

CARDS AND SPINNERS - NEXT! Sides 2022

Number of Characters: Four

Estimated Running Time: 70 to 75 minutes

Characters

David Oxenblatter and Mary Smith, a married couple in their late 50s.
Brian and Julia Fitzpatrick, a married couple in their late 40s.

Side #1 - DAVID

(addressing the audience) When you have a weird name like David Oxenblatter, as I do, you want to preserve the balance of the universe by marrying someone with an ordinary name like Mary Smith, as I did. Now, Mary has a sister who lives in Queens, and the day came not long ago when her sister needed major surgery, and Mary of course wanted to be there for her. Our brother-in-law is a heavy smoker, and Mary, with her asthma and allergies, can't handle the cigarette smell that pervades their house. But who wants to stay at a hotel in Queens? So Mary books a hotel in Manhattan, packs up her crappy generic suitcase, drives to Manhattan, checks in, meets her sister at the hospital in Queens the next morning, waits while she has the surgery, stays in her hospital room overnight, takes her home the next afternoon, and turns her over to her husband.

A stressful situation, obviously, and I figured we could both use a night together in Manhattan, so the day after the surgery I made a dinner reservation at our favorite Manhattan restaurant, packed up *my* crappy generic suitcase, parked the kids with the au pair, left work early, and took the train to the City. When I get to the hotel, I go to the front desk and say "I'm Mary Smith's husband. She told you I'd be coming." And they give me the room key. I get to the room. There on the floor is Mary's crappy generic suitcase. There on the desk is Mary's phone, charging; she must have forgotten it. But no Mary; apparently she's not back from Queens yet. I'm kind of tired, so I lie down on the bed to have a rest and wait for Mary. I'm starting to get really worried. No, actually, I finish getting worried, and move beyond worried to frantic.

Oh-kay. Don't panic, I tell myself. Why don't I take a shower? That usually helps me relax. But that doesn't quite work either.

So I get out of the shower, I can't be bothered with the nicety of a towel, I'm dripping wet, I'm naked, and I'm so agitated I start pacing around the room. On my rounds, I pass by Mary's phone and see it's open to Spotify. After a few circuits, I think to myself, why don't I find out what

was the last music she listened to before she died? I'm a sentimental guy, I might want to play it at the funeral. I check the phone. It's hip-hop music. Gee, I think, as I keep pacing, you're married to someone for twenty years, you imagine you know her intimately, and it turns out you really don't--I thought Mary hated hip-hop. I do another circuit around the room. Something is stirring faintly in the back of my half brain. There's a dim, formless light, it's shimmering, it's taking shape, if only I could get it in focus, no, I can't quite, if only I could see it clearly I might...but I keep blinking just before I...

And then the scales fall from my eyes. I look at the phone again. It's not Mary's, though it's close. I look at the crappy generic suitcase again. It's not Mary's, though it's close. I rifle through the drawers. There's a train ticket in the name of Mary L. Smith. That's not my wife's generic name, though—duh--it's close.

Holy shit! Wrong room! I have to get out of here! I'm still dripping wet. I grab my suitcase, which fortunately I haven't unpacked. I leave the room. I step into the hall. Ahh...I made it. Now I'll just close the door quietly and...oh, wait, I'm not wearing any clothes. I go back in the room, I put on my clothes, I leave the room, I go down to the front desk. This time, they give me the right key, as long as there's not a third Mary Smith staying at the hotel. I go to the right room. I unlock the door. Mary A. Smith, my wonderful wife, is standing there. She's alive. My legs buckle. I actually fall to my knees, put my arms around her legs, hold her tightly, and start weeping with relief.

Side #2 - Mary

(To David) Are we really going to have this same conversation whenever I express some dissatisfaction with life? Or is it because you've got an audience now? After five failed IVF pregnancies, nearly bankrupting ourselves to pay for a surrogate, and being stuck at home with two four-year-olds rather than doing the work I love while you go every day to a job you don't just because it pays more, I think I'm entitled to some occasional mild disgruntlement. This could have happened—it does happen—to anyone. And anyway, it didn't happen to you; it happened to Austin. I don't blame you for wanting to perpetuate your genes; if there's one thing we're naturally selected for, it's that. Everyone feels that impulse; it just took you 30 more years than everyone else to grow up enough to feel it yourself.

