SYD

A play in two acts
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

© 2024 by Craig Houk
1325 Taylor Street NW, APT 2
Washington, DC 20011
617-515-1838
houk1969@gmail.com

Synopsis

In 1973 New Orleans, on the sweltering night a fire tears through the Upstairs Lounge, killing thirty-two men, nineteen-year-old nursing student Sydney "Syd" Trahan is arrested for dancing at a nearby lesbian bar, an act that detonates long-simmering tensions within her devout, working-class family. As her father, Bud, basks in public praise for a professional honor and her mother, Helen, struggles to reconcile faith, reputation, and maternal fear, their neighbors Beau and Beverly Larson confront the consequences of their own cruelty toward their gay son, Roscoe, now among the dead. Over the course of two harrowing days, secrets surface, hypocrisies are exposed, and private reckonings unfold against a backdrop of religious fervor and communal tragedy. SYD is a searing domestic drama about shame, complicity, and the cost of survival in a world that mistakes intolerance for righteousness.

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

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.

Time

1973.

Scene Breakdown

1-1	June 24th	Afternoon	Trahan Kitchen/Porch
1-2	June 24th	Near Sundown	Trahan Kitchen
1-3	June 24th	Sundown	Trahan Porch
1-4	June 24th	Near Midnight	Trahan Kitchen
2-1	June 25th	Morning	Highway 1
2-2	June 25th	Morning	Trahan Kitchen
2-3	June 25th	Early Evening	Trahan Porch
2-4	June 25th	Late Evening	Trahan Kitchen
2-5	July 4th	Evening	Larson Living Room
2-6	July 4th	Evening	Short Distance from the Canal Street Dock
2-7	July 17th	Early Evening	Trahan Kitchen

PERUSAL

ACT 1

SCENE 1

June 24, 1973. Afternoon. A kitchen.

(Helen Trahan has nearly finished setting the dinner table. She is jovial. A television plays offstage. She calls out.)

HELEN

Sydney! Sydney, dinner's ready! Call your Daddy, please! I expect he's out back!

(She takes the main course from the counter and sets it at the center of the table. Calls again.)

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

(She waits. No response. She crosses to the archway, calling into the living room.)

Sydney!

SYD

(Off.)

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

My goodness, you play that TV way too loud.

SYD

(Off.)

Sorry, Mama. I'll turn it down.

HELEN

No, just turn it off. Now listen. I've put together a nice meal for the three of us, and I'd appreciate it if you and your Daddy came to the table.

SYD

(Off.)

Okay, Mama.

HELEN

And wash your hands.

PERUSAL

SYD

(Off.)

Yes, ma'am.

(Helen retrieves a pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator. The television goes quiet.)

Daddy! Dinner's ready!

HELEN

(Quietly with a sigh.)

God give me strength.

(She sets out three glasses and begins pouring lemonade. Bud Trahan enters.)

BUD

Somethin' smells real good in here.

(He kisses her cheek.)

HELEN

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

(Bud sits.)

BUD

Where's Syd?

HELEN

I sent her to wash up. And honestly, how many times do I have to ask you to please stop callin' her that?

BUD

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

HELEN

"Syd" sounds like a man's name, at least to me. She's a grown woman now. 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.

PERUSAL

HELEN

(Calling off.)

Sydney!

(Sydney Trahan enters.)

SYD

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

HELEN

Please don't speak to me that way. Let me see your hands.

SYD

I think I know how to wash my own / hands.

HELEN

/ Let me see 'em.

(Sydney shows her hands, palms up, then down.)

Sit down.

(They sit. Helen studies her.)

SYD

What? What'd I do now?

HELEN

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

SYD

Nothin's gotten into me, 'cept you've been all over my ass / since church this mornin'.

BUD

/ Syd, please.

HELEN

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

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

PERUSAL

BUD

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

SYD

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

HELEN

/ I'm almost at my limit with you, young / lady.

BUD

(Calm but firm.)

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

HELEN

Yes, it is.

SYD

Fine with me. I'm starved.

(Sydney reaches for food. Helen stops her.)

HELEN

Are you tryin' to upset me on purpose?

(Sydney pulls back.)

BUD

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

SYD

Right. Sorry, Mama.

(Helen takes both their hands.)

HELEN

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

(They cross themselves, Sydney half-heartedly.)

Now, how about I make everyone's plate? Like old times?

PERUSAL

SYD

I can make my / own plate.

BUD

(To Helen.)

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

SYD

'Course, Daddy.

(Bud hands over his plate.)

HELEN

Thank you, Bud.

(She serves him.)

BUD

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

HELEN

No, Bud. / I haven't.

SYD

/ Maybe it fell out when the paper boy tossed it onto the porch. I'll check out front.

(Sydney starts to rise.)

HELEN

Stay right where you are. You can look after we've eaten. I assume it's not urgent.

(Sydney sits.)

BUD

No, I suppose it ain't. But of all days for that to go missin'. Hm.

(He sips his lemonade.)

HELEN

Alright, what is it, Bud? Why're you actin' all coy?

PERUSAL

BUD

Oh, never mind.

HELEN

Come on, now. Out with it.

BUD

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

(He winks at Sydney.)

HELEN

Fine. I've lost interest anyway. It can wait forever, 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 it, maybe run next door. See if the Larsons will lend us theirs?

SYD

Sure.

(Helen hands Bud his plate.)

BUD

(To Helen.)

Thank you, dear.

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

HELEN

Sydney.

(Sydney hands it over.)

Go ahead and eat, Bud.

PERUSAL

(She gives Sydney noticeably smaller portions.)

BUD

You sure you ladies don't mind if I start?

SYD

'Course not, Daddy.

BUD

Helen?

HELEN

Didn't I just say?

BUD

Alright then. Everything 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

(Takes a bite.)

Mm… Mm, mm, mm. So good. You've outdone yourself, Helen.

HELEN

(Blushing.)

You stop.

BUD

I'm serious. Best meal ever. Like heaven on a biscuit.

HELEN

Thank you, Bud. Now hush and eat.

(She smiles, hands Sydney her plate.)

Here you go.

PERUSAL

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

(They eat. Helen serves herself.)

BUD

So, how're your studies comin', baby girl?

SYD

Oh. Uh… good. Real good, actually.

BUD

Well, that's nice to hear. And your grades?

SYD

Ninety-three percent.

BUD

Wow! Ninety-three percent! That's great! What does that mean exactly?

SYD

Anything ninety-three or above is "excellent." Grade point value of four.

BUD

Oh, boy. And?

SYD

I got an 'A', Daddy.

BUD

Ah! That's what I wanted to hear. 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–

PERUSAL

BUD

Alright, let's cut her some slack. Studyin' to be a nurse ain't easy. And she works hard. How many hours you puttin' in at the hospital, Syd?

SYD

Twenty a week. Forty-five during vacation breaks.

BUD

(To Helen.)

You see?

SYD

And excuse me, Mama, if once in a while I like to sit in front of the TV. Sometimes it's nice to relax and not think about bed pans and bed sores for a couple hours.

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

BEAU

(Off.)

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

BEVERLY

(Off.)

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

(Beverly appears at the kitchen door, peering through the screen before knocking on the frame. She holds the Dixie Roto Magazine insert.)

Helloooo.

(Beau appears just behind her, both slightly out of breath. Helen and Bud rise. Helen moves to the door.)

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Do you mind if we come in?

HELEN

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

PERUSAL

BEAU

Oh, damn it, they're havin' dinner. I told you so. Sorry, folks. We can come back another time. Come on, Beverly.

(Beau takes her arm, starting to pull her away. Bud steps past Helen.)

BUD

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

(He opens the screen door.)

BEAU

You sure?

BUD

'Course I'm sure.

(To Helen.)

Sweetheart?

HELEN

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

(Beverly pushes in, wasting no time.)

BEVERLY

Terrific. 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

(Entering behind Beverly.)

Hey, Sydney.

HELEN

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

(Sydney perks up, rising.)

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

It sure is.

HELEN

Funny, we were just talkin' about it. Sydney was gonna stop by after dinner to see if you might share yours, since ours went missin'. 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

He's been hintin' at somethin'. Seemed mighty anxious to get his hands on it.

BEAU

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

HELEN

What surprise? What is goin' on?

SYD

Oh, for fu–

(She catches herself, crosses quickly to Beverly, and snatches the insert.)

I'll take that.

HELEN

Sydney!

(Sydney steps away. The others crowd in behind her as she opens it. Bud hangs back. Sydney beams, then looks to him.)

SYD

Daddy!

HELEN

What? What is it?

