

Lockdown

A Play in Two Acts

by Robert Daseler

Act I

Scene 1

Characters

Laura, 32, an unemployed alcoholic
Woody, 72, her neighbor
Sullivan, her brother, 28
Duffy, 64, Laura's father
Cybele, 17, Duffy's other daughter
Maxine, 40, Cybele's mother

Setting

A three-room apartment—living-room-bedroom, kitchen, bathroom—on the fourth floor of an aging brick apartment building in the Wilshire District of Los Angeles. The main room, which serves both as the living room and the bedroom, is cheaply furnished and untidy. The Murphy bed can be lifted out of sight and stored in a wooden cabinet on one wall. Upstage there is a writing desk with a laptop computer on it, a low table with a television, a bookcase filled with paperback books, a small dining table next to the kitchen, and two or three wooden chairs. There is also a sewing machine on another table in a corner.

There is one entrance, stage left. The kitchen is upstage right, the bathroom downstage right. The back wall of the apartment has two windows looking out onto a street that, at night, is drably lit by a distant streetlight. Sirens can often be heard passing a block or two away.

Act I

Scene 1

Early evening. Laura is sitting at her writing table, staring out the window at the treetops she can see from where she is sitting. She is dressed in a loose-fitting robe and a pair of worn-down slippers. The Murphy bed is down and unmade.

There is a knock at the door.

Laura

Who is it?

Woody

(Off)

It's me, Woody

Laura gets up and, without enthusiasm, shuffles over to the door, re-tying her robe as she goes. She opens the door a crack.

I was going out, and I wondered if you needed anything.

Laura

I don't think so, thanks.

Woody

(Off)

Do you have anything to eat in there? I don't think you've gone out in a week, have you?

Laura

I don't know. I haven't been hungry.

Woody

(Off)

Lemme bring you something. How about an In-N-Out cheeseburger?

Laura

(A retching sound)

Ack!

Woody

(Off)

Or a burrito from Leo's Taco Truck.

Laura

(More emphatic retching)

Ack! Ack!

Woody

(Off)

You've gotta eat, Laura.

Laura

I've got food in here.

Woody

(Off)

Show me.

Laura opens the door, admitting Woody. He is a plump old man with tufts of gray hair sprouting like weeds on a piebald lawn, and even in hot weather he wears a tweed jacket over a frayed vest.

After entering Laura's apartment Woody crosses to the kitchen. It is a small kitchen, and even when he is entirely inside it, we can still see him as he moves about. He opens Laura's small refrigerator.

What's this? There's almost nothing in here. A mayonnaise jar. An almost-empty quart of milk. A bottle of club soda. *Another* bottle of club soda. A few cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon. A jar of Dijon mustard. A carton of butter. Eggs. A block of Tillamook cheese. There's hardly enough here to keep body and soul together.

Laura

You know what they say: enough is a feast. If I get hungry, I can have a slice of cheese on a Saltine cracker.

Woody returns to the living room. Laura sits down again at her writing table. Woody studies her for a moment, which makes her uncomfortable.

Woody

Honey, you're not looking well. Your skin is sallow. Let me bring you some fried chicken from Ralph's.

Laura

Yuck!

Woody

Better yet, I'll bring you some fresh fruit. Would you eat some apples if I brought them?

Laura shrugs non-committally.

You've gotta eat *something* other than crackers and cheese. If I brought you some lettuce and scallions and salad dressing, would you at least make a salad for yourself?

Laura avoids his gaze and remains silent.

Come on, baby, you gotta work with me at least a little bit.

Laura

Leave me alone, Woody. I'm all right.

Woody

No, you're *not* all right. You're starving yourself. Why?

Again, Laura does not answer. Unwilling to give up on her, Woody crosses to her bookshelf and runs his eyes along one shelf. He takes down one of her books.

Charles Bukowski. Do you read his poetry?

Laura

Sometimes.

Woody

You like it?

Laura

Sometimes.

Woody

May I infer that you like it *when* you read it?

Laura

(Has not been listening)

Huh?

Woody

(Patient)

I'm suggesting that whenever you read Bukowski, you enjoy yourself, but when you don't, you don't. *(Beat)* But of course, how could you enjoy reading Bukowski if you didn't do it? *Q.E.D.*, as a logician would say.

Laura

(Still in a haze)

I'm sorry. I'm not following.

Woody

Claro. You need to get out more, girl.

Laura

We're supposed to stay home.

Woody

I mean, for a walk. "Shelter in place" doesn't mean crawling into a hole and never coming out. That could be as much a threat to your health as a Trump rally. *(Beat)* Fresh air! Sunshine! Remember what it was like to be alive?

Laura

(A shadow of a smile)

I seem to remember.

Woody

(Gestures to window)

It's actually a beautiful day out there. You should think of joining the human race again. *(Beat)* Why don't you come shopping with me?

Laura

(A minimal shake of her head)

Not today, Woody. Thanks.

Woody

Come on! Humor me. Put on some clothes and rejoin the human race. *(Beat)* Only for an hour.

Laura

(Emphatically shakes her head)

No, thanks. *(Beat)* It's kind of you to ask.

Woody

Laura, I'm not going to take no for an answer.

Laura

I'm afraid you'll have to.

Woody

Jesus, woman!

Laura

Sorry.

Woody

There are heroin addicts who live better than you do.

Laura

(Smiles)

That's probably true.

Woody

I'm going to bring you some lettuce and a few scallions, and you're going to eat a salad, God damn it.

Laura shrugs minimally but doesn't answer.

I'm not going to sit back and watch you waste away.

Laura

Don't worry about me. I'm not worth it.

Woody

What is *that* supposed to mean?

Laura

Never mind.

Woody

I think you're worth going out of my way for. I happen to like you. You're the only person I know who reads poetry.

Laura

I don't read it very much, and I only read Charles Bukowski.

Woody

So that's more than anybody else I know.

Laura

That doesn't exactly qualify me to be a lecturer in poetry at Oxford.

Woody

Why would you want to lecture in poetry at Oxford? That's in England, and England is just Kansas on the eastern side of the Atlantic.

Laura

I wish I did read more poetry.

Woody

Why?

Laura

I dunno. It might broaden my world.

Woody

Well, your world definitely needs broadening, girl.

Laura

It's too late. I feel like Houdini when he was locked inside a safe and dropped to the bottom of Lake Michigan in winter, only Houdini knew how to escape and I don't.

Woody

So that sounds like a metaphysical crisis to me.

Laura

(Smiles)

I've always wanted to have a metaphysical crisis.

Woody

On the other hand, you might just be bi-polar.

Laura

Maybe it's both.

Woody

Have you ever seen a psychiatrist?

Laura

Of course, only I couldn't afford to keep it up.

Woody

What'd he say?

Laura

It was a she, and she said bubkis. *(Beat)* Psychiatrists aren't supposed to say anything. They're supposed to sit there and clear their throats intelligently. *(Beat)* She prescribed an anti-depressant.

Woody

Are you still taking it?

Laura

No. It never did any good, anyway.

Woody

I wish I could do something to cheer you up.

Laura

You can't, though. Others have tried.

Woody

So I'm going to the market now.

Laura

Okey-dokey.

Woody

Are you coming with me?

Laura

Nope.

Woody

Okay. Well. Next time, maybe.

Laura

Maybe.

Woody goes to the door, opens it, then stops.

Woody

Last chance.

Laura

Bye.

Woody exits, closing the door. Laura sits perfectly still. Her iPhone rings. Laura waits for it to ring a second time before she gets up to answer it.

Hello? *(Beat)* Not much. And you? *(Beat)* Not lately. *(Beat)* I very much doubt it. Why would you even ask? *(Beat)* Jeez, Suddy, I don't know. I haven't been. . . . *(Beat)* Well, sure, I guess, if you insist. *(Beat)* Any time you like. I'm not going anywhere. *(Beat)* Okay. Goodbye.

Laura sets the phone down.

Shit.

Fade

Act I
Scene 2

Setting

The same. An hour later.

Sullivan, whom Laura calls “Suddy,” which was her pronunciation of Sullivan when she was a child, is a somewhat disheveled, slightly plump young man of a type one can find anywhere and in almost unlimited numbers: irresolute about his life and much else, living day to day, and incapable of applying himself to any difficult task for more than a week, he possesses nonetheless a certain lingering boyish charm. He has an odd habit of smiling at “inappropriate” moments, and he is genuinely fond of his older sister. He is the only person in the world in whom Laura confides.

Sullivan has a bandage on the left side of his forehead.

The scene begins in media res.

Sullivan

At least he ended up in the slammer.

Laura

He belongs there, I’m sure.

Sullivan

Yeah, he’s a little defective, all right.

Laura

But what were you doing at a party?

Sullivan

It wasn’t a party. I wouldn’t call it a party. It was a few guys getting together to drink beer, watch pornos, and gamble.

Laura

And did you all wear masks?

Sullivan

Not exactly, but. . . . Hey, this lockdown is being carried way, way too far. All the guys there were young—under thirty-five, anyway—and I don't think there were any co-morbidity factors present. We weren't meeting in a nursing home, for God's sake.

Laura

Thank heaven for small mercies. *(Beat)* So, why did this guy haul off and hit you with a beer bottle?

Sullivan

I have no idea. We were discussing super heroes, and I was just saying that I could never take Spider Man seriously, and BAM! He actually broke his beer bottle on my head. And I ended up getting four stitches. *(Beat)* And the police in the emergency room took down all the details from me and Jacob—it was Jacob who drove me to the hospital—and then ended up arresting this other guy, whose name, I think, was Paco.

Laura

It'll make an attractive scar. Women will think it's sexy. *(Beat)* Was Paco Hispanic?

Sullivan

Hard to tell. He might be. He's a mean sucker.

Laura

You should be more careful about disparaging Spider Man.

Sullivan

I will be from now on, believe me.

Laura

So what else have you been up to since the lockdown began?

Sullivan

You know. One thing and another. Nothing much.

Laura

And you're collecting unemployment?

Sullivan

Well. . . . That's not quite clear. I've had real problems applying for it.

Laura

Lots of people have.

Sullivan

So I hear. Things are pretty screwed up, you know.

Laura

What'd you expect with such a bozo in the White House?

Sullivan

Yeah, I thought he'd be bad, but I never thought. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

Wait a second! You voted for him, idiot.

Sullivan

I just thought we needed, you know, the draining of the swamp, or whatever. A new broom. I had no idea. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

You don't deserve to have the franchise. People like you—people who voted for Trump—should disqualify themselves from voting ever again. You're not responsible citizens.

Sullivan

You're saying that nearly half of the electorate should be put on a list and never allowed to vote again?

Laura

Unfortunately, I think that would violate the Constitution. They would have to disqualify *themselves*, admitting implicitly that they

are not reasonable creatures and are incapable of making an informed choice. *(Beat)* These are morons who watch Fox News and subscribe to all sorts of conspiracy theories and live in flyover states nobody in his right mind would ever drive through.

Sullivan

I don't live in a flyover state. How can you generalize. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

You live in a flyover state of mind, Suddy. You have as little as possible to do with the real world.

