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THE MATTHEW PORTRAITS

A One-Act Play

by

Colette Mazunik

The Matthew Portraits

by Colette Mazunik

FERN: 21, a college student

RUTH: 20, her roommate

SCENE i

(FERN and RUTH's dorm room.)

FERN

That is absolutely insane.

RUTH

You think?

FERN

Hello! I mean all that is, is him revealing just how fucking insecure he is.

RUTH

Yeah—I mean, if he's getting jealous over this . . .

FERN

Absolutely. He is just exhibiting his massive insecurity with himself.

RUTH

But I hate to make him so upset. I mean, I care about him.

FERN

Listen, listen, you are not *making* him upset. If he gets upset, that's *his* problem. You are not *making* him upset. To *make* him upset there would have to be a proper stimulus/response pairing. A logical flowing of one thing to another. Which there is not.

RUTH

I don't want to loose him.

(Pause.)

FERN

Of course you don't. Of course not. You love him. Who ever said anything about . . .

RUTH

He said he didn't know if he could take it . . .

FERN

That is *so* manipulative on his part.

RUTH

But he wasn't trying to manipulate me—he's really upset by all this.

FERN

I don't care—okay—so he can feel that way—but this is not something you *tell* someone. I can see he *thinks* it, but to go and—I mean, he's acting like this is *pornography!*

RUTH

Which it isn't.

FERN

Absolutely not. This is *gallery* stuff. Old ladies go and look at it.

RUTH

I mean, when I think about it one way, it seems silly for me to make a big deal about this. It's not like he's asking me to give up painting.

FERN

No—sure—not as long as you only paint Norman Rockwell rip-offs.

RUTH

He doesn't see why it's a big deal to me—why I can't just paint—I don't know—tulips.

FERN

Every major artist throughout the ages!

RUTH

Exactly.

FERN

Has studied the human form.

RUTH

Exactly. It's not sexual. I don't see why he always has to assume that everything is sexual.

FERN

Of course not. You're a professional.

RUTH

Right.

FERN

You look at form, shape, not . . .

RUTH

No!

FERN

He's just insecure.

FERN

It is not sexual.

RUTH

He doesn't understand. Because he's not an artist.

SCENE ii

RUTH

It's sexual.

FERN

What?

RUTH

It's sexual.

FERN

You had the first sitting.

RUTH

I couldn't hold my brush, I was shaking. My entire body was shaking.

FERN

So he's cute, yeah?

RUTH

He is so—comfortable with his body. He is sitting there in front of me, entirely naked and entirely at ease. Fern, it was so beautiful. I have never in my life seen anyone so—unapologetic about their body. He just *was*. He just *existed*. It was like there was peace and energy and safety all around him. And I started shaking—all over—uncontrollably. I have never in my life reacted that—physically to just *seeing* someone.

FERN

And the painting?

RUTH

Horrible. I had no control of my hand.

FERN

So, what . . . ?

RUTH

Fern, hello! I do have a boyfriend.

FERN

That doesn't mean . . .

RUTH

Yes it does.

(Beat.)

Although . . .

FERN

Yes?

RUTH

No, it was just— What am I going to tell Jason?

FERN

What do you mean?

RUTH

Fern, my whole body was shaking.

FERN

But you didn't *do* anything.

(Pause.)

I mean it's not like it's unnatural for you to find other men attractive.

RUTH

I couldn't take my eyes off him.

FERN

Ruth, you were supposed to be looking at him—you're painting him.

RUTH

I know, but . . .

FERN

You're feeling guilty. You should not be feeling guilty.

RUTH

I thought I'd be this professional, detached person, looking at line and shape and transferring that objectively to canvas. But there was this person inside the line and shape and I wanted—I wanted to . . .

FERN

Ruth, you had a beautiful, naked man in front of you—of course you're not going to be objective.

RUTH

That's not what we said last week! We said this wasn't going to be sexual!

FERN

You're an artist, Ruth. You don't paint anything objectively. It's all about emotion and intuition and feeling—even if you're painting a house. It's not supposed to be objective, otherwise, what would be the point? I can look at the real thing, right?

