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LOST IN PLACE

ANTHOLOGY

Five Short Intersecting Plays

By Craig Houk



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BARBARA & JODY

A few weeks into a world-wide pandemic, Barbara is called into a police station to provide a witness statement. Jody, the detective assigned to the case, has a special request.

CHARACTERS

BARBARA Female, Late Sixties

JODY Any Gender, Thirties or Older

TIME

Present.

SETTING

A small American town. Winter. Evening. Witness Interview Room at a Police Station.

(AT RISE: A witness interview room with a table and a chair. Barbara meanders in. She is wearing a mask. She appears puzzled. She looks around. Suddenly, a voice over the intercom.)

JODY

Go on and have a seat, Barbara.

BARBARA

(Startled.)

Oh! Christ on a cracker! You scared the hell out of me. You should never sneak up on an old lady; you know that, right?

JODY

Sorry about that...

BARBARA

...And call me Barb, okay...?

JODY

...Okay. My apologies, Barb. We're, uh... we're just gettin' used to the new procedures 'round here. I mean, I prefer to be in there with you, 'course. But well, uh... you know, what with all the new health and safety guidelines, etc., etc....

BARBARA

...Yeah, no I understand; I get it. So, I should have a seat here?

(She points to the only chair available.)

JODY

Unless you see another chair in there you'd favor.

BARBARA

(She looks around.)

Uhhhhh... no, I do not. This appears to be the only one.

JODY

All right then. So, then if you don't mind settlin' in, that'd be great. Oh, and if you're, uh... comfortable takin' off your mask, then feel free to do so.

BARBARA

I think I will. Thank you kindly.

*(She sits and takes off her mask.
Silence.)*

It's kinda sparse in here. Don't ya think?

JODY

Yeah, well, uh... we, uh... we try not to make things too cozy; you know. The holdin' cells are fully furnished, though. So, uh... let me know if you'd like to check out the inside of one of them sometime.

BARBARA

Haha. That's very funny - I'm sorry, what's your name...?

JODY

...Jody...

BARBARA

...Yeah, well that's very funny, Jody. But I think I'll pass on your generous offer.

JODY

Fair enough. So, uh... do you need anythin' before we get started? Water? Coffee? Soda?

BARBARA

No, I'm good. Thinkin' maybe it's best we just get this over with.

JODY

Right. Understood. Well, this shouldn't take too long.

BARBARA

Good to hear. My programs start in about an hour, you know.

JODY

Mm hm.

BARBARA

And it'll take me about ten minutes to get home.

JODY

Gotcha.

BARBARA

And to be perfectly honest, I shouldn't be drivin' after dusk. I've got that nyctalopia.

JODY

I'm sorry, you've got what?

BARBARA

Night blindness. So, I'm hopin' that maybe we can get this all wrapped up in about fifteen to twenty minutes or so, give or take, but mostly take.

JODY

Well, uh... no offense, Barb, but you're the one that seems to be holdin' us up here.

BARBARA

Huh. Hard not to take offense when you phrase it that way, Jody, but I do get your point.

JODY

All right. Why don't we just get down to business then. Hm?

BARBARA

You got it.

JODY

So, uh... accordin' to my notes here, you stated that, uh... Ginny Lumley approached you recently. Is that right?

BARBARA

S'right. Over at the Walgreens.

JODY

And you're employed there.

BARBARA

Mm hm. I work there part-time, stockin' shelves.

JODY

And Ginny spoke to you there?

BARBARA

That's correct. Just Tuesday mornin' last. Around eight thirty or nine, I guess. In the sexual wellness aisle.

JODY

I see.

BARBARA

We got a new shipment of lubricants in, so I was just puttin' them up.

JODY

Right. Well, I, uh... I think we can skip those particulars if you don't mind. And maybe just, uh... focus on what Ginny said to you.

BARBARA

'Course. Well, she asked me if I might know someone who'd be willin' to kill her daughter-in-law.

(Silence.)

JODY

Mm hm. And that's all she said?

BARBARA

For the most part, yes. Except she also said she didn't know who else to ask, but she heard I might have "connections".

JODY

Connections? How do you mean?

BARBARA

Oh, boy. So, listen. I don't much like talkin' about it, but, well, a long while back I was married to this fella went by the name, Mabry-Five-Second-One-Shot. They called him that on account his name was Mabry, and he gave you five seconds to run before he could kill you with one shot.

JODY

Really? So, he, uh... he was what? Some kinda gangster?

BARBARA

S'right. But we parted ways a very long time ago. Turns out, I wasn't mobster wife material. Mostly because it was just too much work. I mean, I enjoyed the money and livin' in the big city and all, but there was some "expectations" that came along with it, if you know what I'm sayin'. And I just did not have the inclination nor the energy. Anyway, so for some reason, Ginny got it into her head that I might still have "associates" in those "circles".

JODY

I see. And did Ginny say why she wanted Marlene dead?

BARBARA

She really didn't go into any details as such. Just said, "Can't stand that bitch no more."

JODY

Right. And, uh... how did you respond?

BARBARA

Well, the first thing I asked her was, "Isn't Marlene pregnant?"

JODY

I'm sorry, what!? Marlene's pregnant?!

