

# *Crossing Borders: an Evolutionary Tail*

A Ten-Minute Play

by Pat Montley

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## *Crossing Borders: an Evolutionary Tail*

### **Synopsis**

An intrepid, hopeful bookstore mouse tries to persuade timid parsonage mouse to move in with him and enjoy the perks of culture hanging out at Borders, but she resists leaving the parson and embracing a high-risk lifestyle.

### **Cast of Characters**

<u>Izzy</u>	an endearing, self-made young bookstore mouse with big plans and high hopes
<u>Mitzi</u>	a sweet, young, timid, innocent parsonage mouse

### **Scene**

Borders Bookstore: an open area between two bookshelves  
Now...but maybe not forever

### **Script History**

*Crossing Borders* was produced as part of the Estrogenius Festival at the Manhattan Theatre Source, NYC, in 2010, where it was voted “Best-of-Show.” In both Adult and Youth versions, it was produced as part of the Summer Shorties Program by Turtle Shell Productions, NYC, in 2011 and 2012. It was published by CreateSpace in the anthology: *EstroGenius 2010: a Celebration of Female Voices*.



*Crossing Borders: an Evolutionary Tail*

SETTING: Borders Bookstore: an open area between two bookshelves.

Pre-curtain music: “Mighty Mouse” theme song. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsPa8QgGGkc>

AT RISE: IZZY and MITZI poke their heads out, cautiously enter and explore the area, then look towards the fourth wall.

IZZY

So? How about it, Mitzi? Whadda ya see, Babe? Whadda ya think?

MITZI

It’s scary.

IZZY

Why?

MITZI

All those people.

IZZY

Hey—they don’t notice us. They’re swilling their cappuccinos, checking their e-mail, reading books they’re too cheap to buy, talking about best sellers to impress their dates.

MITZI

Dates? At Borders?

IZZY

The economy.

MITZI

It’s just that...well, I’m not used to crowds.

IZZY

What crowds? It’s  
*(Silently counts, pointing.)*  
 nine people. Nine preoccupied people.

MITZI

That’s eight more than I’m used to.

IZZY

That's what I've been telling you, Mitzi. Your situation is too...circumscribed. You don't want to spend the rest of your life as a country mouse.

MITZI

I'm not a country mouse. I'm a parsonage mouse.

IZZY

Same diff.

MITZI

The parsonage is not in the country. It's in the suburbs. Same as this mall.

IZZY

But light years away. You live with some crotchety old coot who talks to himself and dribbles oatmeal down his dickey.

MITZI

I live with an elderly Parson who practices his sermons out loud and feeds me quite generously.

IZZY

Humph.

MITZI

I think you're jealous, Izzy.

IZZY

Don't be sil—

*(Spots a crumb that has been dropped.)*

Whoa! Hold on a sec.

*(Runs to edge of stage, retrieves crumb, brings it to Mitzi.)*

Here you go, Honey.

MITZI

*(Nibbling, disapproving.)*

It's awfully sweet. What is it?

IZZY

Well, they've already sold out of the pecan pie and the caramel mouse cake. So it's either the double fudge brownie, the chocolate chocolate chip cookie, the tiramisu special, or the creamy cheesecake.

MITZI

This is your regular diet?

IZZY

Great, isn't it?

MITZI

Not very healthy.

IZZY

Enjoy it. Our life expectancy is two, three years tops.

MITZI

No!

IZZY

Afraid so.

MITZI

How do you know that?

IZZY

I read it in Homemaker's Guide to Getting Rid of Rodents.

MITZI

You can read?!

IZZY

Yes. And someday...soon...when we have pups, I'll teach them to read. Wouldn't you like that? Oh, you'd be so happy living with me here in the bookstore, Mitzi. What do you say?

MITZI

How did you learn to read?

IZZY

I hung out in the children's section. When parents would read to their kids, I'd hide someplace where I could see the book so I'd hear what sound went with each of those funny little shapes on the page.

MITZI

Where did you hide?

IZZY

Oh, different places...on the back of the chair...in the folds of a scarf...one time in a mother's hair.

MITZI

Ooooh!! How brave you are!

