

STATE OF THE UNION

by Ed Valentine

(revisions 10/23/06)

2W, 2M.

Possible 2 - 4 non-speaking actors more.

*A marriage begins to unravel when a husband and wife disagree
over the strange things they see at a live Presidential speech.*

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Setting

A podium in front of a blue curtain.
The podium bears the seal of the President of the United States.

Characters

SAM (M, 20's up) Ordinary guy. Nice business suit, glasses, American flag pin. Wall Street Journal.

BETSY (F, 20's up) Ordinary gal. Conservative skirt-suit and blouse, American flag pin.

THE PRESIDENT (M, 30's up) Presidential wear. Crocodile face. (He does *not* use the voice or mannerisms of the current occupant of the White House.)

THE FIRST LADY (F, 30's up) Designer wool dress suit. Crocodile face. (She does *not* use the voice or mannerisms of the current First Lady.)

...and, if possible:

SECRET SERVICE AGENTS Men In Black (maybe Women In Black, too). Earpieces, sunglasses. The right haircuts. Their faces are not crocodile faces.

STATE OF THE UNION

1: TUNING UP

AT RISE: A podium in front of a blue curtain. The podium bears the seal of the President of the United States. Secret Service agents mill around, earpieces in their ears. SAM and BETSY enter breathlessly and take two available seats.

SAM

We made it!

BETSY

We made it!

SAM

Just in time!

BETSY

Just in time!

SAM

I was sure we'd be late. With the checkpoints, the security...

BETSY

And your pockets.

SAM

What about my pockets?

BETSY

Nothing.

SAM

There you go again about my pockets.

BETSY

A Swiss Army knife? You're a guest at a Presidential speech and you bring a Swiss Army Knife to the White House?

SAM

Well, what about your purse?

BETSY

Feminine necessities.

A blow dryer?
SAM

I wanted to look good for him!
BETSY

Isn't this exciting?
SAM

It is, it is!
BETSY

Isn't this wonderful? The President – the President!
SAM

Boy, it's exciting, alright!
BETSY

And the First Lady! In just a moment or two, they'll walk through that door, and he'll give one of his famous well-spoken speeches, full of metaphor and simile and rhetoric, and he'll dazzle the crowd, like he always does, like we've seen him do a million and two times on television...
SAM

But this time -
BETSY

But *this* time, he'll be doing it inches from our faces! Here we are, and there he'll be, and we'll be with him live in this very room!
SAM

We're very lucky.
BETSY

Lucky? We're honored.
SAM

Blessed.
BETSY

No one speaks like he does. No one has those rhetorical flourishes –
SAM

Those metaphors – those alliterations –
BETSY

SAM

And especially those similes! No one puts things as clearly as he does. He's the best President ever! And now, we get to see him, not on TV, but LIVE! LIVE! Right in front of us!

BETSY

We're lucky we made that donation to his campaign.

SAM

It was worth every penny, we wouldn't have gotten in otherwise.

BETSY

And you know what else? We're lucky to have each other.

(He blushes, squirms as she gets cuddly with him.)

Well, we are! What, am I embarrassing you? I'm embarrassing you. It's only because I love you so much!

(MEN IN BLACK smirk, a little, shake their heads.)

SAM (pleased, but sotto voce:)

I *am* lucky. You know I'm lucky. I was so lucky to find somebody who shares my views, my values, my...

BETSY

Your political beliefs?

SAM

And that's the best thing about us.

BETSY

The best thing?

SAM

Right! How in sync we are.

BETSY

Politically?

SAM

Well, in every way.

BETSY

You couldn't love me if I saw things differently?

SAM

It's moot. We see things the same.

BETSY

But if we didn't?

SAM

But we do.

BETSY

But if we didn't?

SAM

But we DO.

BETSY

Yes. We do.

(He gives her a small kiss. Flurry offstage; MEN IN BLACK spring into action.)

SAM

Oh look: something's happening. I think it's happening. I think – I think he's *here*! Here he comes!

2: PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

(Fanfare begins. A VOICE intones over the fanfare:)

VOICE

Ladies and Gentlemen: The President of the United States!

(“Hail to the Chief” begins to play. THE PRESIDENT enters with the FIRST LADY. They are well dressed, and they smile and wave to the crowd. But something's wrong: they both have crocodile heads instead of human heads. FIRST LADY carries a tray of cookies.)

SAM (Stands. Euphoric:)

Bravo! BRAVO, MR. PRESIDENT! What an entrance!

BETSY

Oh my God, what is that?

SAM

Why, it's the President and the First Lady, hon! Shh: he's about to speak!

(NOTE: When the PRESIDENT and FIRST LADY speak - as they will in a moment - the actors should NOT do a verbal imitation of the current occupants of the White House.)

PRESIDENT

My fellow Americans – my fellow Americans – I know you’re wondering about the State of the Union. But my fellow Americans – my fellow Americans: the State of the Union is strong!

(Wild cheering. He motions the crowd to quiet down.)

Simmer down now! Simmer down! From the State of Maine to the State of Maine, from the State of Michigan to the State of Michigan, from the State of Minnesota to the State of Minnesota, the State of the Union is Strong! From the Statue of Liberty to the Amber Waves, from the Rocky Mountain High to the Mighty Mississipp, the State of the Union is strong! And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

SAM

Isn’t he wonderful? Isn’t he just wonderful?

BETSY

Sam –

PRESIDENT

Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise, I say. Because the naysayers and the doubters, the pessimists and the antichrists, the pundits and the cheesemongers, they know not what they say.

BETSY

Sam, do you see what I see?

