

FREE SPACE

A FULL-LENGTH DARK COMEDY
BY
TARA MEDDAUGH

EXCERPT



Free Space

By Tara Meddaugh

A Play in Two Acts

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Dedicated
With love and in memory to
MILAN STITT

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Free Space was first presented at Carnegie Mellon University on February 5, 2004 at the Wells Studio Theatre with the following cast:

Amelia *Aimee DeShayes*
Bertha *Pilar Millhollen*
Ricky *Tivon Marcus*
Diane/Voice *Ashley Sherman*

Directed By Laura Gross

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Character Breakdown

AMELIA	A young woman of about 20.
BERTHA	A mother in her forties or fifties.
RICKY	A young man of about 20.
DIANE	A woman in her thirties or forties.
VOICE	A distorted voice.

Setting

Set should be minimal, merely an impression of locations: A home, Community Center, and local cannery in a town.

EXCERPT

ACT I
Scene 1

At rise: A living room. BERTHA, a mother in her forties or fifties, sits. AMELIA, her socially stunted daughter of around 20, sits far away from her. There is a long silence. It is always a bit chilly.

BERTHA

Little hand's on the seven.

AMELIA

Already?

BERTHA

Or the four or the five. In any case, time to look out the window.

(SHE grabs Amelia by the arm and leads her to look outside. BERTHA looks outward. AMELIA glances out, then looks to her mother)

AMELIA

Mother? Tonight was the night I was going to do something different.

BERTHA

Don't be ridiculous, Amelia. Now see? It's snowing out again. Why, that snowflake looks just like your nose!

AMELIA

You said I could go to the Community Center tonight.

BERTHA

I doubt that.

AMELIA

But you did...

BERTHA

What kind of mother would I be if I let you catch your death in that cold out there?

AMELIA

I have a coat.

BERTHA

Would you really leave me here?
(pause)

By myself?

(pause)

AMELIA

I don't want you to be lonely, but...

BERTHA

Very well then. And you don't want to miss the nine o'clock watch of the moon. Now, sit down here and tell me what snowflakes you see.

(AMELIA sits)

AMELIA

I...I see a...Mom, it's Bingo at the Center tonight.

BERTHA

Bingo? Oh, no—then you certainly cannot go there tonight. You're too susceptible to that kind of depravity right now. You've barely even looked outside!

AMELIA

Mother, it's not depravity. It's beautiful out there—on Bingo night...everyone gathered together to—

BERTHA

I don't want my daughter's reputation soiled in that Center.

AMELIA

But I told them I'd volunteer tonight. This is the only thing I've left the house for. Please, just let me go.

BERTHA

What will you do at this Community Center, Amelia, that is so indispensable they can't find someone else to take your place?

AMELIA

I...

BERTHA

Yes?

AMELIA

I'll lay out the cards.

BERTHA

You'll lay out the cards?

AMELIA
To make sure they're in their proper place.

BERTHA
Will you call the numbers?

AMELIA
No...

BERTHA
Now if you called the numbers and everyone had to listen to you, if you did something important there, I might be able to convince your father to let you go—

AMELIA
Dad doesn't live here...

BERTHA
But the cards? Really, Amelia.

AMELIA
Well, everyone needs a card to play.

BERTHA
Sounds to me like a waste of time.

AMELIA
But it won't be—

BERTHA
A waste of time.

AMELIA
No, I...I mean, I won't just lay out the cards. I'll do other stuff too.

BERTHA
Like?

AMELIA
I'll clean up. And I'll count the chips. All of them.

BERTHA
I don't think I like your participating in such a game of chance.

AMELIA
I won't play. I'll just help.

BERTHA

I don't think I like your helping such a game of chance.

AMELIA

What's wrong with chance, Mom? Sometimes a game of chance is nice. I mean, you can't do anything wrong if it's only luck.

BERTHA

Don't fool yourself into thinking you can't do anything wrong, Amelia. No matter what luck one is given, one can always find plenty of things to do wrong.

AMELIA

But in Bingo...I just mean...I have to go to the Bingo Game, Mother.
(moves toward exit)

BERTHA

If you choose not to heed my advice, then perhaps you will have a special consequence of your actions awaiting you upon your return home.

(AMELIA stops)

AMELIA

What do you mean?