IZZY

We have to take risks for education, Mitzi. That's what I'm telling you: it's a great, big world. Bigger than your parsonage.

MITZI

Why didn't I think of that? I could have learned to read too. I could've hidden under papers on the Parson's desk while he was practicing his sermons out loud and—

IZZY

I don't think so. You can't cut your reading teeth on theology. I mean you really have to learn "A is for apple" before you can take in "E is for eschatological."

MITZI

*(Sighs.)*

Too late for me now.

IZZY

No! Don't say that, Mitzi.

"Hope is the thing with feathers/ that perches in the soul,  
and sings the tune without the words, / and never stops at all."

MITZI

What?

IZZY

Emily Dickenson. Poetry section. Come on, I'll show you her picture.

*(Scurries towards bookcase on other side of stage.)*

MITZI

*(Calling after him.)*

No—wait!

*(But IZZY is already there. MITZI points to fourth wall, whispers across the divide.)*

What about...them?

IZZY

I told you: they've got other things on their minds. Come on!

*(MITZI makes a run for it, arrives safely.)*

There. Nothing to it, right?

MITZI

Can you hear my heart pounding?

IZZY

Because of my irresistible pheromones.

*(Sniffs and smooches.)*

Maybe we should take a little break and—

MITZI

No! There's no privacy here!

IZZY

I've got a nice little nest in Periodicals. Shredded paper. It's just around the next—

MITZI

This is not the time to—

IZZY

Okay, okay. But that's just what I'm telling you. If you lived here, we could do it any time we want. I wouldn't have to scurry up the road to the parsonage and you wouldn't have to—

MITZI

He'd miss me.

IZZY

Come on. That can't be true.

MITZI

It is. He cares about me. Why else would he feed me?

IZZY

He doesn't "feed" you. He's a sloppy old geezer who drops his food all over the floor. He doesn't "care about" you.

MITZI

Then why doesn't he get a cat? Or call the exterminator?

IZZY

Because he doesn't know you're there!

MITZI

*(Gasps, cut to the quick, then pulls herself together.)*

He needs me to practice his sermons on.

IZZY

Oh yeah. What? You give him, like...feedback? You do the Saturday-night critiquing thing?

MITZI

Sometimes, Izzy, you can be so cruel.

*(IZZY walks away, tries to pull himself together, returns.)*

IZZY

I'm sorry, Mitzi. Maybe you're right. Maybe I am jealous. I mean I don't get it. After all, he's only...

*(With controlled disgust.)*

human.

MITZI

Maybe that's it. Maybe I feel sorry for him.

IZZY

Why would you...how could you choose him over me. After all, I'm a mouse. Your mouse. I could be your hero if you'd let me. I could be your Mighty Mouse. Oh, Mitzi, there's so much I want to share with you. I have such high hopes for our pups. I'm going to—

*(Sound of approaching heavy footsteps.)*

MITZI

Look! That clerk with the arm-load of books. She's coming this way!

*(They duck behind the bookcase. We hear a loud thwack—of a heavy book falling to the floor. IZZY comes back out.)*

IZZY

It's okay. Coast is clear.

MITZI

*(Coming back out.)*

I can't do this, Izzy. It's too...unnerving. I'm going home.

*(Starts off.)*

IZZY

Wait! You haven't heard my plan!

MITZI

What plan?

IZZY

Well, um...the University is sponsoring a big exhibit on Charles Darwin. Everybody's celebrating evolution.

MITZI

I'm not sure the Parson is celebr—

IZZY

Okay, okay, almost everybody.

MITZI

What's that got to do with us?

IZZY

The book store is having a giant display of his books. That was one of them we barely escaped. Some actor from the Theatre Department is doing a one-man show here about his life and then they're hoping to sell a gazillion copies of On the Origin of Species.

MITZI

So?



IZZY

So I've been doing some serious research.

MITZI

And?

IZZY

Well, it seems humans and mice had a common ancestor—the therapsid.

MITZI

When was this?

IZZY

About sixty-two million years ago. Or maybe it was two hundred million years ago. Anyway, it's all there on the Tree of Evolution. You'll see a big picture of it when they do the display.

MITZI

And I should care about this because?