(To Brian and Julia) Do you remember his mantra? “No wives, ex-wives, kids, pets, or plants.” He was very proud of that; told it to me the night we met. For some insane reason, it didn't scare me away.

(To David) You were 0 for 5 then, but you're four for five now, and I am those kids' mother in every way that matters, and they know it, and I love them unreservedly, and, inexplicably, I love you too, but I swear you're going to be 5 for 5 if you don't stop this shit. You've suffered a narcissistic wound because you've got an imperfect kid? I'm a psychotherapist, David, but not *your* psychotherapist. Talk to *him* about it, not to me. Get over it or don't, but keep it to yourself. Austin's your son, David, and you can't send him back to the kid store now, and he needs you just as much as his brother does, so man up and don't tell me again about how empty your heart feels when you look at him.

Side #3 - Brian

So now let's play my game. It doesn't compare to Candyland, I admit. But I think you'll enjoy it. I call it "The Godfather Game." We'll be the first people ever to play it. You go around the room saying which Godfather character you're most like, and then you go around the room again and everyone else says which Godfather character you're most like. Anyone want to start? *(He gets silence and stares.)* Okay, I will. See, I'm the oldest of three kids, and I was the apple of my parents' eye, and the Great White Hope, and the guy who was going to redeem what they saw as their failures, and it didn't quite happen that way, so I'm Sonny. And my little brother Steven, who got rich and kind of famous, is Michael, who turned out to be the one who redeemed the family honor. And our middle brother Richard, who in our family was considered dumb, which outside of our family means he's of average intelligence, and dropped out of three different colleges and one horrible marriage, and was pushing 40 and had no idea what to do with himself, was Fredo.

So then my little brother flamed out early. Like Sonny. And my middle brother, who found his way into a happy marriage to a good woman, and who took care of my father when he was dying, and takes care of my mother now so that Steven and I don't have to, and turned out to be the family mensch, is Michael. And I'm spineless and annoying, and can fuck up anything I set my mind to, and can't contribute to my family and can't even stop my own father from dying—I'm Fredo.

(They look at him.) I'm sorry. I want to curl up into the fetal position and never uncurl again. It's just....it's all getting to me. All of it. My work, my idleness, my money, my kids, my 50th birthday...all of it. I'm not myself. Or maybe I'm more myself than ever. Maybe me, desperate and sort of drunk, reveals my true essence. But I'm sorry. I need friends. Not people who'll find me a job; friends. People I like, and who like me, at least when I'm at my best. And I don't want to lose any more of them.

Side #4 - Julia

(Reacting to the recent news of the death of her husband's former boss.)

Brian. *Please*. Let it go. You never have to see him again. You didn't ever have to see him again even *before* he died. He didn't care that you hated him while he was alive, and I imagine he doesn't care now. Besides, by your own lights, you got your revenge, didn't you? He's the one who's dead, not you. You're walking God's green earth and breathing God's polluted air. He's null and void. Game over. Savor your triumph. You won.

I don't know where Jim is. I don't even have an opinion. We don't know anything about what happens afterwards, and it's hubris to pretend we do. Maybe he's nowhere. Maybe he's sitting at the right hand of God. Maybe it turns out that being both a nasty prick and a provincial hack puts you on the narrow path of righteousness, while Mother Teresa is writhing in the Ninth Circle of Hell. But one thing I'm pretty sure he's not doing is lying around wondering about you.

Get a grip. Jim's gone. You've got good health. I've got good health. The people we love have good health. We're solvent, albeit just barely. Our kids are sane, and—for people who are living in the same rooms they were in when they were wearing diapers, and about as capable of earning a living now as they were then—mature and self-sufficient. The pandemic will recede. Spring is coming eventually. Life is sweet. Try to enjoy it.