

TANGLED WEB was produced at the Nuyorican Poets Café in June 2004, as part of an evening of one-acts titled "Spider Holes". It was directed by Frederick Stroppel, and had the following cast:

RUTH.....Cindy Keiter
WOMAN.....Heather Male
NEAL.....Ray DeJohn
MAN.....Peter Plano

(A coffee bar in NYC. RUTH, a 30ish woman in a red dress, reasonably attractive if a bit chunky, sits at a table, a book open before her. She reads intermittently, her eyes more often watching the door. A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, also wearing a red dress, enters from the side with a cup of coffee. She sits at a nearby table, opens a book, starts reading. RUTH watches her with dismay. She realizes something has to be said.)

RUTH. Excuse me.

WOMAN. Yes?

RUTH. Well - This is a little embarrassing, but I'm meeting someone here.

WOMAN. Really? So am I. But I guess that's not so surprising. This is the sort of place where people meet.

RUTH. Yes. The thing is, I'm meeting this guy for the first time. I don't know what he looks like, he doesn't know what I look like. So I told him I would be wearing a red dress, and reading *The DaVinci Code*, and that's how he would recognize me.

WOMAN. Yes, me too.

RUTH. Me too what?

WOMAN. I'm meeting a gentleman for the first time. I told him I'd be wearing red and reading *The DaVinci Code*.

RUTH. Oh. Well. This is rather awkward.

WOMAN. A remarkable coincidence, I would say.

RUTH. Not that it should be a problem. Because the guy - the gentleman - I'm meeting is going to be wearing a red tie, and carrying a rose.

WOMAN. Mine too.
RUTH. Yours too? Carrying a rose? *(The WOMAN nods.)* This is a little hard to believe.

WOMAN. Yes, it is.

RUTH. I mean, the odds that we would both come to the same coffee bar at the same time, and we're both dressed the same, and the guys

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we're meeting are dressed the same...

WOMAN. Yes.

RUTH. I mean, unless we're both meeting the same guy...!

(THEY both laugh. Beat)

RUTH. Neal?

WOMAN. *(Nods)* Neal.

TOGETHER. *(And at the same time.)* Butterfield.

RUTH. *(Shocked.)* Oh, my God. He's a stockbroker? Lives in Englewood?

WOMAN. *(Nods.)* Drives a Lexus.

RUTH. *[Redacted]* Can you believe this? It has to be the same guy. Has to be.

WOMAN. So it would appear.

RUTH. What is he, crazy? He makes a date with two women for the same time? What is that all about?

WOMAN. It makes you wonder, doesn't it?

RUTH. He must have gotten his days mixed up. Maybe he thinks he's meeting me tomorrow, or next week. Oh, that's funny. He's gonna feel like such a jerk when he walks in.

WOMAN. It's certainly an amusing situation.

RUTH. *(Apprehensive.)* Unless he does want us both here at the same time, for some kind of kinky reason. Like maybe he's a serial killer, and he likes killing women in pairs? Wearing red? *(Shudders.)* Oh, that's creepy. I don't even want to think about it.

WOMAN. *(Unconcerned.)* There are too many witnesses.

RUTH. You're right. He probably just screwed up. But how do you like that? Telling me how lonely he is, how hard it is to meet someone he can really talk to, that's why he's surfing the chat rooms... See, I met him on the Internet; this is one of those computer things. Big mistake, right? We've never even talked on the phone. We thought it would be more romantic this way. More romantic! Jesus.

WOMAN. I met him on the Internet, too.

RUTH. Wow. Wow! What an *[Redacted]*. I should have known. Stockbrokers!

WOMAN. Yes. Well.

(Goes back to her book.)

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RUTH. This doesn't bother you?

WOMAN. Umm...Not really.

RUTH. The fact that he's asked us both out on the same night? Had us show up in the same place, wearing the same clothes, with the same stupid book?

WOMAN. People make mistakes.

RUTH. So you're going to stay?

WOMAN. I have no other plans.

RUTH. Neither do I, but... *(Sings.)* Maybe you're right. He's the one who's going to look foolish, after all. It'll be fun, watching him try to explain himself. Plus, I really have to get a look at this guy. This big fucking stud. "Neal". Sounds like somebody who collects stamps, doesn't it? Okay, Neal, here we are. Two gorgeous sexy women, but it's too late, you already blew it. Take your fancy Lexus and shove it up your...! *(She catches herself, quiets down.)* By the way, my name is Ruth. *(Shakes her hand.)*

WOMAN. I'm Ruth, too.

