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# Good People

by David Lindsay-Abaire

A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki  
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# ***GOOD PEOPLE***

***By David Lindsay-Abaire***

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## **A STUDY GUIDE**

**By Martin Andrucki**

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**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Born in 1969, David Lindsay-Abaire grew up in the working-class neighborhood of South Boston, the world that is the setting for much of *Good People*. Having begun his education in the public school system there, he won a scholarship at age 11 to Milton Academy, a prestigious private school in a Boston suburb. Among Milton's graduates are the distinguished poet, T.S. Eliot, and future U.S. Attorneys General, Robert Kennedy and Eliot Richardson. So the future playwright was entering a privileged social world far removed from the streets of his native Southie.

Following Milton Academy, Lindsay-Abaire attended Sarah Lawrence College in New York, a school known for its emphasis on the arts, after which he studied playwriting at the Julliard School in Manhattan.

In addition to *Good People*, Lindsay-Abaire has written *Fuddy Meers* (1999)—produced at The Public Theatre in 2002—and *Rabbit Hole*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2007. *Good People* opened on Broadway in March, 2011. He has also written a number of films, including the 2014 version of *Poltergeist*, *Oz The Great and Powerful*, and the screen version *Rabbit Hole*.

In an interview with the Austin, Texas Chronicle in 2013, the playwright noted that he had “been wanting to write about the old neighborhood for a long time, because it’s such a rich place in terms of character and people and history and location.” But, he added, he wanted to wait until a point in his career where he would be able to treat the world of South Boston “respectfully and responsibly.”

Lindsay-Abaire also acknowledged the importance of social class in his thinking about *Good People*:

I kept hearing, ‘Why don’t American playwrights write about class? British playwrights do it all the time. Why don’t American playwrights do it?’ And I think that’s not true. I think American playwrights do, in fact, write about class. I just don’t think they do it in a didactic way, in big capital letters with placards, you know. . . .

But once I put that idea aside – because I knew I didn’t want to write that soap box kind of play – I did think, ‘Well, if I did write about the old neighborhood, then no matter what, it’s gonna be about class.’ That’s gonna come up, because it’s so part of the fabric of the neighborhood, but it’s also so part of my own experience. I grew up in Southie, but when I was 11, I got a scholarship to a private school in the suburbs. So I got on the subway every day and went out to this beautiful campus filled with mostly rich kids and got this wonderful education and got back on the subway at the end of every day and went back to Southie. So I was aware of class differences from a pretty early age and have wrestled with all sorts of thoughts and ideas around class and class mobility since that time, and a lot of that came up in a good way in writing the play.

Despite his long journey from the rough-and-tumble of South Boston to the exclusive worlds of Broadway theater and Hollywood film-making, Lindsay-Abaire still embraces his hometown roots: "Growing up in Southie has totally defined me as a person, as a man, as a father, as a writer. . . . I feel like that working-class kid is just who I am, and I'll never let go of that person." For him one of the most important contributions his South Boston background makes to his work as a playwright is the distinctive sense of humor he picked up back home: "That humor that is so the neighborhood humor . . . still makes its way into a play about the death of a child, for example. . . . It's just there . . . It comes from those people in the neighborhood that would process their hardships with humor, by laughing at it and saying, 'God, it's so horrible and so awful, the only solace that I have is through humor.'"

**THE SETTING.** Since class identity and class conflict are so important to the dynamics of *Good People*, it's crucial that the physical settings of the action convey the social standing of the people who inhabit them. The play contains six scenes, four of them set in South Boston: one in an alley behind a Dollar Store; one in the apartment of the main character, Margaret (Margie) Walsh; and two in a church basement where Margie and her friends play bingo. The remaining two scenes take place in the Boston area, but at a vast social distance from Southie. One is set in the downtown medical office of Mike Dillon, a physician who was born in South Boston, but who has moved on to an affluent upper-middle-class life. The other takes place in Mike's home in Chestnut Hill, a suburb a few miles west of Boston proper, originally developed by Frederic Law Olmstead, the designer of New York's Central Park. Currently the average price for a single-family house in Chestnut Hill is more than two million dollars.

The script describes Mike's office as, "Tastefully decorated." It calls his residence in Chestnut Hill, "a beautiful home . . . tasteful and suburban." The author applies the adjective "tasteful" to both the office and the house. This is noteworthy because the word implies that Mike determines the style and character of his surroundings: they reflect his "taste," his preferences in furniture, artwork, wall-treatments, lighting; his aesthetic values. Mike inscribes his identity on the world he inhabits.

By contrast, we first encounter Margaret in an alley behind the down-market store where she works. "There's a dumpster back there, a rusty chair, and a door labeled 'Dollar Store—Deliveries Only.'" This space doesn't belong to Margaret—instead it's an impersonal, functional area reflecting nobody's "taste." And Margaret has been taken there to be fired.

We next see her in the kitchen of her apartment in Southie, a room that's, "small and run-down." The script mentions no personal touches that Margaret might have applied to this room, no flourishes of "taste." And the space doesn't really belong to her. Much of the conversation in the scene focuses on whether she'll be able to pay her rent now that she has lost her job. In the absence of the rent money, Margie is there provisionally, only as long as her landlady allows. She's a transient in her own home.

