

A Conference on the Mound

Cast of Characters

The pitcher AKA Eric Kearns

The catcher AKA Juan Nuñez

The shortstop AKA Kevin Marek

The Fan

Stadium P.A. Announcer

Radio Announcer

(P.A. and Radio Announcer could be same person, but distinct voices. They are heard but not seen.)

The batter AKA Lance Hendricks

Set Requirements

- One white circle of a few feet diameter with a solid rectangle at its center to indicate a pitching mound/pitching rubber (center stage left)
- An outline of home plate (stage right)

Sound Requirements

- Live or taped organ music as would be heard at a sports stadium

Scene

Conversations by players during a professional baseball game.

SETTING A professional baseball game.

AT RISE Spotlight on the PITCHER (ERIC KEARNS) who is standing on the mound (CENTER STAGE LEFT), other parts of stage are dark. PITCHER is sighing, tugging and adjusting his cap, and wiping his brow with his forearm. He appears distressed. An organ plays, building to the “charge” riff. The CATCHER is crouched or kneeling behind home plate (STAGE RIGHT). The SHORT STOP is upstage right or not seen.

STADIUM PA ANNOUNCER

(Deep, loud, with an echo)

Now batting, number 16, Laaaance Hendricks!

RADIO/TV ANNOUNCER

(Higher voice, exaggerated cadence of a broadcaster)

This is a classic match-up, the bases are loaded with Lance Hendricks—the big bopper—coming to the plate. Cardinals' closer Eric Kearns is on the mound.

(The CATCHER walks to the mound to talk to the PITCHER)

CATCHER

You wanna start him off with a curve?

PITCHER

(Looking down, moving his foot across the mound, shakes his head)

Nah.

CATCHER

Fastball high and tight?

PITCHER

I don't know if I can hit that spot. . . . You can't make a mistake with Hendricks.

CATCHER

(Puts his hand on PITCHER'S shoulder)

You're leading the league in saves. You're the man.

PITCHER

I just don't feel it.

I kind of feel like I don't deserve to be here. Know what I mean?

CATCHER

What are you talking about? You make the all-star team every year.

PITCHER

I guess.

CATCHER

It's true.

PITCHER

Sure, it's just that . . . well, sometimes I feel like I'm a fake, that any day they'll find out I'm not that good after all.

CATCHER

Huh, I see.

What do you think is behind that?

PITCHER

I can't say for sure, but when I was growing up, it never seemed like what I did was good enough.

I was always lacking in some way. My Dad wanted more, more, more. I feel like he kept me in this place of doubt and insecurity, and I still carry that with me.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Looks like pitcher Eric Kearns and catcher Juan Nuñez are discussing what to throw Hendricks. Kearns has got a heater and a nasty breaking ball, both are very tough to hit.

(SHORTSTOP jogs from UPSTAGE RIGHT and joins pitcher and catcher).

Here comes short stop Kevin Marek to join the conversation.

SHORT STOP

Bro', you got this. Blow it past him.

(Silence, pause)

OK, you thinking curve, Juan?

CATCHER

Eric was telling me he's not feeling that great about himself today.

SHORT STOP

You kidding? You looked awesome warming up. Last time you faced Hendricks, you struck him out.

CATCHER

It goes a little deeper than that.

SHORT STOP

You talkin' about that game in San Diego last September? Hendricks was red hot, he was on a streak, hittin' everything. That's ancient history.

Right here, right now, you got this.

(SHORT STOP gives PITCHER an encouraging swat on the rear with his glove)

CATCHER

Kevin, we're not talking about Hendricks.

SHORTSTOP

Yeah, you're right, screw him!

(SHORT STOP holds up his hand for a high-five, or extends it for a fist-bump, but the others don't reciprocate)

CATCHER

Eric, mind if I share?

PITCHER

(shrugs)

Sure, go ahead.

CATCHER

Eric isn't feeling too great about himself today. It's something he struggles with. He thinks it's related to his relationship with his father.

PITCHER

And my mother.

CATCHER

Your mother?

PITCHER

Yeah, she enabled my Dad. She never stood up to him, or supported me. It's like she put all her love into my sister, and I was supposed to tough it out.

CATCHER

How so?

