

(DRAFT: 07 Apr 2021)

SYD

A play in two acts
By Craig Houk



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Syd by Craig Houk

CHARACTERS

HELEN TRAHAN Female, Late 30s
SYDNEY (SYD) TRAHAN Female, 19 y/o
ROBERT (BUD) TRAHAN Male, Early 40s
BEVERLY LARSON Female, Early 40s
BEAUREGARD (BEAU) LARSON Male, Mid 40s

TIME

1973.

SETTING

The kitchen and back porch of the Trahan's single-family home in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans, somewhere along Highway 1 in Louisiana, and the Larson's living room.

SCENE BREAKDOWN

Act 1 Scene 1, June 24th, Afternoon, Kitchen & Porch
Act 1 Scene 2, June 24th, Before Sundown, Kitchen
Act 1 Scene 3, June 24th, Sundown, Porch
Act 1 Scene 4, June 24th, Before Midnight, Kitchen

Act 2 Scene 1, June 25th, Morning, Highway 1
Act 2 Scene 2, June 25th, Morning, Kitchen
Act 2 Scene 3, June 25th, Early Evening, Porch
Act 2 Scene 4, June 25th, Late Evening, Kitchen
Act 2 Scene 5, July 4th, Evening, Larson's living room
Act 2 Scene 6, July 17th, Early Evening, Kitchen

ACT 1**SCENE 1**

(June 24, 1973. Afternoon. A kitchen. We see Helen who has nearly finished setting the table for dinner. We hear a television playing off. Helen calls out.)

HELEN

Sydney. Sydney, dinner's ready. Call your Daddy, please. He's on the back porch.

(She takes the main course from the counter and sets it center on the table. She calls out again.)

Sydney, you hear me? Dinner's ready. Go get your Daddy.

(She stands quietly, waiting for a response. None comes. She crosses to the archway and calls off into the living room.)

Sydney!

SYD *(Off.)*

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

Have you gone deaf? Now, listen to me. I've been slavin' away puttin' together a nice meal for the three of us. And I'd appreciate it if you and your Daddy would come to the table.

SYD *(Off.)*

Okay, Mama.

HELEN

And wash your hands. And turn off that TV.

SYD *(Off.)*

Yes, ma'am.

(Helen heads to the refrigerator to retrieve a pitcher of lemonade.)

Daddy!! Dinner's ready!!

(We hear the television turn off.)

HELEN

God give me strength.

(She retrieves three glasses from the cupboard, brings them to the table and begins to pour the lemonade. Bud enters.)

BUD

Somethin' smells real good in here.

(He kisses Helen on the cheek.)

HELEN

Thank you, Bud. That's very sweet. Now, sit down before everythin' gets cold.

(They both sit.)

BUD

Where's Syd?

HELEN

I sent her to wash up. And I've asked you to please stop callin' her that.

BUD

Oh, come on now. What's the harm in it? We've been callin' her that since she was in diapers.

HELEN

'Syd' sounds like a man's name. She's a grown woman. And it's time she started actin' like one.

BUD

She's nineteen. She's my little girl. She'll always be my little girl.

HELEN

(Calling off.)

Sydney!

(Sydney enters.)

SYD

I'm right here, Mama. Excuse me for not movin' at the speed of light.

HELEN

Please don't speak to me like that.

(Quick beat.)

Now, let me see your hands.

SYD

Oh, now come on, Mama. I think I know how to wash my hands.

HELEN

Let me see 'em.

(Sydney extends her hands, palms up. She then turns them over, palms down.)

Sit down.

(Sydney sits. Helen stares intently at her.)

SYD

What? What'd I do now?

HELEN

I just wanna know what's gotten into you today?

SYD

What's gotten into me? Nothin's gotten into me. Except you've been all over my ass since church this mornin'...

BUD

(Overlapping.)

...Syd, please...

HELEN

(Overlapping.)

...Well, I hardly think that danglin' your spit over the balcony and then repeatedly suckin' it back into your mouth was proper behavior for church...

SYD

(Overlapping.)

...You pinched me so hard, you broke the skin, Helen...

BUD

(Overlapping.)

...Don't be callin' your Mama by her first name...

SYD

(Overlapping.)

...She's always givin' me a rough time...

HELEN

(Overlapping.)

...I'm almost at my limit with you, young lady. Do you understand me...?

BUD

(Overlapping.)

...That's enough! Can we please just eat in peace? You said yourself, Helen. Food's gettin' cold.

HELEN

Yes, it is.

SYD

Fine with me. I'm starved.

(Sydney reaches for a bowl or a plate of something. Helen grabs Sydney's hand, perhaps a little too tightly.)

HELEN

Stop! You are tryin' to upset me on purpose, ain't you?

(Sydney pulls her hand away.)

BUD

Come on, Syd. You know better than that. Prayers first.

SYD

Right. Sorry.

(Helen extends both hands. Bud takes one, Sydney reluctantly takes the other. Helen starts the prayer and the other two chime in quickly.)

HELEN

Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

(They all make the sign of the cross, Sydney half-heartedly.)

Now, how about I make everyone's plate? Whatta you say, huh? Like old times?

SYD

I can make my own plate...

BUD

(Interrupting. To Helen.)

...Sounds like a real good idea, sweetheart. I'd like that very much. And I expect Syd would like that too. Wouldn't you, Syd?

SYD

Sure, Daddy.

(Bud hands his plate to Helen.)

HELEN

Thank you, Bud.

(Helen begins to put a plate of food together for Bud.)

BUD

Oh, and before I forget... I was readin' the paper out back, and I saw that the Dixie Roto Magazine insert was missin'. Have either of you two seen it?

HELEN

No. I'm sorry, Bud. I haven't.

SYD

Maybe it fell out when the paper boy tossed it onto the porch. I'll take a look out front..

(Sydney starts to rise out of her chair.)

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

..Stay right where you are. You can look for it after we've eaten. I expect it ain't urgent.

(Sydney returns to her chair.)

BUD

I suppose it ain't. But I tell you, of all days for that insert to go missin'. Hm..

(He takes a sip of his lemonade.)

HELEN

Well, what is it, Bud? Why are you actin' all coy?

BUD

Oh, never mind.

HELEN

Come on, now. Out with it.

BUD

No. No, I'm sure it can wait.

(He winks at Helen.)

HELEN

Fine. I've lost interest anyway. It can wait until the end of time now, for all I care.

SYD

Well, I don't wanna wait that long.

BUD

Hey, Syd.

SYD

Yeah, Daddy?

BUD

After dinner, if you can't find the insert, maybe you can run next door to the Larson's to see if they don't mind givin' us theirs. Whatta you say?

SYD

Sure.

(Helen hands Bud his plate.)

BUD

(To Helen.)

Thank you, dear.

(Helen smiles and then reaches for Sydney's plate.)

HELEN

Sydney.

(Sydney hands her plate to Helen.)

Go ahead and eat, Bud.

(Helen begins to put a plate of food together for Sydney. The portions will be conspicuously smaller.)

BUD

You sure you ladies don't mind if I start without you?

SYD

'Course not, Daddy.

BUD

Helen?

HELEN

Didn't I just say?

BUD

Well, all right then. Everythin' looks real good. Don't you agree, Syd?

SYD

Looks so good I can't wait to get it into my mouth.

HELEN

Oh, for goodness sake, Sydney. You'll have your food in just a second here.

(Bud has taken a bite.)

BUD

Mmmmmmm. Mm, Mm, Mm. So good. You have outdone yourself, Helen.

HELEN

Stop.

BUD

I am deadly serious. Best meal ever. It's like heaven on a biscuit.

HELEN

Thank you, Bud. Now, shut up and eat.

(She hands Sydney her plate.)

Here you go, Sydney.

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

(Sydney eats. Bud continues to eat. Helen begins to serve herself. A quiet moment.)

BUD

How're your studies comin', Syd?

SYD

Good. Real good.

BUD

And your grades?

SYD

I'm at 93%.

BUD

Wow, that's great. And what does that mean?

SYD

Well, anything at 93 or above is considered 'excellent'. Grade point value of 4.

BUD

Oh, boy. I see. And?

SYD

I got an 'A', Daddy.

BUD

Ah. Okay. All right. Well, that's just what I wanted to hear. That's real nice, Syd. That's my girl.

HELEN

She can do better.

BUD

Better than an 'A'?

HELEN

Just barely an 'A'. Maybe if she didn't spend so much time in front of that TV out there...

BUD

(Interrupting.)

...All right. Let's cut her some slack. I expect studyin' to be a nurse ain't easy. And she works hard too. How many hours you puttin' in at the hospital, Syd?

SYD

Twenty a week. Forty-five durin' vacation breaks. And excuse me, Mama, if once in a while, I like to plant myself in front of the TV. Sometimes it's nice to just sit down, relax a little, and not have to think about bed pans and bed sores for one hour while Kojak is on.

(We hear Henry Larson calling after his wife, Beverly Larson.)

BEAU *(Off.)*

Beverly! Beverly, get back here and leave 'em folks alone. It's Sunday, for Chrissake! Ain't nobody wants to be bothered on a Sunday...

BEVERLY *(Off.)*

(Interrupting.)

...Well, I'm sorry, Beau, but this cannot wait!

(Beverly appears at the kitchen door. She peers through the screen, perhaps knocks on the frame. She holds a copy of the Dixie Roto Magazine insert in her hand. She calls in.)

Hello.

(Beau appears just behind her. They are both a little out of breath. Helen and Bud rise out of their chairs. Helen moves to the door.)

HELEN

Well, hi, Beverly. What're you doin' here?

BEVERLY

Do you mind if we come in?

HELEN

Well, normally I wouldn't, but we were just...

BEAU

(Interrupting.)

...Aw, damn it. They're havin' dinner. I told you so. Sorry about that, folks. We can come back another time. Come on, Beverly. Let's go.

(Beau takes Beverly by the arm and starts off.)

BUD

(He moves past Helen to the door.)

No. No, it's okay, Beau. Why don't you two come on in?

(He opens the screen door.)

BEAU

You sure it's all right?

BUD

'Course it's all right.

(To Helen.)

Sweetheart?

(Beat.)

HELEN

Well, certainly. We're always happy to have you over.

BEVERLY

(She pushes past everyone and makes her way into the kitchen.)

Terrific. Because I've been desperate to talk to Bud about what I found in today's Times-Picayune. Hi, Sydney.

SYD

Hi, Mrs. Larson, Mr. Larson.

BEAU

(He has followed Beverly in.)

Hey, Sydney.

HELEN

That looks like the Dixie Roto Magazine insert in your hand, Beverly.

(Curious, Sydney rises out her chair.)

BEVERLY

It sure is.

HELEN

Funny that, we were just talkin' about it. Sydney was gonna stop by after dinner to see if you might share yours with us since we lost ours. Bud was askin' about it.