BERTHA

It's high time you had a sister. I think I'll order one.

AMELIA

I don't—

BERTHA

If you are going to insist on leaving your mother for a game of decadence, you'll need a responsible sister to accompany you on your adventures. It's really quite a treat considering your abandonment.

AMELIA

But...but Mom, this is something I want to do on my own!

BERTHA

Well, then, perhaps this is something you shouldn't be doing at all.

(pause. AMELIA turns to leave)

It's snowing out again.

(BERTHA disappears. AMELIA walks and she is at the Community Center. STAGE HANDS set in front of her a table filled with dozens of Bingo cards and buckets full of red chips. She carefully counts the chips in tens, moves them from one bucket to another, and marks off on a small notepad. RICKY, an awkward man of about 20, enters. He holds his coat and walks toward an exit.)

RICKY

Hey, Amelia.

(pause)

Still countin' chips?

(AMELIA nods.)

You know you don't gotta do that, right?

(AMELIA shrugs)

Miss Diane said it don't matter if we got them all or not. No one cares.

AMELIA

I do.

RICKY

Oh, well...I guess I like countin' fleas on my dog!

AMELIA

That's gross.

RICKY

Yeah. I guess.

(pause)

Maybe I'll see you in a couple weeks.

AMELIA

You won't be here next Thursday?

RICKY

Gotta work three to eleven at the cannery next week.

(puts on his coat)

Maybe I'll bring ya in some pie fillin'. What kind you like?

(AMELIA shrugs)

Maybe apple?

(pause)

Cherry? Lotta people like cherry.

AMELIA

Okay.

RICKY

I'll bring you in some cherry.

AMELIA

Okay.

RICKY

(pause)

Hey, my shift tonight don't start till 11. You want some help?

AMELIA

(pause)

Thanks.

(RICKY flashes her a quick smile and the two count Bingo chips in silence. Finally, AMELIA takes a deep breath and speaks.)

They're really smooth, huh?

RICKY

Yeah, they are.

AMELIA

(pause)

I like things that are smooth.

RICKY

Yeah?

AMELIA

Like those plastic slides and...wet ice...and...cough drops—sometimes. They just feel so pure and...

(pause)

Do you like smooth things?

RICKY

Yeah. I think so.

AMELIA

Oh! Then we're alike!

RICKY

Yeah?

(AMELIA turns back to her chips and they count quietly again. Pause.)

So you had a good first night workin' here?

AMELIA

The best in my life! Or like a dog's tongue!

RICKY

What?

AMELIA

It's smooth.

RICKY

Oh, yeah.

AMELIA

Cats' tongues are rough though. I don't like them. Here—

(pushes chip in his hand)

Feel it. I mean, I know you feel them all the time, but really feel it now.

(pause)

Put it on your cheek.

(puts another chip on own cheek)

Just glide it up and down. See? It feels so smooth. It's red, but it's almost clear. You see?

(RICKY looks at AMELIA. She turns away)

Can you mark the chips off in tens, please? On the sheet?

RICKY

Okay.

(DIANE, a petulant and stylish woman in her thirties or forties, enters)

DIANE

What's going on in here?

(AMELIA stares at DIANE in silence)

Do you know what time it is?

RICKY

We're countin' chips.

DIANE

I can see that. Thank you, Ricky. Why don't you go home now?

RICKY

I'm working the graveyard shift at the cannery.

DIANE

Well, then why don't you go to the cannery?

RICKY

Oh, okay. 'Night, Miss Diane. Bye, Amelia.

(pause)

Our cherry fillin' don't have any pits in it!

AMELIA

Oh, good!

(RICKY exits.)

DIANE

I thought I told you earlier I don't need you to waste your time like this.

AMELIA

It's not a waste of my time.

DIANE

Well, then it's a waste of my time. Amelia, dear, I know you have...quirks, and that's okay, but you need to leave them outside the building. Can you do that for me?

AMELIA

I...

DIANE

Bringing them into the Bingo Hall only upsets the elderly couples.

AMELIA

I didn't know I was upsetting them.

DIANE

Well, you are. Miss Jenkins did not appreciate your counting her chips mid-game.

AMELIA

I thought I saw one fall.

DIANE

My point is, I want it to stop. Do you understand me? It's not necessary, and it's really rather

distracting. Now if you want to make yourself productive during the games, you could vacuum my office or rearrange my flower vases. I could even set out some of my son's Legos for you to count. Would you like that?