(She reaches for the insert, but Sydney dodges her.)

PERUSAL

SYD

Guess who's on the cover of this week's Dixie Roto Magazine?

(Helen turns to Bud. He just smiles.)

HELEN

Oh, come on now. You're yankin' my chain. Why in the world would Bud be –? Alright, hand it over. Let me take a look at that.

(Sydney, teasing, finally gives it up. Helen studies the cover.)

Well, I'll be.

BEVERLY

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

BEAU

And look at that headline: "Big-City Blacksmith".

HELEN

Looks like the Guidry farm behind you.

BUD

S'right.

(To the Larsons.)

Sydney used to go horseback ridin' there on weekends.

BEVERLY

(Quietly.)

Well, la-di-da.

HELEN

Alright, now I'm on pins and needles. What's this all about, Bud?

BUD

Go on. Read for yourself.

SYD

It's on page six.

PERUSAL

(She takes the insert back, drops into her chair, flips through. The others gather close as she finds it.)

BEVERLY

Go on, Sydney. Read it.

HELEN

Out loud. So, everyone can hear.

SYD

(Reading proudly.)

"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 twenty years. 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

Oh, my God.

BEAU

Ain't that somethin'.

BEVERLY

And that's not all. It talks about how Bud got into blacksmithin' after seein'… Oh, what's that man's name, Bud? Famous blacksmith?

BUD

Alexander Winkler Bealer, III.

BEVERLY

That's the one.

BUD

Saw him at the North Georgia State Fair in '43. Got my first anvil and hammer three years later and I've been playin' with fire ever since.

BEAU

Well, business is bound to pick up now. Not that you've been hurtin' for work, though.

PERUSAL

BUD

No, we're doin' alright. But yeah. I expect a few more customers. Maybe even some from out of state.

HELEN

You really think so?

BUD

Free advertisin', ain't it?

HELEN

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

(She hugs him tightly. Bud reaches out.)

BUD

Whatta you say, Syd? You gonna join us?

SYD

If you got room.

BUD

There's plenty. Come on.

(Sydney joins. A brief, warm family embrace.)

BEAU

Alright, Beverly. That's our cue. Let's get the hell outta here and let 'em get back to dinner. We've pestered 'em enough.

BEVERLY

Alright, alright.

(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.

PERUSAL

BUD

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

HELEN

And a couple of Brandy Milk Punches for me and Beverly.

BUD

You got it.

BEAU

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

HELEN

Oh, no. You make yourself a plate, Beau. Plenty left. Then you and Bud can head out back and talk about whatever useless nonsense you men talk about. Beverly'll stay here with me. You hungry, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Not especially, but I may pick a little.

BUD

Well, that settles it. Syd, grab the milk outta the fridge. I'll get started on those drinks.

(He exits through the archway.)

HELEN

(To Syd.)

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

SYD

Yes, Mama.

(She goes to the refrigerator, takes out the milk.)

HELEN

Go on, Beau. Help yourself. Plates are in the cupboard, silverware in the drawer below.

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(He takes a plate, moves to the table.)

PERUSAL

HELEN

Have a seat, Beverly.

BEVERLY

Don't mind if I do.

(They sit. Sydney passes by them with the milk.)

HELEN

Oh. And Sydney? When you're finished, I'd like you to come back and join us.

SYD

Oh. Uh… Well, if it's alright, Mama, I think I'll pass. I've got some studyin' to do.

HELEN

(With a forced smile.)

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

SYD

Normally, I guess. But, well… I'm headin' out with some of the girls tonight.

HELEN

I'm sorry, you're what?

SYD

I'm goin' out. For a few drinks, maybe some dancin'–

BUD

(Off.)

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

SYD

Be right there, Daddy!

HELEN

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

PERUSAL

SYD

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

HELEN

That's not the same thing, now, is it? We're celebratin' your Daddy's award. And the rest of us aren't tryin' to earn a nursin' degree.

(Sydney starts to interject.)

No. Not another word. And I don't appreciate you arguin' with me in front of company. You will not be goin' out tonight. That's all there is to it.

SYD

(Quietly, a defiant smile.)

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

(She exits with the milk.)

HELEN

(Rising, slamming her hands on the table.)

Sydney!

(Beau and Beverly freeze. Helen collects herself, sits.)

I'm sorry.

BEVERLY

There's no need to apologize. Just take a breath.

(Beau hasn't moved. Bud enters.)

BUD

What the hell happened in here?

BEVERLY

Everything's fine, Bud. Just a little misunderstandin'.

BUD

Sounded like more than that.

(To Helen.)

You alright, sweetheart?

PERUSAL

HELEN

Mm-hm.

BUD

You sure? I'm happy to have a talk with Syd.

HELEN

I'm fine, Bud. Just… leave it be. Please.

BUD

(Unconvinced.)

Alright then. You comin', Beau?

BEAU

(Distracted.)

Uh… yeah. Yeah.

BUD

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

(Bud exits. Beau lingers.)

BEVERLY

Beau?

BEAU

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 yourself a knife and fork and head on out to the porch?

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(Beau does so and exits through the archway.)

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

You sure you're okay?

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

Oh, that's right. And how are Billy and Jack?

BEVERLY

They're doin' real well. They're visitin' Beau's parents down in Leeville, so we've got the house to ourselves for a few days.

HELEN

I bet that's nice.

BEVERLY

It sure is.

HELEN

And Roscoe? How's he doin'? He's been on his own for quite some time now, hasn't he?

BEVERLY

Almost two years now. But we don't really stay in touch. We don't much appreciate the company he keeps. Not interested in havin' those types hangin' around, if you know what I mean.

HELEN

I see. So… where's he livin' now?

BEVERLY

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

(Bud enters with drinks.)

BUD

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

PERUSAL

(He kisses Helen on the cheek.)

HELEN

Thank you, / Bud.

BEVERLY

/ You are way too much, Bud.

BUD

My pleasure. Think nothin' of it.

(He grabs his plate, starts off.)

HELEN

Let me at least warm that up for you.

BUD

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

(He exits. The women sip their drinks.)

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

I suppose I have. But that's all they are, Beverly – rumors. I'm sure there's little truth to 'em. And besides, Roscoe's a good man.

BEVERLY

No. No, I'm sorry, but he is not a good man.

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

With the Metropolitan Community Church, Helen.

HELEN

Well… alright. I mean, I understand they're an unconventional bunch.

BEVERLY

The congregants are all deviants and perverts.

PERUSAL

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's worked very hard for that church… to build it, to keep it goin', often out of his own pocket.

BEVERLY

Let me speak plainly. And this is difficult, because I don't care to discuss private family matters, least of all in this kind of language, especially about 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. And I'm not gonna be one of those mothers who pretends otherwise. Who spends sleepless nights beatin' her chest, prayin' to God, beggin' Him to save her son's soul, wonderin' what she did wrong. Because I did nothin' wrong. Roscoe has a disease. Of the mind and of the body. The Devil's in him. And I want nothin' to do with the Devil.

HELEN

I'm sorry. That's… unfortunate.

BEVERLY

Do you know they've opened some makeshift homosexual bar over on Iberville Street?

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

That's where they gather. That's where Roscoe goes. I don't even wanna imagine what goes on in there. But whatever it is, they better believe God is watchin'. And one day, every last one of 'em will stand before their Maker. And they will answer for the choices they've made.

(Lights down on the kitchen. Lights up on the porch. Bud and Beau sit with tray tables, plates and drinks before them. A copy of the Times-Picayune rests nearby.)

PERUSAL

BEAU

So, whatta you think? Roberts gonna turn the Saints into a winnin' team this year?

BUD

Oh, I doubt it. They had a shit-awful season last year. And aside from draftin' Manning in '71, he's been about as useful as Fears was before him. Then they get second pick this year, earned by that same shitty record, and whatta they do? Trade it away. Hell, I bet Roberts doesn't even make it to the regular season.

BEAU

Yeah, you're probably right. Be nice to make the playoffs once, though.

BUD

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

(They drink.)

BEAU

Hot day today.

BUD

Sure is. Little bit of a breeze, though, so, not too bad.

BEAU

Hotter than yesterday.

BUD

Feels that way.

(They drink.)

BEAU

How's Sydney doin'?

BUD

She's doin' real good. Workin' hard, gettin' good grades.

BEAU

Haven't seen her around much.

PERUSAL

BUD

You will. First year she had to live in the nurses' residence. Hospital's strict – check-in by seven on weekdays, by ten on weekends. Between that, studyin', and workin', she didn't have much time for anything else.

BEAU

She's changed.

BUD

Changed how?

BEAU

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.)