BEVERLY

Oh, my goodness. So, he hasn't told you yet? Bud, you haven't told 'em yet?

BUD

Not yet, no.

HELEN

But he's been hintin' at somethin'. Seemed pretty anxious to get his hands on that insert.

BEAU

Damn it, Beverly! See! Now you've gone and spoiled the surprise!

HELEN

What surprise? What is goin' on?

SYD

Oh, for fu...

(Sydney stops herself. She then crosses to Beverly and pulls the insert from her hand.)

I'll take that.

HELEN

Sydney!

(Sydney moves away a bit. Beverly, Beau and Helen huddle around, looking over Sydney's shoulder. Bud stays put.)

Sydney excitedly unfolds the insert to see what all the excitement is about. A big smile as she turns to Bud.)

SYD

Daddy.

HELEN

What? What is it?

(Helen reaches for the insert, but Sydney moves away.)

SYD

Well, guess who's on the cover of this week's installment of Dixie Roto Magazine?

(Helen turns to Bud. Bud smiles.)

HELEN

Oh, come on now. You've got to be yankin' my chain. Why in the world would Bud be...? All right, Sydney, hand it over. Let me take a look at that.

(Sydney, in jest, reluctantly hands the insert to Helen. Helen takes it and inspects the cover.)

Well, I'll be...

BEVERLY

That's a real nice picture of Bud, ain't it?

BEAU

And check out that headline. 'Big-City Blacksmith'.

HELEN

Looks like the Guidry farm in the background there.

BUD

S'right. Sydney used to go horseback ridin' there every weekend.

HELEN

What's this all about, Bud?

BUD

Well, read for yourself.

SYD

Says on the front that the article's on page six.

(Sydney grabs the insert from Helen and crosses to the kitchen table. She sits down and begins thumbing through the pages. The rest huddle around her. Sydney finds the article.)

BEVERLY

Well, go on, Sydney. Read it.

HELEN

Out loud. So everyone can hear.

SYD

(Sydney reads from the insert.)

"New Orleans resident, Robert 'Bud' Trahan, will be honored with the Metalist Award of Excellence for his extensive and lasting contributions to the blacksmithing community throughout the great state of Louisiana over the last two decades. The Metalist is the most prestigious award bestowed by the Pelican State Blacksmiths Association and will be presented to Mr. Trahan at Gallier Hall in Lafayette Square on Tuesday, July 17th, 1973 at 7:00 PM..."

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

(She looks to Bud.)

...Oh my God.

BEAU

Ain't that somethin'?

BEVERLY

And that's not all. Goes on to talk about how Bud fell into blacksmithin' after seein'... oh, darn it, what's that man's name, Bud? Famous blacksmith?

BUD

Alexander Winkler Bealer, III.

BEVERLY

That's the one.

BUD

I saw him at the North Georgia State Fair in 1943. Got my first anvil and hammer three years later at the age of sixteen. And I've been playin' with fire ever since.

BEAU

And you know, business is gonna pick up for sure, Bud. Not like you been strugglin' to find work otherwise, though.

BUD

No. No, we're doin' okay. And yeah, you're right. I expect I'll get a few more customers after this. Probably even some from out-of-state.

HELEN

You really think so, Bud?

BUD

'Course I think so. I mean, free advertisin', right?

HELEN

My God. I just don't know what to say. This is real good news. I'm so proud of you, Bud.

(Helen hugs Bud tightly. Bud reaches out to Sydney.)

BUD

Whatta you say, Syd? You gonna join us over here?

SYD

If you got room for me.

BUD

We'll make room. Come on.

(Sydney joins them for a group embrace.)

BEAU

Okay, Beverly. Let's get the hell outta here and let the Trahan's get back to their dinner. We've pestered 'em enough already.

BEVERLY

All right, all right.

(They start off.)

I'll see you at card club on Wednesday, Helen.

HELEN

Oh, now wait a minute you two. Why don't you stay and have a drink with us? Hm? To celebrate the good news?

BEVERLY

Well, that sounds real nice.

BUD

I'll make us a couple of Sazeracs, Beau.

HELEN

Oh, and a couple of Brandy Milk Punches for me and Beverly.

BUD

You got it.

BEAU

Now, hold on, hold on. While I hate to pass up one of Bud's Sazeracs, I think Beverly and I need to get out of y'all's hair.

HELEN

No, now listen. You make yourself a plate of food, Beau. Plenty left over. And then you and Bud can head out back. And talk about whatever worthless nonsense you men generally talk about. And Beverly'll stay with me here in the kitchen. You hungry, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Not especially, but I may pick a little.

Syd by Craig Houk

BUD

Well, that's settled then. Syd, can you grab the milk outta the fridge? I'm gonna get started on those drinks.

(Bud exits through the archway.)

HELEN

And set up two tray tables for your Daddy and Mr. Larson on the porch.

SYD

Yes, Mama.

(Sydney goes to the refrigerator and retrieves the milk.)

HELEN

Go on, Beau. Help yourself. Plates are in the cupboard up there. Flatware in the drawer below.

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(Beau grabs a plate and then goes to the table to help himself.)

Have a seat, Beverly.

BEVERLY

Don't mind if I do.

(Beverly and Helen sit. As Sydney passes them with the milk...)

HELEN

And Sydney... When you're done doin' what I asked, I'd like you to come back and join me and Beverly here.

SYD

No thanks, Mama. I've got some studyin' to do.

HELEN

I wasn't askin'. And I expect your studies can wait 'til later this evenin', can't they?

SYD

Normally they might. But then I'm headin' out with some of the girls tonight.

HELEN

I'm sorry, you're what?

SYD

I'm goin' out later. For a few drinks and then maybe some dancin'...

BUD (*Off.*)

Hey, Syd! I need that milk, baby girl!

SYD

I'll be right there, Daddy.

HELEN

Oh, no. No, no, no. You will not be goin' out tonight, do you understand me? Especially on a Sunday night.

SYD

What difference does it make? It's not like you and Daddy ain't havin' drinks at home with the neighbors.

HELEN

Well, it's not the same thing. We're doin' it in honor of your Daddy's award. And none of us here is endeavorin' to get our nursin' degree.

(Sydney starts to interject.)

No. Not another word. And I don't appreciate you arguin' with me in front of the Larson's. You will not be goin' out tonight.

SYD

Well, it's already been decided. So, tough shit, Helen.

(She exits through the archway with the milk.)

HELEN

(Rising up, she slams her hands on the table.)

Sydney...!

(Beau and Beverly freeze. A long, uncomfortable moment. Helen sits.)

I'm sorry.

BEVERLY

There ain't no need to apologize. Just take a deep breath.

(Beau has not moved. Bud enters.)

BUD

What happened in here? Syd looks pissed off.

BEVERLY

Everythin's fine, Bud. Just a little misunderstandin' is all.

BUD

Sounded like a little more than that. You all right, sweetheart?

HELEN

Mm hm.

BUD

(Unconvinced.)

Well, okay then. You joinin' me, Beau?

BEAU

(Distracted.)

Ah... yup.

BUD

Well, get your ass in gear then. Drinks are comin' up, ladies.

(Bud exits. Beau remains still.)

BEVERLY

Beau?

BEAU

(He looks to Beverly.)

Yeah?

BEVERLY

Did you get what you wanted?

BEAU

Uh... yeah... yeah, I sure did. Looks delicious.

BEVERLY

I'm sure it is. Now, why don't you grab a knife and a fork and head on out to the porch?

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(Beau does as is instructed and exits through the archway.)

BEVERLY

You sure you're okay?

HELEN

I'm fine. You know how it is. You've got your hands full with those three boys.

BEVERLY

Indeed, I do. Though we got just the two of 'em livin' at home now.

HELEN

Oh yeah?

BEVERLY

Yeah, well Roscoe packed up and left about three months ago. So, it's just Billy and Jack with us now. And the two of 'em are visitin' with Beau's parents down in Leeville, so we've got the house to ourselves for a few days.

HELEN

Wow. Well, I bet that's nice.

BEVERLY

It sure is.

HELEN

You know, we were wonderin' why we hadn't seen Roscoe around. We didn't wanna pry, though.

BEVERLY

Well, he was too old to be livin' at home anyway. And besides, we didn't much appreciate the company he was keepin'. Didn't want those types hangin' around. You know what I mean. So, we didn't object much to his movin' out.

HELEN

Where's he livin' now?

BEVERLY

Not sure exactly. Not sure I care to know. Except I've been hearin' that he's somewhere over in the French Quarter.

(Bud enters with the drinks.)

BUD

And here we go... One Brandy Milk Punch for the beautiful Mrs. Larson. And one for the even beautifuler Mrs. Trahan.

(Bud kisses Helen on the cheek.)

HELEN

Thank you, Bud.

BEVERLY

You are way too much, Bud.

BUD

It was my outright pleasure. Think nothin' of it.

(Bud grabs his plate and starts off.)

HELEN

Let me at least warm that up for you, Bud. I'm sure it's gone completely cold by now.

BUD

No, no. It's fine. And I don't wanna keep Beau waitin'. You ladies enjoy.

(Bud exits. The ladies are charmed by his cheerfulness, Beverly especially so. They drink. A moment.)

BEVERLY

Well, anyway... I'm sure you've heard the rumors.

HELEN

That's all they are, Beverly. Rumors. I'm sure there's little truth to 'em. And besides, Roscoe's a good man.

BEVERLY

He's not.

HELEN

'Course he is. He's a Pastor, for goodness sake.

BEVERLY

With the Metropolitan Community Church.

HELEN

Well, okay. I mean, I understand that they're an unconventional bunch.

BEVERLY

The congregants are all deviants and perverts.

HELEN

I'm not sure that's entirely true.

BEVERLY

Would you and Bud go there?

HELEN

No. We would not. But from what I understand, Roscoe has worked very hard for that church, to build it and to keep it goin' in the face of many obstacles, sometimes out of his own pocket.

(Beat.)

BEVERLY

Let me speak plainly with you, Helen. And this is very difficult for me, because I prefer not to discuss private family matters.

And I do not like to use this kinda language, especially as it relates to my first-born son, but Roscoe is a faggot. And that's all there is to it.

HELEN

Beverly, no. That's not true.

BEVERLY

It is true. And I ain't gonna be one of them Mothers who pretends it's not, who spends sleepless nights beatin' her chest and prayin' to God, and beggin' Him to save her son's soul, tryin' to figure out what she's done wrong. Because I've done nothin' wrong. Roscoe has a disease. A disease of the mind and of the body. He's got the Devil in him. And I want nothin' to do with the Devil.

HELEN

I'm sorry. That's awful.

BEVERLY

Do you know...? They've opened up some makeshift homosexual bar over on Iberville Street.

HELEN

Sydney mentioned somethin' about it. Upstairs Lounge, I think it's called. Opened maybe a year ago. I didn't ask questions.