RUTH. No! *(WOMAN nods her head.)* Oh, no. This gets weirder all the time. I don't know if I really want to meet this guy, he sounds like a psycho. But we're together, we should be able to handle him, no problem. Solidarity, right? You know what I think we should do? We should really humiliate him. We should make him eat dirt. We should pull his pants off and pour hot coffee on his crotch...no, maybe that's too much, but we need to make a point. These stockbrokers, they think they own the world. Arrogant, self-centered snobs. I hate them.

WOMAN. Why did you agree to meet Neal, then?

RUTH. Well, you know - it's only a date.

WOMAN. But you must have felt some kind of positive connection with him. Didn't you think he was funny? All his jokes and clever puns? And what about his old-fashioned values, his sense of family? That must have appealed to you.

RUTH. Of course he said all the right things when he was looking for a date. Don't they always? Came off like a prince. Very slick with his words. I'm sure he wrote the same *[Redacted]* to you, and God knows how many other women. Seducing as many as he could, and then trimming his list by process of elimination...The bastard. You can bet the only reason he's meeting me is because he thinks I'm this high-society babe. He thinks I'm an art dealer.

WOMAN. Why does he think that?

RUTH. Because that's what I told him.

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WOMAN. And you're not?

RUTH. No. Well, I'm a cashier at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Which is pretty close. I do deal in the experience of art, for which money is exchanged.

WOMAN. Interesting. As it happens, I *am* an art dealer.

RUTH. (*Amazed anew.*) This is incredible. And do you have your own gallery?

WOMAN. On West Broadway.

RUTH. That's where I said mine was! I almost said it was on Madison, but we could walk there from here, and I didn't want to put myself in an embarrassing situation. Like I should have worried.

WOMAN. So you've been lying to Neal about yourself?

RUTH. Not lying. Stretching the truth. That's just standard dating procedure. Everybody does that.

WOMAN. I don't.

RUTH. Well... You don't have to. You already have it all.

WOMAN. Oh, I wouldn't say that.

RUTH. Look at you. If I had your body...I mean, that's the funny thing - you have all the qualities I told Neal I...

(*RUTH stops cold. She stares at the WOMAN a long moment.*)

WOMAN. Yes?

RUTH. Who are you, anyway?

WOMAN. I told you - I'm Ruth.

RUTH. Yeah, "Ruth" - I believe that. What are you really doing here?

WOMAN. I beg your pardon?

RUTH. Who put you up to this? Is this some kind of joke? Am I being filmed?

WOMAN. Why do you ask that?

RUTH. Because this has got to be more than a coincidence! Your face, your whole look, everything about you - You're almost the way I described myself.

WOMAN. I'm exactly the way you described yourself. Exactly.

RUTH. (*Mystified.*) How do you know?

WOMAN. Because that's who I am. I'm the ideal You.

RUTH. You're the what?

WOMAN. The ideal You. The fantasy woman that you created. Here I am.

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(*Beat*)

RUTH. I'm getting a little confused.

WOMAN. It's very simple. When you tried to sell yourself to Neal, tried to make yourself engaging and desirable, you naturally exaggerated your positive traits and minimized your negative ones. Standard dating procedure. You imagined the woman that you wanted to be, and you sent that image blithely into cyberspace, little thinking that your whimsy would take tangible form under the principles of organization that have steadily accreted in the system over the years, due to a ceaseless flow of inputted information.

RUTH. You can't be me. I would never use a word like "accreted". I don't even know what it means.

WOMAN. But your Fantasy Self does. She's as brilliant and accomplished as you are bland and uninteresting. Yes, Ruth, I've been digitally generated out of your ambitions and insecurities. I'm the realization of your deepest hopes and the defeat of your darkest fears. I'm your wish fulfilled.

RUTH. So you're a computer trick. You're not really real.

WOMAN. Ah, but computers have sufficiently blurred the distinctions between the virtually real and the really real, haven't they? So many seeds of thought and energy have been scattered willy-nilly throughout the fertile cyber-landscape that a whole teeming world has taken root. And out of that rich primordial topsoil, life springs forth. Can a computer trick drain a cup of mocha latte to its satisfying dregs? (*WOMAN takes one final sip, turns her cup upside down.*) Maybe, maybe not.