IZZY

Because I'm going to figure out where they went wrong.

MITZI

The humans?

IZZY

Yes! I'm going to find out why they branched off in the wrong direction, why they lost their tails and common sense and became carnivores and killers and capitalists, and why we're so much smarter, and kinder, and...cuter.

*(Chucks MITZI under the chin.)*

MITZI

So what happens then? When you find out why they "branched off in the wrong direction"?

IZZY

I fix 'em.

MITZI

How?

IZZY

I haven't worked out the details, but I'm going to build a time machine and go back to the therapsid era and make the humans branch off with us. Wanna come?

MITZI

Whoa! I'm not cut out for this craziness. Maybe I'm just a coward, but safety and security

MITZI (*Cont.*)

are important to me. I'm not a risk taker, Izzy. That's you—it's not me.

IZZY

But that's exactly why we're a perfect match. Our offspring will have the best combination of genes.

MITZI

That won't matter if they're crushed to death, will it?

IZZY

I'll protect you, Mitzi. If you could just believe in me...believe in us. We can do it! Yes we can!

MITZI

Can do what?

IZZY

Have a wonderful life together here...read poetry out loud to each other, teach our pups to read, have a life of the mind, make a contribution to Mouse Society.

MITZI

But I already have a life of the mind. The Parson's sermons are very stimulating.

IZZY

He comes here every Monday, you know. Picks up a mystery and reads it in the Café while he eats a double fudge brownie. Crumbs all over the place. You could keep an eye on him. Not like you'd be deserting him.

MITZI

Is that the truth?

IZZY

Would Mighty Mouse lie?

MITZI

I'm sorry, Izzy. There are just too many humans here. They're dangerous. And they don't like us.

IZZY

Humans are still evolving. They haven't yet mastered the art of peaceful coexistence.

MITZI

Exactly.

IZZY

But they're making progress. Starting to think bi-partisan, to cross the aisle, get past

IZZY (*Cont.*)

speciesism. We just gotta have hope, Mitzi.

MITZI

I got hope. I got hope the Parson will spill half his dinner every night.

IZZY

That's not hope. That's assurance.

MITZI

I like assurance better.

IZZY

Hope isn't a passive thing. It isn't sitting around waiting for someone else to make your life better. It's doing something—risking something—to improve your life and your children's lives.

MITZI

Risk is highly overrated, Izzy, especially for someone who has a litter of seven pups every three months.

IZZY

But if you had them here, Mitzi, I'd be able to help you protect them and take care of them.

MITZI

If I had them here, in a year there'd be thirty of us crossing this aisle, all depending on these stingy, caffeine-addicted sugar-holics for a few pathetic crumbs.

IZZY

What about the life of the mind?

MITZI

You don't need me for that.

IZZY

But I do! What's the point of reading philosophy and writing poetry if there's no one to share it with?

MITZI

You write poems?

*(He shrugs a "sort of.")*

Did you ever...write one for me?

IZZY

*(Lying.)*

Well...um...sure.

MITZI

Oh! Recite it for me—please! Poetry should be heard not read.

IZZY

Now?

MITZI

Why not?

IZZY

Um...okay...let's see...here goes. She...uh...

*(Gets idea.)*

she bolts in beauty like the night  
of cloudless climes and starry skies  
and all that's best of dark and bright  
are in her tail, her ears, her eyes.

MITZI

Oh, Izzy, I do love you!

*(She throws her arms around IZZY. They rub whiskers.  
He emits high-pitched squeaks.)*

IZZY

So, um, you'll stay here with me then?

MITZI

*(Suddenly pulling back.)*

Oh! Yummy!

*(She darts to other side of stage, sniffing.)*

IZZY

What is it? Where are you going?

MITZI

I smell...it must be just over here—I smell...yes, yes, it is! Peanut butter!

*(Bolts offstage.)*

IZZY

*(Running after her.)*

No! Wait! Mitzi—don't!

*(Blackout.)*

*End of play*

# *The Competent Heart*

A 10-Minute Play

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## ***THE COMPETENT HEART***

### **Synopsis**

A customer enters a bookstore and—in the hope of pleasing her/his less-than-satisfied Significant Other—asks the proprietor for advice on becoming a competent person. The proprietor (clearly a Trivial Pursuits champion) offers advice and self-help books on medicine, home repairs, and plant care. The customer is awed, but questions the definition of competency with an Emily Dickinson poem. The proprietor’s response provides a revelation.

