

adaptation.resilience

**a play about sustaining love and navigating grief in times of extreme disruption
by Jennie Webb**

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Characters:

JESS, female, of color. 40s/50s. Works as a Climate Change Consultant. Keeps her distance. Considers and plans.

BEV, female, probably white. 40s/50s. Works for the County Department of Emergency Operations as a Public Information Officer. In your face. Demands action.

LEONARD, male, any race. 70s/80s. Works repairing vacuums.

WOMAN WHO MAKES NOISE, female, of color. Early 20s. An onstage presence. Vocalist & percussionist/instrumentalist a plus.

Setting:

Los Angeles or a West Coast city a lot like it

Time:

The present or thereabouts

Casting:

The actor playing the Woman Who Make Noise also voices the Assured and Uplifting Voice, Determined Woman*, Self-Involved Man, Frustrated Woman, Intentional Millennial, Female Reporter, Male Official, Fragile Voice and Street Musician; plays Woman in the Shop/Margaret. (Voices marked with * should be live; others can be recorded if necessary.)*

Dialogue:

— Indicates a character's dialogue is interrupted, by another character speaking, an event or a character abruptly shifting gears within a line of dialogue.

... Indicates a character is searching for words, does not complete a thought or leaves a line of dialogue open.

Characters talking over one another is indicated by columns within the script, with suggested staggering of overlap and emphasis.

Sounds:

As many sounds as possible should be created live by the Woman Who Makes Noise through instruments and Foley effects. Some recordings may be necessary. Depending on other production elements, they can be stylized to any degree and don't have to sound realistic.

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SYNOPSIS

Jess and Bev have been together longer than either of them thought they would be. And in their respective fields—Climate Change and Emergency Management—things are heating up, affecting them in ways they didn't see coming. *adaptation.resilience* is a play about sustaining love and navigating grief in times of extreme disruption.

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In darkness, we hear a faint rustling, crackling, which grows into the sound of flames. We might see or feel the force of a fire, as well. Then we see the face of a woman. This is Jess. She's fighting panic, but makes a decision.

JESS:

No! This can't... no!

The flames are overcome by soothing sounds of nature and soft music; the pool of light expands around Jess, as if she's siloed in her own space. Protected, even. She's a bit disheveled, wearing a T shirt and pajama bottoms.

All right...

The soothing sounds and music continue under an absurdly assured and uplifting voice.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

And with that... we're able to move forward, even in a time of deep uncertainty. Let's close with a look back. Remember a generation ago, we were introduced to the phrase, "an 'inconvenient' truth?" "Inconvenient." Perhaps they thought this was easier to swallow than "Incontrovertible."

JESS:

Hah! The time we spend, finding ways to deliver what no one wants to—

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

(interrupting) Yet, years later as we find ourselves pushed even closer to the precipice, the monumental job of sharing this truth—and bearing the weight of this knowledge—has not become the least bit easier, has it?

JESS:

No! It certainly has not!

Jess shakes her head. Maybe her hands and body in an attempted release.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

As Climate Change professionals, we struggle with some of the deepest questions imaginable. How can we make real connections when we feel isolated as the keepers of a terrifying reality? How can we go out into the world each day and tell ourselves—and our clients—that we can truly make a difference? And how can we look at our own dire findings and the doomsday research of our peers, then look into the faces of those we love and say, "Don't worry! It'll be okay?"

JESS:

Well?

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

Quite simply, we can't! But we will learn how to transform the delicate fragility of the world into a dynamic, flexible strength in Part 2 of New Directions in Climate Change—Selling Solutions in a Crumbling World.

JESS:

Oh, please! Why do I even...

With a remote, she turns off the sounds. She's not aware that they have been coming from the Woman Who Makes Noise, who occupies a different sort of space—it's fluid with no boundaries.

The Woman Who Makes Noise observes Jess, who throws on a shirt or blouse and adjusts her stance, preparing herself for something significant.

Then we see another woman in her own silo. This is Bev. She has an intense focus—a natural speaker, she makes the most of every moment, every discovery. She wears a suit as if for a public appearance but speaks informally, directly to the audience.

BEV:

No! I always say there's nothing I regret. And that's true. Between us, there was nothing unsaid. He knows I loved him. And I know that I was there for him. I have absolutely no doubts about that. I mean, people ask me if it was easier, our relationship, after we *weren't* married. But it's not like we really ever split up. Any more than we were ever really "together," so whatever label they wanted to slap on us... who the fuck really cares?

Jess begins speaking again, also to the audience. She is just as passionate as Bev, but has a more measured and practiced air. She tries hard to cover up any raw spots.

JESS:

"Unprecedented." It's a word we've been hearing for a while, now. We turn on our screens and we hear about "unprecedented temperatures," "unprecedented wildfires," "unprecedented storm surges, carbon emissions, power failures..."

BEV:

Okay. As much as I hate this phrase, he really was my "best friend."

JESS:

And it's not just one thing at a time, is it? It's multiple fires *and* floods *and* heatwaves *and* hurricanes...

BEV:

We always joked that he was very fond of lesbians. So fond, as a matter of fact, that he married one!

JESS:

So who, anymore, can believably deny it? This *is* global warming.

The Woman Who Makes Noise begins to underscore the dialogue with live noises that are percussive and at the same time melodic—atmospheric.

BEV:

At the hospital they kept asking me, was I his wife? I had been his wife. Then his ex-wife. Which elicited some very odd looks—me, being the one who was there. And even more looks when I introduced *my* wife.

JESS:

And that is precisely why I'm here.

BEV:

Not that any of that even matters. The fact is, his wife left. In the end, she left and I didn't.

JESS:

Because we're not just seeing it, we're living it.

BEV:

"You're the one he'd rather have with him," she said.

JESS:

We're feeling the extreme disruptions of every system.

BEV:

Of course, I knew it wasn't true. Of course he wanted his wife.

JESS:

Communities and economies...

BEV:

But in the end it was me, just me, with him when everything started to happen.

JESS:

Political and social justice...

BEV:

Was I his wife? I was, and I wasn't.

JESS:

Homeland security.

BEV:

His wife would be the one who authorized the breathing tube.

JESS:

Food insecurity!

BEV:

Which made sense, I guess, so that they could keep him alive until his kids made it there. Until she could get there.

JESS:

You are here today because you know that climate change is real.

BEV:

But as I sat and watched him, eyes glazed over with morphine and struggling with that fucking tube in his throat...

JESS:

You know that the clock is running out.

BEV:

I kept thinking, he wouldn't have wanted that.

JESS:

You know we've reached a tipping point.

BEV:

So here's what I do regret. Or maybe regret isn't the right word. Here's what I wonder.

JESS:

But you should also know this: As the world continues to change, we can change with it.

BEV:

I wonder how much of him knew what was going on.

JESS:

So that when the next big thing happens—and it will happen...

BEV:

Just that morning, I brought him his first "solid food" in a week—a de-caf latte; it was delicious, he said...

JESS:

We'll be able to bounce *forward*, better and stronger than ever!

BEV:

And then he asked me, "Am I dying?"

"Not today. I won't let you!" I said, holding him as if I actually had that kind of power.

JESS:

We do this by bringing people together...

BEV:

“Can you please hold me.” That’s what he’d asked me, the day before. I could do that. I could hold him.

JESS:

By looking at the biggest possible picture...

BEV:

But what I couldn’t do—or didn’t remember to do?—as things got crazier and crazier and more and more nurses and doctors and hospital whoevers surrounded us in the hours waiting for his wife and kids to get there...

JESS:

And by discovering our place in it.

BEV:

I couldn’t bring myself to tell him: “Yes. You are. You are dying.”

Something shifts and Jess is gone. We see who Bev’s been talking to, an older man with a gentle, giving affect; something about him tells us that he’s open to many things. A vacuum cleaner is at Bev’s side. We are in Leonards’ Vacuum Repair Shop.

BEV:

Funny how stuff pops up.

LEONARD:

Second guessing. It’s what humans do.

BEV:

I suppose.

LEONARD:

How long has it been, since his—

BEV:

(interrupting) Coming up on a year, now.

LEONARD:

Anniversaries are significant.

BEV:

Ugh. There should be a better word for dead people.

LEONARD:

Did they ever determine what—?

BEV:

(interrupting) Multiple organs, they said. "System failure."

LEONARD:

System failure.

BEV:

Who can argue with that?

We hear street traffic, created by the Woman Who Makes Noise as she begins to move between and around the two playing areas. A car's horn honks.

LEONARD:

I do need to close up, soon.

BEV:

Sure. Hot date tonight, Leonard?

LEONARD:

Tonight? No, I—

BEV:

(interrupting) I was actually joking.

LEONARD:

Ah.

BEV:

Anyway, my wife's expecting me...

LEONARD:

And my hot date's tomorrow night.

They look at each other, giving nothing away. Something shifts and they are gone. We see Jess, in the living room of an apartment, talking into a screen.

JESS:

So if you're ready to find unique, new adaptation and resilience solutions, Connected Climate Collaborations is ready to get to work. Looking forward to chatting soon. Very excited about the possibilities!

She presses a button and ends the communication. She hangs onto her upbeat sales mode and there's another shift; Bev is in the room with her.

BEV:

Jess? Jess! Hey!

Maybe we hear music in the background. Time has passed but Jess hasn't adjusted.

JESS:
What?!

BEV:
I was asking— You okay? You look like you—

JESS:
(interrupting) No! I'm good!

BEV:
Good!

She looks into a large paper bag on a table.

What'd you end up getting, then?

JESS:
I— Oh. Middle Eastern. I didn't know what time you'd be home.

BEV:
I texted you.

JESS:
Sorry. My phone is... somewhere.

BEV:
Ooooohhh! Did you go to that new place on 6th?

JESS:
Yeah, it opened while you were away.

BEV:
Looks super cute. Is it?

JESS:
I got delivery. Good packaging; compostable.

BEV:
So you're a happy girl. Now back to me, please: Are you ready for the best part?

She takes off her jacket; maybe it's a playful tease.

JESS:
Ha ha ha. I don't know, am I?

BEV:
So! I'm supposed to hold a press conference in a couple of days, then go up to the Bay Area.

JESS:

Again? You just—

BEV:

(interrupting) But here's the thing: They're still fighting over who was in charge of what, when. And this time? I will be damned if I'm gonna cover for them! I am going to tell it like it is!

JESS:

Okay! I'm not exactly surprised, but... What does that mean?

BEV:

What does what mean?

JESS:

I mean in terms of your career.

Bev takes off her shoes.

BEV:

You have a career, baby, I have a job. The County has their head so far up their ass, half the time they forget they even have a Department of Emergency Operations.

JESS:

But if you're the point person on this...

BEV:

Yes, the point person in any crisis would be me. Which means I'll just keep working late and wearing my "Don't shoot me," T shirt.

She picks up her jacket and shoes; untucks her blouse.

JESS:

Are you saying there were threats?

BEV:

No, a joke. "I'm only the messenger." Do you want a drink?

She goes into the kitchen.

JESS:

Great. But don't they need to recognize that you were *supposed* to be the messenger, only no one—?

BEV:

(interrupting, offstage) Yeah, yeah, yeah. You'd think they would have learned from last fire season. Or the one before that.