Listen, you resisted. Jason should feel lucky. You can't help how you felt. All you can help is what you do.

RUTH

Fern . . .

FERN

You are a normal, healthy woman. It's natural to be attracted.

RUTH

I did something.

FERN

Jason should be worried if you weren't.
What?

RUTH

I did something. Today.

FERN

What?
What? What happened? What?! Tell me!

RUTH

Yeah, I kissed him.

FERN

And . . . ?

RUTH

We made out, for awhile.
I was shaking—I couldn't paint, I couldn't think—I was just ruining a canvas with a twitching paintbrush and I am just radiating heat, but I can't open the window because he's naked, poor guy, and it's like two degrees outside. So I said, fuck it, and I went over and I kissed him. And then we sort of just kept . . . And why aren't you yelling at me?

FERN

Good for you.

RUTH

What!

FERN

You were attracted to him, the feeling was evidentially mutual, and you went with it.

RUTH

Fern, I am in a long term, exclusive relationship.

FERN

So how was it?

RUTH

With a boyfriend who expressed clear objections to me embarking on this whole “painting the body” phase.

FERN

Ruth, listen to you. Calm down. Look at this rationally. What are you saying? That you would have been attracted to absolutely any guy who posed nude for you? That you’ve got some kind of animal instinct so that you can't resist the sight of a naked body? No! That's clearly not true. No. You were attracted to *this* guy. He happened to be posing for you. But that's just a coincidence. You were attracted to *him*. You made a move because you wanted to make a move. That's good. That's natural.

RUTH

I’ve got to cancel the rest of the sittings.

FERN

What! Why?

RUTH

Fern, I have a boyfriend!

FERN

And because of that you’re just going to ignore that you’ve met this person you’re drawn to? Just because you’re in a relationship now you’re gonna shut out the possibility of ever being with someone else?

RUTH

No. Okay. But I am in an exclusive relationship, Fern. Exclusive. That means I do not make out with other naked men. At the very least it means that. I love Jason. Okay? And what I have just done is a slap in his face, so I am going to call and cancel the rest of the sittings. Because I know myself well enough to know that if I don’t, the same thing is going to happen again.

FERN

He doesn't own you, Ruth. You can make your own decisions.

RUTH

No, apparently I can't, Fern.

FERN

I mean, he does not have exclusive rights to your body, or something.

It happens, Ruth. These things happen. Even in exclusive, long-term relationships, or whatever kind of clinical term you want to give it. People slip up. I mean, look at history. Lots of artists have *slept* with their models. You just kissed him. I mean, down through the ages artists have had relationships with their models.

RUTH

So it's an occupational hazard. Maybe he was right all along.

FERN

No.

(RUTH picks up the telephone.)

RUTH

Here's to a career of tulips and landscapes.

FERN

What are you doing?

(RUTH looks in her planner for the phone number.)

RUTH

Canceling.

FERN

No. Don't. You're making a mistake.

RUTH

Fern, shut up, and let me do this.

(RUTH dials. While SHE is talking on the phone FERN looks at the canvas RUTH brought in with her. RUTH gets an answering machine.)

RUTH (continued)

Hi, I'm calling for Matthew. Matthew, this is Ruth. I'm calling because, um, something's come up for me and I'm gonna have to cancel our sitting next week. So, um, thanks and I'll talk to you later. Bye.

FERN

Ruth.

RUTH

What.

FERN

Ruth. This is good.

RUTH

I know. That was a stupid message. He's gonna think I'm avoiding him, isn't he?

FERN

No, Ruth. This is really good.

RUTH

I should have just said I'm abandoning the project and cancelled all the sittings.

FERN

Ruth . . . !

RUTH

What?

FERN

This painting!

RUTH

Yeah, I know.

FERN

What happened?

RUTH

I stopped shaking.

FERN

Well, obviously! This is the best work I've ever seen you do.

RUTH

Thanks.

FERN

Thanks! Ruth—this is really, really good.

RUTH

Yeah?

FERN

Yeah! Have you showed this to anybody?

RUTH

No.

