

The Philosophy of Fish

A Play

by

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## CAST

HELEN FROST, 30's, attorney, high-strung, wayward tourist  
KEN SULLIVAN, 30's, CEO-dropout, diner owner, builds chairs  
THADDEUS BAY, 20's, cook, grad student in philosophy  
FRANK BEAUCHAMP, 60's, generous, fisherman from New Orleans  
GUNNAR GRETTISON, 40's, chapter boat captain, Icelandic

## TIME

An early Friday afternoon in September, in the waning weeks of the tourist season.

## PLACE

Sullivan's Diner on the Island of Four Mountains off the southeast coast of Alaska. Wood everywhere. A long counter upstage with two or three wood stools. Oddly matched tables with chairs. A large paned window overlooks a dock and beyond, four, snow-capped peaks in a row. An entrance, a door to the bathroom and a pair of slated, spring-hinged doors to the kitchen, like the ones in saloons in western movies. A set of stairs leads to an apartment above. Four Craftsman-style, dark oak, chairs downstage.

*At lights up, sea sounds are heard. HELEN FROST is pacing the diner, dialing a cell phone. She grows increasingly frustrated as each call fails. Finally, she helps herself to a cup of coffee and sits at a downstage table. She wears black jeans tucked into a pair of brightly-colored L.L. Bean, over-the-ankle duck boots and a matching L.L.Bean squall jacket completely zipped up, the little zipper tab dangling just under her chin. Her hair is swept back by a bright hair band. Along side of her table is a matching L.L. Bean tote bag stuffed with recently-purchased items. She wears a beeper. We watch her sipping, measuredly without incident for several moments. She is alone.*

*Through the bay window upstage, we see KEN SULLIVAN, dressed in a large hooded parka which obscures his face, thick gloves and large rubber boots, grappling with a large object. The large object is an Alaskan halibut in a net, over six-feet long and weighing one hundred twenty-six and a quarter pounds.*

*He's struggling with the halibut, which, though seriously dead and cut up into large slabs of meat tied together, still puts up a fight. He opens the entrance door, gets the halibut half-way through, and then leaves it on the threshold to stop and catch his breath. The cold, crisp air of an Alaskan afternoon enters without impediment. Breathing heavily, KEN sees HELEN.*

KEN

(barely audible through the breaths)

Halibut.

HELEN

Excuse me?

KEN

(louder)

Halibut. Heavy.

HELEN

Oh. Are you ok? Do you need help?

KEN

Everything. Is. Control. Thad!

HELEN

(trying to get his attention)

Excuse me.

KEN

Hey Thad!

HELEN

Excuse me. It's getting cold in here with the door open.

KEN

Yeah. It's Alaska.

*KEN practically tackles the halibut and wrestles into the diner as HELEN closes the entrance door. KEN lies on his back on the floor and sucks air.*

HELEN

Are you sure you're ok?

KEN

(taking off his gloves and gives a thumbs up)

Halibut. Heavy. Have you seen Thad?

HELEN

Who's Thad?

KEN

Cook. Goatee. Round glasses.

HELEN

(matter-of-factly)

Well, if he were here, wouldn't he be helping you right now?

KEN

(unzips his hood, direct to  
HELEN)

Good point.

*KEN loosens his coat, stares at the  
halibut, sucks more air and grunts.  
HELEN looks at KEN, who smiles, then at  
the halibut, who doesn't.*

HELEN

So, is that thing going to stay in here?

KEN

(chuckling)

Kitchen.

*KEN gets up, grabs the halibut and  
begins to drag but bumps into HELEN's  
table and drags the great fish over her  
bag.*

HELEN

Hey. Hey, wait. Watch my bag. Watch it! Hold it, hold it!

*HELEN begins to violently kick the  
halibut.*

KEN

Don't do that. I got it.

HELEN

Get it off my stuff.

*FRANK enters.*

FRANK

(amused)

Whoa, hold on there, Kenny. I told ya, ya couldn't do it by.  
Always trying to everything by yourself.

HELEN

(trying to lift the fish)

It's on my new bag.

FRANK

He got your bag under there? Well ain't that a screaming  
crawfish in boiling water.

KEN

(letting go of the halibut)

Help me get it off, ok? On three?

FRANK

(grabbing the halibut,  
laughing)

They put up a helluva fight even when they dead, don't they.

