

THE WORLD AT ABSOLUTE  
ZERO

c. Sherry Kramer

Sherry Kramer  
skramer@bennington.edu

## CHARACTERS

### DIDI

She's about thirty-five. She's attractive. But not too attractive. She has an intensity that drives men wild in a variety of ways—sometimes straight into a sexual frenzy, sometimes right out the door, sometimes to a Preston Sturges retrospective marathon at the local art film house.

### FRED

He's about forty. He's less attractive than DIDI is, in the scheme of things. But not unattractive, by any means. He hasn't decided which kind of wild DIDI's intensity is going to drive him to. FRED'S had better days.

## SETTING

DIDI'S apartment. The kitchen. Through the window we can see and hear that it's raining outside. A refrigerator—one of those old rounded white ones would be pleasant. A kitchen table, a couple chairs.

A six pack of Coca-Cola Classic.

DIDI

*(Late, late at night. DIDI is standing at the kitchen window, watching it rain. FRED is standing next to her. He is raising his hand, he is about to touch her, he--*

*No. He isn't going to touch her.*

*(With genuine, good-natured interest)*

Fred, are you as unattracted to me as I am to you?

FRED

*(Just as good naturedly)*

I think so.

DIDI

Still, there is this...urge....

*(She moves around him, circling him.)*

This...compulsion. It's like I'm not really out shopping, but it's on sale.

*(FRED moves to the refrigerator. DIDI looks him over, half-heartedly.)*

I don't need it, I can't really use it, it doesn't quite fit, but I have this impulse to buy it anyway.

*(FRED takes a can of Coke out of the refrigerator.)*

Are those cold enough yet?

FRED

They're okay.

DIDI

There's plenty of ice.

FRED

I like it straight out of the can.

*(He holds the can up, so it catches the light.)*

We are a soda-driven society, you know. And in the driver's seat, is Coke.

You pop the top.

*(He does.)*

You drain it down.

*(He starts to chug it down.)*

You feel a little bit better, then fifteen minutes later you go back to feeling hostile again.

DIDI

Oh, I hope you didn't take my saying that about shopping personally.

FRED

Me? Why would I take a comparison of sex with me to a bad day sorting through remnants, out-size garments, and designer nightmares at Filene's Basement personally? However, I hope you don't mind my saying that if I had been even the slightest bit attracted to you, I would have been very hurt.

If I had.

DIDI

But you're not.

FRED

No.

*(Still drinking his Coke)*

I'm sorry.

DIDI

Oh, don't be sorry.

*(She sits down at the kitchen table.)*

It's just one of those slow-mo emotional train wrecks you find yourself living, from time to time. Who would have thought that neither one of us would be the slightest bit attracted to the other? God knows it doesn't take much.

FRED

Look, Didi, it's not like when I left the house this evening—

DIDI

I know that, Fred—

FRED

I didn't set out, hellbent on being unattracted to you—

DIDI

Fred, believe me—

FRED

Normally, my libido—

DIDI

You don't have to say another word. I know.

*(FRED starts in on the Coke again)*

DIDI

Still, you have to admit—it goes against the odds. I mean, think how hard it would be if we were actually *trying* to find two attractive single people who have everything in common but who, after spending seven hours together, can't manufacture the slightest bit of the most base, common attraction for each other? I mean, even if we had a basic level of dislike, or even revulsion to overcome, pheromones alone should have done the trick.

FRED

Obviously, it's one for the record books. Ripley's Believe It Or Not. Fred and Didi's Date of Doom—they'll put us right under the listings for the two-headed goats.

DIDI

No, they'll put us above the listing for the two-headed goats. Fred and Didi's Date of Doom, alphabetically, would go above the....

*(FRED looks at her as he crumples the Coke can.)*

Well, maybe it's the weather. Some freak Canadian storm front barreling out of the frozen North. Or, a weather related condition, like a once-in-a-millennium negative planetary alignment, my Pluto in your Vega—not that I believe in that sort of thing. Or maybe—maybe it's happening everywhere—to everyone! Maybe no one, anywhere on the planet, is attracted to anyone else tonight.

FRED

Now there's a comforting thought.

DIDI

When I didn't feel it start to happen at dinner, I got a little anxious, but I kept telling myself, sometimes you don't feel it at dinner.

FRED

Sometimes, the times when you don't feel it at dinner are the best times of all.

DIDI

Right.