PITCHER

I'll give you an example, and this might sound stupid, but I remember when I was about ten-years-old, my mother and sister were baking cookies and I really wanted to help. My Mom told me I couldn't, no reason, just *no*, go practice your pitching.

I went outside and threw the ball against the wall so hard my arm burned. My Mom came charging out and told me to stop making so much noise.

When the cookies were done, my sister offered me one, and I told her I didn't want any of her stupid cookies. My Mom yelled at me for being mean to my sister, and I started crying because I was still mad that I didn't get to help.

Then my Dad comes in and tells me to stop blubbering like a baby, and what the hell's the matter with me, and why didn't I go practice my pitching?

CATCHER

You're disappointed in your mother.

PITCHER

Yeah. In retrospect, I think she was angry at my Dad and took it out on me. I probably reminded her of him.

I don't think it was purposeful, but I didn't know that. She should have been more aware of how her actions were affecting me.

CATCHER

Sounds like you've come to a few conclusions about the dynamics of the household.

PITCHER

Sure, but maybe I'm completely wrong about it all. My sister has a whole different take. *She* says that my father never paid anything any attention to her, that it was all about me and baseball.

I kind of knew that, but she also thinks that my mother was jealous of her, particularly when my sister got to be a teenager.

CATCHER

Did you and your sister get along?

PITCHER

Back then, not really, but now we do. We each had---

(Organ interrupts pitcher's speech. CATCHER, PITCHER and SHORTSTOP continue gesturing and talking, but audience can't hear them).

RADIO ANNOUNCER

(Speaking fast)

And we're back from a Sound Sleeper moment, just a reminder that there's zero percent financing on all beds and mattresses at metro-area Sound Sleeper locations till the end of the month. Sound Sleeper, you *know* you want to be one.

Pitcher Eric Kearns looks like he's dialed in and ready to go. Catcher Nuñez and the short stop Marek are trying to settle him down, get him to take a moment. Sometimes you can be *too* pumped.

SHORTSTOP

Hey, at least your father was around. My parents divorced, and after that I hardly saw my old man.

PITCHER

You're probably right, no reason to complain.

CATCHER

No, that's bullshit. There's nothing I hate more than when someone says *at least*.

SHORTSTOP

What do you mean? I'm relating my experience, I'm empathizing.

CATCHER

No, you're not. When you say *at least*, you're minimizing Eric's feelings, telling him he's not entitled to them.

SHORTSTOP

Sure but---

CATCHER

I'm not trying to deny *your* pain, but when you bring up your parent's divorce in this context, you're diminishing Eric.

It's not a competition. We all have our struggles. Empathy is about deep listening, trying to understand, not comparing or judging.

FAN IN THE STANDS

(FAN is sitting in the seats with the audience)

HEY KEARNS – YOU SUCK!

CATCHER

(CATCHER looks around)

Excuse me, who said that?

FAN

ME.

CATCHER

Why?

FAN

(Surprised)

Why? Because . . . he sucks; he should go ahead and pitch the goddam ball already. What's he making, eighteen million dollars a year?

CATCHER

Do you like it when people criticize your work?

FAN

No, but I don't make no eighteen million dollars a year.

CATCHER

So, if you were well paid, then you'd enjoy being insulted?

FAN

I don't know.

CATCHER

Are you angry at Eric, who you don't even know, or is there something else going on?

FAN

What is *something else* supposed to mean?

CATCHER

I don't know, you tell me.

FAN

I'm getting a beer.

CATCHER

Perhaps alcohol isn't the best strategy for you.

FAN

I'm just havin' a couple of cold ones with the guys, relaxing, enjoying the game.

CATCHER

You don't appear relaxed.

Do you feel that you need to drink to enjoy yourself?

FAN

Nah, I mean it's just . . . I don't know.

CATCHER

Do you ever socialize *without* drinking? I'm curious what role alcohol plays in your life.

FAN

I'm outta here.

(FAN leaves)

CATCHER

(Addressing PITCHER AND SHORTSTOP)

I don't think there's going to be any healing until he gets a handle on the alcohol. Ultimately, he's going to have to address *why* he's drinking, but you can't do that work till you're sober.

SHORTSTOP

(Gesturing toward home plate)

So, anyway, if you don't want to throw the fastball first pitch, what about starting with a breaking ball out of the strike zone, see if he'll chase one?

CATCHER

Kevin, we'll get to that in a moment.