AMELIA

I don't want to count Legos.

DIANE

Well, you can't keep counting chips like this, alright?

AMELIA

I'm done anyway.

DIANE

Well, good. Then get your coat and let's go.

AMELIA

I haven't gone through all the cards yet.

DIANE

What do you mean, the cards? They're all here.

AMELIA

No, not counting the cards. I have to count the spaces.

DIANE

The spaces?

AMELIA

I have to count them, make sure each card has its one free space.

DIANE

A space is not going to get up and walk away.

AMELIA

But if they're not all there, then it's not fair, Miss Diane.

DIANE

It's a game—it's not meant to be fair. Come on, we both need to go.

AMELIA

I can't. If I don't check, no one else will.

DIANE

Amelia, I don't have time to watch you here. My husband is waiting in the car outside.

AMELIA

You can just go then.

DIANE

No, I can't. I have to lock up.

AMELIA

Well, I can just stay here. By myself.

DIANE

The Pre-School group is coming in the morning and I'm not going to let them find you sleeping with the Bingo chips. No, Amelia, you're going home now too.

AMELIA

I won't be sleeping when they come. I'll be gone by then.

DIANE

You can't leave without locking the door, and you need the key to—

AMELIA

Then you could give me the key. And when I leave, I can just drop it off at your house and—

DIANE

I'm not giving you my key.

AMELIA

Well—then you can lock it and I'll just crawl out the window when I leave! No problem.

DIANE

Don't be ridiculous!

AMELIA

I'm not being ridiculous. I'm being serious. Look.

(gets on floor and curls into ball)

See how tiny I can make myself?

DIANE

Get up.

AMELIA

I can fit right through the bathroom window!

DIANE

That's on the second floor.

AMELIA

Maybe you could put some pillows under it or something!

DIANE

I will not! Amelia, you're beginning to irritate me!

AMELIA

I'm sorry, Miss Diane, I just can't leave until I count the spaces. I need to make sure all the letters and numbers are in their right place.

DIANE

Please, get up.

(tries to pull her up)

AMELIA

Stop touching me!

DIANE

Get your stuff together and leave, please!

AMELIA

No! I have to stay with the cards!

DIANE

No, you—oh!

(She struggles to get her up)

Get up!

AMELIA

No!

(As DIANE is trying to drag Amelia to the door, AMELIA takes one of the Bingo chips she is holding and jabs it at DIANE's leg.)

DIANE

Aaah!

(She lets go of AMELIA, who stays seated on the floor.)

(Pause.)

Did you just jab me with a Bingo chip?

(AMELIA stares at her, frightened, and is silent)

Did you?

(AMELIA puts the chip in her pocket)

That was really not appropriate behavior, Amelia.

(pause)

I don't want you to come back on Thursday.

AMELIA

(still on floor)

Thank you, but I don't need Thursday off.

DIANE

(pause)

I've tried to do the right thing by allowing you to volunteer here. You seemed so excited to give your time to us. I had pity on you, and I blame myself, in part, for taking a chance on someone like you.

AMELIA

What do you mean?

DIANE

(backing up to the door)

I don't want you to come back here anymore. Do you understand?

AMELIA

You mean I can't help on Bingo Night?

DIANE

I don't want to see you here again.

AMELIA

But, Miss Diane, I'm sorry! I need this! I had forgotten how wonderful it is to feel things and this was my—[chance to]

DIANE

You can either come outside with me right now, or I'm calling the police.

(AMELIA stares at DIANE, then back at the chips and the cards on the table. She picks up her coat, along with a few handfuls of chips. She stuffs the chips in her coat pockets)

AMELIA

I'm sorry I used the Bingo chip as a weapon.

DIANE

(pause)

Are you coming?

(AMELIA nods and follows her.)

ACT I
Scene 2

(The cannery. AMELIA stands, clutching her coat. RICKY enters)

AMELIA

Hi, Ricky.

RICKY

Hey, Amelia. My boss said you were here.

(pause)

What are you doin' here?

AMELIA

I just came from the Community Center.

RICKY

This late?

AMELIA

I left an hour ago. I walked here.

RICKY

If you wanted to come to the cannery, I woulda drove you.