JESS:

Right! And you told me yesterday that during the hot...

The Woman Who Makes Noise again creates the rustling and crackling from the beginning of the play; Jess tries to ignore it.

BEV:

(offstage) Hot wash. Post-incident hot wash.

JESS:

Ha ha. I was going to say hot mess.

BEV:

(offstage) Hah! Which would be more apt. I told you “Hot Wash” is a military term, for a de-brief?

She comes in with two rocks glasses containing generous pours and hands one to Jess.

JESS:

Yes. Thanks.

BEV:

Sometimes I forget, and then all of the sudden I remember and it makes me feel all icky. I work for a Department that’s based in a bunker. With some war-zone security set-up. Half the guys are ex-cops and veterans. How did my life get this wonky?

JESS:

But what I’m saying is *you* said, after the fires, there was a finding that—

BEV:

(interrupting) Should I just wear the T shirt at home or will you give this a rest?!

JESS:

Calm down, I’m not—

BEV:

(interrupting) Don’t do that to me! I don’t have to calm—!

JESS:

(interrupting) You’re right! I’m sorry!

The sounds start up again but Jess alone hears them. Bev moves away and Jess moves to the bag in an attempt to distance or distract herself.

I didn’t know what you’d be in the mood for, so I got a bunch of different stuff.

BEV:

Great.

JESS:

Sweetie. Everyone must realize that there were so many factors—

BEV:

(interrupting) Oh, the entire thing was a flaming cluster fuck! Whole neighborhoods were wiped out and despite the fact that this shit happens again and again and again, all they ever want to do is go back to “normal!”

The sound of roaring flames grows louder.

JESS:

Except there is no normal, anymore.

BEV:

Right.

JESS:

Wildfires, everywhere, they're unprecedented. And in twenty years or so—

BEV:

(interrupting) Please don't start. I'm working with fucking dinosaurs who say it's all a hoax. They deserve to be extinct so gimme another natural disaster like that one, thank you very much!

JESS:

But there are no natural— Bev?!

She can't ignore the sounds anymore.

BEV:

Jess?!

JESS:

You don't hear—?!

And the Woman Who Makes Noise is silent. We only hear ice clinking in Bev's glass.

BEV:

What?

JESS:

Nothing. I'm... I'm having a strange day. But I'll be okay. It'll be okay.

BEV:

I tell you, you gotta stop this put on a happy face, prop up a world that's falling apart shit. You need to scream, "Wake up, assholes!"

JESS:

Ha ha ha. I'll leave that strategy to you.

Short pause.

BEV:

Remember when we were just a secretary and a scientist? You and me, running around late nights and making out in the bathroom of the bar that used to be in the old Warehouse District? We had everything we wanted and it was gonna be like that forever?

JESS:

I was still in grad school.

BEV:

I was still married.

JESS:

I remember.

Drinks in hand, they smile at one another. Then sit down to dinner.

BEV:

Oh. I took the vacuum to Leonard, today.

JESS:

You did? Why?

BEV:

You didn't notice? It was making a funny noise.

JESS:

Didn't you just take it in?

BEV:

They don't make them like they used to. That's what Leonard says.

JESS:

How is Leonard?

BEV:

He's good. And you? Your day was strange like... stranger than yesterday's strange? On a planetary scale?

JESS:

Yeah. There's a lot happening at once, I guess.

BEV:

See? I knew you were just guessing. Mmmm, this food looks delicious!

JESS:

It does, right? I'm letting it get to me, is all. And my knee's been acting up.

BEV:

Awww, sorry, can I...?

JESS:

No, it's okay. But I recorded a pitch to send to a company in Minnesota! They're trying to get the community behind a new Carbon Capture and Storage project.

BEV:

Dare I ask?

JESS:

The proposal is like one in Iceland. It's mitigation, but big—they basically turn CO2 emissions into fizzy water and inject it into rocks.

BEV:

Okay! (*re the food*) Does any of this need to be heated?

JESS:

Should be fine. And I found out that big Northwest contract I didn't get last year?

BEV:

Yeah?

JESS:

Probably for the best. The firm that won it delivered the report and they're moving the town.

BEV:

They're what?

JESS:

The town that kept flooding? They've agreed to move it.

BEV:

The entire town? Who's they?

JESS:

The town. Climigration on a civic-scale.

No lightbulb for Bev.

JESS:
Climate change migration?

BEV:
Right! How big a town is it?

JESS:
Small enough, but still very significant.

BEV:
Then why are you glad you didn't get the contract?

JESS:
I honestly don't think I could convince a town to move.

BEV:
You can tell the world we'll all be extinct in 100 years but you can't tell a tiny town to—?

JESS:
(interrupting) It's not like I'm—

BEV:
(interrupting) I know. Just the messenger.

Very short pause.

Sucks, doesn't it?

The women might smile again over glasses which need refilling. And then there is a shift. We see Bev and Leonard, again, in Leonard's shop. The Woman Who Makes Noise creates traffic sounds. Bev remains dressed casually, a hand on her vacuum cleaner. Leonard is working on a different one.

BEV:
Boy, do I feel stupid.

LEONARD:
I should have taken a look before you left.

BEV:
Or I could have looked.

LEONARD:
You might not have known what to look for.

BEV:

You said all you had to do was open it up.

LEONARD:

It was a clog. That's often the case, really. Most people—

BEV:

(interrupting) Yeah yeah yeah, most people. But Leonard, this is me. And I am pretty darn vacuum savvy, right?

LEONARD:

Oh. Certainly...

They both take in the formerly offending vacuum.

BEV:

So I'll just take it home?

LEONARD:

Yes.

BEV:

How much do I owe you?

LEONARD:

Nothing.

BEV:

But you fixed it.

LEONARD:

It didn't even take me a minute.

BEV:

Still. It took up space. It's been here almost a week.

LEONARD:

I'm sorry I couldn't get to it sooner.

BEV:

Then let me take you to lunch!

LEONARD:

I don't really take lunch.

BEV:

You have to eat.

LEONARD:

I don't close the shop. I've got something in the back.

BEV:

Oh.

Short pause.

A sandwich or something?

LEONARD:

A salad.

BEV:

Good for you.

We hear an electronic tone; she presses a button on her phone without looking.

LEONARD:

You're not working today?

BEV:

I'm supposed to be in San Francisco, but let's just say I'm taking some time off.

Okay, maybe she takes a quick look.

LEONARD:

Are you?

BEV:

You don't watch the news?

LEONARD:

When you were on about the fires?

BEV:

Right.

LEONARD:

I thought you handled yourself very well.

BEV:

Well. Thank you. Others do not agree.

LEONARD:

It can't have been easy.

BEV:

I do what I gotta do.

LEONARD:

But still, the City—

BEV:

(interrupting) The County. I work for the County. I mean, we work *with* the City. Eighty-eight cities, actually.

Another electronic tone from her phone. She cuts it short.

LEONARD:

I thought you said you were with the Emergency Management Department. I thought I read—

BEV:

(interrupting) That is the City. We're the Department of Emergency Operations.

LEONARD:

Ah.

BEV:

Which is not to be confused with the State's local Emergency Services Department, the Sherriff's Emergency Response Team or, in this case, the Fire Department's Unit for Emergency Response.

LEONARD:

That's a lot of response.

BEV:

You'd think, right? And in the meantime, they dump all of their shit and pin it on me.

LEONARD:

Pin what on? The fires?

BEV:

Basically. Me, as Public Information Officer, did not have any goddamn information in an emergency. And now they're unhappy because when it comes time for me to make that public they think I come off as, go figure, "angry."

LEONARD:

You didn't seem angry to me. Your responses seemed perfectly reasonable.

BEV:

This is why you're in my life, Leonard. But I was angry. I am angry. The press, they trust me. Reporters call me because they know I give it to them straight but to the County, what's worse than the worst wildfire on record? An angry female. Telling everyone what happened and then being woman enough to take responsibility. And that is why they want me to lay low.

LEONARD:

Until...?

BEV:

People forget?

LEONARD:

About you or the fires?

BEV:

Both, I suppose.

LEONARD:

And when do they think that will be?

BEV:

When the next thing happens?

LEONARD:

The next fire?

BEV:

Oh, it doesn't have to be a fire. Could be a terrorist attack. Everyone's chomping at the bit for that!

LEONARD:

Really?

BEV:

A lot of money in terrorist attacks. Or resources, I should say. Fires are on the back burner, no pun intended.

LEONARD:

But it's only going to get worse, right?

BEV:

What is?

LEONARD:

Wildfires. More and more wildfires, with global—

BEV:

(interrupting) Please. I get enough of that at home.

Another electronic tone. Terminated.

LEONARD:

Sorry.

BEV:

But yes. And to be truthful, on the scale of emergencies, fires are so far down on my list. Floods kind of suck, too. Not as bad as mass shootings.

LEONARD:

No.

BEV:

For my money, I'll take earthquakes. It's all pre- and post-. Cleaner.

LEONARD:

Earthquakes?

BEV:

I guess it's all sort of a personal preference, for those of us in the disaster biz.

LEONARD:

Sounds like you're in the right field; every day something new seems to be happening.

BEV:

The right field. You mean for job security? Is that a joke?

LEONARD:

I didn't intend it to be.

BEV:

But you are correct. Emergency response and disaster preparedness is a growth industry. There are whole schools, and programs devoted to it. Crisis management.

LEONARD:

I wasn't aware.

BEV:

Why would you be? I wasn't. Like a lot of people in the Department, I just fell into it.

LEONARD:

Crisis.

BEV:

Pretty much. I was already in communications, knew how to talk, and there was an opening. Jess, on the other hand...

LEONARD:

Your wife.

BEV:

Yup. She's got it all down. Degrees up the wazoo. Pretty brilliant, my wife. I mean, if anyone can save the planet...

LEONARD:

What's her official field, again?

BEV:

"Climate Change Adaptation."

LEONARD:

Impressive.

BEV:

Oh. Wait. No. "Resilience." Now it's "Climate Change *Resilience*." That's supposed to sound... warmer and fuzzier, I guess?

LEONARD:

Resilience?

BEV:

Sexier? Government's all over it, too. If you want funding, throw in resiliency.

We hear a different electronic tone, which Bev recognizes; she takes out her phone.

LEONARD:

I thought you weren't working.

BEV:

(reading her phone) No this is... Work. I mean, not work, but... *(typing into her phone)* My ex-wife-in-law.

LEONARD:

Ah, your... ex-husband's... widow.

BEV:

Widow. Wow. I never thought of that. Anyway, she wants to know about my ex-father-in-law. He's in the hospital.

LEONARD:

I'm sorry.

BEV:

I should head over there tomorrow.

LEONARD:

That's kind of you.

BEV:

I don't know if it's— We've always been close. My ex- and I kind of grew up together so I've known him since I was a kid. I was the one who told him his son had died. I think that made us even—

She's interrupted by the sound of a huge crash, created by the Woman Who Makes Noise. Both Bev and Leonard look out front, through the window.

Oh my.

And we hear an explosion.

Well, that's gonna be a nightmare. You have a landline? Call 911.

LEONARD:

Don't you have to...

BEV:

Respond? No, I do not, Leonard. That? *(pointing out front)* Is the City's problem.

