

DEGREES

The Place

An apartment in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles

The Time

The play opens at 1:30 a.m. in September

The Characters

ALEX – 30ish female

BRENT – 30ish/40ish male

CONRAD – 30ish male

The Setting

A fourth-floor, two-bedroom and one-bath apartment that is very nearly identical to a million other fourth-floor, two-bedroom and one-bath apartments. We see a front door, a living room, a dining area, part of a kitchen and a few windows. Somewhere there are bedrooms and the single bath.

This is Alex's apartment, although the furnishings are neither distinctly feminine nor masculine. What *is* immediately apparent, however, is the preponderance of books. All kinds of books. Fiction, nonfiction, medical textbooks (*lots* of medical textbooks), cookbooks, travel books, self-help books and hobby books. Someone reads a lot.

In the opening scene, there are a half-dozen or so cardboard boxes, with lids, piled to one side. Several of the boxes are clearly marked "Tools."

There is also a single miniature bonsai tree.

NOTE: A slash (/) indicates overlapping dialogue.

de-gree /di'gri/ [*dih-gree*]

1. any of a series of steps or stages, as in a process or course of action; a point in any scale.
2. a stage or point in or as if in progression or retrogression: "We followed the degrees of his recovery with joy."
3. a stage in a scale of intensity or amount: "He demonstrates a high degree of skill in his profession."
4. extent, measure, scope, or the like: "To what degree will he cooperate?"
5. any of three categories of seriousness of a burn or injury: "The boy received a second-degree laceration."
6. a stage in a scale of rank or station; relative standing in society, business, etc.: "Their uncouth behavior showed them to be men of low degree."
7. an academic title conferred by universities and colleges as an indication of the completion of a course of study, or as an honorary recognition of achievement.
8. a unit of measure, as of temperature or pressure, marked off on the scale of a measuring instrument: "The degrees indicate the rising pressure."
9. the 360th part of a complete angle or turn, often represented by the sign^o, as in the degrees of a triangle.
10. the distinctive classification of a crime according to its gravity: assault in the first degree.
11. *Idiom.* by degrees, by easy stages; gradually: "She had grown angrier by degrees."
12. *Archaic.* to a small extent; somewhat: "He is to a degree very difficult to get along with."
13. *Slang.* interrogation: "The suspect was given the third-degree by a detective."

DEGREES

ACT I

In darkness, a woman's laughter. The lights rise and we see evidence of a small party ... empty bottles, a few glasses and plates of food; torn and discarded gift wrap; the remains of a cake. There are also two conical birthday party hats.

ALEX is at the front door, laughing, wearing a third party hat, a bit tipsy, and bidding an unseen guest goodnight. She speaks in a loud whisper so as not to wake fellow tenants.

BRENT is starting the process of cleaning up.

ALEX: No. No! Now stop it! You're gonna make me pee. Careful! Your presents are gonna fall on—

ALEX rushes out through the door. More laughter. BRENT continues to clean.

After several moments, ALEX reenters. As she turns to close the door ...

ALEX: Goodnight, Connie. Happy birthday!

ALEX closes the door, and starts to join BRENT in the cleanup, transporting dishes and trash into the kitchen. But ALEX soon gives up and plops onto the sofa.

ALEX: Wow, that was fun. That was really fun. Wasn't that fun?

BRENT: It was fun.

ALEX: Isn't Connie great?

BRENT: He is.

ALEX: I knew you guys would hit it off. He really likes you.

BRENT: That's good.

ALEX: And you like him, right?

BRENT: Absolutely.

ALEX: I gotta fix him up with somebody. He shouldn't be alone.

BRENT: I *was* surprised it was just the three / of us.

ALEX: A great guy like him. Don't you think he's great?

BRENT: Yes, Alex, he's great. And he makes a great partner when it's time to gang up on me.

ALEX: We didn't gang up on you. (*pause, then giggles*) Maybe a little. Sometimes you're an easy target.

BRENT: And here I thought I was being a good sport.

ALEX: You *were*. It's just something we fall into. Nine years.

BRENT: Just felt like a squeaky wheel a few times.

ALEX: Third wheel. You felt like a ... To be jealous of Conrad is silly. We're just friends. That's / what I keep—

BRENT: Babe, you're a lot more than just friends. Anyone / can see—

ALEX: There's no / need to be jealous.

BRENT: I'm not jealous. Stop saying that. Where do you keep the oven cleaner?

ALEX: You fascinate him. Connie's never met a mechanic before.

BRENT: Aviation mechanic.

ALEX: *-aviation* mechanic before. He *likes* you. Maybe you could fix him up with somebody from your / work.