BEVERLY

Well, that's where most of 'em congregate. That's where Roscoe goes. I don't even wanna imagine what they're gettin' up to over there. But whatever it is, they better believe that God is watchin'. And one day, every last one of 'em is gonna come face to face with their Maker. And when they do, they'll have to answer for the choices they've made.

(Lights down on the kitchen and up on a porch.)

(Bud and Beau are settled in, both sitting behind tray tables, upon which sit their dinner plates and drinks. A copy of the Times-Picayune lies somewhere near Bud.)

BEAU

...Well, whatta you think, huh? J.D. Roberts gonna turn the Saints into a winnin' team this year?

BUD

(He laughs.)

Oh, I doubt it. I mean, they had a shit-awful season last year. And other than draftin' Archie Manning back in '71, Roberts has been about as useful as Tom Fears was before him. Then, of course, they get second pick this year, which they earned by virtue of their shitty record, and whatta they do? They trade it away! Hell, I bet Roberts doesn't even make it to coach the regular season.

BEAU

Yeah, you're probably right. Be nice to at least make it to the playoffs once, though, you know?

BUD

Sure would. Except I don't see that happenin' anytime soon.

(They drink. A moment.)

BEAU

Hot day today.

BUD

Sure is. Little bit of a breeze, though. So, not too bad, I guess.

BEAU

Guess not. Hotter than yesterday.

BUD

Feels that way, yeah.

(They drink. A moment.)

BEAU

Hey, Bud...

BUD

Yeah?

BEAU

How's Sydney doin'?

BUD

Oh, she's doin' real good. She's workin' hard and gettin' good grades.

BEAU

Haven't really seen her around much.

BUD

Well, she'll be around more. Her first year, she had to live in the nurses' residence. Hospital was pretty strict. On weekdays, she had to check in by seven o'clock and on weekends by ten. So, between studyin' and workin', she didn't have time for much else.

BEAU

She's changed a lot.

BUD

Whatta you mean? Changed how?

BEAU

Well, she's a grown woman now.

BUD

Yeah, that's what Helen keeps sayin'. She's still a teenager, Beau.

BEAU

True enough.

(They drink. A moment.)

She's tough. That's for sure. Maybe a little too rough around the edges?

BUD

Well, she's always been that way, Beau.

BEAU

Has she?

BUD

'Course she has. Do you remember the time she took one of my cross-peen hammers, marched right on over to the Nunez house, and beat Rodger Nunez with that thing? Lucky for him, he was more than a foot taller than she was. Otherwise, she mighta killed him had she wacked him over the head with it.

BEAU

Yeah, and lucky for you she was nine at the time.

BUD

Ain't that the truth? Shit. We woulda been in a heap of legal trouble for sure.

BEAU

Well, that Nunez boy had it comin'.

BUD

He was a hot head. Always gettin' into trouble. And I guess Syd had had enough of his teasin' and tormentin'.

BEAU

He's still a hot head from what I hear.

BUD

Oh yeah? Well, that's too bad.

BEAU

He, uh... He hangs around with my oldest boy.

BUD

With Roscoe?

BEAU

Yup. They, uh... they run in the same circles. You know what I'm sayin'?

BUD

Yeah. Yeah, I know. Wow. Well, I had no idea.

BEAU

Well, you know. We try not to talk about it.

(Bud nods.)

So, I just thank God every day for givin' me my two other boys. Billy and Jack are gonna be just fine. They ain't like Roscoe. I mean, with Roscoe, I could just tell, from an early age. Somethin' was off with him.

(They drink. A moment.)

BUD

My Mama... she, uh... she passed away when I was eleven.

BEAU

Aw, I'm sorry to hear, Bud.

BUD

Well, it was a long time ago. And I'm sure you're wonderin' why I'm bringin' it up.

BEAU

I'm listenin'.

BUD

My old man was a police officer when she died. He kept crazy hours. Nearest relative was my Aunt Minnie on my Mother's side, but she wasn't able to take care of me. She ended up in an institution after a while. So, when my father would go out on patrol, he'd sometimes leave me with one of the neighbors. And when there wasn't anyone around to watch me, he'd drop me off at the local bar. He was good pals with the barkeep. And I didn't mind. Plenty of stuff to keep me entertained. Jukebox, pool table, all sorts of characters comin' and goin'. So, there was this one guy who'd swing by late afternoons. Leroy. He was in his forties, never married, worked part time as a roofer, hardly had two nickels to rub together. And oh boy, he was a talker. Always flappin' his gums, never knew when to keep his mouth shut. On this one particular day, I was lookin' for somethin' to do, so I offered to clean all the cue sticks. I was at the back of the bar when Leroy came stumblin' through the front door. Usually, he'd come in sober and then leave drunk, but on that day, he was already half in the bag. So, he goes to the bar and he orders a double whiskey neat. He downs that pretty quick and then he orders another. After that, he makes his way back to me. He pulls a bar stool over, sits down on it, leans into me, and asks me what I'm doin'. I mean to tell you, his face was all swollen, his teeth were dirty, and his breath smelled god-awful. So, I backed off a little. And when I did, I could see that he

got real sad. I felt bad for him. So, I bolstered myself, moved closer to him, and answered, "I'm just cleanin' these cue sticks, Mister." That's when he smiled, leaned in again, and whispered to me, "I gotta secret that I ain't never shared with no one. Do you wanna hear it?" I gotta tell you, Beau, I did not wanna hear it and I wanted to tell him so, but instead I just said, "Sure, Mister." And this is what he said to me... "Lucifer has put a thorn in my flesh. And God is dead." Then he reached out his hand. It was all cracked and dry and red. I wanted to run or at least call out, but I just couldn't. Then he grabbed my hand real tight and pulled me in to him. He put his other hand around the back of my head and he... he buried his face into my hair. And he breathed in real deep. He stank so bad I thought I might be sick. But before anyone saw what was happenin', Leroy all of sudden just let go of me. He stepped back, his eyes wellin' up with tears. And then he turned and walked backed to the bar, paid his tab, and left.

(Beat.)

Some things can't be fixed, Beau. And some things are worse than others.

(Bud drinks. A moment. Sydney enters.)

SYD

Daddy...?

BUD

Yeah, baby girl?

SYD

Hey, listen. I'm headin' out in a bit with some of the other nurses.

BUD

You get your Mother's 'okay'?

SYD

No.

BUD

You want me to talk to her?

SYD

I'm a grown woman, Daddy.

BUD

So, I've been hearin'.

SYD

Anyway, I didn't come out here to ask for permission. I came out here to ask for money.

BUD

Says the grown woman.

SYD

Daddy...

BUD

All right, okay. I can give you some cash. My wallet's upstairs.

SYD

I'll get it.

BUD

(Rising.)

No. No, I'll get it. Gonna get me and Beau here another drink anyway. I think he needs it. And I'm gonna check on your Mama and Mrs. Larson while I'm at it.

SYD

Thank you.

BUD

You got it.

(Bud exits. Sydney starts to follow him.)

BEAU

Hey, Sydney.

SYD

(Sydney stops and turns to Beau.)

You can call me Syd.

Syd by Craig Houk

BEAU

All right. Syd.

SYD

Yes, Beau?

BEAU

(With a half-smile.)

So, you're headin' out this evenin'?

SYD

That's the word on the street.

BEAU

Bet you got a fun night planned.

SYD

I'm plannin' on havin' fun if that's what you mean.

BEAU

(Another half-smile.)

Where you goin'?

SYD

Well, I don't know just yet. Me and the girls are gonna play it by ear, I guess. Why're you so interested?

BEAU

Oh, just curious is all. I'm an old man. Don't get out much. Just wonderin' what women your age get up to. Lots of crazy shit goin' on in the world right now. So, maybe I'm just thinkin' about your welfare.

SYD

I already have a Daddy. Don't need two of 'em.

BEAU

Fair enough. Though I do wonder if Bud might be a little too easy on you.

SYD

Somethin' tells me if he was here right now, you wouldn't be sayin' these things.

BEAU

Maybe not.

SYD

So, if you're so scared of him, then what makes you think he's such a pushover?

BEAU

I ain't scared. And anyway, you're his daughter. That's a very different thing. And while I'm at it, I think maybe you're a little too hard on your Mama.

SYD

And I'm thinkin' maybe that's none of your business.

BEAU

See, now that's exactly what I'm talkin' about. That attitude right there. You got a mouth on you.

SYD

Well, we all got mouths on us, don't we? One of the first things I learned in nursin' school.

BEAU

You know what I mean.

SYD

I do know what you mean. And I am tellin' you again, it's none of your damn business.

(Beau rises suddenly and grabs Sydney by the arm. She stands her ground.)

Hey! Better be careful there, Beau. You make one more move and, believe me, you will be crawlin' outta here without your testicles. And I think you know what my Daddy might do to you if he saw you puttin' your hands on me.

(Beau releases Syd.)

BEAU

You're lucky you ain't my kid.

SYD

Well, I've seen the way you treat Roscoe, so I couldn't agree more.

BEAU

Your Mama's a good Christian woman, Syd. Ain't nothin' comes before her faith in Christ. And you need to trust that she knows what she's doin'. God has a plan for you. And even though things might not make sense right now, sooner or later they will. Your Mama has God's ear. So, you best mind what she tells you.

(Lights down on the porch and up on the kitchen.)

(The kitchen has been mostly tidied by Helen and Beverly. There are two freshly made Brandy Milk Punches on the table. They are in the middle of a conversation.)

BEVERLY

..Well, I can't think of anyone dumber than the Baily sisters. I mean, how long have they been playin' Canasta with us, and they still ain't figured it out? They lose every hand.

HELEN

Francis and Faye have a good time. And that's really all that matters.

BEVERLY

They're both nuttier than a five-pound fruitcake. But they are good for a few laughs, I suppose.

HELEN

It wouldn't be card club without 'em.

BEVERLY

No, I suppose it would not.

(They share a laugh. A moment. They continue to drink. Perhaps Helen is finishing putting things away and/or cleaning up.)

Listen, Helen.

HELEN

Mm Hm?

BEVERLY

Now, you stop me if you feel like I'm oversteppin' here.

HELEN

(She stops what she's doing.)

All right.

BEVERLY

I think you need to put your foot down with Sydney.

(Helen starts to interject.)

Now, I saw how upset you got earlier, and I don't like to see you in that condition, but that young lady could use some firm discipline from you. Before she gets too outta control. Before it's too late.

HELEN

Whatta you mean? Before what's too late?

BEVERLY

Beau and I went through somethin' similar with Roscoe.

HELEN

Oh, come on now, Beverly. Sydney ain't nothin' like Roscoe. And I'm sorry, but you don't know what it's like to raise a daughter. It's very different.

BEVERLY

I hardly see how Sydney's any different than a boy.

HELEN

And what is that supposed to mean?

