The Ladder

A Comedy by Matt Herzfeld

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(Arlene holds up the Phonathon manual.)

ARLENE
All the answers are in here. Let's see now…

(Arlene flips through the manual until she finds the right page.)

ARLENE
Here we are. "Overcoming Common Objections." OK, I'll be a prospect, and you be you.

JILL
That… works, I guess.

ARLENE
Go ahead. I've just picked up. "Hello?"

JILL (LOOKING TO SAID)
Um… will it bother you if we…

SAID
Go right ahead.

JILL (READING)
Right. OK. "Hello. My name is Jill and, um…"

ARLENE
No um's, no dead air. Be clear and crisp.

JILL
Sorry. "I'm calling today from Tate University to connect with alumni, tell you what's new on campus, and ask for your help in supporting students like – "

ARLENE (SUDDENLY IN CHARACTER)
Tate? That piece of baloney university?

JILL (SURPRISED BY SHIFT)
Oh!

ARLENE (PLAYING CHARACTER)
I left there with sixty thousand dollars in student loans and a worthless degree in "East Asian Studies." No one gives a donkey's behind – I'm working in a grocery store now.

JILL
That's — um, I'm sorry things haven't… worked out the way you hoped they would?

ARLENE
When are you people going to stop calling me? You already bled me dry for four years! I'm going to be paying loans until I'm fifty! Going to college at Tate was the worst decision of my life.

JILL
Uh…

ARLENE (BREAKING CHARACTER)
See, this is why we're doing this. People can come across as extremely negative on the phone. Don't let them shame you!

JILL
Right.

ARLENE
You're doing nothing wrong asking them to give back. I think it's their duty, for everything Tate has done for them.

JILL
OK, maybe. But, if someone is really that… emotional about it, maybe it's better to leave them alone?

ARLENE
You always have to try and win the prospect back.

JILL
And… by that you mean… ?

ARLENE
Turn the negative into a positive.

JILL
How?

ARLENE
Like this.

(Drew, having finished his cigarette, enters in the middle of Arlene's speech.)

ARLENE (RAPID AND MECHANICAL)
I'm very sorry to hear that you had an unpleasant experience at the university, and I assure you that your negative feelings are exceptional. We work everyday to try to improve life for our students, both academically and in the broader scope of their time at the college. Donations from alumni like you help us to improve our program, so that year by year, Tate keeps getting better and better. We're working hard to diminish class sizes for improving student-to-faculty ratios, updating our housing facilities, and providing our students with real-life internship and networking opportunities to help them on their path once they enter today's highly competitive job market, which, thanks to Tate, they'll master with confidence and a newly acquired set of lifetime skills. By donating, you help insure that the next generation of Tate students will succeed out in the world, not only helping them, but increasing the value of your own Tate degree by contributing to the life and vitality of the university. A donation to Tate is a donation to yourself.

(Drew mouths the last few words silently, with a mocking face.)

ARLENE
Would you consider making a small contribution today of one hundred dollars, as much as fifty percent of which might be tax deductible?

JILL
Uh —

DREW (LOUDLY, SURPRISING ARLENE, GRABBING SAID FROM BEHIND)
Under no circumstances would I give money to that shit encrusted fag-fucking syphilitic eyesore of a / school!

SAID (PUSHING DREW OFF)
/ Drew, I'm trying to read here!

(Drew laughs.)

ARLENE (ANNOYED)
Very funny.

DREW
What do you say to that "objection?"

ARLENE
I'm trying to help Jill…

DREW
Come on. Consider it a test.

ARLENE
I won't let you mess with me anymore tonight.

DREW
You scared?

ARLENE
This is stupid…

DREW
Show me your skills. Hold on! My dick is vibrating. (PULLS IMAGINARY PHONE OUT OF PANTS) Oh no, it's my phone!

ARLENE
Stop.

DREW
Ring, ring! Ring, ring!

ARLENE
If you don't -

DREW
Ring, ring! Ring, ring!

(Drew puts the imaginary phone to his ear.)

DREW
Hello?

ARLENE
Moron.

DREW (LOUDER, IN ARLENE'S FACE)
Hello? Is there anyone there?

(Said puts his book down, giving up on reading, and watches.)

DREW (GOADING)
Helll-ooooo-oooo?

(A moment of stand-off, then Arlene jumps into it.)

ARLENE
My name is Arlene, and I'm a student at Tate University –

DREW (OLD MAN VOICE)
Where?

ARLENE
Tate University.

DREW
Tit University?

ARLENE
Tate.

DREW
You'll have to remind me, I'm an old man. I don't recall so good…

ARLENE
Tate Uni –

DREW
Speak up.

ARLENE (LOUDER)
Tate University!

DREW
Oh, yes. I went there.

(Beat.)

ARLENE (JUMPING RIGHT BACK IN)
We're calling alumni today such as you to connect, let you know what's new on campus, and ask for your help in supporting students like me.

DREW
Are you trying to take my money?

ARLENE
Donations from alumni like you help to insure that the next generation of Tate students has a leg –

DREW
What? Speak up.