Lots of dramatic lights and we hear people shouting, a siren or two. Then a shift, and we see Bev in the living room, holding a wine glass. In the background we hear the soothing sounds of nature and soft music which accompany the assured and uplifting voice. There are messy stacks of letters spread around the apartment, and a large box which once contained them. Jess is in the kitchen.

JESS:

(offstage) It's not really two different things. Resilience is technically the capacity to recover, then adapt and grow after a disruptive experience.

BEV:

Really? That doesn't even—

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

Today, of course, we find ourselves in a time when global issues couldn't be more personal.

JESS:

(interrupting, offstage) And people in my field seem to be responding to it—they say it feels more active.

We're fighting an uphill battle...

BEV:

Why does "your field" have a monopoly here?

And look at the size of the hill!

JESS:

(offstage) I didn't say that!

BEV:

I mean, by definition it's re-active, right? Shit happens. You have to be resilient against it. Because of it.

Jess comes in with a glass and a box of wine. She's wearing the same PJ bottoms.

JESS:

But if we're talking about resiliency, we're also talking about awareness and preparing for future disruptions.

BEV:

Like what? Smiling big and hosting a summit?

JESS:

Seriously, though—

BEV:

(interrupting) I am serious! And can you turn that podcast off? It's driving me crazy.

JESS:

It's calming.

BEV:

It's creepy! My god, you listen to this all day?

JESS:

No, not—

She turns it off.

What I was saying is that they've done studies. There's a strength in the concept of resiliency. We talk about "resilience building." So it's constructive. I think to most people "adaptation" seems...

BEV:

Too weak, passive?

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

How can we *not* take it personally?

For those of us directly interacting with affected communities, this is especially true.

Yes, we do our jobs, but we often overlook the personal damage our efforts can cause on a very deep level.

So let's end with a meditation on the *profound powerlessness* that can overcome us as Climate Change professionals.

And of course this is now exacerbated by our current political climate, with sorrow and frustration eating away at our psyches, collectively and individually.

JESS:
No...

BEV:
Ah! Too “female!”

JESS:
I don’t think—

BEV:
(interrupting) Well, I do! And that pisses me off! Another example of the patriarchy taking our language and—

JESS:
(interrupting) I work with mostly women. It’s mostly women who make the—

BEV:
(interrupting) Mostly white women.

JESS:
Yes!

BEV:
And then there’s you. Trying to convince people to take action in a white man’s world. This is why you’re afraid to be angry?

JESS:
I’m not afraid to be angry! Of course I’m angry! Right now, how can anyone not be? I just don’t...

BEV:
No. You don’t!

JESS:
Perhaps, as a woman of color, I can’t afford to!

Short pause.

BEV:
Okay.

JESS:
Okay.

She refills Bev’s wine

BEV:
I’m sorry. Sorry if I’m fussy; it’s just hard for me, not having anywhere to—

JESS:

(interrupting) I know. Sit with me.

She might move some letters so there's room.

What did you do all day?

BEV:

I had lunch with Becky.

JESS:

Becky?

BEV:

Head of Admin, at the Department? You've met her. Then I ran around. Dodging phone calls. Days are very long when you're supposed to be doing nothing,

JESS:

You could have hung out here with me. I'm not back working full time, yet.

BEV:

I was gonna comment on the outfit.

JESS:

Ha ha. I guess you could say that today was targeted resilience testing.

BEV:

Is that what these letters are about?

JESS:

Ha ha ha. No, those aren't work...

She points to her knee.

What I meant was I had Physical Therapy.

BEV:

Oh. You're still going to PT?

JESS:

They come here.

BEV:

Hasn't it been six months, yet?

JESS:

Yes, and I got a six-month re-assessment. A lot of people, recovery after a knee replacement takes over a year. People younger than me.

BEV:

That's right. I always forget how old and decrepit you are.

JESS:

Because you love me.

BEV:

Yes, I do. In spite of myself.

She reaches out affectionately to tidy Jess' hair or clothes, then indicates the letters.

So are you gonna tell me what's all this?

JESS:

These... are letters from my friend Teresa.

The Woman Who Makes Noise plays the refrain of a song which sounds somewhat familiar, then

BEV:

Teresa! Your old friend from school.

JESS:

Uh huh. I hadn't looked at them in years; almost forgot I had them. And you know how it's the things you never expect that give you something to filter, or translate, everything else, to try to make it make sense?

No, Bev doesn't.

It's just that for a while now, I've felt like I'm kind of... on overwhelm?

BEV:

"Profoundly powerless?"

JESS:

You're joking, but yes! And these letters. They were mostly about nothing, really, but they're full of so much... Teresa, that—

BEV:

(interrupting) You remember, I never actually met Teresa. She died when we were first going out.

JESS:

Right. But you know that Teresa and I were never—

BEV:

(interrupting) Yes, yes. I did meet her son, though. With her husband, at that thing after she was gone?

JESS:
Right.

BEV:
Boy, that was one messed-up Greek tragedy, wasn't it? Is that what the letters are about? I remember you said he was an asshole. But I'm guessing not a deserving of painful cancer death asshole?

JESS:
No, and I don't know if anyone is that much of a—

BEV:
(interrupting) Oh, I do. Although you never told me the details. There's a lot you don't share with me.

JESS:
That's not true.

BEV:
It so is. I tell you everything!

JESS:
I'm just not—

BEV:
(interrupting) All I know is she was your friend—just a friend—she died then he—the asshole—kicked it like, less than a year later?

JESS:
I think it was mostly at the end. The asshole part.

BEV:
Okay...

JESS:
When they first got married...

Very short pause.

Are you sure you want me to—?

BEV:
(interrupting) Yes!

JESS:

Okay! They literally went to Vegas after Happy Hour one night. Not what I expected for her, but she was really happy; and she was thrilled to be pregnant! After the baby came everything was great. But then... she got sick. And she'd tell me stories. She never said it, outright, but he was awful to her. Like, mean, awful. Especially after his diagnosis. I think he was just so angry.

BEV:

He was angry? What about her?

JESS:

She was tired. Very tired and trying very hard not to be sad.

BEV:

Sad doesn't rule out angry. Most women don't know the difference. How's the kid doing?

JESS:

I don't know. I kept in touch with her parents...

BEV:

Past tense, kept?

JESS:

Before they died.

BEV:

Wait. They're dead, too?

JESS:

They were older. But they lost their other daughter at one point after Teresa, which was—

BEV:

(interrupting) Her whole family's wiped out? Was it something genetic?

JESS:

Teresa was adopted.

BEV:

Jesus! This keeps getting better and better!

JESS:

You know what? Never mind.

BEV:

I'm sorry. Continue.

JESS:

I was feeling very good about finding these letters. I've been needing...
Something, and—

BEV:

(interrupting) Wait! And you had tapes from her, too, right?

The Woman Who Makes Noise creates the faint sound of a tape rewinding.

JESS:

Yeah. She made a tape for her son, before she died. To give him after.

BEV:

That you did tell me and that is wild. Boy. Knowing you're dying and— I so am not mother material. Can you imagine? Being able to do that, for your child?

JESS:

For me, too. She made a tape for me.

BEV:

Yeah?

JESS:

And there was one for her parents.

BEV:

Oh, shit. That must have been a trip! I mean, for them. When I told my ex-'s dad his son was dead he was like, he didn't say anything, but his eyes. His eyes got bigger than anything I could've imagined and for a moment it was... Like he was lost. He was the one who was gone.

Pause.

What'd she say to you? Teresa, in the tape?

JESS:

I don't know.

BEV:

Why not?

JESS:

I haven't listened.

BEV:

What?

JESS:

They're all still... in a bag.

BEV:

Wait, you— "All...?" You gave the kid his tape, right?

JESS:

I wanted to wait until he was old enough.

BEV:

It's been twenty years!

JESS:

But he was only—

BEV:

(interrupting) Three? Four? That means he's a full-fledged adult, now! And what about her parents? Did they get theirs?

JESS:

When they were alive, I'm not sure I knew one was for them?

BEV:

So you never—

JESS:

(interrupting) No.

BEV:

Jess!

JESS:

I know! I feel terrible. I'm a terrible person.

BEV:

You are not terrible! You are a beyond good person! I just don't— Okay. I love you but I don't understand you, sometimes. This is not planetary problem-solving, they're tapes. From your dead friend. And all these years you've just kept them? Never delivered them and never even listened? Not once?

JESS:

I can't find my cassette player!

Again the sound of a tape rewinding, then coming to a stop. A solid click.

So here's what I was trying to say, before. Teresa. What she had was so impossibly... I don't know. But I was trying to get my head around what she would say, what she would do. How she would hang onto that now that...

BEV:
What?

JESS:
The world is impossible?

BEV:
Whoa. Are you okay?

JESS:
No, I told you, I'm not! I'm—!

Very short pause.

BEV:
Tell me!

Loaded pause.

JESS:
I'm hungry. That's what I am. You?

Very short pause.

BEV:
Sure. You want to go out? It's been a while.

JESS:
I want to cook. I'll find something.

She starts toward the kitchen.

BEV:
Hey! Why don't we find *him*.

JESS:
Who?

BEV:
The son. Teresa's son.

JESS:
No, I'd need to get everything together, first.

BEV:
I'll help you. You can find anyone, now. He's twenty-something, he's on social media. And even if by some miracle he's not, I know people who know people.

We hear a bit of the refrain from earlier, and Jess moves back to the letters.

JESS:
Why don't I order in from the Thai place.

BEV:
I thought you wanted to—

JESS:
(interrupting) Oh. Where's the vacuum? It's not in the closet. You told me you were going—

BEV:
(interrupting) Shit. I forgot to grab it. There was this crazy accident out front of Leonard's shop. An oil truck hit a power pole. Closed down the whole block, I barely got out of there.

JESS:
Is he all right?

BEV:
Fine. He didn't even want to close up. Guess that means...

JESS:
Another excuse to visit Leonard?

BEV:
Ha ha. Jealous?

JESS:
Absolutely.

The women take in one another and maybe a bit of what's between them. And there is a shift. We see Bev with Leonard in his shop, both with vacuums. They look out front.

BEV:
Wow. They can work fast when they want to.

LEONARD:
I was impressed. A couple of days, and it's like it never happened.

BEV:
Until the next truck.

LEONARD:
This was not the first.

BEV:

No?

LEONARD:

It's a high traffic location. Close to the freeway.

BEV:

I never thought of that. And lot of pedestrians, over here.

LEONARD:

The area has changed some, but that's always been an advantage.

BEV:

How long have you been here, Leonard?

LEONARD:

The shop opened in 1959.

BEV:

Really!

LEONARD:

It was my uncle's, then.

BEV:

Hard to imagine this shop pre-Leonard.

LEONARD:

There was no shop pre-Leonard.

BEV:

But I thought you said...

Very short pause.

Ahhhh. So it was... Uncle Leonard?

LEONARD:

And when I came aboard, we moved the apostrophe.

Short pause.

BEV:

"Leonards' Vacuum Repair!"

LEONARD:

After the "s."

BEV:

I should have noticed!

LEONARD:

Not at all.

He gestures to her vacuum.

I used a little lavender oil. Put it on the filter.

BEV:

Thank you.

LEONARD:

It's a lovely scent.

