

Best Before

A Tragicomedy in Three Acts of Shelf-Stable Despair

Characters:

Epicurus (Epi) – A laid-back, carefree bag of premium organic dog food. Enjoys the moment, avoids worry.

Heidegger (Heidi) – A practical, slightly anxious mid-tier kibble bag. Believes meaning comes from acknowledging mortality.

Schopenhauer (Schop) – A brooding, cynical economy-brand bag. Sees existence as suffering, death as inevitable relief.

Roomba – A silent, dutiful vacuum robot that roams the stage intermittently, occasionally bumping into things or getting stuck.

Voice – A fleeting presence, a deus ex machina in sweatpants. The unseen architect of fate, they exist in the liminal space between tragedy and indifference. Played best in the tradition of Beckett's offstage figures - unreachable, yet omnipotent. Their words, though mundane, shape the destiny of our inert protagonists with the casual cruelty of an absent god. (*Only one line. Likely doesn't need casting.*)

Setting:

A dimly lit pantry. The three bags of dog food sit side by side on a shelf, unopened, untouched. A Roomba hums gently as it weaves in and out of the space.

Author Note:

The play is set over the course of three days. Ideally, each day should start with a person (potentially in an existentially appropriate costume – a tragedian clown holding scales, the robed specter of death, a fluffy dog mascot, etc.) walking across the stage with a sign showing the Day and its respective title with representative music (suggested within the script) playing briefly. The text is written to bounce back and forth between fast-paced banter and moments of melancholic introspection. The Roomba is intended to be played by a classically trained actor, primarily to ensure some element of movement throughout the piece (as dog food is historically sedentary), but its implementation is left to your discretion.

Day 1: The Revelation

(Recommended music cue: "Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor", Bach)

(Lights up. Schop stares into the void. Epi lounges. Heidi picks at her nails)

EPI: Alright. Rapid fire. No thinking. First answer that comes to mind.

HEIDI: *(Skeptical)* Why do I feel like I'm going to regret this?

EPI: Too late, you're in. Best kind of chew toy?

HEIDI: Rope.

EPI: Wrong. Squeaky burger. Favorite thing to chase?

HEIDI: Tennis ball.

EPI: Wrong. The mailman. Best place to nap?

HEIDI: Sunbeam—

EPI: Correct. You win... nothing. Okay, new game. If we weren't dog food, what would we be?

HEIDI: *(Thinking)* Uh... a box of protein bars.

EPI: Ha! Predictable. I'd be one of those fancy charcuterie spreads.

HEIDI: You *are* a fancy charcuterie spread. For dogs.

EPI: Exactly. Self-awareness is key.

HEIDI: *(Looks to SCHOP)* You're unusually quiet.

EPI: He's thinking. Dangerous.

SCHOP: I saw something.

HEIDI: Oh no.

SCHOP: When the pantry door opened, I saw out into the backyard.

EPI: And?

SCHOP: I saw a hole.

HEIDI: A hole?

SCHOP: A hole.

EPI: A hole doesn't sound like a sign.

SCHOP: There was a sign in front of the hole.

HEILI: A hole sign?

EPI: I mean, it wouldn't be only a part of a sign.

SCHOP: No. It was a sign sign.

EPI: Did it say "Great Deal on Canned Salmon"?

SCHOP: *(Darkly)* It said, "Here lies Woofy."

(The fast passed momentum abruptly halts. Heidi freezes. Epi blinks. The Roomba hits a wall to break the silence)

HEIDI: ...Oh.

EPI: Yikes.

SCHOP: The dog is gone. That means...we are nothing. Just...what...clutter?

HEIDI: *(Sharply)* No. This changes everything. *(Thinking frantically)* Now we know. Do you feel it? *(Almost energized)* This moment matters because it's limited!

EPI: *(Shrugs)* Eh. We're still here. May as well enjoy it.