Sullivan

I'm not the recluse hiding away in a little apartment in the Wilshire District like a vampire and never letting the sun touch my skin.

Laura

(Defensive)

I do out for walks occasionally.

Sullivan

(Pressing)

How often?

Laura

Not often, I admit. I haven't been sleeping well lately. I've hardly been sleeping at all, to tell the truth, unless I. . . . *(She doesn't finish the thought.)*

Sullivan

Unless you drink, right?

Laura does not want to answer this charge. She bites her lower lip and looks off to one side.

What about that guy—what was his name?—Brady, who you were seeing at one time?

Laura

Bradley. He's not in the picture any more.

Sullivan

As you just said, thank heaven for small favors.

Laura

Yeah, I guess. Except I said “thank heaven for small mercies.”

Sullivan

You have the worst taste in men of any woman I have ever known.
Maybe I shouldn’t vote, but you really shouldn’t fuck.

Laura

You speak the truth, my faithful Indian companion. *(She smiles.)*
Maybe we should both sign pledges of abstinence.

Both Laura and Sullivan are silent for a moment, seeming to reflect on what they have just said.

Sullivan

So do you still like Woody Allen movies?

Laura

That’s a non sequitur, isn’t it?

Sullivan

Not at all. You just made an allusion to *Radio Days*.

Laura

Did I? When? *(The coin drops.)* Oh, “faithful Indian companion.” I wasn’t even thinking of that.

Sullivan

You’re usually so spot-on with your movie references, I just assumed. . . . *(He does not bother to finish the thought.)*

Laura

Well, you know, the mind works in mysterious ways.

Sullivan

(Abruptly changing the topic)

So have you heard from Dad lately?

Laura

No. Have you?

Sullivan

Yeah, sort of. *(Beat)* Well, Maggie called me the other day. She wanted me to help move his stuff out of her house.

Laura

Oh.

Sullivan

Yeah. It's like that. Again.

Laura

(Sighs)

I can't deal with this, Suddy. Honestly I can't. *(Beat)* So what'd you tell her?

Sullivan

I told her normally I'd be happy to, but under the circumstances I can't agree to anything that would involve a violation of social distancing.

Laura

(Smiling)

You hypocrite!

Sullivan

Look who's talking!

Laura

(A long intake of breath)

What're we to do with those people?

Sullivan

One possibility that comes to mind is euthanasia.

Laura

That would be the ideal solution. Do you know where we could lay our hands on some exotic poisons?

Laura and Sullivan fall into another brief but somewhat awkward silence. There is clearly nothing more to be said about their father.

What happened to him, Suddy? He used to be a man of such, I don't know, resolve and. . . . He used to have a sense of humor, and he liked long drives, and. . . . He used to seem. . . . He used to seem so resolute, somehow, and. . . . *(Laura cannot find a resolution to this line of thought.)*

Sullivan

He was never as sturdy a character as you seemed to imagine. I think you used to romanticize him a bit.

Laura

Maybe, but. . . . *(She trails off.)*

Sullivan

He began getting more and more zany after you went off to college, even before Mom died.

Laura

I was entirely unaware. . . . *(Beat)* That's probably not true. I guess I was always aware that there were some screws loose.

Sullivan

I know. *(Beat)* I think it was Mom's cancer that broke him, finally. He didn't have the heart. . . . And then after his own back surgery he sort of. . . . *(He trails off.)*

Laura

I never would've imagined

Sullivan

I know. *(Beat)* Maggie doesn't help matters. It probably wasn't auspicious that they met in AA.

Laura

No, he should've used eHarmony or something. One of those online dating places. *(Beat)* Which might not be such a bad idea for you, come to think of it.

Sullivan

I was about to say the same thing about you.

Laura

Been there. Done that.

Sullivan

If at first you don't succeed. . . .

Laura

. . . throw in the towel.

Sullivan

Our family motto.

Laura

Right. Exactly. *(Beat)* You know, I've almost completely lost interest in sex.

Sullivan

"Almost"?

Laura

Well. . . .

Sullivan

So what happened to that Brady guy?

Laura

Bradley. Nothing happened to him. He's still around.

Sullivan

But you don't see him any more?

Laura

Nope.

Sullivan

Mmm. Can't say I'm sorry.

Laura

He's a nice guy, but. . . . (*She doesn't finish the thought.*)

Sullivan

He's married.

Laura

That's not his main shortcoming.

Sullivan

I know. You like married guys. You always have.

Laura

A married guy is like a library book, you know? You can return it when you've finished it.

Sullivan

No strings.

Laura

No strings. No muss, no fuss.

Sullivan

Except that someday your library card may expire.

Laura

I've been feeling lately that *I've* expired. The most alive part of me has gone dead.

Sullivan

That sounds ominous.

Laura

It's not promising.

Sullivan

Well, I need for you to stick around, Sis. I need somebody I can talk to.

Laura

You'll never be lonely, Suddy. Everybody likes you. That's always been true. Even when you. . . .

Sullivan

(Interrupting)

I know, even when I was a child I was insanely likable.

Laura

It's true. You always had friends, lots of friends. And adults thought you were. . . .

Sullivan

(Interrupting)

And adults thought I was adorable as hell.

Laura

It's true.

Sullivan

So what? You're the only person who thinks I'm adorable *now*.

Laura

I doubt that. Girls have always. . . .

Sullivan

(Interrupting)

You mean girls *used to*. These days women tend to be wary of guys who are perennially broke and unemployed and whose personal hygiene has a medieval pungency to it.

Laura

Fastidious little prigs!

Sullivan

Sensuality has a declining influence on human behavior these days, Sis. Life is carried on remotely, via Twitter feed. I think that's why Californians have adapted so well to the lockdown. Most people *prefer* living in isolation from others.

Laura

That sounds like something you read on somebody's Facebook page.

Sullivan

Fuck you!

Laura

Well?

Sullivan

Okay, I *did* read it on Facebook, but that doesn't necessarily invalidate it as an idea.

Laura

It does, though. *Everything* on Facebook is a lie.

Sullivan

Spoken like a good Luddite.

Laura

Nothing wrong with being a Luddite, Suddy. The Luddite's had the right idea: stop technology before it overwhelms us as humans.

Sullivan

Yeah, but you can't stop technology.

Laura

I know. That's the tragedy of the human condition. Technology is destroying everything that made life worth living.

Sullivan

You don't believe that.

Laura

I *do* believe it, because it's true. There's not one corner of our lives left untouched. Technology is a Trojan Horse. We accept it for its gifts, and it overwhelms us.

Sullivan

That doesn't sound. . . . You must've read that somewhere.

Laura

What if I did? Does that invalidate it as an idea?

Sullivan

No, I guess not, only. . . . I guess not.

There is a knock at the door. Sullivan looks inquiringly at Laura. She nods. Sullivan opens the door. It is Woody, wearing a mask and carrying a paper bag of groceries. After a hesitation, he enters, careful to keep his distance from Sullivan.

Laura

Hi, Woody. Just leave the bag on the kitchen table. What do I owe you?

Woody carries the groceries into the kitchen and sets them down. He is still wearing his mask. When he answers Laura's question, his mask somewhat muffles his voice.

Woody

You don't owe me anything.

Laura

What?

Woody removes his mask.

Woody

You don't owe me anything.

Laura

What'd you bring me?

Woody

A few apples. Two heads of red-leaf lettuce. A bunch of scallions.
A jar of ranch salad dressing.

Laura

What'd it cost?

Woody

Never you mind. I'm running a free food bank for shut-ins.

Laura

I think I've got twenty dollars in my purse. Will that cover it?

Woody

(To Sullivan)

She hardly eats anything.

Sullivan doesn't know how to respond to this information. He just looks at Laura inquisitively.

Laura

Oh, you two haven't met, have you? Woody, this is my brother, Sullivan, whom I call Suddy, but I'm the only person on the planet, except our father, who calls him that. You can call him Sullivan. Suddy, this is Woody, my neighbor from down the corridor. He worries about me.

Sullivan would like to shake hands, and he takes a step toward Woody, but Woody, carefully maintaining social distance, backs up a step and keeps his hands at his side.

Sullivan

Glad to meet you, Woody.

Woody merely nods. He is uneasy with strangers, especially men.

She's always been a light eater. How long've you lived here?

Woody
A few years.

Sullivan
What do you do?

Woody
Retired.

Sullivan
What *did* you do?

Woody
Different things.

Sullivan
Yeah, that's my profession, too.

Woody
I used to deliver mail.

Sullivan
That's steady work, if you can get it.

Laura
(To Woody)
Charles Bukowski also used to deliver mail, Woody. Did you know that?

Woody
Yes, I knew that.

Sullivan
Who's Charles Bukowski?

Laura
Nobody you'd be interested in, Suddy. A poet.

Sullivan
(She's right. He's not interested)

Oh.

Woody

A poet *and* a postman. A rare combination.

Sullivan

Is he any good?

Woody

As a poet? It's a matter of opinion, I guess. As a postman?
Probably not. *(Beat)* And lately he hasn't been much good at
either because he's dead.

Laura

Actually, Suddy, I think you might like some of his poems, if you
read them.

Woody

But if not, you probably wouldn't.

Sullivan

Huh?

Laura

(To Woody)

Suddy was a great reader when he was a child, a little bookworm,
but somewhere along the line he lost interest in books.

Woody

Well, I didn't mean to interrupt your. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

You're not interrupting anything, Woody. Why don't you take a
seat and relax. *(Beat)* Anyway, I owe you some money.

Woody

You don't owe me anything. When I think of all the times. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

Take a seat. Maybe the three of us can sit around and tell each other stories, like the characters in *The Decameron*.

Woody

(To Sullivan)

When I was sick last year, your sister. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

Tell Suddy the story you told me about how you fed letters through a mail slot slowly so that the vicious dog inside would tear them to shreds.

Woody

I didn't always work for the Post Office. I was a newspaper reporter, too.

Sullivan

That must have been interesting.

Woody

On three different newspapers: one in Connecticut, another in Texas, and a third right here in California.

Sullivan

So you went from being a newspaper reporter to a mailman?

Woody

Yes, my career had a generally downward trajectory. The reasons are rather complex and difficult to untangle.

Laura

Woody was a speechwriter, too, for a time.

Sullivan

Really? For a politician?

Woody

It's a long story.

Sullivan

Was that before or after you delivered mail?

Woody

As I say, it's a long story.

Laura

Woody doesn't like to talk about himself.

Sullivan

Though apparently he talks to you.

Laura

Yes, well. . . .

Woody has been standing irresolutely in the middle of the room. He rather tentatively removes one of Laura's blouses from a chair and sits down.

(To Woody)

Just drop it on the floor. It's dirty.

Woody is too fastidious to drop the blouse on the floor. He holds it a little self-consciously on his lap.

(To Sullivan)

Woody and I are old friends. We talk.

Sullivan

How nice for both of you.

A passing siren drowns what Sullivan has just said. All three characters are silent for a few seconds, waiting for it to pass.

Laura

What'd you say, Suddy?

Sullivan

Nothing.

