

OLD FAITHFUL

A play in one act

by Sandy Benson and Ryan Hunter

Based on the short story "Old Faithful"

by S. G. Benson

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CHARACTERS

LUCILLE MINER, 21

RITA GARSKI, 21

CLAYTON MINER, 55-ISH, DOUBLES AS RANGER NELSON

BLANCHE MINER, 50-ISH

MEL CLARK, 21

PLACES

Saint Cloud, Minnesota and Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

TIME

Spring and summer, 1948

(The main part of the stage is darkened until after the introduction.)

INTRODUCTION (TOLD IN PRESENT TIME)

(Spotlight on SANDY, standing in front corner, stage right.)

SANDY

(Speaking to audience): Good evening. I'm a retired forest ranger. I've spent a lifetime getting paid to have really fun adventures out in the woods. This one-act play tells the true story of my inspiration to step outside of the expectations for women in the 1970s, and live the life of my dreams.

In 1974, during my college years, I landed a summer job cleaning outhouses at a US Forest Service recreation area. I hesitated to tell my mother, Lucille, about it. She was a classy, high-society lady and I knew this job wouldn't pass her glamour test. Eventually, I worked up the nerve and broke the news to her. To my utter amazement, she reacted with support, and even excitement. Seeing the confused look on my face, she told me a family story that I'd never heard before.

(MORE)

It all began in 1948, in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, at the home of my grandparents, Clayton and Blanche Miner.

(Spotlight goes off)

PLACE

Dining room of the Miner home, St. Cloud, Minnesota

Dining table with 4 chairs, front, stage left. Doorway is behind table. Spotlight is on the table; the rest of the stage is dark.

Scene I: Lucille makes a big announcement

(CLAYTON is sitting at the table, looking at a newspaper, as

LUCILLE bursts noisily through the door, trailed by RITA)

LUCILLE

Mother, Daddy, I'm home! Rita gave me a lift - can she stay for supper?

CLAYTON

(Looks up from newspaper) Doesn't she always?

RITA

(Grins) And I'm happy to see you, too Dr. Miner.

CLAYTON

You know you're always welcome here, Rita.

(BLANCHE enters from stage left, wiping her hands on her apron. She hugs LUCILLE and RITA)

BLANCHE

Well, look at this! My college girls are home for spring break.

RITA

Hi, Mrs. Miner! Something sure smells good . . . Did you know I was coming?

BLANCHE

(Smiles) I had an idea we might see you. That could be my famous chicken and noodles. It won't be ready for a bit, though, so sit! I want to hear everything you two have been up to.

(LUCILLE and RITA sit at the table while
BLANCHE fusses over them)

LUCILLE

Mother, please! (Bats BLANCHE's hand away when she tries to straighten her collar)

RITA

I'm certain I'm a mess, Mrs. Miner. You can sure fix me up.

BLANCHE

(Sniffs) Well, at least someone appreciates me.

(BLANCHE moves to RITA and works on her
collar)

LUCILLE

She's just trying to butter you up for an extra helping of chicken and noodles.

BLANCHE

Well, she's got it.

(CLAYTON folds his newspaper and puts it
on the table)

CLAYTON

So, girls, tell us about your classes.

LUCILLE

They're going great. I got an A on last week's biology exam, and my business professor told me that once I graduate, any company would feel lucky to have me on board.

RITA

Hmmph! That same professor said he'd pity any firm that hires me. I hope he was kidding.

BLANCHE

(Glances at CLAYTON) I'm sure he was, dear. But speaking of employment, are you both planning to work at the theater again? Last summer you sure enjoyed getting to see all those movies for free, not to mention the all-you-can-eat popcorn.

LUCILLE

(Looks at RITA) Uh, no.

(LUCILLE and RITA look at CLAYTON, who opens his newspaper and pretends to read)

CLAYTON

Hey, it looks like eggs are on sale this week. We should really think about stocking up. I just love omelets!

BLANCHE

Okay, what am I missing?

(LUCILLE frowns, looks at RITA, then at CLAYTON)

LUCILLE

Daddy didn't tell you?

BLANCHE

(Glares at CLAYTON) Tell me what?