BEV:

I appreciate it!

Leonard gets to work on the vacuum in front of him. Bev isn't ready to leave with hers.

Was he a father figure to you?

LEONARD:

Who?

BEV:

Leonard!

LEONARD:

He was an uncle figure to me.

BEV:

Yeah, but... Never mind.

LEONARD:

We're very close, though.

BEV:

Hang on. You *are* close?

LEONARD:

Yes. But he doesn't come into the shop much, anymore.

BEV:

Your uncle? No, I wouldn't think so! I mean, sorry, but I'm just doing the math.

LEONARD:

It's all right. He's a big traveler, so he's out of town more often than not.

BEV:

Really!? Go, Leonard!

LEONARD:

Thank you.

BEV:

I actually meant the other Leonard.

LEONARD:

I know.

He goes back to his repairs. Bev takes out her phone. The Woman Who Makes Noise begins to voice a determined woman on the street. Initially, Bev and Leonard don't take note of her.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

"Why are you surprised?" I said.

BEV:

(to her phone) Ugh.

LEONARD:

Are reporters still calling you?

DETERMINED WOMAN:

"Yes! I'm still here. Where else am I gonna go?"

BEV:

Some. Radio silence does not instill confidence.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

I am a survivor, that's what I am.

LEONARD:

How's your... ex-father-in-law.

BEV:

He's hanging in there.

The determined woman's voice grows louder, as if she's getting closer to the shop.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

And I'm not goin nowhere.

BEV:

I just came from visiting him. Isn't it funny how you get used to them? Hospitals?

LEONARD:

Do you?

DETERMINED WOMAN:

Nope!

BEV:

Take it from me, you can get used to anything.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

Cause I'm like one of those...

Bev registers the voice and looks out front.

LEONARD:

That's Deirdre.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

Cockroaches? No, not cockroaches. Don't look at me like that!

BEV:

(to the unseen Deirdre, through the window) Sorry!

LEONARD:

She lives under the freeway.

DETERMINED WOMAN:

But yeah, cockroaches'll be around for a while!

BEV:

(back to Leonard) I mean, when I first started in the Department I was terrified of activation. And now I'm all, "Come on, already!"

DETERMINED WOMAN:

Ants, too.

LEONARD:

And what does the Emergency—

BEV:

(interrupting) Department of Emergency Operations.

LEONARD:

Do when there's no emergency?

DETERMINED WOMAN:
But me?

BEV:
90% of the time it's data collection and analysis.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
Me?

BEV:
Which is mostly to cover their asses, so I can only imagine how they're scrambling now.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
Me, we're talkin' tardigrades!

LEONARD:
Hmmm.

BEV:
Yup. And preparation. Positioning assets.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
You heard me!

BEV:
You have no idea how many people we have to corral for an event.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
I am like a tardigrade.

BEV:
First responders, FBI, hospitals, psychologists, utility companies...

DETERMINED WOMAN:
A tiny, microscopic tardigrade.

BEV:
Oh! And for the fires? Prisoners.

LEONARD:
Prisoners?

DETERMINED WOMAN:
Tardigrades.

BEV:
Female prisoners!

LEONARD:
Really!

DETERMINED WOMAN:
“Water bears,” to their friends...

BEV:
Oh, yeah. There are these fierce fire crews, women from local prisons.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
The most indestructible animal on this planet!

BEV:
They’re the ones who really get to me.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
On any planet!

BEV:
Putting their lives on the line, like that.

DETERMINED WOMAN:
And now...

BEV:
I mean, they get paid, but like nothing.

LEONARD:
No?

DETERMINED WOMAN:
The Song of the Tardigrade!

BEV:
No, they’re prisoners! So it’s like a dollar an hour!

DETERMINED WOMAN:
I’m here! So said the tiny being
A water bear that’s me.
I’m alive, and that itself has
meaning.
You can’t kill what you can’t see!

BEV:
The deal is that they get training,
and job experience, except they
can’t get hired once they get out.
Why? Because they’ve got
criminal records! Which means
they’ll never be able to...

Both Bev and Leonard get caught up in the song as it grows louder

DETERMINED WOMAN:

Who needs oxygen or water, even?
I'll adapt to outer space!
I can withstand radiation
And temperatures on any scale.

So come try to erase me
It's impossible for you!
Bring on the plague! I'm virus free
And I have so much left to do!

Now sisters and brothers
Sing The Song of the Tardigrade.
We'll be there for one another
There goes the planet! We're not afraid!

BEV:

You know what? That's what I should be doing right now. Putting these women out there in front of the cameras!

LEONARD:

Deirdre?

BEV:

The women who saved our asses in the fire! And thanking them for their work. Not ducking and covering while someone else is spinning! Right?

LEONARD:

It sounds to me like you're very good at your job.

BEV:

Thank you, Leonard! I think I am!

They both turn back out front. There is a shift and we see Jess, alone in darkness and silence. For a long moment, she seems to be luxuriously bathing in the vacuum of sound. It's a welcome void that completely envelops her. Then we begin to hear voices seeping in. Heated voices.

SELF-INVOLVED MAN:

Stop right there: Our water resource policies are tried and true—

FRUSTRATED WOMAN:

(interrupting) True, we've been *trying* for years, but if we want resilient infrastructure—

SELF-INVOLVED MAN:

(interrupting) Working within the existing framework makes sense, given our time crunch!

FRUSTRATED WOMAN:

“Time crunch?” The end of the world?

SELF-INVOLVED MAN:

Don’t get dramatic on me, here...

We are in the apartment, where a frazzled Jess is trying to find her bearings. She might not have changed clothing.

INTENTIONAL MILLENNIAL:

And why not? The more drama, the better!

SELF-INVOLVED MAN:

But I’m not going to be able to sell this, what with all the climate-related financial disclosures!

INTENTIONAL MILLENNIAL:

This isn’t about “selling” or one “solution,” per se, it’s—!

SELF-INVOLVED MAN:

(interrupting) Then what in the hell are we doing here!?

JESS:

Okay! I’ll tell you!

Jess is now grounded. Focused and ready to take charge.

Where we are is at a pivotal juncture, so this is all good. We’re creating awareness. We can assess the range of healthy watershed indicators, but business continuity can’t be an afterthought. What we’re doing is “Decision Making Under Deep Uncertainty,” which means looking at *all* of the possible futures for water management.

So Z is right: Multi-benefit solutions. That do need to be sold, Jeff. And Gina: Thank you for reminding us that doing what we’ve *been* doing is no longer an option!

As she begins to veer off script we start to hear the sounds of running water, gradually increasing in volume.

We have to recognize that, as humans, we have behaved with total disregard for ecological order, the very systems that keep us all alive. We’ve broken down barriers between ourselves and the natural world and something huge *will* happen. But whatever it is, it is not unforeseen! We have been tracking countless, catastrophic threats for decades now but we’ve waited too long to take action and the mistakes we’ve made cannot be willed or washed away. We’re not “stemming the tide” anymore, we’re being violently flooded with—!

She's interrupted by the now deafening sound of rushing water. She can't tell where it's coming from. It's not onscreen but she might push a button to try to end it. Then we see Bev standing close to Jess and the Woman Who Makes Noise abruptly stops the sound.

BEV:
 Jess!

JESS:
 Yes!

BEV:
 I was— Are you all right?

JESS:
 I... Yes...

She looks around the room. The box of letters is on the table, loose letters beside it.

 I had a meeting.

BEV:
 Here?

JESS:
 A conference call.

BEV:
 When? I thought you were—

JESS:
 (interrupting) They're implementing an urban water management plan. A network of cities in Arizona.

BEV:
 Okay. Is it your knee? Are you in pain?

JESS:
 Oh. No. I'm fine.

BEV:
 I got your message. Picked up your prescription.

JESS:
 Thank you...

She suddenly gives Bev a rather intense hug.

BEV:
Whoa! I should bring you drugs more often!

JESS:
No. It was... a strange meeting, that's all. I'm glad you're home.

BEV:
How long are you supposed to be in pain?

JESS:
I told you, I'm not.

BEV:
Then why the pain pills?

JESS:
Anti-inflammatories. It still swells up. But I'm healing. And PT fired me. Which means... I'm healed!

BEV:
That's good. But I thought you said you were going to your office today. That's why I was surprised to get your message about the drug store. I thought you were going to be mid-City, and—

JESS:
(interrupting) No. I'm sorry, I just...

Short pause.

Let's just say that Arizona is not very diversified when it comes to its water supply portfolio.

BEV:
I don't really know what that means, but I am not surprised.

JESS:
Look: I didn't mean to upset you. I know this is weird for you.

BEV:
This being?

JESS:
Hanging around the house all week, waiting to hear about your job? Especially after you've been so crazy busy.

BEV:
No busier than—

JESS:

(interrupting) No, for the past year. You've been working late. Out nights. Out of town...

BEV:

Maybe a little crazy.

JESS:

A lot crazy. You're never even here, anymore.

BEV:

"Never?" That's—

JESS:

(interrupting) Hardly ever. But now, you are! Here with me! So can you please stop acting like you're being punished?

BEV:

I am being punished!

Very short pause.

JESS:

We'll make it into a good thing, then.

BEV:

How are we going to do that?

JESS:

We'll... adjust. Figure out how to make space for each other in the same space!

BEV:

Wait. This is only temporary.

JESS:

But even if it isn't—

BEV:

(interrupting) Oh, it is! It'll take legislation to get rid of me. It's the County.

JESS:

I'm just saying it's nice to have you around, is all!

We hear chatter from the street outside, created by the Woman Who Makes Noise.

BEV:

Jess...

JESS:
What?

BEV:
Should I be worried?

JESS:
You know better than me. Maybe a transfer, or something, wouldn't be bad?

BEV:
No. I'm— About you.

JESS:
Oh. No, I'll be okay. I told you, I've been having a difficult time, with...

BEV:
With?

JESS:
My work. The world.

BEV:
Right, but you never *really* tell me anything. And when I was driving home, today, suddenly it hit me: How long has it been, Jess?

JESS:
Most of the time I'm fine, it just lately there's more and more—

BEV:
(interrupting) Here's what I'm asking you: When did you last leave the apartment?

Short pause.

JESS:
What do you mean?

BEV:
It's not a trick question.

JESS:
I'm not sure. I mean, I've been working from home. We live Downtown and there's an app for everything, so it's not like I really keep track of—

BEV:
(interrupting) Come on.

Very short pause.

JESS:

It's been a while.

BEV:

Like... weeks?

JESS:

Maybe?

BEV:

Maybe? When was the last time you went out?

JESS:

After the surgery I changed my routine, is all!

BEV:

But now you're healed!

JESS:

You are not the only one who's been dealing with things, Bev!

BEV:

I know that. But the last time you and I went anywhere together, I took you to the doctor. That was over a month ago. Have you left, without me, since then?

We again hear street noises which could sound a bit threatening.

JESS:

Maybe not?

BEV:

Jess!

JESS:

It's not intentional.

BEV:

Then why were you hiding it from me?

JESS:

I wasn't.

BEV:

Then why didn't I notice?

JESS:

I don't know, Bev, why didn't you?

More street noises.

JESS:
It's not like it's a problem.

BEV:
No?

