

BAD HEARTS

10 Page Excerpt

By Mike Bencivenga

SYNOPSIS:

On a fall day in 1975, Margaret 'Mags' Esposito unexpectedly comes home from college to her suburban Long Island home. She returns hoping to find love and acceptance in the war zone of a family she was raised in. Her younger brother, Eddie, who appears to be winning his life long battle with stuttering, joyfully greets her. But Mags' return and her new-found confidence rubs her mother, Joyce, the wrong way. Joyce sees in Mags all the opportunities she always wanted but will never have. The weight of being married to a man she no longer loves and a life spent raising children she was never sure she wanted has made her bitter, hard and hateful. Mags' father, Tony, is equally depressed having grown up convinced he'll die, as all the men in his family have, of a heart attack at age 50. Mags tries to shake them out of it but learns that bringing hope to a broken soul is like bringing a match to a gas pump. Something is bound to explode. 'Bad Hearts' is about the fragility of dreams and the toxicity of despair. And about the treacherous and tragic place some of us call home.

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CHARACTERS:

EDDIE ESPOSITO (16) - A stuttering mess of a kid

MAGS ESPOSITO (19) - Eddie's free spirited, older sister

TONY ESPOSITO (49) - Eddie's Dad who thinks his number is up

JOYCE ESPOSITO (46) - Eddie's hard hearted mother

TIME:

ACT I - October, 1975 The days leading up to Tony's 50th birthday

ACT II - November, 1975 Thanksgiving and the days after

SETTING:

The play is set on the back porch of a one family house in Valley Stream, Long Island. It is an open air, non-screened in porch. There is a wall phone crudely mounted to the shingled house belying the do-it-yourself, save-some-cash manner in which it was installed. A weathered couch and a rattan chair sit below the rear two windows of the house. One window looks into the parents' bedroom and the other into their bathroom. Next to the couch is small wooden toy chest that acts as an end table. A portable black and white TV sits on a half fridge. The door to the far right leads to the basement. And there's a door on a back stoop, on the right, leading into the house. The driveway, to the left, runs along the side of the house. A rusted wind chime hangs from the patio wall. It never moves. Two once festive lanterns that provide light at night hang inside the roof overhang. There is a hint of the back lawn, downstage in front of the porch, that extends out to a wooded area behind the house. The whole setting is a bit run down and could use some love.

ACT I - SCENE ONE

(LIGHTS UP on Eddie, 16, who is seated on the couch on the back porch of the Esposito house. His Howdy Doody plaid shirt, rolled up jeans and smallish size suggest a younger kid than he is. Eddie holds a round, hand mirror up to his face and closely studies his mouth as he says each word)

EDDIE

(Slowly and methodically)

Puh-pumpernickel buh-bread. Pump-er-nuh-nickel bread. Pump-er-nickel bread.

(Margaret, 19, who is known to friends and family as 'Mags' walks up the driveway carrying a duffle bag and an old suitcase. She silently studies this curious scene with amused delight)

MAGS

Somebody order some dark, brown bread?

EDDIE

M-Mags!

(Excited, he runs over and hugs her)

MAGS

Hey Buddy, how are you?

EDDIE

F-Fine. What are you duh-doing here?

MAGS

I got sent home. Time off for bad behavior. What's with the pumpernickel bread?

EDDIE

V-voice exercise. Helps with the st-stuttering.

MAGS

(Picking up the mirror)

I thought you were just checking out how handsome you are. Where's Mom and Dad?

EDDIE

Mom's sh-shopping and D-dad's at wuh-work. They should be ho-home suh-soon. Then the fireworks re-really get guh-going.

MAGS

Wow. It's still bad, huh?

EDDIE

Yeah. They fuh-fight all the tuh-time n-now.

MAGS

I mean the stuttering. It seems worse than I remember.

EDDIE

Y-yeah. Cuh-could be my nuh-nerves. Or l-lack of sleep Or be-cuh-cause I'm s-so excited to s-see you. My spuh-speech therapist, Muh-Mister Muh-Mitchell, tells me I nuh-need to be calm. Tuh-talk slow and duh-deliberate. Watch.

(He looks in the mirror)

'She makes a proper c-cup of coffee in a copper c-coffee pot.' He says I guh-gotta watch my mouth.

MAGS

I've been hearing that since I was three. When did you start doing this?

EDDIE

This y-year. The guh-guidance counselor said I w-wasn't fit for regular h-high school. Cuh-cause I'd be a d-distraction. S-so Mom and Dad had to s-send me to the ruh-retard school.

MAGS

Don't say 'retard.' It's not nice.

EDDIE

Well that's wuh-what it is. It was h-horrible. Like a j-jail. Full of ruh-retards. I b-begged them to g-get me out. And they d-did. Then the h-high school said they could let m-me in if I w-went to a s-speech therapist. So n-now I'm in the ruh-regular school which is so much buh-buh-buh-

MAGS

Better?

