening)

**FAITH**

Ain't that right, George?

**GEORGE**

(stoically, contemplatively) Oh, right. I love Mary's new haircut too, dear.

**FAITH**

(sighs, reaching out) You always get that grumpy face when you're thinking about something. What is it?

**GEORGE**

(Not relaxing, coldly) Oh, you know. Just thinking about the wedding. How... soon it is.

**FAITH**

(notices his coldness but isn't willing to reciprocate) Ah, I coulda guessed. Don't worry George. Though, I know that's easier said than done when it comes to the wedding of an oldest child. But still, Gina has found someone who she wants to spend the rest of her life with. John is a great guy. One of them fancy engineers, at that! She will be happy.

**GEORGE**

(under his breath, pseudo-aside) That's not.. (trails off)

(Faith does not hear. Instead, her face changes while looking at him from one of worry to one of excitement)

**FAITH**

(hushed) Pssst, George, look! Up there! I think I see one.

**GEORGE**

(takes out his binoculars) (tentatively, at a normal volume) I don't know. That looks like a knot or something to me. Maybe an old wasp's nest

**FAITH**

Of course it does! The darn thing is built to hide itself like that.

(beat.)

**GEORGE**

I don't know why you're so dead-set on finding this bird anyway. Where I'm from the whip-poor-will is bad luck. When he and I were growing up together, Mom found Tom reaching to pick up one that was roosting on the ground. She grabbed him right before he could touch it. Next day, Tom was playing out in the street and nearly got run over by an 18-wheeler. Mom says if he

had touched that thing we would have buried him right next to Nana that summer.

**FAITH**

That's so... dark.

**GEORGE**

Yeah. I guess it is.

(Faith strains through binoculars to see the supposed whip-poor-will. George, uninterested, wanders the stage behind her, occasionally squinting up with bare eyes to see if he sees the bird. No dice. After a bit he finds a small rock on the ground, evaluates its weight with a few small hand bobs, and throws it at the base of the tree.)

**FAITH**

(startled and furious) What the hell was that?!

**GEORGE**

(flatly) If there was a bird there that would have scared them enough to send them flying. I didn't see anything fly away, so there wasn't a bird.

**FAITH**

Ok. That's it. Up until this point I have been trying to be nice to you, George, but I am really about to lose it. I called off work today so I could go out with you and birdwatch just like we did before the kids were born but you've spent all day moping around with your head glued to the floor and I for one am sick of it! So now you can either tell me what is bothering you really or you can keep your head up and enjoy this damned night with your damned w-

**GEORGE**

(interrupting her) I just don't see why he has to change his name.

(beat.)

**FAITH**

(taken aback) (Surprised, but knows exactly what he is talking about) What?

**GEORGE**

(crescendoing) If he has to like all of the girly stuff like shopping and fingernail polish and romance novels and whatever, fine. He's going to look gay but even that's better than whatever the fuck this is.

**FAITH**

(small) George...

**GEORGE**

No Faith, let me talk. Don't you remember whenever he called us into the living room, saying we needed to have a family chat? I thought he had some actual problem to tell us, like he got a girl pregnant or he owes more money than he has. Those are *real* problems, those are problems we can *fix*. But he comes to us and says "I'm transgender". And I'm just there staring at him blankly, I don't even have half an idea what the word means. And he goes on telling me, *us*, about self-image and all that crap and I just hear ringing in my ears.

**FAITH**

I.. I know, George, I was there.

**GEORGE**

Sometimes it feels like you weren't. It feels like you weren't there whenever he talked about how he goes around his college campus in dresses and makeup. How he shaves his legs and pierced his ears. Have you seen his hair recently? It's pink, Faith. George Jr.'s hair is pink.

**FAITH**

(correcting herself) H-She asked us not to use that name anymore, George.

**GEORGE**

Oh yes, my god, how could I forget? After he finishes with all of this bullshit he says he wants us to use a new name for

him. (said like a swear word. His mouth moves around the word like his tongue is unfamiliar with its shape) *Melanie*. Melanie. He wants to give up the name George. A name that every oldest son in my family has taken up since the goddamned Civil War. I don't know if you've noticed, Faith, but neither he nor I have any brothers. If he is allowed to go through with this that's it! The line is over, Zip! Kaput! All because little George Jr. didn't feel like enough of a man to take up the title.

**FAITH**

(on the verge of tears) I need you to stop talking.