BEVERLY

A Mother knows, Helen. A Mother always knows. And Fathers... well, they're only good for two things... payin' bills and keepin' the bed warm. I mean, Beau only just made things worse with Roscoe.

And it's plenty clear that Sydney has Bud wrapped around her little finger. Now, don't get me wrong. Bud's a good man, no doubt about it. But he doesn't see what you and I see. So, it's up to you.

HELEN

And what do you suggest I do, Beverly?

BEVERLY

I suggest you pray. Pray to God for guidance. And then you do whatever it takes to get that girl back on the right path. Sydney's soul depends on it.

(A moment. Helen thinks on it. Beverly finishes her drink.)

Well, okay then. I think it's time for me and Beau to go home.

HELEN

(Distracted.)

It's gettin' late. And I am a little tired. Do you mind?

BEVERLY

'Course not. I'll grab Beau and then we'll be on our way.

HELEN

Thanks for stoppin' by, Beverly.

BEVERLY

My pleasure. And thank you for lettin' us disrupt your day. We are very much lookin' forward to that award ceremony in a few weeks.

HELEN

(Halfhearted.)

Oh, my goodness. I almost forgot. It's always nice to have somethin' to celebrate, isn't it?

BEVERLY

It sure is. You get some rest. We'll talk soon.

(Beverly moves to Helen, gives her a hug, and then exits the kitchen.)

(Lights down on the kitchen and up on the porch)

(Bud and Beau have finished eating and are drinking fresh Sazeracs.)

BEAU

...That just ain't accurate, Bud. And I don't believe it. Now, what I heard, which is more likely to be true, is that those men broke into that hotel lookin' for intel on that DNC Secretary, what's her name...?

BUD

Ida Wells?

BEAU

That's the lady. She goes by Maxie, though, right?

BUD

S'right.

BEAU

Anyway, that Maxie Wells woman was supposedly usin' her office phone to set up little rendezvous between committee members and high-class hookers.

BUD

Aw, now come on, Beau. First off, you ain't even gettin' the story right.

BEAU

No. No now listen. That John Dean fella - the White House Counsel guy - his girlfriend was one of them hookers. And Maxie had pictures of her and a bunch of other prostitutes locked in her desk drawer...

(Beverly enters the porch.)

BEVERLY

(Interrupting.)

...All right, Beau. That's just about enough of that. Sorry, Bud. I married a conspiracy theorist. And a drunk one at that.

BUD

Oh, Beau's okay. We're havin' a good time.

BEAU

S'right, Beverly. Bud and me are havin' a real good time. And then you come along.

BEVERLY

And it looks like I came along at just the right time. Come on, Beau. We're goin' home.

BEAU

What? Noooo.

BEVERLY

Yes. Let's leave these good people be. You can come over and play with Bud some other time.

(Beverly winks at Bud.)

BUD

Probably a good idea. I'll catch up with you later, Beau. I'm gonna watch the sun set and then I think I'm gonna have a little lie-down here on the porch. Feels like another nice breeze comin' through.

BEVERLY

Sounds lovely. Let's go, Beau.

BEAU

Oh, all right, all right. The old ball and chain has spoken. Can you help me up, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Why should today be any different?

(Beverly starts to help Beau up, but Bud steps in.)

BUD

I got him.

BEVERLY

(She steps aside.)

Thank you, Bud.

(Bud helps Beau up and guides him off the porch.)

BEAU

Hey, Bud.

BUD

Yeah?

BEAU

Hey, listen. I voted for Nixon. Both times.

BUD

I know, Beau. Everyone knows.

BEAU

And he's gonna get through this second term, no matter what them far left radical commies throw at him. You mark my words.

BEVERLY

Consider them marked, Beau.

BEAU

Aw, shit.

BUD

What's the matter?

BEAU

I almost forgot. I was hopin' to borrow your mower, Bud. Mine's busted. Ran over a tree root.

BEVERLY

Well, you ain't mowin' the grass right now, are you? Not in your condition.

BUD

All right listen, Beau. I'm gonna take the lock off the tool shed and you can pick it up tomorrow whenever you like. Okay?

BEAU

Thank you, my friend.

BUD

Any time.

BEVERLY

I can take it from here, Bud.

BUD

You sure?

BEVERLY

Oh yeah. He's been much worse than this many times over.

BUD

Well, okay. He's all yours then.

BEVERLY

(With a feeble laugh.)

Ain't that the sad truth?

BUD

Just be careful there. And take your time.

(Beverly guides Beau off, perhaps they improvise some dialogue as they go. Bud smiles, maybe laughs, and shakes his head. He goes back onto the porch and sits down.)

(All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

(June 24, 1973. Before sundown. An empty kitchen. Sydney enters. She is dressed for the evening out. She is wearing a long denim skirt and a cotton button-down shirt. She crosses to the refrigerator, opens it, and pulls a six pack of canned beer from it. She then turns to see Helen in the archway.)

HELEN

Headin' out already?

SYD

Just gettin' an early start. I'm not plannin' on stayin' out too late. Should be home by midnight.

HELEN

You finished with your studies?

SYD

I will be in about three years.

HELEN

(With a half-smile.)

I see. Well, I'm gonna ask you to please return that beer to the fridge. It belongs to your Daddy.

SYD

I'll replace it when I get paid in a couple of days.

HELEN

If you can't afford to drink, Sydney, then maybe you shouldn't be goin' out at all.

SYD

Me and the girls have been plannin' this for some time now, Mama. So, I'm not gonna miss it. You're actin' like I'm out every night of the week.

HELEN

Whatta you need the beer for anyway?

SYD

We're meetin' up at Marilyn Durand's place first. And I don't wanna show up empty handed.

HELEN

And from there?

SYD

I already said. Out dancin'.

HELEN

Where?

SYD

Jesus, Mama. I'm not gonna share every detail of my evenin' with you.

HELEN

What's the harm in tellin' me where you're goin'?

SYD

No harm, I guess. Except we ain't decided yet.

HELEN

You just said you and the girls have been plannin' this for a while.

SYD

You know what? I'm done with this. Point bein', it's none of your concern where I'm goin' or what I'm doin'. I'll see you later, Mama.

(She starts for the kitchen door. Helen follows her.)

HELEN

I don't know where you get off talkin' to me that way.

(Sydney has opened the screen door.)

Sydney!

SYD

(She stops and turns to Helen.)

What!?

HELEN

Who do you think is payin' for your education? And who do you think's responsible for puttin' a roof over your head? And providin' you with a bed to sleep in? And puttin' food in your mouth?

SYD

(Sydney will set the beer down and move toward Helen.)

Well, it ain't you, Mama. It ain't never been you. It's always been Daddy. And if it wasn't for him, we'd have none of this. So, let me ask you... What have you ever actually done for me?

HELEN

I gave birth to you.

(Beat.)

SYD

So, what is it you're lookin' for then, hunh? Some kinda prize? And for what, Helen? For spreadin' your legs that one time? I doubt you'd be able to find a prize more useless at the bottom of box of Cracker Jack.

(Helen moves to Sydney and slaps her across the face. Helen retreats, surprised at herself.)

HELEN

Sydney, I...

SYD

(Interrupting. Sydney quickly moves to Helen. Helen braces herself.)

Sit down, Mama.

HELEN

Sydney...

SYD

(Interrupting.)

Sit. Down.

(Helen sits and lowers her head. Sydney joins her at the kitchen table. A moment.)

You got somethin' you need to get off your chest?

(Helen looks up at Sydney but does not say anything.)

Go on, Mama. Now's your chance. I'm gonna give you some of my valuable time.

(Another moment.)

HELEN

Your Daddy and me didn't raise you that way.

SYD

What way?

HELEN

The sarcasm. And the spite. The hate. You have no idea what I've had to put up with over the years. The things that've been said to me. The things I've overheard. In church, at social events, on the street, at card club in my own home. The awful things people have said about you. About my daughter. My flesh and blood. The terrible names they called you. Tomboy, lesbian, dyke. And the nasty stories they told. And God help me, I defended you every single time, even though I expect that some of what I was hearin' was quite possibly the horrifyin' truth.

SYD

You defended me, Mama? And how exactly did you do that?

HELEN

By callin' it what is was. Trash talk and gossip. "She's a good, Christian girl", I'd remind 'em. "She'll grow out of it; it's only a phase", I'd say. "As a matter of fact, she has her eye on that Landry boy down in East Riverside; I half-expect they'll be married one day". And I'd just repeat them same things over and over, until either they believed me, or they just stopped talkin' about it. And that's what I did. To protect you.

SYD

You were protectin' yourself, Mama. And let me make one thing clear. I don't hate you. I never have. But I do hate that you're a coward.

HELEN

True enough.

(Beat.)

Times have changed. I'm not blind to that. But they ain't changin' quite as fast as you think they are, Sydney. You suppose it's okay for you to just do and say whatever you want, whenever and however you want? Because that's not how the world works, not the one we're livin' in anyway. And it ain't safe out there, Sydney. No woman is safe out there.

SYD

I'll take my chances.

(Sydney grabs the beer and starts for the door.)

Oh, and if it's any consolation, I did have a crush on that Landry boy. Turns out, he likes girls with big tits and empty heads, so I never had a chance with him anyway.

(Sydney exits.)

HELEN

Only God can protect you now.

(All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

(June 24, 1973. ~7:50 PM. The porch. Bud is asleep. After a moment, Helen enters. She crosses to the top of the stairs and sits. The sun will completely set in a few minutes. She stares out. Bud rouses and sits up.)

BUD

Sweetheart? Helen?

(Helen looks back to Bud and smiles faintly.)

What're you doin'?

HELEN

I thought I'd try and catch the sunset.

BUD

Well, it's nearly gone now. I was hopin' to see it myself, but I guess I slept through.

(Bud goes to Helen and sits next to her.)

How're you doin'? You okay?

HELEN

I'm fine. Long day is all.

BUD

Let's turn in early then. Whatta you say?

HELEN

You still tired after that long nap?

BUD

Didn't say I was tired.

HELEN

(She smiles politely.)

Not tonight, Bud.

BUD

Sorry. Bad timin' on my part.

HELEN

No, it's fine. I love that you still find me desirable.

BUD

Well, 'course I do. What'd make you think otherwise?

HELEN

Oh, I don't know. I guess I'd like to think that I'm useful in some way.

BUD

What in the world are you talkin' about? Useful? What does you bein' the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on have to do with bein' useful?

HELEN

(Unconvinced, self-conscious.)

You shut up.

BUD

What? I'm deadly serious here. I mean, come on, Helen. Without you, this entire house would come down on its foundation. Hell, there are so many things you do that are useful. You're an amazin' cook. You're always cleanin' up after me and Syd; spend most of your time in the laundry room 'cause we're always comin' home dirty. You head up all them bake sales at church. And you're all the time volunteerin' for somethin' or other in the community. And ain't none of that has anything to do with how beautiful I think you are.

