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**AUTHOR'S AGENT**

Susan Schulman  
A Literary Agency  
454 W.44<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10036  
Tel 212 713-1633  
Fax 212 581-8830  
Schulman@aol.com

THE LANDLADY

By

Allan Havis

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Allan Havis  
6035 Hillpointe Row  
La Jolla, CA 92093  
[ahavis@ucsd.edu](mailto:ahavis@ucsd.edu)  
phone (858) 382-0430

## **CHARACTERS**

**Gwen** . . . . . late 50s or early 60s, educated, attractive, perverse, a landlady

**Lana**. . . . . late 30s or 40s, sexy, hidden for protection, a tenant

**Ellis** . . . . . 45 years old, a touch of Asperger's Syndrome, school teacher, Gwen's son

## **SETTING**

Gwen's beach vicinity California home 2 hours south of Los Angeles, a suburb of San Diego, and a garage studio apartment nearby which we never see.

There are a few restaurants scenes too.

## **TEN SCENES & EPILOGUE**

SCENE ONE: A living room in a beach house. Saturday afternoon, April. We catch Gwen and Lana around the coffee table in conversation already in progress.

GWEN

The children's school is just a block away. The fence line is inadequate. Their hedges are cut short. Bougainvillea tend to bloom if you let them go wild. It's a public school.

LANA

Is that a nuisance?

GWEN

Not really. My property has some distance but what can one do? On a daily basis you'll hear the piecing school bells and the bells sound forbidding. The same bells the school used when my son went there. Yet during recess the kids sound so happy and so innocent. Sometimes a ball or a frisbie will fly over our fence. How that happens, I'll never know. And of course I go outside and return the ball. I smile at the kids. I ask them their names. And their nicknames.

LANA

Cute.

GWEN

Yes. And they carry backpacks and rolling luggage. Like little refugees going to a new land. Behind them is litter, gum wrappers, and throwaway toys from McDonalds. Living near the school also means the occasional police lock down. There is an intruder or a crime nearby. God forbid the worst. How horrible that thing in Connecticut. What's wrong with this country? The NRA tugs and that's the way it goes? Why are we letting demented young men free to take shots at our babies? Where is the public trust?

(SILENCE)

I'm sorry.

LANA

Don't be.

GWEN

It's not about the constitutional amendments.

LANA

You're so right.

GWEN

You're very polite, Lana. . Have I ever seen you on television?

LANA

No.

GWEN

Perhaps on the shopping network. You look familiar.

LANA

People think I look like a younger Annette Benning.

GWEN

Before or after Warren Beatty?

LANA

I like your pearls

GWEN

Thank you. Fresh water pearls make me very settled and at ease.

LANA

Your pearls accentuate your strong neck line.

GWEN

That's why I wear low collars. Do you have favorite jewelry?

LANA

Not now.

GWEN

But what did like?

LANA

For a time I like diamonds. They certainly catch the light.

GWEN

I could guess that. About you.

LANA

Yes?

GWEN

Yes, indeed. Diamonds turn heads. But all those dear children in the mines punished by the Sierra Leone warlords. Goddamn those thugs. If you must go that route, choose Cubic

Zirconia. No one lost a digit or an arm in pursuit of CZ.

LANA

I don't wear diamonds, Mrs. Shepherd.

GWEN

I'm always on some soap box to save the children. Or save the seals. There's a group screwing with the seals in the cove. It's in all the newspapers.

(PAUSE)

What is your profession? Something new? Something old?

LANA

I told you over the phone.

GWEN

I couldn't hear on the cell. We have jets flying overhead looking for coyotes.

LANA

I'm a wedding photographer. Mostly weddings.

GWEN

Oh, that is splendid! All you see is public joy.

LANA

Sure. A sea of joy.

GWEN

People love weddings, my dear.

LANA

Half do, half just go crazy. Nothing in life creates more stress than a big wedding. I began as a wedding planner but that was a massive headache. I couldn't rely on my vendors, and my wedding families were far worse. And the cash flow doesn't go to plan.

GWEN

It's awful when they stiff you, darling.

LANA

No one likes getting stiffed. That's why I downsized to the camera.

GWEN

You're free and independent.

LANA

Photography is pure and I have nothing to do with controlling the entire production.

GWEN

Oh, yes, that sounds like so much fun. You're in charge, you're allowed to look sexy, and you only have to boss around the people you shoot.

LANA

I like the fun.

GWEN

My Nikon flashes and people flick up the human wattage – no matter how plain the bride is. I take that back. Brides are always beautiful. Particularly pretend virgins and second time nuptials.

LANA

I've seen all kinds. Sailors and virgins.

GWEN

Cute. Sailors and virgins. Sounds like a subsidiary of Victoria's Secret or a new rock band. Ha, I finally made you laugh.

LANA

Thank you. I need a laugh.

GWEN

You have a melancholic gaze.

LANA

Do I?

GWEN

No one's told you that?

LANA

Never.

GWEN

Forgive me then. Margot Kidder had that look.

LANA

Who's Margot Kidder?

GWEN

She's the actress in the Superman films. Over thirty years ago. She lost her mind and became a street person. I don't know, maybe she overcame her bi-polar thing. Don't you see that look in the mirror?

LANA

No.

GWEN

It's a serious expression. I'm not saying you're Lois Lane.

LANA

I get that.

GWEN

Why did you leave Los Angeles?

LANA

I'm not sure. It was too hectic and I hate the traffic.

GWEN

You can answer that better, Lana.

LANA

Why is this becoming an interrogation?

GWEN

(Warm smile)

No no no., Just a silly little interview, darling.

LANA

I needed a change.

GWEN

Chased by a boyfriend?

LANA

No. Honest.

GWEN

I'd rather know now than later.

LANA

My mother used to say exactly that line.

GWEN

Uncanny. Do I look like her?

LANA

My apartment was broken into three times in West L.A. They took everything but the flat screen which was bolted down.

GWEN

Theft is everywhere, but L.A. is the crime capital.

LANA

San Diego doesn't have gangs?

GWEN

We have brain dead surfers with attitudes and they aren't harmless. Last month a surf board flew off the roof of a car and took out an elderly cyclist. How hard is it to tie a bungee?

LANA

Oh that is too much.

GWEN

A few blocks away is the home of Ellen DeGeneres's father. He's an insurance agent and the mailman reads his postcards to me. We go to the same car mechanic on Turquoise Blvd. Ellen gave the shop one of her head shots with a long dedication to Sal who does god-beautiful cam work. I used to like Ellen a lot and even Rosie O'Donnell. . But was so confused just after the Anne Heche thing with Ellen.

LANA

I don't know about the Anne Heche thing.

GWEN

Well, it's too long to retell, but Heche thought she was abducted by a spaceship and was taught a foreign language with a stop watch. Her true name was Celestia. And when I think about the ordeal, it's never easy learning French or Italian. Even at a neighborhood bistro with a double-sided menu. Anne Heche also thought the aliens were making her fall in love with another woman. And how exactly did they do that? Really. I do feel badly for Heche, and her film career has taken quite a hit, don't you think? She was so good in *Wag the Dog* and that remake of *Psycho*.

LANA

I don't go to the movies much.

GWEN

Nor do I since that terribly Batman thing in Colorado. Guns and nuts, nuts and their guns. Much better to watch at home in your underwear and then you can fall asleep safely whenever the story drops. You don't carry a gun, do you? How do you stay so thin?

LANA

I like to walk a lot. Sometimes I jog.

GWEN

Bad for the knees.

LANA

It's either jogging or zumba. Lesser of the evils.

GWEN

Are you a smoker?

LANA

No.

GWEN

Loud music?

LANA

No, I'm not the party animal.

GWEN

Do you like rap music? I deplore rap. . Final proof that the inner city is the really the outer ring of Saturn.

LANA

Funny thought.

GWEN

I'm full of funny thoughts. I made you laugh.

LANA

Yes.

GWEN

Quiet is an essential element to a peaceful world.

LANA

I agree. I also worked as a day companion for an elderly man – a published poet.

GWEN

It's nice to agree. We have a world in such turmoil. The polar ice caps are melting. There are riots in Athens and Cairo. I bought shares in Facebook and what a joke that was. You can call me Gwen. You can "Friend" me on Facebook, sweetie. I love social media.

LANA

Have you lived here long?

GWEN

Half my life. I did spend some time on the East Coast and I once had a noticeable dialect. With the help of a voice coach, New Jersey vanished, but I you can't varnish the soul.

When I get very emotional, I'm a Jersey cow. Moooo . . . .

(PAUSE)

Are you in trouble?

LANA

Why do you ask?

GWEN

It's the way you wear your hair.

LANA

Just a little wind blown.

GWEN

I know a very nice salon in town. Everyone there has a Caribbean accent. Do you like Reggae?

LANA

Not much. Should I?

GWEN

Do you think Bob Marley's really dead?

LANA

I never gave it any thought.

GWEN

And Snoop Dog converted to Rastafarian beliefs. Which thrills me to no end.

LANA

Yes. I can guess that.

GWEN

Well, how do you like the studio apartment? I realize it's small. Converted garages have limits but I thought I did a fantastic job opening up the side yard and creating a very private space. It's detached from this house and you have a side alley. I would call that privacy. The wood beams are so handsome and that lifts the feel of your ceiling. Your kitchen has utility and the stove top is gas. One can't cook properly with electric burners.

LANA

I'm not much of a cook.

GWEN

I could guess that, yes. When I was your age I loved to prepare meals. There's something about an open bottle of wine and the right mix of herbs before the magic begins. Now all I try to do is lose eight pounds in my midriff. Otherwise I'm a happy idiot. Were you married, Lana?

LANA

Never.

GWEN

Not even once?

LANA

Does it matter?

GWEN

I'm a landlady and I have questions.

LANA

Because you're smiling, I know this is a game. Do you want my references?

GWEN

Yes.

LANA

I've a cousin who's a nurse practitioner at the university medical center. She helped me find some elderly in-house substitute work.

GWEN

Okay.

LANA

And I once worked for a member on the LA City Council. I can email you the contact numbers.

GWEN

Political activism?

LANA

Hardly.

GWEN

I see you bite your nails.

LANA

Not much. Just the pointer finger.

GWEN

I used to have that biting habit but a manicurist treated my nails with a foul tasting polish – something like overripe blue cheese and dead fish. It worked overnight. I just don't know why she also treated my toes. I'm not that flexible. I suppose you have a business card?

LANA

Yes.

GWEN

May I have one?

LANA

Sure.

(She finds a spare card in her wallet and gives it to Gwen)

GWEN

My son's an elementary school teacher in the next district. He's an avid reader. I don't feel lonely when he comes by. We talk about books and art and politics. I often think that Ellis could have done much better in life than teaching 4th graders. All the teachers are women, you know, but he doesn't care. He could have gotten his doctorate and found a perch at some classy college. He had his science dissertation nearly finished – “String Theory and the Umbilical Cord.” I'm joking. I must have more ambition for him than he has for himself. Ellis is a rare man.

LANA

Any other sons or daughters?

GWEN

My daughter died during infancy. She had a punctured lung and a brain disorder.

LANA

I'm so sorry.

GWEN

Actually it hurts Ellis more than it does me. Growing up an only child wasn't advantageous. He would lock himself in his bedroom thinking there were vampires wanting to get him. Therapists did manage to calm him. He's a fantastic school teacher. Always getting awards from the PTA and the state of California. He's also a community Big Brother for a few inner city kids. That's a man with a pure heart. He plays with algorithms and Google earth satellite shots. Ellis did his undergraduate work at Penn State and he's so demoralized by the football scandal and all these obscene cover-ups. What

monsters they are at Penn and the Vatican.

(Pause)

I take it then that you want the apartment.

LANA

Yes. I like being this close to the ocean.

GWEN

And we agree upon the rent?

LANA

Yes.

GWEN

So it's first and last month, you get the utilities in your name, we won't start with a lease but after six months . . . well, we get see how we both like the arrangement. You can park off street and leave your car in the alley. It's more convenient when you unload groceries. Where is your photo studio?

LANA

I plan to sublet space at a loft downtown.

GWEN

That might get expensive. Are you dating?

LANA

No.

GWEN

Do you belong to a health club?

LANA

Do you?

GWEN

(Laughs)

I think I would die if I was seen in spandex.

LANA

There are other choices . . . sweat pants, tennis shorts . . .

GWEN

Sometimes I imagine that if my daughter had lived, she would look so much like Anne Heche – but only fluent in English.

LANA

Gwen, I did have one question about the apartment.

GWEN

Yes?

LANA

The red shag rug may be a problem.

GWEN

Not quite your color?

LANA

I have asthma.

GWEN

Yes?

LANA

The shag is a dust magnet.

GWEN

Oh, I see.

LANA

Can we rip it out? There's a wood floor below.

GWEN

I don't see why not?

LANA

That would be wonderful.

GWEN

You'll have to pay for the floor refinishing. I'll ask Ellis if he can remove the rug next weekend. How does that sound?

LANA

Thank you.

GWEN

He hates physical work if I nag him too much and defends himself by saying he's an endangered intellectual. Would Rush Limbaugh say he's an intellectual? Would Anderson Cooper? But really, what the heck is an endangered intellectual? A gay man abusing Percocet? Ten thumbs and no common sense at the tool shed? Do these educated men

work with their hands anymore? Are there any more real men in America? Really

LANA

I'll leave you a check made out to you.

GWEN

Thank you.

(Lana takes out her checkbook)

LANA

How do you spell your last name?

GWEN

Just as it sounds, darling. Shep – herd. H. E. R. D.

END OF SCENE

SCENE TWO

(A week later. Lana's in a skimpy towel, just out of the shower inside Gwen's living room.)

ELLIS

Oh gosh . . .

LANA

Get out.

ELLIS

Excuse me . . . I thought no one was in.

LANA

Get out.

ELLIS

But I . . . I used to live here.

LANA

What?

ELLIS

Gwen's my . . .

LANA

Was the door unlocked?

ELLIS

(Rapid about-face to leave)

Yes.

(He opens the front door)

LANA

Are you Gwen's son?

ELLIS

Yes.

LANA

I moved in two weeks ago. Close the door, or the cat will get out.

ELLIS

(He closes door)

Into her home?

LANA

No, the converted studio.

ELLIS

The garage? You rented the garage apartment?

LANA

That's right. My shower's not working.

ELLIS

I know. I tried to fix it.

LANA

How hard is it to get a shower to work?

ELLIS

You need the right tools. Gwen doesn't usually lock the side door.

LANA

Oh.

ELLIS

I think she should lock the doors. Don't you? Is she here?

LANA

No. She went to Home Depot.

ELLIS

Okay.

LANA

You seem surprised by that.

ELLIS

Well, she usually has a phobia about the big box stores. Anything more than six wide aisles and old retired men wearing orange aprons – well she just freaks out.

LANA

I asked her to go for me.

ELLIS

Oh, then she didn't go. She lies. Gwen's probably getting her nails done. Usually her toenails.

LANA

You're joking?

ELLIS

No. Why would I?

LANA

You have a smirk on your face.

(She leaves the room to get her robe and soon returns during Ellis's speech)

ELLIS

Not quite. It's a muscle disorder. Orofacial dystonia. Sometimes it's a smile or a sneer depending on the tension I'm holding. Sometimes I take botox to bring it down but the shots aren't cheap. It happens, you know, when I meet someone new and you're just wearing a wet towel. Not anything like Tourette's Syndrome. People hardly notice.

(Silence. Lana returns with robe on) Gwen takes botox too for the wrinkles. I'll come back.

LANA

No, stay. I'll finish up in a snap and you can wait for her.

ELLIS

I'm surprised she rented to you.

LANA

Why?

ELLIS

You're young.

LANA

Oh?

ELLIS

And she doesn't trust young, good looking people.

LANA

I guess there's an exception to every rule. So you teach elementary school?

ELLIS

I do.

LANA

Very nice of you.

ELLIS

Yes, it is nice of me.

(Pause)

Do you really think so or is this condescension?

LANA

I think so. It's hard to be a good teacher to little kids. Particularly for men. (Awkward silence) The hours must be nice, and you get to hang posters on the wall, and you're off in the summer. (More silence) You're giving your very best to others.

ELLIS

I hope that's true. I need to like what I do. Giving to others. I have the gifted kids. You know, Gate Seminar little genius group. They read encyclopedias during afternoon recess.

LANA

No monkey bars for these kids?

ELLIS

Plus they talk like Phineas and all look like Ferb.

LANA

I don't get it.

ELLIS

What don't you get?

LANA

Phineas and Ferb?

ELLIS

Is that your VW outside?

LANA

Yes.

ELLIS

It's leaking oil.

LANA

I know. I'll fix it this weekend.

ELLIS

You should place a pan under the chassis until you fix it. You're staining the alley.

LANA

Can you actually tell that?

ELLIS

When the sun's out, yeah. Doesn't take a genius. Sometimes you can squint your eyes and imagine you're seeing the Virgin Mary in the stain. (Pause) Phineas and Ferb is an animated Disney TV show. Sometimes you can see them at Disneyland or on lunch boxes. Phineas has a point on the top of his triangular head and he's the incessant talker. Ferb rarely talks. (Awkward silence) If I don't comb my hair the right way, you can see the point on my head. (He smiles) I wanted to leave this envelope for Gwen. Would you tell her it's on the kitchen counter?

LANA

Sure.

ELLIS

It's cash. \$200. I always pay at the top of the month. Otherwise she hits me up with 17% interest compounded monthly. Ouch. I don't even know what loan is outstanding but I pay on time. Gwen can be very tight. You'll see. Money isn't such an important thing to me. In fact money is the closest thing to finding the devil's door. Did you know according to the latest Gallup poll that more people in America believe there is a Satan than there is a God? I hope Gwen isn't overcharging you.

LANA

I don't think so.

ELLIS

Because you seem like a nice person.

LANA

Oh.

ELLIS

You have expressive eyes and that usually means you are sweet and nice.

LANA

Thank you.

ELLIS

You do know that someone died in their sleep in that studio.

LANA

No, I didn't know that.

ELLIS

Well, that's why Lana is giving you a price break. You look upset.

LANA

Who died?

ELLIS

An old man. A stinker, actually. Wealthy but eccentric. Hated banks. Had a home in New York and wanted to hide away. Must have been pushing 85. He had a pacemaker and Gwen said it interfered with her cell phone reception. Imagine that?

LANA

When did he die?

ELLIS

Maybe six months ago? Gwen clipped the obituary in the village paper.

LANA

Thank you for telling me.

ELLIS

It's best to know, don't you think?

LANA

Yes.

ELLIS

But it's your home now. And someday the shower will work.  
You know, people with Tourette's Syndrome really can't keep a job.

LANA

I have to get dressed now, Ellis.

ELLIS

About 200,000 Americans have Tourette's. A lot of children have it.

LANA

I'm going back into the bathroom. Bye.

(Lana exits and Ellis continues talking)

ELLIS

One of the first descriptions of Tourette's was made in 1825 by French neurologist who treated a noblewoman who had vocal tics at the age of 7.

(Ellis tries to fix a window shade that is in disrepair)

Her tics developed into screams and curses, so she was sent to live in seclusion.

(Ellis combs his hair in the wall mirror)

Usually tics are most apparent at puberty and then they lessen over time. But men are more likely to have Tourette's which doesn't quite seem fair. 3 men to every 1 woman. Why mock men this way? Is it God or the Devil?

END OF SCENE

SCENE THREE

(Some days later. Ellis is fixing the plumbing with a clumsy hand)



more than you're willing to give.

GWEN

She's rather pretty, don't you think?

ELLIS

Yes, she is.

GWEN

She has that windblown look with lip gloss. I think you've noticed her.

ELLIS

Who cares?

GWEN

But not quite your type.

ELLIS

My type?

GWEN

You like the girl next door look. She's not that girl.

ELLIS

How the heck do you know my type?

GWEN

Ellis, I'm your mother. How many mothers do you have?

ELLIS

You didn't talk to me this way before my divorce.

GWEN

Wasn't it an annulment? Thank God.

ELLIS

It was a bona fide California divorce. You kept your distance.

GWEN

Maybe I shouldn't have? Maybe it'd have made a difference?

ELLIS

No. Meddling is despicable.

GWEN

You're happier now.

ELLIS

Am I?

GWEN

A thousand times happier. You put on weight, less acne, and you wear clean shirts now.

ELLIS

It's not acne but a shaving condition, Gwen.

GWEN

It's hygiene, Ellis. Take responsibility. You don't want me to be happier. Isn't that it?

ELLIS

Of course I want to be happier. But happiness is a myth. The pursuit of life, liberty and happiness – three great American ideals.

GWEN

I know you don't mope about at the public school.

ELLIS

I'm thoroughly charming at the school.

GWEN

That's because you wear plaid suspenders.

ELLIS

Not anymore.

GWEN

Who bought you those suspenders?

(Silence)

Why did I send you to one of the finest boarding schools on the west coast?

ELLIS

Are you asking me or is this a set piece?

GWEN

I'm asking you, Ellis.

ELLIS

The boarding school was not perfect. Kids don't like boarding school. Let me ask you - was that you decision or Dad's?

GWEN

Your father was incapable of making good decisions.

ELLIS

He picked great stocks. He helped others get wealthy.

GWEN

Yes.

ELLIS

He knew when to sell stocks.

GWEN

Yes.

ELLIS

And he was always good about not shorting stocks.

GWEN

Lawrence had a phenomenal ability for making money. That was all of his talent. He was a failure on every other count. He needed me and I knew how to hide the cash. Otherwise he'd spend it on vices. . Never dispute that statement, Ellis. Thank Heaven you didn't inherit his vices.

(Lana enters from the unlocked back door)

LANA

Hi there. It's me.

GWEN

Don't praise your father for his noble failures, Ellis. That won't fly. He had many nice traits but he couldn't lead the Munchkins out of Oz.

ELLIS

What? What the heck are you talking about?

GWEN

Your father was so short, Ellis. You didn't inherit all of his awful genes. Hello Lana.

LANA

I'm not getting any cell phone reception for some strange reason. May I please use your land line?

GWEN

Of course.

LANA

(Smiles at Ellis)  
I'll only be a moment.

GWEN

Aren't you worried about cell phones and radiation?

LANA

(About to dial)  
All the time, actually. That's why I have Bluetooth.

ELLIS

Microwave ovens will kill us first. It's only a matter of time.

GWEN

Never make microwave popcorn, it can explode, Lana.

LANA

(Talking on the phone)  
I need a cab please in an hour – yes. 4170 Belvedere Avenue. Last name is Cassidy. I'll give you my neighbor's phone number (Reading off the phone) 747-2300.  
Thank you. I'll pay with cash.

(Hangs up. To Gwen)  
I hope that's okay that I gave your number.

GWEN

What happened to your car?

LANA

I don't feel lucky about driving at night. Actually it's about safety.

GWEN

Really? Are you on medication?

LANA

No. Don't you ever feel that way?

ELLIS

I certainly do. In fact I suffer from a concept of dread.

GWEN

Oh, stop it, Ellis. You're just a wimp.

ELLIS

I've read the entire works of Primo Levi. You don't have to be Jewish to get the idea. This is a personal belief and I can never convince you, Gwen, that you don't how to use your mind's receptors to see into the future, or to use your natural GPS to make informed choices. Anyone could end up in a concentration camp.

GWEN

My home is not a concentration camp.

ELLIS

I didn't imply anything of the sort.

GWEN

You're saying this because your witchy wife had two suicide attempts.

ELLIS

Trudy's not my wife any more.

GWEN

Thank God. I'll bet a hundred dollars she'll be married before the end of the year.

ELLIS

What else do you want Lana to know?

GWEN

I don't get your sarcasm, but I do get your personal pain. Am I embarrassing you?

LANA

I'll wait outside.  
(She exits)

ELLIS

Are you a VIP member of the Tea Party?

GWEN

I stopped giving money to them four weeks ago.

ELLIS

And you read all of their literature?

GWEN

Only the love letters I get from Grover Norquist – the lonely brain trust of the movement.

ELLIS

A bowel movement.

GWEN

Oh, that's clever wordplay.

ELLIS

You were poor once.

GWEN

Everyone is poor once, Ellis. That's the American dream. Get out of the gutter.

ELLIS

I think you're associating with the wrong people.

GWEN

This is an old conversation and you know me too well.

ELLIS

Sometimes you surprise me, Gwen.

GWEN

I care about the things most people take for granted, and we can't feed the poor anymore, Ellis. When you joined the Peace Corps ten years ago, I said goodbye to the Ellis I had cherished. I've seen you give clean dollars to the assholes at the busy intersections. You can't even read their handwriting on the corrugated cardboard. They're not war vets and their crutches are pure theatre.

ELLIS

Some of those guys went to high school with me.

GWEN

Drugs kill.

ELLIS

Why did you tell Lana you just executed a will?

GWEN

Did I?

ELLIS

You did.

GWEN

It just came up in conversation a few days ago.

ELLIS

It's none of her business. She's a tenant. You hardly know her.

GWEN

But I like her.

ELLIS

Did you actually show her the will?

GWEN

Of course not.

ELLIS

What else did you tell her?

GWEN

We were sipping chardonnay and I had lit a log in the fireplace. I told her I once slept with Larry King in a Los Angeles hotel fifteen years to the day when he left CNN. You know that story. It's a fantastic story. He was between his sixth and seventh wife. Why hold back? I told her I was almost done with estrogen treatments too. I asked her to feel my thyroid and my lymph nodes. And she obliged me. Look, I have been very thorough. I did a background check on her with an internet service. Are you upset about my will?

ELLIS

My point is that you're miserably inappropriate.

GWEN

You are upset. I'm so sorry, Ellis.

ELLIS

No, you're not. Why don't you just post your will on Craigslist?

GWEN

I may be inappropriate but not miserably so. You'll never give me grandchildren. So what do I owe?

ELLIS

Oh, just stuff it, will you.

GWEN

Is that why Trudy Fruity left you?

ELLIS

I wanted children, Gwen. You're just spinning lies.

GWEN

So Trudy had fertility problems?

ELLIS

I don't want to talk about it.

GWEN

It wasn't you, Ellis? You know about ICSI and it does work a lot.

ELLIS

What the heck is ICSI?

GWEN

Hell, I gave you pamphlets. Intracytoplasmic sperm injection. You know it's like a NASA space shot. A fancy way of saying inject sperm into egg with a thingy from science fiction.

ELLIS

I have twenty-seven kids each day at school. I have my offspring.

GWEN

Yes. I guess you do have your offspring.

ELLIS

Children remember great teachers.

GWEN

How do you stay great, darling?

ELLIS

I excite the questions. It's all about how to pose the right questions.

GWEN

So excite me, Ellis.

ELLIS

With a question?

GWEN

Yes, with a question.

ELLIS

Why did you murder my father?

END OF SCENE

SCENE THREE  
(The next week. Gwen's living room)

LANA

What is that odor?

ELLIS

They're roofing down the street. It's tar.

LANA

It's awful. I'm getting a migraine.

ELLIS

If you bake bread, that might mask the smell.

LANA

What a wonderful idea.

ELLIS

Thank you.

LANA

Where did she go?

ELLIS

One of those five day Carnival cruises to Mexico.

LANA

How spontaneous, don't you think?

ELLIS

Gwen knew about the tarring. But then again, she conflicted about boats.

LANA

Does she get seasick?

ELLIS

I don't know. She watched Alvin and the Chipmonks' third film on an ocean cruise liner.

She loves Alvin. Says he reminds her of her husband. My father sounded like Alvin.

LANA

That's funny.

ELLIS

That is, when he sang.

LANA

You know Gwen well.

ELLIS

Hell, she likes to torture herself. Wait. That's too much. I take that back. Much too harsh. Gwen likes to test herself.

LANA

Why?

ELLIS

It keeps her from torturing others. Besides she needs to test herself to see if she's still alive.

LANA

How weird.

ELLIS

Yes. Very weird. Gwen fears she's not thoroughly human. She imagines that she's a walking angel devoid of wings. She hates to walk. I'm actually very sympathetic to her condition. I've read her diary. She keeps it under her bed.

LANA

That's sneaky.

ELLIS

I cannot afford to be anything but sneaky. In fact I think she wants me to read what she's writing. It's her way to keep me informed about the future and the why the future is not a true form of human happiness. Those are my words and not hers. You look confused.

LANA

When is she or you going to fix my shower?

ELLIS

Very soon.

LANA

When is soon?

(Silence)

Where do you live, Ellis?

ELLIS

I've a rental 20 minutes from here. Stucco duplex. Carport overhead. I'm on the top floor and there are squirrels in the vent.

LANA

Do you like living alone?

ELLIS

Do you?

LANA

I asked you first.

ELLIS

No, I don't like living alone. No one likes living alone. It's too monkish and I left my monk phase years ago.

LANA

I don't think people were meant to live together.

ELLIS

People need company. Nights are long.

LANA

People have bad habits. Days are long.

ELLIS

Why did Gwen tell you everything about me?

LANA

Everything?

ELLIS

Yes, everything. I can sense that she has.

LANA

I don't know, Ellis, but she didn't tell me as much as you think.

ELLIS

Did she say I was kicked out of the navy?

LANA

No.

ELLIS

Yes, she did.

(Silence)

This is so humiliating. It's like being in middle school all over again with an uncorrected overbite and awful teenager stutter.

LANA

You don't stutter, Ellis.

ELLIS

I did.

LANA

Why do you beat yourself up?

ELLIS

You know she really isn't my mother.

LANA

She isn't?

ELLIS

Gwen's my aunt. My natural mother died in childbirth.

LANA

Oh gosh . . . that is a lot Ellis.

ELLIS

It's tough, Lana. It's really tough. In her mind, she thinks she gave birth to me. Isn't that pathological? Soon after my mother's death, my father married my Gwen.

LANA

When did you find out?

ELLIS

Way too late. In high school, before college. Right after my father died.

LANA

She was probably trying to protect you.

ELLIS

Protect me from what?

LANA

From the pain.

ELLIS

That's nicely expressed, Lana, but Gwen is not protecting me from pain.

LANA

When I moved into the studio, I didn't know I'd get this soap opera.

ELLIS

You think my life is a soap?

LANA

That's not what I meant.

ELLIS

What did you mean?

LANA

I was trying to share a joke with you. It didn't work.

ELLIS

I believe you.

LANA

Good. And I know you're not the best plumber in town.

ELLIS

I don't like getting my hands dirty, truth be told. My father couldn't pick up a hand saw to save his life. At least I know the difference between a Philip's head and an Allen wrench.

LANA

You have long slender fingers like an El Greco.

ELLIS

Thank you.

LANA

You're welcome. Finally I get to see a warm smile from you.

ELLIS

Do you think I look like Anthony Perkins?

LANA

Who's Anthony Perkins?

ELLIS

Skip it.

LANA

Now I feel like an idiot. Who is he?

ELLIS

An actor who died about twenty years ago. Perkins was in *Pretty Poison*. He also played Norman Bates. You know – “Norman Bates”. “Bates Motel”.

LANA

Oh. The Hitchcock film.

ELLIS

Yes.

LANA

No. You don't look like him.

ELLIS

I'm tall and lanky.

LANA

And he's tall and lanky?

ELLIS

He has a brooding face.

LANA

You don't.

ELLIS

It's the mother thing.

LANA

Oh, the mother thing. I get it. Maybe you just have to leave the country and never see Gwen again?

ELLIS

Are you making fun of me?

LANA

No, Ellis. I like you. It's called affectionate teasing.

ELLIS

How do you like me?

LANA

I think you're attractive, very smart, and unusual.

ELLIS

And?

LANA

And we have interesting conversations.

ELLIS

But what do you feel?

LANA

I don't know. I hate the smell of tar.

ELLIS

I thought you would have moved out by now.

LANA

Because of all the faulty plumbing?

ELLIS

Because of the last tenant's death.

(She moves over to him and touches his face innocently. They both are eerily silent during this exchange. She studies his eyes closely)

LANA

You know, the practice of tar and feathering began in Salem, Massachusetts.

(She moves away like a cat on a high fence)

I nearly did start packing, but a Santería person came in to purify the building.

ELLIS

Really? Was that expensive?

LANA

Yes, actually it was. And you can't put it on your charge card.

ELLIS

I like your perfume.

LANA

It's Shalimar. The very opposite of tar.

ELLIS

There's more to the tenant story. The tenant's name was McClenon and he had hired a call girl to entertain him. He died just before she got out of bed. It was in all of the papers. She was a community college student and was cleared of any charges, including prostitution. What an unpleasant story, Lana. I told Gwen to turn the studio back into a garage. The stain is permanent.

LANA

At least the shower will work before Christmas.

ELLIS

Yes. I'm a lousy plumber.

LANA

I told Gwen I'll just hire a professional this week and deduct it from the rent. I didn't want you to know that.

ELLIS

So pro-active.

LANA

I hate that phrase.

ELLIS

I'm sorry.

LANA

Besides the Santería, I hired someone to address the feng shui inside the studio. The furniture felt heavy and oppressive.

ELLIS

The furniture is a holdover from McClenon.

(Pause)

Do you ever want to see a movie with me, Lana?

LANA

I don't think that would be comfortable.

ELLIS

You can pick the movie.

LANA

I can't.

ELLIS

A matinee?

(She smiles demurely and turns her head away)  
I'm sorry.

LANA

Don't be sorry, Ellis. I just don't want to complicate a living situation.

ELLIS

Isn't Santería just like voodoo?

LANA

I haven't a clue.

ELLIS

Santería comes from Cuba.

LANA

So did Fidel Castro.

ELLIS

(Laughing sweetly)  
That's funny. I see Castro with a cigar.

LANA

Do I remind you of your ex?

ELLIS

Not one bit.

LANA

Gwen said I was nearly her twin.

ELLIS

Gwen's just messing with you.

LANA

That's what I thought too.

ELLIS

You find this curious?

LANA

Yes. Really. Do you have a photo of her?

ELLIS

I do. In my wallet.

LANA

Why do you carry it in your wallet?

ELLIS

I don't know.

LANA

May I see the photo?

ELLIS

It's a bad idea.

LANA

Come on. I'll show you my ex's photo.

ELLIS

You were married?

LANA

Just for a couple of months. Dumbest thing I ever did.

ELLIS

When?

LANA

Seven years, seven weeks. Let me see you ex's photo.

ELLIS

Sure. Curiosity killed the cat.

(Finds the photo and carefully hands it to Lana)

LANA

Oh my God . . .

ELLIS

What?

LANA

(She falls back as if hit by a hammer)

She could be my twin.

ELLIS

No, you're prettier and sweeter than Trudy.

LANA

Where did you get this photo?

ELLIS

At the County Fair.

LANA

This is freaking me out. Did you photo-shop me?

ELLIS

No. Of course not. That would be so mean.

LANA

Then explain this . . .

ELLIS

How can I? I don't know really what to say. You're a photographer. The image is never the subject. We struggle with our vision. There's a trick of mind we learned in cog sci, you know, about the projections we cannot prevent. I think you're projecting, Lana, and it's not good for you. We have doubles and triples of ourselves because the world is that big. We think we're unique, but we're so common.

(He grabs the photo and tears it up)

How about skipping the movies and we just go to dinner at the harbor? Alaska crab legs or lobster? A fine bottle of chardonnay?

LANA

(Still uncomfortable due to the photo)

Why did you tear that up?

ELLIS

I had to. I want to take you to dinner.

LANA

Would you expect something more, Ellis? Dinners always lead to something more.

ELLIS

I've no expectations. I am a public school teacher.

LANA

Relationships can turn out badly. Think, Ellis. Let's use our heads. This can't become complicated.

ELLIS

Complicated? Relationship complicated? Does not compute.

LANA

Why were you kicked out of the Navy?

ELLIS

Many guys get kicked out of the military.

LANA

You're not going to tell me.

ELLIS

Please.

LANA

Ellis.

ELLIS

I can tell you. I'm not ashamed. Nothing sexual. Nothing of the sort. I don't have sea legs.

LANA

Oh no.

ELLIS

At the time I enlisted in the navy to get college benefits. The motion of the ships does something to my inner ear and that, in turn, causes something in my optical nerve and then if I see any flashes of light or sudden changes in primary colors . . .

LANA

Ellis, do you take medication?

ELLIS

No.

LANA

So you had a medical release.

ELLIS

Yes.

LANA

Nothing dishonorable. That's good.

ELLIS

I'm sure Gwen told you different story.

LANA  
It doesn't matter.

ELLIS  
I really like your smile.

LANA  
Thank you.

ELLIS  
I have a classroom of beautiful little children and they try not to smile when we do exams. They think too much and they all know they tested into seminar. It's unsettling to view them as though they are America's version of the precious, preternatural kids in *Village of the Damned*.

LANA  
Is it a novel?

ELLIS  
Yes, by another name. I know the movie. The kids – all blonde and blue eyes - were born at the same time in a small rural village. They demonstrate terrifying intelligence as toddlers and they take control over the community. I'd like to show the film at school?

LANA  
In your class?

ELLIS  
No, but it might do well at the next PTA event.

LANA  
I'm having trouble imagining you in the classroom.

ELLIS  
Why is that?

LANA  
I don't know.

ELLIS  
I've been teacher of the year three times in seven years.

LANA  
That is something to be proud of. You look upset.

ELLIS

I am. I think you're turning me down.

LANA

I'm in a funny way right now and sometimes it is best not to see someone. It has nothing to do with you.

ELLIS

I wish I could believe you.

(She approaches him slowly and stands an inch away from his face. They stare at one another. Suddenly, Lana reaches for him and gives Ellis a very long passionate kiss)

END OF SCENE

SCENE FOUR

(Some months later)

GWEN

You're losing weight.

ELLIS

No.

GWEN

You are and I don't like you being this skinny.

(Pause)

Are you teaching this summer?

ELLIS

No.

GWEN

Is that your choice?

ELLIS

Budget cuts.

GWEN

What are you going to do then?

ELLIS

Some months ago I put in an application for Semesters at Sea. That's right. I'll teach on a cruise ship and lead field trips. It's not high paying but meals are covered and I can sublet my apartment. I'm on the wait list.

GWEN

Teach the whole summer on a boat?

ELLIS

Why not? I don't want another summer retail job to cover my bills. It's demeaning.

GWEN

What about Lana?

ELLIS

What about her?

GWEN

Don't you have a budding friendship? Am I embarrassing you?

ELLIS

I can't make heads or tails out of her.

GWEN

Neither can I. She doesn't come over as much as she used to but I do have a pair of eyes.

ELLIS

Knock it off, Gwen.

GWEN

You're sleeping with her, aren't you? You were sleeping together.

ELLIS

It's none of your business.

GWEN

Have you had sex? Just a straight yes or no will do.

ELLIS

I'm leaving. Bye.

GWEN

I'm not disapproving, Ellis. It's kind of cute. Something to get you out of your hardened shell.

ELLIS

We're not intimate.

GWEN

She drives to your apartment. Once a week? Friday nights? I keep notes.

(Ellis at the door about to leave. Gwen reaches for Kleenex as she detects a spontaneous nose bleed)

GWEN

Oh Christ, another nose bleed! And this is my good blouse! Ellis, get some more tissues. This box is out.

ELLIS

Lie down. You and your bloody nose.

(He takes her to the sofa and with his free hand nabs another box of tissues)

GWEN

It's used to be fast elevators and high altitudes. Now I get these any hour of the day.

(He pats around the chin and makes a good effort to clean)

ELLIS

You do this at your own expense.

GWEN

I don't.

ELLIS

I have to go now.

GWEN

Just sit with me for two minutes, damn it. Please Ellis. I'm lonely.

ELLIS

Okay.

GWEN

I never see her go to work.

ELLIS

Are you spying on her?

GWEN

Hardly ever.

ELLIS

Does she have a key to your house?

GWEN

Yes. For this and that. The laundry room. You know.

ELLIS

So if you trust her with your key, then stop prying.

GWEN

She has many outfits. Lots of tight skirts. Eats granola bars and Yoplait yogurt. Don't marry her, Ellis.

ELLIS

What?

GWEN

One thing leads to the next. If you shared bed sheets, you won't be able to think smartly. I know you told her that I was your aunt. Why lie?

ELLIS

I get the brunt of your craziness. No one else alive goes through this.

GWEN

What if she's a carnivore, Ellis? You don't stand a chance.

ELLIS

You are my mother's sister.

GWEN

You want intimacy with her and hate my closeness with her. Isn't that the pattern, Ellis? What does that say about you?

ELLIS

What does that say about you, Gwen?

GWEN

Are you in love?

ELLIS

Christ, maybe I'm falling in love.

GWEN

I doubt it.

ELLIS

Why do you spoil my flights of elation?

GWEN

Flights of elation?

ELLIS

That's right.

GWEN

Because when you fly you look like a spoiled boy in knee pants.

ELLIS

She likes me, Gwen. Intensely. And that pisses you off.

GWEN

If you slept with her more than twice, yes, I am pissed off.

ELLIS

It's none of your business.

GWEN

I'm her landlady, Ellis.

ELLIS

You don't own her soul.

GWEN

I'm her landlady. She signed papers with me.

ELLIS

What the hell does that mean, Gwen?

GWEN

She signed a detailed contract.

ELLIS

What was in the contract?

GWEN

No loud parties. No lewd behavior. Compliance.

ELLIS

Compliance?

GWEN

You did sleep with her many times. I can tell. She had you stay in her studio and you had no inhibitions. Do you use protection?

ELLIS

You're not running a fucking convent, Gwen.

GWEN

Tell me you were in her bed.

ELLIS

I don't have to tell you anything.

GWEN

I'll just ask her.

ELLIS

You're out of your mind.

GWEN

It's my right.

ELLIS

And she'll just lie.

GWEN

She won't lie to me.

ELLIS

Then you will kill a valuable relationship. And I'll never speak to you again.

GWEN

She's not a wedding photographer, Ellis. You know she's made a charade of things.

ELLIS

What are you talking about?

GWEN

Lana doesn't work as a photographer.

ELLIS

She has some nurse's aid jobs at senior centers. It helps fill the gaps.

GWEN

You're so freaking gullible.

ELLIS

Maybe I am. But I don't care if she's in occupational therapy for seniors.

GWEN

I'm so sorry, Ellis. You're right. I am jealous and I can't help my impulses. There's something about Lana that has gotten under my skin. But I must protect you.

ELLIS

And what's left, Gwen? You've hurt me so much.

GWEN

Don't cry.

ELLIS

I haven't cried since my father died.

GWEN

I know. Some scars never heal.

ELLIS

I won't argue that.

GWEN

Good.

ELLIS

And I won't shed a tear for you.

END OF SCENE

## SCENE FIVE

(Some days later. A diner restaurant, quiet atmosphere.  
Some pop music ballad is playing softly)

LANA

I'm not comfortable.

ELLIS

I can see.

LANA

Ellis . . . there's a faint smell of industrial strength ammonia.

ELLIS

I can't tell with this head cold.

LANA

And the lighting is horrid.

ELLIS

I like bright rooms.

LANA

This is a terribly place to celebrate your birthday.

ELLIS

It's my way of downplaying age.

LANA

At least you dressed up.

ELLIS

It's a clip-on tie.

LANA

No way.

ELLIS

(He removes tie)  
See. It's a joke gift from the gym teacher.

LANA  
Hilarious.

ELLIS  
I'm 45, Lana.

LANA  
I know. And don't put the tie back on.

ELLIS  
I thought I'd have two kids by now.

LANA  
Well, what else did you imagine?

ELLIS  
Home ownership with a small yard.

LANA  
And a barking dog?

ELLIS  
I got a tattoo two nights ago.

LANA  
You did?  
(Ellis just smiles serenely)  
Why?  
(Pause)  
I can't stand this music.

ELLIS  
I think this is Blake Shelton. Why do middle aged assholes get tattoos? Was that what you were thinking?

LANA  
I didn't think you're middle aged.

ELLIS  
Really?

LANA  
What part of your body got that the tattoo?

ELLIS

Guess.

LANA

I can't.

ELLIS

(He laughs)

I think I was drinking a lot at the bar and you wouldn't pick up your phone. Where? On my triceps. Discreet. An equation of positive integers. Much cooler than a coiled cobra. Algebraic numbers are far more dangerous.

LANA

Did it hurt?

ELLIS

How old are you, Lana?

LANA

Why are you asking that?

ELLIS

Gwen knows but I don't know. Is that right?

LANA

Gwen doesn't know my age.

ELLIS

Yes, she saw your driver's license.

LANA

I'm 35. I'll be 35. Okay?

(Pause)

Ellis, you are better than these strange obsessions.  
Look at me. Don't drift away. Let's leave this restaurant.

ELLIS

(He returns her eye contact and smiles)

Fermat's Last Theorem states that no three positive integers  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  can satisfy the equation  $a^n + b^n = c^n$  for any integer value of  $n$  greater than two. Twenty years ago Britain's David Wiles claimed to have proved the second half of the theorem only to be discredited. He then spent a year to redeem himself and he found a way to cover his error. But the glory left him.

(Pulls up sleeve and shows the tattoo)

Does it look dumber than dumb?

LANA  
No.

ELLIS  
I used to love mathematics more than jazz. I drank five vodkas before I got inked. Three integers can also be three human silhouettes. Think about it. Are you really 35?

LANA  
I'm younger than you.

ELLIS  
Gwen knows about us.

LANA  
Did you tell her?

ELLIS  
She just knows.

LANA  
So?

ELLIS  
She knows you're not a wedding photographer.

LANA  
Did she say that too?

ELLIS  
She said you have two cell phones. There's a phone you keep hidden. She googled your cell phone numbers.

LANA  
What is she going to do?

ELLIS  
You haven't committed a crime. Everyone's entitled to privacy.

LANA  
And what do you think?

ELLIS  
About Gwen?

LANA

About me?

ELLIS

I respect your privacy. I wish you were a wedding photographer.

LANA

I am. I take pictures of dozens of weddings. People take my business cards.

ELLIS

Then you could actually build a respectable business in town.

LANA

I am respectable. I think you've been a school teacher for too long.

ELLIS

That's true. I've seen practically everything that can happen at a public school. The kids are too smart. The little entrepreneurs buy up Ritalin and Adderall from classmates and grind them into powder for the middle school students to snort. I would put them in charge of the U.S. Commerce Board to get us out of this crazy depression. It's more than bizarre that half the parents are shoving pills down their throats. And the Asberger kids seem to rule the roost because they've perfected the elementary school filibuster. If you curtail their monologues during the course of a school day, their parents bring in the doctors, lawyers and psychiatrists. I've learned to accommodate them and even go as far as to say that I too have Asberger Syndrome – which is speculative. I think half the elected officials in Congress have Asperger's if you go with the checklist: Congressmen don't recognize that the other person has lost interest in a topic. They are obsessed with statistical data that can be way beyond the narrow. Their body language can be super weird and they have trouble forming relationships. Most fascinating of all, they don't express pleasure at other people's happiness. I'm talking about the Democrats too.

(Sensing he may have gone on too long with Lana)

I don't get people who tune out other people. Even if they have medical excuses.

LANA

That's why someone should invent social varnish. We all would need some of that stuff.

ELLIS

Lana, you know I have strong feelings for you.

LANA

Yes.

ELLIS

Yes?

LANA

Yes.

ELLIS

I've made myself vulnerable to you. You know I've an open heart with no defenses. A guy does that when he jumps without a parachute. I'm in mid-air. Do you look away?

LANA

No.

ELLIS

I sang to you. Recited poetry to you.

LANA

And you do it beautifully.

ELLIS

Am I asking too much?

LANA

I don't know. What are you asking?

ELLIS

Not to share you,

LANA

What good would that do?

ELLIS

Change your cell number. Preserve your privacy.

LANA

I have my privacy.

ELLIS

No you don't.

LANA

I'm not going to change my cell number because of Gwen.

ELLIS

Sure. The last thing I want from you is to have you label me possessive. I was named after Ellis Island in New York. Accepting without judging.

LANA

Tell me when Gwen says something more damaging about me and then . . .

ELLIS  
And then you'll disappear?

LANA  
No.

ELLIS  
All good things come into my life, just to disappear the next day.

LANA  
I can handle Gwen. And I got over the photo of your ex. . That was a huge issue. Give me credit for sticking around, Ellis.

ELLIS  
And I do. But no man is an island.

LANA  
I like that. Yes, please give me credit for having to deal with your mother.

ELLIS  
I do.

LANA  
She goes through my drawers.

ELLIS  
No every day.

LANA  
And if she caught me going through her things?

ELLIS  
Let's not talk about this on a birthday. Why did you stop taking photos professionally? I've seen your work on your website. You have great ability.

LANA  
Freelance is not steady income. Believe me.

ELLIS  
I want to tell you how my father died.

LANA  
Why?

ELLIS  
Because I need to tell you.

LANA  
Gwen already told me.

ELLIS  
That is was a pool accident?

LANA  
Yes.

ELLIS  
Do you believe that story?

LANA  
Why shouldn't I believe it?

ELLIS  
Do you know how many home electrocutions happen in this country each year?

LANA  
I don't.

ELLIS  
1,459.

LANA  
Your father was electrocuted in the pool?

ELLIS  
Faulty underwater light allegedly shocked and killed my 59 year old father swimming in Gwen's backyard pool. Police and firefighters responded but could not revive him. Dad was swimming in the pool's deep end when his limbs suddenly went numb, he called out for help and just sank to his death.

LANA  
I'm so sorry for you.

ELLIS  
He had his faults, Lana. He used to kick the neighbor's dog. Nobody should kick a dog.

LANA  
I agree.

ELLIS

My father didn't die in an accident. The underwater lamps were tampered with and this was a way to do away with him.

LANA

Ellis?

ELLIS

I told the police but there was no investigation. Everyone felt it was easier to close the case.

LANA

And who do you think did it?

ELLIS

Gwen obviously. She talks about it at the anniversary as if this happened yesterday.

LANA

She admits doing this to your father?

ELLIS

She admits to being helpless. She touched the water and felt the electricity. She decries and moans how she was a witness to human torture. She won't admit to hiring an unlicensed Mexican electrician to rearrange the pool lights as though she were designing something for Cirque du Soleil.

LANA

Ellis, that is so creepy. You can't be serious.

ELLIS

Their marriage was a living hell. He had a better endurance than Gwen. She had options. She spoke to a Catholic priest. She contacted Dionne Warwick's psychic 1-900 hotline. Everything pointed to getting a non-union electrician from Tijuana.

LANA

You're making me want to pack up. Is that your intention?

ELLIS

Not at all.

LANA

I know Gwen has a lot of money tucked away.

ELLIS

How do you know?

LANA

She tells me so every other day. It's pathological.

ELLIS

Yes, if she's doing that every other day, it is pathological. Where did you go to college?

LANA

Bryn Mawr. Just outside of Philadelphia. Why do you ask?

ELLIS

I bought a ring.

LANA

What?

ELLIS

May I show it to you?

(He takes out a fine jewelry box from his coat pocket)

You told Gwen you like diamonds, and I know a very nice jeweler in town.

(He opens the box. Lana averts her eyes)

This is for you.

(Silence)

I had a dream the other week and you lighted up the sky. That was so prophetic. Our heads rested on our picnic blanket. Be spontaneous. Try on the ring, Lana.

(Silence)

F. Scott Fitzgerald asked Zelda Sayre in 1918 to marry him and she turned him down. This was near Camp Sheridan in Alabama. I was never in Alabama. Were you, Lana? Zelda didn't see at the time Fitzgerald's promise of artistic and material success. She didn't trust her own heart. Isn't that so terribly strange?

LANA

No, Ellis. It isn't strange.

ELLIS

You don't like F. Scott Fitzgerald?

LANA

That doesn't matter.

ELLIS

Try on the ring.

LANA

I'm sure it fits. And if it didn't you were resize it.

ELLIS

You don't like me?

LANA

People don't get the same impulses at the very same time.

ELLIS

This is more than an impulse.

LANA

Let a year go by, Ellis. Then see what feels right.

ELLIS

You really don't understand me. I had fallen in love with you the very moment we met. I knew you can seem ambivalent and perhaps that is a posture to protect yourself. You were scared by your first marriage. You have your reasons to be on the fence.

LANA

I was meant to be single.

ELLIS

Then I am a fool.

LANA

You're not.

ELLIS

I saved up everything to buy this.

LANA

And if I said yes?

ELLIS

Are you saying yes?

LANA

Look at my eyes.

ELLIS

I am.

LANA

Would you stay in my bed forever?

ELLIS

Isn't that . . . well, don't people do exactly that?

LANA

Would you do anything I ask you to do?

ELLIS

Of course.

LANA

Criminal things, Ellis?

ELLIS

What are you doing, Lana? Don't play games.

LANA

Do you think we should elope, Ellis?

ELLIS

Are you asking if I have friends? Are you asking if we need a wedding?

LANA

Do you think I should wear a formal white gown?

ELLIS

You would look wonderful in white, yes, wear formal.

LANA

And should I be our official photographer?

ELLIS

Oh, that is so absurd.

LANA

Is there no doubt in your mind about women, Ellis?

ELLIS

We all come from women. Isn't that the essence of things?

LANA

How are you able to keep the little boy inside you alive all these years?

ELLIS

Are you teasing me, Lana?

LANA

No.

ELLIS

Do you love me?

LANA

I don't know. I could love you. I should love you.

ELLIS

When you first kissed me, do you remember . . .

LANA

Do I remember what?

ELLIS

The thought inside your head.

LANA

It was fleeting. No. How could I remember?

ELLIS

When we kiss, you keep your eyes open.

LANA

I have to.

ELLIS

Why?

LANA

My father told me when I was a little girl that kissing was dangerous. You could lose your soul if you keep your eyes closed. I believed him then. I always thought he was right. He dressed me in flannel every winter and a child never forgets a promise. The lines of his veins spelled letters at night. He whispered stories that curl your toes. Can you hear the truth of that, Ellis? When I hold your hand, I know your thoughts. When we interlock our fingers, my heart skips a beat. I could be everything. I could be nothing. At night I have more to give you. In the daytime, I slink like a broken alley cat. When we went dancing, the night before last, it was the happiest hour of my life. And you never knew it. Isn't that so? You had a dazed expression. Maybe it was your hole, the cave, the place you go to hide. We prowl like the world has locked us out. We take jobs to find our way back in. You talk so much to fill the lapse in the oxygen. I think it is better to let the atmosphere twist faster than a Kansas tornado. Murder can slap the angel on your shoulder. And then what, Ellis? Grown men don't cry. You owe me nothing. The trust you place in me is as pure as a wedding album.

ELLIS

Put on the ring.  
(She does)  
It fits.

LANA

I now feel twinge of joy.

ELLIS

I see that. Yes.

LANA

This has to be your best birthday ever. Ellis, are you listening?

(She reaches over and kisses him. He reaches for her hair tenderly)

END OF SCENE

## SCENE SIX

(Some days later. Gwen has fallen asleep in her arm chair while Lana is reclined on the couch. Gwen might let out a snore or two before Lana begins. Lana knows Gwen cannot

hear any of this but pretends she's doing this all for Gwen.)

#### LANA'S MONOLOGUE

My car broke down on the 405 on a fucked up day, the rarest day in the universe, when everyone was off the freeway. It was probably Super Bowl Sunday. I called Triple A. My ex-husband was in the car. It was the anniversary of our divorce. He was in a mood – maybe it was the Super Bowl - and I was stupid to be trapped like a ferret. I called some friends so I could feel safer. That didn't go over well. How did I know he was in a mood? His silence. His stare. His breath was as penetrating as a knife. The sound of someone with asthma. And that forced me to talk non-stop. Motor mouth. I can be so fucking stupid. On the theme of a romantic anniversary. Why celebrate such things? Who really cares? As my ex would say, "who gives a crap?" Why do people propose toasts? Why do people propose? And do we have to take photos? Ask the waiter to take our photo. Why do people pose? And why I hate cell phones with heightened pixels. He said that divorce is harder on the man even if culture gives more sympathy to the woman. I didn't argue with him and wanted me to . . . and that made him very angry. Gwen. Gwen. He cries himself to sleep. I'm supposed to believe that. He wakes up in the middle of the night - all frightened. . He calls my number. He faults me for not calling back the next morning. We're still waiting for the tow truck. Traffic gets thicker out of nowhere. Even though we're on the shoulder. My heart begins to sink. Richard reaches for my hand. His fingers are callused and rough. I hear an ultimatum. Was it really a whisper? Then his asthma kicks in. One of my girlfriends calls back to check on me. I have to speak code. Richard can hear her voice. Triple A. Triple A. Triple A. This is the day you fail me miserably. Richard has a gun in his bag. I know he carries one. He mentions this to me after his asthma attack ends. If they had background checks, he would fail. I think quietly to myself how wonderful if he just shot himself in the head during one of his solo fishing trips. No one gets blamed and even the fish get to live. God help us, don't hurt the fish.

(Lana turns to Gwen who, still dozing in her arm chair, says a few words in her sleep )

GWEN

Is the TV on?

LANA

Yes.

GWEN

TV.

LANA

Yes.

GWEN

Bath.

LANA

Hot.

GWEN

Jesus.

(Gwen stops talking and slumps a bit deeper into her chair)

LANA

Old women. Varicose veins. Support hose. Protective underwear. Eleven pills morning and evening. Arthritic hands. There's an odor. You have to flush the toilet and wipe urine off the tiles. A change purse filled with loose rubber bands. Odd things in the fridge. Stained yellow notes by the phone. A favorite wood bench in the park, but missing a plank. The park is empty. Every woman that age has that little pale girl frightfully locked away. Deeply and hidden behind bars. The little girl hates the old bag and envies the moment when total dark overcomes life. Nothing to help things along, nothing in the middle. There is no angel with butterfly wings. I should know. I was the hired companion to an geriatric bat. Medicare? Paid \$175 per day. Cash. No taxes. No benefits. No insurance. Soiled linen. Vomit. Got by without a bed pan And it was hard work. She was a forgotten mother. Two sons out of state. No grandchildren. And no yarn but several long knitting needles. The yard cat ate the open cans of tuna. Gwen, who cares? In the blink of an eye, you'll be so ill and immobile. And you won't care that this hell has happened. Paid \$175 per day. Christ, I can make that in 30 minutes and have time for a cigarette.

END OF SCENE

SCENE SIX

(A few days later, in Gwen's living room. Ellis and Gwen seem very remote to one another.)

ELLIS

The utilities company is tearing up all the front streets, Gwen. Traffic's rerouted. And I think the cable TV has gone down. That's why you should have gone with the satellite

dish. And I notice a lot of nails in the road. What the heck are they doing? Why are all the construction trucks always in reverse gear with that paramilitary warning sounds? I read a study in the New England Journal of Medicine that looked at the correlation between speed bumps in a gated community and the high incidence of pancreatic cancer.

GWEN

What?

ELLIS

I thought you were knitting?

GWEN

I don't knit.

ELLIS

Why do you have knitting needles?

GWEN

(Holding up knitting needles)

These aren't knitting needles.

ELLIS

(Distracted for a moment, he crosses to the window and looks out)

Common sense tells you that speed bumps are more likely to give you bladder or prostate problems. And I brought that up to my fourth graders during our health class. I have very good news. You know I was up for the promotion and . . .

GWEN

What?

ELLIS

I was up for the promotion and it did come through. Starting next month, I am the assistant principal. Isn't that fabulous?

GWEN

How long have you known that?

ELLIS

About a week.

GWEN

And you kept it to yourself?

ELLIS

I wanted to think about it first.

GWEN  
Ellis. What else are you withholding?

ELLIS  
Nothing that matters.

GWEN  
More money?

ELLIS  
Oh, yes. The promotion is a kick in the ass.

GWEN  
Did you tell her?

ELLIS  
Yes. Right away.

GWEN  
Congratulations.

ELLIS  
Thank you, Gwen.

GWEN  
This means new business suits.

ELLIS  
I guess so. Seersucker.

GWEN  
Why do you like Seersucker?

ELLIS  
When I went to Cuba on that teacher exchange, that's what I brought. Loved the light feel. You know we met Castro.

GWEN  
Yes I know.

ELLIS  
He was ill, but very charming.

GWEN  
I saw the ring.

Oh.

ELLIS

You owe me an explanation.

GWEN

Well . . . Lana said she wasn't going to wear it.

ELLIS

She's wearing it.

GWEN

Two people do this when they are in love.

ELLIS

That's your explanation?

GWEN

Yes.

ELLIS

You plan to elope.

GWEN

Is that a question?

ELLIS

You need to prepare a prenuptial.

GWEN

Whatever for?

ELLIS

You have something to protect. She has no assets.

GWEN

And I do?

ELLIS

Don't be a jackass.

GWEN

What are my assets, Gwen?

ELLIS

GWEN

At some point you will have real estate.

ELLIS

Not anything from you.

GWEN

You don't know that for certain. There are codicils to documents.

ELLIS

I have \$10,000 in the bank. That is all I need to protect which is pretty much nothing.

GWEN

Doesn't matter.

ELLIS

Gwen, you can't start a life together with someone you're screwing legally.

GWEN

You're not doing anything cruel with a prenuptial. Happens all the time. If she loves you, she won't bat an eye.

(Pause)

And how well will it go at the school when you introduce Lana?

ELLIS

Nothing to worry about.

GWEN

Can you be so sure?

ELLIS

Unless you cause us trouble.

GWEN

And why would I do that?

(She gets out of her chair and crosses to the window)

ELLIS

You could do other wonderful things with your free time, Gwen.

GWEN

Motivate me.

ELLIS

By marrying Lana she will be in our lives much longer.

GWEN

I looked at the old photographs in our album, Ellis, and I am so sentimental. Yes, that is a side of me. I cry, I laugh. I rock myself inside a cradle. I crave to see you become a boy again. Become your mother again. Does that make me selfish? I yearn for the happier days after Thanksgiving and we went Christmas shopping. Finding the Santa at Macys and preparing the holiday photo. Even you father was in good form every December. Do you remember? What would he say today if he knew you were about to marry a prostitute?

ELLIS

Every paid artist in America is a prostitute, Gwen.

GWEN

But think, what would your father say?

ELLIS

He would admire her photographs.

GWEN

Would he really?

ELLIS

He would enjoy her conversation.

GWEN

Don't you feel any shame, Ellis?

ELLIS

No.

GWEN

Do you need me to show you more?

ELLIS

No, I don't.

GWEN

What will you tell your children? Not at school, but your real children? You may have children in a few years. Ellis, don't you hear me? What will you tell them?

ELLIS

I'll tell them what is good to know and what is wise.

GWEN

You have to tell them the truth.

ELLIS

What's the point of all this Gwen?

GWEN

The light of God will hit you hard.

ELLIS

Maybe not.

GWEN

Maybe so.

ELLIS

There's an Emily Dickenson poem I had to recite in high school.

(Pause)

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
 Success in Circuit lies  
 Too bright for our infirm Delight  
 The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased  
 With explanation kind  
 The Truth must dazzle gradually  
 Or every man be blind –

GWEN

How many men do you think have been with her? Five hundred? Two thousand?

ELLIS

How many men have been with you?

GWEN

You've seen the online ads, Ellis.

ELLIS

A few ad are not a lifetime sentence.

GWEN

It never comes down in cyberspace. Think about that.

ELLIS

And who really cares?

GWEN  
People care.

ELLIS  
Escorts need to pay rent.

GWEN  
Yes, but look at her moral choices.

ELLIS  
You're just driving both of us from your own petty world, Gwen. Why do that to yourself?

GWEN  
Why she doesn't drive at night? Every time she uses a cab, she has a little insurance about getting home safely. It's very clever for an independent provider.

ELLIS  
Stop it, Gwen.

GWEN  
No pimp needed. Just run the taxi meter to 30 minutes and tip the driver. She's very smart.

ELLIS  
If you like her, why this torture?  
(Gwen smiles)  
Because she resembles my first wife?

GWEN  
No.

ELLIS  
Because you wanted her for yourself?

GWEN  
No.

ELLIS  
That's the truth. What's left? You ruined the purity of everything. You kill life itself.

GWEN  
Only in your imagination.

ELLIS  
You killed your last tenant.

GWEN

I did not kill Michael McClenon.

ELLIS

God know.

GWEN

He died by combining heart medication and Viagra. That's what God knows. All by his own choosing. McClenon knew better. It was a choice to die or get high. And stop this mythmaking, for the love of Jesus.

ELLIS

Why did McClenon leave you money?

GWEN

He liked me. I cooked for him. You know, chile con carne every Friday night and stocked vanilla ice cream for all occasions. So he left me an inheritance.

ELLIS

And when you go to church, Gwen, do you confess?

GWEN

I do. As a broken Catholic who found new purpose, I tell what I must tell.

ELLIS

I can imagine you finding forgiveness in confession. And that helps you sleep at night.

GWEN

You can go to church too.

ELLIS

I thought about it.

GWEN

Stop thinking and just go.

(Lana enters awkwardly with a key in her hand)

LANA

Do you think . . . that . . . dogs look like their owners? Owners look like their dogs? Just outside, a man and his pit bull. Both have a slack jaw. I even saw this guy lift his leg near the hydrant. A man, a plan, a canal, Panama. That's a palindrome. Reverse the sentence and get the same results. It's all about Teddy Roosevelt . . .

(Taking in a moment for Ellis and Gwen)

Excuse me. I'm interrupting something. There's an infestation of large carpenter ants in

my apartment and I'm crawling up my skin thinking about it. Is this my problem or can I bring it to your attention? I'm interrupting, sorry.

GWEN

We don't have ants, Lana. But if we do, we will call the pest control company.

ELLIS

I'll get some spray from the hardware store.

LANA

Thanks.

GWEN

There is a lapse of good judgment here.

LANA

Are you talking to me?

GWEN

I'm not letting you two marry.

LANA

Why?

GWEN

He's my son.

LANA

He's not a kid.

GWEN

You signed a lease, Lana.

LANA

What are you going to do to stop us?

GWEN

I'm telling you that you that this cannot go on.

LANA

If we were teenagers.

GWEN

Ellis knows what I'm about.

ELLIS

What are you about?

GWEN

I am the mother. Who gives more than all others. I like you very much, Lana. I know we got to enjoy each other's company. I'm protective of Ellis. And I apologize. I'd say that whether or not he were in the room right now. He's not built to marry again. Certainly not ready to marry someone so much like his first wife.

LANA

Cameras lie.

GWEN

Even so, he shouldn't have to suffer twice.

LANA

Or happiness can be what we're worth.

ELLIS

There is no mathematics to human coincidence. Graph it out.

GWEN

Ellis takes medication, Lana.

ELLIS

Trudy is a coincidence of time. Research has shown anomalous phenomena may be a result of some type of information exchange between the unconscious and the intangible.

LANA

I don't give a damn about his prescriptions and his ex.

GWEN

Trudy made money legally. She went to church.

LANA

Gwen, I'm not stealing Ellis. Be realistic.

GWEN

I'm trying to be realistic.

LANA

I'm more than a tenant.

ELLIS

I'm more than a man.

GWEN

Ellis, think about your promotion at school.

ELLIS

In mathematics, a coincidence point of two mappings is a marking in their domain having the same image point under both mappings.

GWEN

Ellis . . . I will go to the school and tell what I know.

ELLIS

Formally, given two mappings we say that a point  $x$  in  $X$  is a coincidence point of  $f$  and  $g$  if  $f(x) = g(x)$ .

GWEN

(interrupting)

This is a game, Lana, he plays when he feels naked. Integers rush up his legs like vines. You do know what an integer is?

ELLIS

Coincidence theory is a generalization of modern fixed point theory, the study of points  $x$  with  $f(x) = x$ .

(He goes over to Lana and embraces her from behind. He is showing sexual assertion and enjoying Gwen's discomfort)

Fixed point theory is the special case extended for critical identity mapping. Am I not making myself clear?

LANA

We're not eloping. We have to celebrate publicly.

GWEN

I'd rather talk to you alone.

LANA

We're celebrating in town. Next month. A small affair for 50 guests.

ELLIS

It's a coincidence. Next month would be the anniversary.

GWEN

Not a public wedding.

LANA

We want you to be happy, Gwen. I made you happy over the last six months.

Over my dead body

GWEN

Tell me what's really picking at your insides.

LANA

Will you wear white?

GWEN

Of course she will.

ELLIS

Will a member of clergy preside?

GWEN

Yes.

LANA

Ellis, you make your own bed.

GWEN

In mathematics, a negative value can help or detract from a desired outcome.

ELLIS

You needn't pay for the wedding Gwen.  
(Gwen walks slowly out of the room during Ellis' speech)

LANA

When you do an operation with a negative, it will sometimes make the result different than if you were doing the operation with two positive numbers. Yes, to repeat what Lana said, we're inviting you to the wedding. And this will be a different wedding than the one won't let me forget, Gwen.

ELLIS

END OF SCENE

#### SCENE SEVEN

(Several weeks have gone by. Lana and Ellis are at a restaurant. Lana's hair is now very different, perhaps it is tied up or swept to one side. It might even be a new color)

LANA

I'm so glad you bought a new car. Isn't it exciting?

(Pause)

The service is very slow here despite all the good reviews.

ELLIS

We can go to another restaurant.

LANA

Give it another minute. Parking's so hard downtown.

ELLIS

Okay. You look troubled.

LANA

Do I really?

ELLIS

Are you wearing makeup?

LANA

Not much. Just eye shadow.

ELLIS

Is it your hair?

LANA

No.

ELLIS

You're more attractive this way.

LANA

Thank you. I like compliments.

ELLIS

If you do, why don't you smile more?

LANA

I'm not pregnant, Ellis.

ELLIS

I assumed . . . .

LANA  
My period was late.

ELLIS  
I know you don't want a child.

LANA  
My age makes it hard.

ELLIS  
Yes.

LANA  
Even with the fertility specialists. You want something I can't do.

ELLIS  
Not true.

LANA  
Ellis, the touch of your skin is all that I want in life. I don't want to change you. I don't want your disappointment either.

ELLIS  
What if we were to adopt?

LANA  
Adopt what?

ELLIS  
A child?

LANA  
That feels like a glorious mission for other couples. Not the best thing for you and for me.

ELLIS  
Are you adamant?

LANA  
I'm mercurial. You know that.

ELLIS  
You chose a beautiful gown.

LANA  
You weren't supposed to see it.

ELLIS  
Superstitious?

LANA  
I am.

ELLIS  
In mathematics, you cannot chart out or find an equation for superstition. The best effort would be working with imaginary numbers but even that is a rational effort.

LANA  
One day you'll realize we aren't rational. Knowing that would make this more honest.

ELLIS  
You're right. We have to be honest.  
(Pause)

You don't really look anything like Trudy and I never thought there was an issue. I had a year of therapy. Gwen tried to make it an issue. In front of you and behind your back.

LANA  
I know.

ELLIS  
She's the worm in the apple.

LANA  
I cancelled the cell phone. I wanted you to know. Is that okay?

ELLIS  
Yes.

LANA  
I feel good about it.

ELLIS  
Which makes me feel good.  
(Pause)  
Gwen was once a beautiful woman.

LANA  
I can see that.

ELLIS  
There's an entire shoebox of Gwen's old photos.

LANA

I worry about your mother.

ELLIS

You don't have to. It's just a mood disorder.

LANA

The last few weeks she's been so sullen. She's lost a lot of weight too. Over 25 pounds.

(Pause)

Didn't you say she was on Wellbutrin?

ELLIS

Abilify too. And those drugs are supposed to add weight. Gwen went from gloomy to dyspeptic faster than a bullet.

LANA

I think she may try to harm herself.

ELLIS

Has she said something to you?

LANA

Not explicitly but I think we have to watch her around the clock.

ELLIS

That won't be easy. We can't call off the wedding or the honeymoon

LANA

I realize that.

ELLIS

You're thinking about something else.

LANA

She may need to be committed until her health is better.

ELLIS

Committed against her will? She's not seriously mentally ill.

LANA

She is, Ellis. I think she's delusional.

ELLIS

Then you're judging her harshly.

LANA

You've made big changes in your life, Ellis. The school promotion. You bought new clothes. The Lexus. You and me. The old ways can go on. Look at me, Ellis. Don't turn away. How would you feel the day after a tragedy? We can prevent a tragedy.

ELLIS

How?

LANA

Let her doctor know how bad this has been. She's not bathing. Her clothes are filthy. Her kitchen is a pigsty. She left the stove on and fell asleep. Gwen can go in for observation and let the professionals determine what's best.

ELLIS

The doctors might overreact to her condition.

LANA

You have to trust the doctors.

ELLIS

Gwen will think we're after her money.

LANA

She's legally protected. The law protects her. Bank accounts. Stocks. Everything she holds.

ELLIS

I'm uncomfortable with this conversation.

LANA

So am I.

ELLIS

Look, I think we have other things to dredge. You were intimate with Gwen.

LANA

No.

ELLIS

You had intimate conversations with her.

LANA

Why are you interrogating me?

ELLIS

Did Gwen ever kiss you?

LANA

What?

ELLIS

I saw her kiss you. It was raining. You never caught a glimpse of me.

(Pause)

In marriage we cannot lie to each other.

LANA

I understand.

ELLIS

We have to tell everything that's true.

LANA

Would that make you happy?

ELLIS

It may not make me happy, but I want to know.

LANA

Yes, Gwen has tried to caress me and I kept my boundaries. That's all you need to know about her and me. I'll tell you about my past. My parents died in a Chicago plane crash when I was a teenager. I lived on the insurance for years. I have no brothers or sisters. Many of my old girlfriends are now married with children. We don't relate much. And of course my last marriage. My ex-husband Richard – a luxury sports car dealer – shot himself in the head on the 405 during rush hour traffic just south of LAX and I was in the car with him. And I could have saved his life. He was stalking me and I wasn't feeling very strong. That's the truth and you really don't need to know anything more.

ELLIS

How . . . Lana . . .

LANA

I could have taken the gun away. He didn't want to go through with it.

ELLIS

I'm sorry.

LANA

Thank you.

ELLIS

How can you live with this?

LANA

How can you live with your father's death?

ELLIS

Lana . . .

LANA

I'm committed to you. Gwen may be a murderer. I am not. It's good that you have forgiven her. You can still do something good for her now.

ELLIS

Something good?

LANA

Talk to a few doctors and intake specialists. I'll go with you. This is painful, and I can help.

ELLIS

Anthony Perkins.

LANA

What?

ELLIS

His character delivers a sandwich to Janet Leigh's character. She tells him that he can institutionalize his mother. And everything goes to hell.

LANA

I'm not Janet Leigh. I'm not Marion Crane.

ELLIS

I know.

(Pause)

I look over your list of wedding guests, Lana, and we have two separate worlds.

LANA

There's only one world. You're so silly.

ELLIS

In mathematics, we have to occupy a quantifiable space.

LANA

You are inside my space, darling. We'll post our wedding photos on my website. I think that would be so terrific.

ELLIS

Kim Novak jumped off the bell tower in *Vertigo* as Jimmy Stewart watched in utter horror.

LANA

Let's go slow and enter hand in hand. We're like teenagers off the hiking trail. The community is our forest. There is warm sunlight flooding through the tall trees. Gwen cannot humiliate us at your school or in the community. I know she's made threats. You got just what you wished for, Ellis. All your life you were wishing for me. There's part of you that wishes for Gwen to vanish. Poof.

(She kisses him)

END OF SCENE

SCENE EIGHT

(Gwen, disheveled, is alone in her large favorite arm chair. She drifts into a narrator's tale seemingly in mid-progress)

GWEN

The very next day, when their stepmother learns that Hansel and Gretel had returned, she went into a rage. Stifling her anger in front of the children, she locked her bedroom door, screaming at her husband for failing to carry out her instructions. Her husband, the woodcutter, never saw his wife fly into pure temper. The woodcutter protested in a mouse-like voice, struggling between his shame and his fear. You see, destiny itself played a role in the story. Of course, the wicked stepmother kept Hansel and Gretel under lock and key. She gave the children nothing to eat but kept them alive with sips of water. Was heaven participating in this affair? Until the wee hours of the night, the woodcutter and his wife argued and shouted obscenities. The children heard everything and were horrified. Hansel and Gretel knew they would die very soon. But when dawn broke and a gentle rain began to fall, the woodcutter led the children free into the forest. What happened to his wife? Was she under a doctor's care? Did she not wake up that morning?

(Pause)

The story continues. The children get caught again. They were blind to a certain danger. A witch discovers them and lures them to a candy coated cottage lost inside the great woods. The witch is not the stepmother. We have forgotten there are two hags in this story

(Pause)

The cottage is edible and scrumptious because this is a fairy tale from Germany. Inside is a hot oven. The children stay to eat more of the sugar cottage, till they find among the witch's things, a colossal chocolate egg. And inside the egg was a cache of the rarest gold coins in the world.

(She tries to get out of her chair, but is unable to get to her feet)

I too have an egg in my home. I have my treasure. I have my memories. I have all that I can take to Heaven. And I leave the best in my cottage to please the angels who have watched over me.

END OF SCENE

SCENE NINE  
(Four months later)

LANA

I'm glad you grew a beard.

ELLIS

I knew you didn't like the look.

LANA

I was on the fence about it.

ELLIS

I have a strong chin. No reason to reveal it.

LANA

But you shaved today. You shaved it off.

ELLIS

Are you off to work?

LANA

No rush.

ELLIS

You know I made my decision.

LANA

I know, yes. You made me see what was possible.

ELLIS

And what will you do?

LANA

Is the choice between going with you and not going?

ELLIS

I'd say it differently.

LANA

Failure is failure.

ELLIS

That's so ugly.

LANA

How would you say it, Ellis?

ELLIS

Are we still married or is this a full dissolution.

LANA

Why do you want to sound like a lawyer?

ELLIS

Because I still love you.

LANA

I still love you too.

ELLIS

No you don't. You can play act. None of that matters anymore.

LANA

I don't want to move to Sacramento.

ELLIS

Why don't you?

LANA

I have to live by the ocean.

ELLIS

I'm getting a lot of money with this move. These are rapid opportunities, Lana. I've always wanted to be a principal of a school.

LANA

We can see each other every other weekend. You can fly back. I'll fly to you. Summers can be spent here.

ELLIS

No.

LANA

You can't make me do something I won't do.

ELLIS

How the hell can you stay here?

LANA

I've learned to like it.

ELLIS

There's memory in the walls of this house.

LANA

Memory is part of life.

ELLIS

Gwen's death is too fresh, for Christ's sake. We have to go.

LANA

It is history, darling. I accept everything.

ELLIS

How will you make money if we separate?

LANA

I have my photography business.

ELLIS

That's not substantial.

LANA

Well, I can also be a the landlady.

ELLIS

You can't make enough money that way.

LANA

Let me worry about that.

(Silence)

You have no respect for me.

ELLIS

I respect you.

LANA

I wish I could change your image of me. Gwen left me some cash.

ELLIS

She did?

LANA

Not in the will but in her godzillion coffee cans.

ELLIS

I predict you'll come to Sacramento before your birthday.

LANA

I wouldn't bet on it.

ELLIS

Have I been that stupid?

LANA

No, you're not stupid.

ELLIS

You pulled my strings.

LANA

No, I didn't pull any strings.

ELLIS

I have my own string theory, Lana.

(goes over and kisses her with great longing)

ELLIS

Have you always lied to me, Lana?

LANA  
Haven't you lied to me?

ELLIS  
I don't really know.

LANA  
Well, we may be Even-Steven. Who invented String Theory?

ELLIS  
Werner Heisenberg.

LANA  
He wasn't alone.

ELLIS  
He was among a cluster of scientists.

LANA  
These men must take comfort in their private club.  
(She walks away from Ellis)  
Are you surprised by her death?  
(Pause)  
Not me. Most suicides don't leave notes.  
(Pause)  
She just stalled her car at the Amtrak crossing. Something I dreamed she would do. And it came true.

ELLIS  
You couldn't cry.

LANA  
I cried, Ellis. Don't say I didn't.

ELLIS  
If only I could see you cry, I would have faith.

LANA  
Faith in what?

ELLIS  
Faith in Heaven.

END OF SCENE

SCENE TEN

(Gwen is seated in her favorite chair, but she without any makeup, the pale visage of a ghoul. We see in shadow Ellis - and Lana who is dressed up as a second Gwen. And Lana speaks as if she is Gwen.)

ELLIS

I fixed the toilet and the shower head, Gwen. Permanently. I'm getting better at this enterprise. This is what you wanted, you are getting exactly what you wanted.

LANA AS GWEN

I just want to see you happy, Ellis.

ELLIS

I know how to be happy. Jus have to shake the cobwebs away.

LANA AS GWEN

That's right. That's the fucking Tea Party. That's the American spirit. You get what you earn but you got to piss off the slackers.

ELLIS

You don't think the Tea Party is junk dog yard mean?

LANA AS GWEN

Oh, I do!

ELLIS

You know you're gone and yet you're back.

LANA AS GWEN

I know that.

ELLIS

You are a force of nature.

LANA AS GWEN

I must be. I am the landlady.

END OF SCENE

EPILOGUE

(Lights immediately up on Lana's on the phone,  
Gwen's living room)

LANA

Yes, the apartment is still available. We're about 10 blocks to the beach. Yes, that's right. No pets. No cats. That's what I said. Doesn't matter if they're neutered. It's a converted garage. Looks like a cottage. The kitchen is like what you'd find at the Residence Inn at Marriott's. That's right. Cook what you like. You have alley parking which is off street. There's no lease, but after six months we can discuss something more secure, yes. I'm open to that. You can come see the property later today. Yes. I'll need three references. They can't be family references. You can't live with another person here unless you're legally married. I'm sorry. That's what I am requesting, yes. It is a very small studio space. No shares. No shacking up. I'm allowed to say that as the owner, yes. That's not a bias. I am the landlady and I get to make all the rules. You're calling the landline.

END OF PLAY