FRED

Sometimes, you're with the last person on Earth you think you'll be attracted to, you're totally unaware of it, and then it hits you. I like it like that. When it creeps up on you.

DIDI

Like slow, steady, fatal jungle fever. One minute you think you're fine. The next minute, you know it's too late.

FRED

Of course, I also like it when you see her across a room for the first time and something about her just takes you—

DIDI

Your insides start to boil—

FRED

And you have to have her, you have to do it, you have to press your body up against hers or die!

DIDI

It's so wonderful when it happens like that! It's like—all of a sudden, you feel you're the focus of all this energy, and power. Possibly all the power in the world. You feel like it's flooding through you, radiating out of you, flowing directly from the center of the earth, just to you.

FRED

You do?

DIDI

Don't you?

FRED

For me it's just...feeling like sticking it in.

DIDI

And...?

FRED

That s all.

But it's a very, very strong...feeling.

DIDI

Oh. Well, it's probably the same exact feeling. We just verbalize it differently.

*(FRED lunges for the refrigerator, yanks out another Coke, begins drinking it for all he's worth.)*

Fred—if you don't mind my asking...is it the sugar you're after?

FRED

*(Gulping, he replies as he drinks.)*

No.

DIDI

The carbonation?

FRED

No.

DIDI

The trace of phosphorous and sodium?

FRED

You know about the trace of phosphorous?

DIDI

*(Shrugging)*

I read labels. So—is it the phosphorous?

FRED

No. It's a secret formula, you know. Everybody knows what goes into a can of Coke, but nobody knows why it turns into Coke in the can. Nobody knows why Coke connects people. Why it settles them down, at the same time the caffeine and sugar are revving them up. It goes against the laws of nature, for Coke to do what it can do. You sure you don't want one?

DIDI

I'm sure.

FRED

Because you'd be amazed what a Coke can do for a person, it's restorative, it really is—

DIDI

WELL, MAYBE I DON'T WANT TO BE RESTORED!

*(Pause)*

I mean, I never liked Coke, okay?

FRED

Okay.

DIDI

I'm sorry, Fred.

FRED

What's there to be sorry about? It's just a can of Coke. It's okay.

DIDI

*(Sighing)*

We have to face it—

FRED

I know what you're going to say, but let's not jump the gun here—

DIDI

—it's not coming—

FRED

—so it's seven hours late, so what—

DIDI

—it's not your fault and it's not my fault.

FRED

—there's no law that says the time limit is seven hours, after all—

DIDI

—it's just one of those freak accidents. We have to get up and walk away from it. We have to—

FRED

*(Has drained the last sip of Coke; resolutely slams the can on the table)*

—IT COULD STILL BE COMING. Now. I have done my very best to feel it, but if you could—

DIDI

Are you saying I'm not trying to feel it?

FRED

Not exactly, Didi—

DIDI

You have no right to say I'm not trying to feel it!

FRED

Okay, okay. I wouldn't say you weren't trying...a little.

DIDI

Oh, you wouldn't. What was your first clue? The fact that I ate everything on my plate even though I detest Tex-Mex?

FRED

You hate Tex-Mex?

DIDI

That I laughed at everything you said, including the Ollie and Oley jokes, which are really just thinly disguised Polish jokes, which I find bigoted, stupid, and crude?

FRED

*(Crushed)*

The Ollie and Oley jokes are my best material.

DIDI

Or was it maybe the fact that I have made constant eye contact with you for seven hours, without once smirking, or giving any indication at all that you have a large piece of salsa-stained lettuce stuck in your teeth?

*(He removes the piece of lettuce, horrified. He buries his face in his hands.)*

FRED

It's not coming, Didi.

DIDI

No. It's not.

FRED

Look, I'd better go. I should have left hours ago, as soon as I realized I wasn't attracted to you.

DIDI

Don't be so hard on yourself, Fred. Just because you're unattracted to someone doesn't mean they're not attracted to you. Attraction is like a virus, you know. That's the beauty of it. When absolutely necessary, you can lower your resistance—or your standards—and it's contagious. You can catch it from somebody—

*(She snaps her fingers.)*

Just like that. For all you knew, I was attracted to you, and everything was going to work out fine.

FRED

I knew you weren't attracted to me.

DIDI

You did? Then why didn't you go home!

FRED

Well, I mean—it just didn't make sense that you wouldn't be a little bit attracted to me, did it?