BRENT (*"that's gonna happen"*): Oh, yeah.

ALEX: Well, the people *I* work with are just nerdy research geeks. There's got to be *somebody*.

BRENT (*trying again*): Oven cleaner?

ALEX: Now? At ... one-thirty in the morning?

BRENT: Was going to spray it now and clean it when I get up. Do you *have* oven cleaner?

ALEX: No. Which you already suspected. (*gesturing to the boxes*) You didn't bring any with you?

BRENT: Mine was self-cleaning.

ALEX: Well, mine isn't. A major disappointment, I know. It's not too late to change your mind.

BRENT: Small sacrifice. (*he catches her in his arms*) You're okay with this? Me moving in?

ALEX: My idea.

BRENT: Great idea.

A very passionate kiss.

BRENT: Let's go to bed.

ALEX: Okay, but you'll just be thinking about my dirty oven.

BRENT: Ha ha. Very / funny.

ALEX: Sssh! You hear something?

BRENT: What?

ALEX: Ssh.

They listen. Then we hear it. Faint at first, through the open window.

MALE VOICE: Help! Oh my god! Alex, help me!

ALEX and BRENT rush to the window. Sounds of a struggle on the street.

ALEX: It's Connie!

BRENT (*shouting*) Hey! HEY!

BRENT starts for the closet.

BRENT: Call nine-one-one! Where's my bat?!

ALEX: Jesus, Brent! They're *killing* him!

BRENT: Alex! Nine-one-one *now*! Where the fuck'd you put my bat?!

ALEX (*going for the phone*): Your *what*?!

BRENT: My *bat*! My *softball*— Goddamnit!

BRENT grabs a broom from the closet and bolts through the front door as ALEX dials. She runs to the window with the phone.

ALEX (*to the street below*): I'M CALLING THE POLICE! And my boyfriend's gotta *bat*! *He's gonna kick your ass!*

Lights.

* * *

Five days later, early evening. All of the packing boxes from the previous scene are now gone, books are on shelves and no longer in stacks on the floor, and the entire apartment is immaculate. It is a cozy, inviting space.

After a moment, BRENT enters through the front door, returning home from work. He carefully carries two medium-sized brown paper bags, which he sets on the dining table.

BRENT (to the bedrooms): Alex? (pause, then a bit louder)
Alex?! I'm home.

BRENT opens the paper bags and gingerly removes a single bonsai tree from each. He looks about for the perfect placement in the room for each plant, fussing a bit with each before he's satisfied.

BRENT turns the stereo on low and we hear a station specializing in vocal standards. He then folds up the paper bags and starts for the kitchen.

BRENT (loudly): Alex?!

BRENT disappears into the kitchen, we hear a couple of cupboards open and close, and then he reappears carrying a set of professional butterfly bonsai shears. He approaches one of the new trees and begins examining it for errant foliage, humming to the music as he does.

ALEX enters from the hallway, wrapped in a large bath towel. Seeing BRENT, his back to her, she stops for a moment to admiringly watch him work. Then ...

ALEX (walking up behind him): You been home long?

BRENT (turning): There you are. I shouted for you.

ALEX: I was in the shower.

They kiss. It's not short, but it's also not a prelude to anything more.

BRENT: You smell good.

BRENT turns back to the tree. ALEX wraps her arms around him from behind, watching him work.

BRENT: I got a great deal on these new trees.

ALEX: Very pretty.

BRENT: This one's a Baby Jade. That one over there is called a Money Tree. It's supposed to bring good luck.

ALEX: I like the sound of *that*.

BRENT: Just give me a few minutes to trim these up.

ALEX: Don't hurry for me. (*she breaks from him and walks over to examine the other tree*) I picked you up some chicken. You'll just need to reheat it.

BRENT: You're not eating?

ALEX: I'm headed to the hospital, remember? I just came home to grab a quick shower.

BRENT: You're going *now*?

ALEX: I told you this morning. You can come *with*.

BRENT: Aww, sweetheart, I'm beat. You mind?

ALEX: Connie would like to see you. To thank you.

BRENT: I was there with you on Tuesday, when we watched him sleep. I'll go this weekend.

ALEX: He's getting released on Saturday.

BRENT: So soon?

ALEX: It's the damn insurance company. They won't cover his hospital stay for more than a week.

BRENT: Is he ready to go home?

ALEX (*crossing back to BRENT*): No, not at all. And he got a call from his sister last night — who was supposed to fly out here to stay with him — that she's not coming. Her husband's been arrested. Long story.

BRENT: Wow. Tough break. You don't think he'll be okay on his own?