(A strange look comes over Helen's face.)

What? What's wrong?

HELEN

Do you smell that?

BUD

Damn it. It's probably my breath. I should go and brush my teeth.

(Helen stands.)

HELEN

No. No, it ain't that. I smell smoke. Smells like somethin's burnin'.

(Bud stands. They both look off into the distance.)

BUD

Oh yeah. I smell it too.

(Helen spots something.)

HELEN

There. Over there, Bud. Looks like a fire.

BUD

Holy Mother of... That's a real big fire.

BEAU

(Calling from off.)

Bud! Hey, Bud! You see that?

BUD

Yeah, Beau! We just saw! It don't look good! Don't look good at all.

(Beau appears. He looks in the direction of the fire.)

BEAU

Looks like it might be over by Canal Street, close to the river maybe. Hard to tell exactly. Hey, listen... I'm gonna get my car and head that way. They may need help. You wanna come with?

BUD

Yeah. Sure. I'll be right over.

(Beau exits. To Helen.)

You gonna be okay here by yourself?

HELEN

'Course I'll be okay. You be careful, Bud. Don't do anything stupid.

BUD

Ain't nothin' to worry about. Me and Beau are just gonna stay back outta the way unless they need us for anything. And I'll call you if I can.

HELEN

All right.

(We hear a car horn in the distance.)

BUD

(Calling off to Beau.)

I'll be right there, Beau!

(We hear a car start. To Helen.)

Love you, sweetheart.

HELEN

Love you, too.

(They kiss. Another car horn.)

You better get goin'.

BUD

Get some rest if you can. I'll see you in a bit.

(Bud heads off. Helen watches. She waves as we hear Bud get into the car and the car speeds off.)

(All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

(June 24, 1973. ~11:00 PM. An empty kitchen. The coffee maker is on and has just finished brewing. Helen enters and pours herself a cup. Perhaps she puts cream and sugar in it. A long moment passes. She's anxious. The phone rings. She puts her coffee down and answers the call.)

HELEN

Bud...? Hello...? Oh... Oh, I am so sorry, Dennis. I thought it was my husband callin' back... Well, I was waitin' for an update from him on that buildin' that caught fire. I don't suppose you've heard anything more...? You haven't...? Well, I'm actually kinda surprised you're not over there too... You were called away...? Whatta you mean...? A disturbance? A disturbance where...? Oh... Oh my... I see. Well, what does any of that have to do with us...? Oh, dear God, Dennis. That can't be true... Oh my God... No. No, it's fine. I'm glad you called... All right, well, if Bud isn't home soon, I'll just come over there myself and take care of things... No, you don't need to pick me up. I'll drive myself. It's very sweet of you to offer, though... Yes... Thank you, Dennis... Goodbye now.

(Helen hangs up the phone. She stands quietly, showing no emotion. Slowly, a look of sadness comes across her face. She begins to cry softly, quietly at first. This will turn into heavy sobbing. Suddenly, we see and hear Bud approach the kitchen door. He is covered in soot and is extremely disheveled and tired. Helen sees him and hurriedly composes herself. She

moves quickly to the door as Bud enters.)

Oh, for goodness sake, Bud. You're a mess.

(She pulls a chair from the kitchen table and moves it to the middle of the floor.)

Why don't you sit down here? You must be thirsty. We've got some lemonade left in the fridge.

(She starts for the refrigerator.)

BUD

(Bud sits.)

Just some water, please, sweetheart.

HELEN

'Course.

(Helen will retrieve a glass from the cupboard and will get Bud a glass of water from the faucet.)

What in the world happened over there? You've been gone for almost three hours. And you're completely covered in ash.

BUD

It was real bad. Real bad.

HELEN

Whatta you mean? Bad how?

BUD

I don't think you're gonna wanna hear this, Helen.

HELEN

Well, 'course I wanna hear. Has someone been hurt?

BUD

A lot of men have been hurt, yes.

HELEN

What? How many?

BUD

I don't know exactly. Ten or more.

HELEN

Oh my God.

BUD

And that ain't the worst of it.

HELEN

Oh, dear Lord, Bud. Please don't tell me that people are dead.

BUD

We stopped countin' when we got to about twenty or so. All of 'em men.

HELEN

(Beside herself with shock and grief, though not hysterical.)

No. Oh, God, no. No, no, no, no, no...

BUD

(Overlapping.)

(He rises out of the chair.)

...Helen...

HELEN

(Overlapping.)

...no, no...

BUD

(Overlapping.)

(He goes to her and gently subdues her.)

...Helen, Look at me. Look at me. Roscoe is dead.

HELEN

Roscoe?

(Beat.)

Where was the fire, Bud?

BUD

Over on Iberville Street. So, listen. I'm gonna head down to Leeville in the morning with Beau to pick up Jack and Billy and bring 'em home. Maybe you can keep an eye on Beverly while we're gone? Should take us a little less than five hours.

HELEN

(Distracted.)

All right.

BUD

I'm gonna get cleaned up now. And then I think we should go to bed. Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is gonna be a long day.

(Bud hugs Helen tightly and then starts off.)

HELEN

Bud.

BUD

What is it?

HELEN

We can't go to bed just now.

BUD

Whatta you mean? Why not?

HELEN

Sydney.

BUD

She ain't home yet?

HELEN

No.

BUD

Well, what's wrong? Where is she?

HELEN

Detective Cormier called.

BUD

Dennis?

HELEN

Yes.

BUD

Well, what'd he say? Is Syd in trouble? She okay?

(Helen does not respond.)

Helen! What's happened with Syd?

HELEN

She's been arrested.

(All lights fade to black.)

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2**SCENE 1**

(June 25, 1973. Morning. Somewhere along Highway 1. We see Beau hunched over. He has just finished vomiting. Bud stands nearby, perhaps averting his eyes.)

BEAU

I'm sorry, Bud.

BUD

(Bud hands Beau a handkerchief from his pocket.)

Ain't nothin' to be sorry about. Just glad you didn't throw up in my truck.

BEAU

(Referring to the handkerchief.)

Is this clean?

BUD

'Course it's clean. Why in hell would I give you a dirty hanky? I ain't no Neanderthal.

BEAU

All right, okay. I feel like it was a fair question, though. I mean, when another fella hands you a balled-up hanky from his pocket, you might wanna know what it's been through before you wipe your own mouth with it.

BUD

(With a chuckle.)

Fair enough. Well, it's fresh outta the wash. I pulled it from the basket this mornin' before Helen had time to press and fold things. So, go ahead. Clean yourself off before you get any of it on your shirt there.

(Beau wipes his mouth.)

You ready to get back on the road? We probably got another hour before we get to Leeville.

BEAU

I think I need a minute. I'm havin' trouble catchin' my breath.

BUD

'Course.

(Beau breathes. A moment.)

You wanna talk about it?

BEAU

No.

BUD

You sure? I mean, you haven't said a word since we left. Probably not good for you to keep shit bottled up like that. And maybe that's why you're pukin' your guts out on Highway 1.

BEAU

(A moment. With tears in his eyes.)

What have I done, Bud?

BUD

Oh, come on now, Beau. You ain't gonna blame yourself for this, are you?

BEAU

Do you believe in the power of prayer?

BUD

'Course I do. God is gonna help you and Beverly through this, Beau. And me and Helen are here for you. Make no mistake about it.

BEAU

That ain't what I mean.

(A moment.)

When we found out Beverly was pregnant the first time, we prayed to God every day for a healthy baby boy. That's all we wanted. We never thought to ask for more than just that. Roscoe never caused us much trouble. Hardly ever cried. Made a little pig of himself when he ate. Only fussed a little when Beverly put him

down for naps. Almost always slept through the night. All the time smilin', curious, sharp as a tack. And, in a lot of ways, he was just a normal kid. A good boy. But I guess that wasn't enough for us. Roscoe was just barely six years old when we found him playin' dress up with his cousin, Delia. And not even five minutes before that, we had to break the two of 'em up because they was fightin' over who got to play with what baby doll. The rest of the family tried to laugh it off. But not me and Beverly. We knew somethin' wasn't right. So, we got back to prayin'. We prayed hard that Roscoe would turn out okay. We thought that maybe our son's behavior was in some way a message from God; His way of lettin' us know that we'd somehow gotten off track. We needed to get back into God's good graces if Roscoe was gonna grow up and be a proper man. So, we went to church every Sunday and sometimes durin' the week. Prayers every night and every mornin'. Stopped drinkin', stopped goin' out, stopped cursin', stopped gamblin', stopped every goddam thing. But nothin' changed. Roscoe just got more and more peculiar. And the harder we pushed him, the harder he pushed back. When Roscoe was about twelve, thirteen maybe, Beverly caught him messin' around with that Rodger Nunez boy out in the shed in our back yard. She got so mad she locked him in the basement. When I got home that evenin', she was outta her mind; wouldn't give me the key to let him out. So, I had to force the door open with a crowbar. When I finally got to Roscoe, I found him huddled up between the washer and dryer. He was covered in welts and bruises, blood all over the floor. Beverly had dragged him down the stairs by his feet and then beat him bad with one of my belts. His head was twisted somethin' awful and he had dried snot all over his face. Didn't look like he was breathin'. I thought maybe he was dead. I hoped he was. And that's when I prayed to God to make it so.

BUD

God ain't in the business of answerin' them kind of prayers, Beau. And if He is, I want nothin' to do with Him. You failed one of your boys. I ain't gonna let you fail the other two. So, I need you to pull yourself together and get back in that truck. I got my own kid to deal with when we get back to town.

(Beau looks to Bud but does not move.)

Let's go.

(Bud guides Beau off, perhaps brusquely.)

(All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

(June 25, 1973. Morning. Nearly the same time as the previous scene. The kitchen. We see Syd who has just taken the last bite of her breakfast. She is hungover and unkempt. Helen has just finished doing some dishes. There are several filled Tupperware containers on the counter. There is coffee in the pot. Helen crosses to the table to clear Syd's meal.)

HELEN

You finished?

SYD

Yes, Mama. Thank you. You didn't have to go to all that trouble.

HELEN

No trouble. I was up cookin' and bakin' anyway.

SYD

You musta been up all night.

HELEN

I slept a little. You feelin' better?

SYD

Yeah.

HELEN

Well, good. I'm glad. Looks like the color's comin' back to your face.

(She starts for the sink with the dishes.)

SYD

(Rises out of her chair.)

Here, Mama. Let me take care of those.

HELEN

You stay right where you are. I'm just gonna leave 'em in the sink for now anyway. I gotta get this food over to the Larson's.

(She is referring to the Tupperware containers.)

SYD

Well, I can help carry those over.

HELEN

No. Now listen... You just stay here and get some rest.

SYD

Mama, I'm fine. Really. Please let me help you.

HELEN

(Maybe a little too assertive.)

You're not fine. You're hungover. Maybe get yourself some water and some aspirin and then go back to bed.