The church basement where Margaret plays bingo merits no description in the script. Like the back alley, it's probably a drab place, but at least it's well-lit and warmed by a crowd of people hoping for a lucky break as the priest calls out the bingo numbers. But again, Margaret can claim no ownership of this space even though she's been here many times before. Like the apartment she lives in, the place is hers and not-hers, another reminder of the insecurity of her life.

**THE PLOT.** The action begins in the alley behind the Dollar Store where fifty-year-old Margaret Walsh works. She has been summoned there by her boss, Stevie, a much younger man and the son of a former friend. Expecting to be reprimanded for lateness, Margaret tries at first to charm Stevie with old stories about his mother—especially one about an attempted shoplifting and a frozen turkey. But since Stevie is going to deliver more than a scolding, he is in no mood to be charmed. It seems that Margaret is in deeper trouble than she imagines: "You're late every day. Twenty, thirty minutes. Yesterday it was almost an hour." But, Margaret protests, she has problems with her daughter, Joyce, a developmentally

disabled young woman. The person she relies on to “babysit” Joyce, her landlady Dottie, is herself often late, which then results in Margaret being late at the Dollar Store. Stevie has heard it all before, but he is now powerless to cut Margaret any slack because the district manager has noticed the situation and is pressuring Stevie to take action. So he has no choice but to fire Margaret.

She is stunned by this development, and spends the rest of the scene pleading with Stevie to reconsider. She offers to take a pay cut; she tells him that the last time she was fired, it took her seven months to find another job; she appeals to his neighborhood loyalty, reminding him of her friendship with his mother. But none of it works. “I have to do my job!” Stevie says, putting an end to the scene.

**Scene 2** takes place in Margie’s kitchen, where we find her having coffee with Dottie, her landlady, and Jean, an old friend. She’s telling them about being fired, and they’re responding with various degrees of empathy and mordant humor. Jean, known as “mouthy from Southie,” blames Joyce’s babysitter, Dottie, for Margaret’s misfortune. If Dottie hadn’t arrived constantly late, Margaret would have been making it to work on time. Dottie defends herself by pointing out that she stays up late making toy Styrofoam rabbits which she sells for five dollars apiece, and as a result oversleeps in the morning, which means that she shows up late for babysitting.

As Jean is blaming Dottie, Margaret intervenes to defend her landlady:

MARGARET: It’s not your fault, Dottie.

JEAN: Of course it is. Don’t let her off the hook like that!

MARGARET: Let it go.

JEAN: No, you’re too nice. That’s why you don’t have anything.

MARGARET: Oh, is that why?

JEAN: Yeah, you have to be a selfish p\*\*\*k to get anywhere.

MARGARET: I hate when people say that. You know it’s not true.

JEAN: No? Look at Dottie. . . Maybe you should start acting like her.

MARGARET: That’s not who I am.

This is an important moment because the matter of Margie’s alleged “niceness” and its role in the ups and downs of her life becomes important later in the play.

As the women chew over Margie’s options on the job market, Jean comes up with an unusual idea. Instead of looking for work in all the well-known places, why not appeal to Mikey Dillon, a guy from the neighborhood who has made good? Now a physician recently returned to his native Boston, Mikey crossed paths with Jean at a luncheon for the Boys and Girls clubs, which Jean was working as a waitress. Mikey, a former member and now a patron of the clubs, was there to give a speech urging the boys and girls to follow his example, “to work hard and stay in school, or whatever. Be all you can be.” Maybe he could offer Margie a job, or at least put her in touch with someone else who could.

“He was always good people,” Margie says of Mikey—making the first use in the script of the term that gives the play its name. Jean’s response to Margie’s claim is revealing:

MARGARET: He was always good people. Mikey.

JEAN: Uh-huh.

MARGARET: he *was*.

JEAN: Okay.

So Jane is reluctant to affirm Margie’s description—alerting us to keep a wary on Mikey as the play develops.

Margie seems intrigued by the idea of reaching out to Mikey, but also hesitant, and the scene ends with Jean urging her to call him: “Ya never know.”

**Scene 3** takes place several days later, with Margie’s arrival at Mikey’s office. Not having seen one another in over 30 years, their first few minutes together are somewhat uncomfortable and hesitant. Mikey excuses himself for keeping her waiting: he’s been on the line with his wife planning his big weekend birthday party. He asks about Gobie, Joyce’s presumed father. She tells him that Gobie has decamped to distant parts, that they have fallen completely out of touch, and that he provides no support for Joyce. Which puts an end to that conversational thread. We learn that Margie has called the office several times and that Mikey has not responded. She has therefore shown up uninvited, though Mikey assures her she is welcome. But, he lets her know, there are no jobs in his office for her. This seems to be the time to end the visit, but before leaving, Margie asks Mikey if she can look at the photo of his family on his bookcase, which—after the “*slightest pause*”—he agrees to.

Mikey’s wife is very young, Margie notices, and his daughter very beautiful. Which prompts Mikey to ask about Joyce:

MARGARET: Well she’s not a little girl.

MIKE: No, I know. . . . You know, my sister-in-law had a premature baby. Not as premature as . . .

MARGARET: Joyce.

MIKE: Joyce, right, but she had some troubles, too. She’s doing better, though.

MARGARET: That’s good. Mine’s not.

After this exchange, Mike once again assures Margie that there’s no place for her in his office, and she responds with the sour-grapes observation that, “I wouldn’t fit in here anyway.” The office is too formal, and the Hispanic receptionist at the front desk was rude to her: “She and I wouldn’t have gotten along, I don’t think, so it’s probably for the best you don’t have a job for me. I’m not fancy enough for this office. You’re all lace-curtain Irish now.”