She's tough, though. Maybe a little rough around the edges?

BUD

She's always been that way.

BEAU

Has she?

BUD

'Course she has. Do you remember the time she took one of my cross-peen hammers, marched over to the Nunez house, and beat Rodger Nunez with it? Lucky for him, he was a foot taller. Otherwise, she might've killed him had she whacked him on the head. And lucky for us she was nine at the time, or we'd've been in a heap of legal trouble.

BEAU

Well, that Nunez boy had it comin'.

BUD

Yeah, he was a hot head. Always causin' problems. Guess Syd finally had enough of his teasin' and tormentin'.

PERUSAL

BEAU

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

BUD

Oh, yeah? That's too bad.

BEAU

He, uh… runs around with my oldest boy.

BUD

Roscoe?

BEAU

Yeah. Same circles. You know what I'm sayin'?

BUD

Yeah, I know. I had no idea.

BEAU

We try not to talk about it.

(Bud nods.)

I just thank God every day for my other two boys. Billy and Jack… they're gonna be just fine. They ain't like Roscoe. I mean… with him, I could tell early on. Somethin' was off.

(They drink.)

BUD

My mama died when I was eleven. After that, it was just me and my daddy.

BEAU

I'm sorry to hear that.

BUD

Long time ago. And I'm sure you're wonderin' why I'm bringin' it up.

BEAU

I'm listenin'.

PERUSAL

BUD

My daddy was a police officer. Kept crazy hours. Nearest relative was my Aunt Minnie, but she couldn't take me in. She ended up in an institution after a while. So, when my father was on patrol, he'd leave me with the neighbors. And when they couldn't take me, he'd drop me off at a bar. He was friends with the barkeep. I didn't mind. Jukebox, pool table, all sorts of characters comin' and goin'. There was this one fella… Leroy. Forties. Never married. Part-time roofer. Barely had two nickels to rub together. And Lord, could he talk. Never knew when to shut up. One afternoon, I was lookin' for somethin' to do, so I offered to clean the cue sticks. So, I'm at the back of the bar when Leroy stumbles in, already half drunk. Orders a double whiskey. Downs it. Orders another. Then he comes over to me. Pulls up a stool. Leans in. Asks what I'm doin'. His face all swollen, teeth dirty, his breath somethin' awful. I backed off a little. And when I did, I saw him get… sad. So, I stepped back in. Told him, "I'm cleanin' these cue sticks, Mister." He smiles. Leans in again. Says, "I got a secret I ain't never shared with no one. You wanna hear it?"

(Bud exhales slowly.)

I didn't wanna hear it. I wanted to tell him no. But instead, I said, "Sure." And he said: "Lucifer has put a thorn in my flesh. And God is dead." Then he reached for my hand – his hand all cracked, red, and dry – and I… I wanted to run. Or call out. But I couldn't. He grabbed me and pulled me in. His other hand on the back of my head… and he buried his face in my hair. Breathed in real deep. I thought I might be sick. And then, just like that, he let go. Stepped back. Eyes full of tears. Turned, walked to the bar, paid his tab… and left.

(Pause.)

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

(Sydney enters.)

SYD

Daddy?

BUD

Yeah, baby girl?

SYD

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

BUD

You get your mother's 'okay'?

SYD

No.

PERUSAL

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 permission. I came to ask for money.

BUD

Says the grown woman.

SYD

Daddy…

BUD

Alright, alright. I can give you some cash. My wallet's upstairs.

SYD

I'll get it.

BUD

(Rising.)

No, no. I'll get it. Gonna fix me and Beau another drink anyway. Looks like he needs it. And I'll check on your Mama and Mrs. Larson while I'm at it.

SYD

Thank you, Daddy.

BUD

You got it.

(Bud exits. Sydney starts to follow.)

BEAU

Hey, Sydney.

(She stops, turns.)

PERUSAL

SYD

You can call me Syd.

BEAU

Alright. Syd.

SYD

Yes, Beau?

BEAU

You're headin' out tonight?

SYD

That's the word on the street.

BEAU

Bet you got a fun night planned.

SYD

I'm plannin' on havin' fun, yes.

BEAU

Where you goin'?

SYD

Don't know yet. Me and the girls'll play it by ear. Why're you so interested?

BEAU

Just curious. I'm an old man; I don't get out much. Wonderin' what women your age get up to. Lotta crazy shit going on in the world these days. Maybe I'm thinkin' about your welfare.

SYD

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

BEAU

Fair enough. Though I do wonder if Bud's a little too easy on you.

SYD

Somethin' tells me if he were here, you wouldn't be sayin' that.

PERUSAL

BEAU

Maybe not.

SYD

So, what makes you think he's a pushover?

BEAU

You're his daughter. That's all it takes. And while I'm at it… I think you're a little too hard on your Mama.

SYD

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

BEAU

See. That right there. That attitude. You got a mouth on you.

SYD

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

BEAU

You know what I mean.

SYD

I do. And I'm tellin' you again… it's none of your damn business. So, I guess we're done here.

(She turns to go.)

BEAU

Now listen, Syd–

(He rises, reaches for her arm.)

SYD

(Sharp.)

You better be careful, Beau. You make one more move and, believe me, you'll be crawlin' outta here without your testicles.

(Beau pulls his hand back.)

And I think you know what my Daddy might do if he saw you puttin' your hands on me.

PERUSAL

BEAU

I wasn't gonna put hands on you.

SYD

Sure looked like it.

BEAU

You're damn lucky you ain't my kid.

SYD

I've seen how you and Beverly treat Roscoe, so I couldn't agree more.

BEAU

Your Mama's a good Christian woman. And nothin' comes before her faith. You need to trust she knows what she's doin'. God's got a plan for you, Syd. Even if it don't make sense now… it will.

(Lights down on the porch. Lights up on the kitchen. The space is mostly tidied. Two fresh Brandy Milk Punches sit on the table. Helen and Beverly are mid-conversation.)

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

They're nuttier than a five-pound fruitcake. But they're good for a few laughs.

HELEN

Wouldn't be card club without 'em.

BEVERLY

No, I suppose it wouldn't.

(They share a laugh. Helen continues tidying.)

Listen, Helen…

HELEN

Mm-hm?

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

Now, you stop me if I'm oversteppin'…

(Helen pauses, turns.)

HELEN

Alright.

BEVERLY

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

(Helen starts to respond.)

Now, I saw how upset you got earlier, and I don't like seein' you like that. But that young lady could use some firm discipline. Before she gets too far outta control. Before it's too late.

HELEN

Before what's too late?

BEVERLY

You know, Beau and I went through somethin' similar with Roscoe.

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

I don't see how she's any different than a boy.

HELEN

And what's 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. Beau only made things worse with Roscoe. And it's plain as day Sydney's got Bud wrapped around her little finger. Now don't get me wrong, Bud's a good man. But he doesn't see what you and I see.

HELEN

And what exactly do you suggest I do, Beverly?

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

Pray for guidance. And then do whatever it takes to get that girl back on the right path. Her soul depends on it.

HELEN

I see. You know, it's gettin' late, Beverly. And I'm a little tired. Do you mind?

BEVERLY

Oh. No. 'Course I don't. I'll just… grab Beau and we'll be on our way.

HELEN

Thanks for stoppin' by.

BEVERLY

My pleasure. And thank you for lettin' us disrupt your day. We're very much lookin' forward to that award ceremony.

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 hugs Helen, then exits. Lights down on the kitchen. Lights up on the porch. Bud and Beau sit with fresh Sazeracs, their plates cleared.)

BEAU

Now, that just ain't accurate, Bud. And I don't believe it. Now, what I heard, which makes a whole lot more sense, 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 one. Goes by Maxie, right?

BUD

S'right.

PERUSAL

BEAU

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

BUD

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

BEAU

No, no. Listen. That John Dean fella, the White House Counsel, his girlfriend was one of 'em hookers. And Maxie had pictures of her, and a bunch of other prostitutes, locked in her desk drawer–

(Beverly arrives on the porch.)

BEVERLY

Alright, 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 alright. We're havin' a good time.

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

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

BEAU

What? Nooo.

BEVERLY

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

(She winks at Bud.)

BUD

Probably a good idea. I'll catch up with you later, Beau. Gonna watch the sunset, then maybe have a little lie-down out here. Feels like another breeze comin' through.

BEVERLY

Sounds lovely. Let's go, Beau.

PERUSAL

BEAU

Alright, alright. The old ball-and-chain has spoken. You gonna help me up, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Why should today be any different?

(She starts to help him. Bud steps in.)

BUD

I got him.

(Beverly steps aside.)