RUTH. I see what's going on here. This is a dream. I'm having an anxiety dream. (*The WOMAN pinches RUTH's arm.*) Ow! Ow!

WOMAN. No dream, sweetheart. I'm real and I'm ready.

RUTH. Ready for what?

WOMAN. Ready to meet Neal. That's why I'm here. I'm his Ruth.

RUTH. Wait a minute. Let's get something straight: I'm Ruth. And I'm meeting Neal. He's mine.

WOMAN. Oh, please. When he walks through that door, who do you think he's going to make a beeline for - you or me? Have you taken a good look at me? I'm spectacular. Built to perfection, just as you decreed. Perfect skin, perfect teeth. I even have a perfect undimped which was so considerate of you, and I'm very grateful.

RUTH. I never said a word to Neal about my

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WOMAN. But it was implied in the subtext. You've created the perfect match, and your satisfaction will lie in passively observing the perfect courtship. Now why don't you go into the other room and curl up with your book? I'll let you know how things go with Neal.

RUTH. No, I won't go. I worked long and hard for this date - got my hair done, waxed my legs and everything - and I'm not going to just roll over without a fight.

WOMAN. Please, Ruth, for your own sake. You're like a cousin to me. I don't want to see you humiliate yourself.

RUTH. You may be beautiful and brilliant and all that, but I'm an actual human being. That has to be an advantage.

WOMAN. Human beings are a dime a dozen; this place is crawling with them. I'm the only fantasy in town. Believe me, he's not even going to see you.

RUTH. You're awfully self-assured for someone who doesn't even have a self.

WOMAN. Hey, just because I'm computer-generated, it doesn't mean I'm one-dimensional. This is the point you're missing. I'm not shallower than you, I'm deeper. I have all of your qualities, plus a whole raft of better ones. I'm the new and improved version. You can't compete with me. You can't.

RUTH. So I'll rush back to my computer and take out the improvements. I'll give you warts, and varicose veins. I'll give you a spastic colon.

WOMAN. I don't think you have time.

(NEAL ENTERS. He is tall, handsome, and looks rich. He wears a red tie, holds a red rose. He stands in the doorway expectantly.)

RUTH. Neal?

(RUTH rushes wildly up to him, waving the book prominently. The WOMAN doesn't make a move, stays where she is. Nevertheless,

NEAL looks right past RUTH.)

NEAL. *(To WOMAN.)* Ruth? *(WOMAN gives a little wave, holds up her book. NEAL pushes past RUTH.)* Excuse me.

(HE moves up to the WOMAN, hands her the rose.)

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NEAL. Hi.

WOMAN. *(Sexy voice.)* Hi.

NEAL. So we finally meet.

WOMAN. Not disappointed, I hope?

NEAL. *(Admiringly.)* No, not at all. You're just the way I pictured you.

RUTH. *(Interrupting.)* Actually, she's just the way I pictured her.

(Extends her hand.) Hello. I'm Ruth.

NEAL. *(Politely.)* Another Ruth? Isn't that a coincidence?

RUTH. No, it's not. I'm the Ruth that you're supposed to be meeting. See? Red dress? Book? That woman is an impostor. She's pretending to be me. But there's only one me, and that's me.

NEAL. *(To WOMAN.)* I'm sorry - what is she talking about?

RUTH. Don't ask her! Ask me! I'm the one you want!

WOMAN. You'll have to excuse my cousin. She's a little excitable.

NEAL. Oh, you're cousins?

WOMAN. Once removed.

RUTH. What a fake you are!

WOMAN. *(Amused.)* I'm a fake?

NEAL. Look, if you're in the middle of a family thing here...

RUTH. We're not family. She's making the whole thing up. *(To WOMAN.)* Tell him what you are! Go on, tell him!

WOMAN. Let's see - I'm bright, sophisticated, a little shy but secretly sensuous, playful, loving, witty...

