

# *RELUCTANT STRANGERS*

A play in two acts

By William D. Sauers

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Some of the characters in this play are required to disappear, therefore the set should be designed to provide for an opening in a wall, or a piece of wall that a character can slip behind, and give the appearance of disappearing.

The character Napoleon, should not speak with an accent, unless it is very mild.

The characters of Jefferson, Napoleon, and Betsey Patterson can be of any age, as long as they appear older than the character of Jerome.

CHARACTERS

JEROME	20's, single, unemployed, on probation
CELIA	Jerome's Sister , 20's (seven years older), single
NAPOLEON	Former Emperor of France, --Angel, 40-50 Jerome's Great Uncle –10 times removed
THOMAS JEFFERSON	Former President of the U.S. --Angel, 40-50
SHIRLEY	Jerome's Probation Officer, 20's,-single
BETSEY PATTERSON	Jerome's Great Grandmother –10 times Removed, --Angel, 40-50

Time:-- The present, early morning.

Place:-- A flat in New York City, run down, poorly furnished, messy.

ACT I SCENE I

(The play opens with a puff of smoke. As the lights come up, JEROME enters through the only door at stage left. He is unshaven, disheveled and dirty, and tipsy. He is carrying the remains of a six pack of beer. It is early morning. JEROME opens the refrigerator, puts in what's left of the six pack; taking one, he opens the beer and drains it.)

NAPOLEON

(sitting up on the couch so he can be seen by the audience)

So early, my boy? A gentlemen would wait at least, as the English are fond of saying, until the sun drops over the yard arm.

JEROME

(slurred)

Well, I'm no gentleman. I can't wait, and who are you? How'd you get in here? Great costume! Do you want a beer? Are you a friend of DeeWayne Pruitt, my old roomy? My fat old roomie -- DeeWayne Pruitt? Have I met you?

NAPOLEON

(standing up)

A glass of wine would be fine; a good French wine, a Sauterne from Bordeaux, perhaps. Although, it seems a trifle early. No, I think a good country wine to start the day would be better--if you don't mind.

JEROME

(Slurred.)

The wine steward is off today, so sorry. No wine. Actually, it's not permitted, his honor, won't allow it.

(chuckling)

I sneaked in the beer.

NAPOLEON

This is Flat 'B', is it not? And you are Jerome Patterson?

JEROME

Right on both counts. Yes, sir! That's me, Jerome Patterson, but DeeWayne Pruitt is not here. He's in-- he's in-- he's indisposed.

NAPOLEON

Why do you go out so early. Why aren't you sleeping.? You have no one to sleep with? You are a very strange young man.

JEROME

I have to go out early. I'm ducking the cops. So, I go out early before it's light, before they get up.

NAPOLEON

(puzzled)

Cops?

JEROME

Yeah. You know cops.

(with a French accent)

Gendarmes!

NAPOLEON

Ah ha! Gendarmes. I am not one of them--but why?

JEROME

They think I'm America's most wanted, you know. You get a little drunk and you land in jail.

If you're looking for DeeWayne~ he's not here. He got busted and he got locked up. I've been busted a few time myself and one of these days... You're sure you're not a cop? It's none of your business but I'm going to court tomorrow and I'll be getting off probation--so I'm celebrating. Who in the hell are you? How'd you get in here?

NAPOLEON

I came in through the keyhole.

JEROME

Oh yeah! Sure!

NAPOLEON

It would be impossible to keep me out. I don't respect boundaries, or borders, walls, doors or gates. I am Napoleon Bonaparte the Emperor of France.

JEROME

Yeah! Sure! You're Napoleon and I'm--I'm Thomas Jefferson!

NAPOLEON

No. He's Thomas Jefferson.

NAPOLEON (continued)

(Enter JEFFERSON)

You are Jerome Patterson, or we have come to the wrong flat. I would have preferred to come alone and I would not have picked Mr. Jefferson as a traveling companion, but here we are, and we'll just have to make the best of it.

JEFFERSON

(nods to JEROME)

The best of it--yes, and that should include this drunken lad who I take it, is not DeeWayne Pruitt. What can we possibly do here under these circumstances?

JEROME

(shouting) Get out! Get outta here! This is my place. Get out or I'll call the cops. You can't come barging in here.

(NAPOLEON and JEFFERSON look shocked and disappear.)

JEROME (Cont'd)

(calming down)

Jeez--this is my dump. How in hell did they get in here?