Mike takes this as an affront. To be “lace curtain” means to live a life of privilege insulated from the rough-and-tumble of authentic working-class experience. A “lace-curtain” Irishman puts on airs, looks down his nose, turns his back, and lacks the spunk and gumption of the real people on the street. With this accusation, Margie raises the stakes in the game being played between her and Mikey. Calling a man from Southie “lace-curtain” is a slap in the face, and Mikey is quick to deny the accusation:

MIKE: I’m still a Southie kid at heart. . . .

MARGARET: Are ya?

MIKE: Yes

MARGARET: Chestnut Hill. . . . Big house?

MIKE: It’s all right. . . .

MARGARET: Mikey Dillon. You’re rich. . . .

MIKE: I’m not rich.

MARGARET: Well what would *you* call it? . . .

MIKE: We’re just . . . comfortable. . . .

MARGARET: You’re comfortable. Okay. I guess that makes me *un*comfortable then. Is that what you call us lowly folk? *Un*comfortable?

From this point on, Margie intensifies her needling, ragging Mikey about his fancy vocabulary, his lack of connection with the old neighborhood, his failure to invite his cousins, the Feeneys, to his birthday party. "Did you get mean?" Mikey wonders:

MIKE: I hope you're still nice, Margie.

MARGIE: You think I'm not? Because I called you lace-curtain?

MIKE: I can't tell.

MARGARET: Because I asked if you invited the Feeneys?

MIKE: If the Feeney's wanna come, they can come.

MARGARET: I'll let 'em know. (*Beat.*) Can I come, too?

MIKE: (*A nervous laugh.*) Ha.

Again Margie raises the stakes, and her gambit succeeds: "Margie, if you want to come you should come, but stop trying to make me out to be this jackass who's forgotten where he's come from." So playing the lace-curtain card was a shrewd move on her part. Mike is aware that she's got his number, socially speaking, and he's at least a little uncomfortable about not offering her a job. But maybe, Margie speculates, she might land a job from one of Mike's rich doctor friends attending the party. As the scene ends, Margie is heading back to Southie with that possibility in mind:

MARGARET: If you hear of anything . . . call me . . . okay? About work? I'll do whatever.

MIKE: Okay.

MARGARET: See you Saturday.

MIKE: Will I?

MARGARET: Oh, yeah. You're in deep now, Doctor.

**Scene 4** takes place during a bingo game in a church basement in Southie on the Friday following the events of the previous scene. As Margie tells Dottie and Jean about her visit with Mike, we hear the voice of a priest calling out the numbers and letters of the game, a continual counterpoint to the main action. Dottie thinks Margie would be wasting her time by going to Mikey's party because, "Those people aren't gonna hire you." But Margie insists that she wants to see the house in Chestnut Hill: "I'm curious. I bet it's nice. And if somebody wants to give me a job while I'm there, so be it."

At this point, Jean makes a bold suggestion:

JEAN: I know what *I'd* do. . . . I'd say Joyce wasn't premature. . . . Then the math almost works out. . . . Pull a Maury Povich on his ass. . . . Whip out a picture of Joyce and tell him he has a long-lost daughter. . . . You say, 'Hey, Mike, you remember that summer we dated?' [*Maury Povich was a television personality known for hosting a show featuring a segment called "Who's the Daddy?" in which men denying paternity were confronted on air with the results of DNA testing.*]

This is the first we hear of Margie's romantic relationship with Mikey, and the first time the possibility is raised that he is Joyce's father. Looking backward from this moment to the previous scene, we see the awkwardness between Mike and Margie, the needling, and the embarrassments in a glaring new light: we were watching the meeting not of two old friends, but of two old lovers. We should also note, anticipating later developments, Joyce's qualifier, "almost" in describing how the math behind her calculations works.

According to Margie, she only dated Mike for a "few *weeks*"—which later in the play gets expanded to "a couple months"—during the summer after his senior year in high school. And according to Jean, this period of dating took place "right before Gobie"—who, we later learn, entered the picture only a few

days after Margie dumped Mike. If Joyce was conceived in July or August, when Mike and Margie were dating, the baby would have been born around the following April or May. If Margie had taken up with Gobie by the beginning of September, and if he is the father, Joyce would have been due to arrive sometime after June of the following year. If Joyce was born in April or May, she would not have been premature if Mike was the father. If Gobie was the father and Joyce was born in April or May that would have made her premature by six weeks or more, a serious challenge to a baby's health. But we should note that Joyce says the math "almost works" out—which means it's a close call.

Margaret rejects this tactic, saying that she is going to stick with looking for a job among Mike's rich friends.

Stevie, the manager of the Dollar Store, shows up, and joins the women at their folding table. Still irked at him for firing Margie, Jean tries to get his goat:

JEAN: Karen Finch is telling everyone you're gay.

STEVIE: I heard that.

JEAN: Doesn't that bother you?

STEVIE: Not really. . . . because I don't care.

Margie intervenes to settle the issue: "He's not gay. He's dating that Chinese girl up at the store"—a misconception that Stevie corrects by informing Margie that the girl in question is in fact from Thailand.

Margie imagines her odd-duck status at Mike's party where she will be "a middle-aged lady in an outfit from Goodwill. . . . up to my tits in credit-card debt . . . . also in need of major dental work . . . . with an adult daughter . . . . who is severely retarded . . . and who occasionally pisses the bed." This hard-luck litany leaves her "*overcome with emotion*," though she resists the temptation of tears.