BARBARA

Exactly! Now why on earth would anyone wanna kill a pregnant woman?

JODY

And what'd Ginny say?

BARBARA

She said, "Well, I ain't no animal. It'll have to happen after the baby's born."

JODY

Jesus Christ.

BARBARA

I know. She's awful.

JODY

So, then what'd you say?

BARBARA

Oh. Well, I just said, "Let me think on it a bit and I'll get back to you."

(Silence.)

JODY

Well, good God. And that was it?

BARBARA

Mm hm. She left and then I called here. To report what happened.

JODY

That was surely the right thing to do, Barb.

BARBARA

Was it, though? I mean, it's all kinda sad, don't you think? Because I'm wonderin', "What've I gotten myself into here?" Some crazy old bag wants to kill the woman carryin' her grandbaby. It's unthinkable. And who does she come to for help?

(Beat.)

And you know, I'd like blame Mabry for all of this. But what good would that do? 'Cept maybe take a little bit of the guilt away. It's all bullshit, though. Because I knew who and what Mabry was when I met him. And I fell for him anyway. And that's the bed I made and laid in for nearly eight years.

(Beat.)

I never meant anyone no harm. But the choices I made over five decades ago brought Ginny Lumley to me in the sexual wellness aisle over at the Walgreens. So, in many ways, I suppose I'm an accomplice to her dumbass scheme.

(Beat.)

Maybe I should take you up on your offer to put me in one of them holdin' cells.

JODY

No, well that's not gonna happen, Barb. We, uh... we don't arrest innocent people. Not around here anyway. I am curious though...

BARBARA

What's that?

JODY

How does a woman go about partin' ways with a gangster? Seems like that might've been a dangerous move on your part.

BARBARA

Oh. Well, perhaps I wasn't clear. Turns out, even Mabry wasn't able to get very far in five seconds.

(Jody chuckles.)

JODY

All right then. So, listen, Barb. I'm gonna need you to do somethin' for me.

BARBARA

Oh yeah?

JODY

Yeah. And it's not gonna be easy. And it might be a little tricky, but I'm confident that you're gonna do just fine. And if you agree to it, then maybe it'll help ease some of that guilt you're feelin' 'bout all this.

BARBARA

Hm. Well, okay. So, lay it on me, Jody. Whatta you got? And make it quick. It's nearly sundown.

(Lights to black.)

HANK & TEDDY

Early into a world-wide pandemic, good-natured Teddy, from across the road, checks in on his surly neighbor, Hank. A delicate exchange results in a bad decision.

CHARACTERS

HANK Male, Early Fifties

TEDDY Male, Mid Thirties

TIME

Present.

SETTING

A small American town. Summertime. Early Morning. Hank's porch.

(AT RISE: HANK is sitting on an old, rusted metal chair and drinks from a bottle of whiskey. Maybe he smokes. TEDDY approaches but keeps his distance.)

HANK

Somethin' I can help you with?

TEDDY

It's Hank, right?

HANK

S'right. Who's askin'?

TEDDY

Yeah. Sorry. My name's Teddy. Me and my wife, Danielle, we moved here a few months back. We're just across the road here. The yellow house with the gray trim.

HANK

Aw, damn. Looks like you drew the short straw, Teddy. Livin' next to them lesbians.

TEDDY

Oh. Well, they seem all right to me. Adele pretty much keeps to herself and, Rhonda... Well, she's a character for sure, but she's harmless. She's got shitty taste in beer, though.

HANK

Well, my condolences, nonetheless. So, what can I do for you, 'Teddy from across the road'?

TEDDY

Nothin' really. Just thought maybe I'd check in on you. What with the pandemic and all. Felt like it might be the neighborly thing to do.

HANK

Ah. Well, I appreciate your concern, but I think I got everything under control over here.

TEDDY

You sure?

HANK

I just said as much, didn't I?

TEDDY

You did, yes.

HANK

So, maybe our business here is finished.

TEDDY

If you say so.

HANK

I do.

(Teddy lingers.)

You ain't gonna leave, are you?

TEDDY

Yeah, no I'm leavin'. It's just that..

HANK

What?

TEDDY

Listen. It's a small town, you know. And people talk.

HANK

They sure do.

TEDDY

Right. And look, I get it. We don't know each other. And truth is, ain't none of it any of my business really.

HANK

Accurate on all accounts, Teddy.

(Beat.)

TEDDY

It's a tough time to be on your own, though. Don't you think?

HANK

Like I said. I got everything under control.

(Beat.)

TEDDY

Understood. Sorry to have bothered you. You have a good day, Hank.

(Teddy starts off.)

HANK

It's a hoax, you know.

TEDDY

What's that?

HANK

The virus. It's all bullshit.

TEDDY

You think so?

HANK

I know so.

TEDDY

Lots of people are sick. And lots of 'em are dead.

HANK

It's the flu. Okay? People get sick every year from the flu. And people die from it too. It is what it is. But all of a sudden, here we are on lockdown. I mean, come on now. When in the history of this country did we ever quarantine healthy people. Huh? You quarantine sick people, not healthy people. It's a joke.

TEDDY

I ain't sure I follow. I think it's a little more complicated than that, don't you?