Another kind of silence, an awkward one, ensues. Nobody knows what to say. At last Woody turns to Sullivan.

Woody

So, is it aphids that make the leaves turn brown?

Sullivan

Huh?

Sullivan cocks his head inquisitively and stares at Woody, who stares impassively back at him. Receiving no explanation, Sullivan shakes his head.

I feel I'm missing something.

Laura

Woody is full of non-sequiturs and odd little koans.

Sullivan

So I've got to be shoving along. I only stopped by the say hello, Sis. It was nice to have met you. . . .

Woody

Woody.

Sullivan

Yes, Woody. I'm glad my sister has such an. . .interesting neighbor.

Sullivan takes three steps to the door, then turns back to Laura.

Give Dad a call when you have a chance, okay?

Laura

(Non-committal)

Maybe.

Sullivan

I think Maggie's really going to kick him out this time.

Laura

Can you blame her?

Sullivan

Look, she's not exactly Sister Teresa, herself. Our father is not capable of living on his own, you know.

Laura

Maybe it's time he learned.

Sullivan

Okay, I'm outta here. *(To Woody)* Nice to have met you. Bye, Sis.

Laura

Bye, Bro.

Sullivan exits. Laura and Woody sit in silence for a moment.

Woody

I didn't mean to break up your family reunion.

Laura

Suddy never stays longer than twenty minutes. Don't worry about it.

Woody

An interesting young man. What happened to his head?

Laura

Somebody broke a beer bottle on it.

Woody

Oh. *(Beat)* He seems. . .very laid back.

Laura

Yes.

Woody

What does he do for a living?

Laura

Beats me. *(Beat)* Well, as he said, himself, he kinda works the waterfront. He's a sort of handyman at times, doing odd jobs for people. He knows a little carpentry. He used to install air-conditioners. He used to sell cemetery plots door to door.

Woody

So he never went to college?

Laura

No, he went to college. He just dropped out after a couple of years. He doesn't like to stick to anything too long. He's basically a hippie who was born fifty years too late. If this were 1970 instead of 2020, he'd probably belong to a commune in New Mexico or rural Oregon. He's actually willing to work. He just doesn't want to do the same thing day after day, week after week, and nothing in the world would induce him to get up before noon.

Woody

Good material for a brother, not so good for a husband.

Laura

Yeah, that about sums it up.

Woody

I can see why you're fond of him.

Laura

Did I say I was fond of him?

Woody

You don't have to. It's in your voice when you talk about him.

Laura

(Not altogether pleased to hear this)

Really? Well, I suppose that comes with being an older sister. We don't see much of one another, in any case.

Woody

I need to be moving along, too.

Laura

Please let me pay you for the . . .apples and stuff.

Woody

Nope. Not a problem.

Laura

It's a problem for me. What'd it cost?

Woody

You didn't want the groceries. I forced them on you. You can toss it all out, if you please. In any case, it didn't come to much.

Laura

I'm not ungrateful.

Woody

As I said: not a problem. See you later, alligator.

Laura

In a while, crocodile.

Woody exits. Laura slumps in her chair. She would have liked Woody to stay longer. Now that she's alone, she loses her will to do anything.

Fade

Lockdown

Act I Scene 3

Early afternoon, the following day. Not much has changed in Laura's apartment, except that she has put away the groceries Woody brought her. Laura is sitting in a chair, reading a volume of Charles Bukowski's poetry. She is wearing a skirt and blouse.

There is a knock at the door.

Laura
(Loudly)

It's not locked. Come in.

The door opens, and in steps Duffy, her father, a man in his early sixties. He is disheveled and unshaven. Laura has been sitting with her back to the door. She looks over her shoulder and is surprised to see her father.

Lord love a duck, it's you! What's happened?

Duffy
What makes you think something happened?

Laura
You look like. . . . You look like you slept on a garbage dump.

Duffy
Close enough. *(Beat)* Not exactly how a man expects to be greeted by his daughter.

Laura
I thought you were Woody, my neighbor.

Duffy
Boyfriend?

Laura

Hardly. He's older than you. *(Beat)* Older, but a good deal more presentable.

Duffy

Maggie and I are not getting along right now.

Laura

So Suddy tells me.

Duffy

You've seen your brother?

Laura

Yeah, yesterday.

Duffy

Oh. *(Beat)* I'm kinda thirsty. Do you have something cold I could drink?

Laura

There might be a couple beers in the fridge. Help yourself.

Without further ado, Duffy goes into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, and takes out a bottle of beer. He uncaps it at once and drinks deeply, almost emptying the bottle.

Duffy

Ah, thanks! I needed that.

Laura

I bet. Take a load off.

Clearly exhausted, Duffy sits in a chair, still cradling the cold bottle of beer, which he rubs against his forehead.

Duffy

So how've you been? I haven't heard from you in a while.

Laura

About the same. And you?

Duffy

I've had better days.

Laura

So what brings you to L.A.?

Duffy

Can't I drop in to see my daughter if I want to?

Laura

Of course. So why are you dropping by to see me today?

Duffy

There's a global pandemic raging, in case you hadn't heard. People dying like flies. I wanted to see how you're weathering the storm.

Laura

But you enter my abode without a mask. That doesn't show a lot of concern.

Duffy

I left it in the car.

Laura

Do you even own a mask, Dad?

Duffy

I just told you: it's in the car. I left it in the car.

Laura

Okay. You've seen me. I'm still alive. Now what?

Duffy

It probably wouldn't kill you to show your father at least a modicum of respect. After all I came all this way just to. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

All this way from West Covina. It's not like you trekked over the Himalayas or hitchhiked here from Arkansas or something.

Duffy

So I go out of my way to see how you're doing, and all I get for my troubles. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

. . . is a bottle of beer. Correct. Consider yourself lucky.

Duffy

I guess you must hate me.

Laura

(With a weary gesture)

No, I don't hate you, Dad. I just don't need whatever fresh hell you're about to bring into my life.

Duffy

This is what our society is coming to: no filial gratitude, no sense of obligation, no tenderness of feeling anywhere.

Laura

It's the age of Trump, Dad. Get over it.

Duffy

I wish I *could* get over it. We're descending into. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

Don't blame me. You voted for him.

Duffy

No, I didn't.

Laura

(Disbelieving)

You hated Hillary. You told me you were going to vote for Trump.

Duffy

I told you that to get a rise out of you. I knew it would annoy you.

Laura

You voted for Hillary?

Duffy

As a matter of fact, I didn't vote for either candidate. To tell the truth, I didn't vote in that election. *(Beat)* I suppose I should confess that I haven't voted at all in. . . . I don't know how long.

Laura turns away from her father in disgust, but she says nothing.

The whole system is rigged. You know that as well as I do. I didn't like either of the candidates back in. . .whatever year it was. I haven't liked either of the major-party candidates in any election in donkey's years. *(Beat)* Now, go ahead. Give me a lecture on my civic responsibility.

Laura

Let's change the topic, can we? Politics gives me a headache.

Duffy

You know, back in the day, I used to be a Democrat. You could say I was a liberal. I even voted for that ass-wipe Carter instead of Reagan back in. . .whatever year that was. Four years later, of course, I voted for Reagan instead of Mondale because, well, Mondale was a bore. *(Beat)* Who was the president after Reagan?

Laura shrugs with indifference. This recitation of her father's voting history does not interest her in the least. Duffy is unfazed by his daughter's silence.

And then I voted for Clinton both times because, well, he represented hope and change. Or so it seemed. *(Beat)* He turned out to be a scoundrel, too, of course, but who knew? I sort of thought Hillary was a cute first lady, a damned site cuter than any of the other first ladies I can remember.

Laura

How many first ladies can you remember, Dad?

Duffy

What an odd question! First ladies? Lemme see. *(Beat)* Well, there was Jacqueline Kennedy, of course. *(He frowns.)* And Nixon's scarecrow wife, Pat. *(Beat)* And Nancy Reagan, who was a great believer in astrology, as I recall. And then Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama, and now that woman from East Europe.

Laura

Very good, Dad. I didn't think you could do it.

Duffy

I missed a couple, though, didn't I?

Laura

Yeah, but you nailed the important ones. For that you can have another beer, if you like.

Duffy

I *am* still a little thirsty. If you don't mind.

Laura

Help yourself.

Duffy takes his empty bottle out to the kitchen, leaves it on the counter, and takes another from the refrigerator. While he is out of the room, Laura quickly looks at herself in a mirror and brushes hair back from her forehead. She also tugs the hem of her skirt down a little to cover her knees.

Duffy screws the top off the beer bottle and returns, sipping it.

So how are you fixed for cash these days, Father?

Duffy

I'm bumping along, I guess. Why? You got some extra laying around?

Laura

Ha!

Duffy

It's a genetic affliction. Our hands are not grasping enough to hold onto anything for long. Nobody in our family has ever had more than just enough to get by on.

Laura

We're better off than some.

Duffy

True. That's very true. *(Beat)* Be grateful for what you have, that's always been my motto.

Laura

I know that.

Duffy

I've never complained, have I? Take it as it comes. *(Beat)* Play the hand that's dealt you is the way I look at it.

Laura

Absolutely.

Duffy

But that's not to say that life is fair.

Laura

No.

Duffy

It's a lot fairer to some than to others, you've got to admit.

Laura

I know.

Duffy

I wasn't dealt a good hand in life, Laura. You'll admit that, won't you?

Laura

Sure. Okay.

Duffy

I've had some rough breaks. I don't think I need to go into details, do I?

Laura

No.

Duffy

So I've done the best I could under the circumstances.

When Laura does not respond, Duffy shakes his head impatiently.

Oh, I know what you think. I know you. You think I'm a loser.

Laura

Is that what I think?

Duffy

You've always looked down on me, as if. . . . As if you were a princess who had been abandoned by her true father and left with peasants in the forest. Raised in rags, but to the manner born.

Laura

Yeah, you nailed it, Dad. That's *exactly* what I think.

Duffy

You've been like that since. . .since about the age of thirteen, I would say.

Laura

You're a natural psychologist, aren't you? You don't need any training. You've got a gift.

Duffy

Enough of the sarcasm, okay? It's cheap. Sarcasm is cheap.
(Beat) Oh, I know it's fashionable these days to be cynical about everything. Irony spreads like soft shit over everything. *(Beat)* I

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Act I, Scene 3

can be ironic, too. But I can't afford irony. You've got to be privileged to use irony, and I've never been that privileged. I have to face life plain, just like my father before me, nut and bolts, call a spade a spade. *(Beat)* So that's how I'm trying to deal with you now, straight from the hip, no frills, the real McCoy.

There is a silence between them. Laura sighs.

Laura

Start whenever you're ready.

Duffy, however, is not quite ready for what he is to do next. He takes a long pull at his bottle of beer.

Duffy

So there's somebody I'd like you to meet.

Laura

(Sighs)

I'm not in the mood, Dad.

Duffy

Just stay where you are. Let me make a call.

Duffy pulls his iPhone out of his trouser pocket and dials a number. After a second he puts the device to his ear. He speaks into the phone.

