

Smitten

by Anna Stillaman and Mark Matthews

A Black Comedy

Cast

Peter: A Delicatessen Owner

Nichola: A Delicatessen Owner's Lover

Gary (Voice only): A Delicatessen Owner's Lover's Husband

Note: Throughout the play a game of Chess is played, but there is only scattered stage direction as to when the moves should occur. The game can be played at the Director's discretion.

EVENING - Shop Interior - Delicatessen.

It is raining outside. Heavily.

We are inside a preserves shop, dimly lit and stocked with hundreds of jars of pickled meats, fruits, golden onions, deep green gherkins, bright relishes and thick jams.

Their rich colours are lit by a solitary light: a low lamp sitting on the shop counter.

There is also a small table on top of which is a chess game, half-way through a game.

PETER - *a tall man around 45 years, with a delicate complexion, a thin, angular face, and clear, vibrant eyes, enters carrying a jar of meat and tray of condiments. He is wearing surgical rubber gloves.*

Thunder. Light flickers.

He unscrews the jar and lays thin slices of meat onto the plate. He carefully separates 2 slices from the rest, opens a small vial of liquid and places two drops onto the separated slices.

His movements are precise, elegant and artistic. He takes pleasure in the activity.

There is a sharp "rata-tat-tat" at the door.

PETER *hurriedly screws the lid back on the jar and hides the gloves and vial from view.*

PETER: *Coming!*

He crosses the room to let the visitor in. It is Nichola. She bustles in with a light and vibrant energy, rubbing her hands from the cold...

(She has a handbag, a coat and a bottle of wine.)

NICHOLA: *It's freezing out there! And the traffic...my God! The tiniest drop of rain and everything comes to a standstill! It took me ages to get here! I'm sure I look a mess...*

...Anyway I got here in the end. Did you miss me?

PETER: *Actually you're a fraction early. It's only a quarter to six.*

NICHOLA: Is that all? Gosh, it really felt like ages. (*Turning her attention to the chess board*) Whose turn was it?

PETER: Yours my dear.

Nichola makes a triumphant move...

NICHOLA: I think this will be my night Peter!

PETER: Oh blast, I was hoping you wouldn't see that.

Peter ponders his counter move.

NICHOLA: (*about wine*) I've never tried it before, but it's won an award...

She goes back to the door and peers out into the darkness.

PETER: Are you alright?

NICHOLA: Well, it's just that... No. It can wait. Everything is perfect. You?

PETER: Never been better. Hungry?

NICHOLA: Kind of... (*sees meat*) what's that?

PETER: You're in for a treat. It's my finest creation... I promise you it will be unlike anything you've ever tasted. (*he points to one of the infected slices*) Try that bit, that's a good one...

Nichola: It's unusual...

PETER: What do you taste?

NICHOLA:... vinegar...citrus?

PETER: Ah! That's the orange! I steeped it in a 10 percent salt water brine for 8 weeks, rinsed it, and then pickled it in vinegar infused with orange... It's a remarkable thing pickling... the acid environment of the vinegar inhibits bacteria, meaning food can be preserved for years. (*Hands her wine glass*) Here, wash it down.

NICHOLA: You're a strange man Peter. You're unlike anyone I know. Do you like the wine?

PETER: Fruity. Including your husband?

NICHOLA: Sometimes I wonder Peter whether you enjoy being cruel to me.

PETER: I don't. I'm sorry. You know how it is. I get jealous sometimes.

NICHOLA: Trust me, you really shouldn't be... Peter, I have something to tell you. I... What are you looking at?

PETER: An ant.

NICHOLA: Just one is it?

PETER: Yes, all on its own.

NICHOLA: Well that'll be the scout. You should squash it.

PETER: Shame on you Nichola! One of God's creatures.

NICHOLA: It's just an ant. Besides, if you don't kill it, it's just going to go back and tell all its friends where the food is. Anyway, that's why they only send one. It's high risk ranking being the scout; they expect him to die.

PETER: Don't you ever feel pity when you kill an ant?

NICHOLA: An ant? Hardly.

PETER: How about a fly?

NICHOLA: Nope. Hate them.

PETER: Cat?

NICHOLA: A Cat!? Of course I would! There's a world of difference between a fly and a cat.

PETER: I wonder if it realises we are here? Are we so large and close that it can't even see us? Or perhaps it is so single-minded, it doesn't care? One task only. One unwavering mission, and it will not stop until it finds it. Remarkable! What about a mouse? Bit smaller than a cat.

