In A Mind Of Their Own

A Black Comedy

By Michael Payer

ACT I

Lights up.

Sitting idly on an armchair we see GRACE, a middle-aged mother. She has a cup of tea in her hand and for an unsuspecting person, the scene would appear to be typical of an afternoon for a mother. Alas, GRACE is suffering schizophrenia, after she lost her daughter in a fatal car accident three years ago. JULES was GRACE’s closest companion and oldest child, and with her death GRACE went into deep denial and eventually, into psychotic mental trauma. With the lights, we see that GRACE is enjoying her tea alone, however she is sitting opposite an empty, identical armchair to her own, which she calls JOSEPHINE. As part of her illness, she has taken to developing deep relationships with inanimate objects.

GRACE: (to the chair) Do you want a cup of tea love?... No? Well I should say not, you've only just arrived. So, how has your week been?... So the usual then. Love, you really need to do something. My nextdoor neighbour’s just joined a gym, I can get a contact for you if you want? Help you get into a bit of shape. I mean you'll get bed sores if you don’t get off your chair every once in a while. (giggles) Oh dear, well, Mark has been falling behind at school, He just doesn’t seem to be motivated anymore. Such a shame, I always saw him going places. He would have made a wonderful solicitor... or a pilot (straining to hear her guest) yes, or a politician. Well he was always very opinionated, still is today actually. Ah, such a shame he doesn’t put it to good use anymore. I mean he’s always off with friends getting smashed or stoned on MSG, or magic mushrooms, or glue; whatever it is kids do these days. Most nights he doesn’t get home ’til after 4a.m. Bad for his sleeping habits. As for Jules, love, you would think the girl’s dead. I hardly see her anymore. She left home and never came back. Uni has just consumed her. But I tell you, she’s the one going places. I don’t suppose your kids come back to see you every now and again?... No? Mine either.

Enter JACK 1, rummaging quietly through his schoolbag. JACK is GRACE’s youngest, and only remaining child. He is currently sitting his final exams at school and, if he does well, he is expected to dux the school. He is a bright, by-the-book boy and, for the last three years, has been caring for his ill mother. The pressures of such a task in any circumstance would be strenuous on a child, but in JACK’s case, his mother has developed completely false perceptions of him. In her illness, she thinks JACK is an irresponsible teen like she sees on the news and is constantly criticising him of things he wouldn’t even consider doing. In fact for the past two weeks of holidays, she grounded him to try and ‘prevent’ him from ‘hitting the streets.

GRACE: (continuing) I mean they’re just out all the time! Jack’s life is an absolute mess, I mean he’s always out on the booze, the kid is just out o-- (she notices JACK standing cross-armed by the bookcase) And speaking of the devil, if it isn’t the little runaway himself. I’m surprised you’re up so early!

JACK: (unimpressed) Forget to take our meds, did we?
GRACE: Don’t be so rude Arthur!

JACK: Jack.

GRACE: That’s what I said, Brian, but you’ve just stormed in here and not said hello to Josephine. *(She gestures over towards the empty chair)*

*JACK looks over towards the chair with the most unamused expression on his face imaginable, before turning again to face GRACE*

JACK: Look, I really have to go now, do you want me to bring home anything at all?

GRACE: *(to the chair) See what I mean! Just throwing his life away! I probably won’t see him again until tomorrow! *(shifting her attention) Look, Conan—*

JACK: Jack!

GRACE: Don’t answer back! I don’t care how much ‘socialising’ you think you are missing, there is no excuse for slacking on your studies! I’m warning you, you are not to set foot out of that door!

JACK: Look, Mum, I really have to get to school! All I want to know is whether you want me to swing by the shops on the way home.

GRACE: Do you think I’m crazy or something? Don’t think for a second that you can pull the wool over my eyes. *(turning to the chair) Kids these days! They’re so witty!*

JACK: Okay… well, I’m going. I will see you when I get home. *(he reaches out and gives GRACE a kiss on the cheek. Turning to the chair) Nice to meet you.*

*JACK goes to walk out the door R. GRACE jumps from her chair.*

GRACE: STOP!!! You are not to leave this house!