EDDIE

T-totally. Dad got a s-second job as a g-guard at night at Muh-Marvin's Jewelry S-Store to pay for the luh-lessons. And they guh-gave him a g-gun. A s-snub nose revolver. Just l-like 'Mannix.' I know where h-he keeps it. You w-wanna see?

MAGS

(Lighting a cigarette)

That's okay. I believe you. Anything else going on?

EDDIE

Uncle Frank duh-died.

MAGS

He died?

EDDIE

He just duh-dropped d-dead.

MAGS

Where?

EDDIE

Fuh-flat on his f-face. J-just like Uncle P-Pat.

MAGS

No. I mean where was he?

EDDIE

Playing g-golf. Now th-there's just D-Dad.

MAGS

How upset is he?

EDDIE

Vuh-vuh-very. His buh-buh-birthday's coming up.

MAGS

Yeah. I think it's the big five-o. He must be freaking out.

EDDIE

Y-yeah. H-he is. S-so. N-No muh-more Uncle F-Frank.

(A pause)

Hey! G-guess who's in luh-love.

MAGS

Who?

EDDIE

M-me.

MAGS

You? That's fantastic, Eddie. Who is she?

EDDIE

You're nuh-not gonna b-believe it. She's the pr-pr-prettiet guh-guh-girl in the-the-the...Sh-she's the m-m-most--

MAGS

(Handing him the mirror)

Use this and take a deep breath. Is she in your class?

EDDIE

(Looking in the mirror)

N-no. She's older. A j-junior. Her n-name is D-Dorian Santos.

MAGS

Wow. That's a fairy tale name.

EDDIE

I th-think it's S-spanish.

MAGS

How did you meet?

EDDIE

(Still using the mirror)

She walks the same w-way home so one d-day she j-just said 'Hi.' And I s-said 'Hi' b-back. So then we s-started wuh-wuh-walking home all the t-time. S-she talks t-to me. And really luh-listens. And she's s-so pr-pr-pretty.

MAGS

You said that. So have you gone out with her?

EDDIE

Nuh-not yet.

MAGS

You better ask her out. Before somebody else does.

EDDIE

I nuh-know. That would s-suck. B-big time. I w-was going to ask her l-last week. And yuh-you know what h-happened?

MAGS

What?

EDDIE

We were w-walking h-home, right here up the b-block, and we tuh-turn the c-corner and M-mom was th-throwing D-dad's stuff out the duh-door.

MAGS

What stuff?

EDDIE

His c-clothes. His suh-socks. sh-shirts and his under wuh-wear. And sh-she was screaming, 'Buh-buh-bastard' and 'Son of a buh-buh-buh--son of a buh-buh---'

MAGS

I get it. What did you do?

EDDIE

I p-played it cuh-cool. D-Dorian s-says to me, "Hey. Isn't th-this your buh-block?" And I s-say, "Yeah. B-but I don't know th-those puh-people. They're c-crazy."

(Mags laughs at this)

So w-we just k-kept g-going. I think she nuh-knew it w-was our house. B-but she's too nice to s-say anything. And you nuh-know what?

What? MAGS

EDDIE
W-when I wuh-walked her home I luh-leaned forward to k-k-kiss her. And I tuh-touched her nuh-nuh-nuh--

Her neck? MAGS

EDDIE
N-no. Her nuh-nuh-nuh--

Her knee? MAGS

EDDIE
N-no! Her nuh-nuh-knocker.

MAGS
(Laughing)
You touched her boob?

EDDIE
Y-yeah. I was suh-so emb-barassed. But yuh-you know wuh-what sh-she s-said?

MAGS
This'll go a lot faster if you stop asking me that. What did she say?

EDDIE
She s-said, "That's o-o-okay, E-Eddie." D-do you th-think I b-blew it with her.

MAGS
No. I think you did fine. Really good. But you gotta ask her out. Promise me you will.

(During this we hear the sound of a CAR PULLING UP and the door SLAMMING shut)

JOYCE (O.S.)
Eddie, come and help me with the groceries.

EDDIE
(Yelling up the drive)
M-Mags is here!

JOYCE (O.S.)
What?

EDDIE

M-Mags is here.

(To Mags)

Later on I-I'll show you the s-super s-secret project I'm wuh-working on. It's t-terrific.

(Joyce Esposito, 46, walks slowly up the drive carrying a bag of groceries from the market. Having had four kids before she was thirty has drained all the warmth and patience out of her. She is startled to see Mags)

JOYCE

Oh. Hi. You here for your Uncle's funeral?

MAGS

No. I didn't know about it.

JOYCE

I figured your father might've called you. So what are you doing here? I thought you had school.

MAGS

I got suspended.

JOYCE

What?

MAGS

They suspended me for a semester. Sent me home.

JOYCE

Meaning what?

MAGS

Meaning I'll be here until January.

(There is a frozen, awkward silence)

EDDIE

(Trying to break the chill)

Y-yay!