FERN

You can't quit. This is really good work. It's like you suddenly found your voice. Look, I don't know what happened today, but whatever it was, you cannot give it up. This is you as an artist. You owe it to yourself, to your work, to the collection of world art, to not turn your back on whatever it is that is happening to you.

RUTH

I did feel really—free.

FERN

Obviously. This piece has so much, confidence. You're painting with authority.

RUTH

It was like I wasn't worried about getting it right. I just followed my instincts. I wasn't second-guessing myself.

FERN

This is *you* coming out. This is your voice.

RUTH

It did feel good. Like I opened up. Like I was . . . like it wasn't me that was painting, but like—I don't know—I was the brush.

FERN

Yes! Ruth, you can't say no to this. If this is what the universe is giving you—you can't turn your back on it.

RUTH

But Jason . . .

FERN

If Jason would ask you to say no to this . . . kind of breakthrough, then I don't know that Jason is the kind of person you need to be with.

RUTH

Yeah, but I . . .

FERN

You kissed him. Big deal. But this . . .

(indicating canvas)

. . . this is a big deal. This is art.

Say Jason kissed someone and then designed the Eiffel Tower.

RUTH

I'd be jealous.

FERN

Sure—but you’d work through it. You’d deal with it. That’s what relationships are about—dealing with things. This is you succeeding. If Jason doesn’t want you to succeed . . .

RUTH

It is good, isn’t it.

FERN

Yes.

RUTH

Jason wouldn’t want me to just . . .

FERN

No!

RUTH

I can’t just give it up.

FERN

No. Call him back.

RUTH

You think?

FERN

Ruth—you’re an artist.

RUTH

Jason loves me because I’m an artist.
(RUTH picks up the phone.)

FERN

Yes.

RUTH

(dialing)
Okay, here goes.

SCENE iii

(RUTH enters, loaded down with canvases.)

FERN
Where have you been?

RUTH
Painting.

FERN
No—I mean the past three nights?

RUTH
At Jason's.

FERN
At Jason's?

RUTH
Yeah!

FERN
Jason called. He wants you to call him. He's worried about you. He said he hasn't heard from you in three days.

RUTH
I've been busy.

FERN
Apparently.

(RUTH shows FERN her canvases.)

RUTH
What do you think?

FERN
Ruth.

RUTH
Good, huh. Mullinberg says he might be able to get me a show.

FERN
Ruth, what's going on?

RUTH

(indicating what FERN should have said)
“A show, why Ruth that’s fabulous.”

FERN

That’s great, Ruth. What’s going on?

RUTH

I was on a roll—I was inspired. I didn’t want to break the flow.

FERN

You were at Matthew’s.

RUTH

Fern, it’s great. I’ve never painted this well in my life. It just comes. And it’s good.

FERN

You were at Matthew’s as in model Matthew’s.

(Pause.)

RUTH

Yeah.
I was working late. It didn’t make sense to come home.
He offered I could crash at his place.

FERN

You’re sleeping with him.

RUTH

Yeah.

FERN

Are you insane?

RUTH

What’s wrong? It helps the work. It opens me up.

FERN

You have a boyfriend.

RUTH

And, Fern, he’s really good.

FERN

Jason is worried sick. He doesn’t know where you are.

RUTH

Well, it's not like I'm obligated to check in with him. He's not my mother. And Fern, look at the paintings.

FERN

Fuck the paintings.

RUTH

I've found my muse.

FERN

Fuck your muse. You know you have other people in your life. You are not in your own little isolated world where you can do whatever you want, regardless of other people's feelings. You know the least you could have done was called me. I didn't know where you were.

RUTH

I thought you wanted me to do this.

FERN

Jason was crying, Ruth. And then, when I found out you weren't with him, what was I supposed to think? How was I supposed to know you weren't mutilated and lying in some cornfield. You could have called me.

RUTH

Okay, so I should have called and I didn't, so I'm sorry, but look at the paintings.

FERN

Yeah. Yeah, Ruth. They're great.

RUTH

You're not even looking.

FERN

Yeah—I see—they're great.