HANK

Hey, listen. You want the government regulatin' what you do; you go right ahead. Okay? You like havin' your brain washed, that's

your problem. But that ain't how I live my life. And anyway, I don't see you wearin' a mask, Teddy. So, somethin' tells me you might be a little skeptical yourself.

TEDDY

Honestly, I can't make heads or tails of nothin' no more. I'm just doin' what I can to protect me and my wife.

HANK

You're plenty young enough. You ain't got nothin' to worry about.

TEDDY

Well, we're tryin' to start a family, you know. So, I guess I'm just bein' a little extra careful right now.

HANK

All the more reason to steer clear of that garbage vaccine they been peddlin'. That shit'll mutate your sperm.

TEDDY

What? Noooo. You're puttin' me on. That can't be right.

HANK

All I know is, it does more harm than good.

TEDDY

Oh, I don't know about that, Hank.

HANK

Look, I'm just providin' you with the facts. Okay? Feel free to take heed or don't. Your choice.

TEDDY

Well, I appreciate the information.

(Silence.)

HANK

My wife left me.

TEDDY

Oh. I, uh...

HANK

...All right now, you don't have to make like you didn't know. That's why you came over here, ain't it? That's what you meant when you said, "Now's a tough time to be on your own." Am I right?

(Teddy nods.)

Thought so.

(Beat.)

Yeah, she took the kids and ran off a few weeks back. In the middle of the night.

TEDDY

I'm sorry, Hank.

HANK

She left a note, though. You wanna hear it?

TEDDY

Uh... No, I'm sure it's...

HANK

...I don't mind. Got it right here.

(Beat.)

TEDDY

All right.

HANK

(He pulls a letter from his pocket. He reads.)

Dear Hank,

I suppose there ain't no easy way to put this. Your test came back positive. For sheer stupidity. Sadly, it's just what I expected. A very rare strain of foolishness has crept inside your nasal cavity, dug its way through the soft tissue, and has settled inside your brain. In the coming weeks, I imagine you'll find yourself expostulating out loud and to no one in particular, insisting that your rights are being violated and that the ice bucket challenge was in fact a satanic ritual meant to cleanse large numbers of people in preparation for the

greatest human sacrifice in recorded history. Should you come across anyone who voices an opposing viewpoint, you will likely defend your position shamelessly and with remarkable ignorance. I also expect you'll be dead within a few months. Or at least, one can only hope. Meantime, the kids are safe with me. Or, more to the point, safe without you.

Yours in perpetual bewilderment,

Charlene

(Silence.)

TEDDY

Damn, Hank. That's... that's rough.

HANK

Charlene thinks I'm a whack job.

TEDDY

Well, there's two sides to every story. Right? So, what? So, you've got... sophisticated opinions. I mean, just because you view the world a little different than others, don't mean you're altogether wrong.

HANK

Aw shit, Teddy. You just twisted yourself into knots there tryin' to pacify me, didn't you?

TEDDY

Well, I'm just aimin' to be neighborly, I guess.

HANK

So, you've said.

(Beat. Hank offers the bottle to Teddy.)

You want a swig?

TEDDY

Uh... No, I think I'll pass. Thanks, though.

HANK

Come on now. Might help you to loosen up.

TEDDY

No, I'm not really into the hard stuff.

HANK

You worried I got it?

TEDDY

I'm worried we all got it.

HANK

Fair enough.

(Silence.)

TEDDY

We're hopin' for a girl.

HANK

Sorry, what?

TEDDY

Danielle and me. We'd like to have a baby girl.

HANK

Oh yeah? Well, most men want boys. I know I did. But, well, three strikes and I was out.

TEDDY

Oh, come on now. It can't have been all that bad.

HANK

Be careful what you wish for, Teddy.

TEDDY

Well, to be truthful, I don't much like how I turned out. As a man, I mean. You see, my dad was a real hard-ass and my mom... Well, she sorta faded into the background a lot of the time. Easy for her to do I guess, bein' surrounded by mostly boys and an overbearin' husband.

(Beat.)

My oldest sister - my only sister - Carol, she, uh... Well, I guess - though I'm not entirely sure - that she had a lot in

common with Rhonda and Adele across the way. She died several years back. We were never real close. Partly because she was nearly twenty years older than me, but mostly because my family kinda treated her like an outcast anyway. Maybe I was too young to really know any better, but I took part, nonetheless.

(Beat.)

HANK

Listen. You can't hold yourself responsible for the choices other people make.

TEDDY

Well, I don't think Carol had much choice in the matter. Though I know I sure did. I failed her. So, I suppose - selfishly - I'm wishin' for a little girl, so that I can maybe somehow make it up to her. By givin' my daughter somethin' my sister never got. Unconditional love.

(Silence.)

HANK

I miss the old days.

(Teddy smiles knowingly.)

TEDDY

I won't keep you any longer, Hank.

HANK

Startin' to warm up anyway. I'll probably head back into the house to cool off.

TEDDY

It was nice to meet you.

HANK

Likewise.

(Teddy turns to go, but then stops.)

TEDDY

Before I go though...

HANK

Yeah, what?

TEDDY

...I suppose I'll take you up on your offer for a swig of that whiskey. And only because it seems like the neighborly thing to do.