Okay, you can come up now. *(Beat)* Just take the elevator in front of you, ride it to the fourth floor, get out, turn left, and it's three doors down on your right. Room four-oh-nine. Got it? *(Beat)* Yeah, it's fine. Everything's fine. Don't worry.

Duffy clicks the phone off and puts it away. This has got Laura's attention. She is more alert now, puzzled, and a little anxious.

Laura

What is this?

Duffy

Sit still. You'll find out in a moment.

Laura

I don't like surprises. You know that.

Duffy

Of course I know that. Don't worry. It's not going to be Brad Pitt.

Laura

I already know it's a woman, Dad.

Duffy

You're guessing.

Laura

No, your tone of voice gives you away. You have one voice for men and another for women.

Duffy

Really?

Laura

Actually, almost all men do, or at least almost all heterosexual men.

Duffy

Yeah, now you mention it, I remember reading somewhere something about that.

Laura

I've always known since I was about five when you were talking to a woman on the phone.

Duffy

(He laughs a little nervously)

You were too damned bright for your own good. *(He checks his wristwatch.)* That's a slow elevator you've got. *(Beat)* It's an interesting elevator, though. What's it smell like? Sandalwood?

Laura

Sandalwood is right. Very good! It's lined with sandalwood.

Duffy

That's a pretty classy touch for such a shabby building.

Laura

It's not shabby. You wouldn't call a George IV drop-leaf table shabby, just because it's old.

Duffy

But this isn't an antique piece of furniture. It's a building, and by the looks of it, it's been around since the Hoover administration.

Laura

You got it.

There is a very light, feminine knock at the door. Duffy hastens over to open it. Cybele, who is seventeen and rather shy, steps in without a word, unsmiling and obviously ill at ease. Cybele is carrying a battered old suitcase.

Duffy

Laura, I want you to meet your half sister, Cybele.

Laura's face remains carefully impassive, but this is about as big a shock as she has had in a long time. She glances at Cybele and then at her father, and she glares at the latter.

Cybele, this is Laura, whom you already know all about.

Cybele

(Not daring to look directly at Laura, and speaking softly)

Hi.

Laura is still glaring at Duffy, lips compressed. A number of responses are cycling rapidly through her mind, but none of them seems to fit the occasion. After a long pause, she turns her gaze back to Cybele, and her voice, whenever she addresses Cybele, is guarded.

Laura

Hi.

Duffy

I thought it was high time you girls meet each other. *(Beat)* Laura, I've known for a long time that you've known for a long time that I had an extra-marital affair when you were a teenager, and I believe you've also known that the woman I had the affair with had a baby, my baby.

Laura

(Closing her eyes)

Yes.

Duffy

Well, that baby has almost grown up, and. . . here she is.

Laura and Cybele look directly at one another for the first time. Cybele is confused. She doesn't know what to say, or even to think. Laura's overwhelming exasperation is overridden, to an extent, by her awareness of the girl's acute embarrassment. She looks the girl up and down. Cybele is becomingly but cheaply dressed in an off-the-rack dress from Woolworth's or Sears, and her heelless shoes are worn down. She is carrying a cheap blue or purple sweater over one arm. She would probably be comely if her hair had been styled with more guile.

Laura

Come on in. Have a seat.

Duffy, trying to avoid drawing attention to himself, shuts the door as quietly as possible and stands to one side like a butler.

Cybele steps into the room and sits on a chair, decorously tugging the hem of her skirt down to cover her knees.

You don't look a bit like my father. Our father.

Cybele does not know what to say to this. Her eyes don't know where to settle. She keeps glancing around the apartment, as if expecting a Turk with a scimitar to leap from a closet at any moment.

Would you like something cold to drink?

Cybele shakes her head. She can't speak.

Duffy

There's only one beer left, anyway.

Laura

Then why don't you drink it, Dad?

Duffy

I thought you'd never ask.

Duffy brushes by his two daughters, goes into the kitchen, leaves another empty bottle on the counter, and takes a fresh one from the refrigerator.

Meanwhile Laura and Cybele sit in uneasy silence. Duffy lingers in the kitchen.

Laura

Your name is Cybele?

Cybele

(Barely audible)

Yes.

Laura

And where do you live, Cybele?

Cybele

(Making an effort to speak more loudly)

I've been living in Pomona.

Laura

I'm sorry to hear it. *(Beat)* But that's just your launching pad, right?

Cybele nods uncertainly and minimally.

How old are you?

Cybele

Seventeen.

Laura

So I was. . .let's see. . .fifteen when you were born.

Laura glances around for Duffy's confirmation of this, but he is remaining out of her line of sight. Cybele remains silent.

Yes, that would be about right. I seem to remember. . . . *(Beat)* I must say you're rather pretty, Cybele.

Cybele

Thank you.

Laura

And are you planning to go to college?

Cybele

I would like to.

Laura

But your school is not in session now, right? Because of the coronavirus?

Cybele

That's right.

Laura

So what high school do you attend? Were you attending?

Cybele

Ganesha.

Laura

Sounds awful.

Cybele

Ganesha was an Indian god.

Laura

I actually knew that, Cybele, but thank you.

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Act I, Scene 3

Feeling rebuked, Cybele, who was just beginning to emerge from her shell, clams up again, sitting with her face turned away from Laura's.

Don't be afraid, Cybele. I bark, but I don't bite.

Duffy

(From the kitchen)

Ha!

Laura

I don't bite seventeen-year-old girls, anyway. At least I haven't since I was seventeen, myself. *(Beat)* Have you decided what college you're going to attend, Cybele?

Cybele

No.

Laura

And, since you're seventeen, I assume you're in your senior year right now?

Cybele

Yes.

Laura

And you're going to graduate in. . .soon?

Cybele

Yes.

Laura

But you don't know whether you're going to college yet?

Cybele doesn't answer. Laura leans back in her chair and stares at the ceiling a moment.

It's been a pleasure to meet you, Cybele. I wish you well in all your future. . . .

Lockdown

Act I, Scene 3

Duffy steps out of the kitchen, holding his third, and last, bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.

Duffy

(Interrupting)

Actually, I was kinda hoping that. . . . *(He breaks off.)*

Laura

What were you kinda hoping, Daddy dearest?

Duffy

You see, Cybele and her mother aren't getting along very well, and Cybele came to stay with us in West Covina, but, well, you know how cramped our house is, and. . . .and so I was hoping she might stay with you for. . .a short time.

Laura

Your *house* in West Covina is too cramped, but my *apartment* in the Wilshire District is not. I have tons of room, right?

Duffy

It's Maggie, okay? It's not me. If it was me, she could stay with us until the Christmas after next, but. . . .

Laura

(Interrupting)

A little bird told me that Maggie wants you out because of your drinking. The little bird had no scuttlebutt on Cybele.

Duffy

Let's just suppose for a moment your little bird was misinformed, as he usually is. *(Beat)* Maggie can be a little hard to live with. You know this, yourself. Can you help me out here?

Laura

I don't. . . . No! No way! What are you talking about? I hardly have room to turn around in when I'm alone. It's not my fault Maggie is a bitch. *You* deal with her. Be a man for once in your miserable life!

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Act I, Scene 3

There is a lengthy silence. Cybele sits with her head bowed. Duffy compresses his lips, barely able to stop himself from saying something that would ruin his chances. He would dearly like to smack Laura, and one gets the sense that if she were to say one more word, he would.

Fade

Lockdown

Act II Scene 1

Setting

The same. Late morning of the following day.

Laura is seated at her writing desk. She is Bix Biederbecke's "I'm Coming, Virginia" on her computer. She is evidently trying to write something, because she has a pen in hand, and it is poised over a sheet of paper. She hesitates, listening to the music. The Murphy bed has been put away.

The bathroom door opens, and Cybele emerges, more fashionably and attractively clothed than in the previous scene. Laura does notice her at once but appears lost in thought.

Cybele

Hey.

Laura turns in her chair to look at Cybele. She is pleased by what she sees, and she nods.

Do you like it?

Laura

Mmm. It looks better on you than on me.

Cybele

It's a good thing we're nearly the same size.

Self-consciously, and a little awkwardly, Cybele executes a turn, like a fashion model on a runway.

Laura

I think the hem needs taking up a little. *(Beat)* I'll do that later.

Cybele

Do you want me to take it off now?

Laura

No, leave it on. It's an improvement over what you were wearing yesterday, that's for sure.

Cybele

You're very nice.

Laura

(Almost annoyed)

No, I'm not. *(Beat)* I've got a fairly large wardrobe, and since we're close to the same size, there's no reason you shouldn't wear anything of mine you like. *(Beat)* After all, we're related.

Cybele

(A little embarrassed)

We are, aren't we? *(Beat)* We're half-sisters.

Laura

And we both have brothers, too. What's yours like?

Cybele

Adrian? He's sweet, I guess. Sort of a brat. *(Beat)* We have different fathers, of course, so he's actually only my half-brother, like you're my half-sister.

Laura

My brother, Sullivan, also is younger than me. He's kind of a bum, frankly. I mean, I love him dearly, but he's extremely lazy. He used to do drugs a lot, but not so much any more, I don't think. He hangs around with other men who do their best to avoid being employed. One of his friends broke a beer bottle over his head recently.

Cybele

I know. I've met him.

Laura

Oh. My father and I call him Suddy, but we're the only ones who do. *(Beat)* It's a family thing.

Cybele

My mother used to tell me about you.

Laura

(Surprised)

She did? What'd she know about me?

Cybele

She knew all about you and your brother. She even knew he was called Suddy.

Laura

(Beginning to be annoyed)

Really? How did she know about us?

Cybele

Our father talked about you, I guess. And we know Suddy.

Laura

(Annoyed)

I see.

Laura is silent for five seconds, absorbing all this. She shakes her head.

I guess I'm the only one left out of the loop. My father never told me anything about you.

Cybele is extremely attentive to everything Laura says, but in this case she offers no response.

Are you hungry?

Cybele

Not really. I ate two of your apples for breakfast. I hope you don't mind.

Laura

No. *Mi casa es su casa*. Help yourself to anything. *(Beat)* Would you like to see Suddy sometime?

Cybele
(Eager)

Yes. I mean, if you would.

Laura

Okay. I'll give him a call, but maybe not now. He's probably just getting up.

Cybele

It's almost noon.

Laura

Suddy rarely gets out of bed before noon.

Cybele

Oh.

Laura

I honestly don't know how he supports himself, Cybele. I mean, I just do not know. I've never been able to figure it out. He works as little as possible and as infrequently as possible, and yet somehow he seems to get by. Go figure.

Cybele

My mother thinks he has boyish charm.

Laura

Does she now?

Cybele

She likes him. So do I.

Laura

(Shakes her head, perplexed)

Wait. Are your mother and my—our—father still seeing each other?

Cybele

Yeah.

Laura

Oh.

Again, it takes Laura a few seconds to absorb this information, as it gives her a new perspective on her father.

They're not still. . . .

Cybele

I don't know. I don't think so.

Laura

Christ on a stick! *(Beat)* He's incorrigible!

Cybele

My mother still loves him.

Laura

Your mother must be. . . . *(She stops herself.)* I'm sorry. I've never met your mother. *(Beat)* So you've known my father for a long time, right?