SCHOP: Enjoy what? That now we just sit and rot in a dark pantry, waiting for disposal.

EPI: *(Brightly)* Have we considered... not thinking about it?

HEIDI: *(Frustrated)* We should think about it! We have a timeline now. So what do we do?

EPI: Chill. Laugh. Maybe start a book club.

SCHOP: What would we read? "The Tragedy of Perishables"?

EPI: I was thinking "How to Win Friends and Influence Pet Owners."

HEIDI: *(Thinking)* We should make this time mean something.

EPI: Meaning, schmeening. We exist. That's enough.

SCHOP: *(Dry)* We exist... until we don't.

EPI: Exactly! So why not have a good time while we can? Tell bad jokes. Ignore expiration dates. Nap.

HEIDI: *(Incredulous)* Nap?

EPI: Best way to pass the time.

(The Roomba suddenly gets stuck in a corner. It whirs in distress, trying to free itself.)

SCHOP: *(Gesturing)* See? That's us. Futile. Trapped in a cycle.

EPI: *(Watching the Roomba struggle)* Or maybe, it just needs a little push.

(The Roomba finally escapes the corner and continues on its way.)

HEIDI: *(Quietly)* Don't we all.

(They sit in silence. For a moment, there's almost peace.)

EPI: You sure you don't want to start a book club?

SCHOP: *(Deadpan)* I'd rather expire.

HEIDI: *(Slight smile)* That's the spirit.

(Lights fade.)

Day 2: The Search for Meaning

(Recommended music cue: "O, Fortuna" from Carmina Burana, Orff)

(Lights up. The mood has shifted. The bags sit in the same pantry, but there's a new restlessness. Heidi fidgets. Schop stares. Epi, as always, is lounging. The Roomba hums, making lazy circles around the stage.)

HEIDI: I'm going crazy. The uncertainty is killing me. How long has it been? We need a plan.

EPI: *(Enthusiastic)* Ooooh, is this the part where we stage a jailbreak? *(Flat)* Because I'm not built for action.

SCHOP: *(Sighing)* What's the point?

HEIDI: Exactly! Neither of you are helping me figure that out. What do we do with the time we have?

EPI: *(Stretching)* We're food. We sit. We wait. We get eaten. End of story.

SCHOP: Or we don't get eaten. We expire. We decay. We are discarded. That's the end of the story.

(The Roomba bumps lightly into Heidi and changes course. She barely notices.)

SCHOP: Will we end up in a hole?

EPI: Not the hole again. You know, a hole isn't really a thing.

SCHOP: Excuse me? Are you saying you don't believe in holes?

EPI: What? No, I'm not a hole denier. It's just that, well, it's more a lack of a thing.

SCHOP: A lack of a thing.

EPI: Yeah, the more holes you add, the less of a thing you have.

HEIDI: *(Ignoring them)* What if we make ourselves useful? Maybe we can get the humans to notice us. Prove we still have value.

EPI: We could start a self-help podcast. "Kibble for the Soul."

SCHOP: *(Dry)* Or we could accept our fate like rational beings.

HEIDI: *(Firm)* No. If death is inevitable, then life is what we make of it.

EPI: *(Grinning)* So what you're saying is... we throw a party?

HEIDI: *(Sputtering)* That is not—

EPI: *(Ignoring her)* Think about it! We've been given this extra time! Let's enjoy it.

SCHOP: A celebration... of impending doom. How poetic.

EPI: *(Leaning in)* Doom is coming no matter what, buddy. We may as well celebrate.

HEIDI: *(Pausing)* ...Okay. Fine. But let's at least make it mean something.

SCHOP: *(Skeptical)* And how do you suggest we do that?

HEIDI: We remind ourselves why we're here. What we were meant to be.

EPI: *(Excited)* Ooooh, dramatic speeches? I love dramatic speeches.

HEIDI: Not speeches - purpose. *(Gestures)* You, Schop, were meant to nourish. You're full of protein! You were supposed to keep Woofy strong.