*(DIDI says nothing)*

You yourself said it would only have taken a tiny little bit of attraction, right? Think how small a virus is, it's minute, it's infinitesimal...the evening would have worked out fine if you'd just been attracted to even the smallest thing about me—like my sense of humor, for instance.

*(He pauses; DIDI says nothing)*

Or the way my eyes crinkle up when I laugh....

*(Grasping at straws, or in this case, his shirt)*

Or, or, or...my shirt—

DIDI

Oh, I like your shirt.

FRED

You do?

DIDI

Just not enough.

*(Silence)*

I'm sure the sex would have been very nice, though, if I had.

FRED

Sex as an impulse purchase?

DIDI

Oh, you're generally thrilled with an impulse purchase. At least till you get it home.

FRED

YOU ARE HOME!!!

DIDI

Well, that's the downside. But on the other hand—I'm not the one who has to go home tonight in the rain.

*(She is at the window, looking out.)*

Oh, look, someone's making a run for it. Look at him go. He's getting soaked, poor bastard.

*(FRED is at the window, watching the poor wet man's progress.)*

DIDI

He'd be better off walking, don't you think?

FRED

Oh, I don't know.

*(He moves away from the window, despondently, and sits down.)*

You don't know what he's running from.

DIDI

The point is, he'll get just as wet running as walking. There are only so many raindrops per square inch. You have to go through them either way. All you do when you run in the rain is hit the rain harder, you see?

FRED

Fight or flight. It's an irresistible impulse—like shopping, Didi. A survival instinct. Homo Sapiens have two choices, when they're backed into a corner, when they're in a desperate situation—say, like this. And if they don't fight, and they don't take flight—you know what they get? Cancer.

I'm getting it right now.

*(He sinks into the chair, head in hands.)*

DIDI

Fred—

*(She goes to him, to comfort him.)*

Fred, it's just a date that didn't work out.

FRED

Right this instant the chemistry of my body is altering. Certain vital defense mechanisms are breaking down, giving up, eroding. They will no longer recognize the mutagens, the carcinogens, the million daily poisonous free radicals as the enemies they are—but will welcome them in to rewrite my molecular structure with open arms.

DIDI

Look, uh, I had pretty high expectations about this date too, Fred, but don't you think you're taking it a bit too far?

FRED

It is always a matter of life and death. Anne Sexton.

DIDI

If the thunder don't get you, the lightning will. The Grateful Dead.

FRED

By the deeds of man, the world is made, and unmade every day.

DIDI

So is a bed. Didi Watson.

FRED

The wheel of life is—just as a general interest question, did you put fresh sheets on yours?

DIDI

Yes.

FRED

I did too. I feel like a schmuck about it now, of course. The old ones weren't even that dirty.

DIDI

I didn't know guys did that. Fred, that's very sweet.

FRED

It doesn't feel sweet. It feels pathetic.

DIDI

Well, it is pathetic. In retrospect, that is.

FRED

I can feel it starting again. Failed impulses. Thwarted urges. The duplication of bad memories, flooding from one organ to another. Replicated in cell after cell after cell.

DIDI

Look, Fred. If this sort of everyday tragedy gave you cancer, nobody would live long enough to get it. Only seven or eight people would make it past the

age of seventeen. If disappointment killed people—hell, when the Beatles broke up the entire baby boom would have dropped dead.

FRED

That's right, that's right. When in doubt, drag the Beatles into it. Disappointment does kill people. They're just too stupid, anymore, to feel it, that's all.

DIDI

Well—I'm no expert—but after the events of this evening, that sounds like an excellent evolutionary adaptation to me.

FRED

What do you think, that you're immune to this? If attraction is like a virus, unattraction is a super virulent strain. Just wait till it starts eating you up. Then we'll see how calm and cool and detached you are. Then we'll see what you have to say.

DIDI

We don't have to wait, Fred. Because I'll tell you. If I woke up tomorrow morning—alone, in my wasted clean sheets—and found a lump in my breast—it would be much easier accepting that the malignancy was caused by the Beatles breaking up than it would be to accept that it was caused by not being attracted to you.

FRED

*(Outraged!)*

You don't have the right to get cancer from the Beatles breaking up! Only they do. It was their disappointment—their date that didn't work out. But you can probably dredge up more genuine sadness about that event than you can for half the significant love affairs you've had that have gone bad.

DIDI

Fred, I'm sorry you're not attracted to me. I'm sorry I'm not attracted to you. However, I am not ashamed to say that at this moment I am still sorrier that the Beatles broke up. Seriously, aren't you?

