

Ernie's Place

A play for Young Audiences
by Matt Buchanan

Characters (in order of appearance)

Stella Barnes, age 12

Louie Barnes, age 10

Max Barnes, age 7

Mom Barnes, their Mom

Ernie, a homeless man

The Private, Super-Secret Clubhouse of Stella, Louie and Max--a one-room outbuilding that may once have been a tool shed or some such. We can see the inside and the outside of the clubhouse. The clubhouse is covered with signs meant to discourage invasion. "No Grownups Allowed!"--"Private--Keep Out!"--"Members Only"--You Must be at Least This Short to Enter"--"Trespassers will be Eaten!"--etc. The door has been replaced with one that is too low for an adult to comfortably enter. Inside the clubhouse is a large wooden box (used for storage and as a table), a few milk crates (used for chairs), and a mattress for jumping on. The walls are decorated with New York Mets and Yankees posters and pennants, pictures of New York scenes, and other memorabilia of the city. Perhaps there are a few New York City street signs. The clubhouse is lit by a large battery-powered lantern. Outside the clubhouse is a suburban backyard, scattered with various crates and boxes, maybe an old tire, and some large toys--a bicycle, etc. When the play opens it is just growing dark. Louie and Max play chess on the trunk. Stella stands at the front of the stage shouting at the audience.

STELLA

Go away! This is a private club, and nobody here wants to play with you! Go play someplace else! And stay out of our clubhouse!

She watches to see that the unseen invaders leave. Then she comes into the clubhouse.

Geeks.

LOUIE

Stella, why do you always do that?

MAX

It's your move, Louie.

STELLA

What do we need them for anyway? There's no cool kids here.

LOUIE

If you gave them a chance. . .

MAX

Louie!

LOUIE

All right, Max. There. Checkmate. Loser cleans up.

Max cleans up the chess game. Louie picks up a baseball and begins to toss and catch it. During the following, Stella rummages through the trunk for a large roll of duct tape, with which she begins taping over all the cracks and gaps in the walls.

MAX

You always win. I think you cheat.

LOUIE

I think you're just stupid.

MAX

Stella beat you yesterday.

LOUIE

I let her win.

MAX

Oh, I am so sure.

STELLA

You're both stupid. But then you are boys. One makes allowances.

Bite me. **LOUIE**

Bite me too. **MAX**

I rest my case. **STELLA**

Stella, what are you doing? **LOUIE**

I don't want anyone spying on us. **STELLA**

Who's going to spy on us? **LOUIE**

I don't know, Louie, but somebody's been in here. I can feel it. **STELLA**

Someone was eating my cookies again. **MAX**

Don't encourage her, Max. Stella, you've been acting really weird ever since we moved. **LOUIE**

Well, excuse me! I can't get used to this place. **STELLA**

Pause. Louie tosses his ball.

Tomorrow's Saturday. **LOUIE**

Stunning observation. How does he do it, folks? **STELLA**

What are we going to do? **LOUIE**

Let's go camping. **MAX**

Without Dad? **STELLA**

Let's go lion hunting. **MAX**

STELLA

There's never any lions here. Last time we caught Mrs. O'Malley's cat.

MAX

Toodles.

LOUIE

Man, was that old witch mad.

STELLA

Not as mad as Toodles.

MAX

Let's do that again.

LOUIE

Let's play baseball.

STELLA

You got baseball on the brain.

LOUIE

Just 'cause you can't throw. . .

STELLA

I can beat the pants off you, and you know it.

LOUIE

Let's go over to the town field and play with a whole team. There's always kids down there.

MAX

Yeah! Let's do that, Stella!

STELLA

That field stinks.

LOUIE

You stink.

STELLA

(Ignoring him.) There's no buildings. The sun's always in your eyes.

LOUIE

Let's get some kids here and play. We've got trees.

STELLA

We're not playing baseball! I don't like the kids here. They don't play right! Besides, what's the point of having a Super-Secret club if it's not Super-Secret?

Louie throws down his ball in disgust.

LOUIE

Just because you're bigger than us, you're always bossing us around! Ever since we moved all we ever do is hang around this place! This isn't just your club, you know.

STELLA

No?

MAX

No!

LOUIE

Mom says we need to make new friends. She says we're too dependent on each other.

MAX

You mother us too much, Stella.

STELLA

I do not.

MAX

Mom said.

STELLA

Who wants to make new friends anyway? I miss our old friends.

LOUIE

Forget your old friends.

STELLA

(Angry.) I don't want to forget my friends. Forget you!

Pause.

The kids here are all such nerds.

LOUIE

You're a nerd.

STELLA

That's it!

Stella pounces on Louie and starts to pinch and tickle him.

Stella is the boss of me! Say it!

LOUIE

Never! Get off me!

Max jumps onto Stella's back and tries to pull her off Louie.

STELLA

Come on! Stella is my Master and Lord! Stella is the boss of me!

MAX

Hang on, Louie! Hang on!

STELLA

You tried making friends here, remember? Who had to punch out Eric Meyers when he was taking your lunch all the time?

Louie stops struggling.

LOUIE

That was a good one. I bet he doesn't try that again soon.

STELLA

Yeah. . .Hey! Nice try!

Stella starts in on him again. Max squeals and leaps into the pile. Soon all three Children are laughing and rolling on the floor. Mom enters.

MOM

(Calling.) Max! Louie! Stella! It's late!

She knocks on the door of the clubhouse, then crouches and sticks her top half inside.