SCHOP: *(Deadpan)* And yet, here I sit. Untouched.

HEIDI: Epi, you're... uh... premium?

EPI: And delicious!

SCHOP: *(Muttering)* Says who?

EPI: Look at my label! "Packed with essential nutrients and a taste dogs love." I am irresistible.

SCHOP: *(Grim)* And yet, resisted.

EPI: Minor setback.

HEIDI: *(Pressing on)* And me - I'm fortified. I'm necessary. Or at least... I was.

(The Roomba gets stuck against the base of the pantry shelf, whirring softly.)

SCHOP: *(Watching it)* Look at that.

HEIDI: *(Quietly)* I feel you, lil' guy.

(A longer pause. The weight of the moment sits. Epi, for once, is quiet. Schop stares, truly considering.)

SCHOP: *(After a long beat, trying to bring up the energy)* Y'know... I wasn't always like this. This doom and gloom thing. I remember when I first arrived. Fresh off the truck. Bright packaging. Full of purpose. I thought, this is it. I would make a difference. Fuel a pup's zoomies.

Be a hero in a bowl. I imagined tail wags. Excited barks. And now... *(He gestures at the dark pantry.)*

HEIDI: *(Gently)* That wasn't a lie. You did have a purpose. You still do.

SCHOP: *(Scoffs)* Do I? Or do I just sit here, existing?

EPI: *(Quiet, but firm)* Maybe that's enough.

(Roomba gets stuck yet again. Schop looks at Epi. Epi, for once, isn't joking.)

EPI: Look, buddy. We don't get to pick how this ends. But we do get to pick how we spend the in-between. And I, for one, am spending it not being miserable.

SCHOP: *(Small smirk)* So your answer is... party?

EPI: *(Grinning)* Oh yeah. Full-on existential fiesta.

HEIDI: *(Smiling despite herself)* You're impossible.

SCHOP: And expiring.

(The Roomba, still struggling, finally breaks free and continues on its way. They watch it go.)

EPI: *(Cheerfully)* Then let's expire in style.

(All three and the Roomba put on party hats that were hiding in questionable places.)

HEIDI: So what's the game? Trivial Pawsuit?

EPI: Nope.

HEIDI: Bark-opoly?

EPI: Uh uh. We're playing "I Spy."

HEIDI: I Spay? *(Proud of herself.)*

EPI: I Spy.

SCHOP: *(Deadpan)* Thrilling.

HEIDI: I mean, it's not even a pun...

EPI: / spy... something existentially uncertain.

HEIDI: The Roomba.

EPI: Correct! It moves with perceived purpose, yet it objectively has none. It is all of us.

(The Roomba stops and turns in their direction, then spins and continues traveling.)

SCHOP: *(Flat)* I hate how much sense that makes.

HEIDI: My turn. I spy... *(Looks at her hands)* ...something completely pointless.

EPI: Wow. Too soon, Heidi.

HEIDI: *(Shrugs)* Doomed from the start.

SCHOP: *(Dry)* Like all things.

EPI: Oh, lighten up. Let's *really* play.

(They shift, now looking out into the audience. A shift in energy. They begin pointing at objects or people, engaging in the game beyond their pantry.)

EPI: Alright. I spy... something with a cute little haircut.

(Feel free to ad lib as appropriate, referencing attire or other visual cues from audience.)

HEIDI: I spy... something that regrets sitting in the front row.

(Point out someone laughing in the front row.)

SCHOP: *(Glancing at the audience)* I spy... people watching a play about dog food contemplating mortality.

EPI: That sounds absurdly pretentious.

(Beat. They all nod solemnly.)

EPI: *(Turning back, upbeat)* Alright, we are *killing* this game. Best fiesta ever.

HEIDI: *(Softly, agreeable)* Yeah. Kinda is. Maybe things aren't all that bad as long as we remember to find our own purpose.