PRESIDENT

They know not what they see. They don’t see what I see. They don’t see what I say, see? Let me tell you what I see.

BETSY

He doesn’t look like that on TV.

PRESIDENT

I see folks who say Yea! Yea, verily unto you o Lord, we open up our hearts our homes our hoosegow. The folks who say nay, say nay, and they never go away, unless we make them go away.

BETSY

It all sounds different on the news.

(SAM shushes her.)

PRESIDENT

I see good folks, working hard, good hard folks, working with pitchforks and hays, normal regular American folks with normal, regular hard American pitchforks, and they’re working hard? Hardly working, but what do others do? Others try to take away their pitchforks.

SAM

He’s right about that one, you know.

PRESIDENT

Well, I for one, won't let that happen! No, I will not let that happen!

(Directly to BETSY:)

I will eat them up, like the little fishes of the Nile. Smile! But I know you didn't come here to see me - you came here to see my wife. Isn't she lovely? Here she is, folks, the First Lady of the United States!

SAM

She's beautiful – isn't she beautiful! And so darn *smart*! I love the smart things she has to say.

FIRST LADY (stepping forward to the microphone:)

I made *cookies*!

(Throws cookies to the crowd.)

Alewives, amberjack, anchovies, ballyhoo! Barracuda, blue runners, butterfish, croakers! Dolphin, flying fish, grouper, herring! Kingfish, pilchards, pinfish, redfish, sailfish, sardines, sea trout, tuna, wahoo, snook and smelt!

BETSY

Cookies! I bet she didn't even bake them herself!

SAM

Why are you being so cynical?

BETSY

Don't you see what's wrong?

SAM

I see the President of the United States! That's all I see!

PRESIDENT

My fellow slitherers! My fellows who slink and slide and slip through the water, through the swamp, through the sludge, through the slough, Rise Up, Rise Up with me, off your bellies! Rise up, Rise Up with me! The State of Our Union is strong, strong, stronger than anyone knows, if we just swim together! Goodnight, and God Bless America.

(Music. Confetti and balloons fall. The PRESIDENT and FIRST LADY wave and exit. MEN IN BLACK stand forbiddingly in front of the podium. Strange lights, in which BETSY and SAM are left alone.)

3: AFTERMATH

SAM

I've never seen anything like it!

BETSY

I've never seen anything like it.

SAM

He doesn't look like that on television.

BETSY

I'll say.

SAM

He looks younger, stronger, handsome. And oh: she's marvelous.

BETSY

Sam, Sam – get ahold of yourself.

SAM

Well, don't you look wild! Whatsamatter: you see a ghost?

BETSY

Not a ghost –a monster. I don't know how to explain it – The President?

SAM

Yes?

BETSY

Had an alligator face.

SAM

A what?

BETSY

Or maybe it was a crocodile, because the teeth were exposed. Alligator, crocodile - I always mix those two up.

SAM

You're telling me you thought the President had a gator face.

BETSY

No. Now I'm sure it was a crocodile.

SAM

And the First Lady?

BETSY

The same, just the same.

SAM

A crocodile?

BETSY

A crocodile.

SAM

This is – unbelievable. Unbelievable! Wasn't I sitting next to you? Didn't I see and hear the same things you saw and heard?

BETSY

And Omigod, that speech! That speech was nonsense! Larded with veiled threats – coded language – he seemed to be looking straight at me!

SAM

Nonsense? *You're* talking nonsense. He offered sound advice, solid promises, reassurance - protection. I heard him!

BETSY

That's not what I heard at all, at all. That is not what I heard at all!

SAM

Are you getting feverish, honey? Let me feel your forehead.

BETSY

Don't!

SAM

Keep your voice down, Betsy, people are listening. Well, let's get you home. I don't want to be connected to your mania.

BETSY

My mania? *Your* mania – how dare you?

SAM

How dare *you*? How dare you insult the President! Don't you have any respect for the office, the country, the soldiers he commands? We're at war, for heaven's sake. Don't you care?

BETSY

What's happened to you?

SAM

What's happened to *you*? What's happened to the woman I love? I know – someone's been talking to you – getting inside your head – corrupting your thoughts. Who is it, huh?

BETSY

Don't. Don't. Someone's been in *your* head, it's *your* thoughts that are sick.

(SAM calms BETSY down, moves her away from the MEN IN BLACK.)

SAM

Keep your voice down. Let's not fight. You're a reasonable girl.

BETSY

I'm not a girl! And I *thought* you were a reasonable man!

SAM

So use your reason - look around you. Look – you see all those people on fire by what he had to say? Do you think they saw an alligator –

BETSY

Crocodile.

SAM

Whatever. Look at them. Did you see their smiles, hear their applause? See how they stretched to touch his hand, to grasp his sleeve? All those people can't be wrong, can they? Now, sweetheart. Betsy. What did you see?

BETSY (loud:)

HE'S A MONSTER. AND HIS WIFE IS A MONSTER TOO!

(SAM grabs her by the arms and shakes her.)

SAM

WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?

(BETSY slaps him hard, across the face. When SAM goes to hit her, MEN hold him back.)

SAM

Consider this marriage over.

(He breaks away from the MEN and exits. BETSY stands alone.)

BETSY

Sam! SAM! No matter what, I saw what I saw. I saw what I saw and I'll say what I saw. I will. Nobody can stop me. Nobody.

(Lights in tight. MEN confer via earpieces. They nod and move in.)

Did you see? Did you see? I saw. I saw.

(MEN IN BLACK encircle her.)

I saw.

(BETSY disappears.)

END OF PLAY.