JACK: *(looking at his watch) Mum, I really have to get going or I’m going to miss my exams. Don’t worry, I’m just going to school.*

GRACE: NO!! I mean it! Do not leave, mister.

JACK: Whatever. Goo— *(he remembers) Oh, I nearly forgot! Mum, I spoke to Dr Schmidt and—*

GRACE: *(mindlessly) Schmidt?... German perhaps? *(to the chair) It does sound German doesn’t it. Why are so many doctors called Schmidt nowadays? Back when I was growing up and they started letting those bloody Asians into the country, all the doctors had funny little names like Chin… or Phoo-sum… or Wang. *(she gazes out the window)*

JACK: *(confused) Right. Well, anyway, I spoke to Doctor Schmidt and he—*
GRACE: (again interrupting) Is that a German name do you reckon? I wonder if he knew Hitler...

JACK: YES Mum! Anyway, he told me to take your meds back up to three times a day. (He walks off L to, and speaks from, the kitchen) I figured now that I have my hands full with exams, I could maybe look into finding (he re-enters with a pill bottle and a glass of water, sitting them on the coffee table between the two chairs) a carer, you know, just help keep an eye on you for a few weeks and make sure you’re okay.

GRACE: Carer? I see how it is, you can’t fit your poor old mother into your night life! Well that’s just fine, I don’t need a carer! I’ll just call Jules and get her to come over and give them to me. I still don’t see why I need them, but I guess I should probably do what that Nazi doctor said... I don’t want him to get Hitler onto me.

JACK: Oh dear, Mum. Jules has been dead for three years now.

GRACE: Don’t be horrible! You should never wish death upon anybody, especially not your own sister!

JACK: You’re delusional! This is why you need your meds. (He picks up the water and hands it to GRACE, before picking up the bottle and opening it on his descent to the empty chair)

GRACE: NO!!! (She lunges from her chair towards JACK, throwing the water all over him)

JACK: What is it?

GRACE: (hysterically alternating between apologising to the chair and rousing on JACK) Oh, Josephine, I am so sorry!— See what you’ve done! You are so selfish! If you would just do-- Oh! Did he hurt you Josephine? You look so pale!— Well don’t just stand there Doyle!

JACK: It’s Jack!

GRACE: Go get some water! (he exits L)—What ever are we to do with the boy? Absolutely hopeless-- I told you, go get WATER!— Josephine, where have I gone wrong? Why have I failed? Oh why, why why!? (JACK reappears) It’s about bloody time! Here, here!— If I can do anything for you, anything at all, just let me know.— Get to your room, NOW!

JACK: What?

GRACE: You heard me! To your room, march!

JACK: (both crying and laughing) But, but mu--

GRACE: No buts! You have been a very naughty boy Edgar Frank Grusloe, and you need to learn a lesson!

JACK: Jack! My name is Jack! You called me that! Mum, this is ridiculous. I need to be at school right now, so if you don’t mind, it would be great. I think I’ve had enough excitement for one morning. (he again walks to the door)
GRACE: (bounds to the door and blocks JACK's path) Turn around and march that sorry little behind up to your room.

JACK: (annoyed to the point that he grabs her by the shoulders and tries to move her from his path) Come on, enough sil--

GRACE: (As JACK tries to move her, she swings him around in some form of marital arts manoeuvre before pinning him down to the ground. Aggressively) Listen her, kiddo. I am your mother. I know best. I know you might not care about me very much, and you think that I am just some crazy old fool, but you live in my house, my rules. Now you are going to walk up those stairs and you are going to stay there until I say you can come out. Comprendé? (she lets go of JACK and stands up, polishing her hands off)

JACK: Mum, come here.

GRACE: (looking at him in a mixture of outrage and confusion before walking over and standing next to JACK at the window, 1) Alright?

JACK: Look out there and tell me what you see.

GRACE: (looking between the landscape out the window and her son, not gathering what it is all about) I see our street.