(Lights to black.)

MARLENE & GINNY

Early into a world-wide pandemic, Marlene and her mother-in-law, Ginny, decide to get fancy and make martinis. Their fun, however, is interrupted by that damn lesbian from next door, who's hell-bent on stealing their rutabagas. Seems Dwayne, Marlene's infant child, has slept through the whole ruckus.

CHARACTERS

MARLENE Female, Late Thirties

GINNY Female, Late Fifties

TIME

Present.

SETTING

A small American town. Autumn. Dusk. The Lumley living room.

(AT RISE: Two armchairs several feet apart. GINNY sits in one of them. She's absentmindedly watching TV; the volume is on low. A landline phone sits on a small table nearby. A moment passes before MARLENE enters. She has a fresh spit-up rag draped over her shoulder and a full bottle of baby formula in her hand. She sits in the other armchair. Silence.)

MARLENE

Whatta you watchin'?

GINNY

(Preoccupied.)

What's that?

MARLENE

I asked you what you're watchin'. On the TV here.

GINNY

Can't you see for yourself?

MARLENE

Well, I can see there's a commercial on, but I ain't got no idea what program you're watchin'.

GINNY

Oh. I guess I wasn't payin' attention. I think it's, uh... whatta you call it...? Well, it's that cop show; always ends with a courtroom scene...

MARLENE

...Law and Order...

GINNY

...That's the one. Anyway, they got a marathon goin'; every episode over the last - shit, I don't know - fifty thousand seasons.

MARLENE

I like that show. Oh, and that fella who plays Lennie Briscoe is a goddam comedic genius.

GINNY

Jerry Orbach. Damn fine actor. Dead, though.

MARLENE

Oh yeah? I didn't know that.

GINNY

Yep. He died years ago. Some kinda cancer, I think.

MARLENE

That's too bad.

GINNY

Yep.

(Silence.)

Sounds like Dwayne finally settled down.

MARLENE

Yeah, well he's restin'.

GINNY

His fever break?

MARLENE

I believe it has.

GINNY

Oh, well that's good. Poor little guy. He's been sick for weeks.

MARLENE

Almost four months now.

GINNY

That long? S'awful. Just awful. Virus don't care about who it infects, not even an innocent little baby.

MARLENE

He's all right now.

(Silence.)

Have you talked to Barb, lately?

GINNY

Dammit, Marlene. That ain't funny and you know it?

MARLENE

I agree. It ain't.

GINNY

And besides, Barb hasn't spoken to me since... well, you know damn well since when.

MARLENE

Can you blame her?

GINNY

Shit, you're never gonna let that go, are you?

MARLENE

Oh, I don't know, Ginny. Maybe someday, I suppose.

GINNY

Well, I've apologized about a million times now. I don't know what more I can do.

MARLENE

Thanks to you, I've learned to sleep with one eye open.

GINNY

Oh, for... Ain't I the one who went ahead and put a lock on your bedroom door? And a loaded gun in your nightstand? For your protection?

MARLENE

Yeah, that was you.

GINNY

I mean, come on. It's not like I'm gonna try and kill you again. What would be the point? And you know, maybe I oughta be the one worryin' about whether you're gonna try and kill me.

MARLENE

You're nuts.

GINNY

It ain't so farfetched. Maybe you wanna get back at me, you know? Payback and all that?

MARLENE

I suppose I haven't ruled it out.

GINNY

See there. You've got the gun. And you've got the means and the motive.

MARLENE

Is that your closin' argument, Mr. McCoy?

GINNY

As a matter of fact, it is. So, do you think we could just drop it altogether? Hm? And maybe never speak of it again?

MARLENE

Hell no.

GINNY

Fine then. I don't give a rat's ass anymore, anyway.

(Silence.)

I need a drink. You want one?

MARLENE

Sure.

GINNY

What'll you have?

MARLENE

Surprise me.

GINNY

Well, I used to make a mean martini. Haven't had one of them in ages. Whatta you think? We can be all classy and shit.

MARLENE

Sounds good.

GINNY

Gin or vodka.

MARLENE

Gin.

GINNY

Good. I prefer gin too. Vermouth or prussic acid?

(Marlene shoots Ginny a look.)

I'm just screwin' with you. Vermouth it is.

(Ginny exits. Marlene sits quietly for a moment. The phone rings.)

MARLENE

Well, who the hell could be callin' us?

(She gets up and answers the phone.)

Hello...?

(She puts her hand over the receiver and calls off to Ginny.)

Aw, Jesus. It's one of them lesbians!

GINNY *(Off.)*

Which one!?

MARLENE

Rhonda!

GINNY *(Off.)*

Well, what the hell does she want!?

MARLENE

(Back to the phone.)

No, yeah, I'm here, Rhonda... Yeah, sorry about that. My mother-in-law was just hollerin' at me about somethin'. You know how she gets...

GINNY *(Off.)*

...Go to hell, Marlene...

MARLENE

(On the phone.)

...Mm hm... Well, no, I ain't seen Adele at all today; didn't realize it was my day to keep track of her... My apologies Rhonda, I was just tryin' to be funny... I'm sorry, what? Check where...? Our backyard...? Are you serious...? Well, ok.

(Off to Ginny.)