BEVERLY

Thank you, Bud.

(Bud helps Beau to his feet, guiding him off the porch.)

BEAU

Hey, Bud.

BUD

Yeah?

BEAU

Listen. I voted for Nixon. Both times.

BUD

I know, Beau. Everybody knows.

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

Consider 'em marked.

BEAU

Oh, shit.

BUD

What's the matter?

PERUSAL

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

Well, you're not mowin' anything tonight. Not in your condition.

BUD

Tell you what. I'll take the lock off the tool shed. You can come by tomorrow, pick it up whenever you like.

BEAU

Thank you, my friend.

BUD

Any time.

BEVERLY

I can take it from here.

BUD

You sure?

BEVERLY

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

BUD

Alright then. He's all yours.

BEVERLY

Ain't that the sad truth?

BUD

Just be careful. Take your time.

(Beverly leads Beau off. Bud watches them go, smiles, maybe lets out a small laugh, shakes his head. He turns back, settles into his chair on the porch. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

June 24th, 1973. Before sundown. An empty kitchen.

PERUSAL

(Sydney enters, dressed to go out in a long denim skirt, cotton button-down. She crosses to the refrigerator, pulls out a six-pack of canned beer. Turns and sees Helen in the archway.)

HELEN

Headin' out already?

SYD

Just gettin' an early start. I won't be late. Should be home by midnight.

HELEN

You finished with your studies?

SYD

I will be in about three years.

HELEN

(A faint smile.)

I see. Well, I'm gonna ask you to put that beer back. It belongs to your Daddy.

SYD

I'll replace it when I get paid.

HELEN

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

SYD

Me and the girls have been plannin' this for a while, Mama. And I'm not missin' it. You're actin' like I'm out every night.

HELEN

Whatta you need the beer for?

SYD

We're meetin' at Marilyn Durand's place first. And I'm not showin' up empty-handed.

HELEN

And from there?

SYD

Out dancin'. Like I said.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Where?

SYD

Jesus, Mama. I'm not gonna walk you through every detail of my evenin'.

HELEN

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

SYD

No harm. 'Cept we haven't decided.

HELEN

You just said you've been plannin' this.

SYD

You know what? I'm done talkin' about it. It's none of your concern where I'm goin' or what I'm doin'. So… bye, Mama.

(She heads for the door. Helen follows.)

HELEN

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

(Sydney opens the screen door.)

Sydney!

(Sydney turns, sharp.)

SYD

What!?

HELEN

Who do you think is payin' for your education? Hm? Who's puttin' a roof over your head? A bed to sleep in? Food in your mouth?

SYD

Not you. It's never been you. It's always been Daddy. Without him, we'd have none of this. So, let me ask you… what have you actually done for me?

HELEN

I gave birth to you. I raised you.

PERUSAL

SYD

So what? You want a prize? For what, Helen? For openin' your legs that one time? You'd be hard-pressed to find a prize more useless at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jack.

(Helen crosses and slaps her. The beer drops, clattering. Helen recoils, stunned by herself.)

HELEN

Sydney, I–

(Sydney steps in fast. Helen braces.)

SYD

Sit down, Mama.

HELEN

Sydney–

SYD

Sit down.

(Helen sits. Head lowered. Sydney sits across from her.)

You got somethin' you need to say?

(Helen looks up but stays silent.)

Go on. Now's your chance. I'm givin' you some of my precious time.

HELEN

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

SYD

What way?

HELEN

The sarcasm. The spite. The hate. You have no idea what I've had to put up with. The things I've overheard. At church, at social events, on the street. At card club, in my own home. What they say about you. My daughter. My flesh and blood. The names they call you: tomboy, lesbian, dyke… And God help me, I defended you every single time. Even when I feared some of it might be true.

SYD

You defended me? How?

PERUSAL

HELEN

By callin' it what it was. Gossip. Trash talk. "She's a good Christian girl," I'd say. "She'll grow out of it. It's just a phase." "She's got her eye on that Landry boy; I expect they'll be married one day." And I said it again and again. Until they believed me. Or until they got tired of talkin' about it. That's how I protected you.

SYD

You protected yourself. 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

I see. Times are changin', I'm not blind to that. But not as fast as you think. You believe you can do and say whatever you want, whenever and however you want? But that's not the world we live in. And it's not safe out there, Sydney. Not for any woman.

SYD

I'll take my chances.

(She heads for the door, then turns back.)

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 anyway.

(Sydney exits. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

June 24th, 1973. ~7:50 PM. The porch.

(Bud is asleep in his chair. Helen enters quietly, crosses to the top of the steps, and sits. The sun is nearly gone. She stares out, lost in thought. Bud stirs, wakes.)

BUD

Sweetheart? Helen?

(Helen turns back, offers a faint smile.)

What're you doin'?

HELEN

Thought I'd catch the sunset.

PERUSAL

BUD

Well, I'm glad you woke me. I was hopin' to catch it myself.

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

You okay?

HELEN

I'm fine. Just a long day.

BUD

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

HELEN

You still tired after that long nap?

BUD

Didn't say I was tired.

HELEN

(A polite smile.)

Not tonight, Bud.

BUD

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

I don't know. I suppose I'd like to think I'm useful in some way.

BUD

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

PERUSAL

HELEN

(Unconvinced, self-conscious.)

You hush.

BUD

I'm serious. Without you, this whole house would fall apart. You cook, you clean up after me and Syd, you practically live in the laundry room 'cause we're always comin' home filthy. You run 'em bake sales at church, volunteer for just about everything in town… And none of that has a damn thing to do with how beautiful I think you are.

(A shift in Helen. Something unsettled.)

What? What's wrong?

HELEN

Do you smell that?

BUD

Oh, damn. Probably my breath. I oughta brush my teeth.

(Helen stands, alert now.)

HELEN

No. Not that. Smoke.

(Bud stands. They both look out.)

BUD

Yeah, I smell it now.

HELEN

(Points.)

There. Over there.

BUD

Holy Mother of– That's a big fire.

BEAU

(Off.)

Bud! Hey, Bud! You see that?

PERUSAL

BUD

Yeah, Beau! We see it! It don't look good.

(Beau appears, staring out.)

BEAU

Looks like it's over by Canal Street. Near the river maybe. Hard to tell. Listen, I'm gonna get my car, head that way. They might need help. You comin'?

BUD

Yeah. I'll be right there.

(Beau exits. To Helen.)

You gonna be alright here?

HELEN

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

BUD

Nothin' to worry about. Me and Beau'll stay outta the way unless they need us. And I'll call you if I can.

(A car horn in the distance. Calling off.)

I'm comin', Beau!

(To Helen.)

Love you, sweetheart.

HELEN

Love you, too.

(They kiss. Another horn.)

You better go.

BUD

Try to get some rest. I'll be back soon.

(Bud exits. The sound of the car starting and pulling away. Helen lingers, staring out toward the fire. All lights fade to black.)

PERUSAL

SCENE 4

June 24th, 1973. ~11:00 PM.

(An empty kitchen. Fresh coffee sits in the pot. Helen enters, pours herself a cup. She is on edge. The telephone rings. She startles, sets the cup down, answers quickly)

HELEN

Bud…? Hello…? Oh, I'm so sorry, Dennis. I thought it was my husband callin' back. I've been waitin' for an update on that buildin', the one that caught fire. I don't suppose you've heard anything more…? You haven't…? Well, I'm a little surprised you're not over there yourself… You were called away…? 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… Alright. Well, if Bud isn't home soon, I'll come down to the station myself… No, you don't need to pick me up; I'll drive myself. That's very kind of you… Yes. Thank you, Dennis. Goodbye.

(She hangs up. Stillness. Helen stands there, hollow. Then, quietly at first, she begins to cry. It builds. Shoulders shaking. She struggles to contain it. Sound of footsteps approaching outside. The door opens and Bud enters, covered in soot, exhausted. Helen sees him and composes herself. Wipes her face, moves quickly to him.)

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

(She pulls a chair center.)

Sit down. You must be thirsty. I'll get you some lemonade.

(Bud sits.)

BUD

Just water, please, sweetheart.

HELEN

'Course.

(She gets a glass, fills it at the sink, brings it to him.)

My God. You're covered in ash. What happened over there?

BUD

It was awful.

HELEN

Awful how?

PERUSAL

BUD

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

HELEN

Maybe not but I need to. Has someone been hurt?

BUD

Several people. It's real bad.

HELEN

Oh, my God.

BUD

And that ain't the worst of it.

HELEN

Bud… please don't tell me that people are dead.

BUD

We stopped countin' around twenty. All men.