AMELIA

I didn't know I was coming when you left.

RICKY

So why did you come? You want a tour or somethin'?

AMELIA

No. Well, maybe, but not right now.

RICKY

Okay.

AMELIA

(pause)

I got fired from volunteering on Bingo Nights, so I wanted to let you know I won't be there the next time you come. So if you bring in the pie filling for me, it'll just—weigh down your bag, and I wouldn't want you to carry that metal can if you didn't have to. So I was just telling you.

RICKY

Oh. Well, okay.

(pause)

Why'd you get fired from Bingo Night?

AMELIA

I jabbed Miss Diane with a chip.

RICKY

Really? A bingo chip?

AMELIA

On her leg.

RICKY

Huh.

(pause)

Why'd you jab her?

AMELIA

She didn't want me to account for all the boards. The spaces.

RICKY

And you like to do that.

AMELIA

Well—what if I didn't check and then a ball were chosen and the space just wasn't there? Where would the ball go then?

RICKY

Back in, I guess.

AMELIA

Back in that cage.

RICKY

(pause)

They all gotta go back in if you wanna play another game, Amelia.

(long pause)

Well, okay.

AMELIA

(pause)

Okay, bye.

RICKY

Hey, you want me to get you that cherry pie fillin' now?

AMELIA

You don't have to.

RICKY

I can get some. I mean, do you mind if it's blueberry though? I can't really get the cherry now.

AMELIA

I don't mind.

RICKY

You gonna make a pie with it?

AMELIA

Probably not.

RICKY

But you still want it?

AMELIA

Yeah.

RICKY

Okay, well, it's good by itself too. I wouldn't recommend eatin' the whole can all at once, but a spoonful at a time is alright. I done that before.

AMELIA

I don't want to eat it. I just want to look at it.

RICKY

(pause)

Hey, I'm sorry you can't work Bingo Nights anymore.

AMELIA

Thanks.

RICKY

You were real good at countin' and stuff. No one else ever took time to do that before. You got a good eye for noticin' things.

(pause)

Well, now you got Thursdays off again. Like before you worked there.

AMELIA

Yeah.

RICKY

Give ya time to do other stuff.

I guess so.

AMELIA

(pause)

What are you gonna do?

RICKY

I don't know. Nothing, I guess.

AMELIA

Oh.

(Pause, he turns to get pie filling)

RICKY

(She stares at him for a minute, then rushes toward him.)

I hate doing nothing, Ricky! I hate it!

AMELIA

Hey, it's okay...

RICKY

Tonight was so—so—perfect! With all the swirling balls! And the click of the chips on the boards! And the people! All the people there, talking and smiling and just being! I don't want to go back! To go back to doing nothing all the time!

AMELIA

I'm sorry...

RICKY

I can't, I just don't know how I can...

AMELIA

(RICKY takes a step back and looks at her. He thinks for a beat.)

Well, maybe she'll take you back. You know?

RICKY

Miss Diane?

AMELIA

Yeah. Maybe if you tell her you're sorry, if you say you didn't mean to jab her, she'll forgive you and let you volunteer there again.

RICKY

You think so? AMELIA

Sure. I mean, I would. RICKY

Yeah? AMELIA

Yeah. RICKY

Well . . . she's not at the Community Center now. AMELIA

She's probably at home. RICKY

Should I go there? AMELIA

Maybe. RICKY

Do you think she'll mind? It's kinda late. AMELIA

I'm still up. RICKY

Yeah... AMELIA

(pause)
Well, maybe you should wait until tomorrow. RICKY

Really? AMELIA

Maybe. RICKY

But if I go tomorrow, she might not think I'm sincere. I have to...I have to strike while the kettle is hot, right? AMELIA

RICKY

They do say something like that sometimes.

AMELIA

Well, then I'll just go there now. And I'll tell her I'm so sorry, and I'll never hurt with the chip again. And maybe if I told her how important this is to me—that I like getting out of my house now and then, and helping people and meeting people, and being with the pieces of the game—y'know? Maybe she'll understand that!

RICKY

You should go.

AMELIA

Okay. I'll go.

RICKY

You wanna take the pie fillin'?

AMELIA

I'll come back for it later.

(RICKY disappears and AMELIA rushes to one side of the stage, now outside DIANE's home.)

AMELIA

Miss Diane! Miss Diane!!

