

# FIREFLIES

BY  
MATTHEW BARBER

FROM THE NOVEL *ELEANOR AND ABEL*  
BY ANNETTE SANFORD



DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.

FIREFLIES  
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*Eleanor and Abel*  
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The world premiere production of FIREFLIES was presented by Long Wharf Theatre (Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Joshua Borenstein, Managing Director) on October 18, 2017. It was directed by Gordon Edelstein, the set design was by Alexander Dodge, the costume design was by Jess Goldstein, the lighting design was by Philip Rosenberg, the sound design was by John Gromada, and the production stage manager was Kathy Snyder. The cast was as follows:

ELEANOR BANNISTER ..... Jane Alexander  
ABEL BROWN ..... Denis Arndt  
GRACE BODELL ..... Judith Ivey  
EUGENE CLAYMIRE ..... Christopher Michael McFarland

FIREFLIES was workshopped at White Heron Theatre Company (Lynne Bolton, Founder and Artistic Director; Michael Kopko, Executive Director) in June 2017.

FIREFLIES is a recipient of an Edgerton Foundation New Play Award.

## **CHARACTERS**

ELEANOR BANNISTER

ABEL BROWN

GRACE BODELL

EUGENE CLAYMIRE

## **SETTING**

Jackson County, South Texas, July 1995.  
Groverdel, twenty miles north of the Gulf Coast,  
population 1,742.

*For Netsie*

# FIREFLIES

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*The interior of a well-designed two-story house—seventy years old, maybe more—aged but built to last. We see only the kitchen—a handsome room asked little of anymore. Old items clutter the shelves and counters. Wood furniture is simple, serviceable. Decoration is a hodgepodge from past times. Through an open door and over-sink windows we can see into a large screened porch, added to the house for pleasure, now used as a storage room and pantry. An additional window, topped by a panel of clear leaded glass, looks out to the rear of the property. All windows are open. The first light seen is that of a colorful sky moving from sunrise to midday, creating the sense of open beauty beyond the house’s walls. We see two figures in silhouette, then in full—two women close in age to the house. Grace Bodell—casual but polished, without pretension—sits at a table in the center of the room, picking through a basket of figs. Eleanor Bannister works at something on the porch.*

GRACE. (*Examining a fig. To herself, genuinely concerned.*) Never in all my life. (*Raising her voice to be heard, hoping for a response to each thought.*) Eleanor, I told you if you let these figs go for one more day there wouldn’t be a one a bird hadn’t pecked, and that’s exactly what happened. Every last one. You have to move quick when it heats up like this or mockingbirds will rob you blind! (*Setting the basket aside, standing but apprehensive to approach the porch, fanning herself with a paddle fan.*) I could see them gathering in the thicket between your properties, after the storm on Wednesday,

and I just knew what they were up to. Not like you to let mockers have their way. Sure do wish you'd listened to me! But I guess what's done is done. You can't unpeck a fig!

*Eleanor enters from the porch with a box of canning jars—a controlled and dignified figure, stone-faced, clearly agitated. She sets the box down next to another box of canning jars, begins examining jars and lids. Grace watches.*

(Aware of Eleanor's agitated state, trying to keep things light, but on a mission.) I can see your thicket clear as day from my kitchen window. Used to be able to see right on through to your rental house, but now everything's grown up so. (Unacknowledged.) Shame we lost Pete Maloney. He always kept your properties so tidy. The Sheffield boy's doing a nice enough job for me now. But I know how you feel about having former students 'round your place.

*Eleanor gets the basket of figs, goes to the window overlooking the rear of the property, glances out.*

It was about to drive me crazy watching those mockers gather. Had half a mind to pick your figs myself until I got stung by a wasp, cleaning up my yard after the storm. (Rubbing her elbow.) Hurt something fierce. (Raising her arm.) Right here—on the end of my elbow.

*Grace waits, arm aloft.*

*Eleanor turns from the window, puts the basket in the sink.*

ELEANOR. (Dry authority.) An elbow has no end, Grace. An elbow has a center.

GRACE. (Used to Eleanor's corrections.) On the center of my elbow, then. And home alone, of course. Lucky I didn't go into anaphylactic shock.

*Eleanor huffs.*

It happens, Eleanor. The throat swells up and you can't catch your breath. It's a kind of slow suffocation. Drowning in your own saliva.

ELEANOR. If you were worried about drowning in your own saliva, you should have called.

GRACE. I *did* call. I called that evening to see if you'd made it through the storm all right, and to warn you about the mockers in your thicket, and to tell you to lock up on account of the drifter that's been nosing

around, and you about snapped my head right off. Never even got to the wasp.

ELEANOR. (*Tensely defensive, as if something is written all over her.*) I didn't snap your head off. You caught me at a busy moment. I told you that.

GRACE. Seems like lately I always catch you at a busy moment when I call.

ELEANOR. Lucky that you live so close.

GRACE. I called again yesterday morning, but you didn't pick up.

ELEANOR. (*Still on defense.*) I was feeling a little off yesterday morning.