**GEORGE**

(ignoring, steamrolling her) And maybe all of this wouldn't have been so bad if I at least had my family on my side. But after he gets done with his speech Gina starts crying! She hugs him, says how (mockingly) *proud* she is that George Jr. trusted us enough to tell us such a *personal tribulation* or whatever the fuck words she used. And she (in disbelief) goes up to him. And asks him to be her (emphasis) *Maid of Honor*. Faith, I don't know about you but traditionally, the Maid of Honor is a job for a woman.

**FAITH**

Our chi-

**GEORGE**

(On a roll) So now, this is no longer an issue for just the four of us and George's little college friends. Now, I have to stand in front of my entire family and *God* and explain to them why my only son has decided that he doesn't want to be called a man anymore.

**FAITH**

(asserts herself, hard) Stop! Just! Stop! You are going too far!

**GEORGE**

(stumbles due to the sudden outburst) -I... I'm going too far? You think I'm going t-

**FAITH**

(loud) Shut up! I just... Shut up...

(George looks as if he wants to say something, but his wife's resolve causes him to back down)

Look, George, I don't claim to understand anything about this whole "transgender" thing either. Whenever our child sat us down together, I was just as shocked and confused as you. But I can tell you, there are some things in this life that I do understand pretty damn well. I understand the courage that it took for that child to get us all together in the first place. I understand the want, no, the *need* for family connection that every human being on this planet has. And I damn well perfectly understood the look of fear and hopelessness on hi-(corrects herself with resolve) *her* face whenever you started to go off that night. Now I don't know about you, George, but I am *never* going to be the reason that my child would want to leave our family. And dammit. (she is getting teary now) I am never going to let *you* be that reason either. I know you're scared, I am too. But the way to get through this is not to let out all of that fear and anger onto your family. You are better than that.

(beat.)

I am going to go find this bird. When you come to your senses, you are allowed to join me.

(George, shell-shocked, nods)

(Faith exits)

(George sits on a stump, head in hands)

(After a bit of time, the Whip-Poor-Will enters, played by an actor dressed in all black. They are holding a puppet or a stuffed animal of something that looks approximately like a real life whip-poor-will. Accuracy, while appreciated, is not paramount.)

(The Whip-poor-will flies silently around George for a small while before eventually roosting by his side, looking at him up and down)

**Whip-Poor-Will**

You know, you're pretty loud.

(Hearing the sudden voice, George takes his head out of his hands to look at the source. After seeing the bird, George slowly, methodically, puts his head back in his hands)

**George**

Jesus Christ.

**Whip-Poor-Will**

Yelling in the forest like that, I mean it's rude! I don't know if you're aware but, there's things other than you here.

**George**

(to himself) I didn't think I was this far gone.

**Whip-Poor-Will**

(grumbles discontentedly) Not even acknowledging me when I'm speaking directly to you. You're really not helping yourself in my eyes, you know.

**George**

Maybe I shouldn't have skipped that appointment, I mean-

**Whip-Poor-Will**

George!

(George, upon hearing his name, finally looks up at the bird and looks it in the eye. He stares at it as if to say "How did you know my name?")

**Whip-Poor-Will**

(smugly) That got your attention. I noticed the other human said that a lot. That must be your human name.

**George**

My human na-... what? What, who? Are you?

**Whip-Poor-Will**

Me? I'm me. I thought that was pretty easy to see seeing that you're talking to me.

(George does not seem satisfied with this answer)

Well... Sometimes you humans point to me and my siblings and say "Whip-poor-will!". Sometimes the word "eastern" appears before it but that doesn't fully make sense to me because they say that even when I go west. How can I be eastern when I am west? I don't understand it. Either way, I'm pretty sure you called me a "knot" or an "olwaspznest", so maybe I'm one of those, I'm not really sure.

**George**

Wait... well would you look at that. You are a whip-poor-will. (amused) I can't believe it, Faith goes off to find one of you and here you are coming right to me. (beat.) Ah, I suppose it doesn't matter, you're in my imagination, aren't you?

**Whip-Poor-Will**

Hmm. That depends. Does your imagination have delicious bugs flying everywhere and plenty of snug nests to hide from the rain and lots of other ones like me to make the nights warm?

**George**

...yes?

**Whip-poor-will**

Hmph! Then no, we are not there. I have been hungry, wet, and cold for too long! But you should take me there when you get the chance.