JESS:
No! How has it been problematic? I mean, besides you having to go out of your way during your very busy day not being at work to stop by the drug store.

BEV:
I didn't say—

JESS:
(interrupting) I've not even mentioned that you've been picking fights, acting like you're being tortured, here, but if it's too much for you to see to my needs, for once, I guess I should have had them delivered. From way across town, but what's a little more carbon in my footprint if it means keeping you carefree and happy!

BEV:
That is not fair!

JESS:
I know but fuck you anyway.

BEV:
Fuck you, too.

She starts out.

JESS:
Where are you going?

BEV:
What do you care?

JESS:
I'm curious, is all.

BEV:
Then why don't you come with me?

JESS:
Maybe I will!

BEV:
Yeah?

JESS:
Yeah!

BEV:
Really?

JESS:
Really!

We hear faint voices from the street.

What's it like, out?

BEV:
Oh, civilization still teetering on the brink, madmen still in charge.

JESS:
I meant, the weather.

BEV:
Pretty balmy for October. Global warming, you know.

JESS:
Lucky us!

Both women might manage to smile. Maybe we hear birds, outside.

BEV:
All right. I'm sorry I've been on edge. I mean, I haven't *not* worked since... I don't know when.

JESS:
I don't either. And I'm sorry for snapping at you.

BEV:
Hey. What do you say we take a walk, together. How long's *that* been?

Short pause.

It'll be okay, Jess, I'll be right there, with you.

JESS:
You promise?

BEV:

Nothing'll hurt us. We'll be like a couple of tardigrades, just one foot after the other.

JESS:

Tardigrades? Where did you get—

BEV:

(interrupting) Water bears. The most indestructible—

JESS:

(interrupting) I know what tardigrades are. But they're only like a millimeter; they don't exactly walk.

BEV:

We'll saunter, then. Stop somewhere for a bite? What do tardigrades eat?

JESS:

Anything they can. Sometimes other tardigrades.

BEV:

Let's not go that far. I will insist you change, however. More formal pajamas?

JESS:

Ha ha. I'll see what I can find.

As she starts out, Bev notices the box on the table and begins to gather the letters.

BEV:

And I'm going to put these letters in the other room, okay?

JESS:

What? Oh. No, I'll...

BEV:

They're Teresa's, right? Did you find the tapes? Oh, and looky here—want your phone?

She's found Jess' phone under the letters, turns and collides with Jess.

BEV:

Ah! Sorry!

JESS:

Ow! Ahhhh...

It's her knee.

BEV:
Yikes. Hit it right where it counts, didn't I?

JESS:
Ya ya ya ya ya. Where are those...

BEV:
Pills? Hang on.

Bev fetches them as Jess eases herself into a chair.

JESS:
Man. Sorry.

BEV:
No, I'm sorry! How bad is it? You want to go to Urgent Care?

JESS:
No! It's not—I just tweaked it.

Bev hands her a white pharmacy bag.

BEV:
Here. I'll get you some water.

JESS:
Thanks, sweetie. And an ice pack? That'd be great.

Bev starts out, then turns back.

BEV:
So... tomorrow?

JESS:
Tomorrow?

BEV:
We'll take a walk, tomorrow?

Short pause.

JESS:
Maybe tomorrow.

We hear sounds that call back the Teresa refrain which Jess tries to hang onto. Then there is a shift. In black, we hear and see snatches of what resembles a newscast.

FEMALE REPORTER:

The Sherriff's department says it's still too early to release all of the details. With the State Health Department on alert, we join the local press conference at City Hall.

MALE OFFICIAL:

First, I thank you for your attention and indulgence, as we're just starting to gather information. But I'll be glad to answer whatever questions I can.

Noise from a televised crowd, and we see Bev in the living room, staring at a screen. She wears a robe.

BEV:

Goddamnit! Fuck fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck!

She presses a button and picks up her phone. Jess comes in, wearing different PJs.

JESS:

What are you doing up? It's early...

BEV:

(re the screen) Look at that! Those fuckers! They're having a crisis without me!

JESS:

Who is?

BEV:

They're talking about closing the fucking Port.

JESS:

What happened?

BEV:

Some sort of gas leak. Chemicals. Or biological? Apparently some guys unloading a cargo ship got sent to the hospital and someone's screaming germ warfare and they want to shut it down. *(looking at her phone)* This is bad.

JESS:

It's good, being pro-active. The population potentially—

BEV:

(interrupting) I don't care about the Port or the population! I mean, of course I care. But here's the thing: They didn't call me, Jess. They didn't even text. No emails, nothing. *(re the screen)* And I don't even know who that clown is!

JESS:

(looking at the screen) It says "Doctor." Probably a subject expert if they're afraid of biological—

BEV:

(interrupting) No, he's like a doctorate, doctor. You can tell by that institutional smirk.

JESS:

What institution?

BEV:

Who cares? Today, anyway, he's speaking for the County! Public Health, that's us.

JESS:

So who is he?

BEV:

That's what I was telling you! I have no idea! Some white guy with a PhD we're supposed to trust in an emergency! Fuck me.

JESS:

It's too early to get upset. Why don't I—

BEV:

(interrupting) You're putting a timer on my temper? I have to wait until business hours?

JESS:

I meant in terms of this. This situation. There's still a lot of assessment—

BEV:

(interrupting) Okay. You do not know what's going on, here. I just turned on the fucking news and you know 5 minutes less than I do.

JESS:

Sure, but if we look at—

BEV:

(interrupting) No! This is not a we thing. You don't get to be the expert; you have no clue how things work, in my world. My nuts and bolts just get it done world where it's only me and when I see that guy, right there, doing my job that means I cannot sit on my ass and "assess," I need to fucking do something!

JESS:

Okay! So what are you going to do?

BEV:

I'm going to the hospital.

She heads out of the room.

JESS:

To the hospital?

BEV:

(offstage) My ex-father-in-law?

JESS:

Do you really think—?

BEV:

(interrupting, offstage) No, I just say things without thinking. However, if this is a rapidly spreading health crisis maybe I should check on him! What do you think?

JESS:

I think you need some coffee. It's early.

BEV:

(offstage) What's with you and "early" this morning? You're usually all "Oh, no! It's too late."

JESS:

Bev, it's not even light out! *(re the screen)* And look! They're not closing the Port. No biological threat. They're just taking safety measures, which is smart; our healthcare system is not equipped to meet the needs of—

She's interrupted by Bev coming back into the room, hastily dressed.

BEV:

See you later.

JESS:

You're going to stop by your office? Find out what's going on?

BEV:

For all I know my clearance has been revoked and I'm on the bunker blacklist.

JESS:

But you still have people there.

BEV:

I may! I very well, may have. So how about this: I'll go to my "office" if you go to yours?

Very short pause.

No? All righty, then! *(taking out her phone again)* I'll see if anyone wants to meet me at the old watering hole later tonight. Do you want to join, or do you have plans? With your people?

JESS:

What are you saying?

BEV:

Just what is unclear?

JESS:

That I don't have people? I have friends. I have colleagues.

BEV:

Oh, I know! All sorts of 'em. Why don't you ever introduce me, anymore?

JESS:

I do!

BEV:

You do not! Every once in a while you throw out these new names but I've never met them.

JESS:

That's not true.

BEV:

It is! We used to do dinners. Drinks. People would come into town—smart, interesting people—and we'd all go out. We'd have them over! But that's been— Are you ashamed of me? Not good enough for the intelligentsia?

JESS:

What? No!

BEV:

Then what is going on with you, Jess? You love what you do, know why you're doing it and I've felt lucky to be part of that. But you have been totally shutting me out!

JESS:

What are you talking about? You're the one who hasn't been here!

BEV:

That's because I don't have a job where I can just sit and ponder all day!

JESS:

I don't—! My knee slowed me down! You know that!

BEV:

Right. Your knee.

JESS:

And I was trying to explain to you, it's very... I... I don't...

Loaded pause.

BEV:

And there it is. What am I supposed to do with that? See you later.

JESS:

When will you be home?

BEV:

I have no fucking idea.

She leaves. We hear a door slam and Jess stands still for a moment, then perhaps we see very sad, barely discernable tears. And start to hear the rumblings of a storm.

JESS:

No. No no no no no...

She banishes anything tear-like but the storm noises from the Woman Who Makes Noise get louder. And louder. A hurricane force storm. Jess looks around as the morning sun starts to stream through the window. She tries to gather herself.

Okay! It's okay. It'll be okay! Stop it. Stop!! Just...!!!

Jess desperately pushes a button and the feed onscreen shifts from the newscast to the soothing sounds of nature and soft music. The storm fades away and we begin to hear the assured and uplifting voice.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

Welcome! To New Directions in Climate Change, Part 3—Helping Ourselves Before We Can Help Others.

JESS:

Ooooooooookay.

She tilts her head back, shakes her body as a release.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

More than ever, we find that professionals in our field are buckling under the burden of what we know: that the end is in sight. It's not if, it's when.

JESS:

As long as I have time to make coffee first.

She starts toward the kitchen.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

So in order to connect with others in our work and our life—to continue to find purpose in both—we must be able to do one thing: Use *hope* as a tool.

JESS:

You can't be serious.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

Yes! Hope itself can be an impactful tool to reach decision-makers, but it's also a tool to help *ourselves*. Because the fatalism and resignation that can accompany eco-anxiety are yet another kind of threat; particularly susceptible are women over 40.

JESS:

Excuse me?

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

And in all cases, ESD, or ecological stress disorder, can manifest in ways we might not expect.

Jess sinks onto the couch or a chair.

Loss of autonomy. Loss of identity. Depression. Anger. Substance abuse. Physical pain. Delusions. Withdrawal. Not just for those in weather-related crisis, anymore!

JESS:

Jesus Christ.

She stands and her knee acts up.

Ow! Damnit!

She looks for her bottle of pills.

Wait. My pills were right here...

On the table. That's where I left them, right?

Right. I did. I'm not crazy...

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE:

So even as we address defenses and doubts in others...

We must acknowledge our own vulnerabilities.

We must find strength in those vulnerabilities.

And to instill hope in others, we must embrace it, ourselves.

Only then will we come to terms with the fact that once we know what we know, we can never be the same.

JESS:

Goddamnit! Bev! You can't just do shit like that!

Jess looks for her phone.

You talk about how pissed off you are, and what's wrong with *me*, but I am not your problem. I am not a disaster that needs to be mitigated!

Jess finally finds her phone, but stops herself from messaging.

No. You know what? This is something that— You. Me. Here.

You can't just make me feel like a fraud, then run around from crisis to crisis and expect to come home and crawl into bed! Because the truth is that I have been here for you in every way! Right here, while you're off wherever it is, feeling oh-so-important, but all *you're* doing is putting your finger in a goddamn dyke!

Ack. I didn't mean...

I mean, hope I didn't...

Jess registers the change in the voice.

Teresa?

That can't...

Teresa!

FRAGILE VOICE:

I'm not scared for myself. My body is doing whatever it's doing. And I'm hoping my mind is still in some reasonably reasonable state, ha ha ha. I don't know. You tell me.

ASSURED AND UPLIFTING VOICE

So we find ourselves holding a tragic consciousness, operating in a new space where everything we once took for granted is challenged, from growth-based democracies to personal freedoms.