(CLAYTON sheepishly lowers the newspaper, then clears his throat)

CLAYTON

Now Blanche, it's really not a big deal.

BLANCHE

What isn't a big deal?

LUCILLE

Mother, Daddy found summer jobs for Rita and me at Yellowstone National Park, in Wyoming, cleaning tourist cabins. We'll be heading out there as soon as spring finals are over.

BLANCHE

Excuse me?

CLAYTON

Do you remember my friend, Levi Winters?

BLANCHE

Yes, he's that sneaky fellow you hung out with in dental school. I've never liked him.

CLAYTON

Now, Blanche, Levi is a great guy, and he happens to sit on the concessioner's board of directors.

BLANCHE

And exactly what does that have to do with my daughter going into the wilderness to clean tourist cabins?

CLAYTON

The concessioner is the Yellowstone Park Company. I mentioned to him that next year Lucille will be a senior, and I'd love to see her get some real-world experience before venturing out into the post-college job market -- you know, something beyond cleaning spilled root beer in a movie theater. One thing led to another, and . . .

BLANCHE

And you're sending my little girl out to fend for herself in the woods without telling me?

LUCILLE

Mother!

CLAYTON

She won't be fending for herself in the woods. It's a very well-run organization; she'll be perfectly safe. (Starts to pull the paper up and hide his face again) Besides, I'm sure I must have told you at some point.

BLANCHE

(Turns toward the girls) You know what, I think this is probably a good idea.

LUCILLE

You do?

BLANCHE

Mmm hmmm. Any beast you bump into out there in the wilderness will be a pussycat compared to what your father will be dealing with back here.

(Lights go out)

Scene II-1: In front of Yellowstone cabin, June 1948

Lights on, stage right only, shows a cabin front; the rest of the stage is dark.

(RITA walks on from stage right; she is dirty and exhausted. She wipes her forehead, sighs, and looks around. She shouts to LUCILLE off stage right.)

RITA

Lucille, come on! It's quitting time.

LUCILLE (Off)

Not for another two minutes.

RITA

That's what you've said every day this week.

LUCILLE (Off)

That's because you've tried to quit working two minutes early every day for the past week.

RITA

Ugh, I can't believe I talked my father into talking my mother into letting me come here for this.

(LUCILLE enters from stage right, wiping her hands)

LUCILLE

What did you think cleaning cabins was going to be like?

RITA

I don't know, more Cinderella at the ball than Cinderella in the first part of the story. (Pouts, then brightens) Come on, let's try out that hiking trail that's supposed to have incredible views.

LUCILLE

Don't you want to get cleaned up first?

RITA

Why would I get cleaned up to go sweat on a hike?

LUCILLE

Oh, so Mel won't be joining us then.

RITA

He's probably busy in the shop.

(Mel runs in from stage left.)

RITA

Speak of the devil.

MEL

And I appear.

LUCILLE

Rita thought you'd be in the shop.

MEL

No, that's the first place he'll look.

LUCILLE

Who? What??

MEL

Oh, speaking of . . . if it wouldn't be too much trouble,
could you lovely ladies hide me?

RITA

What did you do now?

MEL

You know, I really can't wait to tell you the whole story but...
(looks off stage left) Yikes!

(Mel runs off, stage right.)

LUCILLE

You can't go in there! That's a lady's cabin!

RITA

No one's in there.

LUCILLE

But she'll be back any minute!

RITA

We'll get him out then.

(RANGER NELSON (played by the actor who played CLAYTON in the first scene) enters from stage left, looking all around. He sees LUCILLE and RITA.)

RANGER NELSON

Miss Miner, Miss Garski, has either of you seen young Mr. Clark?

LUCILLE

Well, um . . .

RITA

No sir!

(LUCILLE shoots RITA a look, RITA glares back. LUCILLE sighs and they both turn back to RANGER NELSON.)

RITA

Have you checked the shop?

RANGER NELSON

Yes, that was the first place I looked.

(MEL pokes his head out from the cabin to see what's going on. RITA notices and points in the opposite direction to distract RANGER NELSON.)

RITA

Hey, look! The Old Faithful Indicator is growing.

RANGER NELSON

(Looking) What's that?