Hey! Earth to the Barnes kids! Oh, my gosh! There's a three-headed killer octopus in the shed! What have you done with my children?!

The Children tumble apart. Max shoves Mom out of the clubhouse.

MAX

Mom! You're not s'posed to come in here!

STELLA

Can't you read?

LOUIE

No grownups allowed. This means you, sweetheart.

MOM

Oh, pardon me, I'm sure.

She bangs on and then speaks through the wall.

It's awfully late! Don't you think you should be coming in soon?

STELLA

Not really, no.

MOM

It was a rhetorical question, smarty pants. It's bedtime. Now!

Mom waits outside. Stella gives Louie one last shove, and the Children begin cleaning up.

MAX

What's "rhetorical" mean?

LOUIE

It means you may as well argue with a pile of bricks.

They begin to file out of the clubhouse. Stella, as usual, is first. She bumps her head on the way out.

STELLA

Don't forget to turn out the light.

LOUIE

Yes, your highness.

Max turns off the lantern. He and Louie come out of the clubhouse and exit. Stella and Mom lag behind. They are silent a moment.

STELLA

Mom, why did we have to come here?

MOM

Stella, we've been over this before. Now that Dad doesn't live with us I had to find a full-time job, and the best one was here in New Jersey. You need to leave New York behind you, Stella. That clubhouse is like a shrine to the city. Besides, this is a really nice town.

STELLA

(Snorting.) Yeah, right.

MOM

Stella. . .

STELLA

I don't want to talk about it.

MOM

Well, I do. Stella, do you have any idea how lucky we were to rent this place? We're in a nice neighborhood. You have your own room, a yard, your shed. . .

STELLA

No Dad, no friends. . .

MOM

(Growing angry.) You know, moving wasn't so easy for me either. I have friends in the city too. And I hate not being here all the time for you kids.

Mom puts a hand on Stella's shoulder.

You might just like it here if you gave it a chance.

STELLA

(Bursting out, whirling on her.) What did you do to him, Mom? What did you do to make him leave?

This stops Mom for a moment.

MOM

Stella, it just wasn't working. These things happen.

STELLA

I don't care.

MOM

I'm trying to make it okay. You could try a little harder too. Maybe you should go into town and play with some other kids tomorrow.

STELLA

Mom, come on. . .

MOM

You might at least give Max and Louie a chance to make friends. All you ever do is play in that shed.

STELLA

It's our Secret Clubhouse. It's not a shed.

MOM

Well, sometimes secrets are not such good things.

STELLA

You don't understand! Max and Louie like our club! They need me!

MOM

All right, we'll talk about it tomorrow. It's bedtime. You and your brothers may be free as little birds, but now that I'm working, Saturday is the only time I can get any housework done, and I need to get some sleep. Are you coming?

STELLA

In a minute, Mom.

Mom exits. Stella looks for a moment at the "You Must be at Least This Short" sign. She stands against the wall and carefully adjusts the sign so that it just reaches the top of her head. She exits. It is night now. After a moment, Ernie slowly enters. He is of indeterminate age, but certainly over forty, and he carries his years heavily. He is dressed in ragged clothes, a crumpled fedora, and an old raincoat. He has not recently been near a bathtub. He carries a greasy paper shopping bag full of his possessions. He shuffles to the clubhouse, ducks his head and goes inside. He switches on the lantern, hangs his hat on a nail, and sits on a crate.

ERNIE

Home, Sweet Home.

He opens the trunk and removes a bag of cookies, which he devours. He carefully places his bag in the trunk. He shrugs out of his coat, arranges himself comfortably on the mattress, covers himself with his coat, and closes his eyes. After a moment he sits up and shuts off the lantern. He lies down

and sleeps. He sleeps soundly and silently, lying on his side. The stage is dark.

Time passes. It is morning, and grows light. We see Ernie just where we left him, lying motionless on the mattress.

STELLA

(Off.) Last one to the clubhouse is a pregnant cockroach!

LOUIE

(Off.) No fair! You started first!

Stella appears, running, with Louie right behind her. He tackles her and they both go down, but in a moment Stella is on top. They are dressed in playclothes and wearing pith helmets. Max runs past them, carrying a butterfly net, and tags the door of the clubhouse.

MAX

I win!

STELLA

Get your elbow out of my ear, you big dope!

LOUIE

Get your ear off my elbow! Eeewww!

MAX

You guys, I win! Come on!

Louie breaks free and makes a run for the clubhouse. Stella pursues him out of sight behind the clubhouse. Max watches, bemused.

LOUIE

(Off.) Let me go, you Amazon!

MAX

Are we going lion hunting or not?

Max shrugs his shoulders and enters the clubhouse. He sets his net by the door and notices Ernie's hat. He examines it

quizzically, then puts it on. He is about to sit on a crate when he catches sight of Ernie.

MAX

(Screams.) Stella!

Louie and Stella arrive at the door together, still fighting not to be last. All three Children stare at the motionless man.

LOUIE

Let's get Mom.

STELLA

Wait a minute.

MAX

I'm scared, Stella.

LOUIE

Let's get Mom. What if he's dangerous?

STELLA

Shut up. This is our clubhouse. We can handle this ourselves. Let's wake him up.

LOUIE

Mom would definitely not approve. We're not even supposed to talk to strangers.

Stella does not move closer.

STELLA

I told you somebody was in here. *(Shouting.)* Hey, you!

MAX

Hey, you!

STELLA

Yo! Mister! Wake up!

LOUIE

Come on, Stella! This is really dumb. I'm getting Mom.