JOYCE

Eddie, go bring the rest of the bags inside.

EDDIE

B-but I want to h-hear--

JOYCE

Don't make me ask you twice.

(Eddie moves off down the drive. Joyce waits until he's out of earshot)

JOYCE

What did you do?

MAGS

Nice to see you too.

JOYCE

Tell me what you did.

MAGS

Why do you assume I did something? It was nothing.

JOYCE

You must've done something. What was it? Tell me.

MAGS

(Surrendering)

I was at a party in the dorm and got caught smoking pot.

JOYCE

Were you the only one smoking?

MAGS

No. Everybody was.

JOYCE

And they all got suspended?

MAGS

No. Only me.

JOYCE

Only you. Why's that?

MAGS

Because I sold it to them.

JOYCE

How long have you been doing this?

MAGS

What? Selling drugs? Since last semester.

JOYCE

Why?

MAGS

I needed money.

JOYCE

For what?

MAGS

Books.

JOYCE

They don't give you books?

MAGS

This isn't like public school, Ma. Books are expensive at college. I asked you for the money and all I got was a lecture. So I sold some pot to some friends.

JOYCE

This is what we send you away to college to learn? To be a drug dealer?

MAGS

I was going to try prostitution but I don't think I have the legs for it.

JOYCE

Don't get wise with me. When did this happen?

MAGS

Last weekend. They had a disciplinary meeting and told me I had to go. It took me a couple of days to get enough cash together to make it home.

JOYCE

Why didn't you call us? We'd have come and gotten you.

MAGS

And listen to you two argue for 300 miles? No thanks.

(Mags pulls out a cigarette, lights it and sits down)

JOYCE

I can't believe this. Your father's going to have a fit. You know how he feels about drugs. He's already a mess, with your Uncle Frank and all. He's got it in his head that he's next. That whole nonsense about how all the men in his family drop dead after fifty. It's ridiculous.

MAGS

Two brothers, two heart attacks. That's not so ridiculous.

JOYCE

Let me tell you something, Miss Smarty-pants-college-girl. His brother Patrick smoked two packs a day and drank a bottle of scotch for dinner every night. Of course he died. And your Uncle Frank was as fat as a horse.

MAGS

Has Dad ever been checked?

JOYCE

No. He doesn't want to spend the money. He says it's a waste of time. How his brother Frank had the best doctors in New York but that didn't stop the Esposito 'curse of the bad hearts' from taking him out.

MAGS

Still, he should get checked.

JOYCE

You want to tell your father to get checked? You go right ahead. He won't listen to me. And he's driving us all nuts with this bullshit. You see how your brother has gotten worse with the stumbley talk? He comes home every other night beaten up. It's gotten so bad I started taking nerve pills.

MAGS

He's getting into fights?

JOYCE

They pick on him. You know how kids are. I had to go down there. Your father couldn't go. There's nothing they can do.
(Rummaging in her purse)
I gotta take a pill. Hold on.

MAGS

Maybe I can help with him.

JOYCE

Help him how? Teach him to get high? Leave him alone. He's a mess. You want to do something try talking to your father. Tell him he's not going to die from some mystical family curse. What's gonna kill him is lifting those heavy crates all day down at JJ's. That's what's gonna kill him.

MAGS

What do you want me to do? Tell him to quit?

JOYCE

Talk sense to him. They got an opening for a manager position there. He could get off the loading dock and work inside. I told him to go after it. And you know what he tells me? He says, "Nah, I don't want to be a desk jockey. I don't want to wear a jacket and tie." So what does he do instead? He stays out every night drinking with his buddies down at the Twin Harps. Then he comes home and tosses in bed all night, wondering when his number's coming up. Well, I've had it. He's giving me a nervous condition. If he's gonna drop dead I wish he'd go ahead and do it and put all of us out of our misery.

MAGS

Ma, don't say that. What if he does die?

JOYCE

What do you mean 'what if he does die?' Of course he's gonna die. We're all gonna die.

MAGS

But if he 'drops dead' don't you think you'll feel terrible for saying that?

JOYCE

So I'll feel terrible. That's my business. Not yours.

MAGS

Still, I wish you wouldn't say it.

JOYCE

Why?

MAG

Because words have power.

JOYCE

Words are words. You don't want me to use words? What do you want? Hand signals?

MAGS

No. Just be more careful what you say.

JOYCE

So you're telling me to shut up?

MAGS

I didn't say that. I just think--

JOYCE

You go and get yourself tossed out of your fancy upstate school and you got the gall to tell me how to behave? You're the one who needs to shut up. Telling me to shut up. I don't need any grief outta you. I got enough problems here dealing with your lunatic father and your idiot brother.

MAGS

He's not an idiot.

JOYCE

He's failing everything. What do you call that? An Einstein? Maybe you can help with him. And with your father. They sure as hell are sick of listening to me.

MAGS

I'm sure they sure as hell are.