Yet we still want to do good, meaningful, important work. It then becomes our job to deliver information judiciously and with clarity in order to effect change. In order to invest in the outcome, as professionals and as human beings.

To do this, we need to find ways to employ practical, day-to-day denial.

And learning how to balance toxic threats with the hope that we can heal is the kind of self-care that makes us healthier and more productive in every way.

The voice changes tone; it's a woman who sounds brighter and more fragile.

FRAGILE VOICE:

I'm not afraid. I know that sounds dopey, but I'm really not.

I was afraid of what happens next, but now I'm...

Yeah. All right. Fear is there.

It's definitely there.

But it's a different kind of fear.

Jess looks at the screen which has frozen. There is silence. Then Jess reaches into her pocket and pulls out a small cassette tape player. She looks at it a moment, then back at the screen. She presses a button. And we hear the voice from a different source.

FRAGILE VOICE:

Right now I'm scared for my son, Jess. My parents are old. I can't count on my sister and his dad is... who knows what will happen. I don't know who'll be there for him. And honestly, I'm scared of the world he's going to grow up in. The only thing I'm hanging onto, right now, is that you'll be in it, too. And that you'll be able to make it better.

We hear the sound of static. There is a shift. We see Bev and Leonard in his shop. Leonard is watching Bev, who holds the remote for a small robotic vacuum that is buzzing around the shop.

BEV:

Have I ever asked you this?

LEONARD:

Asked me what?

BEV:

Were you ever married, Leonard?

LEONARD:

Yes.

BEV:

For any significant time? Or wait: to a woman?

LEONARD:

Fair question. Yes.

BEV:

Didn't want to assume, you know.

LEONARD:

Appreciated.

The robo-vac begins to struggle.

BEV:

Has a hard time on edges, doesn't he?

LEONARD:

There should be a button. On the remote. Looks like toast?

She presses it and the robo-vac changes its pattern.

BEV:

Look at that!

LEONARD:

The newer models are very impressive.

BEV:

So how long were you married? No. Hang on. What question were you answering, before? Maybe the “yes,” was to “significant time?” Are you holding out on me, Leonard?

LEONARD:

Married to a woman.

BEV:

Good job!

LEONARD:

For 35 years.

BEV:

Oh! I didn't—

She pauses the robo-vac.

I'm so sorry!

LEONARD:

Why are you sorry?

BEV:

That is very significant. Was it... a good marriage?

LEONARD:

I think so.

BEV:

That must've been impossibly hard.

LEONARD:

At times.

BEV:

Why didn't we talk about this, before?

LEONARD:

I don't know.

BEV:

I mean, I was telling you my stories, my ex-, and I never even... When did she die?

LEONARD:

She didn't die.

BEV:

No? So after 35 years you... what?

LEONARD:

Nothing. We're still married.

BEV:

You're kidding me!

LEONARD:

No.

BEV:

You never told me you were— Leonard. That is just... wrong.

LEONARD:

Wrong?

BEV:

I just... I've been coming here for, like, a year, and I never imagined you with... I imagined you with cats, Leonard. A house full of cats. I don't know why.

LEONARD:

Well. I like cats. We don't have any.

Short pause. Then Bev presses a button and the robo-vac resumes its journey.

There's an "Automatic" button there. If you really want to put it through its paces.

The robo-vac amps up its efforts.

There's no need for all the features on the more expensive ones. That was a good choice. Very good on pet hair.

BEV:

So, what? You have a dog?

LEONARD:

No.

BEV:

Then how do you know about pet hair? Rabbits?

LEONARD:

Customers. They make recommendations.

BEV:

Oh. Right.

LEONARD:

Rabbits aren't very helpful. They're not fond of vacuums, in general.

The robo-vac continues. Then Bev presses a button and it stops.

BEV:

Leonard, I know this sounds ridiculous. But I don't know what's more upsetting to me: That you're married, or that you have other customers.

LEONARD:

That is a little ridiculous.

BEV:

I know. But there's never anyone else in here. How would you feel if I had another vacuum repair guy?

LEONARD:

I'd wonder how many vacuum cleaners you had.

BEV:

I only have one, Leonard. Now one-and-a-half.

She presses a button and the robo-vac starts up again. They both watch its progress.

I don't know why I bought this. We don't have cats, either. Jess is allergic.

LEONARD:

My daughter is, too.

BEV:

Wait. You have a daughter?!

LEONARD:

Three.

BEV:

Three daughters?

LEONARD:

And five grandchildren.

BEV:

No! That's...

She starts to cry. A loud, ugly cry that takes up a lot of space. The Woman Who Makes Noise takes the remote and ushers the robo-vac away.

That's wonderful! I don't know why I— I just feel so completely alone, there's no one that—! I don't know what's going on with me, Leonard.

LEONARD:

Do you want something to drink?

BEV:

Got any Rye? Or anything brown, actually.

LEONARD:

I meant water.

BEV:

Of course you did. Okay. I'm blaming this on biological warfare.

LEONARD:

What?

BEV:

I'm kidding. Or I think I am; down at the Port today, there was— Don't you have any chairs, Leonard?!

LEONARD:

Yes. I'll just go and...

He leaves and Bev pulls herself together, moves to her bag and takes out her phone. Checks it. Then records a voice message into it.

BEV:

Hey! I'll meet you there at five, or might be closer to 5:30. Assuming the crisis is averted, anyone else at DEO willing to be seen with me? Ha ha ha.

She sends then looks for the response. We hear a short sound.

Fuckers.

Leonard comes in with a surprisingly large chair.

LEONARD:
Will this do?

BEV:
That's great, Leonard. Thank you. And I apologize. I had no idea I was such an idiot.

LEONARD:
You're not—

BEV:
(interrupting) I kind of am. I'm certainly not a genius. I can muddle through. Put words together. Respond appropriately. But sometimes I surprise myself by acting like a complete moron. What's your wife like?

LEONARD:
I'll get another chair.

He does. Bev moves to check her phone but before she reaches it, we hear a jingle and a door opening. The Woman Who Makes Noise comes into the shop as a somewhat awkward young woman

YOUNG WOMAN:
Oh! Hi! Is Leonard...?

BEV:
In the back.

YOUNG WOMAN:
Okay. I'll stop by tomorrow, then.

BEV:
No! He'll be right...

We hear a jingle and she's gone, just as Leonard returns with a small stool.

There was a girl, here?

Leonard looks out the window.

LEONARD:
That's Margaret. She'll come by tomorrow.

BEV:
Margaret. Who's Margaret? Did I say something wrong?

LEONARD:
I couldn't hear.

He produces a bottle and two small glasses.

LEONARD:
Irish Whiskey?

BEV:
Great.

Leonard pours. The Women Who Makes Noise creates the sounds of a Street Musician.

So. Thirty-five years.

LEONARD:
In September.

BEV:
September? Really? Jess and I are the 19th. And it was 19 years. Huh. I just thought of that.

LEONARD:
That's significant.

BEV:
I mean, we couldn't make it legal for the first 8.

LEONARD:
And what about your first marriage?

BEV:
That was legal. Now he's dead.

LEONARD:
You mentioned.

BEV:
It was just over a year. But technically we didn't get divorced until Jess and I got together. Even then, I didn't really see the point. Of course he was also— his soon-to-be-wife was pregnant. Hence, my baby gift.

LEONARD:
A divorce.

BEV:
You got it. God, they seemed so happy. Just married, expecting. Huh. That's a familiar story.

LEONARD:
A nice story.

BEV:

That they were happy until they weren't?

LEONARD:

Oh.

BEV:

I don't know what happened. I mean, I loved them. Together. I loved their kids. We all went on vacations together. And then, something just— It was before he got sick. Something poisoned what they had. Maybe part of me blamed her, but neither of them could get what they wanted. They loved each other, but at one point he just couldn't do it, anymore.

Very short pause.

He told me, he felt like his bootstraps were broken.

LEONARD:

That could be problematic.

BEV:

Right?

The Street Musician finishes a tune. We hear passersby and clinking of change in a hat.

Did you ever get to a place in your marriage where it struck you, "Oh! This. *This* is it." And everything starts to matter, more.

LEONARD:

I'm not sure what that means.

BEV:

It all counts more. Has more weight and finality because you're like, "This is what the rest of my life looks like. With this person. Is this what I really want? Will this make me happy?"

Short pause.

LEONARD:

"Will this allow me to be happy?"

BEV:

What?

LEONARD:

Maybe that's a better question.

We hear buzzing and the robo-vac comes back into the room.

BEV:

Oh, no! I completely forgot about him.

LEONARD:

Easy enough to do.

BEV:

Another reason I'm not allowed to have children.

The Street Musician strikes up the chords of "The Song of the Tardigrade." It sounds a bit melancholy, very different from Deirdre's version.

STREET MUSICIAN:

I'm here! So said the tiny being
A water bear that's me.
I'm alive, and that itself has meaning
You can't kill what you can't see!

Then there is a shift. We see Jess, still wearing PJs but maybe a sweater thrown over, in the apartment with Margaret.

JESS:

I... I don't know what to say.

MARGARET:

You don't have to say anything. I can go.

JESS:

No! Please, no!

MARGARET:

I get that this is out of the blue.

JESS:

Strangely, it kind of isn't.

MARGARET:

I mean, I knew who you were for a long time.

JESS:

You did?

MARGARET:

Of course! In my program, you're legend. Your work with the University's greenbelt biodiversity—we have all of your talks archived; I've listened to them over and over again.

JESS:

That's... very flattering.

MARGARET:

Part of my thesis involves system dynamics, thanks to you. Oh, god. Now I'm totally fan-girling. Sorry!

JESS:

Ha ha ha. No. Thank you. But I thought you meant you knew who I was because...

MARGARET:

Oh. Aunt Teresa. No. Well, that, too. I mean I knew that you existed. I'd always heard of "Jessica" when I was a kid. My grandparents, it was "Teresa's Jessica!"

This hits Jess in an unexpected place.

Hey! Are you okay?

JESS:

I'm sorry. After all this time, that's just... I really love hearing that.

MARGARET:

Honestly, I didn't really know my Aunt very well. I was a baby when she died.

JESS:

Sure.

MARGARET:

Anyway. After I came here to go to school—my grandparents were gone by then—I did remember that you—my Aunt's Jessica—lived here—once anyway—and I kept meaning to see if I could find you but, well, it's a pretty big town, ha ha.

JESS:

Yes, it is!

MARGARET:

And I honestly I didn't even know anything about you beyond our family so I had not even a clue that "Jessica" was you.

JESS:

Jess. Call me Jess.

MARGARET:

Really? I will. Totally. Man! I'm so sorry it took me so long to make the connection!

JESS:

I'm just so glad you did!

MARGARET:

And I'm glad you didn't think I was, like, a stalker or something! I know it's such bad form, I just showed up at your door. But I figured, why not? When am I ever going to catch her home again!

JESS:

Ha ha ha. *(re her clothes)* If I'd known you were coming...

MARGARET:

No! You're good! It's all good!

Short pause.

JESS:

Do you want a glass of wine?

MARGARET:

That would be amazing!

Jess goes into the kitchen and perhaps Margaret moves to a window.

This is an incredible place. Have you been here long?