HELEN

(Quietly, shaking her head.)

No. Oh, God, no. No, no…

BUD

(Rising, going to her.)

Helen…

HELEN

No…

(He takes her gently.)

BUD

Look at me.

(She does.)

Roscoe's dead.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Roscoe? Where was the fire?

BUD

Over on Iberville Street. So, listen. I'm headin' down to Leeville in the mornin' with Beau. We'll pick up his other boys, bring 'em home. Maybe you can keep an eye on Beverly while we're gone.

HELEN

(Distant.)

Alright.

BUD

I'm gonna get cleaned up. Then we oughta try to get some sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day.

(He pulls her into a tight embrace, then starts off.)

HELEN

Bud.

BUD

What is it?

HELEN

We can't go to bed just yet.

BUD

Why not?

HELEN

Sydney.

BUD

She's not home?

HELEN

No.

BUD

Well, what's wrong? Where is she?

PERUSAL

HELEN

Detective Cormier called.

BUD

Dennis?

HELEN

Yes.

BUD

What'd he say? Is Syd in trouble? She alright? Helen, what happened?

HELEN

She's been arrested.

(Blackout. End of Act 1.)

PERUSAL

ACT 2

SCENE 1

June 25th, 1973. Morning. Somewhere along Highway 1.

(Beau is hunched over. He's just finished vomiting. Bud stands nearby.)

BEAU

I'm sorry, Bud.

BUD

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

(Bud hands him a handkerchief.)

BEAU

This clean?

BUD

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

BEAU

Alright, alright. Just sayin'. When another fella hands you a balled-up hanky from his pocket, you gotta wonder what it's been through before you wipe your own mouth with it.

BUD

Fair enough. Fresh outta the dryer this mornin'. Go on. Clean yourself up before you get any of it on your shirt there.

(Beau wipes his mouth.)

You ready to get back on the road? We got another hour or so to Leeville.

BEAU

I need a minute. Can't quite catch my breath.

BUD

Take your time.

(Beau breathes.)

You wanna talk about it?

PERUSAL

BEAU

No.

BUD

You sure? You ain't said a word since we left. Bottlin' it up ain't gonna help. Might be why you're pukin' your guts out.

BEAU

What have I done, Bud?

BUD

Oh, come on now. You ain't gonna blame yourself for this.

BEAU

Do you believe in the power of prayer?

BUD

'Course I do. God's gonna see you and Beverly through this. And me and Helen… we're here for you. No question.

BEAU

That ain't what I mean. When Beverly was pregnant the first time, we prayed every day. Just wanted a healthy baby boy. That's all. Roscoe… he was a good baby. Hardly cried. Ate like a little pig. Slept through the night most times. Always smilin'. Curious. Smart as a tack. In a lot of ways, he was just a normal kid. But I guess that wasn't enough for us. He was six when we found him playin' dress-up with his cousin, Delia. Not even five minutes before that, we had to break the two of 'em up, they were fightin' over a baby doll. Most folks just laughed it off. Not me. Not Beverly. We knew somethin' wasn't right. So, we prayed harder. Thought maybe it was a message from God that we'd gotten off track. That we needed to get back into His good graces if Roscoe was gonna grow up to be a proper man. So, we did everything. Church every Sunday, sometimes durin' the week. Prayers mornin' and night. No drinkin', no gamblin', no cussin'. Cut out every goddam thing. But nothin' changed. He just got more… peculiar. And the harder we pushed, the harder he pushed back. When he was about twelve, maybe thirteen, Beverly caught him upstairs messin' around with that Nunez boy. She lost it. Rodger ran off, but Roscoe just stood there. Frozen, I guess. So, Beverly took one of my belts to him. He eventually got away from her, made it to the landin', but she caught him again. Kept hittin' him. And then he… he went over the handrail. Fell to the floor below. When I got home, Beverly was outta her mind. She'd locked him in the hall closet. Wouldn't give me the key. So, I took a crowbar to the door. Found him on the floor. Curled up. Covered in welts. Blood everywhere. Head twisted all wrong. Snot dried all over his face. Didn't look like he was breathin'. I thought he was dead. I hoped he was. And I prayed to God to make it so.

PERUSAL

BUD

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

(Beau looks to Bud but doesn't move.)

Let's go.

(Bud takes him firmly by the arm, guiding him off. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

June 25th, 1973. Morning.

(Nearly the same time as the previous scene. The kitchen. Syd has just finished her breakfast. She's unkempt, hungover. Helen has been doing dishes. Several filled Tupperware containers sit on the counter. Coffee in the pot. Helen crosses to clear Syd's plate.)

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 must've been up all night.

HELEN

I slept a little. You feelin' better?

SYD

Yeah.

HELEN

Good. Looks like the color's comin' back to your face.

(She moves toward the sink.)

PERUSAL

SYD

(Rising.)

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've gotta get this food over to the Larson's.

(Indicates the Tupperware containers.)

SYD

I can help carry 'em over.

HELEN

No. You just stay here and get some rest.

SYD

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

HELEN

/ You're not fine, you're hungover. Get yourself some water, and some aspirin, and go back to bed.

SYD

Mama, I–

HELEN

Now's not the time, Sydney. Do what I said.

(Helen gathers the containers into a tote. Syd doesn't move.)

SYD

Mama, I'm sorry.

(Helen pauses. Composes herself.)

HELEN

Sorry for what?

SYD

For yesterday. For last night. I shouldn't've spoken to you that way. And I should've listened to you.

PERUSAL

HELEN

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

SYD

We can't just forget it. I fucked up.

HELEN

Sydney, please. Save it for when your Daddy gets home. He's the one who's gonna have to clean up your mess. And as for how you treat me… Well, I've gotten used to it. One of us has to be the punchin' bag in this house. I drew the short straw on that a long time ago.

(Beverly appears at the door with a covered cake. She's in good spirits.)

BEVERLY

Good mornin', Trahans!

(Helen moves to let her in.)

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Well, I made a carrot cake. Thought I'd share. I know how much you like carrot cake, Sydney.

SYD

I sure do.

BEVERLY

It's one of those new Betty Crocker recipes. I used toasted almonds instead of pecans, though. I hope that's alright.

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

You don't like almonds?

HELEN

No. I mean yes, almonds are fine. It's just … Shouldn't you be home, Beverly? Beau and the boys'll be back soon. I expect you'll be having visitors. Phone's probably ringin' off the hook.

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

No. No phone calls. No visitors.

(Offers the cake.)

So, are we having this or not?

HELEN

'Course. Sit down. I'll get plates. Coffee's still fresh.

BEVERLY

Well, what's cake without coffee?

(Beverly sits. Helen sets plates and cups.)

So, how are you, Sydney?

SYD

I'm doin' okay, I guess.

BEVERLY

You sure? 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, what am I? A mouse? A rat? Maybe a bird? Sparrow? Robin? 'Course cats like bugs too. Spiders. Grasshoppers and the sort. Or maybe I look like a snake. Or a lizard. So, which is it?

BEVERLY

You just can't help yourself.

HELEN

Why don't you go lie down, Sydney.

SYD

Oh, now Mama… I'd like to try some of Mrs. Larson's cake.

HELEN

You just had a big breakfast.

SYD

I've got room for one slice.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Sydney, please. Aspirin's in the bathroom. Get some water, take it, and then go lie down.

SYD

Okay.

(She grabs a glass, exits. Silence as Helen pours coffee.)

HELEN

Roscoe's gone, Beverly.

BEVERLY

I know.

HELEN

You don't seem upset.

BEVERLY

Why would I be? I don't question the Lord.

HELEN

Beverly–

BEVERLY

"For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience."

HELEN

Thirty-two men died last night.

BEVERLY

And all of 'em sodomites. If that's not a message from the Almighty, I don't know what is?

(Starts to uncover the cake. Helen stops her.)

HELEN

The cake can wait.

BEVERLY

Did I say somethin' to upset you?

PERUSAL

HELEN

No. I just… I don't understand how a mother, whose son hasn't been dead twenty-four hours, can't shed a single tear for him.

BEVERLY

Roscoe nearly died once before. Fell down the stairs. Cracked his ribs, dislocated his shoulder, split his head open. Nearly broke his neck. We thought he was gone.

HELEN

I remember.

BEVERLY

Just a stupid accident. I'd just finished waxin' the floors when he came runnin' out of his room. Always in a hurry. Told him to slow down. And that's when he slipped and fell. All the way down to the landin'. I believe God meant to take Roscoe from us that day. Seemed He changed His mind, though. Guess He wanted to give Roscoe a chance to right himself. But that never happened.