Cybele

Yeah. He's my father, too.

Laura

Sorry. I still have a hard time getting my head around that idea. *(Beat)* Bear with me. This is all pretty new to me.

Cybele

But you knew that our father had another daughter.

Laura

Sure, but. . . . It's one thing to know something, and it's quite another to. . .to see it. You know what I mean?

Cybele

I think so. Like the Pythagorean theorem or something.

Laura

Precisely. Theories are one thing, diagrams another. *(Beat)* So, if you don't mind me asking, who is your brother's father?

Cybele

You mean Adrian.

Laura

Right. Who is *his* father?

Cybele

A man named Randy. I met him a few times.

Laura

And is Randy married?

Cybele

Yes, to a woman named Sylvia. They live in Whittier.

Laura

Our family is its own demographic of Los Angeles County, it seems. *(Beat)* And do you see Randy very much?

Cybele

No, but he and my mother still have sex occasionally.

Laura

Randy his name, and randy his nature.

Cybele

Huh?

Laura

Never mind. *(Beat)* I shouldn't judge.

Cybele

But she's not in love with him.

Laura seems lost in thought for a few seconds. After gazing off into the middle distance abstractedly, she returns her attention to Cybele, and she smiles.

Laura

That dress really looks good on you.

Cybele

(Blushes. She's unused to compliments.)

Thank you.

Fade

Lockdown
Act II
Scene 2

Setting

The same. Perhaps an hour later.

As the lights come up, Woody, Cybele, and Laura occupy all the available chairs. We join their conversation in media res.

Woody

. . .and after that we moved to Texas.

Laura and Cybele have been listening intently, smiles on their faces.

Laura

You never told me that story before, Woody.

Woody

I guess I never felt the occasion was right for it.

Laura

And you never told me you were married.

Woody

Didn't I?

Laura

No. I would've remembered.

Woody

Well, I was. *(Beat)* You find it hard to believe any woman would marry me?

Laura

It's not that, it's just. . . .

Woody

What?

Laura

I have a hard time picturing you. . . .

Woody

(Interrupting)

. . .in bed with a woman?

Laura

No, just. . . . *(Beat)* I just don't see you reading *The New York Times* while your wife is knitting a sweater and the two of you are living together in a suburban home or something.

Woody

Maybe that's because I didn't read *The New York Times*. I read *The Dallas Morning News*. *(Beat)* Which, I admit, is not as good a source of information about the state of the world. *(Beat)* And also Darby didn't knit. To tell the truth, she wasn't much of a cook, either. In fact, her domestic virtues were virtually nil.

Laura

And that's why you left her?

Woody

Actually, to be strictly honest, she left me.

Laura

How long were you married?

Woody

Not quite seven years.

Laura

And why did she leave you?

Woody

You're an inquisitive little creature, aren't you?

Laura

Yes, I am.

Woody

She left me for another man.

Laura

Oh. I'm sorry.

Woody

Why? Would you have been less sorry if she had left me because of my body odor? Or because I was physically abusive? Or because I gambled away our life savings? *(Beat)* Leaving me for another man was the best possible way she *could* have left me. I carried no residual guilt away from the marriage, which, from what I hear, is almost unheard-of. Marriage is an around-the-clock, universal, guilt-producing machine, and very few people get out of it with their self-respect intact.

Woody has been aware that Cybele has remained silent through his recitation. He turns to her now.

What do *you* think of marriage, Cybele?

Cybele

Me? I don't know anything about it.

Woody

Do you think you'll get married someday?

Cybele

I don't know.

Woody

Despite my personal experience, I am a big proponent of marriage, Cybele, though it's not for everybody. I reckon about two-thirds of men and three-quarters of women really ought to get married,

because marriage is generally a stabilizing influence in life. *(Beat)*
Or maybe now it's two-thirds of women and three-quarters of men.
Things have changed since my salad days. The point is, *most*
people live more healthfully inside marriage than as singles. A
spouse tends to discourage eating or drinking in excess. A spouse
is somebody to come home to in the evening. A spouse is
somebody to take drives with on a weekend. You tend to clean up
your act a bit if you're even a little bit still in love with another
person, regardless of whether it's a same-sex or heterosexual
relationship.

Laura

So why didn't you get married a second time?

Woody

I did, actually. *(Beat)* That one didn't take, either.

Laura

Did your second wife leave you for somebody else, too?

Woody

We can leave that to our next episode, okay? I've talked enough
about myself for one day.

Laura

Oh. All right.

Woody

Did you like my story, Cybele?

Cybele

(Almost inaudible)

Yes.

Woody

I'm sorry. I'm a little deaf. What did you say?

Cybele

Yes.

Woody

You know, I am right now in a circumstance that storytellers through the ages have mostly dreamt of: amusing two beautiful women at once. *(Beat)* Or, if we were in ancient Greece, two beautiful boys.

Laura

You're a natural raconteur, Woody.

Woody

(To Cybele)

Raconteur is just French for storyteller. Don't be intimidated by her vocabulary, dear.

Cybele

(Smiling a little)

Okay.

Woody

She's a wonderful woman, your half-sister, but she can be a bit cerebral at times, by which I mean hoity-toity. *(Beat)* She even reads poetry, if you can believe that.

Cybele is smiling more broadly now. She really likes Woody. Laura, noticing this, glances from one of them to the other, and she smiles, too.

I'm serious. She actually reads poetry for pleasure. You have to watch out for people like that. Poetry lovers are the sneakiest people in the world.

Cybele

Really?

Woody

Oh, yeah! Never turn your back on somebody with poetry on her bookshelf.

Cybele

(Smiling)

I'll try to remember that.

Woody

You'll live longer if you do.

Cybele

I like the name Darby.

Just as Cybele says this, the wail of a siren is heard through the open window. Laura, Cybele, and Woody all fall silent, waiting for it to pass.

Woody

I'm sorry, dear. I didn't catch that. What'd you just say?

Cybele

I like the name Darby.

Woody

The name of my first wife, yes. I like it, too. *(Beat)* You're an attentive listener, aren't you?

Cybele shrugs.

You are. But don't let people know you are listening so carefully. It makes them nervous. *(Beat)* Good listeners are very rare. There are far more orators and lecturers than listeners in our society.

Cybele

Was she pretty?

Another siren wails, probably a second fire engine following the first. Laura, Cybele, and Woody wait for it to pass.

Woody

Was Darby pretty? Was that your question?

Cybele

Yes.

Woody

I thought she was. Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, though, as you know. Other men found her attractive, too, but what mattered to Darby—what particularly fed her vanity—was that other *women* often commented on how pretty she was. Women, Darby always said, are far more exacting judges than men when it comes to beauty in either sex.

Cybele

I think that's true.

Woody

I think it's true, too.

Cybele

Where is she now, do you know?

Woody

Darby? The last I heard, she was living in Oregon and was married to a dentist, but that was many years ago.

Cybele

Do you miss her?

Woody

I did, after she left me, in the worst way, but. . . . *(Beat)* I still think of her from time to time.

Cybele

Would you have taken her back, if she had wanted to come back? I mean, a year or so after she left you?

Woody

Oh, yeah, no question about it. Yeah.

Cybele

If you love somebody, you should be willing to forgive her.

Woody

Absolutely. I believe that.

Cybele

So do I.

Laura's iPhone rings. She answers it and immediately goes into the kitchen for slightly more privacy.

Laura

Yeah, Suddy. Hi. *(Beat)* Oh. *(Beat)* Unh-huh. Okay.

Woody

(Addressing Cybele)

Do you have a boyfriend?

Cybele

Not at the moment.

Laura

(Into her phone)

She's here right now.

Woody

That's good.

Cybele

Why?

Woody

I don't know. I think sex is overrated.

Cybele

I agree.

Laura

(Into her phone)

Does it have to be today? *(Beat)* Okay. Okay. *(Beat)* Of course.

Laura hangs up. She compresses her lips. Woody has been following Laura's private conversation while talking to Cybele.

Woody

(To Laura)

Bad news?

Laura

(To Cybele)

Your mother wants to see you.

Cybele

(Casual)

What about?

Laura

I don't know. That was my. . .that was Suddy. He says she's upset.

Cybele

That's normal for Maxine. She's always upset.

Laura

She insists on seeing you today.

Cybele

Okay. *(Beat)* But I'm not going back with her.

Laura

She *is* your mother, Cybele.

Cybele

I'm not going back with her. Period.

Laura

I don't think there's anything I can do about it.

Cybele gets to her feet. There is a look of determination about her now.

Cybele

I should be going now.

Cybele looks for her suitcase, which is against the wall, downstage right.

Laura

Cybele, wait! Where would you go?

Cybele

I don't know. I'll think of something.

Laura

Think a minute! Stop and think. Wherever you go, the police will find you. This is not a . . .

Cybele

I'm not going back to Pomona with that woman!

Laura

Okay, maybe we can find. . . . Woody, say something! Tell her not to go.

Woody

Laura's right. You gotta stay and face the music, sweetie

Cybele

Maxine is completely nuts. She really is. I'm not going back to Pomona with her.

Laura

I can easily understand that, but. . . .

Cybele

I'll stay in a homeless shelter.

Laura

During a pandemic? Going to a homeless shelter is not a very good idea even in the best of times, but with a pandemic raging it's just a very, very bad idea. *(Beat)* Anyway, I don't know where you would find one. Have you ever been in a homeless shelter? I don't

think they allow unaccompanied minors. *(Beat)* Just settle down a minute, and let's think this through.

Cybele

I'm not going back to Pomona.

Woody

(With newly assumed authority)

Sit down, Cybele!

Struck by his unaccustomed tone of voice, Cybele turns to Woody, surprised but still wary. When he repeats himself, his voice is gentler.

Sit down, Cybele. You aren't going anywhere.

Cybele

(A little intimidated)

Why not?

Woody

Because, dear, you have absolutely nowhere to go. Furthermore, you don't really want to go on the lam quite yet. Not at seventeen, without even a high school diploma. The world is an impersonal machine. It chews up and spits out the young and the naïve and the innocently hopeful. You're not an outlaw. You're not prepared to take on the world. Give yourself a fighting chance. Get a few more years and a little more education under your belt, and *then* challenge the world to a fight. Okay?

Cybele

I don't want to see Maxine.

Woody

You're going to see her, anyway. She has legal custody of you, and you're not ready to fight the law.

Cybele

I thought you were on my side.

Woody

I *am* on your side. *(Beat)* Sometimes good advice tastes as bitter as Hell, but you still have to swallow it.

Cybele

I don't want to live with her.

Fade

Lockdown

Act II

Scene 3

Setting

The same. An hour later.

Laura, Sullivan, Cybele, and Maxine have been talking together. Laura and Maxine are seated; Sullivan and Cybele are standing. Sullivan is leaning against a wall.

Maxine, a woman in her late thirties, is sitting at Laura's writing table with her back to the windows. She was probably an attractive woman when she was younger, but time and circumstances have left her looking small and rather diffuse. She seems to be very self-conscious and tentative. She looks at Laura and Sullivan directly and intently for a second or two and then looks away. Her eyes keep darting about the room.