At this point she receives a phone call from Mike, who informs her that the party is canceled because his daughter is sick. Margie is convinced that he is lying as an underhanded way of un-inviting her to his house. But she decides to go the party anyway: "He said his friends might have something for me. He said that. I think it's rude. To invite someone like that, and then say it's canceled. That's rude." So her course is set for the following night. Meanwhile, people all around Margaret have been winning at bingo, while she and her friends remain luckless. With an obscene cry from Joyce bemoaning this fact, the first act ends.

**Act two** opens in Mike's house in Chestnut Hill, where he and his wife, Kate, an "*attractive, pleasant, African American, early thirties*," are trying to find a mutually agreeable date for their next marriage counseling session. Mike feels that these sessions have stopped being valuable; Kate is eager to continue. Kate prevails, and they decide on the following Tuesday.

Mike leaves the room to see to their sleeping—and sick—child, and while he's gone the doorbell rings. Kate answers, expecting it to be the caterers come to collect the unused tables and glassware from the canceled party. But instead it's Margie. Never having met the woman before, Kate blunders into a scene of mistaken identity, taking Margie for the caterer's representative

When the penny finally drops and Margie introduces herself as Mike's old friend from Southie, Kate is embarrassed and asks if Mike forgot to inform Margie that the party has been canceled. It's now Margie's turn to be taken aback, since, as we learned in the last scene, she was sure Mike was lying about the cancellation. She offers to leave at once, saying she received Mike's call but mistook what he said. But Kate insists she stay long enough to drink a glass of wine and sample some of the uneaten party food. Mike returns from his upstairs mission and greets Margie with wordless disbelief. As Kate presses her to stay and socialize, Mike urges his wife not to "force her," clearly eager to see her go. They finally agree on a brief visit, and Kate goes off to fetch a plate of cheese.

Left alone with Margie, Mike asks how she could have misunderstood his call about the party. Margie tells him she thought he was lying, and offers again to leave. This time Mike asks her to stay, saying that his wife was eager to meet her because, "she doesn't believe I grew up in Southie. You're my evidence. . . . You'll have to tell her what a hoodlum I was." Margie bristles at the word "hoodlum," which seems to suggest that any working class kid from the neighborhood must be some kind of gangster or thug.

Margie is curious about why Kate wants to meet her, asking, "What'd you tell her about me?" Mike answers somewhat evasively, and Margie gets to the point:

MARGARET: You didn't mention we used to go out?

MIKE: Oh god no. No, I didn't mean—No.

MARGARET: How come?

MIKE: That was such a blip.

MARGARET: Huh.

MIKE: A couple months.

MARGARET: No, I know.

Mike explains that he would prefer not to delve into his romantic past because he and Kate are "in a really good place right now" and would rather not, "Stir anything up." Margie instantly intuits that there is trouble in their marriage, and asks, "What'd you do? . . . It involves that Dominican receptionist doesn't it?"

Kate returns with the cheese, they nibble, and she declares that Mike was "adamant" that they cancel the party because of his daughter's illness. Margie absorbs that interesting fact then remembers that she has brought a present for the child: one of Dottie's rabbits. Talk turns to Mike's young days in Southie, about which Kate wants to learn more. Mike has been portraying himself as someone who had it rough, "With the violence and drugs and rats." Margie is having none of this narrative: "You want Mike's big secret? Here it is: he didn't have it so bad. . . . Not compared to other people." He had a mother who kept a clean and orderly home, and a real, live-in father who worked a steady job. He had people looking over his shoulder, making him do his homework. "You obviously like to reminisce," she tells him, "So it couldn't have been *too* bad. Least you managed to get out."

This prompts Mike to claim that he escaped from the mean streets of his past because, "I worked my ass off." And this leads to what is the central dispute of the play:

MARGARET: No, you worked hard, you're right. You escaped. I didn't. (*Beat.*) You had a little help, but you did it.

MIKE: What does that mean? What help did I get?

MARGARET: You were luckier than most people, that's all. You were smart. You had a dad that pushed you. You had some advantages. So I don't know if I'd be complaining if I were you.

So what determines success or failure? Mike asserts that it's a matter of individual effort; Margie thinks it's luck.

Pressed by Kate for stories about Mike's life as a young hooligan, Margie tells her about a fight between some kids from Columbia Point and a bunch of guys from Southie, including Mike. The run-in ended with a single Columbia Point kid being beaten senseless by Mike and a half-dozen of his friends. "If your father hadn't come out to break it up, I don't know what would've happened," Margie says, suggesting that the boy from Columbia Point might have been seriously injured, or even killed. So the one fight

story Margie tells has no hint of raffish charm. Instead it depicts brutal and even cowardly behavior—hardly reflecting well on Mike.

When Kate leaves the room to fetch another bottle of wine, Margie brings up a touchy subject:

MARGIE: If you hadn't left for U-Penn? You think we would've stayed together? . . .

MIKE: *You* broke up with *me*.

MARGIE: I know, because you were going away. . . .

MIKE: Anyway. What's done is done. It all worked out.

MARGARET: It did?

Obviously it hasn't "all worked out" for Margie, and it's clear that Mike's satisfaction with the course of his life rubs her the wrong way.

