

LOST IN PLACE

ANTHOLOGY

Six Intersecting Playlets

By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

© 2021 by Craig Houk
1325 Taylor Street NW, APT 2
Washington, DC 20011
617-515-1838
hok1969@gmail.com

Lost in Place Anthology interweaves six sharply observed, darkly comic playlets set in a nearly abandoned American town buckling under a relentless pandemic. A former mob wife is recruited by a wary detective to entrap a grandmother plotting to kill her pregnant daughter-in-law; a conspiracy-minded husband drives away his family while a well-meaning neighbor makes a fateful choice; martinis, stolen rutabagas, and buried resentments culminate in a shocking mercy; a prickly recluse and her abrasive visitor reveal unexpected tenderness; two widowed neighbors memorialize love with lawn chairs and gallows humor; and a displaced mother seeks refuge from an ex-cop guarding more than just her property. By turns absurd, profane, and poignant, the anthology explores isolation, moral compromise, and the uneasy intimacy of those left behind when the world falls apart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SEXUAL WELLNESS AISLE	1
THE SHORT STRAW	8
THE RUCKUS	16
THE DUMPY LITTLE HERMIT	25
THE CORPSE FLOWER	31
THE COLOR OF HER EYES	39

THE SEXUAL WELLNESS AISLE

Synopsis

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, wearing a mask. She appears puzzled, looking around. Suddenly, a voice over the intercom.

JODY

Have a seat, Barbara.

BARBARA

(Startled.)

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

JODY

Sorry about that.

BARBARA

And call me Barb.

JODY

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

BARBARA

Yeah. No I understand. I get it. So... I should have a seat here?

(She points to the only chair.)

JODY

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

BARBARA

(Looking around.)

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

JODY

Alright then. If you don't mind settlin' in, that'd be great. And if you're, uh... comfortable takin' off your mask, feel free.

BARBARA

I think I will. Thank you kindly.

(She sits and takes off her mask.)

It's kinda sparse in here, don't ya think?

JODY

Yeah, well... we try not to make things too cozy. The holdin' cells are fully furnished, though. So, let me know if you'd like a tour sometime.

BARBARA

(Light laugh.)

That's very funny— sorry, what's your name?

JODY

Jody.

BARBARA

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

JODY

Fair enough. Do you need anything before we get started? Water? Coffee? Soda?

BARBARA

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

JODY

Understood. Shouldn't take too long.

BARBARA

Good to hear. My programs start in about an hour.

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' we can wrap this up in about fifteen to twenty minutes. Give or take. But mostly take.

JODY

Well, uh... no offense, Barb, but you're the one 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

And if it's any consolation, I've got what they call deuteranopia.

BARBARA

Oh, yeah?

JODY

Form of color blindness.

BARBARA

I didn't realize this was a competition.

JODY

Oh. Uh... It's not. I just thought—

BARBARA

Seems like you might be the one holdin' things up now.

JODY

You're right. So, uh... why don't we get down to business then.

BARBARA

You got it.

JODY

Accordin' to my notes, you stated that Ginny Lumley approached you recently. Is that right?

BARBARA

S'right. Over at the Walgreens.

JODY

And you work there.

BARBARA

Mm hm. Part-time. Stockin' shelves.

JODY

And Ginny spoke to you there?

BARBARA

That's correct. Tuesday mornin'. 'Round eight-thirty or nine. In the sexual wellness aisle.

JODY

I see.

BARBARA

We'd just gotten a shipment of lubricants in, so I was puttin' 'em up—

JODY

Right. Uh... we can skip those particulars. Maybe just focus on what Ginny said.

BARBARA

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

JODY

Mm hm. That's all she said?

BARBARA

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

JODY

Connections? How so?

BARBARA

(Sighs.)

Alright. I don't much like talkin' about it, but... a long while back I was married to a fella went by Mabry-Five-Second-One-Shot. They called him that 'cause 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 kind of gangster?

BARBARA

S'right. But we parted ways a long time ago. Turns out I wasn't mobster-wife material. Too much work. I enjoyed the money, the big city... but there were "expectations" came along with it. And I just didn't have the inclination. Or the energy. So, somehow Ginny got it into her head I still had "associates" in those "circles".

JODY

Did she say why she wanted Marlene dead?

BARBARA

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

JODY

And, uh... how did you respond?

BARBARA

First thing I asked was, "Isn't Marlene pregnant?"

JODY

I'm sorry, what? She's pregnant?