ALEX: I don't see how. The insurance company's paying for a nurse to stop in and check in on him, but that's just once a day. He needs more than that.

A long moment.

BRENT: Honey, you don't have to beat around the bush. You can just ask me.

ALEX: It'd probably be for just a couple of weeks. He'll be in bed practically all the time. You won't even know he's here.

BRENT: *Here?* I thought you were wanting to stay at *his* place.

ALEX (*embracing him*): Oh, babe, I wouldn't do that. Leave you here by yourself, after you just moved in? What kind of a girlfriend would I be? We can put Connie in the second bedroom.

BRENT: Would he be okay with moving in here?

ALEX: He'd have to be. Are *you* okay with him moving in?

BRENT (*a moment, considering*): Yeah, I *guess* so.

ALEX: There'll be some medical equipment initially, so it's possible we'll need to move some stuff out. (*looking around*) But we can put the desk in here.

BRENT: Might be a little tight.

ALEX: It's just for a few weeks. And I'll need to pick up some things from his place. Clothes and books, and he has a pet snake. It's very friendly.

BRENT (*good-naturedly*) Oh, good. *That's* a relief.

ALEX (*taking BRENT'S face in her hands*): You're really okay with this?

BRENT: Yes. Yes, absolutely.

ALEX: Lucky me. I found myself the greatest guy in the world.

She kisses him. Hard. He gives into it.

Lights.

* * *

Afternoon, two weeks later. The low sounds of a televised football game.

BRENT sits on the sofa, facing us, watching an unseen TV. Beside him is a pile of clean laundry for folding that should be receiving more of his attention. On the floor is an empty laundry basket.

A desk is crammed between the living and dining areas, covered with books, papers and a laptop computer. There are now four bonsai trees, and a three-foot high metal snake cage.

BRENT sneaks up the volume with a quick look toward the bedrooms. A moment, then he edges up the volume some more.

ALEX enters through the front door. She goes directly into their bedroom.

ALEX (*on her way to the bedroom*): I'm out of quarters. Sweetheart, can you turn that down? I could hear it coming up the stairs.

BRENT lowers the volume of the game, then begins folding with more earnest. When ALEX reenters from the bedroom, he is examining a pair of men's bikini briefs.

ALEX: Sexy.

BRENT: I don't know how he wears these things.

ALEX: You should try them.

BRENT (*derisively*): Yeah! (*thinking*) Yeah?

ALEX: Keep the game down, okay? He didn't sleep again last night.

BRENT: How do you know?

ALEX: You didn't hear him? He screams.

BRENT (*folding again*): I would have heard him scream. I hear him wandering the apartment after we've gone to bed.

ALEX: It's short. Then he wakes up. Manifestation of his PTSD. (*no response*) Post-traumatic str/ess disorder.

BRENT: Stress disorder. I know.

ALEX: Connie's gotta be going stir crazy after two weeks cooped up in that bedroom. And with the meds he's taking, his inner clock's all out of whack.

BRENT: It's a little creepy. Him clumping around in the middle of the night. I've heard him open the refrigerator door.

ALEX: But you don't hear him scream?

ALEX watches as BRENT continues to fold.

ALEX: My god, you look sexy doing that.

BRENT: Doing what?

ALEX: Domesticity.

BRENT: You're just saying that 'cause you've got another basket somewhere.

ALEX straddles BRENT on the sofa. She gives him a long, deep kiss and then nuzzles his neck. He runs his hands across her body. She tongues a nipple through his shirt.

BRENT: *Oww!*

ALEX: Ssh!

BRENT (*laughing*): You bit me!

ALEX: A love bite.

BRENT: Am I bleeding?

ALEX: Not yet.

BRENT (*starting to lift her shirt*): Let me / try it on—

ALEX: Not out here. Later. In the bedroom. I promise. (*no response*) Watch your game. I'll finish up the laundry. We'll make time. Later.

BRENT (*playfully*): Should we synchronize our watches?

ALEX: You're cute when you're trying to be funny.

BRENT (*not playfully*): I can't see the game.

A moment, then ALEX slides off BRENT'S lap and stands.

ALEX: Connie asks about you all the time. You should go in and talk to him.

BRENT: I talk to him.

ALEX: You deliver meals and help me when he needs to be moved. That's what an orderly does. I'm talking about a conversation. (*no response*) He asked this morning if it's okay for him to come out of his room. He's getting better.

BRENT: That's good.

ALEX: He asked if it's okay.

BRENT: Of course it's okay.

ALEX: Why don't you tell him that? Maybe he'd like to watch the game with you.