RUTH

You're mad.

FERN

Oh, no.

RUTH

What's the deal?

FERN

You're sleeping with him! You have a great relationship with Jason—and you're just throwing that away—you just move on to someone else.

RUTH

Wait a minute. First of all, I didn't throw away anything with Jason—I am just doing my art. And second of all—I thought you wanted me to do this.

FERN

Why would I want you to cheat on your boyfriend?

RUTH

Oh, so now you're getting all moral on me?

FERN

I suppose you and Matthew are all like a couple now.

RUTH

No. I don't know.

FERN

You don't know.

RUTH

What is this? What is the problem.

FERN

Well, you do already have a boyfriend.

RUTH

You told me to follow my instincts.

FERN

Because I didn't think it would work!

(Pause.)

RUTH

What?

FERN

I don't know. I don't know what I thought. But I didn't think it would work. It's not fair.

You aren't even all that pretty.

RUTH

What?

FERN

You're not pretty. You're not. Look at you. Your hair is straggly and you're—plain. I'm prettier than you. I'm smarter than you. I care more than you do. If I had a relationship I wouldn't—I would be an amazing lover. Why doesn't anyone see that? Why doesn't anyone see me?

RUTH

Fern . . .

FERN

It's not fair. I'm beautiful.

RUTH

Okay, this is . . .

FERN

But you—you're the one that doesn't even have to be alone for a minute. You fuck up one relationship and just—do you remember before you and Jason, when you broke up with Kyle? “Oh, you know I'm really excited to be single for a while. I think it's going to be a really good thing for me.” Not even a week. Not even a week! And how long has it been for me? How long has it been? You know when I was in high school people thought I was interesting and beautiful and . . . I had--Shit, I mean *seven* guys asked me to the prom. Seven. And there were more who wanted to, but they were just shy. But I come to this stupid college and no one—no one sees me. They all think my roommate is some kind of god and they all come to me for advice. And no one even—it doesn't even *occur* to anyone that I too might be available. I'm just “the friend”. Fuck, I could walk around this campus *naked* and it wouldn't *occur* to any of these guys that I might be a sexual being. They'd just think I was being “natural” or something.

(FERN is crying.)

RUTH

I . . . Fern, I don't know what . . .

(Pause. RUTH looks at FERN.)

Here. Here.

(RUTH offers FERN a tissue. SHE doesn't take it.)

Hey.

(RUTH reaches out to touch FERN, but FERN pulls away.)

FERN

I don't want your pity.

RUTH

I'm not giving you pity. I'm giving you a Kleenex.

(FERN takes the tissue and blows her nose. RUTH continues looking intently at her.)

FERN

I feel so stupid. I shouldn't care. I just . . . I just want someone to . . .

(Silence. RUTH makes a decision:)

RUTH

Take off your clothes.

FERN

What?

RUTH

Take off your clothes.

FERN

What?

RUTH

Take off your clothes. I want to paint you.

FERN

Why?

RUTH

You want someone to see you? Take off your clothes. I want to paint you the way you look right now.

FERN

I'm crying. My eyes are . . . red.

(RUTH begins to try to assist FERN in disrobing. FERN resists.)

RUTH

Hurry. I don't want to loose this. Take off your . . .

FERN

No. What do you think . . . ?

RUTH

Fern, trust me. You want someone to see you? Please. Let me paint you. The way you look right now. Only—take off your clothes. It's gotta be a nude.

FERN

No this isn't right. This is weird.

RUTH

Oh, come on. It's not sexual. I'm an artist. I look at line and form, not . . .

FERN

Liar.

RUTH

No. Come on. We are going to do this.

FERN

Right *now*?

RUTH

What are you scared of? That someone might actually *see* you?

FERN

I don't . . .

RUTH

That maybe you aren't as beautiful as you think?

FERN

That's not fair. I am . . .

[beautiful.]

RUTH

Then take off your clothes.

FERN

So you can paint me?

RUTH

Yeah.

(RUTH whips out a fresh canvas and sets it on her easel. She starts putting paint on her palette. Meanwhile, FERN gets very quiet.)