BARBARA

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

JODY

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, what'd you say?

BARBARA

I told her I'd think on it and get back to her.

JODY

And that was it?

BARBARA

Mm hm. She left, and then I called here. To report it.

JODY

That was the right thing to do.

BARBARA

Was it, though? Because now I'm thinkin', what've I gotten myself into? Some crazy old bag wants to kill the woman carryin' her grandbaby, and she comes to me for help. I'd like to blame Mabry. But what good would that do? Might take a little of the guilt off. But it's bullshit. I knew exactly who he was when I met him, and I fell for him anyway. That's the bed I made. Laid in it for eight years. I never meant anyone any harm. But choices I made fifty years ago brought Ginny Lumley to me in the sexual wellness aisle at Walgreens. So... in a way... I suppose I'm an accomplice to her dumbass scheme. Maybe I should take you up on that offer. One of those holdin' cells.

JODY

That's not gonna happen. We, uh... don't arrest innocent people. Not around here. I am curious though.

BARBARA

What's that?

JODY

How does a woman part ways with a gangster? Seems like a dangerous move on your part.

BARBARA

Oh. Well, maybe I wasn't clear. Turns out, even Mabry couldn't get very far in five seconds.

JODY

(Chuckles.)

Okay. Say no more, Barb.

BARBARA

So, you get my meanin' then.

JODY

No, I do not entirely get your meanin'. That's why I'm askin' you not to say more. Let's let that sleepin' dog lie.

BARBARA

Yeah. That's what I thought at the time.

JODY

Alright then. Listen, Barb. I'm gonna need you to do somethin' for me.

BARBARA

Oh yeah?

JODY

Yeah. It involves you and Ginny. Might be a little tricky, but I think you'll do just fine. And if you agree... it might ease some of that guilt you're carryin'

BARBARA

Hm. Alright. Lay it on me, Jody. Whatta you got? And make it quick. It's nearly sundown.

(Lights to black.)

THE SHORT STRAW

Synopsis

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 sits on an old, rusted metal chair, drinking from a bottle of whiskey. Maybe he smokes. Teddy approaches, keeping his distance.

HANK

Somethin' I can help you with?

TEDDY

It's Hank, right?

HANK

S'right. Who's askin'?

TEDDY

Right. Sorry. Name's Teddy. Me and my wife, Danielle, we moved here a few months back. We're just across the road. Yellow house, gray trim.

HANK

Aw, damn.

TEDDY

What?

HANK

Looks like you drew the short straw, Teddy.

TEDDY

The short straw? How do you mean?

HANK

Livin' next to 'em lesbians.

TEDDY

Oh. Right. Well, they seem alright to me. Adele pretty much keeps to herself, and Rhonda... well, she's a character, but she's harmless. She has shitty taste in beer, though, that's for damn sure.

HANK

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

TEDDY

Nothin', really. Just thought I'd check in. What with the pandemic and all. Felt like the neighborly thing to do.

HANK

Ah. Well, I appreciate the concern, but 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...

HANK

What?

TEDDY

Listen. It's a small town. People talk.

HANK

They sure do.

TEDDY

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

HANK

Accurate on all accounts, Teddy.

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.

TEDDY

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

(Teddy starts off.)

HANK

It's a hoax, you know.

TEDDY

What's that?

HANK

This... virus. It's all bullshit.

TEDDY

You think so?

HANK

I know so.

TEDDY

Lots of people are sick, Hank. And lots of ‘em are dead.

HANK

It’s just the flu. People get sick every year. People die every year. It is what it is. But now – suddenly – we’re on lockdown? Come on. When in this country’s history have we ever quarantined healthy people? You quarantine the sick, not the healthy. It’s a joke.

TEDDY

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

HANK

Hey, listen. You want the government tellin’ you what to do, go right ahead. You like havin’ your brain washed, that’s your problem. That ain’t how I live my life. And 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

Hell, you’re young enough. You ain’t got nothin’ to worry about.

TEDDY

Yeah, well... we’re tryin’ to start a family.

HANK

Oh yeah?

TEDDY

We’re hopin’ for a girl.

HANK

Huh. Most men want boys. I know I did. But... three strikes and I was out.

TEDDY

Come on. It can’t have been all that bad.

HANK

Be careful what you wish for, Teddy.

TEDDY

Anyway... that's why I'm 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? No. Come on now. You're puttin' me on.

HANK

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

TEDDY

I don't know about that, Hank.

