

The New Client

A ten-minute play

By

Paul Donnelly

2439A Holomua Place
Honolulu, HI 96816
paul@pauldonnellyplays.com
808-465-0602

Cast of Characters

Margaret Henson-Mittendorf – 40's. A small town attorney in two-person firm in north Georgia. Margaret is not from Georgia. She settled in this small town because it is Lee-Ann's hometown. They have been living together in the town for four years and a couple for much longer.

Lee-Ann Henson-Mittendorf – 40's. Proprietor of a yoga studio, surprisingly successful for a small town in north Georgia. She and Margaret moved back to her hometown four years ago, after the death of her father.

Setting

The Henson-Mittendorf den. A small town in north Georgia.

Time

The present.

Log line

A small-town attorney faces a personal challenge when taking on a controversial client.

The New Client

Setting: The den of the comfortable home shared by Margaret and Lee-Ann Henson-Mittendorf in a small town in northwest Georgia.

At rise: Close to 9 p.m. Sunday. Margaret Henson-Mittendorf is seated on a sofa with an open laptop and stacks of file folders on a coffee table in front of her. Margaret's attention moves from a legal pad on which she is writing to typing on her laptop and back. She is concentrating deeply.

There is an unseen television downstage. It is on, but muted. Lights might suggest the flickering screen.

The alarm on Margaret's cell phone rings. She is startled, but immediately grabs the phone and silences the alarm.

Heck. Already?
MARGARET

MARGARET glances to the television, then begins shutting down her laptop, straightening the folders and returning them to her briefcase.

Hey Lee-Ann! It's almost time.
MARGARET (calling off)

MARGARET exits quickly and returns with two bottled beers which she places on the coffee table.

Lee-Ann!
MARGARET

MARGARET picks up and points the remote and clicks off the mute button. We hear the unmistakable strains of the theme to "Game of Thrones."

Lee-Ann, it's starting!
MARGARET

LEE-ANN HENSON-MITTENDORF enters. She is coiled, poised between fury and betrayal.

I got your beer.

MARGARET

LEE-ANN glares at her, unmoving.

What?

MARGARET (turning and seeing LEE-ANN)

LEE-ANN continues glaring.

Can't you let it go for an hour?

MARGARET (gesturing to the television)

LEE-ANN continues glaring.

For god's sake.

MARGARET (hitting the mute button)

It's completely unacceptable.

LEE-ANN

It's also completely non-negotiable.

MARGARET

How can you say that?

LEE-ANN

Since when do you get to review my client list?

MARGARET

Oh come on ... this is ...it's beyond the pale. This isn't just some random client I'm objecting to.

LEE-ANN

No.

MARGARET

It's going to have a huge impact on our lives.

LEE-ANN

Probably.

MARGARET

Then how can you not give me some say ...

LEE-ANN

MARGARET

I'm sorry. It's too late. I've said yes.

LEE-ANN

And tomorrow you can go back and tell them no.

MARGARET

I can't ...

LEE-ANN

You can tell them ... You can tell them ... that your marriage is more important than standing up for bigots.

MARGARET

Lee-Ann ...

LEE-ANN

Or whatever they're paying you.

MARGARET

Wait a minute ...

LEE-ANN

Or that you had momentarily taken leave of your senses and now you're in your right mind.

MARGARET

Look. You don't have to agree with me. You don't have to support me ... although that would be nice. But you do have to accept that I am going to represent Shelley and Mark and the bakery.

LEE-ANN

I don't have to accept anything.

MARGARET (after a beat)

No. No, you don't. But your not accepting isn't going to change anything.

LEE-ANN (after a beat)

Does Bert know?

MARGARET

Excuse me?

LEE-ANN

Does Bert know?

MARGARET

Do I have permission from my male partner? Is that what you're asking? Are you serious?

LEE-ANN

Does he?

MARGARET

Yes.

LEE-ANN

So you discussed this with him but not with me.

MARGARET

Y'know I frequently discuss business with Bert that I don't discuss with you. I don't typically discuss things like the color to paint the guest bathroom or where my wife and I should go on vacation with him; and I don't typically discuss whether or not I'm going to take a case with you.

LEE-ANN

This isn't a typical case! They're bigots ... hate-mongers ...

MARGARET

Who have the right to counsel.

LEE-ANN

Maybe. But why do you have to be that counsel?

MARGARET

Because they asked.

LEE-ANN

And you couldn't say no?

MARGARET

Shall we tease out the levels of meaning in that question.

LEE-ANN

Don't ...

MARGARET

Are you suggesting that I should deny them service because of what they believe?

LEE-ANN

That's not ...