**George**

(amused) Right... Will do... So, what are you doing here?



**Whip-poor-will**

(matter-of-fact) I live here. (beat.) On that bit of leaves over there.

(several beats go by. George is waiting for a third sentence that will never come.)

**George**

... uh, I mean what are you doing here... talking to me (under his breath) talking? Oh my god, I sound insane.

**Whip-poor-will**

Oh that's what you meant. You really do have to be more specific about things. You have a bad habit. (beat.) (George starts to say something but gets interrupted) But anyway, to answer your question, I see so many of you tall creatures walk by with your strange appearances and funny voices and I grew a little soft spot for you guys. I want to learn more about you.

**George**

(joking) Well, they say curiosity killed the cat.

**Whip-poor-will**

(scared.) What? It did? (beat.) What's a cat? Am I a cat?

**George**

No.

**Whip-poor-will**

Oh. I guess I have nothing to worry about then! But I saw you and the other human you were with get into a fight and I figured now was a great time to learn what makes humans angry. (beat.) I assume that it was anger, I don't know why else you would get so red in the face.

**George**

(touches his face.) Uhh. I don't know, bird. This feels like an issue between me and my family. I don't-

**Whip-poor-will**

Oh please. Who am I going to tell? You said yourself you think I'm in your head.

**George**

I suppose that's a... good point. It's, ah, it's a problem with my son.

**Whip-poor-will**

Son... Son... that's another name for (thinks of the word) ...offspring, right?

**George**

Sort of, it's the word for a boy child.

(Now it's the Whip-poor-will's turn to wait for an explanation that will never come)

**Whip-poor-will**

(curiously) ...Boy?

**George**

Yeah, you know. Boy. Man. Male. Masculine. Any of that ring a bell?

(The Whip-poor-will stares, confused)

**George**

(slightly annoyed) Oh come on. You're telling me you've studied humans, and you still don't know about the differences between men and women?

**Whip-poor-will**

You don't have to be so mean about it.

**George**

That's fine, I just thought it would be something kind of obvious to see.

**Whip-poor-will**

Well, are you going to tell me??

**George**

I will! You know... males and females have different (uncomfortable) genitalia. (beat.) private parts. (beat.) reproductive organs.

**Whip-poor-will**

(overlapping with organs) OH! Some birds I know lay eggs and others don't. Is that what you mean?

**George**

Yeah... kind of.

**Whip-poor-will**

Got it! (enthusiastically) Do you lay eggs?

**George**

N-No I don't. I'm a man, women lay eg- well. No they don't but they... (struggling to find the words. horrifically uncomfortable) Uh... We're just... different in that way.

**Whip-poor-will**

(studious) I see. And why do you need to know if your child lays eggs or not?

**George**

Huh?

**Whip-poor-will**

You used a different word for your child who... doesn't(?) (looks at George quizzically for approval, smiles and keeps going once he nods) lay eggs. Why is that how you differentiate your children? Surely there are other ways to tell them apart.

**George**

Well, yes. Of course. Men and women are different in other ways besides... egg-laying.

**Whip-poor-will**

Like how?

**George**

You know... men are strong. Leaders. A bit of assertive assholes sometimes but still. They're a bastion for their children and wives to lay their problems on. They are the bearers of responsibility, but that's ok, because I-(quickly) we can take it. It's a great honor to be a man.

**Whip-poor-will**

(in awe) I see... and what about the ones who do lay eggs?

**George**

Women are... (apologetic) Well, they are no less powerful and respectable than men! Their skills just lie elsewhere. They're... nurturing and gentle. It's a woman you want to go to if you're tired and need to rest. Women will speak quietly to you and stroke your hair and... you know... heal you.

**Whip-poor-will**

(genuine, not picking up on George's awkwardness) Wow... That makes so much sense! So that means, the other human you were with, that was a man?

**George**

What? No. That was Faith, my wife. Why did you think she's a man?

**Whip-poor-will**

Oh... well that human just wasn't very quiet, that's all.

**George**

I... (beat.) I guess I don't mean women are quiet *all* the time and men are assertive *all* the time. We're all human after all.

**Whip-poor-will**

(confused) So then. Men are *sometimes* assertive and *sometimes* quiet. And women are *sometimes* quiet and *sometimes* assertive? And that is what makes them different?

**George**

...yes.

(beat.)