HANK

Look, I'm just providin' you with the facts. Take 'em or leave 'em. Your choice.

TEDDY

Well, I appreciate the information.

HANK

My wife left me.

TEDDY

Oh. I, uh—

HANK

You don't have to pretend you didn't know. That's why you came over, ain't it? "Tough time to be on your own." That what you meant?

(Teddy nods.)

Thought so. Yeah. She took the kids. Ran off a few weeks back. Middle of the night.

TEDDY

I'm sorry, Hank.

HANK

She left a note. You wanna hear it?

TEDDY

Uh... No. I'm sure it's—

HANK

I don't mind. Got it right here.

TEDDY

Alright

(Hank pulls a letter and reads.)

HANK

Dear Hank, I suppose there's 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 girls are safe with me. Or more to the point, safe without you. Yours in perpetual bewilderment, Charlene.

TEDDY

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

HANK

Charlene thinks I'm a whack job.

TEDDY

Well... there's two sides to every story, right? I mean... you've got... strong opinions. Just 'cause you see things different doesn't mean you're altogether wrong

HANK

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

TEDDY

I'm just tryin' to be neighborly.

HANK

So, you've said.

(Offer bottle.)

You want a swig?

TEDDY

Uh...

HANK

Come on. Might loosen you up.

TEDDY

You get to know me; you'll find I'm pretty easy-goin'.

HANK

So, is that a yes or a no?

TEDDY

Maybe some other time.

HANK

You worried I got it?

TEDDY

I'm worried we all got it.

HANK

Fair enough.

(Hank drinks.)

TEDDY

You know... sometimes Danielle and I don't agree on things.

HANK

Oh, yeah?

TEDDY

Yeah. I mean, it's no secret – I ain't usually the smartest one in the room. And if I am, I probably wandered into the baboon enclosure at the zoo.

(They share a laugh.)

There's a lot of things I don't know. Or at least didn't know. I used to think film had always been shot in color. Thought old movies just... faded into black and white.

HANK

Get outta here.

TEDDY

Swear to God. So, I finally told Danielle that. And she laughed so hard she nearly choked on a pear. We argued about it for damn near an hour. I knew I was wrong, but I stood my ground anyway. Didn't speak to her for a month. All 'cause I felt like an idiot.

HANK

Shit. Well, I guess we're all idiots at some point. I do miss the days when women knew their place, though. When they treated their men with respect. Used to be consequences for laughin' in a man's face.

TEDDY

Right. Well... I won't keep you any longer, Hank.

HANK

Oh. Okay. Startin' to warm up anyway. I'll head inside.

TEDDY

Nice meetin' you.

HANK

Likewise.

(Teddy turns to go, then stops.)

TEDDY

Before I go...

HANK

Yeah?

TEDDY

I suppose I'll take you up on that swig of whiskey. Only 'cause it seems like the neighborly thing to do.

(Lights to black.)

THE RUCKUS

Synopsis

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.

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, absentmindedly watching TV; the volume is low. A landline phone sits nearby. A moment passes before Marlene enters, a clean spit-up rag over her shoulder and a full bottle of baby formula in hand. She sits. Silence.

MARLENE

Whatta you watchin'?

GINNY

What's that?

MARLENE

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

GINNY

Can't you see for yourself?

MARLENE

I can see there's a commercial on. I just don't know what program it is.

GINNY

Oh. I guess I wasn't payin' attention. It's, uh... whatta you call it...? That cop show. Always ends in a courtroom.

MARLENE

Law and Order.

GINNY

That's the one. They got a marathon goin'. Every episode from the last – shit, I don't know – fifty thousand seasons.

MARLENE

I like that show. And that fella who plays Lennie Briscoe? Goddamn comedic genius.

GINNY

Jerry Orbach. Damn fine actor. Dead, though.

MARLENE

Oh yeah? I didn't know that.

GINNY

Yep. Years ago. Cancer, I think.

MARLENE

That's too bad.

GINNY

Yep. Sounds like Dwayne finally settled down.

MARLENE

Yeah. He's restin'.

GINNY

His fever break?

MARLENE

I believe it has.

GINNY

Well, that's good. Poor little guy. Been sick for weeks.

MARLENE

Almost four months.

GINNY

That long? S'awful. Virus don't care who it infects – not even a baby.

MARLENE

He's alright now. You talked to Barb lately?

GINNY

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

MARLENE

I agree. It ain't.

GINNY

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

MARLENE

Can you blame her?