HELEN

So, what're you sayin', Beverly? You saying God started that fire?

BEVERLY

Mysterious ways.

(The phone rings.)

HELEN

Sydney!?

SYD

(Off.)

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

Pick that up on the extension, please? That may be your Daddy.

(The ringing stops.)

Listen, Beverly…

BEVERLY

Mm-hm?

PERUSAL

HELEN

All those young men. All of 'em gone. None of it makes any sense to me. But I do believe the Lord has a plan.

BEVERLY

I prayed for Roscoe every day. I did my duty as his mother. It's in His hands now.

(Sydney appears.)

SYD

Mrs. Larson, that call's for you.

BEVERLY

For me? Well, who would be callin' me here?

SYD

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

BEVERLY

Thank you, Sydney. Would you mind tellin' 'em–

SYD

I suggest you take it.

BEVERLY

Alright then. Excuse me.

(Beverly exits through the archway. Sydney turns to go.)

HELEN

Sydney…

SYD

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

Come here.

(She does.)

Yesterday, you called me a coward.

PERUSAL

SYD

Mama, I–

HELEN

Let me finish. That wasn't very nice. But I suppose you're right. I don't think I have it in me to be brave. And that's why you scare me when you do the things you do. I think about what might happen to you. Because there are people out there who'll hurt you, Sydney. But I don't want you livin' in fear. So maybe you can leave that to me. It's all I know. It's the only way I know how to protect you. Now… who else knows about your arrest?

SYD

Oh. Uh… You and Daddy, 'course. Detective Cormier. Another officer… I don't remember his name.

HELEN

Who else?

SYD

Mama, why–?

HELEN

Who else?

SYD

They arrested Marilyn Durand too. They took us in together.

HELEN

And the others?

SYD

If you're worried about any of 'em girls sayin' anything, I promise you they won't. 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 if this shows up on a background check? You think you'll still get that degree?

SYD

No.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Then you'd better hope your Daddy can fix this. Until then… not a word. To anyone. Understood?

SYD

Mm-hm.

(Beverly appears in the archway. They turn.)

HELEN

Everything alright, Beverly?

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

Oh. Well, I can help with arrangements if you like. We used Hitchens funeral home when Bud's Aunt Minnie passed–

BEVERLY

That won't be necessary. Roscoe can stay where he is.

HELEN

I'm sure you don't mean that, Beverly. And I expect that Beau–

BEVERLY

You leave Beau to me. Anyway, sounds like you've got enough trouble in your own house. Maybe that fire was a blessin'. A convenient distraction. Wouldn't you agree? Well, I should be goin'. You enjoy the cake.

(She moves to exit.)

HELEN

Beverly…

BEVERLY

Mm-hm?

HELEN

Before you go, I put together– Never mind. It's not important.

PERUSAL

BEVERLY

Alright then. Oh, and don't forget. Card club on Wednesday. My turn to host. See you soon.

(Beverly exits. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

June 25th, 1973. Early evening.

(At rise, the porch is empty. Sydney enters through the porch door, starting down the steps. She's on the verge of tears. Bud follows.)

BUD

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

SYD

I can't, Daddy. I just… I can't.

BUD

Can't what?

SYD

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

BUD

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

SYD

This is different.

BUD

I know it is. And it 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 didn't say that, so don't go puttin' words in my mouth. And now ain't the time to be feelin' sorry for yourself. Come on. Let's go back inside.

PERUSAL

SYD

I'd rather not.

BUD

You wanna stay out here? Away from your Mama?

(He smiles, gives her a wink. She cracks a small smile.)

Alright then. Come up here on the porch.

(She joins him. They sit.)

Look. We don't have to talk about last night. Not just yet. So, I'll let you start. You talk about whatever you want, and I'll listen. Unless you got questions. Then I'll answer as best I can. Whenever you're ready.

SYD

I'm angry. Most of the time. I know it. And I just can't figure out what to do with all that rage sometimes. And when you're angry like that, you start forgettin' what it feels like to be happy. Or you start wonderin' if you were ever happy to begin with. Some days I feel so far gone, I don't know if there's any way back. And back to what? I can't change who I am, Daddy. And even if I could, I don't think I would. I don't know why. Maybe I'm stubborn. Or selfish. Or just plain spiteful. Maybe I'm just so damn tired of bein' judged all the time. I mean, if God is love, then why is the world so full of hate? I haven't done anything wrong. Or at least it don't feel wrong to me.

BUD

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

SYD

Daddy…

BUD

I love you.

SYD

I love you too. But that just isn't enough. Not anymore.

BUD

So… this Marilyn – that's her name, right?

SYD

Mm-hm.

PERUSAL

BUD

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

SYD

I don't know. But I do know we broke the law last night. We knew what we were doin' wasn't proper. But we did it anyway. Maybe it wasn't love. Maybe it was rebellion. But it felt good. It felt right.

BUD

Two ladies dancin' together. Seems harmless to me.

SYD

I don't know. We women are criminals just for existing.

BUD

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

SYD

That's not exactly what I was expectin' / to hear right now.

BUD

(Knowingly, with a smile.)

/ Buuut the first time I held you… saw that chubby little face, those big blue eyes… I changed my mind real quick. I love every piece of you, Syd. Which means I love this piece too. We're all made up of pieces, right? And if we keep chippin' away at the ones we don't like, there won't be anything left. And that don't sound right to me. Now listen. I'm gonna talk to Dennis Cormier, see if I can get 'em charges dropped. And if I can't… well, we'll figure somethin' else out. Together. You understand?

SYD

I understand.

BUD

Alright. You head back inside. I got some thinkin' to do.

SYD

Thanks, Daddy.

(They hug tightly. She exits into the house. Bud sits quietly. Helen appears in the doorway, holding a plate with a slice of carrot cake, a fork, napkin, and a glass of milk.)

PERUSAL

HELEN

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

BUD

Sure. I'll give it try.

(Helen hands him the plate, fork, milk. She settles in. Bud takes a bite.)

HELEN

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

BUD

Oh, I figured you might be.

(He reacts, spits the cake into a napkin.)

Ack. This tastes funny.

HELEN

Whatta you mean? Funny how?

BUD

I don't know. Kinda sour.

HELEN

Well, you don't have to eat it. Between you and me, Beverly's never been much use in the kitchen.

BUD

Yeah, I'm gonna pass.

(He sets the plate aside, drinks his milk.)

HELEN

I just don't understand it, Bud.

BUD

What's that?

HELEN

Why Sydney feels the need to hide things from me.

PERUSAL

BUD

Is that right?

HELEN

Whatta you mean, “is that right”?

BUD

Nothin’. It’s just a turn of phrase.

HELEN

That’s all you’ve got to say?

BUD

Whatta you want me to say?

HELEN

You’ve got nothin’ to add?

BUD

I don’t know what you’re gettin’ at.

HELEN

So, you’re just gonna take Sydney’s side?

BUD

I ain’t takin’ sides. Didn’t know there was one to take.

HELEN

Your daughter gets herself arrested and then tells you she’s a… I can’t even say it.

BUD

We can say it or not say it; it don’t change nothin’. She is who she is.

HELEN

And you’re okay with that?

BUD

There’s nothin’ we can do about it.

HELEN

There’s plenty we can do.

PERUSAL

BUD

Oh yeah? Like what? Pray?

HELEN

For starters.

BUD

And then what?

HELEN

Then maybe we send her somewhere.

(Bud lets out a short, incredulous laugh. Shakes his head.)

This funny to you?

BUD

No. Ain't nothin' about this funny. I'm just so damn worn out right now I don't know what else to do but laugh. Why does everything have to be black or white with you? Right or wrong? This is our daughter. Our only child. And you're talkin' about shippin' her off. To where? Some kind of madhouse?

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

It's not the same thing.

BUD

(Raising his voice.)

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

(Helen is taken aback. Bud catches himself, steadies.)

By the time Beau and I got over to Iberville Street there wasn't much left of that buildin'. Just bricks. Broken windows. Fire was almost out, but you could still feel the heat from it. Smoke everywhere. Ash in the air. And this… awful smell. We turned the corner and there was a crowd of people. Pointin'. Carryin' on. I heard one man say, "The only good faggot is a dead faggot." That's when we looked up. Took a second to see it. Beau saw him first. It was Roscoe. Hangin'

PERUSAL

out that second-floor window. One arm danglin'. Hair burned clean off. Eyes open. Mouth open. Just… stuck there. Beau begged 'em to pull him down. Said he'd do it himself. But they just left him there. Nearly two hours. And the whole time… folks just stood there. Laughin'. Mockin' him. And I kept thinkin'… What must it be like to have to hide who you are from the world? To take all that pain… all that fear… and carry it around with you every day. And then tuck it away somewhere. Up high. Outta reach. In the dark. Because if you don't… you might not make it through another day.