SYD

Mama, I...

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

...Now's not the time, Sydney. Okay? Now, do what I said.

(Helen finds a tote bag or a box of some sort and begins putting the Tupperware into it. Sydney does not move. A moment.)

SYD

Mama, I'm sorry.

(Helen stops what she's doing. She steadies herself.)

HELEN

Sorry for what?

SYD

For yesterday. For last night. I shouldn't've spoken to you the way I did. And I shoulda listened to you.

HELEN

I really need to get this food over to Beverly, so let's just forget about it.

SYD

We can't just forget about it, Mama. I fucked up.

HELEN

Sydney! Please! Could you just save all of this for when your Daddy gets home? It's him you need to apologize to anyway. He's the one who's gonna have to clean up your mess. And as far as your conduct towards me is concerned, I've gotten used to it. Okay? I mean, one of us has gotta be the punchin' bag 'round here. And I drew the short straw on that a long time ago.

(We see Beverly approach the kitchen door. She carries a coffee cake in a covered dish. She appears to be in good spirits.)

BEVERLY

Good mornin', Trahans.

(Helen crosses to the door to see Beverly in.)

HELEN

Mornin', Beverly. I was just on my way to your place. What are you doin' here?

BEVERLY

Well, I made a nice carrot cake and I wanted to share it with you all. I know how much you like carrot cake, Sydney.

SYD

I sure do.

BEVERLY

It's one of them new Betty Crocker recipes. Except I used toasted almonds instead of pecans, so I hope that's okay.

HELEN

Well, that's very nice, but why would you do that?

BEVERLY

So, you don't like almonds?

HELEN

No. I mean yes, almonds are fine, Beverly. It's just that... well, shouldn't you be home? Beau and the boys'll be back soon with Bud. And I expect you'll be havin' visitors today. I'm sure your phone's already ringin' off the hook.

BEVERLY

No. No phone calls. No visitors.

(Beat. She refers to the cake.)

So, you wanna give this a try or no?

HELEN

Sure. 'Course. Sit down. I'll grab some plates. And I've got some coffee left over, still fresh.

BEVERLY

Well, what's cake without a nice cup of coffee, right?

(Beverly sits and places the cake on the kitchen table. Helen will pull plates and coffee cups from the cupboard and place them on the table.)

So, how are you Sydney?

SYD

I'm doin' okay, I guess.

BEVERLY

(To Sydney.)

You sure? I mean listen, and I hope you don't mind me sayin', but you look like somethin' the cat dragged in.

SYD

Oh yeah? Well, cats have pretty mixed appetites. So, are you sayin' I look like a mouse or a rat? Or maybe a little bird, like a sparrow or a robin? Now, 'course cats also like bugs...

spiders, grasshoppers and the sort. Or perhaps I resemble a snake or possibly a lizard? So, which one is it?

BEVERLY

You just can't help yourself..

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

..Why don't you go to your room, Sydney? Get some rest.

SYD

Aw, now Mama. I'd like to stay and try some of Mrs. Larson's carrot cake.

HELEN

You just had a big breakfast.

SYD

I think I've got room for one slice.

HELEN

Sydney, please. There's some aspirin in the bathroom cabinet. Get yourself a glass and get on outta here.

SYD

Okay.

(Sydney gets a glass and then exits. A moment as Helen pours the coffee. She may bring sugar and cream to the table. Helen sits. Beverly and Helen prepare their coffees in silence.)

HELEN

Roscoe's gone, Beverly.

BEVERLY

I know.

HELEN

You don't seem upset about it.

BEVERLY

Why would I be? I ain't one to question the good Lord above.

HELEN

Beverly...

BEVERLY

(Interrupting.)

...“For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience.”

HELEN

Thirty-two men died last night.

BEVERLY

And all of 'em sodomites. So, if that ain't some kinda message from the Almighty, I don't know what is.

(Beat.)

Now, I think we should give this a try. Hm?

(She reaches for the cake dish cover, but Helen puts her hand on it first.)

HELEN

The cake can wait.

(Beat.)

BEVERLY

Did I do somethin' to upset you, Helen?

HELEN

I guess I'm just havin' a hard time figurin' out how a Mother, whose son hasn't been dead twenty-four hours, can't find it in herself to shed one single tear for him.

(A moment.)

BEVERLY

Roscoe almost died once before. He was just a teenager at the time. Fell down a flight of stairs, cracked a couple of ribs, dislocated his shoulder, busted his head open, nearly broke his neck. It was real bad.

HELEN

That's awful. I had no idea.

BEVERLY

Well, we don't much talk about it. A stupid accident is all. I was washin' the kitchen floor when he came in from playin' out in the back yard. He was headin' to the basement for a football or some kinda ball, I don't remember what exactly. Anyway, I told him to slow down. And that's when he slipped and fell. Tumbled all the way down to the landin'. We didn't think he was gonna make it.

(Beat.)

And I believe that God meant to take Roscoe from us that day. But it seemed He changed His mind. Maybe He wanted to give Roscoe a chance to right himself. But that never happened. So, I guess it was only a matter of time before God decided He needed to finish what he'd begun.

HELEN

So, you're sayin' God started that fire?

BEVERLY

Mysterious ways, Helen. Mysterious ways.

(The telephone rings.)

HELEN

Sydney!

SYD *(Off.)*

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

Can you pick that up on the extension, please? That may be your Daddy.

(The phone stops ringing as Sydney answers the call off. To Beverly.)

Listen, Beverly.

BEVERLY

Mm hm?

Syd by Craig Houk

HELEN

I take no pleasure in sayin' this.

BEVERLY

What is it?

(A moment.)

HELEN

I think maybe you're right. I mean, none of it makes any real sense to me.

(She becomes a bit emotional.)

And I don't think I've ever been so overcome in my entire life. But I do believe, with all my heart, that the Lord has a plan.

BEVERLY

I prayed for Roscoe every day, Helen. I did my duty as his Mother. I did what was expected of me. It's in God's hands now.

(Sydney appears in the archway.)

SYD

Mrs. Larson, that phone call's for you.

BEVERLY

For me? Well, who in the world would be callin' me here?

SYD

It's the coroner's office. They've been tryin' to reach you all mornin'. Phone's in the den.

BEVERLY

Okay, well thank you, Sydney. Would you mind tellin' 'em I...

SYD

(Interrupting.)

...I suggest you take it.

(Beat.)

BEVERLY

All right then. Excuse me.

Syd by Craig Houk

(Beverly exits through the archway past Sydney. Sydney starts off.)

HELEN

Sydney.

(Sydney turns back to Helen.)

SYD

Yeah?

HELEN

Come here.

(Sydney moves to Helen.)

SYD

What is it, Mama?

HELEN

Who knows about your arrest?

SYD

Uh... well... you and Daddy, 'course. And Detective Cormier. There was another officer there with him; don't remember his name, though.

HELEN

Who else?

SYD

Mama, why are you...?

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

Who else?

SYD

Well... they, uh... they arrested Marilyn Durand too. Took us in together.

HELEN

What about those other girls? You said you went to that bar with some other nurses?

SYD

S'right. A couple of 'em left early before the police came in. Some of the others were questioned and then let go.

(Beat.)

Listen, Mama. If you're worried about any of them girls sayin' anything, I promise you they won't. I mean, none of us'd be able to take our board exams if anyone at the hospital found out what went on last night.

HELEN

And what happens if you wind up with a criminal record? Hm? You gonna be able to come up with a satisfactory answer as to why somethin' questionable showed up on your background check?

SYD

I don't know.

HELEN

There's a pretty good chance you won't ever get that nursin' degree, am I right?

SYD

S'right.

HELEN

Okay. Well, you'd better hope your Daddy can sort things out. In the meantime, we need to keep this to ourselves. Not a word to anyone. You understand?

SYD

Mm hm.

(Beverly has been standing in the archway. Helen and Sydney look to her. A beat.)

HELEN

Everythin' all right, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Yes, everythin's fine. They're lookin' to release Roscoe's remains. They want me and Beau to come in and claim the body.

HELEN

I see. Well, I'm happy to help with the arrangements if you like. Bud and I used the Hitchens Funeral Home when his Aunt Minnie passed a few years back. They put together a beautiful service for her.

BEVERLY

Oh, there won't be no need for any of that. Roscoe can stay right where he is.

HELEN

Now, come on, Beverly. I'm sure you don't mean that at all. And I expect that Beau'll...

BEVERLY

(Interrupting.)

...You leave Beau to me. Okay? Besides, sounds to me like you got your own troubles here at home. Maybe that fire was a blessin' after all. A convenient distraction for you and your family. Wouldn't you agree?

(Beat.)

Well, I suppose I should be headin' home now. You all go on and enjoy that cake without me.

(She starts off.)

HELEN

Beverly.

BEVERLY

Mm Hm?

HELEN

Before you go, I put together a little somethin' for...

(She stops herself.)

You know what? Never mind. It's not important.

BEVERLY

All right then. Oh, hey and don't forget. Card club on Wednesday. It's my turn to host. See you soon.

(Beverly exits through the kitchen door.)

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

(June 25, 1973. Early evening. At rise, the porch is empty. After a moment, we see Sydney exit through the door and start down the stairs. She is on the verge of tears. Bud follows her.)

BUD

Now, hang on, Syd. Where're you off to? We ain't finished talkin'.

SYD

I can't Daddy. I just can't.

BUD

You can't what?

SYD

I can't have this conversation with you. I can barely even look you in the eye right now.

BUD

When have I ever given you a reason to not look me in the eye?

(Beat.)

SYD

This is different.

BUD

I know it's different. And you can be sure this ain't gonna be easy for me neither. But we can't fix things by ignorin' 'em.

SYD

You sayin' I need to be fixed?

BUD

I ain't said that at all, so don't you go puttin' words in my mouth. And now ain't the time for you to be feelin' sorry for yourself. So, let's go back in the house, all right?

SYD

I'd rather not.

BUD

You wanna stay out here? Away from your Mama?

(Bud smiles and winks at Sydney. She smiles back.)

Okay then. Come on up here and join me on the porch. Come on now.

(Sydney does as is requested. They settle in. A moment.)

Look, we don't gotta talk about what happened last night. Not just yet anyway. So, I'm gonna let you start. You talk about whatever you want. And I'll just sit here and listen. Unless you got questions for me. And then I'll answer 'em as best I can.

(Beat.)

So, whenever you're ready.

(A long moment.)

SYD

I'm angry. A lot. I know it. And I just can't figure out what to do with all that rage sometimes. And you know, when you're angry all the time, you start to forget what it's like to actually be happy. Or you start to question whether you've ever been happy to begin with. It's a hard thing to shake. And some days, I feel like I'm so far gone that I ain't ever gonna be able to find my way back. If there is a way back. And back to what? I can't change who I am. And I suppose that even if I could change, I wouldn't. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I'm stubborn. Or because I'm selfish. Or maybe I'm just plain spiteful and stupid. Or maybe it's because I'm so damned fed up with bein' judged all the time. I mean, if God is love, then why is the world so filled with hate? I haven't done anythin' wrong. Or at least what I have done... it don't feel wrong. Not to me anyway. I just wanna be loved is all.