RUTH. No, that's me! I'm the witty one! I'm the secretly sensuous one! She's stealing all my lines! Look, I'm the one who first contacted you. It was three weeks ago, on a Sunday night. You were in the Romantic Nook chat room. They were discussing biological warfare, remember, and you made a joke about your Aunt Thrax, who lived in Germany? And then I sent you an Instant Message, and we talked about how much we loved puns, and knock-knock jokes, and we were on-line for a good two hours, and then we started E-mailing each other...Hey! I know your AOL address!

WOMAN. *(Chimes in.)* "GECKO".

NEAL. She's right.

RUTH. I know she's right! She got that from me. She got everything from me. *(Goes into her purse.)* Here, I have credit cards, and my driver's license... Ruth Stencosky. See? What kind of proof does she have?

WOMAN. I'd be happy to give you a private showing of my

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undimplied credentials.

RUTH. She's trying to pander to your baser instincts. But I know you better than that. I know that you're a man of character and principle, with a real solid foundation. Just like me. I'm solid. I'm the real thing. She's not real. She's been accreted!

NEAL. Which one of you is the art dealer?

WOMAN. I am.

NEAL. Which one spent three years in Florence?

WOMAN. I did.

NEAL. Which one is a member of Mensa?

WOMAN. Guilty.

NEAL. (To RUTH.) I'm sorry, you may be solid, but she fits the description.

RUTH. Of course she does! Too well! That's where her story falls apart. Because people never represent themselves truthfully on the Internet. We all know there's always a little embellishing, a little polishing of rough edges, a little bare-faced lying. It's understood, it's a given. I mean, I didn't expect you to be tall and handsome and charming.

NEAL. But I am.

RUTH. Lucky you. The point is, I would have been perfectly happy with some nerdy little shrimp. I was prepared for that. And you should have been prepared for someone like me, and not expect more. She's too much. I'm not.

NEAL. So what you're saying is, you're the real Ruth? You're my date?

RUTH. Yes.

NEAL. Then who is this stunning creature?

RUTH. She's a cyborg! She thinks she can show up at the last minute, after all my hard work, and steal you away, just because she happens to be perfect. But you won't let her, Neal, because you have scruples, and an elevated sense of decency.

WOMAN. Stirring words, but nobody signed a contract here. (To NEAL.) You're a free man. It's not important which one of us you came to meet. The question is, which one of us do you want?

(NEAL looks them both over.)

NEAL. (To RUTH.) I'm sorry --

RUTH. But she isn't real! I'm real! We can't let these holograms start meddling with our dating system, or who knows where it will end?

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Virtual families, virtual societies? They'll be taking over the whole universe if we don't watch out. They'll be programming us! No, we have to take a stand, right here, right now. It's a moral responsibility we owe to our children.

WOMAN. For God's sake, Ruth, stop getting so Biblical. It's only a date. For all you know, I could be saving you a miserable time.

NEAL. I was thinking, dinner at Nobu, and then perhaps a dance or two at the Rainbow Room?

WOMAN. I'll just get my jacket.

RUTH. You're making a cosmic error, Neal. This may seem like a good idea now, but, believe me, it's never going to work out. She's artificial. She has no soul.

NEAL. Forgive me for saying this, but if you stopped putting so much stock in appearances, and focused more on a person's inner beauty, you might have a better chance of meeting someone. (To WOMAN.) Shall we? (Holds door open.)

WOMAN. Don't worry, Ruth, you'll find somebody who's right for you. Keep searching.

(NEAL and the WOMAN leave the coffee shop.)

RUTH. Wait! Neal! I have a good joke! Knock-knock. Neal? Knock-knock...!

(But they are gone. RUTH, dejected, sits down at the table)

RUTH. (Sadly, to herself) ...Who's there...?

(A MAN with a red tie, carrying a rose, ENTERS. Balding and stocky, he is not as tall or as young or as handsome as NEAL. But he spots RUTH, and approaches her.)

MAN. Ruth? (RUTH looks up at the MAN. He smiles, holds out the rose.) I'm Neal.

(RUTH does a double-take. She rises, bewildered. It takes her a moment to process that this is the real NEAL, not the computer-generated improvement who left with the WOMAN. Once she makes the connection, she looks him over, and realizes that he is not quite the shining knight that she was given to anticipate. At the same time,

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NEAL is checking out RUTH, and finding her somewhat less than advertised. There is a long moment, as their expectations slowly settle into reality.)

RUTH. (Finally, with an amused resignation.) Hello, Neal.

(Lights fade.)