When Kate returns with the new bottle of wine, she also brings along a brainstorm: if Margie needs money, why doesn't she babysit their daughter, Allie? This opens up a big can of worms. Mike objects, claiming that their daughter will be disoriented and upset by a change in sitters; that their current sitter knows the house and its routines; that firing her would be unfair; that she knows CPR and all the phone numbers to call in case of an emergency. Kate is confounded by these objections:

KATE: I still don't understand what the problem is.

MARGARET: He obviously doesn't want me working here.

MIKE: Don't say it like that.

MARGARET: Well, do you? Do you or don't you?

MIKE: No, I don't. . . .

MARGARET: No, you don't because it's obvious. I'm not babysitter material. . . . I'm not smart enough to watch a kid sleep. . . . I don't know the right things. Or how to use a phone. . . .

Angered and humiliated by this rejection, Margie decides to retaliate against Mike. She reveals a previously omitted detail about the beating of the Columbia Point kid: he was black and the motive was racist. Obviously, this is intended to tarnish Mike's image in the eyes of his African-American wife. Then she intentionally disregards Mike's plea to stay away from their previous relationship:

MARGARET: And did he mention we used to date? . . .

MIKE: In high school. Over the summer.

KATE: Okay.

MARGARET: See, she's fine with that. . . . He told me not to mention it . . . . because you might get weird. . . .

MIKE: [*To Kate*] Because you're sensitive about that stuff, for obvious reasons, and I didn't want to rock the boat.

But the boat has been rocked, and Mike is angry. Once again the dialogue returns to the subject of individual responsibility versus luck in determining life's outcomes:

MIKE: I'm sorry that you made some bad choices in your life, but that is not my fault.

MARGARET: Oh, I had choices? . . .

MIKE: You never applied yourself. Not at school or anywhere else. . . .

MARGARET: You're right, I *did* drop out of school. Was that a choice though?

MIKE: Of course it was. Girls have babies, and still stay in school. . . .

MARGARET: Well I chose to take care of the baby instead. . . . I got a job. I got a bunch of jobs in fact. And every one of them sucked, because what other job *could* I get. Not much of a choice there either, I'm afraid.

When Mike asserts that she lost all those jobs because she chose to fail by being chronically late, Margie responds with a litany of reasons that made it impossible for her to succeed: having a car repossessed because of a missed payment, which happened because of an unexpected dental bill, which happened because she broke a tooth on peanut brittle, which happened because she was trying to save money by skipping dinner. In her view, her life has been determined by an endless row of fateful dominoes, falling beyond her control.

But there was one moment when she did take her life in her own hands: "In fact the only *real* choice I ever *did* make was dumping you. And yeah, I've thought about it a million times since: 'What woulda happened if I hadn't dumped Mikey Dillon?' . . . Maybe . . . this coulda been my house. . . . All of this. Maybe it coulda been mine."

And why did she make that fateful choice? The explanation centers on Joyce, who she now claims "wasn't premature." And because of that fact, she tells Mike, "[You can't] say you didn't have help getting out of Southie. . . . You had help. . . . If I hadn't let you go, you'd still be there right now. . . . I just said she was premature so Gobie would think she was his. . . I could've kept you there. . . . I could've trapped you. . . . I didn't do that to you. But I *could've*. I let you go. . . . Because I didn't want to be the thing that ruined your life! BECAUSE I WAS NICE!"

In effect she claims that her decency has ruined her life and enabled his. But Mike won't let her cling to that story. He tells her that even if she had tried to keep him in Southie by springing the baby-trap, he wouldn't have allowed himself to be caught: "We wouldn't have stayed together. Baby or no baby. I wouldn't have stayed."

Margaret finds this idea intolerable: "That's a mean thing to say, Mikey. . . . Because it means that nothing woulda been different. That there really *was* nothing I coulda done to get outta there. It's a pretty . . . depressing thought." Depressing because it obliterates the only meaning she has been able to find in her unhappy life.

At this point, Kate intervenes, and asks Margie why she didn't come forward long ago with the information about Joyce: "Your story doesn't make any *sense*. . . . You could've looked him up at any point and said, 'Hey, I know this sucks, but I could really use your help with our kid.' . . . If your story's true . . . . you're saying you let her suffer needlessly. . . . You said you did it because you're a nice person! Which, I'm sorry is a *stretch*. Especially when you start pitting me and Michael against each other. . . . That is just spite. And I don't know if any of the other stuff is true or not, but I can tell you one thing—you are not nice."

Margie then says that she tried to convince Mike that Joyce is his daughter because she was "pissed . . . off about that babysitting thing. You could've let me watch her, Mike. It wouldn't have been any skin off your nose."

Once again the characters veer back to the question of choice versus luck:

MIKE: You can't blame me for your life, you know.

MARGARET: I don't. I just think you got lucky. . . . What if your father hadn't come out to stop that fight with the black kid? . . . You would've killed that boy. . . . You could be sitting up in Walpole right now, bunkin' with Marty McDermott. . . . If your father wasn't watching. . . . Which is *lucky*. . . . I never had anyone watching from a window for me. You got lucky. [*Walpole is a prison in Massachusetts.*]

As a parting shot, Margie brings up the question of Mike's paternity again: "It wasn't my job to come looking for you. . . . Not when you knew. . . . And if you didn't know, you must've suspected at least that she *could've* been yours." So the question of who's the daddy remains hanging in the air, even after Kate directly asks Margaret if she was lying about it: "Yeah," Margie responds, "I was lying." But her parting line is yet another attempt to rock Mike's marital boat: "I do think he's f\*\*\*ing that Dominican receptionist, though. Just Kidding." /s she really kidding about the receptionist? Was she really lying about the baby?