FRED

No.

DIDI

You didn't like the Beatles?

FRED

I loved the Beatles. They changed my life.

DIDI

I wouldn't have.

FRED

That's clear.

DIDI

How long does an affair like the one we might have had usually last? Four months? Five?

FRED

Oh, no. We could have deluded ourselves for six or seven months at least.

DIDI

Fine, six or seven months it is. The loss of six or seven months with me, versus the loss of the Beatles. THE BEATLES!!!! How can you even begin to compare the two? I admit that I've spent a few ridiculous moments this evening, imagining our life together, picking out my wedding dress, watching us spend our golden years together. But that's not realistic, Fred.

That is not really in the cards.

All that is really in the cards, what you would have ultimately gotten from me, is this:

A six or seven month relationship, at the end of which you have my list of favorite restaurants to add to yours, as places to take future dates.

The secret place to press down hard on a woman's pelvic bone so she'll really come—

*(She grabs his hand and places it on her pelvis for an instant.)*

—here, right here, got it? Okay?

An untold amount of senseless grief and aggravation—starting with that shirt.

A hell of a lot of great sex.

Some choice cocktail conversation one-liners and jokes, here, here's one, so you won't go away empty-handed: Question: How do you circumcise a whale? Answer: Send down foreskin divers.

And that, Fred, would be about it. That would be what you would have gotten out of a relationship with me. But the Beatles...the Beatles, if they had stayed together, would have given you more than I ever could. Except children, I suppose...if we had let it get that far. Which we obviously couldn't.

FRED

Obviously! Because we would be too busy bickering about the Beatles! You think I don't know why you keep retreating into this Beatles nonsense? Well, I do. The breakup of the Beatles, while tragic, is also understandable to you. Other tragedies in your life are incomprehensible, but this, alone among what you consider your great personal catastrophes, makes sense. This one has a reason you can pin down, and understand.

Yoko.

DIDI

*(Oh, how ridiculous)*

Linda.

FRED

*(Don't make me laugh)*

YOKO.

DIDI

*(I'm getting annoyed.)*

LINDA.

FRED

*(I'm getting annoyed.)*

YOKO.

DIDI

*(Don't you dare say Yoko to me again !)*

LINDA!

FRED

*(Panic envelops him.)*

What am I doing here!

*(He pulls open the refrigerator, takes out a Coke, and drinks it for all he's worth.)*

It all started out so normally tonight. It all started out the way it always starts. Why can't I feel it? Where is it! Why isn't it coming! Why, all of a sudden, is tonight the night it's gone!

DIDI

I guess that's the way it finally starts, in the end. Just like any other day. And it keeps on until you realize. It's not coming. It's never coming. You will never feel it again.

FRED

*(Chugging desperately)*

No, the weather will change. The planets will realign themselves. The strange powers at work that are keeping us from feeling it—what am I saying? I don't understand what I'm saying. I don't understand anything anymore, if you want to know the truth. Nothing. Not one thing. Even the things that don't go wrong, I can't figure out. Something good happens, I'm not really happy about it because I know it might just as easily be something bad. And you know something else? Lately, if I had to make a choice between something good that doesn't make sense, and something bad that I can understand—I'll take something bad.

DIDI

You don't really mean that Fred.

FRED

Oh yes I do. I could stand anything. I could stand it all. If I could just understand.

DIDI

Anything, Fred?

FRED

Yes. I can't go on and on with nothing making sense. Every time I turn around there's a knife in my back and I can't figure out how it got there. It's

not the pain, Didi. I can take the pain. I could take more of it—I know I could. If it just made sense. If I could just understand.

DIDI

Then the good news is the bad news, Fred. Because all you have to understand is—that not understanding is the thing you have to stand.

FRED

*(Doubling over)*

Oh, God.

DIDI

Yes. It has the chill of the inevitable, doesn't it? The gut kick of the "Why didn't I see it before?" Not understanding is the thing you have to stand.

FRED

*(Experiencing the gut-kicking chill in all its glory, he lunges for the refrigerator, yanks out a Coke, even though he hasn't finished the other one.)*

This is terrible. This is much worse than I thought. It's been getting harder and harder, every time I meet someone, to go out on a date, to do this, to feel it again, but this is definitely the worst. The worst by far.