LUCILLE

That's what we call the crowd when they line up to see Old Faithful erupt. Everyone thinks it goes off exactly on the hour and, when it doesn't, the crowd keeps getting bigger and bigger.

RANGER NELSON

I see, that's awfully clever. By the way did you know that geysers are boiling hot springs that send tall columns of water and steam into the air?

RITA

(Smirks) Gosh, no, Ranger Nelson. What a fun and educational piece of information!

RANGER NELSON

(Oblivious) You'll find that Yellowstone National Park is just full of those. Oh, may I use that phrase, the Old Faithful Indicator? I think the other rangers would get a real kick out of that.

RITA

Sure, it's yours.

RANGER NELSON

Thanks, we're lucky to have the both of you working here.

RANGER NELSON

I wish I could say the same about all of our summer employees.

(MEL ducks back inside.)

RANGER NELSON

Miss Miner, did your father tell you that he and I were in school together?

LUCILLE

No, sir, I don't believe he did.

RANGER NELSON

Good man, your father. Smart, kind, (to audience) handsome man. (Back to girls.) I don't say that about most men. Anyway, I can't stand here all day, chatting. I've got a mad scientist to find.

(RANGER NELSON walks off, stage left.)

RITA

You can come out, Dr. Frankenstein, the coast is clear.

(MEL enters stage right.)

MEL

Hmmph . . . mad scientist is a bit much, I think.

RITA

What did you do?

MEL

Look, in some cultures it's a sign of respect when someone builds a machine that knocks on your wall every three minutes making you think there's someone at the door, and then hides it in your office. Is it my fault he's uncultured?

RITA

Is that true? About the cultures?

MEL

(Shrugs) Might be. There are a lot of cultures out there.

LUCILLE

If you keep this up, they're going to kick you out and you'll probably drag us down with you.

MEL

This place couldn't function without me. Do you know how many mowers I've fixed just today?

RITA

How many?

MEL

Well, actually fewer than yesterday; the door-knocking machine took up a lot of my day. But still, everything in this place is falling apart. I'd have to do something pretty big to get the boot.

LUCILLE

I don't know why you do it.

MEL

(Grinning) You wouldn't say that if you'd seen the look on his face the eighth time he answered the door to no one. Hey, thanks for covering, by the way.

RITA

(Also grinning) Don't get used to it.

LUCILLE

So, Rita and I were about to check out a new hiking trail. Want to join us?

MEL

No, I actually should run over to the shop and get a few things done. By the way, what was that you were saying about an Old Faithful indicator?

RITA

You haven't noticed how much the crowd grows when Old Faithful is late?

MEL

(Wide grin) It does, doesn't it?

LUCILLE

I don't like that look. Whatever you're thinking, stop thinking it right now.

MEL

I'm afraid I just can't do that. (Chuckling, he exits stage left.)

LUCILLE

(Looks at RITA and shakes her head) This is going to end badly for us, isn't it?

RITA

(Shrugs) Probably; I guess we should go enjoy nature while we can.

(Lights out, pause a few beats, then lights on, center stage, where MEL is in front of an open shed.)

Scene II-2: In front of Old Faithful

(LUCILLE and RITA enter from stage right and stop in front of the open shed.)

MEL

(Nods) Hi Rita, Lucille. How was your hike yesterday?

LUCILLE

Lovely; you should have joined us. We saw a moose!

RITA

Whatcha doin'? We thought you'd be off duty by now.

MEL

I'm just cleaning up. (Pauses, looks from side to side and grins.) I got a little, uh, distracted today.

LUCILLE

Oh-oh. What have you been up to? No good, I'm sure.

RITA

Oh Lucille, I'm sure Mel's been behaving himself. (Looks at Mel) Haven't you?

MEL

Of course. (Puts his hand on the shed) This old shack has been sitting here right next to Old Faithful for years.

LUCILLE

So?

MEL

So, I asked Ranger Nelson if it would be okay if I spruced it up a bit, and he agreed. I got a couple of the guys to help move out all of the mowers and other equipment, and I've been fixing broken boards and painting all day. I'm not quite done, but it's close. What d'ya think?

RITA

It looks really nice.

LUCILLE

(Suspiciously) I still think you're up to something.

RITA

Lucille, have a little faith!

