

"MINUET ON THIRD"

10 Page Excerpt

By Mike Bencivenga

SYNOPSIS:

For over 50 years Abigail Peechly has lived in her 1600's colonial home located in the midst of modern day, midtown Manhattan. Of late she's been sharing the house with her great granddaughter, Toni, as they fight off attempts to be driven out by a greedy real estate tycoon, Morris Schotz. To pay her taxes and legal fees she rents out a room to a young lawyer from Alabama, Charlie Babcock, who is so charmed by Abigail and Toni that he joins the struggle to help save their home. In doing so he stumbles on the fact that Abigail is the sole living heir to Peter Minuit and is, therefore, the legal owner of the entire island of Manhattan. What Abby does with her new found power is something straight out of a Frank Capra movie. She creates new rules of conduct for the citizenry. Be polite...or else. This enforced behavior transforms some, like Toni, and infuriates others, like her hip-hop boyfriend A.R. The battle lines are drawn with the soul of the city at stake. MINUET ON THIRD is a whimsical comedy about the loss of civility in our world and how there's nothing 'old fashioned' about respect and kindness toward each other.

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CHARACTERS:

ABIGAIL PEECHLY (89) - An elegant lady of another time

TONI HARPER (21) - Abigail's feisty great-granddaughter

CHARLES BABCOCK JR. (25) - A visiting young lawyer from the south

A.R. DIEGO (21) - A hip-hop loving boy from the Bronx

MORRIS SCHOTZ (85) - An irascible real estate tycoon

TIME:

The noisy, often cruel, modern world

ACT I - A spring day

ACT II - Two months later

SETTING:

We are in the stately, baroque foyer of a large home on 53rd and 3rd Avenue in Manhattan. Most of the furnishings have the same colonial charm as the house, which was built in the late 1700s. There's a lace doily below a Tiffany lamp atop a table. On an ornate, carved cupboard sits a large ceramic sugar jar with a removable lid. There is wooden front door with a bell embedded inside it at upstage center. To the side of the main entrance hangs a large portrait in a gold frame of an exceedingly ugly fellow in vest and waistcoat. Off to the right of the front door is an arched opening leading to the kitchen and pantry. This being a sitting room there are several comfortable high back easy chairs to be used while you wait to be announced. A low table in front of a love seat is located stage left by a tall window. The once pastoral view out the window now faces the facade of a drug store jammed right up next to it. There is a staircase downstage right which leads to the upstairs dining room and bedrooms. Suspended above the very grand room is a crystal chandelier

ACT I - SCENE ONE

(Lights up. We're in the elegant antique foyer of a townhouse in midtown Manhattan. In contrast to the colonial splendor of the setting, a boom box sitting on the carved wooden cupboard blasts a local hip-hop station)

DJ

(On the radio)

So whether you're steppin' out or chillin' in your crib, keep it locked in here at Hot 69-9. Your home of the hottest hip hop and R & B hits. Keepin' it fresh. Keepin' it real.

(As a loud rap song plays TONI HARPER (21) enters from the kitchen. She's dressed in jeans and a casual pull-over top. Toni carries a box full of silver candle sticks and sets it down on the table. Using a rag, she starts angrily whacking dust off the silver. When her cell phone RINGS she answers it)

TONI

(Into the phone)

Where are you, babe? So...park. We gotta get going. I don't know. You're the one driving.

(Moving to the front door)

Hurry up. I'll leave the door open for you.

(Still on the phone she whips the door open and walks off. Standing in the doorway, about to knock, is CHARLES BABCOCK JR. He's a meek yet playful young man dressed in a suit. Charlie is startled that the door opened without his having to knock. Toni doesn't see him as she moves to the kitchen)

TONI

(Into the phone)

Yeah. It's Tuesday. So it's the left side of the street, I think. Read the signs. I don't know.

(She vanishes into the kitchen. Charlie steps in and, seeing the time capsule of a room, he smiles. He closes the door and studies the hideous portrait hanging by the entrance. Toni hurries in with another box of stuff)

CHARLIE

Hello there.

TONI
(Startled)
Ahhh! What are you doing in here?

CHARLIE
The door was open.

TONI
So you just walk in?

CHARLIE
I was about to knock. I had my hand up and everything. Anyway I'm sorry to startle you. I'm looking for Mrs. Peechly.

TONI
(Sorting her boxes)
Who are you?

CHARLIE
Are you Mrs. Peechly?