Note: Neither the sex nor the age of either character is indicated in the script.

### **Cast of Characters**

Terry:                                   the proprietor;  
  any age;  
  a very competent pragmatist

Chris:                                   the customer;  
  any age;  
  a less-than-competent romantic

### **Setting**

An intimate bookstore. The present.

### **Script History**

*The Competent Heart* was a final finalist in the Actors Theatre of Louisville 10-Minute Play Contest, was given a reading at the Women’s Project in Ft. Lauderdale, FL, and productions at the Women’s Project at Theatre Project in Baltimore and Love Creek Productions in NYC. It is published by Dramatic Publishing in *25 in 10: Twenty-Five Ten-Minute Plays*.

*The Competent Heart*

SCENE: *Lights up on the back wall of a bookstore. TERRY, the proprietor, is shelving books. CHRIS, the customer, approaches, browses through the books in one bookcase.*

TERRY

May I help you?

CHRIS

I want to be a competent person.

TERRY

Excuse me?

CHRIS

My significant other is tired of being the competent one.

TERRY

Your significant other?

CHRIS

My...partner.

TERRY

I see.

CHRIS

Do you?

TERRY

So you thought...

*(Referring to case where CHRIS has been browsing.)*

you'd try poetry.

CHRIS

I always go to the poetry section first. That's how I tell if it's a good bookstore.

TERRY

And...is it?

CHRIS

You have the Singleton translation of Dante.

TERRY

Yes.

CHRIS

The Sayers is better.

TERRY

The Singleton is more faithful to the original.

CHRIS

But it isn't even in verse. Anybody can translate. It takes another poet to translate into *terza rima*.

TERRY

Some people don't want to read "another poet." They want to read Dante.

CHRIS

*(With disdain.)*

In prose?

TERRY

*(Conceding.)*

The Sayers is out of print.

CHRIS

Ah.

*(Beat.)*

TERRY

What kind of competence are you looking for?

CHRIS

I'm not sure. Remember it isn't my idea.

TERRY

*(Inviting.)*

Speculate.

CHRIS

Well...perhaps omniscience...

*(Beat.)*

though I don't think omnipotence is expected.

TERRY

That must be a relief.



CHRIS  
Yes...something short of that.

TERRY  
How short?

CHRIS  
Somewhere between helpless and all-powerful.

TERRY  
Do you want to be...capable, adequate, satisfactory?

CHRIS  
At least.

TERRY  
Efficient, productive, on top of things?

CHRIS  
Probably.

TERRY  
Authoritative, imperative, controlling—

CHRIS  
Definitely not.

TERRY  
Good. Now we've settled on degree. How about field of activity?

CHRIS  
That's a hard one. I think the disappointment is pretty...universal.

TERRY  
Whose?

CHRIS  
My significant other's.

TERRY  
Are you sure?

CHRIS  
It felt that way to me.

TERRY  
I'm sorry.

(Pause.)  
So you'd like to...

CHRIS  
Become a competent person.

TERRY  
Yes. Were any specifics mentioned?

CHRIS  
Medicine.

TERRY  
Medicine?

CHRIS  
I need to know stuff.

TERRY  
Like?

CHRIS  
Like what kind of food not to eat if you've been throwing up.

TERRY  
Hmm...

CHRIS  
And what to do if somebody mistakes the mosquito-bite drops for the eye drops, and puts them in.

TERRY  
Ouch.

CHRIS  
Oh yes—and the difference between aspirin and tylenol.

TERRY  
The hard questions.

CHRIS  
Yeah.

TERRY

*(Crossing to shelf.)*

How about...

*(Perusing shelf, locating a book.)*

*Complete Guide to Symptoms, Illness & Surgery?*

CHRIS

*(Taking the tome, reading cover.)*

“796 symptoms, 520 illnesses, 160 surgeries.”