MEL

(Looks thoughtful) I've been watching the Old Faithful Indicator all day. It's amazing how big the crowd gets.

LUCILLE

Yup, here it comes . . .

RITA

(Shaking her finger at LUCILLE) Lucille! (Looks back to Mel) It sure is. See, folks are gathering right now (points out toward the audience). Look at 'em all!

MEL

Well, I've been timing it, and I think I've noticed a pattern in the steam that puffs out before each eruption.

LUCILLE

And your point is?

MEL

Watch this: I'll predict when it's gonna blow. (Looks out over audience)

LUCILLE

Yeah, sure you will. (Shakes her head and looks toward the audience) There's no way you can pinpoint the exact moment.

RITA

Look, the crowd's getting pretty big, so we know it'll go off soon; we just can't say quite when. (To Mel) What are you staring so hard at?

MEL

(Still looking out) Okay, she's getting ready. Five, four, three, two, one . . . NOW! (Makes a 'ta-da' gesture with his arm)

LUCILLE AND RITA

(In unison) Wow, how did you do that?

(Lights go out, pause a few beats, then spotlight on cabin front, stage right.)

Scene II-3: At tourist cabin

(LUCILLE and RITA enter from stage right, carrying broom and bucket)

RITA

Hurry up, Lucille. Let's get this last cabin cleaned so we can go check on Mel. He said Ranger Nelson gave him another day to work on the shed, and I want to see how it looks.

LUCILLE

I still think he's up to no good. Did you see that smirk on his face when he perfectly predicted the eruption?

RITA

I can't imagine how he could use that to cause trouble.

LUCILLE

I think you are too trusting. I just hope he doesn't do something he'll regret.

(Spotlight goes out, pause a few beats.)

Scene II-4: At the geyser shed

(Lights on, center stage. MEL is in the open shed, working behind a tarped object on a table. LUCILLE and RITA enter from stage right.)

MEL

(Looks up at them and grins) Hi, girls! You have perfect timing. (Fiddles with something behind the tarp)

LUCILLE

(Suspiciously) Timing for what?

MEL

(Stands up straight and looks at them over the tarp) I have this idea . . .

LUCILLE

I knew it!

RITA

(Grabs LUCILLE's arm) Just give him a chance, Lucille. (Looks at Mel) What's your idea?

MEL

Now that I know how to predict Old Faithful's timing, I think we ought to have a little fun with it.

LUCILLE

(Skeptically) What kind of fun?

MEL

It's harmless, I promise. But I'll need some help. (Looks surreptitiously right and left) Take a look at what I've been working on today.

(MEL grabs the tarp and whooshes it off with a flourish, showing a machine with a lever. LUCILLE and RITA take a step backwards)

RITA

Whoa!

MEL

See, I built this gadget from old parts I found in the junk pile. It's got a dial that moves, a buzzer that actually works, and this lever that I can move up and down.

RITA

What's it connected to?

MEL

Nothing, that's the beauty of it. I can see Old Faithful clearly from this spot, so when I'm sure it's ready to erupt, all I have to do is pull the lever, and it will look like I'm setting it off.

LUCILLE

(Rolling eyes) So, who's going to see it and be impressed with your shenanigans?

MEL

That's where the two of you come in. I'll need some help ushering tourists from the waiting area to the shack.

LUCILLE

Oh, no you don't. We're not about to help you get into trouble with Ranger Nelson.

RITA

Now, just wait, Lucille. People won't really be fooled. It'll be fun . . . right, Mel? (Looks at Mel uncertainly)

MEL

Of course. Nobody will actually believe it. It'll make everyone laugh.

LUCILLE

(Sighs) All right, but just this once. (Looks at RITA) Come, on, Rita, let's see if we can find him an audience. (Girls exit, stage right)

(Lights out, pause a few beats, then lights on. MEL, wearing a ranger jacket, is in the open shed, standing by the tarped machine. LUCILLE and RITA enter from stage right.)

LUCILLE

Step this way, folks, make room for a few more people (motions for unseen crowd to move back). That's right. Can everyone see the geyser area? Good.

RITA

(Holds up arms) Quiet, please. Meet Ranger Mel! He's our geology expert, here to tell you how Old Faithful really works (gestures at Mel, then steps back).