The final scene returns us to the church basement and the world of bingo with Margaret, Dottie, Jean, and Stevie. We learn that Dottie has received a wad of money in the mail with a note attached saying, "Margaret's rent." All three of the women assume the money came from Mike, and Stevie suggests that "maybe he just wanted to help out," an explanation Margie rejects because "It's not in his nature." In any case, Margie is determined to reject the money because her pride won't let her take a handout. Jean and Dottie tell her she's being foolish, but in the midst of their bickering, Stevie announces that the money is not from Mike, but from him. He has been lucky at bingo, and has decided that Margie needs the cash more than he does. After a perfunctory rejection of his help, Margie gives in, and thanks him for his assistance.

Jean asks Margie if she mentioned Joyce to Mike:

MARGARET: I did. He didn't believe she was his. I always thought you didn't know about that.

JEAN: Everybody knew.

So, we infer, Margie wasn't lying to Mike, and Joyce really is his daughter. And Margie really did make the choice that allowed Mike to have his "comfortable" life.

After this sudden reversal, the conversation drifts back to topic A: a job for Margie.

JEAN: Something'll come up.

MARGARET: I hope so.

The last words in the play belong to the voice of the priest as he calls out bingo numbers: "G-53. . . ([T]hey scan their cards searching for the number. *Nothing.*) G . . . 53. " And as luck fails Margie and her friends yet again, the play ends.

## THE CHARACTERS.

Like many of the most notable characters in the history of drama, MARGARET's life has been haunted by a fateful decision made in the past that comes to light in the course of the action. Oedipus learns that the man he killed at the crossroads was his father; Nora's illegal loan from Krogstad destroys her marriage; Blanche Dubois can't rid herself of the memory of her young husband's suicide. And Margie has built the narrative of her life around a decision she made during the summer after her junior year in high school. It was then that she chose not to prevent Mike from going off to college. Instead of telling him that she was pregnant with his baby—because, as she insists, she was nice— she let him leave Southie to pursue a future that would see him become a prosperous Boston physician and a suburban squire in Chestnut Hill.

Margie clings to this story about herself because it is the only serious exercise of free will that she has performed in the course of a life driven steadily downward by the random malice of fate, the worst blow being her daughter's severe mental handicap. If she can think of Mike's success as her creation, at least in part, then she has accomplished something decent; she has proved herself to be "good people," one of the highest accolades bestowed by the people of Southie on their neighbors. As the playwright explains, "to be a good person in Southie is to be the salt of the earth, selfless, a good-time person, nice to be around."

But Margie also comes face to face with the possibility that she really isn't "good people" after all. This happens when Kate challenges her decision not to tell Mike about his daughter. How could she have allowed herself and her child to suffer, when she could have asked Mike for help? A genuinely "nice" person would have swallowed her pride and acted selflessly—as "good people" are supposed to do—in order to provide for her baby. So if Mike really is the father, she hasn't been nice at all, a possibility she can't face. But if Mike isn't the father, then the whole story she has been telling herself about her life has been false: she never had any hold over him, so she can't claim to have set him free. Which means there really has been no meaning in her luckless existence—another unbearable thought.

But there might be a way of extricating herself from this painful dilemma: if Mike is the father, but she continues to deny that fact, then she is re-enacting the great renunciation she made thirty years earlier. She knows the truth, but she withholds it from Mike, and so she can continue to be selfless in her own eyes. As the playwright says about this scene, "Margie has to reassess not just what's happening in the moment but how she's defined herself as a person for her entire life." Her choice seems to be to hang on to that definition—if, that is, Mike really is the father.

We should also note that her decision to let Mike off the paternity hook is one side of a two-sided coin. Heads is giving Mike a free pass; tails is picking Gobie to be Joyce's putative father. The hints about Gobie scattered throughout the text suggest that he was a pretty noxious character—irresponsible, immature, self-centered. If Joyce had been born normal, and if Gobie had hung around while she was growing up, it's likely that he would have been worse than no father, an actively destructive influence on her life. And Margie had no way of knowing that that wouldn't have been the outcome when she cast him rather than Mike in the role of Joyce's daddy. She was playing a dangerous game with her daughter's future—which weakens her claim on being "good-people."

MIKE also goes through a similarly upsetting process as he is forced to confront truths about himself that he would rather keep hidden behind a curtain of sentimental Southie memories.

Lindsay-Abair tells us that, "Mike feels like he worked incredibly hard and made good choices and made sacrifices and feels like he's entitled to the life that he is now living because he is a good person." However, he "hasn't really come to face some of the people that he stepped on and some of the bad choices that he made, or acknowledged that luck has actually played a role, that he was dealt a much better hand than other people."

The first question to ask about Mike is why he is so reluctant to re-connect with Margie? He doesn't acknowledge her phone calls; he is hesitant to discuss his current family situation with her; he's instinctively disinclined to invite her to his party; having invited her, he is "adamant" about canceling it, presumably to prevent her from coming. And once she does show up at his house, he is eager to get rid of her. Why?

We probably all have people in our pasts whom we would rather not meet again, especially old flames. It can be painful or embarrassing to see what time has done to that formerly young and beautiful girl; or to have her see what time has done to us. But Mike has aged well and has put together an enviable life, and, judging by the text, Margie seems to have remained in relatively decent shape. So what is he hiding from?