**Whip-poor-will**

I don't think that makes very much sense.

**George**

(begins to speak but trails off) Well, I mean statistically men...

(long beat.) (Both are deep in thought)

My mechanic's a wom-

**Whip-poor-will**

(interrupting) MOSQUITOS!

(The whip-poor-will swoops around George, opening and closing its mouth, catching several "mosquitos" who have come to feast on George. Once this is finished, the whip-poor-will roosts next to George once more, smug and satisfied)

**Whip-poor-will**

Wow, I love those things, they taste just like rocks.

**George**

They taste like... rocks?

**Whip-poor-will**

Well, more like how rocks smell when they touch water.

**George**

I see... (beat.) (curiously, opening up) What do other bugs taste like?

**Whip-poor-will**

(happy that he asked) Well! moths taste like a night after the snow melts and all of the grass from before springs up and proves that it's not dead. Fireflies taste like humid days when the sun just went down and the animals that croak croak and the animals that yelp yelp. Beetles all taste the same, like crunchy tree branches that have just enough weight on them to not sink down but you know sooner or later the red bird is going to have to move it's nest but you're not sure if it's offspring are going to be able to fly by that tim-(cuts itself off) (sudden and angrily) dragonflies are GROSS. (beat.) (cheerfully) And mosquitos taste like wet rocks!

**George**

(taking this seriously) Wow. I never knew that. Well, either way, thanks bird, mosquitos are the worst, you really saved my hide.

(They smile at each other.)

**Whip-poor-will**

So, "George". How did you choose your human name?

**George**

Oh, I didn't choose my name, no one does.

**Whip-poor-will**

What? You don't? Who does? What if you don't like it?

**George**

Your parents do. You just live with it, I guess.

**Whip-poor-will**

You just live with it?!

**George**

Yeah. Well, for me it's a little bit different. I was named after my father.

(beat.)

My, uh. Parent who doesn't lay eggs. Every man in my family has been named George for quite some time.

**Whip-poor-will**

Only the men? Not the women?

**George**

(laughs) No. Not only would that get confusing, but George is a man's name.

**Whip-poor-will**

Oh. There's men's names and women's names? Why is George a man name?

**George**

I don't know. Someone a long time ago made it up and decided to give it to their son. And then someone else did it. And someone else. It's how things have been done for a long time. (beat. Whip-poor-will is thinking) And to answer your other question, sure, there's "men's and women's" a lot of things.

**Whip-poor-will**

(excited) Really? Like what?

**George**

Well, there's men's clothing and women's clothing. Men and women's hairstyles. Men and women's television shows. Men and women's shoes, men and wom-

**Whip-poor-will**

(interrupting) Ohhh I get it. Men's and women's head pieces-

(George nods)

(proud.) Men and women's chairs, men and women's music, men and women's trees, men and women's *food*.

**George**

(starts at "music") I-.. No, not really. Ahh.

**Whip-poor-will**

(wind taken out from under its wings) What? You mean there isn't food that just men eat and just women eat?

**George**

No. And uh, there also isn't really specific music. Or chairs. or ... trees.

**Whip-poor-will**

(distraught and confused) But there are specific shoes?

**George**

Yeah.

**Whip-poor-will**

Why?!

**George**

(agitated) I don't know, that's just the way it's always been I guess.

**Whip-poor-will**

Where's the purpose of all of that? Why are there clothes made for women but not men, why are there things that men can do but women can't? You humans are a resourceful bunch, I know that. I have always looked up to you because of that. A few days ago, I saw one of you take something from your pants, and put water from the creek inside of it to drink later! Genius! I've seen one human have something on their face that went dark in the sun! That's so cool! One time I saw an entire family of humans come out of a giant shining moving thing with 4 round legs. That's what human stuff is! Wonderful and beautiful and useful and so smart! But then you tell me something like this, something so seemingly inherent to humans that doesn't follow nearly any consistent logic. And when I ask you to explain it, you have no answer for me. I am confused and frustrated and-

**George**

(loud, but not necessarily angry) I don't know, bird! Stop yelling at me!



(The whip-poor-will is startled. It instinctually flies away from George, and lands on a spot far from him. It lowers its head and does not speak.)

(George anxiously sits on a stump. He looks deep in thought, he bounces his leg, a lot.)

(The stage is silent for a long while, George is thinking.)