MEL

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Old Faithful was discovered by the Washburn expedition in 1870, just two years before Yellowstone became our first national park. The geyser was named for its frequent and somewhat predictable eruptions, which occur about 21 times each day. For decades we tracked the height of the steaming water and the length of each eruption and we used that information to predict the next one.

(MORE)

But in recent years the geyser has become less reliable, and sometimes people just wait for it in vain. But you folks are in luck!

(MEL dramatically whips the tarp away, revealing the shiny contraption.)

MEL

Recently, we've perfected this machine that takes the guesswork out of the process. In fact, if the old girl threatens to act up, we can now give her the encouragement she needs.

(MEL looks at his watch and gestures toward the geyser)

Well, let's see, I think she just might be dragging her feet a bit right this minute. I know you folks have been waiting for quite a while. Let's get 'er moving! Keep an eye on her and let me know if this helps (pulls the lever with a flourish).

LUCILLE AND RITA

(In unison) It worked! Isn't that amazing?

RITA

Hold your applause, please, there's more (gestures at MEL).

MEL

(Bowing) Thank you, thank you. Old Faithful might have become a big disappointment without this baby (pats the machine). But science and modern technology have saved the day. Thank you all for stopping by. Please exit through the gate on your left.

(LUCILLE and RITA motion as if guiding the crowd away from the shed.)

LUCILLE

(To RITA and MEL) Wow, did you hear all of those oohs and aahs?

RITA

They were absolutely amazed!

MEL

I think they swallowed it – hook, line, and sinker. Let's do it again tomorrow!

LUCILLE

Well, we got away with it once, but we shouldn't press our luck.

MEL

(Grins mischievously) No, that would be crazy.

(Lights down, fun music starts, then lights up on RITA, dragging LUCILLE on stage. They pantomime hyping the crowd. MEL pulls the lever, lights down, then up on both girls energetically hyping the crowd.)

Lights down and up, the girls hype, but look to stage right. They motion Mel to stop and then lean against each other to hide the lever. MEL ducks.

RANGER NELSON walks on. He waves, and the girls wave back. They watch him walk off stage and jump out of the way just in time for MEL to pull the lever. Lights down, music fades, lights up.)

LUCILLE

Okay, but this is absolutely the last time.

(Lights down, lights up.)

MEL

. . . as I was saying, I know you folks have been waiting for quite a while. Let's get 'er moving, shall we? Keep an eye on her and let me know if this helps (pulls the lever with a flourish).

(RANGER NELSON enters from stage left, looking angry.)

RANGER NELSON

(Hands on hips) Just what in tarnation is going on here?
(Looks at the crowd) This is entirely unauthorized. The geyser is not controlled by this gadget. Move along now, folks, just move along.

(LUCILLE and RITA motion the 'crowd' away, then look at MEL before stepping back behind the machine.)

RANGER NELSON

(Glares and points a finger at MEL) Young man, you'd darn well better have an explanation . . . I'm going to have to report this to the concessioner. This kind of behavior violates their concession agreement. I want to know, right now, who helped you with this.

(MEL glances at the girls, the girls hold their breath, the audience (hopefully) holds their breath. Mel turns back to the ranger.)

MEL

You think I need help with something like this? I'm like a timber wolf. I work alone!

RANGER NELSON

Well, that certainly makes things easier for my hand.

MEL

Huh?

RANGER NELSON

I only have to fill out one dismissal form.

MEL

Really?

RANGER NELSON

Really. Follow me.

(RANGER NELSON starts to walk off stage
left with MEL following.)

RANGER NELSON

And if you'd paid half as much attention to the lessons as you
did to your shenanigans, you'd know that timber wolves usually
hunt in a family pack of between three and thirty wolves.

MEL

(Dryly) What a fun and educational piece of information,
Ranger Nelson.

(Lights go out, pause a few beats, then
spotlight on SANDY, standing in front
corner, stage right.)

SANDY

(Speaking to audience): So that's why, when I told Mom about
my summer job with the Forest Service, she just smiled and
said, "Go. Enjoy yourself. Take a friend along. This is the
stuff that makes memories."

THE END

[INTRODUCE CAST]