GRACE. (*Still on mission.*) I'm sorry to hear that. Anything you want to talk about?

ELEANOR. Not particularly.

GRACE. I thought I'd stop by in the afternoon, but your car was gone.

ELEANOR. I drove over to Paleyville to do some shopping.

GRACE. All the way over to Paleyville? Alone?

ELEANOR. The whole twelve miles.

*Eleanor folds a large red kitchen towel, thinking. Grace watches, concerned.*

GRACE. Funny thing to do when you're feeling off. (*Unacknowledged.*) Women alone have to look out for each other, Eleanor. (*Unacknowledged. Rubbing her elbow.*) You have wasps this year?

ELEANOR. Every year that I can remember.

GRACE. Wasps and mockers. Frogs and flies. Texas is downright biblical in the summertime. (*Fanning.*) Are you planning to go the whole summer without getting your cooling system repaired?

ELEANOR. The fresh air is fine.

GRACE. It's the middle of July. There is no fresh air.

ELEANOR. You came to borrow something, Grace.

GRACE. A can of pineapple.

*Eleanor exits to the porch. Grace follows her to the doorway, fanning.*

At least clear off this porch so you can use it again. You always enjoyed your porch.

*Eleanor enters with the can, hands it to Grace in passing, returns to the jars.*

I could sit on a porch all day in the summer. Especially one as nice as yours. Your daddy built the nicest house on the block. I've always said that. (*Having noticed a small stack of library books, going to them.*) Going to the library today?

ELEANOR. Same as every Friday.

GRACE. Not this Friday. Closed, due to damage from the storm. Most likely old Miss Grimley just wanted a few days off. She'll shut that library down for a cloud.

ELEANOR. Thinks she's the gatekeeper of knowledge.

GRACE. (*Off-handed.*) When we all know that's your job.

*Eleanor and Grace exchange a tense look.*

Having taught school for so long, I mean. (*Noticing something.*) Eleanor—did you do something to your hair?

ELEANOR. (*Self-conscious, reluctant.*) I put a rinse in it last night.

GRACE. (*Finding this unusual.*) Yes you did. Looks nice. Busy day yesterday. (*Opening a book.*) Patsy's due home tomorrow. I'll have to warn her about drifters now too. Sure was a nice service they gave Dewey.

*Eleanor huffs.*

You didn't think it was nice?

ELEANOR. It always astounds me how fools instantly become saints when they die.

GRACE. You thought Dewey Newsome was a fool?

ELEANOR. Thick as a brick. Always was, even when we were children.

GRACE. Did Patsy return your casserole dish before she left?

ELEANOR. She did not.

GRACE. I'll remind her when I warn her about the drifter. (*Reading something horrifying.*) Eleanor, what on earth have you been reading? (*Examining the book's cover.*) *The London Stalker.*

ELEANOR. Miss Grimley's recommendation.



GRACE. Some poor girl is getting the sharp end of a carving knife—right in the first paragraph.

ELEANOR. I didn't get much further than that. For all I know she deserved it.

GRACE. Miss Grimley shouldn't recommend books like this to women alone. (*Looking the book over.*) *The London Stalker*. Maybe that's what we've got with this drifter, Eleanor! "The Groverdell Stalker"!

ELEANOR. (*Stopped cold by this.*) Why would you say that?

GRACE. I tried to tell you why when I called on Wednesday. Because he's been creeping around for a week now, making inquiries about empty houses. Abel Brown—or so he calls himself. Not *bad*-looking, for a man his age. But I suppose it's the not *bad*-looking ones we have to be the most careful about.

ELEANOR. (*Concerned.*) Meaning what?

GRACE. Meaning that it's not the inquiries about empty houses that's got people talking. It's the fact that all of his inquiries have been placed with single women.

*Eleanor folds the red towel again, thinking. Grace watches.*

Have I got you spooked about the drifter? Is that what's wrong?

ELEANOR. Have I said something's wrong?

GRACE. No. You haven't. But then you wouldn't even if there was. I mean were.

ELEANOR. (*With a purpose.*) When did you see the drifter?

GRACE. Wednesday morning, right before the storm. You remember my niece, Maggie? The big one? You sent her back a year in school? Twice? I'd driven down to see if she had any fresh eggs, and when I got out of my car the drifter was getting into his truck.

*Eleanor considers this, folds the red towel again. Grace watches.*

Eleanor, that's the third time you've folded that towel.

ELEANOR. It is not.

GRACE. It is so.

ELEANOR. (*Tossing the towel aside, agitation increasing.*) This heat's

# FIREFLIES

by Matthew Barber

from the novel *Eleanor and Abel* by Annette Sanford

2 men, 2 women

Retired schoolteacher Eleanor Bannister lives a quiet life alone in tiny Groverdell, Texas, set in her routines and secure in her position as the town's most respected woman—until a hole in her roof draws the attention of Abel Brown, a smooth-talking drifter intent on renovating Eleanor's house, and possibly her life. Can the unexpected sparks of late-life romance be trusted, or is there truth in the gossip that Abel isn't all that he seems to be? Either way, the whole town is talking.

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