*A cellular phone rings.*

*Wait. Listen. The halibut is ringing.*

HELEN

Oh my God. Warren! Lift it!

FRANK

(laughing)

Somebody named Warren underneath there too?

HELEN

It's my cell phone. C'mon, lift it.

KEN

Ok, on three.

*KEN and FRANK say a quick "one, two,  
three" and lift the halibut as HELEN  
pulls out bag and quickly rummages  
through it. The halibut hits the ground  
with a thump.*

HELEN

Hello? Warren? Warren? Hello? Dammit! Ugh! This thing  
never works.

(clicking off the phone,  
smelling it and her things)

FRANK

Expecting a call, were ya?

HELEN

Why are you dragging that thing in here?

KEN

Back door is boarded up.

*KEN enters kitchen.*

FRANK

You're that tourist come in on Gun's boat, ain't ya.

HELEN

Yes.

FRANK

We don't get a lot of tourists round here.

HELEN

Hard to believe.

FRANK

Tourist season's supposed to be over.

HELEN

Can you please put the fish somewhere else, please.

FRANK

I wouldn't worry about ya phone stinking. Fresh fish don't smell.

*HELEN pulls out a sweater from her bag.*

HELEN

(smelling)

Oh, God. Look at this. It smells like the halibut.

FRANK

(smelling sweater)

I don't smell nothing.

HELEN

You don't smell that?

FRANK

(really smelling it, comparing  
it with his clothes)

Nope.

*KEN emerges from kitchen with a large,  
rather menacing fish hook.*

HELEN

(smelling)

Why can't you smell it?

(to KEN)

You smell this.

KEN

(smelling)

Smells like a sweater. Is it new?

HELEN

Are you guys insane! It smells like that thing.

FRANK

I told ya, he just come out the water. He don't stink at all.

HELEN

He stinks.

KEN

I really don't smell anything. Fresh fish doesn't smell.

FRANK

That's what I'm trying to tell ya. You think fish smell because of those supermarkets.

HELEN

Supermarkets?

FRANK

Yep, by the time your fish get to those supermarkets and sit on that crushed ice, all scraped and sliced up, with parsley, fancy tartar sauce, lemon wedge, it's been days since they were swimming in the water. You can smell 'em all the way down the bread aisle by then.

HELEN

All fish smell like fish.

FRANK

(testing)

Is that right? Well, well, then let me ask you something. Do fish smell more like fish when they filets or more like fish when they the whole fish?

HELEN

Huh?

FRANK

Do fish stink more when they cut up into filets or more, when they a whole fish? You know. Gills, scales, eyes like marbles.

HELEN

What are you talking about?

FRANK

I'm talking about fish.

HELEN

What difference does it make how it's cut up?

KEN

Frank?

FRANK

Well, a helluva lot if ya'll riled up about fish stink.

KEN

How about giving me a hand with this, Frank.

HELEN

Can you just help him?

*KEN stabs the halibut with the fish hook, it bleeds. HELEN screams.*

FRANK

(laughing)

He didn't feel that. I told ya. He's dead. And he's fresh.

KEN

Grab the tail. I'll drag.

FRANK

(teasing)

Oh, now ya gonna listen to me. Ya sure we gonna make it all the way into the kitchen?

KEN / FRANK

On three. One, two, three.

*FRANK and KEN drag the halibut into kitchen, ad lib with "watch out," "you got it" etc. Meanwhile, HELEN is examining her bag, sweater.*

HELEN

I cannot believe this is happening. That stupid cruise ship. God! This is a complete disaster.

*HELEN removes a small urn from the bag, sniffs the outside of it then talks to it.*

HELEN (CONT.)

Alaska was your idea, mother.

*As FRANK enters from kitchen, she replaces it quickly to her bag and takes out the sweater.*

FRANK

(noticing her smelling)

If you wanna be sure you don't smell like a halibut, go outside and smell your sweater. Cold air don't hold no stink.

HELEN

I'm not going outside.

FRANK

Go outside. You'll see.

HELEN

It's too cold.

FRANK

It's Alaska.

HELEN

I'm not going outside.

FRANK

You wanna wear your sweater doncha? Doncha wanna know if you're gonna smell like that big ole halibut in there? I sure as hell would.

