

# The Atomic Cafe

AN EXCERPT FROM THE FULL-LENGTH PLAY

By John Moore



“The Atomic Cafe” is set at a bustling Irish pub across the street from a Catholic church that has just been the site of a funeral mass for 30-year-old Peter Wagner. Convenience makes this pub the ideal place for an impromptu wake. It’s late in the play, after all the pleasantries have been spoken, the whiskey has made its way into bloodstreams and people are finally getting down to telling the truth. There is one truth this family has avoided speaking directly of for more than decade. Only it’s one truth that may be nothing of the kind. But sometimes what we fear most is the thing that’s easiest for us to believe.

FRANK is the dead man’s oldest brother. He is 32. His mother is, MARY. She is married to Dean, who is in the early stages of dementia. ANTHONY is another brother, 28. An interloper named THOMAS is an evidently ill young man whose possible relationship to the decedent is assumed by all but never openly asked about. This pub is filled with other strangers, distant friends and even more distant family. The mystery woman at the end is just that.

At this point in the play, some family bickering has some uncomfortable IMPLIED PEOPLE heading for the door.

Mary: Francis, people are starting to leave. Say something. Quickly.

Frank: What do you want me to say?

Mary: You were supposed to deliver the eulogy, weren’t you? ... That is, if you had bothered to arrive for the mass on time.

Frank: Well, yes, mother, but as we all know, I didn’t. How many times are you going to make me beg for your forgiveness today?

Mary: Just say it. Now.

Frank: What? Here ... at the bar?

Mary: If not now, Francis, when? I assume you at least gave it some thought.

(FRANK is resigned, defeated and drunk).

Frank: Why yes, mother, I did. All right, then. Everyone, can I have your attention for one moment, please? Can we turn the music down? ... On behalf of the family, I’d like to thank you all for coming today, as we say goodbye to our brother. And I want to apologize for all that ... discord before ... This has been a very difficult day for all of us, as

you all can no doubt understand - (Stops) - I made some notes for this.

(FRANK fishes a cocktail napkin from his coat.)

Frank: Let's see, here ... (dryly) "...Joseph Conrad once said that the dead can only live with the exact intensity and quality imparted by the living." ... Jesus, now I don't even know what the hell that means. Made sense at 2 o'clock in the morning ... I was looking up quotes because I don't know what the hell I am supposed to tell you about Peter ... I guess you can't know everything about a person. No matter how much you think you do, you can't ever really know someone. And, the fact is, I didn't know a damned thing about my brother. Well, one thing. I know he had a lot more courage than I do. Me? I committed suicide, too. Only I never bothered to kill myself.

(FRANK gulps down his drink, and more people head for the exits).

Anthony: Nice job, asshole.

Mary: Francis, that's enough. Please stop now.

Frank: I'm sorry, mom. I know I wasn't supposed to talk about that. I was supposed to choose my words more carefully. Otherwise, something might slip out... like the truth. OK, well, I'll try again. Here goes: We all feel awful about what happened to Peter. Just sick, sick, rickety sick about it. Sick and tired and guilty as hell. So here we are, drinking ourselves into oblivion and punishing ourselves for past mistakes, all the while not learning a damned thing about how we can go on to make new and better mistakes.

Mary: This is not what I had in mind, Francis, as a tribute to my son.

Frank: You're right, mom ... You're right, you're right, you're right. (He closes his eyes and clasps his hands into the praying position.) Dear God, please look after our brother and care for him and cherish him in death the way we all did in life. (Opening his eyes.) I'm sorry, mother, but this is bullshit. Because the truth is that our God, the one you gave to us, is a God who wants nothing more to do with your son, your poor, dead son, than any of the rest of us did. And he wants nothing to do with that man (pointing at an THOMAS), who -- Jesus, just look at that poor bastard -- who's apparently not that far behind

him. Hah! Poor Peter. Poor, poor pitiful Peter. Keeper of the gate, but he can't get in. (Seriously, to MARY:) Your God, mother, is a vengeful god. He is. And he struck down your son as an example to all other sinners in the world who might still be saved. Some God.

Mary: (matter-of-factly throughout, until the very end) THAT'S ENOUGH. Sit down, Francis. I have something to say now. You all seem to think that because I am still a religious woman that I am not capable of seeing "the truth." Well, I can see plenty, Francis, and here's the truth as I see it: I'll wake up tomorrow morning and I'll draw breath, but my son won't. That's what I know is true. It took the death of one of my children to bring the rest of them together in the same room. That's what I know is true. I raised a boy so desperate and afraid of his own family that he drank himself to death. That's what I know is true. Oh, I understand, Francis, you have your theories and suspicions and your sad little fears. But here's the only fact that matters to me right here, right now: He's gone. He's dead. So it no longer matters to me how my baby ended up face-first in that snow. It matters to me that my son was no doubt crying out for help with his final breaths on this earth, and he was heard by no one. It matters to me that I will never be able to wrap my arms around him and apologize for every single day that led up to that night, and I'll never get to tell him how sorry I am that he had to die cold and alone. It matters to me that I will never be able to say, "I failed you. I all but myself placed your sad, drunken face into this pile of snow that is going to kill you. And I'm sorry for that." That's what I know to be true, Francis. Nothing else matters to me. None of your gossip and innuendo. But unlike you, I can't blame God for this. God is much more to me than a handy scapegoat, someone to blame for all the bad things that happen in life. That's so easy, isn't it? Blame God so you don't have to take any responsibility for yourself? It's not God's fault that my son had to run thousands of miles away from home just to find a home of his own. People who loved him ... for real. I can't blame God that I was raised so afraid and insecure that I was incapable of accepting him for whatever he was, and I can't blame God that I gave birth to two other sons who are so much like me it makes me want to throw myself into that same snowbank. If it didn't matter to me who Peter was, or how he lived, he would be standing next to me right now. He'd be playing with his nephew -- this sweet, young boy with nothing but love in his heart but whom I can't seem to

even look at anymore because he looks so damned much like Peter. That's what I know is true, Francis. And now I'm being punished with every second I spend in this loud, stinking cesspool of a bar because all of that did matter to me ... and because it mattered to me, it mattered to all of you, too. And that's my fault. You hear me? It's my fault. Oh, God, I'm sorry, Peter! It's all my fault.

(And she collapses into DEAN's arms, he cradles her, stroking her hair.

Dean (repeating his earlier words loudly, to everyone): CONCEIVED IN LOVE! ... (now softly) ... He was conceived in love.

Mary: (barely audible now) My fault ... my fault ... my fault.

Frank: Let me, dad. (He takes Mary to her seat.)

Woman: I'd like to say something, too. A toast.

Cecilia: Who the hell is that?

Anthony: Who knows?

Woman: Peter was a man of more strength than weakness, more love than hate, more selfless than selfish. In short, he was the best kind a man. Not without fault, but just slightly better than the rest of us, and taken from us much too soon. When I met him, he was beaten and scared and had a wall around him that was 10 feet tall. But all it took to wash away the fortress around his heart was a single tear. He loved unconditionally, and he asked only that he be loved in return. It wasn't so much to ask, but we failed him. All of us. You, me, my brother (indicating THOMAS) because none of us were there for him when he needed us most. (She begins to rub her protruding, pregnant belly). He spent his entire life looking for his family. ... So why couldn't we just be that for him? Why couldn't we just love him, and each other, like he wanted? Would that have been so hard?

(She leaves the bar to a sad silence, followed by THOMAS).

Anthony: Anyone know who the hell that was?

END OF EXCERPT