(checks door)

**So** I'm Worthless--the scum of the scum--I've got rights. I've still got rights. Yeah, I've got rights. What rights do I have? I have the right to kill myself--that's No. 1. I have the right not to kill myself if I want to. I have the right to remain silent and I have the right to another beer!

(goes and opens a beer)

No! That's not exactly so. Shirley would be disappointed. The judge would be mad--probation revoked--into the slammer. Scuzz--scum--louse--worthless jerk!--but what the hell, I'll sleep it off.

(drinks beer.)

NAPOLEON and JEFFERSON reappear)

NAPOLEON Now then, if your tantrum is over.

(to JEFFERSON)

We are here to help this wretched child--agreed?

JEFFERSON

If Louisiana were still for sale, I would be but pleased to deal with you--but here! Now...

NAPOLEON

You are a gentlemen. You must try--agreed?

JEFFERSON

Alright. Agreed, for the time being.

JEROME

OK, OK. I don't get the private joke and I'm really not sure what this is all about. So level--who put you up to this little charade? I could call the cops you know, they'll come after me in a minute. One of you better say something. Something plausible. If Celia put you up to this!

(laughs nervously)

God damn, I'm going to be--I'll get even. I know you guys are cops. Where is your warrant? You can't bust in here. This is private property. I can have you thrown out of here. All I've got to do is to make a phone call.

NAPOLEON

But who will you call? You have no mother, no father, no wife or girlfriend--only a sister who called us.

JEROME

My sister called? She's been telling me what to do since I was 7--and I never do it right.

JEFFERSON

By all means, call. There is the phone. (Pointing.

He sees the chess set)

Chess anyone?

JEROME

I'll call--I'll call the landlord.

JEFFERSON

But you haven't paid the rent!

(moves a chess piece and gestures to NAPOLEON)

JEROME

Yes, because it's confiscatory. It's unfair, no human being should be forced to live in a dump like this. If the city of New York cared, this wouldn't happen, but if you are poor, like me, nobody cares. They go right on, to the opera and the theater, stepping over the poor and the sick and never look down. Maybe if we all died the stench would be so bad they'd have to notice us.

JEFFERSON

Bravo! Bravo! You have some fight left after all. I was told you were out and down, near ropes end and squashed! Now ! see you could rise up and--complain.

NAPOLEON

Don't encourage him. Tom. So you have no money to pay the rent? How do you support yourself?.

(makes his chess move)

JEROME

I get public assistance. But that's no business of yours. I'm entitled to it. That's the law. Just enough to keep me enslaved like a rat in a filthy trap. Sometimes, towards the end of the month, I walk dogs and I'm good at it. I can walk fifteen dogs at a time.

NAPOLEON

Mon Dieu. Don't they fight?

JEROME

No. Dogs naturally travel in packs and they are friendly. A lot friendlier than people.  
(to JEFFERSON)

You want a beer?

(opens another beer, starts to drink)

JEFFERSON

No, and neither do you.

(knocking at the beer in JEROME's hand, and JEROME flinches and drops it) You've had quite enough self indulgence for today. You should be drowned in coffee. Where is your coffee pot ?

(looks in cupboards and finds a pot)

Nappy Will you had me that cup?

NAPOLEON

In a moment. I'm studying my next move.

JEFFERSON

Never mind.

(he magically pours hot coffee into the mug, all the while  
he is saying)

When I was living in Paris I became fond of good French coffee, and quite fond of good French wine. So I tried every way I could to duplicate their wines at Monticello. Alas, it didn't work, in my day at least. I firmly believed that a nation that drank wine would excel, whereas a whiskey drinking country heads for trouble. Wine drinkers tend to be gentlemen and whiskey drinkers are drunks.

(to JEROME)

You must be a whiskey drinker, eh lad?

JEROME

I drink anything I get my hands on--what do you mean by that?--I'm clean now--on a special program for substance abuse. Anyway, I'm not a drunk. I'm a dope addict.

(laughs)

JEFFERSON

Then I don't have to tell you that you should not be drinking! Except, drink that coffee.

(pours him some more)

JEROME

How do you do that?

JEFFERSON

Do what?

JEROME

Make that coffee like that?

JEFFERSON

It's magic given to me by your sister

JEROME

Yeah? ( thinks) The cops will never know--unless you're one of them; and if you are, it's too late now. Are you guys cops?