Ginny!

GINNY *(Off.)*

Keep your pants on! I'm just about finished with these drinks!

MARLENE

It's not about the drinks! I need you to look out the kitchen window! See if Adele is fumblin' about in the backyard!

GINNY *(Off.)*

Why the hell would she be back there!?

MARLENE

I don't know! Just take a look!

(Back to the phone.)

Hang on, Rhonda. We're checkin'.

GINNY *(Off.)*

Well, I'll be damned! She sure is back there! Looks like she's makin' off with a bunch of our rutabagas, stuffin' 'em into her cargo shorts!

MARLENE

You're lyin'!

GINNY *(Off.)*

I am not! Come see for yourself!

MARLENE

(Back to the phone.)

Rhonda... Yeah, well listen, your... your lady pal is hijackin' our rutabagas. I'm gonna head out back now, but I suggest you get your ass over here asap... Yeah, all right. Bye.

(She hangs up the phone. Almost to herself.)

Dammit.

(Marlene heads off. We hear the sound of a screen door opening and slamming shut. The stage is empty. We hear Marlene off.)

Hey Adele...! Yeah, I'm talkin' to you, old lady! Put them rutabagas back where you found 'em and get the hell off my property, you hear me...!? Now listen, I am deadly serious! Just empty your pockets and go home...! Yeah, well you can give me the bird all day long; I don't care! Just get the fuck outta here...! Go!

(Silence. Ginny enters with two martinis. She sets hers down somewhere near her chair and Marlene's down somewhere near hers. She then settles in and begins sipping her drink. We hear the sound of a screen door opening and slamming shut. Marlene enters in a huff.)

MARLENE

Can you believe that bitch?

GINNY

Ok, now. Sit down and enjoy your martini. I found some olives, so I decided to make 'em dirty.

MARLENE

That took some real balls.

GINNY

What's done is done. Just sit down and relax.

(Marlene relents and lets out a big sigh. She then settles into her chair. She begins to sip her drink. Silence.)

Did she leave the rutabagas?

MARLENE

She did not.

(Marlene looks to Ginny, exasperated. Ginny starts to laugh quietly. Her laughter gets louder and louder until Marlene joins in. Their shared laughter lasts a moment and then subsides. They both let out a sigh and continue to drink. Silence)

GINNY

We should check on Dwayne, don't you think?

MARLENE

Let him rest, Ginny. He's fine.

GINNY

You sure? I mean, I just can't believe we haven't heard a peep outta him. Especially considerin' all the ruckus.

MARLENE

Leave him be. I'll look in on him in a bit.

GINNY

(Skeptical.)

All right.

(They drink. Silence. Ginny rises out of her chair.)

You know what? I'm just gonna peek in. Just to make sure he's okay.

MARLENE

What did I just say?

GINNY

Yeah, I heard you, Marlene, but there ain't no harm in it. So, why don't you just shut up about it? Okay?

MARLENE

Fine. Suit yourself.

(Ginny exits. Marlene drinks quietly. A long moment passes before Ginny re-enters. She is pale and appears spooked.)

GINNY

(Quietly.)

Marlene...

MARLENE

Yeah, Ginny?

GINNY

What have you done?

MARLENE

(She takes another sip of her martini and then turns to Ginny.)

I think he's suffered enough. Don't you?

(Lights to black.)

TRINA & ADELE

A year or so into a world-wide pandemic, Adele pays Trina a visit to follow up on a commitment she made.

CHARACTERS

TRINA Female, Mid Sixties

ADELE Female, Late Fifties

TIME

Present.

SETTING

A small American town. Summertime. Midday. Trina's porch and living room.

(AT RISE: TRINA is sitting in a very worn armchair. She appears to be asleep. A basket of dirty laundry sits nearby. Adele approaches the porch. She looks on the porch and around it, searching for something. She crosses to the screen door and taps lightly on the frame.)

ADELE

Trina...? Trina, you home...?

(To herself.)

What the hell am I sayin'? 'Course she's home. She's always home. Dumpy little hermit...

TRINA

...I can hear you, Adele.

ADELE

Aw shit.

TRINA

I'm in my chair.

ADELE

Okay, well it's noon, Trina. And your wash ain't on the porch.

TRINA

I know.

ADELE

It's supposed to be on the porch.

TRINA

I know.

ADELE

So, where the hell is it?

TRINA

It's in here with me. On the floor. Just a few feet from where I'm sittin'.

ADELE

A lotta good that does me. How am I supposed to get your wash done if it's in there with you?

TRINA

(She winces.)

My back went out.

ADELE

What's that?

TRINA

My back. It went out. I was bringin' the basket out to the porch, and it just seized up. I barely made it to the chair. And my gout's been flarin' up.

ADELE

Well, that sucks for you, don't it? Guess you'll have to go without clean clothes for another few days then.

TRINA

Guess so. I would've called to let you know, but... Well, I'm stuck in this goddam chair.

ADELE

Hopefully, your back will sort itself out.

TRINA

It usually does.

(Silence.)

ADELE

You know I can't come in there and help you, right?

TRINA

I know. It's fine. I'll be fine. I can't make it to the fridge neither, so I suppose it's really a blessin' in disguise.