NICHOLA: Mouse? Well, I'd feel a little sorry about a mouse. Although they are full of disease. I suppose it depends how you did it. What are you doing now?

PETER: I'm feeding it some sugar.

NICHOLA: You can't do that - you'll have them everywhere by tomorrow morning and you run a food shop!

PETER: I didn't say I was making friends with it. No. That's not the way to deal with them at all. I'm feeding it - after all, that's what it's looking for - and then you watch it make its way back to where it came from, which invariably is much faster than the way here.

NICHOLA: Then what?

PETER: Find the nest. Kill them all.

Beat.

NICHOLA: I suppose that's one method.

PETER: Works every time - hungry?

He holds out the plate of food again, she shakes her head.

Now, what is it you were going to tell me?

Light flickers, thunder, then all is black.

NICHOLA: What just happened?

PETER: I think you'll find the lights have gone out...

Scrapping. He disappears. There is a long period of silence. Some more scrapping.

NICHOLA: (Nervously) Isn't it amazing how dark it is when all the lights are out? Completely and utterly black. You can't see a thing. There could be just about anyone out there and you wouldn't know. Peter? ...This sure is a nasty storm. Seems to be settling in. The weather just gets crazier and crazier. What do you think of all that global warming - do you think it's true?

No reply from Peter, just silence.

Peter?

Silence.

Peter are you there?

Silence.

Pe...

Peter strikes a light behind her.

NICHOLA: Oh!

PETER: Found them!

He has a bundle of candles which he lights and proceeds to place around the room.

NICHOLA: You gave me a fright!

PETER: Sorry. Dash, the ant has disappeared.

NICHOLA: I told you, you should have just squashed it.

PETER: Oh no, I couldn't possibly. Have you ever squashed an ant then lifted your thumb to find there's still a part of it twitching, so you have to squash it all over again? And even then, how are we to know whether it's really dead? Perhaps it's still alive, paralysed, writhing silently inside? I can't do it like that Nichola... No... I prefer poison; it's far less, ...grubby.

NICHOLA: Oh Peter, you are such a gentle man... You know, you remind me of my father a bit when you say that. We raised chickens and he refused to wring their necks for exactly the same reason. He preferred to chop their heads off. My job was to relax them enough to then stretch their necks out on the block. I got pretty good at it! And do you know, even after chopping off their heads, sometimes they would flap around the garden just like they were still alive!

PETER: Well we're all hard-wired to live. Maybe that's the proof there is nothing after death after all? Maybe there's a part of us that already knows that this is all we have and so we try to hold on to it for as long as we can. *(Pause)* I remember when my Mother hung herself, even though she put the rope around her own neck, her body resisted it for a very long time...

NICHOLA: Oh Peter!

PETER: I was very small when it happened. It was morning I think. Beautifully sunny. She hugged me, put me in my play pen, and looked at me in such a loving way. I'll never forget that look. Then she stood on the kitchen chair, attached a rope to the copper pipe that ran across the ceiling and hung

herself. But it took so long for her to die Nichola and she seemed in such pain... and there I was, trapped in that pen...

NICHOLA: Oh my God Peter, that's the worst story I've ever heard. I'm so sorry, how utterly awful!

PETER: I've never told anyone about that. But it seemed right that I told you.

NICHOLA: I'm very glad that you did. Do you still think about her much?

PETER: Every day.

NICHOLA: It seems a very cruel thing for a mother to do. She must've known you'd see her, surely? I don't know why she didn't put you in another room, or give you to a neighbour or something... that kind of thing can seriously disturb you for life!

Peter is busy spreading pate on to a cracker. In sudden reaction to her words, he crushes the cracker and dropping it on the floor.

PETER: Blast it!

He goes behind the counter and gets a cloth.

NICHOLA: I shouldn't have said that should I? Your mother. It's all very well to make judgements, but it's *your* mother. I wouldn't like anyone to say that about *my* mother. She must've been very ill and unhappy...

Peter wipes up the mess on the floor without saying a word. He appears uneasy.

...You know, it makes a bit of sense. You have that look in your eye. A man who's seen something he shouldn't have seen. Knows something nobody else knows. That was the very first thing I noticed about you. That secretive look. Very dark. Very mysterious...

Peter is directly below her now. He looks up to answer her and his face is an inch from her leg. He finds himself uncontrollably drawn to the sight of her smooth calf disappearing up into her skirt...

...Smitten I was. And you're into preserving things. I like that about you. You know how to cherish what is important. I always wanted to be a taxidermist. People think it's morbid,

but really it's about preserving beauty. (*laughs nervously*) I'm babbling aren't I? And I've just said the stupidest things! It's because I'm nervous. I don't know why I'm nervous...

Peter doesn't dare to breath. His hands are trembling. He mimics gently caressing her calf using the blunt end of his knife.

... Look! I'm actually trembling a little! How strange. Maybe I've drunk too much...

Peter's reverie is broken.

PETER: Is it a little warm in here?

NICHOLA: A little.

PETER: You seem a bit pale, would you like something else to drink. Or eat?

NICHOLA: I'm fine. I think it must be an acquired taste. Sorry

PETER: Oh. Well. Perhaps. I've been enjoying this batch for many years, but I'm almost out. (*Sighs*) I must say, I shall be very sorry when it is gone...

NICHOLA: But you can make more can't you?

PETER: Yes, I can make more. In fact I'm working on it right now.

NICHOLA: Peter? You know how I've been trying to tell you something since I arrived...?

PETER: Yes?

NICHOLA:...Well it's something important. Very important.

PETER: Yes. What is it?

NICHOLA: I... I'm not sure how you will take this ...I left Gary.

Peter looks dismayed and in shock...

PETER: When?

NICHOLA: Just before I came here.

PETER: Did you tell him about us?

NICHOLA: Oh no, no! It was ugly enough without dragging us into it! I wasn't intending on doing it, I know it's crazy and we've never discussed anything like that. It's *terrible* timing, but I just saw him there, he wasn't doing anything in particular, but I could smell him. In fact I could smell him all through the house and it just kind of bubbled up inside of me... I knew I had to do it... You don't look very pleased...

PETER: I'm just surprised that's all. Do you think he suspects anything?

NICHOLA: I hope not because he can be very vengeful sometimes.

PETER: Nichola this is really important. We discussed this you know. This is our secret. Does he suspect *anything*? Anything at all?

NICHOLA: No! I've been so careful. I haven't told a soul, I promise! Why does it matter so much to you?

PETER: It's nothing. You don't understand.

NICHOLA: No I don't understand! I thought you'd be pleased. This way it's different. Before it was you and me, and the shadow of Gary. Now it's just you and me. Just as we are. Entirely free. Me. Just me.

Beat

PETER: You're right! Why didn't I think of that? In fact it's perfect. Perfect!

NICHOLA: Why do you look at me like that? There's something you're not telling me. Oh god it's because you have a wife isn't it? You do don't you?

PETER: No of course I don't!

NICHOLA: Oh yes you do! It all makes sense now. Oh god what have I done!?

PETER: Well I did once, but she's gone.

NICHOLA: And I thought I was being so careful...

PETER: She died.

NICHOLA: It's all gone wrong!

PETER: It's just you Nichola!

NICHOLA: I have to get out of here!

She grabs her coat, becoming increasing unco-ordinated...

PETER: Don't go! Please Nichola. Stop it! You can't leave now!

NICHOLA: I can't get my stupid coat on... arms won't work...

She collapses against him...

NICHOLA: I feel dizzy all of a sudden... Oh Peter, this isn't good. I feel so tired...

PETER, *holding her, tenderly brushes the hair from her face.*

PETER: Hush... Would you like to have a sleep Nichola dear?

NICHOLA: Perhaps a sit down, yes please Peter. I'm so sorry...

He gently scoops her up, her head nestles against him, and carries her to the counter and lays her on top of it. He cradles her like a child.

PETER: Dearest Nichola...

NICHOLA: Oh Peter, I can't move my legs. My arms are so heavy. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

He shhh's her, then proceeds to remove her shoes.

NICHOLA: No but... What are you doing?

PETER: I have to tell you something too. Nichola are you listening to me?

NICHOLA: I don't want my shoes off!

PETER: Nichola, just calm down...

NICHOLA: I need my bag, pass me my bag!

PETER: Nichola listen! You haven't got long, so you have to listen to me.

NICHOLA: How do you know I haven't got long?

PETER: You have to believe, that I love you. That's why I chose you.

(long pause)

NICHOLA: You mean, you did this to me... Deliberately?

PETER: I did. I am.

Shocked silence.

NICHOLA: How?

PETER: I added a poison to the meat I gave you earlier. It will keep you calm until the end. You'll just gradually fade away. You won't feel a thing, I promise. The last thing I want to do is hurt you Nichola.

NICHOLA: The meat...! I thought it tasted funny. So that's why. I really did think it tasted funny.

PETER: My wife.

NICHOLA: What?

PETER: That... My last wife.

You must understand that I loved her very much.

NICHOLA: Is that what you're going to do to me?