TONI
No.

CHARLIE
Well my business is with her. Is she here?

TONI
(Eyeballing him)
You some kind of lawyer?

CHARLIE
(Surprised)
Wow. Yeah. As a matter of fact I am some kind of lawyer. How'd you know that?

TONI
She's got a lot of lawyers after her.

CHARLIE
Oh. For a minute I thought maybe you had psychic powers. The way you opened the door before I could knock and all.

TONI
Nope. Sorry.

CHARLIE
Maybe you're just good at guessing. Want to guess my weight?

TONI
Nope.

CHARLIE
Come on. Give it a shot. I bet you can't.

TONI

I don't like guessing games and I don't like lawyers. So why don't you--?

CHARLIE

173. Huh? I'll bet you thought I was less. Because I'm not so tall. But that's deceptive. I actually work out quite a bit.

TONI

(Dusting)

Good for you.

CHARLIE

And, even though I'm small, a pound of muscle weighs a lot more than a pound of regular weight.

TONI

(Thinking on it)

That's impossible.

CHARLIE

No. It's true.

TONI

One pound of anything can't weigh more than one pound of anything else. A pound is a pound.

CHARLIE

I guess that's true. Well, thank goodness I'm a lawyer and not a mathematician. Are you one?

TONI

(Dusting a candlestick)

One what?

CHARLIE

A mathematician.

TONI

Do I look like a mathematician?

(He watches her beating the dust off the candlestick with a rag)

CHARLIE

No. You look like a dominatrix. I don't know what that candlestick did to upset you but I think it's had enough.

TONI

I'm dusting it.

CHARLIE

I see. How do you polish it? With a jackhammer?

TONI

What the hell do you want?

CHARLIE

I was hoping to have a nice chat with you while I waited to see Mrs. Peechly but I can see that's not going to happen.

(Looking at his watch)

We had an appointment at one. I was late because I had trouble navigating the underground trains.

TONI

You mean the subways?

CHARLIE

Yeah. Where I come from we don't hide the trains under the street. We keep them right out in the open where you can see them. It's so much more civilized.

TONI

And where would that be?

CHARLIE

Where would what be?

TONI

Where you're from Mr. Whoever the hell you are.

CHARLIE

Birmingham.

TONI

Mr. Birmingham.

CHARLIE

No. Birmingham, Alabama. That's where I'm from. My name is Charles Babcock Jr. My friends call me Charlie.

TONI

Not Junior?

CHARLIE

Only my father calls me that. I always hated being a Junior. Especially since I'm short. I thought about getting business cards that say Charles Babcock the second but that sounds so pretentious. And I don't know if being 'the second' is any better.

TONI

Look Junior, I'm busy. Why don't you take your 173 pounds of muscle mass and go? Come back another day.

CHARLIE

But I have an appointment.

TONI

I don't care. I want you to go.

CHARLIE

And you would be?

TONI

I would be the person who wants you to go. I asked you nicely. Don't make me ask you again.

CHARLIE

Why? What are you going to do? Hit me with your dust rag.

(The front doorbell RINGS)

TONI

(Shouting)

It's open!

CHARLIE

You know you're beautiful when you're angry?

(The door flies open and a large, muscular young man ambles in. He's A.R. DIEGO (21). He wears a sleeveless sweat shirt, pants slung below his boxers and has a body littered with tatoos)

A.R

I'm double parked. Let's go.

(Seeing Charlie)

Who's this?

TONI

He was just leaving.

(Indicating the boxes)

Take these two. There's another one in the kitchen.

CHARLIE

Do you need a hand?

TONI

No. Just go.

A.R

Is he botherin' you?

TONI

Yes.

A.R

Who is he?

TONI
He's a lawyer. Name of Babcock.

CHARLIE
Cock. It's cock.

A.R.
(Moving at him)
What did you say?

CHARLIE
(Frightened)
Bab-cock. My name. That's all.

A.R.
(Lifting the box)
Come on. I don't wanna get a ticket. Grab that other box.

TONI
I can't leave him here.

A.R.
Why not?

TONI
Because.

A.R.
Because why?

CHARLIE
Because it would be rude.

A.R.
You calling me rude?

CHARLIE
(Cowering)
Did I say 'rude?' I meant 'impolite.' Or maybe 'impertinent.'
But not 'rude.' No no. Not 'rude.'

A.R.
(To Toni)
I got no time to squash this cockroach. Let's go.