BUD

You are loved. You know that, right? Your Mama loves you...

SYD

(Overlapping.)

...Daddy...

BUD

(Overlapping.)

...I love you.

SYD

I love you too. And I'm sorry, but that just ain't enough. Not anymore.

(A moment.)

BUD

So, uh... so, you think maybe this Marilyn - that's her name, right...?

SYD

Mm hm.

BUD

...You think maybe she can give you the kind of love you need?

SYD

I don't know for sure. But I do know that the two of us broke the law last night. We knew what we were doin' wasn't proper, but we did it anyway. And I suppose it wasn't really an act of love so much as an act of rebellion. But it felt good. It felt right.

BUD

Well, two ladies dancin' together. Seems harmless to me.

SYD

Oh, I don't know. We women are just criminals by virtue of our own existence.

(A moment.)

BUD

When I found out your Mama was pregnant, I told her I didn't want no girl.

SYD

Well, that hardly seems appropriate at a time like this.

BUD

(Knowingly, with a smile.)

But the very first time I held you in my arms and saw your chubby little face and looked into your beautiful brown eyes, I thought differently about 'em. I love every piece of you, Syd. Which means I love this piece of you, too. I mean, we're all made up of pieces, right? You know, but if we just keep chippin' away at the pieces we don't like, then there won't be anything left. And that don't sound right to me at all.

(Beat.)

Now listen. I'm gonna have a talk with Dennis Cormier to see if I can't get them charges dropped. Okay? Now, but if his hands are tied, then we're gonna have to figure somethin' else out if this goes to court. You understand?

SYD

I understand.

BUD

All right. You get back in the house. I got some thinkin' to do.

SYD

Okay, Daddy.

(Syd hugs Bud. He hugs her back tightly. She exits into the house. Bud sits quietly for a moment.)

(Helen appears in the doorway holding a plate with a slice of coffee cake on it. She also holds a fork, napkin and a glass of milk.)

HELEN

You want some of this carrot cake? If not, I was just gonna toss it out? Beverly made it.

BUD

Sure. I'll give it go.

(Bud reaches out. Helen passes what she has in her hands to him. She settles in as Bud takes a bite of the cake. A moment.)

HELEN

If you think I wasn't listenin' in on your secret conversation with Sydney, you are sorely mistakin'.

BUD

Oh, I figured you might be.

(Quick beat.)

This cake tastes funny.

HELEN

Funny how?

BUD

I don't know. It's a little sour, I guess.

HELEN

Must be the almonds. Well, you don't have to eat it if you don't want.

BUD

Yeah, okay. I think I'm gonna pass then.

(He puts the cake aside and takes a drink of milk.)

HELEN

Between you and me, Beverly's never been very useful in the kitchen.

(Bud smiles faintly. A moment.)

I just don't understand it, Bud.

BUD

What's that?

HELEN

Why Sydney feels the need to hide things from me.

BUD

Is that right?

HELEN

Whatta you mean, "is that right"?

BUD

I don't mean anythin' by it. It's just a turn of phrase is all.

HELEN

So, that's all you've got to say?

BUD

Well, whatta you want me to say?

HELEN

You ain't got nothin' to add?

BUD

I don't know what you're gettin' at.

HELEN

So, you're just gonna take Sydney's side on this?

BUD

What're you talkin' about? I ain't takin' sides. I didn't know there was a side to take.

HELEN

Your daughter goes and gets herself arrested and then tells you that she's a... that she's a... I can't even bring myself to say it.

BUD

Well, we can say it out loud or we can just keep it to ourselves. Don't matter either way. It ain't gonna change the fact that she is who she is.

HELEN

And you're okay with it.

Syd by Craig Houk

BUD

I don't know. There ain't nothin' we can do about it anyway.

HELEN

Well, that ain't true. There's plenty we can do.

BUD

Oh yeah? So, what then, huh? We gonna pray?

HELEN

For starters.

BUD

And then what?

HELEN

And then I think maybe we send her off somewhere for treatment.

(A beat. Bud chuckles and then shakes his head.)

This funny to you?

BUD

No. No. Ain't none of this funny to me. Maybe I'm laughin' because I'm just so damned worn-out right now. I mean, why does everything have to always be black or white, right or wrong with you, huh? This is our daughter we're talkin' about here. Our only child. And you're proposin' that we just ship her off to what...? Some kinda madhouse?

HELEN

We gotta do somethin', Bud. It's for her own good.

BUD

For her own good? The Larson's have been doin' for years what they thought was for Roscoe's own good and look how that turned out. Is that what you want for Syd?

HELEN

It ain't the same thing, Bud...

BUD

(Interrupting, maybe too loud and aggressive as he rises.)

...It is the same thing! It's the same goddam thing!

(Helen is stunned into silence. Bud takes a long moment to compose himself.)

By the time Beau and I made our way over to Iberville Street, there wasn't much left of that buildin'. Just a stack of bricks and broken out windows. The fire was almost out, but we could still feel the heat of it. Lots of smoke and ash in the air. And as we made our way around the corner, we saw a crowd of people carryin' on and pointin' upwards. I heard one guy say, "The only good faggot is a dead faggot." And that's when Beau and I looked up. Took us a few seconds to figure out what everyone was starin' at. Beau was the first to see him. It was Roscoe. He was hangin' out the second-floor window, one arm danglin', the hair on his head completely burned away, his eyes and mouth wide open. It looked like one of the glass panes came down on him, trappin' him there. Beau begged 'em to pull Roscoe outta there; he even offered to do it himself. But they just left him up there for almost two hours. And them folks on the street... they just kept pointin' at him and mockin' him.

(Beat.)

And I wondered to myself, what must it be like to have to hide who you are from the world? To have to somehow take that burden of pain and grief and to put it up over your shoulder. Up on a shelf somewhere in the dark. Way up high. And to just leave it there. Because if you don't tuck it away outta reach, you might not make it through another day.

BEAU (Off.)

Bud! Hey Bud!

BUD

What the hell's goin' on now?

(Beau appears, out of breath.)

BEAU

Hey, listen. Is Syd around?

HELEN

Yeah, Beau. She's in the house. What's wrong?

BEAU

I don't know exactly. It's Beverly.

BUD

She okay?

BEAU

No. She's in real bad shape. I was hopin' Syd might take a look at her.

BUD

Yeah. All right. Okay.

(He calls out.)

Syd!

(He heads to the door and calls in.)

Syd...!

HELEN

(Overlapping.)

...Sydney!

SYD (Off.)

I'm comin'!

HELEN

You need to hurry, Sydney!

(Sydney enters the porch.)

SYD

What's the matter? What's happened?

BUD

Beverly ain't feelin' well.

BEAU

She's all red and swollen. And she's been throwin' up for about an hour now.

SYD

Well, Jesus, Beau. She needs to go to the hospital.

BEAU

I tried, but she won't budge. Every time I touch her, she cries out. I don't know what else I can do. The boys are scared shitless. I don't know if she's gonna make it.

SYD

Listen, we gotta get her to the hospital. Okay? So, you need to go to your car, get it started and wait for us there. I'll head over and see what I can do.

BEAU

Okay.

(Beau runs off.)

SYD

Daddy, you come with me. I'm gonna need your help gettin' Beverly outta that house.

BUD

Yeah. Yeah, 'course.

(Bud heads off ahead of Sydney.)

HELEN

(Calling after her.)

Sydney.

SYD

(She stops and turns to Helen.)

What is it, Mama?

HELEN

Billy and Jack.

SYD

Shit. Well, I guess they're just gonna have to squeeze into the car with the rest of us.

HELEN

No, I'll look after 'em. 'Em boys have seen enough already. I'm just gonna grab a few things from the kitchen and I'll be right over. Gotta make myself useful.

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

(She starts off again.)

HELEN

Sydney...

SYD

(Interrupting.)

...Sorry, Mama. I ain't got time. I really gotta go.

(Sydney is off. Helen stands alone for a short moment, feeling anxious and unsure. She takes a deep breath and then exits into the house.)

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

(June 25, 1973. Late evening. The kitchen. The carrot cake still sits on the table. We see Sydney approaching the door. She enters, grabs a beer from the refrigerator, opens it and takes a seat at the table. She drinks alone for a moment. We then see Helen approach the door and enter.)

HELEN

Where's your Daddy?

SYD

He went out to the tool shed. Said he needed to check on somethin'. Didn't say what.

HELEN

How'd you get back home?

SYD

We walked.

HELEN

You walked? Well, that's almost three miles. Why didn't you call? I would've picked you up.

SYD

It's fine, Mama. We wanted to walk. And besides, it didn't make sense for you to leave 'em boys all by 'emselves.

HELEN

They're fast asleep. Been that way for a coupla hours now.

(Helen joins Sydney at the table. She notices some scratches on Sydney's face.)

What happened to your face?

SYD

It's nothin'. I'm okay.

(A moment.)

HELEN

How's Beverly?

SYD

She ain't doin' so well.

HELEN

Did they say what was wrong with her?

SYD

Well, they did some bloodwork and found that she had cyanide in her system.

HELEN

Cyanide?

SYD

Almost enough to kill her. She's lucky to be alive.

HELEN

My God. Well, how in the world did she...?

SYD

(Interrupting, quietly.)

...She drank it, Mama.

HELEN

She did what?

SYD

She mixed it with some sweet tea. And she drank it.

HELEN

Why? Why would she do that to herself?

(A moment.)

SYD

Have you ever thought about killin' yourself, Mama?

HELEN

What a terrible thing to ask me.

SYD

Well, have you?

HELEN

`Course not. It's a sin.

(A moment.)

SYD

Do you remember a few years back when the dryer broke? And we had to hang the wash out on the line?

HELEN

Oh boy, do I. It was nearly a month before Bud could fix it. I had to haul those wet clothes up from the basement and out to the yard. I nearly broke my back.

SYD

A coupla times you asked me to bring the wash in and fold it.

HELEN

S'right. And I was happy for the help.

(Quick beat.)

Sydney, why are you bringin' this up?

SYD

I think maybe it was a Monday, because I remember the smell of red beans cookin'. I grabbed the wash basket off the couch, and I went out back. And as I was headin' to collect the laundry, I saw this yellow-rumped warbler fly out of a shrub, dive into the grass under the Cyprus tree, and then shoot back up and settle down on the clothesline. She just perched herself there at the far end, a few inches from the post, facin' away from me. So, I moved in closer. And when I did, she turned 'round real quick. Looked me dead in the eye. Cocked her head. And that's when I spotted a caterpillar in her beak. It was bright orange. Tiny little thing. And so I thought to myself... what if... what if I could get my hand on the clothesline? And tug at it? Well, I just might surprise that warbler. You know? And maybe cause her to drop the caterpillar. Give it a chance to get away. So, I reached up real slow. But before I could get my hand in place, she bent her head back and swallowed that caterpillar whole. And then she flew off. And you know, it made me real sad, Mama. Sadder than I oughta've been, considerin' it was just some grubby old bird and a stupid little bug...