ADELE

I hear that. Oh, and by the way. Rhonda and me, we got that vaccine. But apparently it don't work too well. Thought you should know.

TRINA

Yep. Saw that on the news. Sneaky little virus keeps mutatin'. Can't keep up with it.

ADELE

End times for sure.

TRINA

I suppose that's true.

ADELE

I should also probably let you know that I'm gonna start handwashin' your things and hangin' 'em out to dry.

TRINA

Now, why on earth would you do that when you got a perfectly good washer and dryer set at home? I mean, the whole reason you offered to do it in the first place was because my set broke down.

ADELE

You're lucky I'm doin' it at all.

TRINA

Exactly my point. You're just makin' more work for yourself.

ADELE

Well, I'm tryin' to do my part, you know. Conservin' water, and savin' the environment, and all that fuckin' nonsense.

TRINA

Okay. Well, it don't matter to me either way. Though I expect my delicates'll be happy to have your gentle touch.

ADELE

Yeah, well don't get me started on your delicates because they're anythin' but.

TRINA

Right. Sorry about that. It's rough bein' an old lady.

ADELE

Anyway, I'm just lettin' you know in case your things come back all stiff and stretched out.

TRINA

Well, there's an easy fix for that, you know. The trick is to shake the clothes out before you put 'em up on the line. And anythin' heavy you just lay out on a rack to dry.

(Beat.)

ADELE

Yeah, so like I said, "Don't' be surprised if they come back all stiff and stretched out."

TRINA

Duly noted. Thanks.

ADELE

Happy to help.

(Silence.)

Okay then. I guess I'll just head on home...

TRINA

...Why do you do it, Adele?

ADELE

(Inappropriately defensive.)

All right. Now there's no need to get belligerent with me, Trina. I steal vegetables from everyone's garden 'round here. And truth is, it's slim pickins' at your place. You don't exactly have a green thumb, now do you?

TRINA

Well, I wasn't talkin' about that. But since you just confessed, may I ask, "What the hell is the matter with you, stealin' from peoples' yards?"

ADELE

Aw shit. Okay, well, let's not get off topic now. I think maybe you was askin' about somethin' else I might be doin' that I'm hopin's a little less criminal in nature?

TRINA

You are somethin' else, Adele.

ADELE

Ain't that the truth.

(Beat.)

TRINA

No, it's just that... Well, I been wonderin'. Why do you come visit? And why're you helpin' me out? You know I don't much like bein' 'round people.

ADELE

Well, that's somethin' you and me have in common then, ain't it? 'Cept whereas you keep to yourself, I generally tell people to their face that I don't like 'em.

TRINA

You haven't answered my question, Adele.

(Silence.)

ADELE

Listen, it ain't no secret that I'm an unpleasant woman. But bein' unpleasant is all I know. Okay? It's all I can muster. There ain't never been real joy for me in my life. Except for Rhonda, I suppose. Other than that, it's just been sorrow mixed with rage. Some days it's like pushin' through quicksand just to get out of bed. And it feels like my skin has fallen away. And like I'm on fire all the time. Always burnin' up with no way to put out the flames.

(Beat.)

TRINA

Well, that sucks for you, don't it? But what's any of that got to do with me.

ADELE

Well, Trina... Bein' 'round you is like if a bird shit on my head. It turns my stomach, but it's considered good luck when it happens.

TRINA

It's hard to take somethin' like that personal when the feelin's mutual.

ADELE

So, have I answered your question?

TRINA

You have.

ADELE

Good. So, can I go now?

TRINA

Not before I clear somethin' up first. For the record, I don't dislike people. There was a time, though, when I didn't like myself. So, I decided that I needed to be alone to sort things out; to maybe find a way to learn to love myself; to get away from it all; to mend; to heal. But then after a while, I realized how peaceful life was bein' alone, so I purposely chose to just settle into it. I'm content now, Adele. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

(Beat.)

ADELE

Well, goody for you, Trina. So, I'm gonna head on home now. Before Rhonda starts to worry.

TRINA

All right.

ADELE

I'll check in on you tomorrow.

TRINA

Sounds good.

(Adele starts off.)

Hey, Adele...

ADELE

What the hell is it now?

TRINA

You ain't actually gonna do it, are you?

(Beat.)

ADELE

Oh, I don't know, Trina. I might.

TRINA

Well, I prefer you didn't. But if you do decide to go through with it, make sure you get my laundry done first.

ADELE

If it's the last thing I do.

(Lights to black.)

RHONDA & DANIELLE

Two or more years into a world-wide pandemic, next door neighbors, Rhonda and Danielle, gossip with one another while dealing with the loss of their significant others.

CHARACTERS

RHONDA Female, Late Fifties

DANIELLE Female, Mid Thirties

TIME

Present.

SETTING

A small American town. Summertime. Late afternoon. Property line between two yards. Four lawn chairs arranged in pairs at least six feet apart.

(AT RISE: RHONDA enters and carries a six pack of beer. She sets it down on the ground next to one of the chairs on her side of the lawn. She looks to the other chair, reaches for it, folds it closed and then carries it off. DANIELLE enters. She carries boxed wine and a plastic cup. She sits in one of the chairs on her side of the lawn and pours herself some wine. She drinks quietly, looking off. RHONDA reenters. DANIELLE turns to RHONDA, nods and smiles. RHONDA nods back and smiles. She sits and opens a beer. She drinks and looks off.)