GINNY

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

MARLENE

Maybe someday.

GINNY

I've apologized a million times. Don't know what more I can do.

MARLENE

Thanks to you, I sleep with one eye open.

GINNY

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

MARLENE

Yeah. That was you.

GINNY

Come on. It's not like I'm gonna try and kill you again. What would be the point? Hell, maybe I oughta be the one worryin' about you killin' me.

MARLENE

You're nuts.

GINNY

It ain't so far-fetched. Maybe you want payback?

MARLENE

Haven't ruled it out.

GINNY

See? You got the gun. Means and motive.

MARLENE

Is that your closin' argument, Mr. McCoy?

GINNY

As a matter of fact, it is. So, can we drop it? Maybe never speak of it again?

MARLENE

Hell no.

GINNY

Fine then. I don't give a rat's ass anymore. 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 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 her a look.)

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

(Ginny exits. The phone rings.)

MARLENE

Well, who the hell's callin' us?

(Answers.)

Hello...?

(Covers the receiver and calls out to Ginny.)

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

GINNY

(Off.)

Which one!?

MARLENE

Rhonda!

GINNY

(Off.)

What the hell does she want!?

MARLENE

(Into the phone.)

No, yeah, I'm here, Rhonda... Sorry – mother-in-law's hollerin'... you know how she gets...

GINNY

(Off.)

Go to hell, Marlene!

MARLENE

(Into the phone.)

Mm hm... No, I ain't seen Adele today. Didn't realize I was on watch duty... My apologies Rhonda, I was just tryin' to be funny... I'm sorry – check where...? Our backyard...? You serious...?

(Calls out to Ginny.)

Ginny!

GINNY

(Off.)

Keep your pants on! Drinks are almost ready!

MARLENE

It ain't about the drinks! Look out the kitchen window! See if Adele's back there!

GINNY

(Off.)

Why the hell would she be back there!?

MARLENE

I don't know! Just look!

(Into the phone.)

Hang on, Rhonda. We're checkin'.

GINNY

(Off.)

Well, I'll be damned! She sure is! Stuffin' our rutabagas into her cargo shorts!

MARLENE

You're lyin'!

GINNY

(Off.)

I am not!

MARLENE

(Into the phone.)

Rhonda... Your lady friend is hijackin' our rutabagas. I'm headin' out back. You might wanna get over here now... Alright. Bye.

(Hangs up. To herself.)

Dammit.

(She exits. Off, a screen door opens and slams shut. The stage is empty. Off.)

Hey Adele! Yeah, I'm talkin' to you, old lady! Put 'em 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!

(Ginny reenters with martinis, sits, drinks. Off, a screen door opens and slams shut. Marlene storms in.)

MARLENE

Can you believe that bitch?

GINNY

Now, sit down and enjoy your martini. Found some olives – decided to make 'em dirty instead.

MARLENE

That took some real balls.

GINNY

What's done is done. Sit. Relax.

(Marlene relents, sits, drinks.)

Did she leave the rutabagas?

MARLENE

She did not.

(Marlene looks to Ginny, exasperated. Ginny starts to laugh quietly. Marlene joins in. They both let out a sigh and continue to drink.)

GINNY

We should check on Dwayne.

MARLENE

Let him rest. He's fine.

GINNY

You sure? Haven't heard a peep out of him. Especially with all that ruckus.

MARLENE

I'll check on him in a bit.

GINNY

(Skeptical.)

Alright.

(They drink. Ginny rises.)

You know what? I'm just gonna peek in.

MARLENE

What did I just say?

GINNY

Yeah, I heard you. Ain't no harm in it, though. So, maybe shut up and just let me do it.

MARLENE

Fine. Suit yourself.

(Ginny exits. Marlene drinks. A quiet moment before Ginny re-enters. She is pale, spooked.)

GINNY

(Quietly.)

Marlene.

MARLENE

Yeah?

GINNY

What have you done?

(Marlene takes a sip. Turns.)

MARLENE

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

(Lights to black.)

PERUSAL

THE DUMPY LITTLE HERMIT

Synopsis

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 sits in a very worn armchair, asleep. A basket of dirty laundry nearby. Adele approaches the porch, looking around for something. She crosses to the screen door and taps lightly.

ADELE

Trina? Trina, you home? 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

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

In here. On the floor. Couple 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

(Winces.)

My back went out.

ADELE

What's that?

TRINA

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

ADELE

Well, that sucks for you. Guess you'll have to go without clean clothes a few more days.