**George**

You know. (beat as George is trying to formulate what he wants to say.) I never fully told you why my wife and I were arguing.

**Whip-poor-will**

(looks up) Oh yeah... Why were you?

(The birdsong stops.)

**George**

(full of awkward pauses and spaces for thinking. Unpolished and Sad.) A couple of months ago. My son sat down me, my wife, and our other kid. He told us that he didn't want to be called a man anymore. That he felt more comfortable being seen... as a woman. And he asked us to start using she and her to refer to hi- ah, I guess you wouldn't really know what that means. That's fine. He just said, that he wants to do things like, like grow out his hair, wear dresses, introduce himself as "Melanie", and eventually be called a wife and a mother. And I- (chokes) I'm just so... so scared for him. I love him so much, I would give up my entire life for him in an instant, that will never change, but I'm so scared that I don't know how to protect him. I'm so- (overwhelmed by emotions)

(beat.)

Sorry. Uh. Anyway, My other kid asked my son if he wanted to be her maid of honor. I don't even know how to begin to explain that to you. It's just. Think of it as my son announcing this decision to the world. That's coming up in, oh, a couple of

weeks? And I. I just think that if maybe I show how. Unhappy. Or something. I am about all of this. How... disapproving, I am. If I can just prove to him that gender is something that can't be changed, he will change his mind. But, (tearfully) I don't think that that is going to happen. I think he's just. Distancing himself. And I don't want that, I don't want that at all. I love my family so deeply I'm just so scared. (George places his head in his hands once more)

(While this whole speech is occurring it flies closer and closer to George, until it is leaning on him for comfort. All sense of comedic performance from the bird is gone, it is now speaking purely as a friend. It is, strangely, more eloquent.)

**Whip-poor-will**

George, who are you scared of?

**George**

People who aren't going to understand my child. People who will discriminate against and argue with him.

**Whip-poor-will**

Didn't you just describe yourself?

(beat.)

I don't understand... "gender", George. I don't understand why it is beneficial for humans to compartmentalize yourselves in ways that seem random to me. If it were up to me, I believe there are ways to structure yourselves that aren't so needlessly hindering. But it seems like it is something that you believe in, very deeply. Though, even with that being the case, it appears to me that there is one thing you put above all else, family. Is that right?

(George sniffs, and nods slowly)

Did you ever try to talk to your child about why they feel this way? Did you try to understand the finer points of what they might be saying? Did you put yourself in their shoes? I am not blaming you George, I just need you to self-reflect. You are

scared, I have no doubt about that, but so are your children and your wife. You all need each other now more than ever. If you spend this time arguing instead of talking, you'll get what you get. You don't need to perfectly understand your child, but you do need to foster the willingness to keep on as a family. If you want to protect your child, George, start with yourself.

(George sits and thinks for a while. A slight smile moves across his face. He wipes his eyes.)

**George**

(laughs weakly) Where did that come from?

(The birdsong fades back in. The Whip-poor-will is back to their semi-goofy self)

**Whip-poor-will**

(bashful) That? Oh you know, I don't know, I just said what was on my min-

(The Whip-poor-will is interrupted by...)

**Faith (Off stage)**

George! George, Oh my goodness you're not going to believe it!

(Startled by the sudden noise, the Whip-poor-will flies away from George and goes to the opposite side of the stage)

(Faith enters)

**Faith**

Oh there you are, you haven't moved an inch. You are not going to believe it, I saw an entire flock of nightjars. I know! A whole colony of whip-poor-wills just sitting underneath this tree! I got so many pictures. Look at this one, those beautiful whiskers! This one had its mouth open! I wonder if there were any dragonflies out for them to eat.

(At "tree", the Whip-poor-will beams. It takes off immediately and swoops in the direction Faith came from, unnoticed. The Whip-poor-will exits.)

(beat.)

George, are you alright? Were you crying?

(George smiles and wipes his eyes once again.)

**George**

Ah, Faith. I'm so glad to see you.

**Faith**

(cautiously affectionate) Ok you..... (beat.) I wanted to apologize for yelling at you earlier. I meant what I said but, I shouldn't have raised my voice at you.

**George**

No... No, you're fine. I was being a jerk.

(beat. George takes Faith by the hand)

I think I want to go have a conversation with our... our daughters.

(A startled Faith eventually smiles. She is happy. George is hopeful. Hand-in-hand, George and Faith exit).

**End.**