Maxine

I remember you, Laura, when you were in a high school play. You were about the age Cybele is now.

Laura

Which play? Do you remember? I was in several.

Maxine

I don't remember. I'm sorry. *(Beat)* You were good, though. I thought you had talent as an actress.

Laura

Was my hair dyed black? Was I wearing a very tight, short skirt?

Maxine

I think you were wearing a short skirt.

Laura

It was probably *Pantagleize*.

The title means nothing to anybody in the room except Laura.

It was about a revolution in an unnamed European country, and it was written by a Belgian playwright named Michel de Ghelderode. My character was supposed to be a streetwalker who joins the revolution, or wants to.

Maxine

That sounds right.

Laura

But since this was a high school play, we could only hint that I was a prostitute. In fact, my moral degeneracy was pretty much confined to the short skirt and a pair of knee-high black boots.

Maxine

I noticed you had nice legs.

Laura

Mmm. *(Beat)* People said it was typecasting, me playing a fallen woman.

Maxine

Girls say that about each other when they're jealous. *(Beat)* Girls can be very mean at that age.

Laura

There was an element of truth to it, all the same. *(Beat)* After every performance I fellated the leading man in the green room.

Sullivan

You told me you did that to keep his performance from sagging. It was motivational.

Laura

Yes, I motivated quite a few men that way.

Maxine does not know how to respond to this line of badinage between brother and sister. She lowers her gaze and stares at the floor. Laura smiles faintly, pleased to have disconcerted her visitor.

So much for nostalgia. *(Beat)* I guess we need to discuss Cybele and her living arrangements. *(Addressing Maxine)* Do you intend to take her home? Is that why you came?

Maxine has difficulty in expressing herself in the best of circumstances. Now, confronted by Laura and Sullivan, she does not know what to say. Laura and Sullivan look at her expectantly, but for several seconds Maxine remains mute, staring at the floor.

Maxine?

Maxine

That isn't why I came.

Laura

Why did you come?

Maxine

I wanted to see my daughter. Is that okay?

Laura

Sure. Of course it is. *(Beat)* You can see Cybele whenever you want to. You're her mother. *(Beat)* That goes without saying.

Maxine

And I want her to finish school.

Laura

Of course.

It takes some seconds for Maxine to nerve herself to say what follows. She speaks hesitantly, stumbling occasionally on multi-syllabic words.

Maxine

I don't know what she's told you, but. . . . *(Beat)* I've not always been a good mother. I know that. If I could undo the past. . . .

(Beat) None of us can do that, can we? *(Beat)* Did she tell you about the drug bust?

Laura

No.

Maxine

It's a long story. I won't bore you with it, but this man I knew who was staying with me for a few days was dealing "illegal substances" out of his van, which was parked in my driveway. *(Beat)* You get the picture.

Laura

I think so.

Maxine

But I got off with a suspended sentence. The judge said he didn't want to send a single mother to prison. But now I've got a police record.

Sullivan

How long ago did that happen?

Maxine

Five years? Six years? Who knows?

Sullivan

What about the fellow who owned the van?

Maxine

He served his time and then moved to Texas.

Sullivan

That figures.

Maxine

Right now he's back in prison.

Laura

Cybele never said a word about any of that. She hasn't mentioned any arrests. In fact, she has told me nothing about you that is to your discredit.

Maxine

She's a good girl, isn't she?

Laura

Yes, she is.

Maxine

Better than I deserve, is what you're thinking, I bet.

Laura

You have no idea what I'm thinking.

Maxine

I did my best with my kids, the best I could do under the circumstances.

Laura

I don't doubt it.

Maxine

I was scared of coming here. That's why I asked Suddy to bring me. I like Suddy.

The use of the family nickname, "Suddy," nettles Laura. Her face tightens for a second, manifesting her annoyance, but she quickly subdues this reaction. She and Sullivan exchange a glance.

Laura

I was not aware before today that you two knew each other.

Maxine

Oh, yeah, I've known Suddy for a couple years now.

Laura looks inquiringly at her brother. Sullivan looks a little embarrassed and makes a moue that is ambiguous, as if he were saying: "What can I say?"

Laura

Nobody tells me anything any more. I had no idea that you. . . .
(She lets the thought hang.)

There is a moment of slightly embarrassed silence.

Maxine

Oh, yeah, Suddy and I are old pals. *(Addressing Sullivan)* Aren't we?

Sullivan prefers not to answer this question.

I think he was curious about me, sort of like James Dean in *East of Eden*? Where he goes in search of his mother, who, his father has said, is dead? *(Beat)* Of course I'm not his mother, but. . . .

Laura looks inquiringly at Sullivan, who merely raises his eyebrows a little, too equivocal a response to mean anything explicit.

Anywho, he dropped by my place one day—a Saturday, I think it was—and I knew at once who he was, so I invited him in and brewed up a pot of green tea, and we talked. Isn't that right, Suddy?

Sullivan nods.

So now he turns into Tarbaby. Won't say a word. He usually has a lot to say. He's very. . . . He's very talkative, normally.

Laura looks back and forth between Sullivan and Maxine, absorbing the tale Maxine has been telling.

I enjoy talking with him. He's a bright kid. He thinks the world of you, Laura. He's always telling me what you've been doing.

Laura

I don't think he knows what I've been doing, most of the time. I almost never see him.

Maxine

I don't know, Laura. Maybe he has sources of information you don't know about.

Laura

Yeah, right. Like our dad. *(Beat)* This is all news to me. I'm beginning to see my extended family as a Venn diagram, all these overlapping constituencies. *(Beat)* I knew I had a half-sister somewhere in the vicinity, but I never thought. . . .

Maxine

(Interrupting)

Look at it this way: Your world just got a little larger. *(Beat)* And the ironic part is, this wouldn't have happened except for the pandemic, everybody sheltering in place. *(Beat)* Because Cybele and I started quarreling more than we used to, because we were spending so much more time together, and so she decided to go live with her father, only that didn't work out so well, because Maggie, as you probably know already, is insanely jealous, and so she ends up here.

Cybele

That's your version, Maxine. That's not how it happened.

Maxine

(Addressing Laura)

She started calling me Maxine when she was about twelve. Up to then I was *Mother* or *Mommy*, but when she was twelve she decided she was going to call me Maxine, and it's been that way ever since.

Cybele

That's not true, either. *(To Laura, with a glance to include Sullivan)* She wanted me to call her Maxine so men would think I was her younger sister.

Maxine

(Laughs with delight)

That was a *joke*, dear. It was a joke. *(Beat)* She has no sense of humor, that girl.

Cybele

All she thinks about is men. She throws herself at them.

Maxine

(Shaking her head ruefully)

The young are so judgmental, aren't they? You don't think, when you're seventeen, that finding a suitable mate will ever be a problem, but just you try being a single woman and having two kids and being. . . over a certain age. It's a goddam minefield out there, thousands of women picking through a handful of men, because, let me tell you, a man who is unmarried at forty usually has a very good reason *why* he's unmarried at that age, and it usually has to do with an arrest record, or drug addiction, or alcoholism, or spousal abuse, or. . . . Or all of the above. If I knew at twenty what I know now. . . . *(She lets this thought hang.)*

Cybele

I'm not going home with you, Maxine.

Maxine

Pardon me, dear, but did I invite you? Did I say I wanted you to come home and live with me?

Cybele is caught off guard by this question. She does not know what to say.

I certainly don't recall asking you to come home. *(Beat)* You can live wherever you want, as far as I'm concerned, but you are still underage, and I am still responsible for you, legally. I just want to be sure you're okay.

Cybele

I'm okay.

Maxine

Good. That's the only thing I care about.

Cybele

I'm going to graduate high school, and I'm going to go to college.

Maxine

Excellent! What college?

Cybele

I don't know yet. Maybe Mt. Sac.

Maxine

(To Laura)

She means Mount San Antonio College, which is a community college that's near us in Pomona. *(Beat)* Mt. Sac would be less expensive than, you know, Harvard or something, but still you have to be able to support yourself. Can you?

Cybele

Support myself? No, not right away, but. . . .

Maxine

So think it through, is all I ask. Just look before you leap. You need to have a *plan*, and your plan needs to have stages—one, two, three, four—and you need to complete each stage before moving on to the next. *(Beat)* I wish somebody had told me these things when I was your age. *(Beat)* Not that I would have listened.

Laura

And there are other community colleges beside Mt. Sac. L.A. Trade Tech is not so far from here. She could enroll there.

Maxine

(To Cybele)

Just have a plan and execute it. Don't be like your mother and find yourself someday stuck in one place without much of a formal education or opportunities when you're pushing forty.

Cybele

You *are* forty, Maxine. That's nothing to be ashamed of.

Maxine

(To Laura)

I just turned forty the other day. *(Beat)* If there is ever anything about your life you don't want other people to know, don't have children, okay? Because children are worse than the internet: they spread information like it was a virus.

Cybele

It wasn't just the other day. It was months ago.

Maxine

So who cares? The older you get, the faster time flies.

Laura

I think Cybele is lucky to have a home she can return to whenever she wants to. I don't think she will want to live with me for very long. This apartment would be overcrowded if it was occupied by two dead flies.

Maxine

Well, I'm glad we're keeping it all in the family. Sort of.

Laura

Yes. Some of us are just discovering how big the family really is.

Sullivan

They say family is the bedrock of American democracy.

The others all look at Sullivan, surprised to hear from him.

Laura

That's the sort of thing Woody might say.

Maxine

Woody Allen?

Laura

No. A friend of mine who lives down the hall.

Maxine

A boyfriend?

Laura

No.

Maxine

But you have a boyfriend, don't you? *(Beat)* Suddy told me you're seeing somebody.

Laura

No. Suddy doesn't know what the fuck he's talking about most of the time.

Maxine

Don't wait too long. The window of opportunity closes fast.

Laura

I'll bear that in mind.

Maxine

Well, I should be going. *(Beat)* I'm glad my little girl is in such good hands. And I'm very glad, Laura, to have met you at last. I've heard so much about you over the years, from your father and from your brother.

Laura

I'm glad to have met you, too, Maxine.

Maxine

If Cybele becomes a burden, don't hesitate to call me.

Laura

Sure.

Maxine gets to her feet. Laura rises, too. After a hesitation, Maxine steps forward and kisses Laura's left cheek.

Maxine

(To Cybele)

And you behave yourself, young lady. *(Beat)* Bye now.

Maxine exits. Laura closes the door behind her, then turns to Sullivan.

Laura

“Suddy”? You let her call you Suddy?

Sullivan

She just started calling me that. I didn’t tell her to. She must’ve heard Dad calling me Suddy.

Laura

Suddy is the name *I* gave you, Boyo. Only Dad and I are allowed to call you that.

Sullivan

I’m sorry! It’s a little late now.

Laura

I gave you that name, and only I can give permission to anybody else for its use. Jesus!

Cybele

I can’t call him Suddy?