TRINA

Guess so. Would've called, but... I'm stuck in this goddam chair.

ADELE

Hopefully it sorts itself out.

TRINA

It usually does.

ADELE

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

TRINA

I know. I'll be fine. Can't make it to the fridge neither, so... blessin' in disguise, I suppose.

ADELE

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

TRINA

Yep. Saw that. Sneaky little virus keeps mutatin'. Can't keep up.

ADELE

End times for sure.

TRINA

I suppose.

ADELE

I'm gonna start handwashin' your things. Hang 'em out to dry.

TRINA

Now why would you do that when you got a perfectly good washer and dryer? Whole reason you offered was 'cause mine broke.

ADELE

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

TRINA

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

ADELE

I'm doin' my part. Conservin' water, savin' the environment... all that fuckin' nonsense.

TRINA

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

ADELE

Don't get me started on your delicates. They are anythin' but.

TRINA

Right. Sorry. Rough bein' an old lady.

ADELE

And don't be surprised if your things come back stiff and stretched out.

TRINA

There's a fix for that, you know. Shake 'em out before you hang 'em up. Heavier stuff – lay 'em out flat to dry.

ADELE

Like I said... Don't be surprised if your things come back stiff and stretched out.

TRINA

Duly noted. Thanks.

ADELE

Happy to help. Alright then. I'll head on home–

TRINA

Why do you do it, Adele?

ADELE

(Immediately defensive.)

Alright. No need to get belligerent. I steal vegetables from everybody's garden. Slim pickins' at your place, by the way. You don't exactly have a green thumb

TRINA

That's not what I meant. But since you brought it up... what the hell is wrong with you, stealin' from people's yards?

ADELE

Aw shit. Let's just stay on topic, why don't we. I think you were askin' about somethin' a little less criminal in nature?

TRINA

You are somethin' else, Adele.

ADELE

Ain't that the truth.

TRINA

No. It's just ... I been wonderin'. Why come visit? Why help me? You know I don't much like bein' around people.

ADELE

Well, that's somethin' we got in common. Difference is, you avoid people. I tell 'em straight to their face I don't like 'em

TRINA

You still haven't answered me.

ADELE

It ain't no secret I'm an unpleasant woman. That's all I know. All I got. There ain't never been much joy in my life. Except Rhonda, I suppose. Otherwise... it's just sorrow mixed with rage. Some days it's like pushin' through quicksand just to get outta bed. Feels like my skin's been peeled off... like I'm on fire all the time. No way to put it out.

TRINA

Well, that sucks for you. But what's any of that got to do with me?

ADELE

Well, Trina... bein' around you is like a bird shittin' on my head. Turns my stomach, but it's supposed to be good luck.

TRINA

Hard to take that personal when the feelin's mutual.

ADELE

So, have I answered your question?

TRINA

You have.

ADELE

Good. Can I go now?

TRINA

Not before I clear somethin' up. For the record, I don't dislike people. There was a time when I didn't like myself, though. So, I chose to be alone. To sort things out. To mend. To heal. To learn how to live with myself. And maybe to learn how to love myself. Then after a while... I realized how peaceful it was bein' alone. So, I stayed like that. I'm content now, Adele. Wouldn't have it any other way.

ADELE

Well, good for you. I'm gonna head home. Before Rhonda starts to worry.

TRINA

Alright.

ADELE

I'll check 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?

ADELE

I might.

TRINA

Well, I'd prefer you didn't. But if you do... make sure you get my laundry done first.

ADELE

If it's the last thing I do.

(Lights to black.)

THE CORPSE FLOWER

Synopsis

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 carrying a six-pack of beer. She sets it beside one of the chairs on her side of the lawn. She looks to the other chair, folds it, and carries it off. Danielle enters with boxed wine and a plastic cup. She sits, pours, drinks quietly, looking off. Rhonda reenters. They exchange a small nod and smile. Rhonda sits, opens a beer. They drink.

DANIELLE

I see you took the chair away.

RHONDA

Figured it was about time.

DANIELLE

Good for you.

RHONDA

And you?

DANIELLE

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

RHONDA

True enough. I was thinkin' I might make a ceremony of it.

DANIELLE

A ceremony? How?

RHONDA

Well... I've been agonizin' over it for a long time. Tryin' to figure the right way to do it.

DANIELLE

To do what? Get rid of the chair?

