

THE LADY FROM OUT OF THE PAST

A Ten Minute Play
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THE LADY FROM OUT OF THE PAST

Action of the play: A woman seeks the help of a detective to find out who murdered her husband.

Characters

Dick: a “lone wolf” private detective

Laura: a stunning femme fatale in trouble

Setting

A sparsely furnished office: a desk, two chairs, and Venetian blinds covering a window on the rear wall.

Time

Stranded somewhere in the 1940s.

THE LADY FROM OUT OF THE PAST

(Setting: a small office.)

LIGHTS UP

(Dick is sitting at his desk. He addresses the audience.)

DICK

I'll never forget that day. I was sitting in my office, a cheap little rat hole which suited the work I did. There was a knock on the door. She entered. A real classy dame with eyes the color of blue gardenias. I knew she was trouble from the moment I laid eyes on her. She was the kind of woman who doesn't care how a guy makes a living, just how he makes love. When I start out to make a fool of myself, there's very little can stop me. You know the rest. That's how I found her and from that moment I did not use my head, except to think about her.

(Laura enters and stands at the doorway.)

DICK

What can I do for you, Lady?

LAURA

(very distraught and agitated)

I've just returned from Shanghai. Two days ago. When I arrived home my husband met me at the door and when I tried to embrace him he said, "Don't kiss me, I'm deadly." Then he collapsed. I called an ambulance. We went to the hospital, but he was D.O.A. Poisoned. The big sleep.

DICK

Better sit down, Angel Face.

(She takes the chair and seductively crosses her legs.)

LAURA

I need a private detective. A very, very private detective. *Bangbang wo. Quigbang wo.* Will you help me? Will you take my case?

DICK

I don't speak much Chinese but to me a dollar is a dollar in any language.

(He takes a bottle and two glasses from his desk drawer.)

DICK (cont.)

Looks like you could use a drink, sweetheart.

LAURA

Yes, please. I feel like I'm caught in a crossfire. It's a little claustrophobic in here. All the vertical shadows from those Venetian blinds. So German Expressionistic.

(He hands her a drink.)

DICK

You're an artist?

LAURA

No, an art dealer.

DICK

What kind of art do you deal?

LAURA

Ceramic birds. That's why I was in Shanghai. To buy a sculpture of a falcon from Malta.

DICK

That was lucky.

LAURA

You need more than luck in Shanghai.

DICK

No, I mean, that it was lucky you were out the country when your husband was poisoned. You have an alibi.

(Laura freezes. Dick breaks the scene and speaks to the audience.)

DICK

If I'd known where it would end, I'd never let anything start... if I'd been in my right mind, that is. But once I'd seen her, I was not in my right mind for some time. You know the rest. Some people can smell danger. Not me.

(Back to the scene. Dick takes up a notebook and pen.)

DICK

And your name is?

Laura. LAURA

Laura? DICK
(as in go on)

Just Laura for now. LAURA

And your address? DICK

Just put down Sunset Boulevard. Do you think my husband was poisoned by a killer? LAURA

That's why they call it murder, my sweet. DICK

I mean I need to find out if the killer was someone I know? LAURA

Why does it matter if you know him? DICK

Double indemnity. If it wasn't an accident and if it was murder, "the murder has to be committed by a person other than, and not in collusion with, the beneficiary of the policy." Or double indemnity doesn't apply. LAURA

And did you collude with the murderer? DICK

No. That's why I need to know who the murderer is and make sure there is no way it could be construed that I was in collusion with him... or her. LAURA

Her? DICK

You see, the next morning the postman rang twice. I opened the door and he handed me a letter. You need to see the letter. LAURA

(She fishes the letter out of her purse and gives it to him.)

DICK

(reading)

I can't go through with it. Signed Gilda. (looking up) And who is this Gilda?

LAURA

There never was a woman like Gilda.

DICK

What'd you mean?

LAURA

I met her at the beauty salon. We got to talking. And I may have mentioned that I hated my husband. And she said she did too.

DICK

Hated your husband?

LAURA

No, hated her husband. And we talked some more and she said what if I killed her husband and she killed mine. No one would ever figure it out. We were just strangers under the hair drier.

DICK

And did you kill her husband?

LAURA

No. I went to Shanghai. I was going to do it when I got back. But now... if she didn't kill my husband then I don't have to kill her husband. But then who killed my husband? And do I know him... or her? And could anyone say I colluded? Can I get my double indemnity pay out?

DICK

Hey, Sweetheart, you still conspired to commit murder.

LAURA

I didn't know what I was doing. I... I didn't know anything except how much I hated him. Don't you believe me?

DICK

Baby, I don't care.

LAURA

Do I sense a fatalistic tone of doomed nostalgia? A mood of *temps perdu*. An irretrievable past. A predetermined fate. An all-enveloping hopelessness...

DICK

Do all rich women play games like this?

LAURA
How do you know I'm rich?

DICK
Well, Baby, you ain't exactly some pick-up on South Street.

(Laura gets up and walks to the window, spreads the Venetian blinds, and looks out.)

LAURA
It's raining.

DICK
Strange weather. Rain's unusual for LA.

LAURA
But the streets are so photogenic when they're wet. Plus we could use the rain after that big heat last week. It exhausted me. (turning to him) You ever been to Shanghai?