*HELEN grungingly acquiesces and gathers her bag, sweater and exits. She can be seen holding up items and smelling each of them, then the air. KEN emerges from the kitchen with a mop and pail. He sees HELEN through the window.*

KEN

He's going to make a good meal tonight. Thanks.

FRANK

No problem. How ya gonna cook him?

KEN

Broil.

FRANK

Yep. Little black pepper, splash of hot sauce. Mighty tasty.

KEN

We're still on for four, right?

FRANK

Yep.

KEN

I have to be at the convention center no later than seven.

FRANK

We'll make it. Seas are calm. So, these are them, eh?

KEN

Yeah.

FRANK

Mighty nice work there, Kenny. Good tung oil finish.

KEN

Actually, I use a special polyurethane and linseed oil blend. I mixed it myself.

FRANK

(rubbing chairs)

Is that right. Well ain't that as smooth as a halibut's ass.

*FRANK and KEN watch HELEN.*

FRANK

Tourists gotta smell their clothes. Afraid of a little stink.

KEN

Have you seen Thad?

FRANK

Nope.

*HELEN enters quickly.*

FRANK (CONT.)

Don't smell, don't it.

HELEN

I can't tell. My nose is a popsicle.

FRANK

(smelling her sweater)

Yep, Alaskan halibut's one helluva fish. Hippoglossus hippoglossus. "Hippos of the Sea." Largest member of the flat flounder family. Some of them have the life span of a human being. A lotta life in that big bastard. Didja know that they just lie there on the bottom, waiting for food to float by their mouths? Just ease a line past their big ass mouth and when you see the rod dip, wham! When I catch 'em, I like to look in their eyes... hey, didja know they have both their eyes on only one side of their body?

(beat)

Only one side. Anyway, when I catch 'em, I thank 'em.

(MORE)

FRANK(cont'd)

I look right into their eyes and say, "thank ya for giving your life up so I can eat." I do that 'cause they giving up a whole lotta life. You gotta thank a halibut every once in while. Keeps things in perspective.

HELEN

You're not from around here, are you?

FRANK

Nope. New Orleans. Born and raised.

HELEN

What are you doing in Alaska?

FRANK

I'm a man of extremes. Anyway, about halibut. Didja know there are over 314 ways to cook a halibut? Yep. All kinds of ways. Ever had halibut head soup?

HELEN

Not lately.

FRANK

It's not bad if you don't mind the eyeballs staring at ya between spoonfuls. Yep, your halibut's one helluva link in the food chain. Gotta respect that. I could go on and on about halibut but, I better get on back to the boat. Alright, Kenny. I'll be back around three, help get yer chairs stowed.

KEN

Ok.

FRANK

Make sure that Thad thanks the halibut before he cuts his head off, alright?

KEN

Alright.

FRANK

See ya around ma'am. Watch out for the halibut now.

*FRANK exits.*

HELEN

That guy has sex with halibut, doesn't he?

KEN

(amused and mopping)

Not any halibut that I know of.

HELEN

Can you turn up the heat in here?

KEN  
Oooh. No, sorry. Can't do that.

HELEN  
You can't turn the heat up?

KEN  
No. Sorry.

HELEN  
But I'm freezing in here.

KEN  
It's Alaska.

HELEN  
I know where I am.

KEN  
I can't turn up the heat because of my chairs.

HELEN  
Your chairs?

KEN  
Yeah, those.

HELEN  
Your chairs are too hot?

KEN  
No. I just finished them. They're still curing. The polyurethane mixtures needs a temperature of between forty-eight and sixty-two degrees to cure properly. Too much heat at this stage will yellow the top coat.

HELEN  
Oh. Well I guess we have to make sure the chairs are comfortable.

KEN  
(rubbing the chairs with care)  
It might sound strange but it's a delicate process. Took me a long time to get it right. You have to strike the right balance between texture and temperature and finish. The three elements come together in precisely the right environment to bring out the soul of the piece. See the grain, the way the light just lets the wood breath? Nothing like a fine piece of smooth wood. It's an art. I can get you some coffee if you want to warm up.

HELEN  
Fine. Maybe the chairs would like a Pepsi or something.

KEN  
Want something to eat?

HELEN  
I'm not hungry.

KEN  
We've plenty of salmon. I can make you a salmon sandwich.

HELEN  
A salmon sandwich?

KEN  
It's like a fish filet sandwich you get at McDonalds only more fishy tasting.

HELEN  
No thanks.

