Theatre/Practice: *The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the Mid America Theatre Conference*

Volume 15, 2026

The Maw

a 10-minute play
by Christine Benvenuto

benvenutoc2024@gmail.com
christinebenvenuto@hotmail.com
413/695-9116
102 Leonard Road, Shutesbury MA 01072 USA

Character
Alana, female, 30s or older, any race/ethnicity

Time
The present

Scene
An empty stage

Running Time
Approximately 10 minutes

Synopsis
Alana crawls into the dark mouth of a caterer's van to try to pull back what has been taken from her.

AUTHOR NOTE
Christine Benvenuto's work will be presented in 2025 at the MATC Playwrighting Symposium in Atlanta and The Valdez Theatre Conference. Her plays have been presented at New Perspectives Theatre, International Human Rights Art Festival, Sixth Festival, Queens Short Play Festival, Lenox Hill House and The Bond Street Arts Center, NYC; Boston Theater Marathons XXI & XXVI and LAVA Center, Western MA; The Braid, LA and B8 Theatre's One Act Festival in the SF Bay Area; Clamour Theater, Florida; Fern Street Festival and Theatreworks, CT; and online. A play is available as a podcast from Onstage/Offstage; another was performed by Orpheus Theatre Company, Lancaster, PA and included in the anthology Borderless Thalia. Monologues are forthcoming in the anthologies Frozen Women/Flowing Thoughts from Venus Theatre, Best Men's Stage Monologues 2024 and 2025 and Fool's Gold from Dramatic Chaos Productions. She is the author of two books from St. Martin's Press, and stories and essays that appear in many newspapers, magazines and anthologies.

It was cold brunch, salads and smoked salmon and bagels and all the things you serve with that, and there was tons of it. My sister-in-law ordered enough for a large crowd and there was a large crowd, the largest crowd that's been in our house or ever will be again. The food arrived cut into tiny pieces. Platter after platter of little soft pink tongues of smoked salmon. Quarter bagels, not halves, quarters, who eats quarters? As if they were cut up for children, as if the caterers heard *funeral for a child* and thought funeral for a child was like *birthday party for a child*, the guests would be children with tiny mouths they couldn't wrap around a great big chewy half of bagel.

My sister-in-law who has been so good to us ordered it all, paid for it all. She ordered from the best place, the highest quality, and it was all so fresh, so astoundingly fresh, of such astoundingly high quality, as if the highest quality food had come into the world and would never exist again. Never exist again until the end of days haha. She paid for it, paid for it all. I thanked her. I think I thanked her. I hoped I thanked her. I was having trouble looking at my sister-in-law, that has never happened before and I hope it stops soon. It's awkward. I couldn't look at her, and here she was so good to us, handled everything and paid for everything, I wouldn't have ordered it, my husband wouldn't have, I don't know what we would have done, you have to have people come to the house after and especially all the people from out of town, all the people who drove for hours or even flew in. You have to feed these people, you have to offer them something as if they are offering you something, well they are offering you something I just don't know what. There's my sister-in-law being so good and doing everything and not saying anything about all that she's done, never a word. It's not as if I want my sister-in-law, who is actually my best friend, to suffer harm, that I wish her life, her family, to be anything other than the perfect life, the perfect healthy family it is. I just need to gain back the ability to look her in the face and congratulate her on everything that is so good in her life and I'm sure I will.

People ate the food but not that much of it. Maybe they weren't hungry under the circumstances or maybe they were hungry, terribly hungry and just wanted to be discreet. Discreet about their hunger. Yes. Or maybe even though there were so many of them, my sister-in-law ordered even more than that number could eat. A lot more. So they ate but there was a lot left, a lot left, it's not as if we had nothing left in the world, and I said to my husband we're going to have plenty to eat. We're going to enjoy this brunch until the end of days haha. I laughed. People standing near us looked startled. Shocked. Maybe because I laughed. I don't know. Then people started to leave and when they did leave, which took a long long time, the caterers came into the dining room and started to take the food.

They took it.

I didn't notice at first, I was seeing people off from the front door and the caterers were going through the garage, their van was parked in the driveway, and when I walked into the dining room I saw one of the caterers, they were kids really, the people working for this catering company were just kids, I saw one of them pick up a platter and head out the door. The table was half empty. Half empty. Who ever heard of such a thing? Who ever heard of caterers taking back food that wasn't eaten? That was paid for. I ran out after this kid and I yelled wait, wait, and no one paid attention, none of the caterers, and I ran around to the back of the van and there was our food. They were loading up our food to take back with them. I screamed wait. That's our food.

You can't take that. It's paid for. She paid for it. My sister-in-law paid for all that food. They acted as if they didn't hear me. Two of them talked with each other, and the third headed back into the house. No no no I screamed and they didn't react. They didn't flinch.

It was as if they weren't really there. As if I was dreaming them, it was just like a dream by which I mean a nightmare. As if I was only imagining them. I screamed don't take my food. That's paid for. The two stood talking with each other softly, so softly I don't know what they were saying, very seriously talking in something like a whisper, so soft it was as if their voices didn't exist. Two of them. The third kept making trips into the house and out again with platters of food. Our food, our food that my sister-in-law had paid for and that we're going to eat until the end of days haha.

The open back of their van was a maw. An open, gaping, cavernous maw. It was dark inside, as soon as the food went in you couldn't even see it, as if it was being actually swallowed and not metaphorically swallowed by this great voracious maw. Stop doing that I screamed. No one listened. Stop taking what's mine. I screamed and screamed, and finally I reached in. I reached in as far as my arm could go and I got the things that went in last, the last platters, and placed them on the roof of a car parked next to the van but there was so much more out of reach, they were putting it so far back inside. So I climbed. I climbed up inside this van, this dark maw, in my stockings, I never wear stockings but there I was wearing them, my dress with the matching blazer fitted across the shoulders and my stockings and my high heels, and I climbed into that dark voracious maw to take back my food. All the while I was screaming, you can't take this food it's paid for, and all the while the caterers were saying nothing though I could still hear the sounds of their whispers.

I crawled forward into the van and then I crawled back out. Over and over. One of these trips I saw my husband standing in the driveway, watching me. I saw my sister-in-law from the corner of my eye, I didn't actually look at her, watching me also. A few others as well. That's our food I screamed to my husband. They were trying to take it back. Who takes it back, I screamed to my husband who wasn't helping me. Who just stood there watching me crawl into the van and out again until I had brought out all the platters, just cheap plastic stuff, not things the caterers needed back, and piled them onto the car roof and the ground, the dead lawn next to the driveway.

Once I was done and back on the ground in my high heels my husband stepped forward and placed one arm around my shoulders and the other hand on my two hands which were somehow clasped in front of me. Then my sister-in-law and the other people standing there sprang into action as if this was their cue. They picked up the platters of food from the car and the ground, and they marched them back through the garage and into the house in a straight line like ants with crumbs of treasure, treasure that would have to last until the end of days haha. My husband and I, my husband with his arm wrapped around my shoulders and his hand gripping my two hands, watched until they had all come back out through the front door and gotten into their cars and driven away. Then we walked up the driveway, through the garage and into the house that we two live in and that was entirely empty now.

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