NAPOLEON

Just a minute--just one minute, Mr. Jefferson. I think you are going about this in the wrong way. You are being too harsh.

JEFFERSON

Well, we have to sober this lad up, or we can't get anywhere, but I see your point. I wouldn't want you to tutor my nephew. What do you suggest?

NAPOLEON

Thank you for the compliment. I would make the boy want to do the right thing for his own good.

JEFFERSON

When were you ever that reasonable?

NAPOLEON

You don't understand young men. You never had any sons, legitimate ones at least, so you are ill prepared to deal with Jerome.

JEFFERSON

It's your ancestor that is the drunk, and on welfare. I had nothing to do with that and let's not get into offspring--you would lose on that score! In my life I had two wonderful daughters. Every father should have daughters. In their eyes he can do no wrong. But- I always wanted a son- I wanted the challenge- and now here- at last I have that challenge- to influence the life of a young male. That must be why I am here.

JEFFERSON

(looking in cupboards again, finds a wine bottle with a candle stuck in it.  
He pulls it out and pours a glass of wine)

I can assure you I'm not one of them--whoever "they" are. Try this!

(he pours a glass and hands it to NAPOLEON)

I wouldn't recommend it, but the poor lad is on welfare and it's all he can afford, poor darling. Now, if you would care to ask me to visit you at the "Invalides" in Paris I'll respond more generously.

JEFFERSON (continued)

(takes a sip--spits and chokes)

Delightful! Wine is a gentleman's drink. It's good for the digestion!

(to JEROME)

You ought to learn to control yourself--then you could drink a little wine.

JEROME

Will you guys knock it off and tell me who you are, what you want and what's going on?

JEFFERSON (to Napoleon)

I thought you were on St. Helena. When did you move? The last I heard they had you in "Durance Vile" on that island and were not about to let you off. Dreadful place. I would imagine.

JEROME

Hey! Remember me--this is my place and I'm in charge here. I'm not on welfare, like you said, I'm on Supplemental Assistance and it's the law, and you guys better start leveling with me. I know my rights.

NAPOLEON

My dear boy, we are truly here to help you but it seems we have to set some ground rules first. What's that on your leg? You seem to have some sort of impediment there.

JEROME

You know what it is! It's an electronic ankle bracelet. I'm under house arrest, so the cops can keep track of me--unless I fool them. It's hooked into the phone. Come on, you guys know more about it than I do

NAPOLEON

House arrest? That's a bit like slavery, isn't it? Tom would know about that. He is a reported expert on that subject. Now to your little problem.

JEROME

My tittle problem? My little problem! What do you mean by that? I had no problem till you two nuts came in here and took over my digs. I know it's a dump, but it's mine and you have no right to be here. I! No! I don't have no problem! I got no sex, no money, no job, no life and NO problem.

JEFFERSON

Your sister said you did and I have no reason to disbelieve her. She said you had changed your life--dropped out of school--became a bum! She said you were killing yourself or trying to, threatening to. Now, that's what I call a problem. That is true? No?

JEROME

Yeah! I get depressed. -I've thought about it--doesn't everyone, haven't you, sometime? When I flunked chemistry I got depressed; when I lost my job, fired, I got depressed; when my girl friend dumped me, get lost!, I really got depressed.

JEFFERSON

Your grandmother is quite concerned, too.

JEROME

I don't have no grandmother. She died !-I don't have no mother, and I don't have a father either. They all died. So, I'm thinking? Why not join them? They left me to make it on my own and lately I wonder if it's worth it. I gotta die sometime--why not now? What's so wonderful about hanging around? Nothin' good has happened so far. Anyway, I just took the wrong medicine and they had to pump my stomach. Big deal! Lousy county hospital. They put me in the loony ward, strapped me down and this weird doctor asked me if I knew anything about--Napoleon. Now I get it. You guys are from the loony bin, but what's with this Thomas Jefferson costume? That's funny! What happened to the white coats?

JEFFERSON

The white coats will be here soon enough. The question now is, or should be, can I, or can we, or can anyone help you put your life together so you will be a credit to your ancestral heritage or just another low-life New Yorker taking no responsibility, and just drifting along like a piece of shit in a sewer?

JEROME

Wait a minute, this is a free country. I can drift along like a piece of... piece of... what did you call me? A New Yorker? Hah! You're wrong there mister. I'm from Baltimore. Boy, you ought to be an actor, or a politician or something! What makes you think you have a fucking right to invade my space and put me down? Now get out.