(pause)

Miss Diane, it's Amelia! Please come out and talk to me! Miss Diane!

(picks up a small rock from the ground and tosses it up)

Miss Diane! Please don't ignore me! I want to talk to you!

(she throws another small rock)

Miss Diane! I'm sorry!

(DIANE enters in a bathrobe)

DIANE

What the hell are you doing here?

AMELIA

I wanted to talk with you.

DIANE

My husband is standing right by the door, so don't try—

AMELIA

I'm not gonna do anything. Honest. I just—I just need to tell you something.

DIANE

It's freezing out here!

AMELIA

Do you want to go inside? I could make us some warm milk. Or hot chocolate. Do you like hot chocolate?

DIANE

Say what you need to say and leave, Amelia.

AMELIA

Okay. Sure. I'll tell you now.

(pause)

(pause)

DIANE

(wraps bathrobe tighter around herself and waits.)

Do you want my husband to call the police?

AMELIA

No—I . . . I'm sorry. I'm just nervous. I'm sorry.

(pause)

(pause)

DIANE

Look, I'm gonna need to go back inside now. Okay?

AMELIA

No, wait! Okay, I'm ready to talk.

(pause)

Okay. I just wanted to say that, well, I haven't done a lot of stuff or anything since High School ended. I just sort of stay at home with my mom and, I don't really do a lot of activities like a lot of girls do.

DIANE

Okay.

AMELIA

But I've been waiting for Bingo to come here for all my life. I mean, I didn't really know it was

Bingo I was waiting for, but I knew there must be—something more...And when I saw that poster you made—

DIANE

My son made them.

AMELIA

Well...when I saw the pictures of those solid square spaces—all so perfectly in line with each other, and when I stopped by the Center for the first time last week... and I heard all those jumbled up balls, racing through their metal cage, all trying to be the special one chosen to be...well, I knew then my Thursdays would never be the same. Because—

DIANE

Amelia—

AMELIA

Because I know what it's like to grow up on the wrong side of Bingo, on the wrong end of chance, of luck. You know?

DIANE

No. And I'm cold.

AMELIA

Okay. Well...I was so happy when you let me volunteer for Bingo Night. And I just wanted to let you know that I'm really really sorry for what happened tonight.

DIANE

Okay.

AMELIA

I don't know why I wanted to hurt with the chip—I've never felt that way before. And I'm sorry.

DIANE

Alright.

AMELIA

And if you let me come back—

DIANE

Amelia—

AMELIA

I mean—just listen! If you let me come back, I promise, I would never do anything like that again. I promise. Please? Just let me come back. I promise I'll—I'll be appropriate!

(pause)

DIANE

Amelia, I accept your apology, but your violence is unacceptable.

AMELIA

Oh...

DIANE

You're an adult now, and you need to start accepting consequences for your actions.

AMELIA

But I am accepting them! I said I was sorry and I've promised to—

DIANE

I'm going back to bed, and you should go home.

AMELIA

Are you giving me another chance?

DIANE

No, I'm not. Thank you for your apology, but now you need to leave.

AMELIA

Are you going inside? You're leaving me out here? By myself?

(DIANE walks away.)

But what will I do, Miss Diane? What am I going to do? Miss Diane? Why won't you listen to me? Miss Diane! Maybe I didn't explain it well enough!

(she runs after DIANE, then stops)

I...I'm sorry for yelling. I'll just leave.

(pause)

I'm sorry.

ACT I
Scene 3

(The living room. BERTHA sits. AMELIA enters)

BERTHA
Where have you been?

AMELIA
The Bingo Hall.

BERTHA
Until 2am?

(AMELIA shrugs)

Your father was worried to death.

AMELIA
I—

BERTHA
He suggested I call your friends to see if you might have gone out for a cup of coffee or an alcoholic beverage.

AMELIA
You know I don't drink, Mom.

BERTHA
And you don't have any friends. I had to remind him of that too. He's become quite forgetful in his middle-age.

(AMELIA starts to walk away)

Where are you going now?

AMELIA
To bed.

BERTHA
Why are your pockets bulging? Did you win money at the Bingo game?

AMELIA
No, I didn't even play.

BERTHA

What's in your pockets?

AMELIA

Nothing.

BERTHA

What is it, Amelia? I can see you have them stuffed with something.