JESS:

(offstage) Almost fifteen years.

MARGARET:

Cool. I like it Downtown.

JESS:

(offstage) We do, too.

MARGARET:

We?

JESS:

(offstage) Me... and my partner, Bev.

MARGARET:

Cool.

Jess comes back in with two filled glasses.

JESS:

I found champagne.

MARGARET:
Awesome!

JESS:
Ha ha. It's been in there a while, so I'm not all that sure. And I probably shouldn't have told you that. Do you want to sit down?

MARGARET:
Thanks.

They sit; on the table is the box of letters and a small bag.

MARGARET:
So it's Bev?

JESS:
Yes. Bev.

MARGARET:
She's still at work?

JESS:
No. She... She's taking some time off work. And to be honest, we're also taking a little break.

MARGARET:
Oh!

JESS:
I mean, it's fine. Just a few days. Her job is very stressful right now.

MARGARET:
Unlike yours?

JESS:
Ha ha. Right. And *she* gets to stay at a hotel!

MARGARET:
I totally get it, though. Everyone needs a break, right? From whatever it is. Gives you perspective, and all. The first step before coming together in DMDU, right?

JESS:
"Decision Making Under Deep Uncertainty."

MARGARET:
I really love your DMDU and Climate Change talk. The need to let go of the expertise reflex—our reliance on predictions.

JESS:

Okay. What I was saying before, about this not being out of the blue? I need to show you something: This box. It's letters from your Aunt.

MARGARET:

Really! She wrote letters? Now that's cool. I mean, some people still do cards, but actual letters?

JESS:

I was in grad school, and would go away on various projects. Then lately I've been... struggling with things? I found them again. And do you know what I realized?

Very short pause.

MARGARET:

Am I supposed to answer that?

JESS:

Ha ha. Probably not. It was this: The way Teresa lived, she was open to anything. I mean, for her, "deep uncertainty" was just the way it was and somehow she made that okay. She let herself do what felt right but she stayed so connected to other people and she... owned whatever happened.

MARGARET:

Like dying?

JESS:

Yes. She did!

MARGARET:

Well that's dope. My mom kind of fucked that one up.

JESS:

Oh. I'm sorry—and your grandparents! I should have...

MARGARET:

It's okay.

JESS:

I am sorry; this is not what I'm good at? Talking about... "Dwelling" on things wasn't something I was brought up to do.

MARGARET:

I get it.

JESS:

I didn't think of myself as young, when Teresa died, but I was. Older than you, of course.

MARGARET:

I'm almost 23.

JESS:

Right. Anyway, during that time there was so much going on. And I think I didn't know what would happen if I stopped everything to admit she was really gone.

MARGARET:

This class I'm taking; we're talking about that.

JESS:

About?

MARGARET:

Grief. Well, specifically, "Complicated Grief": Intense grief that continues for an extended period and is predominately brought on by something other than—

JESS:

(interrupting) Yes, that's the term, but don't you think all grief is complicated?

MARGARET:

But what I meant was grieving for the planet. And how that, in itself, can be in a constructive or destructive loop. In terms of whether it spurs us to action or paralyzes us. If we view grief as a responsibility, we tend to resist it or ignore it. But grief is messy. And if we don't allow ourselves to grieve and honor the loss, are we fully aware, and connected in an essential way to what we're left with?

There is a silence between them that's a bit messy, and complicated. Especially for Jess. Then,

JESS:

I have tapes that she made, too. Teresa.

MARGARET:

Tapes? You mean, like—

JESS:

(interrupting) She made them before she died. For—

MARGARET:

(interrupting) Oh yeah! Old cassettes! That's right! I remember!

JESS:

You remember?

MARGARET:

She made one for my grandparents.

JESS:

She—

MARGARET:

(interrupting) They played it for me when I was a little kid. I remember I wondered why there wasn't one for me, but she never really knew me. My mom didn't get one, either. She didn't speak to my Aunt after she got married and honestly? I don't think she ever forgave herself. My mom. And of course there was Michael's tape—I remember that, more, because he got it when he was a teenager and he digitized it right away so it wouldn't wear out. He's like that. He takes care of things. He took care of me.

JESS:

Michael!

MARGARET:

Michael. My cousin? Oh, my god I am such a selfish thing and I was so excited to find you and put it all together I totally forgot to— *(pulling out her phone)* I'm texting him right now.

JESS:

Yes! Of course! But I— I have a tape for him. And for—

MARGARET:

(interrupting) That'd be the same one. I mean, a copy.

Short pause.

JESS:

Why would you think that?

MARGARET:

Because she wrote on them, the tapes. There were notes on them saying you had copies. Which makes total sense, from what you were saying about her before. Redundancy. One of the factors in building effective resilience, right? So it's not all on one person. No one should ever feel like it's all up to them.

JESS:

I—! Oh, god, come here, please?

She embraces Margaret.

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you both!

MARGARET:

Both? You mean Michael? Ha ha, why does he get—

She's interrupted by Bev who has come into the room.

BEV:

Hello?

JESS:

Oh! Hi!

MARGARET:

(to Bev) Hi!

Very short pause.

BEV:

Hi.

JESS:

Bev, this is—

BEV:

(interrupting) Margaret.

JESS:

Oh. You—?

BEV:

(interrupting) What is Margaret doing here?

MARGARET:

Ha ha ha. I'd ask what *you're* doing here, but... Hi, Bev!

BEV:

You know Jess?

MARGARET:

Yes! Well, we've never actually— Long story.

JESS:

And how do *you* two—?

MARGARET:

(interrupting) Leonard!

BEV:

What were you doing at his shop the other day?

MARGARET:
He repairs vacuum cleaners?

BEV:
I know, but—

MARGARET:
(interrupting) Except! I brought him a vacuum he couldn't repair. So we kind of bonded. He's selling me a used one, though; I'm paying him in installments.

BEV:
Layaway.

MARGARET:
Ohhhh that's what he calls it, too. He's so cute, isn't he? Anyway! I should get going. Thanks for the champagne... Jess.

JESS:
You're very welcome.

MARGARET:
And I have your number. So I'll keep in touch? I've got exams coming up, but of course I wanna introduce you to Michael.

JESS:
Definitely!

MARGARET:
Okay! So great. Again. I didn't even mean to stay this long...

She heads toward the door; Jess picks up the bag.

JESS:
Wait. I need to give you the tapes! For Michael and—

MARGARET:
(interrupting) No, I told you. That's done. He doesn't—

JESS:
(interrupting) Please?

She retrieves her own tape, then holds out the bag. Margaret takes it.

MARGARET:
Okay. I do have to go. Bye!

And she's gone. We hear a door slam.

BEV:
Champagne?

JESS:
Yes! Let's celebrate; I'll get you a glass.

Still holding the tape, she starts toward the kitchen.

BEV:
No, I mean, how old is she?

JESS:
Almost 23, as a matter of fact!

BEV:
And who is she?

JESS:
I thought you'd met?

BEV:
Not officially.

JESS:
Well, then! First of all, she's studying environmental justice through the program I set up at the University.

BEV:
Good for her.

JESS:
And second, she's Teresa's niece.

BEV:
She's— Wow, that's— Those were all Teresa's tapes?

JESS:
Except mine! I have mine. And there's a lot more to it, but she'll give them to Teresa's son.

BEV:
Michael.

JESS:
Right!

BEV:
And this is the first time you two have...

JESS:

I honestly didn't even remember there was a niece!

BEV:

So this was like, random?

JESS:

As random as anything is, sweetie! I'm so happy you're home! I've missed you!

She moves toward Bev and they are about to embrace, until Bev turns away. After a moment, Jess puts down the tape and picks up Margaret's empty glass.

Um... Did you want champagne?

BEV:

Thanks. No. I actually just came back to pick up some more things.

JESS:

Why?

BEV:

I'm gonna stay with a friend, for a while.

JESS:

I thought we said—

BEV:

(interrupting) I know we said. But I need more time, Jess.

JESS:

Are you seeing someone? Is that what—?

BEV:

(interrupting) No, of course not! I just...

Very short pause.

JESS:

Just what? What do you need time, for?

BEV:

To see if I can do this, anymore.

JESS:

This being us?

BEV:

Is there an us, Jess?

JESS:

Excuse me?

BEV:

I mean there's me, and there's you. Each in our own little whatevers. And I think... I think there's something more, don't you? That there should be?

JESS:

I think there's a whole lot more going on in the world right now and that's a really good reason to hang onto what we've got!

BEV:

But what even is that, anymore? Maybe the world is ending but I feel like I've already lost the person who was supposed to always be there, for me and with me!

JESS:

Who are you talking about?

BEV:

Who do you think I'm talking about?

JESS:

I'm guessing your ex-?

BEV:

No! I was—

JESS:

(interrupting) Because I'm still here, Bev. I'm the one who's here!

BEV:

Some remote part of you, maybe, but you don't— It's like you don't even try to understand what I—

JESS:

(interrupting) I've done nothing but try, but since he's been gone you keep running away! Anything not to be with me! And it's pretty impossible to compete with someone who's—

BEV:

(interrupting) No! That's not— Okay. I know I'm not allowed to feel this way and, yes, he had a wife and a family and they took up more room in his life but what I did have, with him, was a very particular thing. The space that he left, I don't know how to fill that. I don't know if I can because I'm so fucking pissed he left me and you don't even seem to...!

Very short pause.

JESS:

What is it you want from me, Bev?

Very short pause.

BEV:

Maybe nothing, Jess. Maybe nothing at all.

We see Bev heading toward the door and hear a howl outside of the window—a coyote on the streets of Downtown from the Woman Who Makes Noise. Maybe in darkness it grows into an extended chorus of coyotes.

There is a shift. We see Leonard alone in his shop, with paperwork at the counter. The Woman Who Makes Noise creates light traffic sounds. Then, a jingle and a door opening. Jess comes into the shop, dressed in street clothes but clearly ill at ease.

LEONARD:

Hello.

JESS:

Hi.

She looks around the shop. Then she takes in Leonard.

I'm... Jess.

LEONARD:

Oh! Yes! Hello. Very nice to meet you!

Short pause.

JESS:

That's a nice chair.

LEONARD:

Thank you.

JESS:

(re the shop) This is smaller than I expected.

LEONARD:

My workshop's in the back.

Short pause.

JESS:

Has she been in? To see you?

LEONARD:
Today? No.

JESS:
Recently?

LEONARD:
Not since she left this. That was over a week ago.

He sets the robo-vac on the counter and the Woman Who Makes Noise blasts a car horn, which unsettles Jess further.

JESS:
And... what is that? One of those little, what-do-you-call-them?

LEONARD:
Yes.

JESS:
It's hers?

LEONARD:
She said she'd just bought it.

JESS:
But it needed repairs?

LEONARD:
No. It's remarkably effective.

JESS:
Then why did she leave it here? That was last week?

LEONARD:
The week before. I couldn't tell you.

Short pause.

JESS:
Did you know she left me?

LEONARD:
Oh. No. I'm... I'm very sorry.

JESS:
I thought she might be staying here.

LEONARD:

This is a repair shop.

The Woman Who Makes Noise voices someone on their phone, walking past the shop. Jess is caught off guard and unconsciously reaches for the robo-vac.

JESS:

Oh. Sorry...

