

# JOHN - EMILY

JIM. I think.

EMILY. Okay, here's what we do. We get eighty to ninety. We diagnose what's wrong, what's credible, what's accurate. Then we're off by ten percent, and when people notice only half those, I issue a correction on that five percent. Right?

*He has no idea how to answer.*

*Go to another room while I calm down Norman Maller.*

JIM. You've worked with him before—

EMILY. —so what?—

JIM. —so I mean, is he, well—unstable?

EMILY. Like will he fly cross-country to invade someone's home? Go!

JIM. Where?!

EMILY. Kitchen! And close the door!

*Jim points at the kitchenette.*

JIM. That is the kitchen.

*She points at the door across the stage from the front door.*

EMILY. There!

*Jim strides determinedly to the door and throws it open.*

JIM. That is a three-season porch stuffed with old lady furniture.

*He closes the porch door. Emily looks over at the stairs.*

EMILY. Then upstairs! Jim, come on, make things happen!

*He strides to the stairs, climbs a few steps, looks up, offstage, at the top of the stairs; his eyes widen.*

JIM. (Abruptly stopping.) There's a baby gate.

EMILY. Step over it!

JIM. (Staring up at it, creeped out. It's hard to disobey, but—) No...

*Emily points under the stairs.*

EMILY. Then go in the basement!

*He descends, looks at the door under the staircase, then at her. Her face is set. He strides to it, throws it open, and pulls a chain to turn on an overhead lightbulb.*

JIM. Oh. This—

EMILY. Jim!

JIM. Yep. Okay.

*He closes the door behind him. Emily goes over to the front door, opens it.*

START



EMILY. Come in.

*John enters.*

JOHN. Oh, may I? May I please come in to my own house?

EMILY. You were strangling one of my people, John.

JOHN. He's not "people," he's a bundle of tics and abstractions, arbitrary principles stacked on top of horseshit till he's yea high.

EMILY. I get it: You're good with words.

JOHN. You'd hardly know it, assigning me this kid.

EMILY. If you don't want to have to deal with someone like him, then don't *shake* me, don't plant cute little *bombs* all over this thing. You do not understand the difference between...MY magazine and the Bumblefuck Literary Review this is going to end up in. It's one thing to say it was sunny on a day it was cloudy. It's another thing to claim that a girl *hanged* herself when in fact she jumped off a building!

JOHN. That girl—

EMILY. Lorenza Ortiz! She's as dead as Levi, and you pissed on her memory for the sake of some literary conceit.

JOHN. Her death has nothing to do with this essay.

EMILY. And what do I do when her parents read the story? When her father sues the magazine for emotional distress?

JOHN. Let him prove it.

EMILY. Really? He has to prove in a court of law his daughter's death was important.

JOHN. Not to the essay, it wasn't. I'm sorry. If you'd like, I'll tell him personally—

EMILY. The girl's father, John. Her mother? What are you thinking?

*Beat.*

JOHN. Let's just "put a pin in it."

EMILY. You wouldn't use a cliché unless you hated me.



JOHN. Emily—

EMILY. Take a look at a few of these. Just a few. Change a date or two if we have to.

JOHN. Dates? The dates are fine.

EMILY. John, we need to look like we've considered—

JOHN. You really need to stop treating me like I'm a journalist, Emily. I'm not a journalist. I'm an essayist. Since antiquity respected authors have regularly arranged and nudged details to create a closer understanding—writers like Herodotus, Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch—

*She lifts her finger to get a word in edgewise, but she cannot.*

—St. Augustine, Lamb, De Quincey, Thoreau, Defoe, Orwell, Didion, Sontag—I'm done.

EMILY. Oh, are you? Because I have all the time in the world to sit here and listen to you list the entire canon of the expository essay. You may or may not be a journalist, but I am and my magazine, like it or not, is going to be judged by journalistic standards. We need to look like we've considered every potential inconsistency. We need to make a good-faith effort.

JOHN. I'm not the one who's lost faith.

EMILY. Let's just get through this meeting.

JOHN. Meeting? With him? Why?

EMILY. Because he's the fact checker.

JOHN. Fire him.

EMILY. Fire him?

JOHN. He's poison to the creative process.

EMILY. If attorneys get involved do you know how that will look?

JOHN. Wait, attorneys?

EMILY. It's one thing for me not to know. But will you look at that fucking paper trail? We have to at least go through the motions—I fire him, he goes public, his attorney, or publicist, his attention-hungry girlfriend, whatever, they draft a narrative. And I—we—are all over social media for the wrong reasons. A narrative of willful negligence.

JOHN. He scares you that much.

EMILY. Your essay is important. People will care. People will ask

questions. You understand what it is to stare into the—

JOHN. The abyss?

EMILY. The barrel of a gun. Don't finish my sentences. If this happens—this is a career ender. For both of us. Listen, I have a duty to my audience, my publisher, my advertisers.

JOHN. This isn't a business to me. It's not a business.

EMILY. It is also a business. The whole industry is falling down around me. Ad sales through the floor, an aging audience—circulation literally dying. We sell high-end ads because of cutting-edge writing, writing shareholders call "monetized content." But the entire enterprise comes down to—

JOHN. Money?

EMILY. Trust, John. It comes down to trust.

*A beat.*

JOHN. Where is he?

EMILY. The basement.

JOHN. I don't have a basement. ← END

*Emily looks at the door under the stairs.*

EMILY. No basement?

JOHN. Not in Vegas. There's a hard caliche layer.

*(Kuh-LEE-lee)*

EMILY. What's a hard caliche layer?

JIM. (Off.) A hard sedimentary layer of calcium carbonate and other impermeable materials!

JOHN. That's a closet.

EMILY. Jim, did you just hear our entire fucking conversation?!

*Jim emerges.*

JIM. I really tried to pretend I was in a basement.

EMILY. Yes, fine.

JIM. I stuck my fingers in my ears and—

EMILY. We are running out of time. Look. (Checks her watch.) I have to make a phone call.

*John's face immediately sours.*

*Try not to kill each other.*