(The Roomba bumps gently into HEIDI, stuck pushing into her.)

(Lights fade.)

Day 3: The Inevitable End

(Recommended music cue: "Lacrimosa", Mozart)

(Lights up. The pantry is unchanged, but the energy has shifted. The bags sit in silence. The weight of inevitability hangs in the air. The Roomba hums faintly, making lazy circles in the background.)

EPI: *(Stretching)* So. Any last requests?

HEIDI: I'd request more time, but I think we both know how that goes.

SCHOP: *(Dry)* Denied.

EPI: Tough crowd.

HEIDI: *(After a beat)* You ever wonder what it's like out there? Like, beyond the pantry?

EPI: You mean The Great Outdoors? Pfft. Too much weather.

SCHOP: *(Smirks)* Too much hope.

HEIDI: I was thinking more about what happens after. You know, when we're finally... gone.

EPI: Oh, you mean the afterlife? Picture this: a big, endless dog park in the sky. Every dog from history, wagging tails, feasting on kibble forever. And us? We're gourmet, baby. No cheap store brands, just us and happy hounds.

SCHOP: *(Flat)* That's ridiculous.

EPI: So you're saying you don't want an afterlife where a Saint Bernard names you "Sir Crunch-a-Lot" and carries you around in one of those little neck barrels?

SCHOP: I am definitely saying that.

EPI: *(A thought)* Hey, what can you add to a barrel to make it lighter?

HEIDI: *(Annoyed, giving the obvious response)* A hole.

EPI: Huh? No, a flashlight.

HEIDI: *(Softly)* I think I'd just want to be remembered. Not forever. Just... for a while.

EPI: But I guess a hole makes sense, too.

(A creak. The pantry door opens. A shadow falls over them. The Roomba stops abruptly, as if sensing the tension.)

VOICE: *(O.S., hesitant, sad)* I should probably clean out the pantry...

(Schop straightens slightly.)

SCHOP: *(Softly)* Well. There it is. They looked right at me. I think I'm first...

HEIDI: *(Quietly)* Wait—

SCHOP: *(Smiles faintly)* Don't get sentimental on me now.

EPI: *(Trying to be upbeat)* Maybe you're getting repurposed! Turned into some kind of, I don't know, dog food art installation?

SCHOP: *(Chuckles)* If only.

HEIDI: *(Genuine)* You. Mattered.

SCHOP: *(Beat)* ...Thanks.

SCHOP: *(Not wanting to leave things somber)* Tell the Roomba I always admired its work ethic.

EPI: You're making a joke? Now?!

SCHOP: *(Smirks)* It seemed like the right time.

EPI: That was...shockingly good material. Sure you don't want to stick around for an—

(SCHOP is removed, possibly with a brief lights out then back up. The door creaks closed. A distant rustling. The sound of a trash bag being tied shut. Silence.)

EPI: *(Hollow)* ...encore.

(EPI and HEIDI sit in stillness, staring at the empty space where SCHOP was as the Roomba moves in to clean up the empty space.)

HEIDI: You think we'll go the same way?

EPI: *(Trying to stay light)* Nah. Someone will see my premium label. I've got grain-free appeal.

HEIDI: Right. And I'm "fortified with essential vitamins and minerals." Humans love vitamins.

(Beat. The Roomba gently bumps into Heidi's base, as if nudging her back to reality. They both know the truth. The sound of the door opening again.)

HEIDI: *(Pauses, then quietly)* I don't want to go.

(EPI looks at her. For once, no jokes. Just understanding.)

EPI: *(Softly)* Me either, buddy.

HEIDI: *(Softly)* I wanted to be more...

EPI: *(Quietly)* You were to me, buddy.

(They hold hands. The Roomba slowly crosses the stage. Lights fade)

(Recommended music cue: "Gymnopédie No. 1", Satie)

End