RHONDA

Mm hm. First thought was... build a little pile of sticks under it and then set it on fire. Or dig a hole out back, bury it, cover it up, plant some jewelweed on top. Maybe say a prayer over it.

DANIELLE

Aren't you an atheist?

RHONDA

I'm kind of agnostic now. 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... I feel like I've been headed the other direction lately. Losin' my faith. I mean, what's the point? We're all bein' punished. Every last one of us. No one's bein' spared.

RHONDA

Maybe it's God's way of sayin' She meant it when She said we're all equal.

DANIELLE

You think God's a woman?

RHONDA

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

DANIELLE

Fair enough. And you know, that's not actually in there. The Bible, I mean. About everyone bein' equal.

RHONDA

No?

DANIELLE

Not exactly, no.

RHONDA

Huh. 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 put it out with the trash. End of the driveway.

(Danielle leans, looks toward the road.)

DANIELLE

You sure did. And you know it's just gonna sit there. They haven't picked up garbage in... what, months now?

RHONDA

I've lost track.

DANIELLE

Smell's awful when the wind shifts.

RHONDA

I've gotten used to it.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

Oh. Hey. I put together a basket for you. From the garden. Carrots, cabbage, peppers, radishes, tomatoes, beans, lettuce... all the usual suspects. Did real good this year.

RHONDA

Sounds nice.

DANIELLE

I'll scrub 'em down and leave 'em on your porch tonight. You might wanna give 'em another rinse before you cook 'em.

RHONDA

I will. Thanks.

DANIELLE

'Course. Least I can do. With all the preserves you been sendin' over, I been bakin' up a storm. Muffins, cakes, bread... even made a vinaigrette the other day. I'll leave some of that too – you can make yourself a nice salad.

RHONDA

Glad they're not goin' to waste.

DANIELLE

There's a million things you can do with preserves.

(They drink. She looks across the road.)

I see they finally pulled Hank Ouellette outta his car.

RHONDA

Yeah. Yesterday. Two women in hazmat suits came for him.

DANIELLE

He was in there a long while.

RHONDA

Yep. Dropped dead behind the wheel. Just... sittin' there for everyone to see. Or anyone passin' by, at least. I guess he was tryin' to make it to the hospital.

DANIELLE

Even if he made it, I doubt there'd be anyone there to help him.

RHONDA

True enough.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

So that leaves what – every house on that side empty now?

RHONDA

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

DANIELLE

Trina Patterson?

RHONDA

Gray, ramshackle house about a hundred yards that way.

DANIELLE

Don't think I ever met her.

RHONDA

She keeps to herself. One of 'em... whatta you call 'em... introverts. Recluse. Probably what's keepin' her alive.

DANIELLE

Alive for what? The long run? I'm not sure I wanna be around for that.

RHONDA

Yeah. I hear that. Anyway... looks like it's Trina over there, and you, me, and then Marlene Lumley and her mother-in-law three houses down. 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, seein' as they seem to be gettin' along just fine now.

RHONDA

Well, they don't have much of a choice, do they? All they got left is each other. Oh. And do you remember? No... that's right. You and your husband had just moved to town. You probably didn't hear about it. Couple years back, maybe longer. I've lost track. Anyway... Ginny – allegedly – tried to hire someone to kill Marlene.

DANIELLE

Get outta here.

RHONDA

I shit you not. She was friendly, I guess, with a woman who stocked shelves over at the Walgreens. Barbara... Barbara somethin'. Don't much matter. Turns out Barbara had been

married – briefly – to a hitman back in the seventies. So, Ginny figured she still had connections. Well, Barbara was floored. Marlene was nearly nine months pregnant at the time with Dwayne. So, she went straight to the police. They had her go undercover. Wired her up. She met Ginny in her car at the Sonic parkin' lot, out on Highway 27. Ginny didn't have a dime to her name. So, for a down payment, she offered a Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter, a buck knife, one of 'em iPads, four bottles of gold dust... and a Ronald Reagan commemorative coin. And said the job would have to wait... until after the baby was born.

DANIELLE

You have got to be kiddin' me.

RHONDA

I ain't.

DANIELLE

So, what happened?

RHONDA

Nothin'.

DANIELLE

Nothin'? Whatta you mean, 'nothin'?

RHONDA

Pandemic hit not long after. Knocked the whole country on its ass. Ginny was already livin' there, so when the lockdown came, they were all stuck in the same house. So... nothin' ever came of it

DANIELLE

That's just plain crazy. I mean, how do you live with someone who tried to have you killed?