KEN  
I could rub some vinegar on your sweater if you want to be sure it doesn't smell.

HELEN  
(short, quickly)  
No, no, no. No thank you.

*HELEN tries to make a call on her cell phone.*

KEN  
(coming over with coffee)  
So, you were chasing a cruise ship, huh.

HELEN  
Yes, I was.

KEN  
What happened?

HELEN  
There was a misunderstanding in Juneau.

KEN  
Get lost or something?

HELEN  
I did not get lost. I know exactly what I'm doing.

KEN  
I guess that's why you're here instead of the Love Boat.

HELEN

Funny. I forgot to set my watch to Juneau time. It was two hours later than I thought it was. I missed the call the ship was leaving.

KEN

That happens a lot. Alaska's easy to get lost in.

HELEN

I did not get lost.

KEN

Sure. My name is Ken Sullivan, by the way. I own this place.

HELEN

(shaking hand)

Helen.

KEN

On vacation?

HELEN

I wouldn't call it a vacation.

KEN

You just like chasing cruise ships?

HELEN

I don't even like cruise ships.

KEN

Then why were you chasing one?

HELEN

Because of Warren.

KEN

Huh. Well I guess he's a good reason as any.

*Cell phones rings. HELEN quickly answers.*

HELEN

Oh my God. Hello. Hello? Warren? It's me. Yes, it's me. Where are you? I can't hear you. Talk slower. Warren! Talk slower, there's an echo. Hello? Hold on.

(to KEN)

Where am I?

KEN

The Island of Four Mountains.

HELEN

(to phone)

I'm on the Island of Four Mountains. Island of Four Mountains. What? Warren? Hello? Hello? Island of Four Mountains. Four Mountains. Four! Warren? Warren? Shit!  
(she clicks off phone)

KEN

So, that was Warren, huh.

HELEN

This thing is a piece of crap! It's totally useless! It's supposed to work anywhere around the world.

KEN

Cell phones are tricky around here. Mountains get in the way. Northern lights cause static electricity. We use two-way radios up here. Much more reliable.

HELEN

You have a two-way radio?

KEN

Yeah, but it's nothing fancy. From Radio Shack.

HELEN

Can we use it?

KEN

It won't reach your ship.

HELEN

Can we try it? I wasn't that far behind when my boat broke down. You might be able to get through.

KEN

I don't think so. It's just for the island. Has a range of about five miles on a good day. Your ship's headed to Sitka, right?

HELEN

Yes.

KEN

That's at least thirty miles from here. We can't reach it.

HELEN

There's a possibility we might get through.

KEN

Not likely.

HELEN

What makes you so sure?

KEN

It's from Radio Shack.

HELEN

But I need some help. I've been sitting in here for over an hour. No one knows where I am. I'm freezin'. You and your fishing buddy dragged a giant squid over my sweater--

KEN

--we did not drag it over you--

HELEN

--I smell like that halibut--

KEN

--you don't smell--

HELEN

--I have to do something--

KEN

--I understand--

HELEN

(quickly)

--I didn't even want to take this cruise. I don't want to be in Alaska. But I have to be here so I can get to the glaciers and the cruise ship has those helicopter rides that take you right on top of the glaciers and we have reservations for one tomorrow morning and I have to be there so I can stand on the glacier and do what I have to do and be done with it. Do you understand?

KEN

What do you have to do on a glacier?

HELEN

It's personal. I just have to get there. It's the only reason I'm here right now.

KEN

Well, the glaciers are very nice this time of year.

HELEN

Then you know. So, let's try the radio.

KEN

I didn't mean to get your hopes up but we can't call your ship.

HELEN

Can't or won't.

KEN

I'm just being realistic.

HELEN

Fine. Go ahead and be a realist.

*HELEN begins to search the diner.*

KEN

What are you doing?

HELEN

I'm being unrealistic and getting out of here.

*HELEN rifles through bookshelf and handling KEN's chairs and furniture supplies.*

KEN

(following)

The radio is not going to work. It's from Radio Shack. Hey, hey. Stay away from that stuff. Don't. That's private.

*HELEN finds a Radio Shack box.*

HELEN

Ha!

KEN

(viciously grabbing box)

Don't touch that. I said, it's private.

HELEN

I thought it was the radio.

KEN

Just don't touch anything in here, ok.