DANIELLE

I see you took the chair away.

RHONDA

I think it was about time.

DANIELLE

Good for you.

RHONDA

And you?

DANIELLE

Oh. Well, I suppose I'm not ready just yet. I mean, what's the rush anyhow?

RHONDA

True enough.

(Beat.)

I was thinkin' I'd might make a ceremony of it.

DANIELLE

Whatta you mean? A ceremony how?

RHONDA

Well, you know. I've been agonizin' about it for a long time now. And I've been thinkin' about what might be the right way to do it.

DANIELLE

To do what? To get rid of the chair?

RHONDA

Mm hm. My first thought was that maybe I'd just put it up on a pile of sticks and then set it on fire. Or maybe dig a hole out back, bury it there, cover it in dirt and soil, and then plant some nice jewelweed on top of it. Maybe say a prayer over it.

DANIELLE

Aren't you an atheist?

RHONDA

I'm kind of agnostic now. Though I might be a full-on Christian by tomorrow. Who knows?

DANIELLE

That's funny.

RHONDA

Well, it was meant to be.

DANIELLE

No, not that. It's just that I feel like I've been headed the other direction lately. Losin' my faith in God. I mean, what's the point? We're all bein' punished. Every last one of us. Ain't no one gettin' spared.

RHONDA

Maybe it's God's way of tellin' us that She meant every word when She said we were all equal in Her eyes.

DANIELLE

You really think God's a woman?

RHONDA

There's no man smart enough or ruthless enough to pull off somethin' like this.

DANIELLE

Fair enough.

(Beat.)

And you know, God never said that by the way. About everyone bein' equal.

RHONDA

No?

DANIELLE

Not exactly. No.

RHONDA

Oh. Okay. Well, I'm new to this.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

So, what'd you decide?

RHONDA

Hm?

DANIELLE

The chair. What'd you do with the chair?

RHONDA

Oh. I just put it out with the trash. At the end of the driveway there. By the road.

DANIELLE

(She rises a little out of her chair and looks to the road.)

You sure did. Well, you know damn well it's just gonna sit there. They haven't collected garbage in... How many months do you think it's been now?

RHONDA

I've got no idea how long it's been.

DANIELLE

Well, the smell is awful when the wind starts comin' through, that's for sure.

RHONDA

I've gotten used to it.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

Oh, hey. I put together a basket of vegetables for you from the garden. Some carrots, cabbages, red and yellow peppers, radishes, tomatoes, beans, lettuce... All the usual suspects. I did real good this year.

RHONDA

Sounds nice.

DANIELLE

I'll scrub 'em down and leave 'em on your porch before I go to bed tonight. You should probably give 'em another scrub before you go cuttin' 'em up and cookin' 'em though.

RHONDA

I will. Thanks.

DANIELLE

'Course. I mean, it's the least I can do. With all the preserves you been sendin' my way, I been bakin' up a storm over here. Muffins, cakes, bread... Oh, and I made a scrumptious vinaigrette the other day. I'll leave some of that for you as well. You can make a nice salad with it.

RHONDA

I'm happy that you're makin' good use of 'em.

DANIELLE

Well, there's a million different things you can do with preserves. So, they're not gonna go to waste, that's for sure.

(They drink. She looks across the road.)

I see they finally pulled Hank Ouellette out of his car.

RHONDA

Yeah. Just yesterday actually. Two women in hazmat suits came for him.

DANIELLE

He was in there a long while.

RHONDA

Yep. Dropped dead in the driver seat. And on display for all the world to see. Or at least for those passin' by on the main road here. I suppose he was tryin' to get to the hospital.

DANIELLE

Well, even if he made it there, I doubt he woulda been able find someone to help him.

RHONDA

True enough.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

So, that leaves what? All the houses on that side of the road empty now.

RHONDA

No. Trina Patterson's still 'round. Saw her this mornin'.

DANIELLE

Trina Patterson?

RHONDA

Yeah. She lives in that gray ramshackle house about a hundred yards that direction.

DANIELLE

I don't think I ever met her.

RHONDA

Oh. Well, she's always kept to herself. She's one of 'em... whatta you call 'em...? introverts. A recluse. Good thing too. It's probably what's gonna keep her alive in the long run.

DANIELLE

In the long run? Hell, I'm not sure I'd actually wanna be here when the long run comes 'round.

RHONDA

Hm. Well, I hear that.

(Beat.)

Anyway, so looks like we got Trina on that side of the road, and I guess you, me, and then Marlene Lumley and her mother-in-law, Ginny, three houses over on this side of the road. Everyone else is gone.

DANIELLE

As far as we know.

RHONDA

As far as we know.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

Marlene and Ginny. I heard they was always at each other's throats. Hard to believe since it seems like they're gettin' along just fine now.

RHONDA

Well, they don't have much of a choice, now do they. All they got left is each other.

(Beat.)

Oh, and do you remember...? Oh, no, that's right. You and your husband just moved to town 'round that time, so you probably didn't know. Anyway, I guess it was two years ago. Maybe longer. I've lost track of time. Anyway, so Ginny - allegedly - tried to hire someone to kill Marlene.