(The silence is broken by…)

BEAU

(Off.)

Bud! Hey, Bud!

BUD

What the hell's goin' on now?

(Beau rushes in, out of breath.)

BEAU

Hey. Is Syd around?

HELEN

She's in the house. What's wrong?

BEAU

I don't know exactly. It's Beverly. She's… she's in real bad shape. I was hopin' Syd could take a look at her.

BUD

Alright, okay.

(Calling out.)

Syd!

(He moves to the door, calls inside.)

Syd!

HELEN

Sydney!

PERUSAL

SYD

(Off.)

I'm comin'!

HELEN

Hurry, Sydney!

(Sydney rushes out onto the porch.)

SYD

What's the matter? What's happened?

BUD

Beverly's not doin' well.

BEAU

She's all red and swollen. And now she's throwin' up.

SYD

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

BEAU

I tried. She won't move. Every time I touch her, she screams. I don't know what else to do. The boys are scared outta their minds. I don't know if she's gonna make it.

SYD

Alright. Now, listen to me. We gotta get her to the hospital. Go get your car, start it up, and wait in the driveway. I'll come over and see what I can do.

BEAU

Okay.

(Beau runs off.)

SYD

Daddy, you come with me. I'm gonna need help gettin' her outta there.

BUD

Yeah. 'Course.

(Bud hurries off ahead of her.)

PERUSAL

HELEN

Sydney.

SYD

What is it, Mama?

HELEN

Billy and Jack.

SYD

Shit. Right. They'll just have to squeeze into the car with the rest of us.

HELEN

No. No, I'll stay with 'em. Those boys have seen enough. I'll just grab a few things from the kitchen and come right after. Make myself useful.

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

(Sydney turns to go.)

HELEN

And Sydney–

SYD

I don't have time, Mama. I gotta go.

(Sydney rushes off. Helen stands alone for a moment, uneasy, gathering herself. She takes a breath, then quickly exits into the house. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

June 25th, 1973. Late evening. The kitchen.

(The carrot cake still sits on the table. Sydney enters, crosses to the refrigerator, grabs a beer, opens it, sits, and drinks. Helen enters.)

HELEN

Where's your Daddy?

PERUSAL

SYD

Out in the tool shed.

HELEN

What's he doin' out there?

SYD

Don't know. Said he needed to check on somethin'. Didn't say what.

HELEN

How'd you get back home?

SYD

We walked.

HELEN

You walked? That's nearly three miles. Why didn't you call? I would've come and got you.

SYD

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

HELEN

They're fast asleep. Been that way for hours.

(Helen joins her. Notices scratches on Syd's face.)

What happened to your face?

SYD

It's nothin'. I'm alright.

HELEN

How's Beverly?

SYD

Not good.

HELEN

Did they say what's wrong?

SYD

They ran some bloodwork. Cyanide.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Cyanide?

SYD

Almost enough to kill her. She's lucky.

HELEN

My God. Well, how did she–?

SYD

She drank it.

HELEN

She did what?

SYD

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

HELEN

Why? Why would she do that?

SYD

Have you ever thought about killin' yourself, Mama?

HELEN

That's a terrible thing to ask.

SYD

Well, have you?

HELEN

'Course not. It's a sin.

SYD

You remember when the dryer broke and we had to hang the wash outside?

HELEN

'Course, I remember. Nearly broke my back haulin' those wet clothes out to the yard.

SYD

A couple times you had me bring it in and fold it.

PERUSAL

HELEN

S'right. And I appreciated the help. Sydney, why are you bringin' this up?

SYD

I think it was a Monday, 'cause I remember the smell of red beans cookin'. I grabbed the basket off the couch and went out back to collect the laundry. And I saw this little yellow bird. It flew outta the shrubs, dipped into the grass under the Cypress tree, then shot back up and landed on the clothesline. Perched herself there at the far end, a few inches from the post, facin' away from me, her tail twitchin' a little like she was settlin' in. So, I moved closer. And when I did, she turned 'round real quick. And that's when I saw it. A little orange caterpillar in her beak. Still wrigglin'. And I thought, what if… what if I could get my hand on the clothesline? And tug at it? To startle her? And make her drop it. Give it a chance to get away. So, I reached up real slow. Put my hand on the clothesline. I was ready to pull on it… just enough. But before I could, she tipped her head back and swallowed that caterpillar whole. And then she flew off. And it made me real sad, Mama. Sadder than it should've. Considerin' it was just some grubby old bird and a silly little bug…

HELEN

Sydney…

SYD

So, I set the basket down in the grass and turned to see one of Daddy's work shirts hangin' there on the line. I pulled the pins, took it down, and put it on. Still warm from the sun. Smelled like soap. Then I stepped forward and pressed my forehead against the line, felt the tension in it. I rose up on my toes, rested my chin there, nodded my head a few times… and then I walked myself forward until the rope met my neck. I remember takin' a deep breath… holdin' it… and then I let my knees fall forward and my heels kick up. I dropped quick. Felt a sharp pain in my throat, and then I flipped back onto the grass. I laid there a long while… coughin'… tryin' to catch my breath. Then I got up. Dusted myself off. Brought the wash in. And folded it.

HELEN

(In tears, horrified.)

Oh my God. Sydney, why didn't you tell me? I would've–

SYD

Beverly wanted to die, Mama. That's why I've got these scratches. She fought tooth and nail to keep us from draggin' her outta that house. Daddy had to slap her, knocked her out. It was the only way we could get her to the hospital.

(Bud enters suddenly. He's disheveled, agitated.)

BUD

Goddamit.

PERUSAL

SYD

(Rising.)

What's wrong, Daddy?

BUD

I took the lock off the tool shed yesterday. Forgot to put it back. I tore that place apart. But it's gone.

HELEN

What's gone, Bud?

BUD

You gotta understand. I only keep it for work.

SYD

Daddy, what are you talkin' about?

HELEN

Bud, please!

BUD

I, uh… I had a bottle of sodium cyanide out there. And now it's gone. And I expect that's what Beverly got into.

HELEN

What in the world do you need cyanide for?

BUD

It hardens the metal. Keeps my tools from warpin'.

HELEN

I see. Well, this isn't your fault, Bud. You know that, right? So, you need to put that outta your mind. I should go check on those boys.

(She starts off but then turns back.)

But before I do, I have something I need to say to you, Sydney… Syd. I am your mother. I always will be. I am doin' my very best. And for that reason alone, you will treat me with respect. Do you understand?

(Syd nods.)

PERUSAL

I love you. No matter what. And I don't think you believe that. So, I'm tellin' you now, it's the God's honest truth. I need you to trust me. And I know that needs to be earned. And I intend to earn it. Because I never want you keepin' anything from me again. Have I made myself clear?

SYD

Yes, Mama.

HELEN

You are a gift. To me and to your father. And we are blessed to have you.

(Sydney moves to her. They embrace. Helen kisses her forehead, then exits. Bud sits heavily at the table. Syd grabs another beer, opens it, hands it to him.)

SYD

Come on, Daddy. Beverly was gonna do it one way or another.

(Bud drinks. His eyes drift to the cake. He pulls it closer, lifts the cover and then sets it back.)

BUD

Syd.

SYD

Yeah?

BUD

Go see if your Mama needs help.

SYD

You alright?

BUD

I'm alright. Go on.

(Sydney hesitates.)

Go.

(Sydney exits. Bud watches her go. He then takes the cake, carries it to the trash, and drops it in. He pulls the bag from the bin, ties it off, and exits with it. Lights fade to black.)

PERUSAL

SCENE 5

July 4th, 1973. Evening. The Larson's Livingroom.

(Faint fireworks in the distance. Sydney sits on an ottoman facing Beverly, who is in an armchair. A tray table with dinner rests in front of her. Beverly is weak with limited movement, strained speech, but conscious and aware.)

SYD

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

(Beverly says nothing.)

You need to eat somethin', you hear me? And look. Your hands aren't shakin' like they were a few days ago, so I think it's time you start feedin' yourself. Why don't you try pickin' up that fork. Just to see how it feels.

(Beverly grabs the fork clumsily, then tosses it to the floor. Sydney calmly retrieves it, sets it back on the tray.)

Alright. Listen to me. Truth is, you're probably never gonna get back to exactly how you were. But you sure as hell are gonna get better than this. You're gonna be fine. You know that, right?

(Beverly looks at Sydney and then squeezes her eyes shut.)