RHONDA

I don't know. But I'd start with a lock on the bedroom door.

DANIELLE

Ain't that the truth? So, why'd she do it?

RHONDA

Ginny never liked her. And Marlene was threatenin' divorce. Said she'd fight tooth and nail for custody of the boys. Ginny figured she'd never see her grandkids again.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

I've been thinkin'.

RHONDA

Oh yeah? About what?

DANIELLE

Well... it don't take a medical degree to see men are more likely to get infected and die.

RHONDA

That's been my take too.

DANIELLE

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

RHONDA

My wife.

DANIELLE

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

RHONDA

Look... I appreciate that you're kind. And I enjoy talkin' with you. But even now, some things are still nobody's business. You understand?

DANIELLE

I didn't mean to upset you. We were just talkin' about the chair, and I know that was a hard decision—

RHONDA

And that's all it is, isn't it? Just a chair. A placeholder. It don't replace her. Just marks where she used to be.

(They drink.)

DANIELLE

So... you think maybe I should do the same?

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. He's the one who convinced me to move here. We were gonna have kids. Raise 'em somewhere quiet. Somewhere safe. Guess that wasn't meant to be. And you know... he wasn't just my husband. He was my friend. Maybe not my best friend, but he loved me with all his heart. Treated me with respect. And my God, he was funny. Made me laugh all the time. I won't repeat some of the things he said – they weren't exactly proper – but I laughed so hard sometimes I thought I might throw 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 suppose that's my way of sayin' I liked your husband too. He was different. Decent company. Though he had shitty taste in beer. We got along just fine.

(They drink.)

Adele did not die from the virus.

DANIELLE

No?

RHONDA

No. She was always... a sad woman. Not that she couldn't enjoy herself. She could. And we enjoyed being together. But she reached her limit. Didn't like the idea of sittin' around watchin' the world fall apart. And when it became clear nobody was gonna fix it – nobody was gonna take responsibility – she stopped seein' the point. She did what she could. Recycled. Conserved water. Planted trees. Hand-washed our clothes. Hung 'em out to dry. But it was never gonna be enough for her. I knew it. She knew it. So... she took matters into her own hands. That's all there was to it.

(They drink. Danielle rises, takes the empty chair, and walks it off. Rhonda watches her. Danielle returns, brings her wine and chair closer, sits beside Rhonda. She pours another cup. Raises it. Rhonda raises her beer. They clink. They drink. Lights to black.)

THE COLOR OF HER EYES

Synopsis

Charlene, looking for shelter, shows up on Jody's doorstep with two of her three daughters.

Characters

JODY, Any Gender, Thirties or Older

CHARLENE, Female, Late Forties

Time

Present.

Setting

A small American town. Springtime. Late morning.

AT RISE: Charlene enters cautiously.

CHARLENE

Hello? Hello? Anyone here? Hello?

(Jody appears, seemingly out of nowhere. A revolver at their hip.)

JODY

Excuse me, / can I, uh...?

CHARLENE

/ Oh, Jesus.

JODY

Can I help you?

CHARLENE

Sorry. I just need to catch my breath. You scared the heck outta me.

JODY

Certainly not my intention.

CHARLENE

No, no. 'Course not. Hoo.

JODY

You, uh... You okay?

CHARLENE

Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you.

JODY

You know, it's not a good idea what you're doin'.

CHARLENE

I know.

JODY

Showin' up unannounced. Here or anywhere else.

CHARLENE

You're right. But... I'm a little desperate. And I've got my girls—

JODY

Your girls?

CHARLENE

My daughters. Two of 'em. They're waitin' in the car.

JODY

I see.

CHARLENE

We don't have anywhere to go. We're nearly outta gas. And there's a storm comin'.

JODY

Yeah. I, uh... heard about that on the radio.

CHARLENE

So, you know it's gonna be bad.

JODY

High winds, heavy rain, some floodin'. Frankly a relief from this dry heat.

CHARLENE

And it's only just Spring.

JODY

But I understand. Not safe for you and your girls.

CHARLENE

No, it's not. And I know it's a big ask but–

JODY

Are you sick?

CHARLENE

Sorry?

JODY

Are you sick?

CHARLENE

No. No, none of us are. We stopped at a drive-through testing site a couple hours ago. I've got the papers.

(She produces them.)

Do you have a workin' phone?

JODY

I do. Just set 'em on the, uh... ground. And maybe step back a bit.

CHARLENE

'Course.