Laura

You’re a blood relative. I suppose you’re entitled. Call him Suddy, if you want to. The floodgates are wide open. The whole world can call him Suddy, for all I care. (*Addressing Cybele*) So, are you feeling better now, knowing you won’t be dragged back to Pomona in chains?

Cybele

Yes, much better.

Laura

Your mother doesn’t seem so bad.

Cybele

That’s because you don’t have to live with her.

Laura

I might turn out to be just as bad.

Cybele

I'll take my chances.

Fade

Lockdown
Act II
Scene 4

Setting

The same. The apartment is empty. The door is unlocked from outside, and Laura and Cybele enter, each carrying two paper bags of groceries, which they carry into the kitchen, where Laura begins unloading the bags and putting things away. The door to the apartment remains open a crack. The Murphy bed is down, its blanket and sheets rumpled.

Cybele, who is wearing another of Laura's dresses and a pair of sandals, throws herself down on the bed, kicks off her sandals, and stretches out.

Cybele

That was fun.

Laura

(Off)

Fun?

Cybele

Yeah. Maxine shops at Von's. I like Ralph's better.

Laura

(Off)

Is there much difference?

Cybele

Not really. *(Beat)* Ralph's has a better meat department.

Laura

(Off)

I never shop at Von's, but that's because. . . . *(Beat)* To be honest, I don't know why I stopped shopping at Von's. I just did.

Cybele

I'm going to live in New York City someday. I wonder what grocery shopping is like there.

Laura

(Off)

Why do you want to live in New York City? Everything's awfully expensive there.

Cybele

I don't know. That's just something I've decided I should do.
(Beat) Not right away, but. . . . *(Beat)* I think it would be very exciting to live there.

Laura

(Off)

Have you decided which borough to live in? That could be a big decision in itself.

Cybele

I've never been there. I don't know anything about the boroughs. Have you ever been there?

Laura

(Off)

Yeah, but only once, for three nights.

Cybele

Was it exciting?

Laura

(Off)

Well, everything was new to me, and. . . . *(Beat)* Yeah, it was exciting.

Cybele

What'd you like best?

Laura

(Off)

Oh, I don't know. *(Beat)* I liked the Metropolitan Museum. That was pretty cool. *(Beat)* I also liked the stores on Fifth Avenue, near where we were staying. They were terribly expensive, though.

Cybele

Did you go there with somebody?

Laura

(Off)

Yeah. It was a business trip for him and a monkey-business trip for me.

Cybele

But you had fun, right?

Laura

(Off)

Yeah, whenever he was in meetings I just wandered around on my own. *(Beat)* The city's rather overwhelming, though.

Cybele

I don't think you were in love with him.

Laura

(Off)

Nope. He was married.

Cybele

I think I'd like to have an affair with a married man someday. Is it exciting?

Laura

(Off)

Is that what you want in life? To do exciting things?

Cybele

Yeah! Of course!

Laura

(Off)

Having an affair with a married man didn't work out so well for your mother, did it?

Cybele

What are you talking about? She had me!

Laura

(Off)

Oh. That's true. I hadn't thought of it that way.

A siren begins to shriek quite nearby, making conversation impossible for about ten seconds. While the wail of the siren fills every aural space in the apartment, Woody pushes open the door, which Laura had failed to close. Because of the noise, he only sticks his head in and sees Cybele stretched out on the bed. She does not see him. When the siren has passed, its wail diminished, Woody announces his presence.

Woody

Knock, knock.

Seeing Woody, Cybele sits up on the bed and straightens her skirt.

Cybele

(To Laura)

It's Woody. *(To Woody)* Hi.

Woody

Hi. Your door was open.

Laura, with a can of corn in each hand, emerges from the kitchen briefly.

Laura

Hi, Woody. Sit down. Make yourself at home. Excuse the mess.

Laura goes back into the kitchen to finish her unpacking.

Woody

With two girls living here now, a certain amount of mess is probably inevitable.

Laura

(Off)

Women, Woody. We're women, not girls. Your age is showing. *Girls* is a derogatory word now.

Woody

Oh, right. *(Beat)* So how are you girls getting along?

Laura

(Off)

We just now returned from Ralph's, where I spend more than seventy-eight dollars on groceries.

Laura enters the living room/bedroom area empty-handed.

Com'on Cybele, let's put up the Murphy bed and make more room for our guest.

Laura and Cybele remove the pillows, shake out the blanket, and then, together, swing the bed into its upright box on the wall and latch it. During this exertion, Cybele's skirt rises, showing her legs to mid-thigh, which Woody observes with interest. Laura notices Woody's noticing. She catches his eye and frowns at him. Woody shrugs.

That's better. *(To Woody)* Can I get you some tea?

Woody

Tea? You have tea now?

Laura

Of course I have tea. This is a civilized household.

Woody

You didn't have tea the other day.

Laura

I have it now. Do you want a cup or not?

Woody

Not unless one of you girls is going to join me.

Laura

I'll have a cup of tea. How about you, Cybele?

Cybele

Sure.

Laura returns to the kitchen, puts on a kettle for tea, and continues putting groceries away.

Woody

So how are things going?

Cybele

Good. We're good.

Woody

So have you made plans for the future?

Cybele

Ah, not detailed plans. I want to enroll in classes at a community college, whenever they open up again.

Woody

Have you ever gotten lost in the Mojave Desert?

Cybele is momentarily confused by this non-sequitur. She hesitates.

Cybele

What do you mean?

Woody

It's a perfectly simple question. I once got so lost on my way to Las Vegas that I had to sleep in my car because I couldn't find civilization. *(Beat)* I've never forgotten that experience.

Cybele

Maxine and I have gone to Vegas several times. She loves that town.

Woody

Does she like to gamble?

Cybele

Only the slot machines.

Woody

I hate Las Vegas. Hunter Thompson had that city pegged. It is what the entire hip world would be if the Nazis had won the war.

Laura

(Off)

I think he was referring to just one casino, Circus Circus.

Woody

It's true of the entire city. It's fascist to its core.

Laura

(Off)

Then America itself is fascist to its core, because what happens in Las Vegas happens in Iowa, too.

Woody

You said it. I didn't.

Cybele

(To Woody)

I don't like Vegas, either. I never understood why Maxine wants to go there all the time.

Woody

The place exerts a kind of magnetism on some people. I've known people who can't stay away from the place. It's a sickness. They think it represents freedom, but really it represents compulsion.

Laura

(Off)

You know, Woody, there are times when you talk like a religious zealot or something.

Woody

Anybody who thinks for himself sounds like a zealot to others.

Cybele

I think that's true.

Woody

(Raising his voice for Laura to hear)

You see, Cybele agrees with me.

Laura

(Off)

I can hear you perfectly well. You don't have to shout.

The last part of what Laura says is drowned out by a siren. Woody and Cybele look at each other and smile. After a few seconds the siren diminishes in decibels.

Woody

We get a lot of those around here. You have to get used to them.
(Beat) They remind you that, as bad as things may be going for you, they could be worse.

Cybele

I already know that.

Woody

It's a good thing to remember, because there's really nothing admirable about self-pity.

Cybele

I know.

Woody

It's a good thing for you to bear in mind, because we have become a nation of victims. Everybody thinks of himself as a victim: a

victim of the economy, a victim of technology, a victim of whatever. Our current president plays to that sense of victimhood in white people, who feel they're being replaced by black people and brown people and Jews. And you know what?

Cybele

What?

Woody

They are absolutely right. They *are* being replaced. And you know something else?

Cybele

What?

Woody

They need to be replaced. They're fuckin' useless.

Cybele

You think white people are useless?

Woody

Not all of them. You're not useless. Laura's not useless.

Cybele

How about you?

Woody

Me? I'm completely useless. I always was, to tell the truth. I am a piece of lint, carried by the breeze. I neither toil nor do I spin, but the Lord has looked after me. *(Beat)* God knows why.

Cybele

You're not useless.

Woody

Just because I'm handsome, wise, and charming doesn't mean I'm useful, because I'm not. *(Beat)* My saving grace, however, is that I

don't feel sorry for myself. I'm not a victim. I don't blame anybody for making me useless.

Cybele

I don't understand why you think you're useless, though.

Woody

Because I've never contributed anything to society. I was married twice, but I didn't have any children, that I know of. *(Beat)* I was a newspaper reporter, long ago, but not a very good one. I was a mail carrier. I did lots of different jobs, but just to earn money. I never had any big ideas. I never designed a skyscraper. I never changed a child's diapers. *(Beat)* I just sort of floated on the breeze, a piece of lint.

Cybele

Does that make you unhappy?

Woody

No! Not in the least. I know what I am, and I'm comfortable with that knowledge, and I don't hold a grudge against anybody. *(Beat)* Unlike other white men of my generation, I don't feel that anything's been taken away from me. I haven't lost status, because I never had it. I'm content with being who I am.

Cybele

But you don't want me to be that way, too?

Woody

Content? Yeah, I want you to feel comfortable with yourself, but you don't have to be useless.

Cybele

But I don't know what I could ever be useful for.

Woody

You have to find that out for yourself. Nobody else can tell you what it is.

Cybele

That's the sort of thing grown-ups always say. It's not very helpful.

Woody

You wouldn't want my help, even if I had any to give. That's what it means to be useless.

Cybele

(Laughs)

You're a funny man.

Woody

That's me, a funny fellow.

Cybele

Why didn't you have children of your own?

Woody

Oh, God, it's a blessing on humanity I didn't.

Cybele

But why didn't you?

Woody

You're asking questions as if you thought I could answer them. The truth is, I don't remember. *(Beat)* Or, to be somewhat more candid, I sometimes *think* I remember why I did some stupid thing or other, but in most cases, I suspect, my memory tends to be a co-conspirator with my self-esteem, such as it is. I remember things the way I wish they had been.

Cybele

That must be awful.

Woody

No, it's actually the easiest way to survive. It's being honest with yourself that causes you to age prematurely.

Cybele

So what you're saying is I shouldn't be honest with myself because I'll grow old before my time. Have I got that right?

Woody

Oh, I don't know. You shouldn't listen to me. I'm not entirely consistent in my thinking. I'm sort of like Nietzsche in that way: crazy as a bedbug but brilliant in flashes.

Cybele

I like the way you talk, though.

Woody

(Pleased)

Do you? I'm so glad. This is what wisdom is good for, entertaining beautiful women for a few minutes.

Laura emerges from the kitchen, carrying two cups of tea on saucers.

Laura

It's tea time, ladies and gentlemen.

Laura very carefully hands a saucer and cup to Cybele and then another to Woody. Her hand is shaking a little, and she almost spills tea on Woody.

Sorry. I'm a little unsteady.

Woody

That's because you've been starving yourself and keeping body and soul together with vodka.

Laura

It's Polish vodka, made from potatoes. There's a lot of nourishment in potatoes.

Woody sips his tea.

Woody

Green tea, very healthful. Is it caffeinated?

Laura

I'm afraid it is. Does that make a difference?

Woody

No. But my body is a temple. I'm careful what I take into it.

Laura

I've got some decaf out there, if you prefer. Cybele picked it out. It's her mother's favorite, she says.

Woody

No, I like what caffeine does to my nerves. *(To Cybele)* It makes me horny.