ARLENE (BREAKING)
If you keep interrupting -

DREW (STILL IN CHARACTER)
Tate. Tate. I remember Tate. I went there one hundred and eighty two years ago —

ARLENE
The university is only seventy-four years old —

DREW
- and when I attended, there were only two majors, Big Game Hunting and Studies in Misogynism.

(Jill cracks a smile despite herself.)

ARLENE
Let me tell you about some of the exciting new developments on campus. Our new Diversity Initiative —

DREW
Diversity? Do you mean to tell me they're letting those Afro-Americans into the school these days?

ARLENE
Our Diversity Initiative is a broad cross-campus effort to make the university a comfortable and accepting environment for students from all backgrounds.

DREW
Even Chinks?

ARLENE (TACTFULLY IGNORING SLUR)
So, would you say that Tate played a large role in your life?

DREW
Oh, yes. Lost my virginity to the head football couch in the gym showers.

ARLENE (FIGHTING BACK DISGUST)
A… lovely recollection -

DREW
I was on the receiving end.

ARLENE
- and a donation to the university can help insure that others form similar lasting memories. Would you consider a donation of, say, one hundred dollars?

DREW
Oh, times is tough for me. I'm not quite sure I could swing that. I just lost my job.

ARLENE
I'm sorry to hear it.

DREW
Thirty-nine years screwing on bottle caps, and they let me go, just like that.

ARLENE
Even a tiny donation —

DREW
Fired, just like that. They said it was because I needed my arms to screw on the caps, but if you ask me, they were only looking for an excuse.

ARLENE
Your arms?

DREW
I'm a double amputee. Bitten off by Siberian tigers.

ARLENE
Right…

DREW
Big Game Hunting. My major at Tate.

(Said snickers and snorts.)

ARLENE
This is stupid…

DREW
Wait, wait! I *would* like to help the school.

ARLENE
A token donation of, say, five dollars means that we can add your name to a list of alumni contributors, which is important to the school for obtaining grants from foundations.

DREW
Oh, that's far too much for me.

ARLENE (ANNOYED)
What were you thinking?

DREW
Well, you know how at the gas station a gallon of gas always ends with nine/tenths of a cent?

ARLENE
Yes.

DREW
Well, I was thinking I could maybe donate one of those. A tenth of a cent.

ARLENE
Give me a break.

DREW
I really couldn't afford anything else. I'm scaling back all my living expenses. Ran out of toilet paper the other day, know what I had to use?

ARLENE
What?

DREW
My degree from Tate University –

(Arlene jumps up from her seat. Drew and Said laugh and snicker. Jill tries to stay neutral.)

ARLENE
OK, enough of this shit!

DREW (BREAKING CHARACTER)
Oo, Little Miss Perfect knows a swear word!

ARLENE
You have no respect for this school, you have no respect for this job —

DREW (MOCK PAIN)
Oh, the truth hurts!

ARLENE
- you clearly don't care about an education at all, since you're too busy… smoking drugs —

DREW
And snorting them.

ARLENE
God, I hate you.

DREW
Hey, you know, I didn't want to go here. But if my dad wants to pay for me to drink, get high, and fuck a lot for four years, shit, I'd be stupid not to take that offer.

ARLENE
God. The worst thing, the worst thing about it all, is that in the end, when you actually manage to graduate by some combination of bribery and teacher neglect, you'll have worked a fraction as hard as me, but you'll still be better off, with your cozy trust fund making a mockery of every student who had to actually fight -

DREW
Poor you.

ARLENE
- to get to where we are today. You make me sick, because you've had everything handed to you on a platter, and you're completely ungrateful.

DREW (SHRUGGING)
At least people *like* me, because I'm not some high-strung workaholic freak.

ARLENE
People *like* you?

DREW
I'm a fun guy. You… need to loosen up. Go to a party once in a while.

ARLENE
I don't have time to do that! I have to study and write essays and read long boring textbooks, because if my grades slip and I lose my scholarship, I won't be able to afford to go here!

DREW
You don't have to be a bitch about it…

ARLENE
I can't afford to fail! Don't you understand that? I have to be on my best game!

SAID
I think –

ARLENE (SNAPPING)
What?

SAID
I think, Drew is right. Might as well get high and party.

DREW
Homo Muslim Einstein to the rescue!

SAID
Higher education is like… it's like an outdated factory from the Soviet era, right? It's there, it exists, but it isn't making anything useful because some bureaucrat miscalculated how many pencil erasers you'd have to manufacture each year. But… but… but. You need to keep the people employed. You have to keep them busy. So they come into their factory everyday, pull the levers, run the assembly line, go through the motions. These machines only exist to keep themselves going, keep the gears spinning, churning out more and more… product. Human fodder released into a world that has no room for them, no jobs for them, no opportunities to do anything with what they've learned, until they're eventually ground up and fed back into the gears as fuel for the next batch. So students becomes alums, and alums become prospects, and new students come in, and it keeps on going and going and going.

(Beat.)

SAID (RETURNING TO BOOK)
And I'm an atheist, Drew, not a Muslim.