For one thing, he wants to conceal from Kate his past romantic involvement with Margie. He opts for secrecy about this matter because it seems his marriage has been going through some sort of crisis—perhaps some problems with fidelity.

When we first meet Kate, she and Mike are talking about making an appointment with their marriage counselor. Mike dismisses these sessions as a mere "security blanket," but Kate says that she needs a security blanket. A few moments later, Margie claims that she has come to the canceled party because she "misunderstood" Mike's phone call. "It was probably the way he said it," Kate suggests. "He does the same thing to me all the time."

What might that mean? Is Mike purposefully ambiguous in communicating with Kate? Does he dance around the truth through equivocations and evasions? Is he always trying to hide something? His anxious desire to conceal his past relationship with Margie would be an example of that sort of behavior: "Can you just . . . not mention we dated? . . . We were practically kids after all. . . . I'm not making a big deal, I just wanna . . ." "Keep it secret," Margie says, putting what seem appropriate words into his mouth.

When Margie reveals that she and Mike were a year apart in school because she repeated a grade and he skipped a grade, Kate teases Mike: "You never told me you skipped a grade. . . . He hardly tells me anything."

Then, not long after this exchange, Mike is talking about how Kate doesn't believe his stories about his Southie youth: "My own wife thinks I'm a compulsive liar." To which Kate responds, "Well, it's not like you don't have a history." Again, the imputation of deception on his part.

Later, after Margie has spilled the beans about the racist nature of the fight with the kid from Columbia Point, Mike accuses her of "trying to bait my wife. . . . Or get her mad at me, or something. . . . and she knows that's not who I am. I've been very honest with her." Except his honesty has not extended to telling her that story with its blatantly racist significance.

Then Margie throws down her next card: she reveals that she and Mike once dated each other, and that Mike has told her to keep this information from Kate. Kate wants to know why. Mike's response—and the exchange that follows—provides another glimpse into their married life:

MIKE: Because you're sensitive about that stuff, for obvious reasons, and I didn't want to rock the boat.

KATE: So you thought lying to me was better?

MIKE: I didn't lie. I just didn't . . .

KATE: Tell the truth?

MIKE: Kate—

KATE: Are we actually having this conversation again? . . . And you wonder why I don't wanna stop seeing the counselor.

Clearly they have been down this path before, maybe more than once, with Mike withholding the truth and Kate discovering it despite him.

So this pattern of concealment, evasion, equivocation seems central to Mike's character: hiding things from others, and, as the playwright suggests, hiding things from himself. Not just details about racist incidents in his past, or about how his success has been a matter of luck as well as individual virtue. He even claims that he no longer really knows Margie, which incenses her. Or maybe what he knows about Margie is something he doesn't want to face. As Margie says, "It wasn't my job to come looking for you. . . . Not when you knew. . . . And if you didn't know, you must've suspected, at least, that she *could've* been yours."

And what would he have done had he known or suspected? As he says, he would have ignored the situation, he would have "been one of those deadbeats that take off. Just like your father took off. Just like Gobie took off. That would have been me." Aristotle tells us that characters reveal themselves most clearly when we see what kinds of things they choose to do or not to do. Here is the moment in the play when Mike's character is most sharply etched: even had he known, he would have evaded the consequences. He would have looked the other way, putting the truth behind him, hiding it from himself.

KATE's background is starkly different from Mike's Southie past. The daughter of a prominent physician, she was raised in Georgetown, a swanky neighborhood in Washington, D.C. An upper class black girl,

she was secure enough in her social and economic circumstances to dabble in bohemianism during her college years, dating puppeteers and djembe drummers. She attended graduate school, presumably earned a Ph.D. in English, and is now teaching literature at Boston University.

Why was she attracted to Mike in the first place? Perhaps because he was a physician like her father, who encouraged the match. Perhaps because he was unlike her and her rich and coddled friends. Mike might have played up his street-cred as a blue-collar guy from a tough urban neighborhood, coming across as the kind of sexy bad-boy whom the good girls can't resist. (One of the reasons he allows Margie to prolong her visit is to get her to burnish this image.) Or maybe as a well-bred, well-heeled African-American she's drawn to the idea of upsetting the racial apple-cart by playing social-superior to a white husband. After all, she does make a joke about race and wine: "I prefer white anyway. Which is why I married Michael, actually."

She's also much younger than Mike. He's 50; she's in her early 30's—a gap of more than 15 years. But in marrying Mike, she took on a man with a longish past that did not include her. So she continually finds herself making discoveries about his former life—discoveries like Margie and Joyce.

And she also makes discoveries about his current life that make a marriage counselor necessary. Mikey from Southie has little use for that sort of upper class thumb-sucking; on the other hand, for Kate from Georgetown therapy is one of life's givens, a habit of the well-educated middle class, like *The New Yorker* and public radio.

So dealing with a man like Mike and his hidden baggage is a challenge for a person from her background. When she meets Margaret, she is finally getting a chance to unpack some of that baggage, which explains why she is so friendly and welcoming, and so determined to put on her "thinking cap" and find Margie a job.