Okay. So, that's how it's gonna be? You just gonna shut me out. Pretend I'm not even here?

(Beverly opens her eyes, turns her head away.)

I see. Well, I get it. You're upset about missin' the fireworks, aren't you? Well, so am I. But here we are. I'm sure your boys are havin' a nice time with their daddy tonight. Probably a good thing, 'em gettin' outta the house for a bit. Everybody needs a fun distraction now and then.

(Beverly raises one middle finger.)

Well, my goodness, Beverly. That's not very Christian like.

(Beverly raises another middle finger.)

Alright then. Well, at least you're in better spirits today. Oh, and hey. I got a bit of news. Police think they've got the man who set the fire. Rodger Nunez. You remember him?

(Beverly's triggered but tries not to react.)

I never cared for him much. He was a mean kid. So, I'm not the least bit surprised he'd do somethin' like that. Turns out they wouldn't let him into the bar. So, he went across the street to the Walgreens, bought himself some lighter fluid and a book of matches and then– Well… no need to get into all the particulars. Just thought you might wanna know.

PERUSAL

(Sydney hands her a tissue. Beverly takes it.)

Roscoe was cremated, by the way. The church is keepin' his ashes under the altar for now. Till they can afford a proper burial. A lot of the men who died were part of that congregation. So, the costs are gonna add up. They held a memorial this past Sunday. Over on Claiborne. Me, Daddy, and even Mama went. It was beautiful. Place was packed. We had to stand way in the back, right by the vestibule.

(Beverly begins to cry quietly.)

So, I know you may not wanna hear this… but Roscoe was loved. By a lot of people. And I'm not sayin' that to hurt you. I'm not tryin' to rub anything in. I just thought… maybe it might bring you some comfort. Knowin' he mattered.

(Beverly continues to cry quietly.)

And, you know, I might be oversteppin' here, Beverly, but I really do think you need to find a way to let go of all that hate. I mean, look at where it's got you. Stuck in your own house on the fourth of July and bein' hand-fed by a smart mouthed lesbian. Now come on. I'm runnin' outta patience here.

(Sydney takes the fork, spears a bite, raises it toward Beverly's mouth.)

Just one bite.

(A standoff. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 6

July 4th, 1973. Evening. Not far from the Canal Street Dock.

(Bud and Beau stand watching the fireworks.)

BEAU

We can move closer to the river if you want.

BUD

No, this is fine. Got a good view right here.

BEAU

I just figured… best to stay away from the crowd. I mean, I don't think I'm ready to–

BUD

No, no. 'Course not. I understand.

PERUSAL

BEAU

(Calling off.)

Billy! Jack! Don't go too far, you hear me? I need to see you!

(To Bud.)

'Em boys are a handful. I don't know how Beverly manages it.

BUD

Well, they'll be young men before you know it. Then you'll have a whole new set of problems.

BEAU

Ain't that the truth.

BUD

Somethin' to look forward to. You gonna be okay?

BEAU

That's a hell of a question.

BUD

Well, you don't have to answer it. But it don't have to be complicated neither. Sometimes when folks ask if you're gonna be alright, you can just say yes. And then do your best to make it true. I know that's easier said than done, but what's the alternative? You can't change what's already happened. You've got a wife who needs you. Two boys who need your guidance and your love. And, you know, if you ain't okay… well, then you just say that. You say, no, I'm not okay. And if that's how you're feelin', then we're here. Me and Helen. For whatever you need.

BEAU

I don't know how you do it, Bud.

BUD

Do what?

BEAU

Find the silver linin' in everything.

BUD

Not everything. Some things can't be salvaged. And when that happens, I try to keep my mouth shut. Ain't my place to judge. I just don't see the point in livin' in fear of things I don't understand.

PERUSAL

BEAU

When Roscoe moved out a couple of years back, I… I felt relieved. It was easier. Havin' him gone. Less shame. Fewer questions. We just told folks we asked him to leave. But I'll tell you somethin', Bud… I'd give anything to have him back.

BUD

I know you would.

BEAU

(Calling off.)

Hey boys! Now, what did I just say? Stay close! You hear me? I need you to stay close!

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 7

July 17th, 1973. Early Evening. An empty kitchen.

(The telephone rings several times before Helen enters hurriedly. She's dressed nicely for an evening out, attempting to fasten a necklace as she crosses. She gives up, answers the phone.)

HELEN

Hello…? Oh, hey, Louise… No, no, it's fine. We're headin' out shortly, but I've got a minute… Yes, of course I'll be at card club; I wouldn't miss it. And as a matter of fact, I'm glad you called; you just reminded me. We'll need to stop by the bakery on our way to Gallier Hall tonight. I need to pick up some brioche… That's right. I'm makin' a bourbon bread puddin' to bring. Unless, of course, you had somethin' else in mind… Oh now, Louise, that's ridiculous. My bread puddin' is just okay; it is not the best in all of New Orleans… Well, I'm flattered, but that's just plain dumb… I'm sorry, what's that…? Yes, I am plannin' on bringin' Beverly. Why do you ask…? I see. Well, awkward or not, she needs to be there. It'll do her a world of good… Right. Well, you let me worry about that, and you just focus on bein' a lovely hostess, alright? Besides, you're gonna have your hands full with the Baily sisters… No, not another word. We're all gonna have a wonderful time, and that's that… Good. Alright then. I'll see you tomorrow evenin'. Goodbye.

(She hangs up. During this, Bud has entered in formal attire. He grabs a beer from the refrigerator, opens it, drinks.)

Don't you look nice.

BUD

I clean up alright, I guess. You, on the other hand… You look beautiful.

PERUSAL

HELEN

Stop it, Bud.

BUD

I will not stop it.

(He pulls her in. They embrace and kiss.)

HELEN

Alright, fine. I guess I look beautiful.

BUD

And don't you forget it.

HELEN

I'll do my best. Now, can you help me with this?

(She hands him the necklace.)

BUD

'Course. Turn around.

(Helen turns. Bud fastens it.)

HELEN

And why are you havin' a beer? I'd rather you weren't tanked-up when you go on stage tonight.

BUD

Oh, come on. Cut me some slack. I'm nervous. Never stood in front of that many people before. All 'em eyes on me. I might just freeze up; forget everything I'm supposed to say. And besides, one beer ain't gonna get me drunk

HELEN

Alright. Well, there's nothin' to be nervous about. You're a blacksmith, not an orator. Expectations are already low. And if you get flustered, just read from the note cards I made for you. They're in your jacket pocket.

BUD

I don't know what I'd do without you.

HELEN

You're not completely useless. You'd manage. Now, where's that daughter of yours?

PERUSAL

BUD

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

HELEN

She's not in trouble. But she will be if she doesn't get down here soon.

(Calling out.)

Syd!

(To Bud.)

Oh. And I gave her some money. Sent her to Maison Blanche to find somethin' nice to wear. There's this beautiful dress there. Long sleeves, midi length, bubble gum pink, high neck, bodice covered in these tiny beaded flowers, looks like an empire waist, but it's not, so it's not too snug across the bust, very simple. And best of all, it was on sale.

BUD

I'm sorry, but I didn't understand a word of that.

HELEN

Oh, for goodness' sake, Bud. 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 like a straitjacket. I'd be more comfortable in my overalls.

HELEN

Exactly. If you can manage it for a few hours, so can she. This is your night.

(Calling out.)

Syd!

BUD

Now don't rush her. We've got time.

HELEN

Bud…

PERUSAL

BUD

We've got time.

(Helen lowers her head.)

What's the matter?

HELEN

Nothin'.

BUD

You sure? 'Cause I'm gettin' the feelin' I'm not the only one on edge tonight. You know, we ain't gonna be able to cover up what's happened with a bubble gum pink dress. We've done what we can. Took a little money, and a lotta sweet talk, but 'em charges are dropped. 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' until they find somethin' else to talk about. Everything I need, everything I care about, is right here. I'll look out for you. And I'll look out for my daughter. And I wouldn't mind if the two of you looked out for me, too.

HELEN

'Course, Bud.

SYD

(Off.)

Mama? Daddy?

HELEN

Yeah, Syd?

SYD

Is it time to go?

BUD

Your Mama's called for you twice now. We're just waitin' on you, baby girl.

PERUSAL

SYD

(Off.)

Okay. I'll be right there. Just puttin' on my other shoe.

(Helen and Bud look toward the archway. Helen takes a breath.)

HELEN

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… no way in hell I'd take that bet.

(They look back toward the archway.)

SYD

(Off.)

Alright. I'm comin' out.

(Lights fade to black. End of play.)

PERUSAL