*KEN replaces box crosses behind counter, pulls out a small radio from beneath counter.*

KEN (CONT)

What's the name of your ship?

HELEN

The Windward. Norwegian Cruise Lines. You need to reach Warren Michelson.

KEN

(turning dials)

I doubt Warren's manning the ship's two-way radio right now.

HELEN

Navigation Deck, Cabin 313.

KEN

This doesn't work like a phone. I have to find the channel the ship's receiving. This thing's only got nine channels.

HELEN

(optimistic)

Well, start with channel one.

KEN

(into handset)

Calling Norwegian Windward, Norwegian Windward do you copy?

*Sound of static*KEN (CONT'D)

Norwegian Windward this is Sullivan Bay 053 do you read?

(turns up the volume, more  
static)

Nothing. Static radio.

HELEN

Try channel two.

KEN

(turning dials)

Sullivan Bay 053 calling the Norwegian Cruise Ship Windward,  
do you copy?*The slight sound of a voice can be  
heard.*KEN (CONT'D)

It's only forty watts.

HELEN

Wait. Listen, listen.

*Voice sounds more distinct*HELEN (CONT'D)

Don't you hear that?

KENCalling the Norwegian Cruise Ship Windward, do you copy? Do  
you copy? I seem to be getting something.

*Static slowly fades as the crackling,  
but distinct sound of a voice is heard.*

HELEN

See I told you! You got through!

*The voice of THAD is coming through the  
static*

THAD

Ken? Ken?

KEN

(turning dials)

Norwegian Windward this is Sullivan Bay 053 do you copy?

THAD

(clearly)

Ken? Hey man, is that you? Over.

KEN

Thad?

HELEN

See! Let me talk to him.

(trying to grab mic)

THAD

Yeah. What are you doing on the two-way? Over.

KEN

Where are you? Over.

THAD

Frank's boat. Where are you? Over.

KEN

I'm in the diner. Over.

HELEN

(coming around counter, trying  
to grab mic)

Let me talk to him.

THAD

What are you doing there? Over.

KEN

Hold on. Over.

(to HELEN)

It's not your ship.

HELEN  
Who are you talking to?

KEN  
Thad. The cook. Goatee, round glasses.

THAD  
(laughing)  
--Ken? What's up, man? Hey, Ken?--

KEN  
(to THAD)  
--Hold on, Thad.  
(to HELEN)  
He's at the dock, just down the hill. On Frank's boat.

HELEN  
--I can't believe this!!

KEN  
It's only forty watts--

THAD  
--Hey Ken. Ken? Hello? Hey, man, what's up? Over.

KEN  
(into handset)  
Nothing. I was just trying to reach the cruise ship for the tourist who came in on Gun's boat. Over.

HELEN  
--This is not happening, this is not happening--

THAD  
No shit. Why in the hell were you wasting your time on that? Over.

KEN  
Don't swear on the two-way. Over.

HELEN  
This is not going to happen. Nope. Not going to happen.

*HELEN tries to dial her cell phone, repeatedly and with growing frustration.*

THAD  
Didn't you tell her the two-way's from Radio Shack? It's a waste of time. Oh shit. She can hear me can't she. Over.

KEN  
Yes. Over.

THAD

(a smirking laugh)

Hey, what can I say, you know? Tourists. Over.

KEN

What are you doing at Frank's boat?

THAD

I was at Gun's boat and he told me about Frank's haul. He said you dragged a big ass halibut up the hill by yourself. You didn't rupture your spleen or anything? Over.

KEN

You need to get up here and start cleaning it. Over.

THAD

Yeah, I know. I'm just going to pick some cod for the stew. He's got salmon but I've eaten so much salmon my shit's pink. Over.

KEN

Don't swear on the two-way. Over.

THAD

Hey, what can I say. It's pink. Hey, did you see Gun's boat? He really blew the shit out of his engine. That thing ain't going anywhere. Over.

KEN

(not in handset)

Christ.

(into handset)

Just, get up here as soon as you can. Over.

*KEN turns off radio, puts back under counter.*

KEN

Sorry.

HELEN

There's got to be a way out of here.

KEN

You're going to catch your ship. Why don't you finish your coffee and relax.

HELEN

Relax? How can I possibly relax? Getting stuck here was not part of the plan.

**Wonder what happens next?**

For a copy of the full script, email me at:

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Thanks!