PETER: About 2 years ago I realise I'm running out and I'm thinking, what am I going to do? You must understand that for some time I was in quite a panic. I mean, I felt so lonely every day just knowing it was going to end. It can't just be anyone you see. It's just so hard to meet the right person these days. And then I met you and I fell in love all over again. Look at your face. You look so worried. Don't worry, I'll wait until you've gone first. How do you feel?

NICHOLA: I feel slightly sick. I can't move at all. My entire body feels like stone.

PETER: It should have knocked you out by now, but don't worry, it won't be long. I love you Nichola. I love everything about you. That's why I have to do it. I must preserve what we have. Your skin is so perfect. I love you so much...

NICHOLA: Oh Peter...

PETER: Dice some garlic, a few cloves. And I'll think about you every day.

Peter's movements are becoming increasingly unco-ordinated during this and he eventually slumps to the ground.

NICHOLA: Don't forget the orange.

PETER: Of course, how could I forget? The orange...

NICHOLA: Darling, be a pet and pass me my bag.

PETER: I... I can't move my legs.

NICHOLA: What? Uh oh... that'll be the poison...

PETER: I didn't have any poison.

NICHOLA: You did. I put a poison in the wine!

PETER: You did that?

NICHOLA: I wasn't going to eat you though. I never thought of that. No, I just meant to take a token. My favourite bit to remind me of you. That I could take out every now then, and look at and think about how perfect everything was. And it would *always be perfect*. I thought about your eyes first, but then I thought no, your hands... artistic, beautiful hands...

PETER: But you drank just as much as I did.

NICHOLA: Yes, but I injected myself with a very large dose of hydroxocobalamin before I came. It was supposed to protect me against the wine, but then I started to feel funny and I thought it wasn't working properly. I didn't realise of course I'd had a double whammy. I've still got some in my bag.

PETER: You mean an antidote?

NICHOLA: Yes, can you reach it?

PETER: I can't move...

NICHOLA: Oh poop.

Pause.

PETER: It's really in your bag?

NICHOLA: Yes. In a perfume bottle.

Both of them try to move but can't. Finally they give up.

PETER: Who would've thought?

NICHOLA: Are you angry at me?

PETER: No, I think it's wonderful.

NICHOLA: And I thought we both just liked playing Chess! Oh Peter, how silly we've been! We both could've had so much fun and now we ruined it!

PETER: How were you going to preserve my hands?

NICHOLA: Just in salt. I thought about formaldehyde at first, but salt is cheaper. I have a special box too! It will only fit one though. I hadn't decided which one...

PETER: I've always preferred my left hand over my right. And I do have nice hands. No one else has thought so except you.

They stare at each other.

PETER: I'd really like to kiss you right now.

NICHOLA: Can you reach at all?

PETER: I can try...

There is a loud knock on the door.

They both freeze guiltily.

NICHOLA: Who could that be?

GARY'S VOICE: I know you're in there Nichola!

NICHOLA: It's Gary! He must've followed me here.

GARY'S VOICE: I know what you're doing in there Nichola!

NICHOLA: I seriously doubt that.

Gary knocks again.

PETER: Why me Nichola? Why not Gary?

Nichola: There's really nothing about Gary that's worth preserving, you know?

GARY'S VOICE: If you don't come out right now Nichola, I'll come in and drag you out!

NICHOLA: I told you he was vengeful. He was a prop at high school.

PETER: I never played rugby.

More hammering...

NICHOLA: I never loved Gary. Gary the big city shirt - who would've thought he would take a shine to little old me?

GARY'S VOICE: Fine then! If that's the way you want it! I'll see you in court shall I? Is that what you want?

PETER: He could save us you know. Get us the antidote.

GARY'S VOICE: You'll be sorry Niiichoooooaaaa!

NICHOLA: Ugh! I hate it when he says my name like that. I really don't want to see him.

PETER: Are you sure?

NICHOLA: I am. Are you?

PETER: I am too.

They wait for Gary to knock again, but all is silent...

NICHOLA: Do you think he's gone?

PETER: Yes, he's gone.

NICHOLA: Thank God!

PETER: Queen E7 to F8

NICHOLA: King H8 to H7

PETER: Queen F8 to F7.

NICHOLA: Checkmate?

PETER: Stalemate.

NICHOLA: I love you.

PETER: I love you.*

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

This moment... This...! To be here with you... To have you,
knowing me as I am, and you still love me... That is
perfection...

When I least expected it, I found an angel...

Nichola?

Nichola?

But she's gone.

THE END

**NOTE: The actor is at liberty to repeat this as many times as
he likes.*