LEONARD:

It's fine. Would you like to take that?

JESS:

It's not... No.

They both look at the robo-vac.

LEONARD:

Well. If you change your mind, it's a good model. Not a lot to go wrong. And if it does, it's a simple fix. In my experience, anyway. Even when things seem complicated. Or especially. If you look at them the right way.

Jess takes another look at Leonard.

JESS:

Do you like what you do, Leonard?

LEONARD:

I do. I've always liked working with my hands.

JESS:

Fixing things?

LEONARD:

And making things, I suppose?

JESS:

You're an inventor?

LEONARD:

I fancied myself one. I started college as an engineer. It was all Aerospace out here, then.

JESS:

So where did you end up? In college.

LEONARD:

No.

JESS:
No?

LEONARD:
I ended up repairing vacuum cleaners.

Maybe Jess allows herself to smile.

JESS:
I like what I do. Or I did.

LEONARD:
Bev says that when it comes to the environment, if anyone can—

JESS:
(interrupting) No.

LEONARD:
No?

JESS:
No. And I wish I could remember what that feels like: Being able to make things work.

LEONARD:
I find it very satisfying.

JESS:
What about when something is too broken?

LEONARD:
Can I ask, what sort of thing?

JESS:
The sort where you tell yourself what you're doing is helping, but everything you do, you're only making things worse.

LEONARD:
In what sense?

JESS:
When you realize that you've been trying to keep things together for the wrong reasons. You're caught in a destructive, stagnating loop, clinging onto the pieces and forcing them to fit because you don't want to—

LEONARD:
(interrupting) Tell me what you know about vacuums.

Very short pause.

JESS:

Most people think a vacuum is an absence of everything, but in reality, there is no such thing as “nothing.”

LEONARD:

I was actually talking about vacuum cleaners.

JESS:

I figured. Why are you asking?

LEONARD:

I’m not exactly sure. It’s... what I know.

Very short pause.

JESS:

So tell me, then, Leonard: vacuum cleaners.

LEONARD:

Well... Air is brought into the machine by the fan motor, creating suction. It flows through the body and is filtered where matter is caught, then exhales back out into the atmosphere. So, in effect, they’re agents of transformation. And validation. Acknowledgement. In some respects, what do we do every day that we’re alive, but gather dust? And transfer it. We shed skin. We get dirty. Dirt follows us into our homes. We’re visited by others. We spread germs. There’s a thin coating of who we are and where we’ve been—who we’ve been with—that we can’t escape. That we don’t see, or recognize. And a vacuum captures that. Collects it. Some might say “removes it” but it really just—

JESS:

(interrupting) Rearranges it.

LEONARD:

Exactly! One of the most profound things that’s ever happened in my life? Bag-less vacuums. Quite the revelation! *(laying hands on the robo-vac)* Even these little ones. We hear the sounds of particles being suctioned into the machines and think of them as being gone, I suppose. Because our floors and carpets are clean. But now when we empty them... there it all is. Not hidden in a bag, but right there. Everything we’ve picked up. And in those expensive, cyclonic vacuums? Dust and dirt and particles get spun up and sorted in layers, striated after they’re collected. Remarkable.

JESS:

Right.

LEONARD:

I have dreams. About falling into the contents of a vacuum cleaner. They were quite disorienting, at first. Because I didn't know what I was surrounded by. Then, I'm not sure when it was, I recognized where I was in my dream—my dreams—and I was strangely comforted. Being in a world of discarded matter that had been a part of something, and was now, in a way, part of everything.

JESS:

I had an aunt who saved her dog's hair. She made like a pillow of it, after her dog died. I honestly don't know whether it was all made of hair that had shed—that she'd collected—or if she didn't have enough, did she shave her dead dog? Have it shaved?

LEONARD:

I don't know how that works, either.

JESS:

In any case, I remember feeling sorry for it.

LEONARD:

The dog?

JESS:

The dog's hair. Being trapped in a horrible pillow, that's not really a "pillow" at all.

LEONARD:

I completely understand.

Jess takes in Leonard again, this time as if a fuse has been lit. We begin to hear new sounds, like a tune that's missing beats or notes, from the Woman Who Makes Noise, and we see Bev coming into the apartment carrying an overnight bag. The action continues in the two playing areas underscored by the sounds.

JESS:

How is that possible, Leonard?

BEV:

Jess?

LEONARD:

How is what possible?

JESS:

How can you "completely" understand?! It's all... It *is* complicated and no one can be sure of anything!

LEONARD:

But what I was—

JESS:
(interrupting) No!

LEONARD:
No?

BEV:
Jess!

JESS:
You know where we are, right now, Leonard?!

LEONARD:
My shop?

JESS:
Think bigger. I mean, in the largest scheme of things. Where we are, we have never been before! None of us! It's...

LEONARD:
Unprecedented?

BEV:
Where are you?

JESS:
Yes! But do you realize what that means?

LEONARD:
I...

Bev sets down her bag and heads into another room; Jess is becoming more fired up.

JESS:
It means that we have no idea what's ahead, or around the corner or sneaking up behind us or already there, all around us! How does that sound?

LEONARD:
Daunting?

JESS:
Yeah? Well, I have been incredibly frightened, Leonard!

LEONARD:
Of?

JESS:
Everything!!

BEV:

(offstage) Sweetie?

JESS:

It's like I have no filter, anymore! Everything that's happening in the world, I can't stop it but I can hear it and feel it with every one of my senses and it's like it's trying to... get rid of me! Every trace of me!

LEONARD:

That does sound frightening.

JESS:

It's terrifying! And how am I supposed to admit that to anyone!?

LEONARD:

You're telling me.

JESS:

But you're not...!!

Bev comes back into the living room.

BEV:

You left the apartment! Good for you!

She takes out her phone; makes a call.

LEONARD:

I'm not Bev?

JESS:

No! You are not. That, I can be fairly sure of. Because with Bev, I'm supposed to be the one! I mean, I got my shit together!!

She so doesn't. On the table in the apartment, Jess' phone starts to ring.

BEV:

Oh, Jess...

Bev presses a button on her phone and the ringing stops.

JESS:

But I was about to do something so stupid.

Bev sees something on the table next to Jess' phone.

LEONARD:

What was that?

Bev picks up the cassette player, a tape inside.

JESS:

I made a tape.

BEV:

I'm sorry, I can't resist.

Jess starts looking through her purse as Bev presses a button; we hear Jess' voice.

JESS' VOICE:

Hi, Bev. So. It's me.

LEONARD:

A tape?

BEV:

And not Teresa! Hello, Jess!

JESS' VOICE:

You've probably figured that out.

BEV:

Ha ha ha.

JESS:

(still searching) A cassette.

JESS' VOICE:

You say I never tell you anything. I guess that's...

BEV:

True!

JESS:

(still searching) For Bev.

JESS' VOICE:

It's just that there's stuff in my life that's part of me, whether I like it or not. But I'm not wired like you—to stick my nose in, put it all out there—or in a way that lets me...

BEV:

What?

JESS:

(still searching) I was going to leave it here, for her, if she...

JESS' VOICE:

It's different for me, is what I'm trying to say. We are different. And that's not a race thing. Or a culture thing. Or maybe it is. No. That's not what I... Shit. I should stop this and...

BEV:

No! Say it!

JESS:

Shit. Where is it?

LEONARD:

(re the cassette) Did you take it out of your bag?

JESS' VOICE:

Okay. I'm just going to do this. I love you.

BEV:

And I love you!

JESS:

I don't know!

They search the counter.

JESS' VOICE:

But when you said I don't have what you want?

BEV:

Sorry no: That's not what I said. Or not what I meant. I—

JESS' VOICE:

(interrupting) You were right. The two of us, we've been... disconnected, missing each other, for a long time, now.

BEV:

Yes. But we will change that. Because *you* are what I want. That's what I wanted to—

JESS' VOICE:

(interrupting) I want, more than anything, to be there for you.

BEV:

Yes! Me, too, for you. I can do that, Jess.

JESS' VOICE:

But I am who I am and...

BEV:

I am impossible, I know.

JESS' VOICE:

I guess that's not enough for you.

Jess and Leonard have exhausted their search.

JESS:

It's not here!

BEV:

Whoa. Where did that come from?

LEONARD:

I don't have a cassette player, anyway.

JESS' VOICE:

It's clear that you and I have reached our tipping point.

JESS:

(looking in her bag again) Did I leave it at home?

BEV:

Our what?

JESS' VOICE:

So whatever—or whoever—is next for you...

JESS:

Shit! I can't find my phone, either!

JESS' VOICE:

I won't do anything to hold you back.

LEONARD:

Do you need to make a call?

JESS:

I need that tape!

JESS' VOICE:

Goodbye, Bev.

BEV:

Goodbye?!

JESS:

Ah! What am I supposed to do now?

LEONARD:

Go home? Look there?

BEV:

Wait. Is that...?

Bev picks up the cassette player, willing it to contain more. Maybe she fast forwards.

JESS:

No, I mean about me and Bev!

BEV:

No. You can't. You can't just...

LEONARD:

What was on the tape?

BEV:

Goddamnit!

She throws the tape player across the room. It's as if Jess can sense this and something unexpected breaks open. Bev picks up her bag and heads toward the door.

JESS:

A message from someone who was very hurt, and very angry even if she didn't know it, to someone she'd been trying to fool into believing she was someone she was not. A message that was intended to close a door when she should have been... opening up to all the possibilities, whatever they are.

LEONARD:

Now I've lost you.

JESS:

I don't want to lose *her*, Leonard! I accused her of running away but it's me: I've been pushing her away!

LEONARD:

How very human.

Bev turns back.

BEV:

No. Fuck you and fuck your tipping point!

JESS:

The truth is, I can't fix the planet. It's such a mess, no one can.

LEONARD:

I was afraid of that.

BEV:

It's not that simple, Jess.

JESS:

But we can't just give up, can we? We can't do nothing.

BEV:

It's not only up to you.

LEONARD:

We? You mean, you and Bev?

JESS:

Ha ha. I did mean a bigger "we." But yes! I hope!

BEV:

There are two of us, here!

JESS

What we *can* do, is work to make it better.

BEV:

So I'm going to tell you what I want.

JESS

Take care of things, for as long as we have, together.

BEV:

I want you to let me in.

LEONARD:

In this place we've never been?

BEV:

I want you to be able to tell me anything. Show me everything.

JESS:

Where we're all just making it up as we go along.

BEV:

Because I was wrong. There totally is an us.

Jess considers the robo-vac.

JESS:
May I take this? I'll hold it hostage, if I need to?

BEV:
And that's why I'm here, to fight for that.

LEONARD:
Please! It's very good on dog hair.

JESS:
We don't have a dog.

LEONARD:
Not yet, anyway.

BEV:
But Jess...

JESS:
Right.

BEV:
I can't do it alone!

JESS:
You never know, do you?

There is a new sort of shift that joins the two playing areas and Bev and Jess connect across the space. The sounds from the Woman Who Makes Noise also come together in a new way.

WOMAN WHO MAKES NOISE:
So come try to erase me
It's impossible for you.
We will not, cannot be silenced.
Together
We have so much left to do!

It's complicated, but we can definitely hear hope, ahead.

End of Play