NAPOLEON

Fucking right? What an odd use of that word. Do you understand that, Tom?

JEFFERSON

It must be a modern thing, Nappy, intended to shock no doubt. An abomination of the language--making an adjective out of a verb or a noun perhaps. You can fuck--or be fucked, but you can't go fuckingly on you way!

JEROME

I want you fucking out of here!

JEFFERSON

There he goes again!

(pause)

Must you use such foul language? I believe it is entirely possible to make your point in plain English.

NAPOLEON

If he could speak French he would be much more expressive--such a musical language.

JEFFERSON

Not so, my friend. French is very limiting. English, on the other hand, has three times the word choices. We took all the best French words into ours, those that a regular person can pronounce, and today English is the language of the world.

NAPOLEON

Tis true. The barbaric English could not express themselves without stealing from the civilized French.

*[Napoleon speaks French]*

*(The English are as crude as their cooking. They are overbearing, arrogant and rude.)*

JEFFERSON

*[answers in French]*

*(I could say the same about you--but I won't get personal. We should stick to our mission here.)*

JEROME

Now I get it, you ass--- you guys are professors and you're here to scholarship me to some god-damned French academy! I can't imagine learning anything from you assholes.

JEFFERSON

Well, I speak, read and write seven languages. You should learn at least one! And I don't use four-letter words in any of them. Therefore, I could not begin to teach you anything that you would find useful.

JEROME

Then move on, mister. I'm a loser and I admit it. I never win, can't do anything right- nothing ever goes the way I want it- so just leave me be.

NAPOLEON

How is it that you never win? Who is setting the rules of your game? Weren't you engaged in living just a short while ago?

JEROME

I don't call my life, living. Living is—Living—should be smooth and delicious; it's being needed and wanted—nobody wants me!

NAPOLEON

You have a sister?

JEROME

Yeah! My sister-mom. She raised me- by the numbers. My father checked out when I was five, and my mother gave up shortly after that. I barely remember them

NAPOLEON

Did she?

JEROME

Oh! No!- she died of tuberculosis. I guess I never got over that. I have a room mate but no friends. The closest thing I have to a friend is my probation officer, and maybe the judge.

JEFFERSON

So they're the ones that trouble you?

JEROME

No not them- the others. They set the rules--and they're not fair.

NAPOLEON

But who are they that control you?

JEROME

The capitalist pigs--the authorities--the politicians--the ones that bum down the rain forests and pollute our rivers. They're the ones that are killing me.

NAPOLEON

And you think your getting drunk will save the rain forests? That if you kill yourself the fires will go out?

JEROME

You are twisting my words around--leave me alone.

NAPOLEON

(Changing subject. Pointing to a picture)

Who is that lovely young woman? I feel a restive feeling growing in my loins. So exquisite.

JEROME

She's my tight assed sister Celia, and you better not hassle her. She is one tough lady. Boy, when she gets on your back, look out--do this, don't do that. I'm always wrong--can't get anything right., Saint Celia is special--everyone looks to her, she gets everything she wants. Then she takes out her bad side on me. If she would just butt-out.

NAPOLEON

So that is Celia! You want her to allow you to kill yourself?. To make it possible? To assist you?

JEROME

NO! I just want her to leave me alone!

NAPOLEON

Last time you swallowed a bottle of pills. How do you plan to do it this time? Poison? Hanging? Or throwing yourself in front of a train?

JEROME

I don't know--all of the above, maybe? ( Jerome pulls a gun out of a drawer) Here!- how about this? I could blow my head off- or your head off ( points it at Napoleon)  
(Napoleon grabs the gun and points it at Jefferson)

NAPOLEON

It seems that every citizen here has a gun. How can the Government keep order against a citizens army?

JEFFERSON

The constitution Nappy. The constitution provides for a citizen army. That's guaranteed!

NAPOLEON

I wouldn't permit that. The citizenry is not to be trusted, and they cannot be trusted. NO! you are wrong! (the gun goes off right at Jefferson.)  
(The Bullet passes through Jefferson and hits a lamp behind him, and knocks it over, or breaks it)

JEROME

(Shouts) Look out you'll kill somebody. (to Jefferson) Didn't that hit you? He fired point blank-(looks at lamp and back at Jefferson , in amazement) The people next door knock on the wall.