TONI
I can't leave him alone here with Grand-mamma.

CHARLIE
(To Toni)
Mrs. Peechly is your grandmother?

TONI
My great-grandmother.

CHARLIE
 (Indicating A.R.)
 Who's this? Your brother?

(Hearing this A.R. snaps)

A.R.
 I'm not her brother. I'm nobody's brother. You got that? Not
 her brother. Why the hell would you say I'm her brother?

CHARLIE
 (Trembling)
 Because you're both so nasty. Maybe that's a New York thing.

A.R.
 If I wasn't double parked I'd bust you in pieces, you little
 shit.

TONI
 Calm down, A.R. He didn't mean it.

A.R.
 Shut up. Go check on the car.

CHARLIE
 Don't you yell at her.

A.R.
 You're tellin' me what to do? You comin' in here and
 disrespectin' me in front of my woman?

CHARLIE
 (Frightened)
 It was an impulse. I'm sorry. It passed. I swear.

A.R.
 One more word outta you and I'm gonna put down this box and
 you're gonna get hurt bad.

CHARLIE
 Don't put down the box.

TONI
 Throw him out, babe.

A.R.
 You want me to throw him out?

TONI
 Yeah. He's been hanging around here, being all flirty.

A.R.

He flirted with you?
 (To Charlie)
 Did you flirt with her?

CHARLIE

I wouldn't call it flirting. At worst it was...chatting with intent.

A.R.

(Furious)
 That's it. I'm puttin' down the box.

CHARLIE

Don't put down the box.

A.R.

I'm puttin' down the box.

CHARLIE

Don't put down the box. You wouldn't want to get my blood all over your lovely tatoos, would you?

(A.R. slams the box down on the table)

A.R.

All right. That's it. The box is down. Now you're goin' down!

(Charlie runs behind Toni and uses her as a shield so A.R. can't get at him)

CHARLIE

Help! Help!

A.R.

(Chasing him)
 Come out of there!

(A.R. grabs both of them and all three tumble to the floor. As they noisily wrestle an elegant, older woman appears on the stairs. She is ABIGAIL PEECHLY (89) and she is not amused)

ABBY

What in blue blazes is going on? A.R. let go of that man.

A.R.

All right. But he was--

ABBY

(Moving into the room)

No arguments. I won't have this kind of commotion in my home. Now who is this young man?

(They all get up. Charlie helps Toni up which further annoys A.R.)

TONI

He's a lawyer. He showed up here looking to--

CHARLIE

Permit me. I'm Charles Babcock Jr., Ma'am. We spoke on the phone. About the room.

ABBY

Oh yes. We had an appointment. When was that?

CHARLIE

(After a beat)

That would be now, ma'am.

ABBY

Oh good. Then you're right on time. Let me get these two on their way and I'll show you the room.

TONI

What room are you showing him?

ABBY

Why your room dear. I'm going to rent it out. We discussed this.

TONI

No. You said you 'might possibly' need to consider it.

ABBY

Yes. Well now that possibility has become a reality.

TONI

How can you rent my room? Where am I supposed to sleep?

ABBY

On the couch in the sitting room.

A.R.

You can't rent her room. Where are we supposed to go when we want to, you know, be together?

ABBY

You can, you know, sit in the parlor like I did with my suitors. We'll talk about this when you get back.

A.R

Yeah. We should go.

(Lifting the box)

God. I'm gettin' tired of haulin' all this heavy-ass shit.

ABBY

Uh uh uh. That's another dollar A.R.

A.R.

Ugh. You pay it, babe. My hands are full.

(Toni digs a dollar out of her pocket
and moves to the sugar jar)

TONI

(To Charlie)

Grand-mamma keeps a swear jar. If you're caught cursing then
you got to put a dollar in.

A.R.

Babe, the door?

ABBY

There are so many expressive words in the English language.
People can't seem to get past the four letter ones.

A.R.

Babe, the door.

CHARLIE

What do you do with the money?

ABBY

I donate it to the church. I like the idea of using a sin to
pay for a sacrament.

CHARLIE

Sort of a sin tax. For using bad syntax.

ABBY

Oh. I see what you did there. That's quite good. Syntax.

(Abby, Charlie and Toni laugh as A.R.'s
knees buckle)

A.R.

Would you open the God damned door already!

(To Abby)

I'm sorry.

ABBY

I'll let that one go. You've suffered enough. Go. On your
way. And try to get more money this time. Haggle a little.