Or for who they are?
MARGARET

They wouldn't serve you!
LEE-ANN

That is immaterial.
MARGARET

No it isn't!
LEE-ANN

If Shelly turned up at your studio tomorrow night for the 5:30 Stretch Away Your Day class would you turn her away?
MARGARET

She wouldn't.
LEE-ANN

But if she did ...
MARGARET

They wouldn't bake a cake for a child's birthday party because his mothers ... because he has two mothers.
LEE-ANN

I know the particulars of the case.
MARGARET

Two women like us. Two women who are friends of ours ... or who will be until they find out you are defending the bakers who wouldn't bake a cake for their son's birthday! How ... how can you ... what kind of internalized horseshit would allow you to think those people were right?
LEE-ANN

I don't think they're right.
MARGARET

You're defending them.
LEE-ANN

I am exploring the possibility that they may have a legal right to be wrong.
MARGARET

LEE-ANN

Oh my god, what does that even mean in English? No. Never mind. I don't want to hear your brief! Don't make this an abstraction. You were at that party. You know that child. You've known him his whole life. You held him when he was four days old ... and now you can somehow justify defending people who wouldn't bake him a birthday cake? Really? At no point does simple human decency come into play for you?

MARGARET

I can see you're angry.

LEE-ANN

Oh, don't do that. Don't patronize me.

MARGARET

Okay ... then give me a little credit.

LEE-ANN

For what?

MARGARET

Oh that's great.

LEE-ANN

What?

MARGARET

Nothing.

LEE-ANN glares.

MARGARET

Since there's nothing else to say ... (picks up the remote)

LEE-ANN

I would appreciate it if you didn't do that.

MARGARET

I would appreciate it if you would support me in this.

LEE-ANN

There's no way.

MARGARET

I haven't mentioned this once in the last four years, but don't you really owe me your support?

LEE-ANN

I can't.

MARGARET

I gave up a partnership for you. I moved to Dogpatch for you. I gave up WBNA season tickets. I have to drive nearly two hours to see a baseball game. I did all of that willingly ... because I share my life with you and you needed to be here for your mother. Because your mother couldn't leave Dogpatch. Oh no. God forbid!

LEE-ANN

What's your point?

MARGARET

A little quid pro quo?

LEE-ANN

No. This isn't about a little career disruption ...

MARGARET

Oh my god ...

LEE-ANN

This isn't about a few life-style sacrifices ...

MARGARET

You really want to stop ...

LEE-ANN

This is a matter of pure and clear right and wrong. These people are wrong. Being on their side is wrong.

MARGARET

Then maybe you'd be happier moving in with your mother until this blows over.

LEE-ANN

Maybe I should..

There is a long moment of silence.

MARGARET

Okay then.

LEE-ANN

That's it? That's all you have to say? You would let me move out?

MARGARET

You drew the line in the sand. Usually a mistake.

LEE-ANN

Can you at least tell me why ...

MARGARET

I was calling their bluff.

LEE-ANN

What?

MARGARET

Shelley and Mark came into my office expecting me to say no. Expecting to be able say "See, the lesbian lawyer wouldn't take our case. Oh the hypocrisy!" I'm sure there was conference room full of high-priced talent up at Jones-Day who soiled themselves when the call came in that I said yes.

LEE-ANN

And you're not going to represent them all that effectively!

MARGARET

What? Do you really have no respect for me at all?

LEE-ANN

That would at least make sense.

MARGARET

No, it wouldn't. I am going to give this my best shot.

LEE-ANN

That's appalling.

MARGARET

Oh, I'm likely to lose. While Shelley and Mark are now stuck with little ole' me, Dee and Kelli have the HRC and millions of dollars' worth of real legal talent on their side. And our case is weaker. We'll probably do okay in Georgia, but we'll get our clocks cleaned in Federal court.

LEE-ANN

But meanwhile you'll be all over the news ...

MARGARET

And think of the cognitive dissonance it would cause if the bigot baker's lawyer had her wife standing at her side during all those press moments.

LEE-ANN

There's no way ...

MARGARET

Think about it.

LEE-ANN

I couldn't ...

MARGARET

Sometimes infiltration can be as effective as confrontation. The optics will kill. Time and time and time again.

LEE-ANN

And millions of people will think what's wrong with those two? What kind of self-hatred would let them ...?

MARGARET

I do worry about getting lumped in with the Log Cabin losers.

LEE-ANN

Exactly.

MARGARET

Think of it as taking one for the cause. A big one, I'll grant you.

LEE-ANN

I can't. I guess I don't have your moral sophistication or something, to pretend like that. I have to say wrong is wrong and I won't be a party to it.

MARGARET

I'm sorry you feel that way.

LEE-ANN

It will define us for the rest of our lives ... the traitors ... the champions of bigotry!

MARGARET

But we'll know better.

LEE-ANN

That's not enough. For me. I can't live a life of lonely virtue for thirty or forty years.

MARGARET

I can't make you stand with me.

LEE-ANN

Are you really going to do this? In spite of how I feel about it? In spite of what it's going to do to my life without my agreement?

MARGARET

Yes.

LEE-ANN

That's it? "Yes"?

MARGARET

Yes. You're always asking me to "speak English." So here it is, clearly and unequivocally: Yes. I am going to defend the right of the Sitton Family Bakery to refuse to make a birthday cake for the son of two lesbians.

LEE-ANN

No matter what it does to me.

MARGARET

Yes.

LEE-ANN (after a long beat)

Wow.

LEE-ANN turns to walk out of the room.

MARGARET

Where are you going?

LEE-ANN

I'll let you know when I decide.

LEE-ANN exits.

MARGARET picks up a beer and sits. She sits holding the beer and thinking for a beat. She takes a sip, then picks up the remote as lights fade to black.

End of *The New Client*.