Laura

You don't need caffeine for that. *(To Cybele)* Don't let him sit too close, okay?

Cybele

Why?

Laura

Because he has deep feelings, and he feels.

Cybele

(To Woody)

Is that true?

Woody

It sounds like something that *might* be true, at times.

Cybele

I'll remember that.

Woody

Forewarned is forearmed, as they say.

Woody reaches out with his left hand, as if to touch Cybele's knee. She jerks her knee away from him, spilling tea on her dress.

Cybele

Shit! Look what you made me do!

Woody

Sorry.

Cybele

Now I've spilt tea on Laura's dress.

Woody

I wasn't actually going to touch you.

Laura

It'll wash out. Don't worry. That's an old dress, anyway, I've spilled worse than tea on it many times.

Cybele

But I *like* this dress!

Laura

(Soothing)

Don't worry about it. It'll be fine. *(Beat)* But we've come to a teachable moment here, I think, and lesson is: never trust sage older men. Any man who mentions Nietzsche in casual conversation, especially if he compares himself to Nietzsche, has criminal tendencies.

Woody

Nietzsche was a misogynist, though. I'm not.

Cybele

(Having recovered her sense of humor)

Do you have criminal tendencies, Woody?

Woody

(Sighs)

I would, if I had the stamina for it. *(In all seriousness)* I really am sorry about the tea, Cybele. *(To Laura)* I'll pay for the dry cleaning.

Laura

Okay. I'll let you.

There is a long silence as all three characters sip tea.

Woody

(English accent)

I say, that was a nasty looking tiger you shot, Vickers.

Cybele

Huh?

Laura

He's channeling a movie, I bet.

Woody

(Continuing English accent)

Don't tell me you never saw Errol Flynn in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Laura

I don't think so.

Woody

(Still with the accent)

David Niven was in it, too. His best performance ever, I'd say.

Laura

Okay.

Woody

(To Cybele. Drops the accent.)

The first part is set in India, and the English go hunting a tiger on elephants. Errol Flynn saves the pasha's life, or the sultan's life, or some damned life. I don't remember. Anyway, as we were sitting around here, sipping tea, I couldn't help think of Errol Flynn in India, or more likely in Inyo County, where the movie was filmed.

Laura

I see. *(To Cybele)* Woody usually makes sense, if you shake him a little.

Woody

It's not a very good movie. *(Beat)* I like this tea, though. *(Resumes the English accent)* Reminds me of the tea they served at Lady Bracknell's country house in Sussex.

Laura

Lady Bracknell served green tea, did she?

Woody

(English accent)

Absolutely. Green as an iguana.

There is a pause.

(Drops accent)

Okay, you're about to say iguanas aren't green, but imaginary iguanas are any color you like, and the iguanas I'm thinking of are imaginary. Most of them are.

Cybele

Green tea is supposed to be good for you.

Fade

Lockdown
Act II
Scene 5

Setting

The same. It is a few days later.

The Murphy bed is down, and Duffy is lying on it with his shoes on, propped up on pillows with his hands behind his head. Cybele is sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a silk kimono, her legs and feet bare. Woody and Suddy are sitting in chairs, more or less attentive. Laura is seated in lotus position on top of her desk, her back to the windows, reading from Charles Bukowski's Love is a Dog from Hell.

Laura

(Reading)

“Sick with the flu, drinking beer, my radio on loud enough to overcome the sounds of the stereo people who have just moved into the court across the way. Asleep or awake they play their set at top volume, leaving their doors and windows open. They are each eighteen, married, wear red shoes, and blonde, slim. They play everything: jazz, classical, rock, country, modern, as long as it is loud. This is the problem with being poor: we must share each other's sounds. Last week it was my turn: there were two women in here fighting each other, and then they ran up the walk screaming. The police came. Now it's their turn. Now I am walking up and down in my dirty shorts, two rubber earplugs stuck deep into my ears. I ever consider murder. Such rude little rabbits! Walking little pieces of snot! But in our land and in our way there has never been a chance; it's only when things are not going too badly for a while that your forget. Someday they'll each be dead. Someday they'll each have a separate coffin and it will be quiet. But right now it's Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan, Bob Dylan all the way.”

Laura stops reading, and for a moment she scarcely moves, then she looks around at her audience: first at Cybele, then at Duffy, then at Woody and Suddy. For a long moment nobody speaks. At last Woody clears his throat.

Duffy

I had neighbors like that once. You remember them, Suddy? The young couple who played loud music all night?

Suddy

You mean the Croatians?

Duffy

I don't know where they were from. They sounded foreign.

Suddy

They were Croatians. Or Serbs, I think. *(Beat)* I think they were Serbs. Their father had a place in Malibu, but he bought that dump in West Covina for them so they wouldn't be anywhere near him.

Duffy

The girl wasn't bad looking. Nice legs, anyway.

Suddy

She was at least thirty years younger than you.

Duffy

So? I've got eyes, don't I? Is it against the law for me to notice if a girl has nice legs, when she runs around in mini-skirts all the time?

Laura

Ahem! Can we get back to the poem?

Duffy

What about it?

Laura

What'd you think of it?

Duffy

It's stupid.

Laura

What's stupid about it?

Duffy

Everything.

Laura

Can you be a little more specific?

Duffy

So Bukowski's neighbors are young and play loud music. Okay. Who gives a damn?

Laura

What do you think, Woody?

Woody

I'm with your father. The poem did nothing for me.

Cybele

Aren't poems supposed to rhyme or something? *(Beat)* It didn't sound like a poem to me. It sounded like part of a letter one old guy was writing to another old guy.

Suddy

Yeah, I agree with my half-sister.

Laura

What if you learned that it *was* part of a letter Bukowski wrote to a male friend? Would that deprive it of beauty?

Duffy

What beauty? I didn't hear anything even remotely beautiful.

Woody

I liked the line about the poor having to share each other's sounds.

Cybele

Yeah, I liked that part, too.

Laura

Shall I read another?

Woody

I think you should let us just contemplate that poem for a day or two and savour the nectar we can draw from it. We don't want to overdo it.

Laura

(Disappointed)

Okay.

Suddy

I'm with Woody on that. We need to savour it.

Laura

Fine.

Duffy sits up with some difficulty, and he touches Cybele's elbow with his fingertips.

Duffy

I'll tell you this, though: I never dreamed there would come a day when I would attend a poetry reading with all three of my children.

Laura

Well, this is not exactly. . . .

Duffy

(Interrupting)

No, you read very well, Laura. You should probably be a poet, yourself. You've got such a pleasing voice.

Woody

Hear, hear!

Laura

(A little embarrassed)

Thank you. I'm not sure I ever read poetry aloud before.

Duffy

Nobody who heard you would ever know. *(Beat)* I'm really very proud of all three of my children. I have two beautiful, intelligent daughters and a son who is, unfortunately, a lot like me when I was his age.

Cybele

Come on, Dad! Suddy's intelligent and beautiful, too.

Duffy

(Sighs)

If you say so.

Suddy

(To Cybele)

It's okay. It's a matter of principle with Dad never to say anything nice about me.

Cybele

But why?

Suddy

That's just the way he is.

Cybele

(To Duffy)

Why don't you say nice things about Suddy?

Duffy

I would, if there were anything to say.

Cybele turns to Laura for support, but Laura remains impassive. She is too accustomed to her father's biases to try to do anything about them.

Cybele

That's terrible! He should be ashamed of himself.

Laura

You can no more shame our father than you can shame Donald Trump. The two men were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

Duffy smiles. He is pleased by the comparison.

If he were president, he'd behave just like Trump.

Duffy

That's probably true. I didn't vote for him, but you've got to admire his gall.

A siren passes. All five people fall silent, each thinking his or her own thoughts.

Cybele

By the way, Laura, I'm curious about something.

Laura

Oh?

Cybele

So, how do you support yourself. Do you have a job, or what?

Laura

At present it's what.

Cybele

(Confused)

You mean. . . .

Laura

I mean I'm what is called "structurally unemployed" at the moment because the company that employed me has gone under.

Cybele

Bankrupt, in other words.

Laura

Yes.

Cybele

What kind of company was it?

Laura

Educational materials. *(Beat)* It was called Lexicon Educational. We published school textbooks, teachers' manuals, that sort of thing. *(Beat)* The business was failing, anyway. The coronavirus just delivered the coup de grâce.

Cybele

So you're living on unemployment now?

Laura

In theory.

Cybele

And when that runs out?

Laura smiles faintly but says nothing.

Do you think you can find another job?

Again, Laura smiles but says nothing.

Duffy

Don't worry about her. Laura always lands on her feet. She's got the brains in this family. *(Beat)* She's a survivor, that girl.

There is a lapse in the conversation. Nobody speaks for several seconds.

Woody

In my opinion, for what it's worth, unemployment is the defining condition of the proletariat in late-stage capitalism.

The other four characters turn their heads to look at Woody.

Of course it's a fine question whether or not it still makes sense to talk about "the proletariat." It sounds so nineteenth-century, so Marxist. Another word for it might be the *underclass*, all the

unemployed and the under-employed, plus everybody in low-wage jobs, who are always the first to be laid off. Most of Trump's voters belong to this class, and so do we. *(Beat)* Let's face it, there aren't enough jobs to keep everybody employed in post-industrial society. We're all superfluous, a drag on the economy.

There is another silence. Nobody has anything to add to what Woody has just said.

Pardon me. I spoke out of turn.

Laura

No, you didn't, Woody. I'm sure you're right.

Duffy

(To Cybele)

Do you understand what he said?

Cybele

I think so.

Duffy

(To Cybele)

Good. Smart girl.

Laura

Does anybody want tea?

Duffy

Not me. I've got to be shoving off.

Laura

But you just got here.

Duffy

I know, but Maggie's waiting for me.

Duffy gets up from the bed, tucks in his shirt, and smiles at Woody.

Look after my girls, will you, Woody?

Woody

Sure thing.

Duffy

Be good, girls. *(Beat)* Cybele, you can learn a lot from your older sister. Heed what she tells you.

Cybele

Okay.

Duffy

Be smart, everybody. Just be smart. And stay healthy.

Without another word or gesture, Duffy exits. Again, there is a momentary silence.

Woody

An unusual character.

Laura

True, but that doesn't even begin to say it.

Suddy

I didn't realize you're unemployed.

Laura

Well, I am.

Suddy

What're you going to do?

Laura

I dunno. Survive? *(Beat)* Tea, anyone?

Woody

I'll have some.

Cybele

Me, too.

Suddy

Ditto.

Laura goes into the kitchen to put the water on the range.

Woody

Ditto's a word you don't hear so much any more. I imagine it's going to completely disappear from the language in the coming twenty years or so.

Suddy and Cybele have nothing to say to this.

So here we are, spinning through space, going nowhere, and in a few billion years our entire solar system will collapse, and it will be exactly as if none of us had ever lived. *(Beat)* I draw comfort from that knowledge, don't you?

Suddy

I just wish the end would come sooner. Who wants to wait a few billion years?

Cybele

Only not yet. I don't want it to end quite yet.

Fade