JACK: (calmly, for the first time) Okay, and tell me, what colour is the sky?

GRACE: (hesitantly) Blue?

JACK: Mhm. So what time of day is it?

GRACE: About midday?

JACK: No, it's 9:00 in the morning. So what you're trying to say is that you think I am going out to get smashed at 9:00 in the morning?

GRACE: (pausing, refusing to believe him) Well I suppose you kids won't even let the time of day separate you from the grog, will you?

JACK: No, mum. I am not going out to get drunk. I am not going out onto the street. I am going to school. To sit my HSC. I have an English exam starting in half an hour. So I really, really need to get going.

JACK believes he has convinced GRACE, who is still looking out the window, that he is not going out to get drunk, and so frantically goes back to packing his bag. GRACE, however, is still convinced he is lying. GRACE huffs softly as she marvels at the deceitfulness of her son. JACK, with bag in hand, walks up to GRACE.

JACK: Okay, wish me lu-- Ooh. Nearly forgot again. (He picks up the empty glass and quickly runs into the kitchen, returning with it full once again with water. While he gets out the tablets) You need to have two at around 10 and then another two around 2, alright? Promise you won't forget.
GRACE: Forget what?

JACK: (extremely frustrated) Oh God! Look (he pulls out his mobile phone) I'll ring you at about 2 to remind you, ok-- (the phone rings in his hand. He drops it in shock) Ah! (he bends down, picks it up and answers it) Hello? -- Yeah, hi! -- No, I'm just running a bit late. -- Yeah, I just had to fix a few things up at home first. -- Oh, just mum being painful again. -- You already there? -- Alright, well I shouldn't be too long, I'm just about to leave. -- Okay, I'll see you there. -- Okay, bye.

While JACK was speaking on the phone, GRACE had been wandering around the room, stroking random objects like the curtains, books, shoes and paintings on the wall and having conversations with a few of them. As JACK hangs up, he looks up to see GRACE about to kiss a shoe she is holding.

JACK: Ah Mum! Mum. (He takes the shoe off her) Okay, I'm going now. I'll ring you at about 2 to make sure you take your meds. Okay. Phew, I can't believe that I'm starting my HSC.

GRACE: (with a puzzled expression) What meds?

JACK: (exasperated) Gah! (The phone rings again. He picks up the pill bottle in a frantic rush, ignoring the ringing phone) Look, you know what, here, just take some of these here (he empties the bottle's contents onto his hand, dropping pills everywhere. He is focussing more on the ringing phone and getting out of the house than what he is doing. In the rush, he shoves all the pills in his hand into her mouth and holds it there until she has swallowed them) That's it, just gulp 'em down. Now that should keep you going until your next lot at about 2! (Running out the door.) Call if you need me! I'll check on you later! Love you!

With that he answers the phone, stopping the ringing. He says "Hello" before slamming the door behind him. GRACE is the only one left on stage, surrounded by scattered pills all across the floor. Due to the excessive number JACK shoved down her throat, GRACE starts walking aimlessly in a little circle, before jerking and convulsing in an episode similar to an epileptic fit. Finally she collapses in a heap on the floor, still in a fit, before she succumbs to the overdose and lays motionless. With one final twitch, she dies.

The stage is left for a few seconds before JACK bursts through the door once more.

JACK: (still in a rush) Mum, I just forgot my-- (he trips over GRACE's mangled body, realising what has happened) Oh my God!

Standing in disbelief, he nervously chews his nails and darts his attention between GRACE and the door. With one short moment of stillness, JACK's eyes are drawn to his wristwatch. With a very strenuous expression on his face, he looks at his watch, then to GRACE. He repeats this twice, each time edging closer to the door. He goes to walk out the door and turns for one last look of disbelief at his mother.

JACK: (his attention is drawn up to the coffee table where his keys sit, returning to his fluster) Oh, right! The keys!
At that, he runs to the coffee table, jumping over his mother's corpse, and grabs the keys. Without looking back, he dashes out of the door, slamming it behind him.

Blackout.