Eric, you were about to tell me about your sister, your relationship with her.

PITCHER

It's good. She lives a regular life - she's married, has two kids, works as a nurse. Everybody thinks she's wonderful, and she is, but I feel people accept her for *her*.

It's different for me. What if I had never pitched in the majors, or even made my high-school team, what would my Dad think of me? Sure, he's proud of me *now*, because I'm a big star and all that, but let's say I was working for UPS or running a flower shop, what then?

SHORTSTOP

(Gestures toward plate)

Guys, the ump wants us to move it along, he's coming out here.

CATCHER

Typical umpire mentality.

I think we have a lot more to unpack here. I hate to do this because we're at a critical point, but can we revisit this, maybe post-game?

PITCHER (nods)

Sure.

SHORTSTOP

(Slaps PITCHER on the shoulder with his glove).

Go get him!

(Runs back to his position)

CATCHER

We'll talk later.

PITCHER

Thanks, buddy.

CATCHER

Give me a hug.

PITCHER

I don't know.

CATCHER

Hug.

(CATCHER and PITCHER hug, then CATCHER walks to home plate and stands there for a moment. SPOTLIGHT now on home plate area, rest of the stage dimly lit. The BATTER walks from DOWNSTAGE RIGHT to plate and takes a practice swing, taps his shoes with his bat, tightens batting gloves, and stands at plate. CATCHER crouches down)

BATTER

Quite a little chat you ladies were having.

CATCHER

Yeah, Eric's going through a tough time.

BATTER

Well, I'm about to make it tougher.

(Is in the batting stance and waves the end of bat in a slightly circular motion, and then points it at the pitcher)

CATCHER

That was hostile.

But I guess that's your job.

BATTER

Time.

(Makes the "T" sign with his hands to call time and steps away from plate. He continues to hold bat in one hand, but the fat end of it is resting on the ground).

Yup, my job. And it is a job. No different than being a baker or car mechanic, I get paid to do a task. Mine is hitting baseballs.

CATCHER

Seems like a good way to look at it.

BATTER

I think so.

(Turns and faces CATCHER)

But most people don't see it like that. They think you're a super hero. I'm going out with this girl, gorgeous by the way, and she's a fan. At first, I was into it, not as an ego thing, but because she understands baseball, and the life of an athlete. I don't have to explain to her what an RBI is, or that I'm on the road a lot. She gets it.

But lately, I've been thinking that what she really likes isn't Lance Hendricks, it's Lance Hendricks the *ball player*. She wouldn't have given me a second look if I was an average Joe in a cubicle. Mind you, if she was some plain Jane, I probably wouldn't be interested either, knowing I could do better. So it cuts both ways.

CATCHER

How long has the relationship been going on?

BATTER

About six months.

CATCHER

So, we're not talking about a fling.

BATTER

No. I've had a few of those, and that's fine, but I'm looking for something more serious, and I don't know if this is it.

We have fun together, but I'm wondering if she would be a good mother. That's what's most important.

CATCHER

So you want to have children?

BATTER

Definitely.

CATCHER

It sounds to me like you have questions surrounding your status as an athlete, and how that impacts your personal life.

BATTER

Yep, that's about the size of it.

CATCHER

Would you be open to some group work?

BATTER

Group work?

CATCHER

I know a few players going through a similar thing; it might be helpful if you could share your experiences.

BATTER

Yeah, why not? Sometimes I feel so isolated, like I'm the only one with these feelings, but I know I'm not. It's just, you know, how do you start the conversation?

(Takes a practice swing)

So, when would the group meet?

(Organ drowns out CATCHER and BATTER. BATTER steps back up to the plate and stands there ready, awaiting pitch. PITCHER and home plate area are now both illuminated)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

You saw catcher Juan Nuñez jawing with the Big Bopper, Lance Hendricks. No love lost there, probably needling each other pretty good. Hendricks is always dangerous. He's back in the batter's box now. What a battle this has been, and Kearns hasn't even thrown a pitch yet. Just a reminder, as Kearns checks the runner at first, that Burger Barn is offering a free order of fries with every double burger purchased this month. Drop by their new Route 2 location. "Burgers, it's not just *what* we do, it's *how* we do." Here's the wind-up and the pitch---

(PITCHER winds up to pitch)

(BLACKOUT – END)