*(Opening to various pages at random.)*

“Alzheimer’s...anxiety...hot flashes...impotence...PMS...genital warts...hemorrhoid removal”...all the important stuff.

*(Turning to last part.)*

“Aspirin” is not in the index.

*(Returns book.)*

TERRY

*(Pulling another book.)*

This one has a good medication guide.

*(Hands book to CHRIS.)*

It’s in the back.

CHRIS

*(Checking.)*

Aspirin’s not on this list either.

TERRY

Look under “analgesic” or “antipyretic.”

CHRIS

*(Looking.)*

Wow! Here it is. Just like you said. Now how did you know that? I admire a person who knows things like that.

TERRY

Thank you.

CHRIS

Now see, if I had you at home, I wouldn’t have to buy this book.

*(Pause.)*

TERRY

What other?

CHRIS

Other what?

TERRY  
Areas of desired competence?

CHRIS  
*(Beat.)*  
Domestic engineering.

TERRY  
Like plumbing?

CHRIS  
Yeah, like how to adjust one of those thing-a-ma-jigs in the back of the toilet.

TERRY  
A ball cock assembly?

CHRIS  
That's the thing.

TERRY  
*(Pulls a book from another bookcase.)*  
Try the *Home Repair Handbook*.  
*(Gives it to CHRIS.)*

CHRIS  
Will this say what to do when the pipes freeze?

TERRY  
*(Shrugs.)*  
Warm them with a hair dryer.

CHRIS  
Look, is there a gene for knowing this stuff or what? I mean where did you learn that?

TERRY  
I don't know.

CHRIS  
Come on—did you read that in this book?

TERRY  
No. But you can.

CHRIS

You probably even know how to install a dimmer switch.

TERRY

They come in handy, don't they?

CHRIS

So—you're a romantic.

TERRY

*(Ignoring this.)*

Anything else?

CHRIS

Did I say something wrong?

TERRY

Is there another competence you want to develop?

CHRIS

Yes. I'd like to be better at...looking after...taking care of...living things.

TERRY

What kind of living things?

CHRIS

Well...plants?

TERRY

*(Reaching to another shelf.)*

You could read *The New York Times Book of House Plants*.

*(Hands it to CHRIS.)*

CHRIS

*(Paging through.)*

Pictures. That's good. Oh—here's one we have—with the little pink flowers.

TERRY

*(Just glancing at the page upside down, then, looking at CHRIS.)*

Cyclamen. Yes, beautiful blooms. Requires a lot of care though: just the right temperature, the right amount of light and water, daily misting, the pebble base. You have to really love it.

CHRIS

Oh, I do. I do. But sometimes it's hard to know...what a living thing needs.

TERRY

Well, the book is pretty specific about—

CHRIS

*(Interrupting.)*

Yeah, right. So...if I read these books...will that do it?

TERRY

Hmm...assuming you apply what you learn?

CHRIS

I mean—you seem real clear on it—is that all there is to competence?

TERRY

It's a good start.

CHRIS

Tell me, do you believe in talking to plants?

TERRY

Some people do. Do you?

CHRIS

I read to them. I believe all living things need...poetry.

TERRY

But could your cyclamen live on poetry?

CHRIS

Could my cyclamen live without poetry?

*(Takes a volume of Emily Dickinson from the poetry shelf, opens to a familiar page, and recites without having to read it, looking at TERRY.)*

“It's all I have to bring today—  
This, and my heart beside—  
This, and my heart, and all the fields—  
And all the meadows wide—  
Be sure you count—should I forget  
Some one the sum could tell—  
This, and my heart, and all the Bees  
Which in the Clover dwell.”

*(CHRIS slowly closes book and replaces it on shelf. Beat.)*

TERRY

Chris...

CHRIS

*(Takes a credit card from pocket, hands it to TERRY.)*

Put the books on my VISA.

*(Starts to leave, turns back.)*

I'll make your favorite quiche for dinner.

TERRY

But the oven...

CHRIS

Will be fixed by the time you get home.

TERRY

You can't fix a gas stove!

CHRIS

No, but the repair person I called this morning can.

*(Beat. TERRY kisses the card and tilts it towards CHRIS, who smiles and exits.)*

*(Lights.)*

*(End of play.)*