HELEN

Sydney...

SYD

(Overlapping.)

...So, I set the basket on the ground and turned to see one of Daddy's work shirts hangin' there. I pulled the pins from it, took it down, and I put it on. Then I took a step forward and pressed my forehead against the clothesline. Leaned into a bit to check the tension. Then I rose up on my toes and rested my chin there. Nodded my head a few times. And then walked myself forward until the rope met my neck. I remember breathin' in real deep before I let my knees fall forward and my heels kick up. I dropped quick. Felt a sharp pain in my throat and then flipped backwards on to the grass. I laid there for a long while until I

could stop coughin' and catch my breath. And when my nerves settled, I got up, dusted myself off, pulled the rest of the wash from the line, and brought it into the house to fold.

(A moment. Helen is at a loss for words.)

Beverly wanted to die, Mama. That's why I've got these scratches on my face. She fought tooth and nail to keep us from draggin' her outta that house. Daddy slapped her real hard. Knocked her out. That's the only way we could get her to the hospital.

(Bud enters through the kitchen door. He is distracted, distraught, not himself.)

BUD

Goddamit.

SYD

(Sydney rises to meet him.)

What's the matter, Daddy?

BUD

I took the lock off the tool shed yesterday and I forgot to put it back.

SYD

Is somethin' missin'?

BUD

I searched every inch of that shed and I couldn't find it anywhere.

HELEN

Well, what is it, Bud? What were you lookin' for?

BUD

Now listen to me. You both gotta understand. I wouldn't have it if I didn't need it for my work.

SYD

Daddy, what're you talkin' about?

BUD

I sometimes use it to keep my tools from warpin', sometimes I use it to harden the metals...

HELEN

(Interrupting.)

..Bud, please.

(A moment.)

BUD

I keep a bottle of Sodium Cyanide in the shed. But it ain't there no more. And I expect that's what Beverly got her hands on.

(All are silent for a moment.)

HELEN

I'm gonna go check on Billy and Jack.

(Helen exits out the kitchen door. Bud moves to the kitchen table and sits. Sydney grabs another beer from the refrigerator, opens it and hands it to Bud.)

SYD

Now, come on, Daddy. You know damn well Beverly was gonna do it one way or another.

(Bud takes a swig of his beer. He spots the carrot cake on the table. He reaches for it, pulls it toward him and removes the dish cover. He replaces the dish cover.)

BUD

Syd.

SYD

Yeah?

BUD

Go see if your Mama needs some help.

SYD

You okay, Daddy?

BUD

I'm fine.

(Sydney hesitates.)

Go.

SYD

All right.

(Sydney exits through the kitchen door. After she's gone, Bud takes the carrot cake from the table and carries it to a waste basket. He drops it in. He then takes the plastic bag out of the waste basket, ties it off and exits through the kitchen door.)

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 5

(July 4th, 1973. Evening. The Larson's Livingroom. Sounds of fireworks in the distance. Sydney sits on an ottoman facing Beverly, who is sitting in an armchair. Beverly's dinner sits on a tray table.)

(NOTE: Beverly is not wholly incapacitated, though she is unwell and recovering. She could speak and move if she wanted to; she's just choosing to be difficult. Where a "beat" or "moment" is noted in the following, Beverly may respond with a sound, a mumble, a gesture or a movement of her choosing. She may also decide not to respond at all.)

SYD

I gotta say, Beverly, for a woman who's generally not at a loss for words, you've been awfully quiet this evenin'.

(Beat.)

You need to eat somethin', you hear me?

(Beat.)

And look here, your hands ain't shakin' like they was just a few days ago, so I think it's time you start feedin' yourself, okay? So, why don't try puttin' that fork in your hand to see how it feels.

(Beat.)

All right now listen. Truth is, you ain't never gonna get back to the way you were. Okay? But you're damn sure gonna get better than you are now. You're gonna be fine. You know that, right?

(Beat.)

So, I guess this is how it's gonna go then. Hm? You just gonna keep to yourself? Pretend that I'm not in the room?

(Beat.)

Okay, I get it. You're upset about missin' the fireworks, aren't you? Well, so am I, but here we are and there ain't much we can do about it now.

(Beat.)

Nonetheless, I'm sure your boys are havin' a nice time with their Daddy tonight. It was a good idea 'em getting' outta the house for a while. I mean, everyone needs a happy distraction now and then, right?

(Beat.)

Oh, and hey, a bit of good news. The police are pretty sure they got the guy who set that fire.

(Beat.)

Rodger Nunez. You remember him?

(Beat.)

I never liked him much. He was nothin' but a bully. So, I ain't the least bit surprised he'd do somethin' like that.

(Beat.)

Turns out they wouldn't let him into the bar. So, he just marched on over to the Walgreens across the street, bought some

lighter fluid and he... well, I suppose there ain't no need to get into the particulars of it.

(Beat.)

Anyhow, I thought maybe you'd wanna know.

(A moment.)

Roscoe was cremated by the way. The church decided to keep his ashes in an urn under the alter. For the time bein' anyway. Until they can afford a burial for him. Most of the men who died in that fire were part of the congregation. So, them expenses are gonna add up.

(Beat.)

Oh, and they held a memorial service for him this past Sunday. Over on Claiborne. Me, Daddy, and even Mama went. It was a beautiful service. The pews were full up, so we had to stand all the way in the back of the vestibule near the entrance.

(Beat.)

So, I get that maybe you don't wanna hear this right now, but I think I should tell you. Roscoe was loved. By a lot of folks. And I don't mean to say that to be spiteful. I ain't tryin' to rub salt in the wound. I guess I'm just hopin' that maybe it might bring you some comfort to know that he meant somethin' to a lot of people.

(A moment.)

And I might be oversteppin' my bounds here, Beverly. But I really and truly think you ought to find a way to get all that hate outta your heart. I mean, look where it's got you. Stuck in your house on the fourth of July and bein' hand-fed by a smart mouthed lesbian.

(Beat.)

Now, come on. I'm runnin' outta patience here. Just one bite. Okay?

(Sydney takes the fork and stabs it into the food. She then raises the fork to Beverly's mouth.)

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 6

(July 17, 1973. Early Evening. The kitchen. We see Bud dressed in formal attire. He's a bit nervous and drinking a beer. After a moment, Helen enters. She is dressed nicely as well. She carries a necklace and is putting an earring in.)

HELEN

Can you help me with this, Bud?

BUD

(He puts the beer down.)

'Course. Turn around there.

(Helen turns around. Bud takes the necklace, places it around her neck and fastens it.)

HELEN

And why are you havin' a beer? Hm? I'd rather you weren't tanked-up when you get up on that stage to accept your award.

BUD

Oh, come on now. Cut me some slack, will you? I'm nervous. I ain't never been up in front of that many people before. All of 'em eyes on me. Shit, I expect I'm gonna just freeze up and forget what I'm supposed to say. And besides, one beer ain't gonna get me drunk.

HELEN

Okay, well there ain't nothin' to be nervous about. You're a blacksmith, not an orator. So, expectations are already gonna be low. And for goodness sake, if you get all flustered then just read from the note cards I put together for you. They're in your jacket pocket there.

BUD

Thank you, sweetheart. I don't know what I'd do without you.

HELEN

Well, you ain't completely useless, so I expect you'd get on just fine.

(Quick beat.)

How do I look?

(Helen does a twirl.)

BUD

Beautiful as always.

HELEN

You shut up.

(Bud pulls Helen to him. They embrace and kiss.)

Where's that daughter of yours?

BUD

Well, I expect she's still gettin' ready. And why is she just my daughter when she's in trouble?

HELEN

She ain't in trouble. But she's gonna be if she don't get down here soon.

(She calls out.)

Sydney!

(Quick beat.)

Oh, and hey. I gave her some money. Sent her to Maison Blanche the other day for somethin' nice to wear. There's this long sleeve, midi length, bubble gum pink dress there. It's got a high neck and the bodice is covered in these beautiful, tiny beaded flowers. It looks like an empire waist but it ain't, so it's not too snug across the bust line, very simple. And best of all, it was on sale.

(Quick beat.)

BUD

I'm sorry, what?

HELEN

I just thought she should look pretty for your big night.

BUD

Well, I gotta say, that don't sound like somethin' she'd wear.

HELEN

And how often do you wear a tuxedo?

BUD

First time ever. Feels more like a straitjacket. I'd be a lot more comfortable in my overalls.

HELEN

My point exactly. I mean, if you can put up with it for a few hours, then so can she. This is your night.

(She calls out.)

Sydney!

BUD

Oh, now don't rush her. We got time.

HELEN

Bud...

BUD

(Interrupting.)

...We got time.

(Beat.)

What's the matter?

HELEN

There ain't nothin' the matter.

BUD

You sure? Because I'm startin' to get the feelin' that I ain't the only one's who's on edge tonight.

(A moment.)

You know, we ain't gonna be able to cover up what's happened with a bubble gum pink dress. We've done all we can. It took a little bit of money and a lot of sweet-talkin' to get 'em charges dropped, but it's done. And Syd's safe now. As safe as she can be.

HELEN

People know, Bud. And they're talkin'.

BUD

Let 'em talk. Nothin' we can do about it. They're gonna just keep talkin' anyway, until they find somethin' else to talk about.

(Beat.)

Everythin' I need... everythin' I care about is under this roof. I'm gonna look out for you. And I'm gonna look out for my daughter. And I wouldn't mind so much if the two of you'd look out for me too.

HELEN

Well, 'course, Bud.

(Helen is overwhelmed.)

BUD

You gonna cry now?

HELEN

I might.

BUD

Well, go ahead. I just might join you.

(Helen rests her head on Bud's chest. A moment.)

SYD *(Off.)*

Mamma? Daddy?

HELEN

(Calling back.)

Yeah, Syd?

SYD

Is it time to go?

BUD

(Calling back.)

Well, your Mama's called for you twice now, so we're just waitin' on you, baby girl.

SYD *(Off.)*

Okay, I'll be right there. I'm just puttin' on my other shoe.

HELEN

(They both look to the archway. Helen breathes deeply. To Bud.)

Oh, boy. Here we go.

BUD

How much you wanna bet she ain't wearin' that dress?

HELEN

Gamblin's a sin, Bud. And besides, there ain't no way in hell I'd take that bet.

(They look back to the archway.)

SYD *(Off.)*

All right. I'm comin' out.

(Lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY