

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

SYD by Craig Houk

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

ACT 1**SCENE 1**

June 24, 1973. Afternoon. A kitchen. We see HELEN TRAHAN, late 30s, female, who has nearly finished setting the table for dinner. She is jovial. There is a television playing off. Helen 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 center on the table. She calls out again.)

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

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

Sydney!

SYD

(Off.)

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

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 to me. I've put together a nice meal for the three of us and I'd appreciate it if you and your Daddy'd come to the table.

SYD

(Off.)

Okay, Mama.

HELEN

And wash your hands.

SYD

(Off.)

Yes, ma'am.

(Helen heads to the refrigerator to retrieve a pitcher of lemonade. The television goes quiet.)

Daddy! Dinner's ready!

HELEN

(Quietly with a sigh.)

God give me strength.

(She retrieves three glasses from the cupboard, brings them to the table and begins to pour the lemonade. BUD TRAHAN, early 40s, male, enters.)

BUD

Somethin' smells real good in here.

(He kisses Helen on the cheek.)

HELEN

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

(Bud sits.)

BUD

Where's Syd?

HELEN

I sent her to wash up. And I mean 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. And anyway, she's a grown woman and it's time she started actin' like one.

BUD

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

HELEN

(Calling off.)

Sydney!

(SYDNEY TRAHAN, 19, female, enters.)

SYD

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

HELEN

Can you please not speak to me that way? Now, let me see your hands.

SYD

I think I know how to wash my own hands.

HELEN

Let me see 'em.

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

Sit down.

(Sydney and Helen sit. Helen stares intently at Sydney.)

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.

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

(Not hostile, just firm.)

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

HELEN

Yes, it is.

SYD

Fine with me, I'm starved.

(Sydney reaches for a bowl or a plate of something. Helen puts her hand on Sydney's.)

HELEN

Are you tryin' to upset me on purpose?

(Sydney takes her hand away.)

BUD

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

SYD

Right. Sorry, Mama.

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

HELEN

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

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

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

SYD

I can make my / own plate.

BUD

(To Helen.)

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

SYD

'Course, Daddy.

(Bud hands his plate to Helen.)

HELEN

Thank you, Bud.

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

BUD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

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

(Sydney starts to rise out of her chair.)

HELEN

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

(Sydney sits.)

BUD

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

(He takes a sip of his lemonade.)

HELEN

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

BUD

Oh, never mind.

HELEN

Come on, now. Out with it.

BUD

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

(He winks at Sydney.)

HELEN

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

SYD

Well, I don't wanna wait that long.

BUD

Hey, Syd.

SYD

Yeah, Daddy?

BUD

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

SYD

Sure.

(Helen hands Bud his plate.)

BUD

(To Helen.)

Thank you, dear.

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

HELEN

Sydney.

(Sydney hands her plate to Helen.)

Go ahead and eat, Bud.

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

BUD

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

SYD

'Course not, Daddy.

BUD

Helen?

HELEN

Didn't I just say?

BUD

Well, 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

(He takes a bite.)

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

HELEN

(Blushing.)

You stop.

BUD

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

HELEN

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

(She laughs quietly as she hands Sydney her plate.)

Here you go, Sydney.

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

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

BUD

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

SYD

Oh. Um... Well, they're comin' along good. Real good in fact.

BUD

That's nice to hear. And your grades?

SYD

I'm at ninety-three percent.

BUD

Wow! Ninety-three percent! Well, that's great! And what does that mean exactly?

SYD

Anything at ninety-three or above is considered 'excellent', grade point value of four.

BUD

Oh, boy! I see. And?

SYD

I got an 'A', Daddy.

BUD

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

HELEN

She can do better.

BUD

Better than an 'A'?

HELEN

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

BUD

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

SYD

Twenty a week, forty-five durin' vacation breaks...

BUD

(To Helen.)

You see?

SYD

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

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

BEAU

(Off.)

Beverly! Beverly, get back here and leave 'em 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 LARSON, early 40s, female, appears at the kitchen door. She peers through the screen and then knocks on the frame. She holds a copy of the Dixie Roto Magazine insert in her hand. She calls in.)

Helloooo.

(BEAU LARSON, mid 40s, male, appears just behind her. They are both out of breath. Helen and Bud rise out of their chairs. 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—

BEAU

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

(Beau takes Beverly by the arm and starts off. Bud moves past Helen to the door.)

BUD

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

(He opens the screen door.)

BEAU

You sure it's alright?

BUD

'Course it's alright.

(To Helen.)

Sweetheart?

HELEN

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

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

BEVERLY

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

SYD

Hi, Mrs. Larson, Mr. Larson.

BEAU

(Having just followed Beverly in.)

Hey, Sydney.

HELEN

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

(Curious, Sydney rises out her chair.)

BEVERLY

It sure is.

HELEN

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

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

BEAU

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

HELEN

What surprise? What is goin' on?

SYD

Oh, for fu—

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

I'll take that.

HELEN

Sydney!

(Sydney moves away. Beverly, Beau and Helen huddle around, looking over Sydney's shoulder as Bud keeps his distance. Sydney excitedly unfolds the insert. A big smile as she turns to Bud.)

SYD

Daddy!

HELEN

What? What is it?

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

SYD

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

(Helen turns to Bud. Bud smiles.)

HELEN

Oh, come on now. You have got to be yankin' my chain. Why in the world would Bud be —? Alright, Sydney, hand it over, let me take a look at that.

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

Well, I'll be.

BEVERLY

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

BEAU

And check out that headline: "Big-City Blacksmith".

HELEN

Looks like the Guidry farm behind you there.

BUD

S'right.

(To the Larsons.)

Sydney used to go horseback ridin' there on weekends.

BEVERLY

(Quietly.)

Well, la-di-da.

HELEN

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

BUD

Well, go on and read for yourself.

SYD

The article's on page six.

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

BEVERLY

Go on, Sydney, read it.

HELEN

Out loud, so everyone can hear.

SYD

(Reading proudly from the insert.)

“New Orleans resident, Robert “Bud” Trahan, will be honored with the Metalist Award of Excellence for his extensive and lasting contributions to the blacksmithing community throughout the great state of Louisiana over the last 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. Goes on to talk about how Bud fell into blacksmithin' after seein' ... Oh, darn it. What's that man's name, Bud? Famous blacksmith?

BUD

Alexander Winkler Bealer, III.

BEVERLY

That's the one.

BUD

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

BEAU

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

BUD

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

HELEN

You really think so?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

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

BUD

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

SYD

If you got room for me.

BUD

There's plenty of room. Come on.

(Sydney joins them for a group embrace.)

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

Alright, alright.

(They start off.)

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Well, that sounds real nice.

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

You got it.

BEAU

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Not especially, but I may pick a little.

BUD

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

(He exits through the archway.)

HELEN

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

SYD

Yes, Mama.

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

HELEN

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

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(He grabs a plate and then goes to the table.)

HELEN

Have a seat, Beverly.

BEVERLY

Don't mind if I do.

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

HELEN

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

SYD

Oh. Um... Well, if it's alright with you, 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 'til later this evenin', can't they?

SYD

Normally they might but I'm actually headin' out with some of the girls tonight.

HELEN

I'm sorry, you're what?

SYD

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

BUD

(Off.)

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

SYD

I'll be right there, Daddy!

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

Well, it's not the same thing, now is it? We're doin' it in honor of your Daddy's award. And the rest of us aren't endeavorin' to get our nursin' degree.

(Sydney starts to interject.)

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

SYD

(Quietly and with a defiant smile.)

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

(She exits through the archway with the milk.)

HELEN

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

Sydney!

(Beau and Beverly freeze. Helen sits.)

I'm sorry.

BEVERLY

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

(Beau has not moved. Bud enters.)

BUD

What the hell happened in here?

BEVERLY

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

BUD

Sounded like a little more than that.

(To Helen.)

You alright, sweetheart?

HELEN

Mm hm.

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

(Unconvinced.)

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

BEAU

(Distracted.)

Uh, yup.

BUD

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

(Bud exits. Beau remains still.)

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 a fork and head on out to the porch?

BEAU

Yes, ma'am.

(Beau does so and exits through the archway.)

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

Oh, they're doin' real well. They're actually visitin' with 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 you know, 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' that he's somewhere over in the French Quarter.

(Bud enters with the drinks.)

BUD

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

(He kisses Helen on the cheek.)

HELEN

Thank you, / Bud.

BEVERLY

/ You are way too much, Bud.

BUD

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

(He grabs his plate and starts off.)

HELEN

Let me at least warm that up for you, Bud.

BUD

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

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

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

No, 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, okay. I mean, I understand that they're an unconventional bunch.

BEVERLY

The congregants are all deviants and perverts.

HELEN

I'm not sure that's entirely true.

BEVERLY

Would you and Bud go there?

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Let me speak plainly with you, Helen. And this is very difficult for me because I prefer not to discuss private family matters. And I do not like to use this kinda language, especially as it relates to my first-born son, but Roscoe is a faggot. And that's all there is to it.

HELEN

Beverly, no, that's not true.

BEVERLY

It is true. And I'm not gonna be one of 'em Mothers who pretends it's not. Who spends sleepless nights beatin' her chest and prayin' to God and beggin' Him to save her son's soul. Tryin' to

figure out what she's done wrong. Because I've done nothin' wrong. Roscoe has a disease. Of the mind and of the body. He's got the Devil in him. And I want nothin' to do with the Devil.

HELEN

I'm sorry. That's unfortunate.

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

(Lights down on the kitchen and up on a porch. Bud and Beau are settled in, each behind a tray table holding their dinner plates and drinks. A copy of the Times-Picayune lies somewhere near Bud.)

BEAU

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

BUD

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

BEAU

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

BUD

Sure would. '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, I guess.

BEAU

Guess not. Hotter than yesterday.

BUD

Feels that way, yeah.

(They drink.)

BEAU

How's Sydney doin'?

BUD

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

BEAU

Haven't really seen her around much.

BUD

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

BEAU

She's changed.

BUD

Whatta you mean? Changed how?

BEAU

Well, she's a grown woman now.

BUD

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

BEAU

True enough.

(They drink.)

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

BUD

Well, 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 right on over to the Nunez house, and beat Rodger Nunez with that thing? Lucky for him, he was more than a foot taller than her. Otherwise, she mighta killed him had she wacked him over the head with it. And lucky for us, she was nine at the time. Otherwise, we woulda been in a heap of legal trouble for sure.

BEAU

Well, that Nunez boy had it comin'.

BUD

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

BEAU

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

BUD

Oh yeah? Well, that's too bad.

BEAU

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

BUD

With Roscoe?

BEAU

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

BUD

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

BEAU

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

(Bud nods.)

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

(They drink.)

BUD

My Mama passed away when I was eleven, so, it was just me and my Daddy after that.

BEAU

Oh. Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Bud.

BUD

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

BEAU

I'm listenin'.

BUD

My Daddy was a police officer. He kept crazy hours. Nearest relative was my Aunt Minnie on my mother's side, but she wasn't able to take care of me. She ended up in an institution after a while. So, when my father would go out on patrol, he'd sometimes leave me with one of the neighbors. And when there wasn't anyone around to watch me, he'd drop me off at the local bar. He was good pals with the barkeep. And I didn't mind. Plenty of stuff to keep me entertained: Jukebox, pool table, all sorts of characters comin' and goin'. So, there was this one guy who'd swing by late afternoons: Leroy. He was in his forties, never married, worked part time as a roofer, hardly had two nickels to rub together. And oh boy, was he a talker. Always flappin' his gums, never knew when to keep his mouth shut. On this one particular day, I was lookin' for somethin' to do, so I offered to clean all the cue sticks. I was at the back of the bar when Leroy came stumblin' through the front door. Usually, he'd come in sober and then leave drunk, but on that day, he was already half in the bag. So, he goes to the bar, and he orders a double whiskey neat. He downs that pretty quick and then he orders another. After that, he makes his way back to me. He pulls a bar stool over, sits down on it, leans into me, and asks me what I'm doin'. I mean to tell you, his face was all swollen, his teeth were dirty, and his breath smelled god-awful. So, I backed off a little. And when I did, I could see that he got real sad. I felt bad for him. So, I bolstered myself, moved closer to him, and answered, "I'm just cleanin' these cue sticks, Mister." That's when he smiled, leaned in again, and whispered to me, "I gotta secret that I ain't never shared with no one. Do you wanna hear it?"

(Bud inhales deeply and then lets out a breath.)

I gotta tell you, Beau, I did not wanna hear it and I wanted to tell him so, but instead I just said, "Sure, Mister." And this is what he said to me: "Lucifer has put a thorn in my flesh. And God is dead." Then he reached out his hand – it was all cracked and dry and red. And I wanted to run or

at least call out, but I just couldn't. Then he grabbed my hand real tight and pulled me in to him. He put his other hand around the back of my head and he... he buried his face into my hair. And he breathed in real deep. He stank so bad I thought I might be sick. But before anyone saw what was happenin', Leroy all of sudden just let go of me. He stepped back, his eyes wellin' up with tears. And then he turned and walked back to the bar, paid his tab, and left. 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.

BUD

You want me to talk to her?

SYD

I'm a grown woman, Daddy.

BUD

So, I've been hearin'.

SYD

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

BUD

Says the grown woman.

SYD

Daddy...

BUD

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

SYD

I'll get it.

BUD

(Rising.)

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

SYD

Thank you, Daddy.

BUD

You got it.

(Bud exits. Sydney starts to follow him.)

BEAU

Hey, Sydney.

(Sydney stops and turns to Beau.)

SYD

You can call me Syd.

BEAU

Alright. Syd.

SYD

Yes, Beau?

BEAU

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

SYD

That's the word on the street.

BEAU

Bet you got a fun night planned.

SYD

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

BEAU

Where you goin'?

SYD

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

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

Maybe not.

SYD

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

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

You know what I mean.

SYD

I do know what you mean. And I am tellin' you again, it's none of your damn business. So, I guess maybe we're done here.

(Sydney starts off.)

BEAU

Now listen, Syd—

(Beau rises and reaches for her arm.)

SYD

(Sharply.)

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

(Beau cautiously moves his hand away.)

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

BEAU

I wasn't gonna put hands on you.

SYD

Oh, yeah? Well, it sure looked like you were.

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

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

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

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

It wouldn't be card club without 'em.

BEVERLY

No, I suppose it would not.

(They share a laugh. Helen is finishing putting things away and/or cleaning up.)

BEVERLY

Listen, Helen...

HELEN

Mm Hm?

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

(She stops what she's doing.)

Alright.

BEVERLY

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

(Helen starts to interject.)

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

HELEN

Whatta you mean? Before what's too late?

BEVERLY

Beau and I went through somethin' similar with Roscoe.

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

And what'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. I mean, Beau only just made things worse with Roscoe. And it's plenty clear that Sydney has Bud wrapped around her little finger. Now, don't get me wrong – Bud's a good man, no doubt about it – but he doesn't see what you and I see. So, it's up to you.

HELEN

And what do you suggest I do, Beverly?

BEVERLY

I suggest you pray to God for guidance. And then you 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. Uh, no, 'course I don't mind. I'll just, uh... I'll just grab Beau and we'll be on our way.

HELEN

Thanks for stoppin' by.

BEVERLY

Well, it was my pleasure. Thank you for lettin' us disrupt your day. And we are very much lookin' forward to that award ceremony in a few weeks.

HELEN

(Halfheartedly.)

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

BEVERLY

It sure is. So, listen. You get some rest, and we'll talk soon.

(Beverly moves to Helen, gives her a hug, and then exits the kitchen. Lights down on the kitchen and up on the porch. Bud and Beau have finished eating and are drinking fresh Sazeracs.)

BEAU

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

BUD

Ida Wells?

BEAU

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

BUD

S'right.

BEAU

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

BUD

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

BEAU

No, now listen. That John Dean fella – the White House Counsel guy – 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 okay. We're havin' a good time.

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

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

BEAU

What? Noooo.

BEVERLY

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

(Beverly winks at Bud.)

BUD

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

BEVERLY

Sounds lovely. Let's go, Beau.

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

Why should today be any different?

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

BUD

I got him.

(Beverly steps aside.)

BEVERLY

Thank you, Bud.

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

BEAU

Hey, Bud.

BUD

Yeah?

BEAU

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

BUD

I know, Beau. Everyone knows.

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

Consider 'em marked, Beau.

BEAU

Oh, shit.

BUD

What's the matter?

BEAU

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

BEVERLY

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

BUD

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

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

Well, okay. He's all yours then.

BEVERLY

Ain't that the sad truth?

BUD

Just be careful there. And take your time.

(Beverly guides Beau off. Bud smiles, maybe laughs, and shakes his head. He goes back onto the porch and sits down. All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

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

HELEN

Headin' out already?

SYD

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

HELEN

You finished with your studies?

SYD

I will be in about three years.

HELEN

(A half-smile.)

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

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

Whatta you need the beer for anyway?

SYD

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

HELEN

And from there?

SYD

I already said. Out dancin'.

HELEN

Where?

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

No harm, I guess, 'cept we haven't decided yet.

HELEN

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

SYD

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

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

HELEN

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

(Sydney has opened the screen door.)

Sydney!

(Sydney stops and turns to Helen.)

SYD

What!?

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

I gave birth to you. I raised you.

SYD

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

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

HELEN

Sydney, I–

(Sydney suddenly moves to Helen. Helen braces herself.)

SYD

Sit down, Mama.

HELEN

Sydney–

SYD

Sit down.

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

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

(Helen looks at Sydney but stays silent.)

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

HELEN

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

SYD

What way?

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

By callin’ it what is was: trash talk and gossip. “She’s a good, Christian girl”, I’d remind ‘em. “She’ll grow out of it, it’s only a phase”, I’d say. “As a matter of fact, she has her eye on that Landry boy down in East Riverside, I half-expect they’ll be married one day”. And I’d just

repeat 'em same things over and over, until either they believed me, or they just stopped talkin' about it. And that's what I did to protect you.

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

I'll take my chances.

(Sydney starts for the door.)

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

(Sydney exits. All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

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

BUD

Sweetheart? Helen?

(Helen looks back to Bud and smiles faintly.)

What're you doin'?

HELEN

I thought I'd try and catch the sunset.

BUD

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

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

You okay?

HELEN

I'm fine. Long day is all.

BUD

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

HELEN

You still tired after that long nap?

BUD

Didn't say I was tired.

HELEN

(A polite smile.)

Not tonight, Bud.

BUD

Sorry. Bad timin' on my part.

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

(Unconvinced, self-conscious.)

You shut up.

BUD

I'm downright serious. I mean, come on. Without you, this entire house would come down on its foundation. Hell, there are so many things you do that are useful. You're an amazin' cook. You're always cleanin' up after me and Syd, spend most of your time in the laundry room 'cause

we're always comin' home dirty. You head up all 'em bake sales at church. And you're all the time volunteerin' for somethin' or other in the community. And none of it has anything to do with how beautiful I think you are.

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

What? What's wrong?

HELEN

Do you smell that?

BUD

Oh, damn, it's probably my breath. I should brush my teeth.

(Helen stands.)

HELEN

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

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

BUD

Oh yeah, I smell it now.

HELEN

(Spotting something.)

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

BUD

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

BEAU

(Off.)

Bud! Hey, Bud! You see that?

BUD

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

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

BEAU

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

BUD

Yeah, sure. I'll be right over.

(Beau exits. To Helen.)

You gonna be okay here by yourself?

HELEN

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

BUD

There's nothin' to worry about. Me and Beau are just gonna stay back outta the way unless they need us for anything. And I'll call you if I can.

(We hear a car horn in the distance. Calling off.)

I'll be right there, Beau!

(We hear a car start. To Helen.)

Love you, sweetheart.

HELEN

Love you, too.

(They kiss. Another car horn.)

You better get goin'.

BUD

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

(Bud heads off. Helen watches. She waves as we hear Bud get into the car and the car speeds off. All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

June 24th, 1973. ~11:00 PM. An empty kitchen. The coffee maker is on and has just finished brewing. Helen enters and pours herself a cup. She's anxious. The telephone rings. She puts her coffee down and answers the call.

HELEN

Bud...? Hello...? Oh, I am so sorry, Dennis, I thought it was my husband callin' back... Well, I was waitin' for an update from him on that buildin' that caught fire; I don't suppose you've heard anything more...? You haven't...? Well, I'm actually kinda surprised you're not over there

too... You were called away...? 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 just come over to the station and take care of things myself... No, you don't need to pick me up, I'll drive myself. It's very sweet of you to offer, though... Yes... Thank you, Dennis... Goodbye now.

(Helen hangs up the telephone. She stands quietly. A look of sadness comes across her face. She begins to cry, softly at first. This will turn into heavy sobbing. Suddenly, we see and hear Bud approach the kitchen door. He is covered in soot and is extremely disheveled and tired. Helen sees him and hurriedly composes herself. She moves quickly to the door as Bud enters.)

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

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

Why don't you sit down here? You must be thirsty. Let me grab you some lemonade.

(Bud sits as Helen starts for the refrigerator.)

BUD

Just some water, please, sweetheart.

HELEN

'Course.

(Helen pulls a glass from the cupboard and gets Bud a glass of water from the faucet. She brings it to him.)

Well, my goodness, Bud, you're completely covered in ash. What in the world happened over there?

BUD

It was awful.

HELEN

Whatta you mean? Awful how?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

There were several that were injured real bad.

HELEN

Oh, my God.

BUD

And that ain't the worst of it.

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

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

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

BUD

(Rising out of the chair.)

Helen...

HELEN

...No, no...

(Bud goes to Helen and gently comforts her.)

BUD

Helen, look at me. Look at me.

(She does.)

Roscoe's dead.

HELEN

Roscoe? Where was the fire?

BUD

Over on Iberville Street. So, listen. I'm gonna head down to Leeville in the mornin' with Beau to pick up his other boys and bring 'em home. Maybe you can keep an eye on Beverly while we're gone? We won't be too long.

HELEN

(Distracted.)

Alright.

BUD

I'm gonna get cleaned up. And then I think we should go to bed, try to get some sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day.

(He hugs Helen tightly and then starts off.)

HELEN

Bud.

BUD

What is it?

HELEN

We can't go to bed just now.

BUD

Whatta you mean? Why not?

HELEN

Sydney.

BUD

She's not home yet?

HELEN

No.

BUD

Well, what's wrong? Where is she?

HELEN

Detective Cormier called.

BUD

Dennis?

HELEN

Yes.

BUD

Well, what'd he say? Is Syd in trouble? She okay? Helen! What's happened with Syd?

HELEN

She's been arrested.

(All lights fade to black. End of Act 1.)

ACT 2**SCENE 1**

June 25th, 1973. Morning. Somewhere along Highway 1. Beau is hunched over. He has just finished vomiting. Bud stands nearby.

BEAU

I'm sorry, Bud.

BUD

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

(Bud hands Beau a handkerchief from his pocket.)

BEAU

Is this clean?

BUD

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

BEAU

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

BUD

Fair enough. Well, it's fresh outta the wash; I pulled it from the dryer this mornin'. So, go ahead. Clean yourself off before you get any of it on your shirt there.

(Beau wipes his mouth.)

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

BEAU

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

BUD

'Course.

(Beau breathes.)

You wanna talk about it?

BEAU

No.

BUD

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

BEAU

What have I done, Bud?

BUD

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

BEAU

Do you believe in the power of prayer?

BUD

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

BEAU

That ain't what I mean. When we found out Beverly was pregnant the first time, we prayed to God every day for a healthy baby boy. That's all we wanted. We never thought to ask for more than just that. Roscoe never caused us much trouble. Hardly ever cried. Made a little pig of himself when he ate. Only fussed a little when Beverly put him down for naps. Almost always slept through the night. All the time smilin', curious, sharp as a tack. In a lot of ways, he was just a normal kid. A good boy. But I guess that wasn't enough for us. Roscoe was just barely six years old when we found him playin' dress up with his cousin, Delia. And not even five minutes before that, we had to break the two of 'em up because they was fightin' over who got to play with what baby doll. The rest of the family tried to laugh it off. But not me and Beverly. We knew somethin' wasn't right. So, we got back to prayin'. We prayed hard that Roscoe would turn out okay. We thought that maybe his behavior was in some way a message from God, His way of lettin' us know that we'd somehow gotten off track, and that we needed to get back into His good graces if Roscoe was gonna grow up and be a proper man. So, we went to church every Sunday and sometimes durin' the week. Prayers every night and every mornin'. Stopped drinkin', stopped goin' out, stopped cursin', stopped gamblin', stopped every goddam thing. But nothin' changed. Roscoe just got more and more peculiar. And the harder we pushed him, the harder he pushed back. When Roscoe was about twelve, thirteen maybe, Beverly caught him messin' around with that Rodger Nunez boy up in his bedroom. She got real mad. Rodger, of course, ran out of the house but Roscoe was too scared to move. Beverly took one of my belts and started beatin' him with it. Roscoe somehow managed to slip away and he made it as far as the landin' before Beverly caught up with him. I guess she started hittin' him again and that's when he, uh... that's when he went up over the handrail and fell to the floor below. When I got

home that evenin', Beverly was outta her mind. Turned out, she dragged him into the hall closet, shut the door and locked him in there. She wouldn't give me the key to let him out. So, I had to force the door open with a crowbar. That's when I found him huddled up on the floor. He was covered in welts and bruises, blood everywhere. His head was twisted somethin' awful, and he had dried snot all over his face. Didn't look like he was breathin'. I thought maybe he was dead. I hoped he was. And that's when I prayed to God to make it so.

BUD

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

(Beau looks to Bud but does not move.)

Let's go.

(Bud guides Beau off brusquely. All lights fade to black.)

SCENE 2

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

HELEN

You finished?

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

You musta been up all night.

HELEN

I slept a little. You feelin' better?

SYD

Yeah.

HELEN

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

(She starts for the sink with the dishes.)

SYD

(Rising out of her chair.)

Here, Mama, let me take care of / those.

HELEN

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

(She is referring to the Tupperware containers.)

SYD

I can help carry 'em over.

HELEN

No, now listen. You just stay here and get some rest.

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

Mama, I—

HELEN

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

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

SYD

Mama, I'm sorry.

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

HELEN

Sorry for what?

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

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

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

BEVERLY

Good mornin', Trahans!

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

SYD

I sure do.

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

So, you don't like almonds?

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

No. No phone calls. No visitors.

(Referring to the cake.)

So, you wanna give this a try, or no?

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

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

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

So, how are you, Sydney?

SYD

I'm doin' okay, I guess.

BEVERLY

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

SYD

Oh yeah? Well, cats have pretty mixed appetites. So, are you sayin' I look like a mouse or a rat? Or maybe a little bird, like a sparrow or a robin? Now, 'course cats also like bugs: spiders, grasshoppers and the sort. Or perhaps I resemble a snake or possibly a lizard? So, which one is it?

BEVERLY

You just can't help yourself.

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

You just had a big breakfast.

SYD

I think I've got room for one slice.

HELEN

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

SYD

Okay.

(Sydney gets a glass and then exits. Helen pours the coffee and sits. Beverly and Helen prepare their coffees in silence.)

HELEN

Roscoe's gone, Beverly.

BEVERLY

I know.

HELEN

You don't seem upset about it.

BEVERLY

Why would I be? I'm not one to question the good Lord above.

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. So, if that isn’t some kinda message from the Almighty, I don’t know what is. Now, I think we should give this a try, hm?

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

HELEN

The cake can wait.

BEVERLY

Did I say somethin’ to upset you, Helen?

HELEN

No. No. I guess I’m just havin’ a hard time figurin’ out how a mother – whose son hasn’t been dead twenty-four hours – can’t find it in herself to shed one single tear for him.

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

I remember. I didn’t know what happened exactly and certainly didn’t wanna pry.

BEVERLY

Oh, it was just a stupid accident is all. You see, I had just finished waxin’ the upstairs floors when he came runnin’ out of his room. He was always in a hurry. Anyway, I told him to slow down. And that’s when he slipped and fell. Tumbled all the way down to the landin’. We didn’t think he was gonna make it. And I believe that God meant to take Roscoe from us that day. But it seemed He changed His mind; maybe He wanted to give Roscoe a chance to right himself. But that never happened.

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Mysterious ways, Helen. Mysterious ways.

(The telephone rings.)

HELEN

Sydney!?

SYD

(Off.)

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

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

(The telephone stops ringing as Sydney answers the call off.)

Listen, Beverly...

BEVERLY

Mm hm?

HELEN

None of this makes any real sense to me. And I don't think I've ever been so overcome in my entire life. But I do believe, with all my heart, that the Lord has a plan.

BEVERLY

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

(Sydney appears in the archway.)

SYD

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

BEVERLY

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

SYD

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

BEVERLY

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

SYD

I suggest you take it.

BEVERLY

Alright then. Excuse me.

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

HELEN

Sydney.

SYD

Yeah, Mama?

HELEN

Come here.

(Sydney moves to Helen.)

SYD

What is it?

HELEN

Yesterday, you called me a coward.

SYD

Mama, I–

HELEN

No, let me finish. That wasn't a nice thing to say, but I suppose you're right. The truth is I don't have it in me to be brave, which is why you scare the hell out of me when you do some of the things you do. Mostly I worry about what might happen to you when you're away. I worry that you'll get hurt. Make no mistake, there are people out there who will hurt you, Sydney. But I don't want you livin' in fear; it isn't healthy. So maybe you can leave that to me. It's all I know, and it's the only way I know how to protect you. Now, who else knows about your arrest?

SYD

Oh. Um... Well, you and Daddy, 'course. And Detective Cormier. There was another officer there with him, don't remember his name, though.

HELEN

Who else?

SYD

Mama, why are you—?

HELEN

Who else?

SYD

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

HELEN

I see. And what about those other girls? You said you went to that bar with some other nurses?

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

I don't know.

HELEN

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

SYD

S'right.

HELEN

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

SYD

Mm hm.

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

HELEN

Everything alright, Beverly?

BEVERLY

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

HELEN

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

BEVERLY

Oh, there won't be any need for that. Roscoe can stay right where he is.

HELEN

Oh, now, come on, Beverly, I'm sure you don't mean that at all. And I expect that Beau—

BEVERLY

You leave Beau to me. Besides, sounds to me like you got your own troubles here at home. Maybe that fire was a blessin' after all; a convenient distraction for you and your family. Wouldn't you agree? Well, I suppose I should be headin' home now. You all go on and enjoy that cake without me.

(Beverly starts off.)

HELEN

Beverly...

BEVERLY

Mm Hm?

HELEN

Before you go, I put to[gether]— You know what, never mind, it's not important.

BEVERLY

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

(Beverly exits through the kitchen door. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 3

June 25th, 1973. Early evening. At rise, the porch is empty. We see Sydney enter through the porch door and start down the stairs. She is on the verge of tears. Bud follows her.

BUD

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

SYD

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

BUD

You can't what?

SYD

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

BUD

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

SYD

This is different.

BUD

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

SYD

You sayin' I need to be fixed?

BUD

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

SYD

I'd rather not.

BUD

You wanna stay out here? Away from your Mama?

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

Okay then. Come up here on the porch. Come on now.

(Sydney does. They settle in.)

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

SYD

I'm angry. A lot. I know it. And I just can't figure out what to do with all that rage sometimes. And you know, when you're angry all the time, you start to forget what it's like to actually be happy. Or you start to question whether you've ever been happy to begin with. It's a hard thing to shake. And some days, I feel like I'm so far gone that I'm never gonna be able to find my way back. If there is a way back. And back to what? I can't change who I am, Daddy. And I suppose that even if I could change, I wouldn't. I don't know why. Maybe it's because I'm stubborn. Or because I'm selfish. Or maybe I'm just plain spiteful and stupid. Or maybe it's because I'm so damned fed up with bein' judged all the time. I mean, if God is love, then why is the world so filled with hate? I haven't done anything wrong. Or at least what I have done, it don't feel wrong. Not to me anyway.

BUD

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

SYD

Daddy...

BUD

...I love you.

SYD

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

BUD

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

SYD

Mm hm.

BUD

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

SYD

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

BUD

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

SYD

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

BUD

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

SYD

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

BUD

(Knowingly, with a smile.)

/ Buuuut the very first time I held you in my arms and saw your chubby little face and looked into your beautiful blue eyes, I thought differently about 'em. I love every piece of you, Syd. Which means I love this piece of you, too. I mean, we're all made up of pieces, right? You know, but if we just keep chippin' away at the pieces we don't like, then there won't be anything left. And that don't sound right to me at all. Now, listen. I'm gonna have a talk with Dennis Cormier to see if I can't get 'em charges dropped, okay? Now, but if his hands are tied, then we're gonna have to figure somethin' else out if this goes to court. You understand?

SYD

I understand.

BUD

Alright. You get back in the house. 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 on it. She also holds a fork, napkin, and a glass of milk.)

HELEN

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

BUD

Sure. I'll give it go.

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

HELEN

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

BUD

Oh, I figured you might be.

(He spits the cake out into a napkin.)

Ack, this cake tastes funny.

HELEN

Funny how?

BUD

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

HELEN

Well, you don't have to eat it if you don't want. I mean, between you and me, Beverly's never been very useful in the kitchen.

BUD

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

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

HELEN

I just don't understand it, Bud.

BUD

What's that?

HELEN

Why Sydney feels the need to hide things from me.

BUD

Is that right?

HELEN

Whatta you mean "is that right"?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

Well, whatta you want me to say?

HELEN

You'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 on this?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

And you're okay with it.

BUD

There's nothin' we can do about it.

HELEN

There's plenty we can do.

BUD

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

HELEN

For starters.

BUD

And then what?

HELEN

And then I think maybe we send her off somewhere.

(Bud chuckles and shakes his head.)

This funny to you?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

It's not the same thing, Bud.

BUD

(A little loud and aggressive as he rises.)

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

(Helen is surprised. Bud takes a moment to compose himself.)

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

just left him up there for almost two hours. And ‘em folks on the street, they just kept pointin’ at him and mockin’ him. And I wondered to myself, what must it be like to have to hide who you are from the world? To have to somehow take that burden of pain and grief and to put it up over your shoulder, up on a shelf somewhere in the dark. Way up high. And to just leave it there. Because if you don’t tuck it away outta reach, you might not make it through another day.

(The silence is broken by...)

BEAU

(Off.)

Bud! Hey, Bud!

BUD

What the hell’s goin’ on now?

(Beau appears, 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, uh... she’s in real bad shape. I was hopin’ Syd might take a look at her.

BUD

Yeah. Alright, okay.

(Calling out.)

Syd!

(He goes to the door and calls in.)

Syd!

HELEN

Sydney!

SYD

(Off.)

I’m comin’!

HELEN

You need to hurry, Sydney!

(Sydney arrives on the porch.)

SYD

What's the matter? What's happened?

BUD

Beverly ain't feelin' well.

BEAU

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

SYD

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

BEAU

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

SYD

Listen, we gotta get her to the hospital now. So, go get your car, get it started and wait for us in the driveway. I'll head over and see what I can do.

BEAU

Okay.

(Beau races off.)

SYD

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

BUD

Yeah, 'course.

(Bud races off ahead of Sydney.)

HELEN

Sydney.

SYD

What is it, Mama?

HELEN

Billy and Jack.

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

Thanks, Mama.

(She starts off.)

HELEN

And Sydney—

SYD

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

(Sydney is off. Helen stands alone, feeling anxious and unsure. She takes a deep breath and then exits quickly into the house. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 4

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

HELEN

Where's your Daddy?

SYD

He's out in the tool shed.

HELEN

What's he doin' out there?

SYD

I don't know, Mama. Said he needed to check on somethin'. Didn't say what.

HELEN

How'd you get back home?

SYD

We walked.

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

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

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

What happened to your face?

SYD

It's nothin'. I'm okay.

HELEN

How's Beverly?

SYD

She's not doin' so well.

HELEN

Did they say what was wrong with her?

SYD

They did some bloodwork. She had cyanide in her system.

HELEN

Cyanide?

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

She drank it, Mama.

HELEN

She did what?

SYD

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

HELEN

Why? Why would she do that to herself?

SYD

Have you ever thought about killin' yourself, Mama?

HELEN

What a terrible thing to ask me.

SYD

Well, have you?

HELEN

'Course not. It's a sin.

SYD

Do you remember a few years back when the dryer broke, and we had to hang the wash outside to air dry?

HELEN

Oh boy, do I. It was nearly a month before your Daddy could fix it. I had to haul those wet clothes out to the yard; I nearly broke my back.

SYD

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

HELEN

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

SYD

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

HELEN

Sydney...

SYD

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

HELEN

(In tears, horrified.)

Oh, my God, Sydney. Why didn't you tell me this sooner? I would've—

SYD

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

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

BUD

Goddamit.

SYD

(Rising to meet him.)

What's the matter, Daddy?

BUD

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

SYD

Is somethin' / missin'?

BUD

/ I searched every inch of it, and I couldn't find it anywhere.

HELEN

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

BUD

/ You gotta understand. I wouldn't have it if I didn't need it for my / work.

SYD

/ Daddy, what're you talkin' / about?

HELEN

/ Bud, please! What's wrong?

BUD

I keep a bottle of Sodium Cyanide out there, but it's gone. And I expect that's what Beverly got her hands on.

HELEN

And what on earth do you need cyanide for, Bud?

BUD

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

HELEN

I see. Well, none of this is your fault, Bud. You know that don't you? So, I think it's best you put that idea out of your mind right now. Okay then, I should probably head next door and check on 'em boys.

(She starts off but then turns back.)

You know, but before I do, I have something I need to say to you, Sydney... Syd. I am your mother. I will always be your mother. And I am doing my very best, make no mistake about it. And for that reason alone, you will treat me with respect. You understand?

(Syd nods.)

I love you, no matter what. But I don't think you believe that, so I'm telling you right now that it's the God's honest truth. And I need you to trust me, but I know trust has to be earned. Fair enough. I accept that, and I'm determined to earn it, because I never want you to keep anything from me again. Now, 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 Helen. They hug tightly. Helen kisses Syd on her forehead and then exits out the kitchen door. Bud moves to the kitchen table and sits. Sydney grabs another beer from the refrigerator, opens it and hands it to Bud.)

SYD

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

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

BUD

Syd.

SYD

Yeah?

BUD

Go see if your Mama needs help.

SYD

You okay, Daddy?

BUD

I'm doin' alright. So, go on.

(Sydney hesitates.)

Go.

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

SCENE 5

July 4th, 1973. Evening. The Larson's Livingroom. Faint sounds of fireworks in the distance. Sydney sits on an ottoman facing Beverly, who is sitting in an armchair. Beverly's dinner sits on a tray table in front of her. It's difficult for her to move and a challenge for her to speak, however she is not wholly incapacitated. She is unwell but recovering.

SYD

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

(Beverly remains silent.)

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

(Beverly reaches for the fork, grabs it clumsily and then throws it to the floor. Sydney calmly retrieves the fork and places it back on the tray.)

Alright now listen. Truth is, you're never gonna get back to the way you were, but you're damn sure gonna get better than you are now. You're gonna be fine. You know that, right?

(Beverly turns her eyes to Sydney and then closes them tightly.)

Okay, so, I guess this is how it's gonna go then, hm? You just gonna keep to yourself, pretend that I'm not in the room?

(Beverly opens her eyes and turns away from Sydney.)

I see. Well, I get it. You're upset about missin' the fireworks, aren't you? Well, so am I, but here we are and there isn't much we can do about it now. Nonetheless, I'm sure your boys are havin'

a nice time with their Daddy tonight. It was a good idea ‘em gettin’ outta the house for a while. I mean, everyone needs a happy distraction now and then, right?

(Beverly gives Sydney the middle finger.)

Well, my goodness, Beverly, that’s not very Christian like, now, is it?

(Beverly gives Sydney the middle finger with the other hand. Sydney’s now looking at two middle fingers.)

So, okay then. Well, at least you seem to be in a better mood today. Oh, and hey, a bit of good news. The police are pretty sure they got the guy who set the fire: Rodger Nunez. You remember him?

(Beverly’s triggered by the news but does her best not to show it.)

I never liked him much. He was nothin’ but a bully. 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 just marched on over to the Walgreens across the street, bought some lighter fluid and a book of... Well, I suppose there’s no need to get into the particulars of it. Anyhow, I thought maybe you’d wanna know.

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

Roscoe was cremated by the way. The church decided to keep his ashes in an urn under the altar. For the time bein’ anyway. Until they can afford a burial for him. Most of the men who died in that fire were part of the congregation, so ‘em expenses are gonna add up. Oh, and they held a memorial service for him this past Sunday, over on Claiborne. Me, Daddy, and even Mama went. It was beautiful. The pews were full up, so we had to stand all the way in the back of the vestibule near the entrance.

(Beverly begins to cry a little.)

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

(Beverly continues to cry quietly.)

And I might be oversteppin’ my bounds here, Beverly, but I really and truly think you ought to find a way to get all that hate outta your heart. I mean, look where it’s got you. Stuck in your house on the fourth of July and bein’ hand-fed by a smart mouthed lesbian. Now, come on. I’m runnin’ outta patience here. Just one bite, okay?

(Sydney takes the fork, stabs the food with it, and then raises it to Beverly’s mouth. A standoff. Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 6

July 4th, 1973. Evening. Not far from the Canal Street Dock. Bud and Beau are watching the fireworks.

BEAU

We can move closer to the river if you want.

BUD

No, this is fine. We got a great view from here.

BEAU

I just wanted to stay away from the crowd, you know? I mean, I guess I'm not ready to—

BUD

No, no, 'course, not. I understand.

BEAU

(Calling off.)

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

(To Bud.)

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

BUD

Well, they're gonna be young men soon. And then you're gonna have yourself a whole 'nother set of problems to deal with.

BEAU

Don't I know it.

BUD

It'll be somethin' to look forward to. You gonna be okay?

BEAU

That's a really big question for me to have to answer.

BUD

Well, you don't have to answer it. But you know, it doesn't have to be a complicated answer neither. Sometimes, when things go wrong, and people ask you if you're gonna be alright, you can always say, yes. And then make it happen. And I know that's easier said than done but what's the alternative, Beau? You can't change what's happened. You got a wife to take care of,

and you got two boys who need your guidance and your love. And if you're feelin' out of sorts and things are looking hopeless, then in that case, you can always say, no, I am not okay. And if that is how you're feelin', well then, we're here for you. For whatever you need.

BEAU

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

BUD

Do what?

BEAU

How you find the silver linin' in everything.

BUD

Well, not in everything. I mean, there are some things that can't be salvaged, I guess. And in those cases, I do my best to keep to myself because it ain't my place to judge. So, you know, I just try not to live in fear of things I don't understand. Don't see the point in it.

BEAU

When Roscoe moved out a couple of years back, I... I have to admit, I felt relieved. It was just easier to have him out of the way. You know? Less shameful. We didn't have to answer questions no more, and, well, we just let people believe that we asked him to leave. But I gotta tell you Bud, I would give anything to have him back with us.

BUD

I know you would.

BEAU

(Calling off.)

Hey, boys! Now, what did I just say? You need to 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 is dressed nicely for an evening out and is trying to put on a necklace as she moves to the telephone. She gives up on the necklace and answers the call.

HELEN

Hello...? Oh hey, Louise... No, no, no, it's fine. We're headin' out shortly, but I've got a minute or two... Yes, 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 this evenin'; I need to pick up some brioche... That's right, I'm gonna make a bourbon bread puddin' to bring, unless of course you got somethin' else in mind... Oh, now come on, Louise, that's ridiculous. My bread puddin' is just okay, it is not the best bread puddin' in the whole of New Orleans... Okay, well, I am flattered but that's just plain dumb... I'm sorry, what's that...? Well, yes, I am plannin' on bringing 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, okay? And besides, you're gonna have your hands full with the Baily sisters... No, now not another word. We're all gonna have a wonderful time and that's all there is to it... Good... Alright then. I'll see you tomorrow evenin'. Goodbye.

(Sometime during the previous, Bud enters wearing formal attire. He moves to the refrigerator and pulls a beer from it. He opens the beer and begins drinking it.)

Don't you look nice.

BUD

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

HELEN

Stop it, Bud.

BUD

I will not stop it.

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

HELEN

Okay, fine then. I guess I look beautiful.

BUD

And don't you forget it.

HELEN

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

(She presents the necklace.)

BUD

'Course. Turn around there.

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

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

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

BUD

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

HELEN

Well, you aren't completely useless, so I expect you'd get on just fine. Now, where's that daughter of yours?

BUD

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

HELEN

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

(Calling out.)

Syd!

(To Bud.)

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

BUD

I'm sorry, but I can't make heads or tails of what you just said to me.

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 more like a straitjacket. I'd be a lot more comfortable in my overalls.

HELEN

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

(Calling out.)

Syd!

BUD

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

HELEN

Bud...

BUD

We got time.

(Helen lowers her head.)

What's the matter?

HELEN

There's nothin' the matter.

BUD

You sure? Because I'm startin' to get the feelin' that I'm not the only one who's 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 all we can. It took a little bit of money and a lot of sweet talkin' to get 'em charges dropped, but it's done. And Syd's safe now. As safe as she can be.

HELEN

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

BUD

Let 'em talk. Nothin' we can do about it. They're gonna just keep talkin' anyway, until they find somethin' else to talk about. Everything I need, everything I care about is under this roof. I'm gonna look out for you. And I'm gonna look out for my daughter. And I wouldn't mind so much if the two of you'd look out for me too.

HELEN

Well, 'course, Bud.

SYD

(Off.)

Mama? Daddy?

HELEN

Yeah, Syd?

SYD

Is it time to go?

BUD

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

SYD

(Off.)

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

(Helen and Bud look to the archway. Helen breathes deeply.)

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, there's no way in hell I'd take that bet.

(They look back to the archway.)

SYD

(Off.)

Alright. I'm comin' out.

(Lights fade to black. End of play.)