RUTH (continued)

(talking as she works)

Come on. Don't worry. I'm not going to be *attracted* to you. I'm thoroughly heterosexual.

Look. I don't know why you're not with someone right now.

And I don't know why I am.

This sounds cheesy.

But, don't get mad at me—but you never looked like you needed someone. You never look like you need anyone. So maybe people thought you didn't—want—someone. I don't know. I don't know. But just now, I saw . . . In you. When you said that you could walk around campus naked and no one . . . I saw . . . Look, you know how we said, when I went to paint Matthew that, we said it wasn't going to be sexual. But . . . *Art* is sexual. Creation is sexual.

I don't know what I'm saying but, look—I saw something—I see something. And I want to paint you.

Please.

(Pause.)

FERN

I hate you. Who do you think you are? I just opened myself up to you. And what do you do? All you're worried about is your art. You want to *use* me. You “see” something in me. Fuck you. I just . . . Fuck you.

RUTH

No! Fern, no. You don't understand. I think this would be really good for you.

FERN

Right. You think this would be really good for *you*. Just turn me into a painting. Hello. *I'm* here. I'm not a painting—I'm not some *subject* for you to paint—I'm not your model, Ruth. I'm your friend. Or at least I was your friend. I don't know anymore.

RUTH

No. This is not what this is about. I don't care what you say. This is about you hiding. This is about you not willing to be vulnerable.

FERN

Like hell it is.

RUTH

No, we *are* going to do this. I am not going to let you cheat me out of an artistic opportunity just because you're scared.

(RUTH comes to FERN and begins pulling at her clothes.)

Come on—get your clothes off. Come on.

FERN

No! No! What do you think . . .

(The sound of tearing fabric. RUTH has ripped FERN's shirt. Silence. THEY stare at one another.)

RUTH

I'm sorry.

FERN

Shut the fuck up.

(Silence. After a moment FERN picks up one of the paintings of Matthew. SHE picks up a high-heeled shoe from the floor and uses the heel to rip a gash in the canvas.)

RUTH

NO! What are you . . . Are you crazy?

FERN

That's how it feels.

RUTH

That's my art!

FERN

And what do you think I am? Shit?

RUTH

Murderer!

FERN

Find yourself another roommate.

(FERN starts to walk out of the room. RUTH blocks her way.)

RUTH

No. You can not just walk away.

FERN

Let me go.

RUTH

What do you think . . . ? You just destroyed my painting.

FERN

Yeah, your precious painting. You just destroyed my life.

RUTH

I did not.

FERN

“I did not.”

FERN
I hate you.

RUTH
Yeah? I hate you.

FERN
I hate you more.

RUTH
I hate you too. More.
(Pause.)
I'm sorry.

FERN
Yeah.
(Pause. Then, about the painting.)
I'm sorry too.

RUTH
It's just a painting.

FERN
No it's not.

RUTH
No.
It's not.
But still, you're . . . [more important than a painting]
(Pause.)
I didn't . . . [mean to hurt you]

FERN
I know.

RUTH
I mean I . . . [didn't know, didn't mean . . . —I'm so, so sorry.]

FERN
I know.
You jerk.

RUTH
I'm sorry.
Do you, can you . . . ? [forgive me?]

FERN
 Yeah.
 I forgive you.

RUTH
 I won't . . . [ever try to force you to do something like that again.]

(Pause.)

FERN
 (referring to painting)
 Do you think you can fix it?

RUTH
 I don't know.
 No.

(Pause.)

FERN
 Do you still . . . ? [want me to pose for you?]

RUTH
 What?

FERN
 You know. Do you . . . ? [want me to pose?]
 I mean if you want . . . [me too, I'll . . .]

RUTH
 No. No. You don't . . . [have to.]

FERN
 I will.

(Pause.)

RUTH
 Are you sure?

FERN
 Yeah.

RUTH
 Yeah?
 Yeah. Okay then. Yeah!

Do I just . . . ?

FERN

Yeah.

RUTH

(RUTH is crying. FERN begins to take off her clothes as LIGHTS fade to BLACK.)