For much of the play, she is oblivious to the vibrations passing between Mike and Margie: they know things about each other that Mike is trying to keep under the rug, and that Margie can use as ammunition, but that pass entirely over her head. Kate only begins to catch on to this when Margie grows vindictive after Mike refuses to let her babysit. At that point, the congeniality of the gracious hostess disappears, and Kate appears as someone who has been toughened up by her life with Mike. "Your story about Joyce doesn't make any sense," she tells Margie. "I could never put my pride ahead of my daughter. . . . And I *have* had to make that choice. Haven't I, Michael? . . . A *few* times. And my pride always lost. My daughter's more important."

So living with Mike has forced her to surrender her pride repeatedly for the sake of her daughter, meaning, presumably, that she has stayed married to him despite his infidelities in order to keep home and family together. So she is not about to let Margie capsize the boat: "This is our life and I'm not gonna let you come in here and deliberately try to sabotage us. That is just spite. . . . Is it true, by the way? The stuff about your daughter? . . . We'll write you a check right now. If it's true. Is it, Margaret?" And Margaret says it isn't. So when the chips are down, Kate from Georgetown musters the kind of ferocity that would serve her well in Southie.

STEVIE is a young man who grew up in Southie. He has neither fled the old neighborhood nor become disappointed and embittered by his life there. Instead he might be seen as the face of a new Southie. Stevie is free of the old social and ethnic prejudices—he dates an Asian girl; he doesn't bridle at being called gay—and he is motivated by a genuine ethic of personal decency. He gives Margie rent money because she "needed it more than I did." Here we see another choice revealing another character. So even though he fired Margie, he is "good people"—maybe the character who most deserves that designation.

JEAN and DOTTIE are a contrasting comic duo. Jean is irked by Margie's misfortunes, angry at Dottie for showing up late to babysit, skeptical about Margie's claim that Mike is "good people," determined to harass Stevie for firing her friend. She's a cynic and a schemer, the one who suggests that Margie tell

Mike that Joyce is his. She sums up her view of the world in a single sentence: "Yeah, you have to be a selfish p\*\*\*k to get anywhere."

Dottie, on the other hand, seems to exist in a continuous fog of mild confusion. She has trouble keeping Mikey Dillon and Kevin Dillon straight in her head, and she can't grasp the fact that the girl Stevie is dating doesn't work at the Chinese restaurant but at the Dollar Store. Impatient at Dottie's dottiness, Jean cries out: "Jesus *Christ*, Dottie. . . . you're like f\*\*\*in' Aunt Clare sometimes! It pisses me off." Who exactly Aunt Clara is we don't know, but we can imagine a wandering figure lost in the labyrinths of misunderstood conversation and missed allusion. The one activity that keeps her focused is making and selling her toy rabbits, objects some people actually buy, which means that Dottie is in fact in touch with something real.

**THEMES.** Two of the six scenes of *Good People*, including the last scene of the play, take place during bingo games. The last words of the play are bingo numbers being called out by the voice of a priest. And in each scene Margie and her friends fail to win. What is this telling us?

Pretty clearly, we are being reminded of the role of chance—of pure luck—in the outcomes of life. Margie is convinced that her life has been a succession of misfortunes brought about by fate, not produced by her own choices.

On the other hand, Mike, whose life has been marked by professional and economic success, wants to believe that things happen because people make them happen, that he escaped from Southie thanks to his own hard work and individual initiative. He is proof that being born in South Boston does not have to determine the course of the rest of your life. A self-made man, he is proud of his work.

The action of the play grows out of the conflict between these two characters, driven by their opposing views. Margie wants to be seen as a victim of bad luck, not as someone who has chosen to be a failure; Mike wants to be respected as the agent of his own success, not dismissed as someone who was just dealt a good hand. And yet, because Margie decided not to tell Mike that he is the father of Joyce, she has in fact *chosen* her life of economically marginal single motherhood. And if Mike has managed to escape Southie because Margie didn't try to hold him back, then he really has been lucky to have benefited from her decision.

Of course, if it's true that Mike would have abandoned Margie even if she had informed him she was pregnant with his child, then her choice was meaningless—what happened would have happened even if she had spoken up. And if he had abandoned her, then he would have owed his career not to virtuous effort, but to deadbeat irresponsibility. So by not telling him, Margie has allowed him to avoid seeing a scoundrel in the mirror every time he shaves. He owes her his self-esteem; she owes him her sense of heroic martyrdom. They have enabled each other to think of themselves as "good people."

So what does account for the outcomes of life: luck or choice? The fact that we last see Margie losing at Bingo suggests the former. On the other hand, she is still choosing not to hold Mike responsible for Joyce. So the play leaves us balanced on the edge between life as a lottery and life as an experience designed by those who live it.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is Mike reluctant to re-establish his friendship with Margie?
2. Do you think Stevie was wrong to fire Margie, an old friend of his mother?
3. Could Margie have done anything to change the course of her life for the better?
4. Why was Kate attracted to Mike in the first place?
5. Do you think Mike is telling the truth when he says he would have left South Boston even if Margie had told him she was pregnant?
6. Why are there two scenes featuring bingo?
7. Why is Margie adamant about refusing the rent money when she thinks it's from Mike, but willing to accept it when she learns that Stevie has provided it?
8. Are individuals largely responsible for their failures and successes in life? Or is some other force the cause of these outcomes? If so, what is it?
9. Why does Margie decide to tell Kate about the racist incident from Mike's past, and about their once having dated?
10. Should Margie have told Mike about being pregnant before he left South Boston to go to college? Why? Why not?

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### **Moonlight & Magnolias** by Ron Hutchinson (Grade 8 and up)

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