AMELIA

It's nothing. Really. I'm tired.

BERTHA

I did not raise my daughter to lie to me. You'll have to take lessons from your older sister in how to speak to your elders more respectfully.

AMELIA

She's here already?

BERTHA

Yes, she arrived this evening. Simply a joy to have around.

AMELIA

Where is this...sister?

BERTHA

I know you're anxious to meet her and you will tomorrow. But she's sleeping now and I really don't think it's fair to wake her just to see you. Don't good people have a right to sleep?

AMELIA

I'm sorry.

BERTHA

Empty your pockets.

(AMELIA dumps the Bingo chips out of her pockets)

You've brought these into the house?!

(she moves toward the chips, but AMELIA stands in the way)

AMELIA

Don't touch them!

BERTHA

You brought them into my house; I may touch them.

AMELIA

Please don't hurt them...

BERTHA

How would I hurt them?

(scoops up the chips into her apron)

Hm, I think they might make a nice "welcome home" gift for your new sister.

AMELIA

No—don't give them to her!

BERTHA

What a spoiled little sister you are! Oh, Amelia, you've never had a sister to share things with before.

AMELIA

You know that's not [true!]

BERTHA

Well, you're going to have to stop being so selfish now.

AMELIA

But, they're mine! Please!

(tries to grab them from her mother)

BERTHA

Remember your manners!

(holds the chips away from AMELIA)

AMELIA

Don't take them away from me!

(grabbing onto BERTHA's apron)

BERTHA

Stop fighting with your mother, Amelia!

(she yanks on her apron hard and AMELIA loses her grip and falls to the floor. She stays there.)

Honestly, I want you to meet with your sister first thing in the morning so she can give you a lesson on proper behavior.

(starts to exit)

Why don't you use this time tonight to practice behaving appropriately?

AMELIA

I'm tired.

BERTHA

Well, your sister sleeps in your bed now—

AMELIA

But you already—

BERTHA

There's nothing wrong with the floor out here, I suppose. You have a coat. Just be careful of the dog. He doesn't like to share his space. Well, good night.

(BERTHA leaves. AMELIA stares after her for a moment. Her chin begins to quiver and she puts her head down. She stays like this for a moment, then suddenly lifts her head.)

AMELIA

What?

(she looks around and sees no one is there. After a moment, she settles onto the floor once more. Again, she starts suddenly and sits up.)

Who's there?

(she stands and looks toward the exit.)

Who said that? Who's talking?

(she walks around the room and looks under a piece of furniture. She stares at something and her eyes widen.)

You...

(She pulls out a single bingo chip from under the furniture and holds it up)

She didn't get you... You're a lucky chip—she took all the others.

(pause)

So...what do you want from me?

(pause)

Just to listen? But...why me?

(pause)

You really think I'm that special? That pure?

(pause)

Yes, I think I understand Bingo more than them too. I'm glad you noticed. Some of them still think that if you're prettier or smarter or people like you more—that you have a better chance of winning...But you don't.

(pause)

Well, it's hard to remember really, what I did before Bingo. I know I just saw it last week, but I guess I didn't really do too much before it. I just...I stared out the window with my mother...but besides that....oh—I guess I used to look at the stars by myself sometimes. Is that doing something?

(pause)

Because if I squinted my eyes hard enough, I could see myself on one of those stars. And I'd wave down to myself from that star and think, "I look so tiny on that earth." And then I'd wave up at myself from earth and think, "I look so tiny on that star." Of course, I know I'd be dead if I were actually on a star...but, sometimes, I'd really like to be there. But my mom said I shouldn't think about things so far away from me. So...I stay here. Now that I don't have Bingo at the Center anymore.

(pause)

My own game? Oh, I don't know if I should start my own game. I'm really not that great talking to people and stuff.

(pause)

You'd help me?

(pause)

I don't know. Why would I even want to—

(pause)

Well, sure, I want people to notice me, but...

(pause, smiling)

You think so? Well...maybe this is my chance to shine in front of everyone!

(lies down on floor, next to chip)

And when the game is over, someone would win. But most people would lose. But that one person, that one extraordinary person, would be the luckiest one in the world.

(pause)

Well, I like talking to you too.

END OF EXCERPT

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<https://www.tarmeddaugh.com/free-space>