*(He pops the top.)*

I keep telling myself—

*(Talking and drinking from both Cokes at the same time, alternating, without realizing he's working two Cokes at once, like a cigarette smoker smoking two cigarettes.)*

—nobody knows but you.... If you hide it they won't see.... You think it's written all over your face, that they'll run from you when they see what you are, but you hide it, and they don't see...this is just a stage you're passing through, things aren't going so well for you, it's no wonder you feel so empty...so cold...so alone.... Just go through the motions, go, go, they won't see.

*(He holds both Cokes up at once and realizes. Terror strikes. He may begin to weep.)*

God I wish I'd been attracted to you!

DIDI

Yes. It's a lot easier tracking a basic attraction down, chasing it into bed, and killing it than it is figuring it out, out here. Trapped out here, like this, it's

like the Twilight Zone. How do you even know when it's over? How can you hope to keep score? Once you get it into bed, even the pain is comforting, familiar. If we could just have made it into bed, we'd be safe from all this. If we could just have made it into bed, we'd be back in the known world.

FRED

I feel....

*(The calm that comes after the worst that can possibly happen happens)*

I feel like I've already been through a very comforting, familiar, destructive relationship with you. I feel like we've done every possible stupid thing we can to fool ourselves, and each other, reopened all the standard wounds, given them a chance to heal, opened them up again, and there is no way to keep it up any longer. It's over.

*(Longing and regret overpower him again.)*

And we never even got to have the sex!

DIDI

But you did get the pelvic bone trick. More than you've gotten out of most relationships, I'll bet.

FRED

Yes, but I haven't gotten the chance to try it out yet.

DIDI

Are you holding out for the names of the restaurants? Here, I'll write them down for you.

FRED

That's not what I mean.

DIDI

Then what do you want?

FRED

I want to understand. One thing.

DIDI

Look—it's not my fault.

FRED

I'm not saying it is!

DIDI

It's no one's fault! Let's just drop it, better luck with the hunt next time, let's just move on.

FRED

But it has to be someone's fault. It had everything going for it.

DIDI

I KNOW THAT! DON'T YOU THINK I KNOW THAT! I heard wedding bells as I walked into the restaurant, okay? I was already making up the guest list. I was already praying the children would have my hair. What more do you want me to say?

FRED

*(A drowning man clinging to a life raft)*

I just want to understand. One thing.

DIDI

*(Silence)*

All right. Although normally that would be impossible, Fred, this is your lucky day.

FRED

What do you mean?

DIDI

I mean, I'm not attracted to you, you're not attracted to me, so we will just have to do something...else, won't we? It makes perfect sense.

*(She sits down on a chair, pats the chair next to her.)*

Sit down. I will help you understand one thing.

FRED

Just like that?

DIDI

Well, you know what the alternative is....

FRED

Cancer.

DIDI

Right. So whenever you're ready, however you want to, begin.

FRED

*(He takes in a deep breath.)*

I'm forty years old, my wife left me, the apartment went with her, I feel ridiculous.

DIDI

*(Pause)*

Is that it?

FRED

No, no, I feel ridiculous doing this.

DIDI

Surely that can't be hard to understand.

FRED

*(Defiantly)*

I'm forty years old, my wife left me, the apartment went with her, my mother just died, I have no income to speak of, and much to my surprise, no sex drive. Thank God they brought back Classic Coke. Other than that my life is absolute zero.

DIDI

*(Smiling)*

Minus four hundred and fifty-nine degrees. That's absolute zero. It's very cold. It is so cold, in fact, that it does not exist naturally. Scientists, in labs, have to manufacture it, at great trouble and expense. They make cold so cold that there is nowhere in the universe that is colder—except, perhaps, in the cold made by other organisms in their absolute zero labs.

You may have stumbled out of the temperate zone tonight, Fred. And strayed into that first little patch of ice and snow. But when it comes to absolute zero, you're just a beginner. A rank amateur.

You don't really know anything about absolute zero, Fred. And trust me.  
You don't want to know.

FRED

Is this supposed to comfort me?

DIDI

*(Shrugging)*

In an odd way, I suppose.

FRED

You and reality don't have much of a relationship, do you?

DIDI

I thought we'd worked through the recrimination stage, Fred. I thought we were on our way to something new. But—here—

*(She gets another can of Coke out of the refrigerator.)*

Have another one. The last two seem to have worn off.

*(He doesn't take it.)*

Come on. Take it. Between you, and what you view as absolute zero, there is only this can of Coke. Whatever you can get from it, I suggest you do.