JEFFERSON

He missed!- If you want to kill someone you need an AK-47. (Takes gun from Napoleon and throws it in the trash) This thing is junk. No self respecting militia man would have one- and you don't need it.

JEROME

There is something weird going on here. How come you are not bleeding?

JEFFERSON

I'm bleeding for you young man and your desire to throw your life away.

JEROME

What about my lamp?

JEFFERSON

What about your life? Do you want him to shoot that too?

NAPOLEON

I didn't come here to shoot anybody. How can you suggest such a thing?

JEROME

I don't want to be shot by this guy. I don't want anymore shooting- and what about my gun? I have a right to it. You can't take that away from me.

JEFFERSON

You have the right to a militia mans rifle- to protect the public from its enemies. Your Saturday Night special doesn't count.

JEROME

(Digs the gun out of the trash) It's mine! That's the law. Just because you are some sort of cop doesn't mean you can confiscate my gun.

NAPOLEON

Maybe he has a point. You can't----

JEFFERSON (Interrupting)

Gentlemen, gentlemen, this looks like it's degenerating into a family argument, and this lad is so devious he can't even be honest about killing himself. I cannot be of service any longer. Pay my respects to Celia. She got me into this, you know, but I can't be of any use to this cipher.

NAPOLEON

You can't leave now, we haven't even started to address this problem.

JEFFERSON

Sorry old boy, it's your problem, not mine. By the way, you seem much taller these days. I always thought you were short!

NAPOLEON

Short? Short? In what way do you mean short?

JEFFERSON

I mean fucking short!  
(laughs)

JEROME

Now what? You said it--how come I can't?

JEFFERSON

I used the word correctly.

NAPOLEON

(finning)  
I was never short. I was a giant of a man.  
(moves the last chess piece)  
You are conquered, monsieur, checkmate.

JEROME

I don't think so. You have missed a move--and it's checkmate to you.  
(to JEFFERSON)  
Sorry, but I couldn't resist.

NAPOLEON

Do not help the enemy. You are a Bonaparte! Help me--if you must interfere.

JEROME

Bonaparte? He was short. They called him the "little colonel"?

JEFFERSON

The little corporal, it was.

NAPOLEON

I was never short--you are not my nephew.  
(Irritated. Moves another piece)  
Checkmate!

JEROME

Yeah, the "little colonel"--I remember the movie. He was in big trouble--like they shipped him off to an island or something. Celia would know.(Stops and thinks) Come on! Are you saying that we are related? What gives?

NAPOLEON

Your great, great, great, great grandfather was my brother. That makes you my nephew many times removed, but you are a Bonaparte nevertheless, and you are the last of the line. If you do yourself in, without leaving a male heir, the American Bonaparte blood line will disappear. That would be a tragedy I would like to prevent.

JEFFERSON

So that's what the fuss is all about?

NAPOLEON

That is why I'm here to preserve the Bonaparte legacy. The Bonaparte are an outstanding family and I was it's outstanding leader, and to preserve that legacy has always been my destiny.

JEFFERSON

Legacy is an overworking term.

JEROME

Oh boy! That's a story I haven't heard before--clever! So how do you guys know one another? Same precinct?

JEFFERSON

We go way back into antiquity. Although we never met, actually, until this very day. We are reluctant strangers you might say.

NAPOLEON

(to Jefferson)

Alright, have it your way! I am perfectly capable of handling this matter by myself. I don't know why you are here. That Patterson woman! She is still angry and has influenced you no doubt. Well, Mr. Jefferson, tell Betsy Patterson if I could run an empire, I can take care of this--this--

JEFFERSON

This real, live personal problem that's happening right in front of your eyes. I seem to recall that you were never very good at personal matters. Generals aren't supposed to be, I suppose.

JEROME

Are you talking about me?

NAPOLEON

My subjects thought I was wonderful. I was a hero.

JEFFERSON

It occurs to me that you would not be so wonderful today--the world has changed.

NAPOLEON

For the worse you might add. There is no decency anymore--no courtesy--no community. It's everyone for himself. In my day, the citizens loved their country and would give their lives to defend it. Today they turn their backs.

JEROME

Are you talking about me?

NAPOLEON

No one wants to take any responsibility. The younger generation is totally incompetent to take over.

JEROME

Now you are talking about me.

JEFFERSON

Yes, I think he is--indirectly. You are absolutely right, Nappy. That is the way it appears. But, you are not the first to make that observation. It was Cicero or someone, who said that thousands of years ago!