DANIELLE

Get outta here.

RHONDA

I shit you not. And Ginny was sorta friends I guess with this woman who used to stock shelves over at the local Walgreens. Can't remember her name. No, wait. I do remember. It was Barbara... Barbara somethin'. Guess it don't matter anyhow. So anyway, this Barbara lady was married for a short time to a hitman in the 1970s, and so Ginny thought Barbara still had connections with the mafia. Well, Barbara was flabbergasted by Ginny's declaration that she wanted Marlene dead. And Marlene was almost nine months pregnant with her youngest son, Dwayne, at the time. So, 'course Barbara went to the police. And they asked her to go undercover for 'em. So, she did. And they wired her up and she met Ginny in her car in the Sonic parking lot over on Highway 27. Well, 'course Ginny didn't have a penny to

her name. So, she told Barbara that she could offer the hitman a Smith and Wesson 9 mm, a buck knife, one of 'em iPads, four bottles of gold dust, and a Ronald Reagan Commemorative Coin as down payment. But then he'd have to wait until after Marlene had the baby before takin' her out.

DANIELLE

You have got to be kiddin' me.

RHONDA

I ain't.

DANIELLE

So, what happened then?

RHONDA

Nothin'.

DANIELLE

Nothin'? Whatta you mean, 'nothin'?

RHONDA

Well, not long after that, the pandemic kicked in real hard. Knocked the whole country on its ass. Ginny was livin' with her son and Marlene at the time, so when the governor issued a total lock-down, they were all stuck in the same house together. So, nothin' ever came of it.

DANIELLE

Well, that's just plain crazy. I mean, how in the world do you live with a woman who intends to kill you?

RHONDA

I don't know. But I'd start by puttin' a lock on my bedroom door, that's for certain.

DANIELLE

So, why'd she do it?

RHONDA

Well, Ginny didn't much like Marlene from the start. And Marlene was threatenin' divorce. Said she'd fight tooth and claw for custody of those three boys. And I guess Ginny was worried she'd never see her grandchildren again.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

I been thinkin'.

RHONDA

Oh yeah? About what?

DANIELLE

Well, it don't take a medical degree to figure out that men are more likely to get infected and die.

RHONDA

That's been my take on it as well.

DANIELLE

So, I guess I was just wonderin'. Why do you think your lady friend...

RHONDA

...My wife...

DANIELLE

...Sorry. Your wife. Why do you think she succumbed so early on?

RHONDA

Look, I appreciate that you're a kind person. And a good neighbor. And I like you and I enjoy talkin' to you. But even durin' times like these, some things are still just nobody's business. You understand?

DANIELLE

I didn't mean to upset you. I mean, we was just talkin' about the chair. And I know that was a tough decision for you to...

RHONDA

...And that's all it really is, isn't it? It's just a chair. A placeholder. It don't serve as a substitute. It was just markin' the spot where Adele used to be. And it took me until just this afternoon to figure that out.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

So, you think maybe I should do the same with this chair here?

RHONDA

You should do what's right for you. Don't matter much what I think.

DANIELLE

What you think matters a lot to me.

(They drink.)

I miss Teddy. Desperately. It was him who convinced me to move here. We was plannin' on havin' kids. And we wanted to raise 'em somewhere quiet. Somewhere safe. But I guess that was never meant to be. And you know, he wasn't just my husband. He was my friend. Maybe not by best friend, but he loved me with all his heart. And he treated me with respect. And my God, he was so funny. Made me laugh all the time. I mean, I'm not gonna share with you some of the awful things he said because they were just not proper. But boy did I laugh so hard until sometimes I nearly threw up. He was a good man.

RHONDA

Men are like corpse flowers. They bloom rarely and only for a short time. And they stink.

DANIELLE

Well, that don't sound very nice.

RHONDA

I guess that's my way of sayin' that I liked your husband too. He was different than most. And he was decent company. Though he had shitty taste in beer. He and I got along just fine, though.

(They drink.)

Adele did not die from the virus.

DANIELLE

No?

RHONDA

No, she did not. Adele... well, she was always sort of a sad woman. I mean, she got through life just fine, I guess. She was able to enjoy herself. And we were able to enjoy each another. But she had finally reached her limit. She didn't much like the idea of hangin' 'round and watchin' the world collapse. And since it seemed that no one was ever gonna take responsibility; that no one was ever gonna make an effort to put things right;

she didn't see the point. And of course, she did what she could. She made sure we recycled. And that we conserved water. And that we planted trees. And that we started handwashin' our clothes and hangin' 'em on the line to dry. But no matter what we did, it was never gonna be enough for her. I knew that. She knew that. And so, she took matters into her own hands. And that's all there was to it.

(They drink. DANIELLE rises out her chair, takes the other chair and walks off with it. RHONDA drinks her beer as she watches DANIELLE go. DANIELLE returns. She puts her boxed wine and cup on her chair, carries it over and places it next to RHONDA. DANIELLE sits. She pours herself another cup of wine. She raises her cup. RHONDA raises her beer. They clink. They drink.)

(Lights to black.)

(End of anthology.)