DICK
I've been a lot of places.

LAURA
Which one did you like best?

DICK
This one right here.

LAURA
Bet you say that to all the places.

DICK
Let's take a little detour here. You admit that you colluded with Gilda, but if Gilda didn't murder your husband you want to know who did, so you can cover your tracks just in case you know him...

LAURA
(interrupting)
... or her...

DICK

... in case the police suspect that you colluded with him ... or her... and then you couldn't collect on the double indemnity policy? Did you murder your husband?

LAURA

What would you do if I didn't tell you? Would you do something wild and unpredictable?

DICK

I might. You're a real force of evil, Lady.

LAURA

Nope, just a touch of evil.

DICK

Sorry, wrong number, Sweetheart. Why did you kill your husband?

LAURA

Why do you think I was the one who killed my husband?

DICK

Come on, Sweetheart, your story is like Swiss cheese—full of holes.

LAURA

Suppose I were to say I had to kill him?

DICK

Humor me, Sweetheart.

LAURA

My husband had hired a detective to watch me. He wanted to fix it so I'd never be able to divorce him... I haven't a cent. He wanted to cut me off without a dime.

DICK

All women are wonders, because they reduce all men to the obvious.

LAURA

(flirtingly)

You're falling for me, aren't you? Just a little bit? Do you fall in love with all your clients?

DICK

Only the ones in skirts.

LAURA

Suppose I say you can't prove a thing.

DICK

First, your alibi won't stick. You've never been to Shanghai. You asked me in Mandarin to please help you—*qingbang wu*. The Hu dialect is spoken in the city of Shanghai—not Mandarin. And Mandarin is not intelligible by those speaking the Hu dialect. In other words, baby, Mandarin isn't spoken in Shanghai. In Shanghai they speak Shanghainese.

LAURA

How do you know that?

DICK

Anyone who lives this close to Chinatown knows that. Besides you said the big heat last week exhausted you. You couldn't have gotten to Shanghai and back since we had the big heat.

LAURA

Suppose I say that still doesn't prove murder.

DICK

Without an alibi and with a double indemnity clause the cops are going to be looking at you very, very carefully.

LAURA

Suppose I say I've fallen for you? We could come to a dead reckoning here. You make sure that when the cops look very, very carefully at me they don't find anything. Perhaps you can set up a third man. I collect on the policy and we head into the sunrise. Then, you see, we're both rotten.

DICK

Only you're a little more rotten. (beat) What about the letter? And what about Gilda? Where's Gilda now?

LAURA

Gilda gambles as recklessly as she lives. I knew I had to do something. Late last night I told her to meet me on Pier 13. She was cornered. Spellbound on making me pay for her silence. I always carry a gun in my purse. You know, night and the city. I took it out just to frighten her away and there was a clash—it was night—and the gun went off and I ran away.

DICK

Did you intentionally shoot her?

LAURA

No.

DICK

Are you sure?

LAURA

Without a shadow of a doubt.

DICK

Then what did you do?

LAURA

I was in such a lonely place. I didn't know what to do. I thought I was shockproof, but I panicked—ran through the streets. I ran down Scarlet Street. Up Midnight Alley. I have a fear of the night. Why don't you try and understand? Gilda was supposed to take care of my husband, but she lost her silly head. After that, I knew I couldn't trust her. She had to be shot.

DICK

So you admit you shot her. It was your fault.

LAURA

You boys always put the blame on Mame. You and I could go off together...

DICK

...Into the sunrise? You and me?

LAURA

We could live by night. We could have many lost weekends.

DICK

But you poisoned your husband... Turn yourself in. You better kiss tomorrow goodbye, Sweetheart. This is where the sidewalk ends.

LAURA

But I've fallen in love with you. Doesn't that count for something?

DICK

I hope they don't hang you, Precious, by that sweet neck... Yes, Angel, I'm gonna send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means if you're a good girl, you'll be out in 20 years. I'll be waiting for you. If they hang you, I'll always remember you.

(He picks up the phone and dials.)

DICK (cont.)

Hey, Harry, it's me. You had a homicide last night. A woman on Pier 13. Most likely a red head. Yep. Named Gilda something or other? Yeah, I thought so. I think papa has it figured out. Figured out and wrapped up in tissue paper with pink ribbons on it. I got the angel face right here who confessed to it. Also coped to poisoning that D.O.A. you got at County General two nights ago. Yeah, *cherchez la femme*. Right here, waiting for your arrival.

(He hangs up the phone. Laura gets up and suggestively presses her body against his.)

LAURA

What about a long goodbye? Wouldn't you like a long goodbye?

(He pushes her back into the chair.)

DICK

The best goodbyes are short. Adieu.

LAURA

Give my love to the sunrise.

(Laura freezes. Dick breaks the scene and speaks to the audience.)

DICK

I never make up my mind about anything until it's over and done with. Because it looks like one thing, and then right before your eyes it becomes another thing. Everybody is somebody's fool. The only way to stay out of trouble is to grow old, so I guess I'll concentrate on that. Maybe I'll live so long that I'll forget her. Maybe I'll die trying. You know the rest.

LIGHTS DOWN

THE END