(She does. Jody scans them.)

JODY

You're Charlene?

CHARLENE

S'right. Tammy and Tracey are my girls.

JODY

Name's Jody.

CHARLENE

Nice to meet you.

JODY

Everything checks out.

(Jody steps back. Charlene retrieves the papers.)

You got any other kids?

CHARLENE

I do. How did you—?

JODY

Used to be a cop. Still am, I guess. Just not officially. Got the badge, the uniform, the gun... but none of it's much use anymore. I'm good at pickin' up on things.

CHARLENE

Theresa. My oldest.

JODY

She okay?

CHARLENE

I don't know.

JODY

On her own?

CHARLENE

No. She left with a young man. Seemed nice enough. But I worry.

JODY

'Course.

CHARLENE

I could've stopped her. I wanted to. But I didn't.

JODY

How do you mean?

CHARLENE

I suppose any of us can pretty much do as we please. That's how the world works now, isn't it? All I ever wanted was to keep my daughters close, to protect them, just the four of us together. I didn't like the idea of Theresa runnin' off with him, so I pulled that young man aside. I was ready to say whatever it took to make sure he walked away alone and never looked back. But instead... I just asked him to take care of her, and to keep her safe.

JODY

You're a better human than me.

CHARLENE

I don't know about that. A better human probably wouldn't have left her husband to die alone.

JODY

I'm sure you had your reasons.

CHARLENE

He was a dumbass. And he was gonna get us all killed.

JODY

You did the right thing.

CHARLENE

Maybe. Anyway... that's why I let her go. Tomorrow could be the end of everything. So, if she had a chance at somethin' like a decent life, to maybe find some happiness, to fall in love... I couldn't take that from her.

JODY

Fair enough. So, uh... listen. I don't have much to offer. Not much food, but I've got plenty of water. And I think you'd better get your car tucked out of the way. It's a precious commodity these days. Someone'll snatch it up if you're not careful.

CHARLENE

True enough. 'Cept—

JODY

There's a barn a couple hundred yards that way. We can lock it up. I've got some gas too – fill your tank. You and your girls can stay here. At least till the storm passes.

CHARLENE

You mean it?

JODY

Just for the time bein'.

CHARLENE

'Course. And I'm sorry, but I have to ask...

JODY

Oh. Right.

(Jody raises their hand, palm facing out.)

You can scan here.

They've rolled out an upgrade. Same as the papers, just tattooed. Harder to lose. Unless you lose your hand. Go ahead. It'll read fine from there.

(Charlene pulls out her phone, manipulates it and then aims it at Jody's palm. She then turns the phone around to review it.)

CHARLENE

Thank you.

JODY

We take care of each other by takin' care of ourselves. Right?

CHARLENE

Right.

JODY

Hey, listen.

CHARLENE

Mm hm?

JODY

I, uh... don't wanna get your hopes up, but... there's a chance I saw your daughter.

CHARLENE

Oh, God.

JODY

Couple came through a few weeks back. On foot. Both healthy. I gave 'em some water and a little food. We chatted a bit, and then they moved on. Didn't get names.

CHARLENE

What did they look like?

JODY

Young. Late teens, maybe early twenties. He had dark hair and a little scruff on his chin. She had dirty blond hair. Little taller than him—

CHARLENE

Her eyes?

JODY

Her eyes?

CHARLENE

What color?

JODY

Uh... blue, maybe. Hazel.

CHARLENE

Her eyes are green. Emerald green. Hard to miss.

JODY

Right. Well... they might've been. I don't recall exactly. Like I said... I didn't want to get your hopes up.

CHARLENE

'Course not.

JODY

Could've been the two of 'em... but—

CHARLENE

I'd like to think it was.

JODY

Why don't you bring your car around to the barn. I'll follow you.

CHARLENE

You're sure you're alright with all this?

JODY

I'm sure.

CHARLENE

Thank you. We'll make ourselves useful.

JODY

I appreciate that. Go on. Storm's comin' in soon.

CHARLENE

Alright.

(She exits toward the car, calling off.)

Darn it, Tracey. I told you to stay in the car with your sister. You need to listen when I tell you somethin'...

(She disappears. Car doors. Engine. Driving off. Jody watches. Then slowly draws the revolver. Opens the cylinder – two rounds missing. Takes two bullets from their pocket. Loads them in. Closes the cylinder. They hold the gun low – just out of view – and head toward the barn. Lights to black. End of Anthology.)

PERUSAL