

**DEFAULT**

A Play in Two Acts  
by Ken Love

(602) 580-5401

Zimbabwe1960@outlook.com

## **CHARACTERS**

### BARKER HUDSON III

*U.S. Senator from the South. Early eighties.*

### ESTHER BAILEY

*African American woman. U.S. Senatorial candidate. Late thirties.*

### SOFIA

*Barker's wife. Early seventies.*

### LEONARD

*Barker and Sofia's son. Late fifties.*

### SAM REYNOLDS

*Barker's friend and campaign manager. Early eighties.*

### DAVID LITTLEJOHN

*Esther's campaign manager. Forties.*

### NEWS COMMENTATOR/INTERVIEWER/DEBATE MODERATOR

*Male or female. Forties.*

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## **TIME**

*Summer, Fall. 2004.*

## **PLACE**

*Somewhere in the American South*

*“All politics is local.”*

**Tip O’Neill**  
**U.S. Representative, MA**

*“Democracy is hard work, not righteousness.”*

**David Thomson**

*For Benjamin Stewart*



## ACT ONE

(Darkness. Sounds, hit songs and other aural indicators of the year 2004 fade in. Lights up on a news commentator. The other sounds soon fade away. Music continues underneath)

### COMMENTATOR

. . . and Democratic Senator and 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry has chosen a running mate: North Carolina senator and former candidate John Edwards. Currently, polls show the senator with a three to five-point lead over President Bush . . .

(The 2004 hit music montage continues)

. . . In Illinois, state senator Barack Obama has received the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate seat to be vacated by Republican Jack Ryan. And in the South, yet another African American, this time a woman, Republican state senator Esther Bailey, has secured the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate. She will face Democratic Incumbent Barker Hudson III . . .

(Music fades as lights fade on commentator, then rise on Senator Barker Hudson III who is speaking on the senate floor in Washington, DC)

### SENATOR HUDSON

. . . Thus, we place all aside to consider a federal amendment to our constitution to *define*, if you will, the institution of marriage. That is: to debate as to whether certain Americans should not only be permitted to marry those of the same gender, but that the states as well as the federal government sanction such unions on par with *traditional* unions. Such as mine and my colleagues . . . such as my neighbors and friends. Such as that of my father and mother . . . and that of the fathers and mothers before them.

Yes! One thinks of the audacity of such a thing. And the entire premise seems insolent in its nature.

The very insolence which George III no doubt referenced when he spoke of those who had authored and signed the Declaration of Independence. The very indictment visited upon Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in their long and labored battle for women's suffrage. The same mark of insolence smote upon the head of the laborer by the owners and fat-cats of American industry when he demanded to be treated like a man! And the same accusation of insolence thrust into the side of the Negro when he dared seek equal justice before the law.

And yet, inasmuch as the mere thought of same-sex marriage proves too unsettling for many in this chamber at this particular juncture, let us offer, at the very least, our support to our gay brethren while, concomitantly, offering a concession to those who object to such unions on the grounds that it may conflict with the tenets of their religious belief.

Yes, what I propose is a way to *compromise*. I believe members of the senate to be wise people. I believe them to be capable people. And I believe that a governing body which strikes a path toward tolerance, compassion and *compromise* is truly great.

I thank you.

(Barker closes, then enters the area of his and Sofia's bedroom where they are dressing for a formal party)

SOFIA

First the war . . . now this.

SENATOR HUDSON

It won't pass, Sofia. Junior clearly does not have the votes. So, please – cool it!

SOFIA

You won't break out in hives by supporting the President. Every once in a while, at least.

SENATOR HUDSON

Of course not. I'll just grow a boil and call it even.

SOFIA

Well, if not for the President, how about following through on what the people of this state want. After all, it was what you were elected for.

SENATOR HUDSON

You don't say? I must have missed that part.

SOFIA

I declare, for a southerner, there are times when you are as liberal as a whore at a crap game.

SENATOR HUDSON

That is a lie! And for the last time, the term is *honest progressive*.

SOFIA

Just step out of the closet full-frontal and expose yourself as an honest *socialist*. That would simplify things, would it not?

SENATOR HUDSON

No. There's a difference. Quit being dumb.

SOFIA

And to think that there was a tiny moment, despite being a mere Democrat, when even *you* made sense, when even *you* had integrity.

SENATOR HUDSON

Then I got elected.

SOFIA

I want to be taken seriously.

SENATOR HUDSON

Sofia, I know what the hell I'm doing.

SOFIA

Well, I do wonder. If I were in your position . . . let's just say I'd know the proper position to take.

SENATOR HUDSON

And while I pray my stomach won't be turned while laying eyes on it, to what would this "proper position" represent?

SOFIA

The will of the constituency!

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, go shit in your hat! From being sewed up in the same dress with that Marilyn Winston and that tag-team of lizard women for so damn long, you wouldn't know a constituencies will if it smacked your ass good.

SOFIA

Bite your damn lip! Those women are as my sisters!

SENATOR HUDSON

Scales! Forked tongues! Venomous fangs, 'n all!

SOFIA

Why hate them? All they do is stand for something.

SENATOR HUDSON

As I do.



SOFIA

Oh, yes. *Compromise!* Isn't that sexy!

(He walks to the liquor cabinet)

Where are you going?

SENATOR HUDSON

I b'lieve I need me a whiskey.

SOFIA

Don't get liquored up now. Not before we . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

I need just a taste to quiet my nerves.

SOFIA

Did I rattle them?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm past eighty, Sofia. As it is, there's enough rattling in me to start a shindig. So what do you think?

(She shakes her head as he makes a drink)

Speaking of Marilyn Winston, how did she get so chummy with the vice president?

SOFIA

Must you ask?

(Silence as Barker awaits a response)

Since her husband, the congressman, gave such a lovely speech at the University last week in which he strengthened both the president and Mr. Cheney's standing on the war . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Of course! I should've known: Congressman Bill Winston – one of the vice presidents' testicles –

(Sofia reacts)

*Right* testicle, to be politically correct.

SOFIA

Am I going to be embarrassed tonight?

SENATOR HUDSON

As long as none from that cud-chewing herd you graze with don't bother me, I'll be as docile as a church mouse.

SOFIA

Do respect the Vice Presidents office. At least, for tonight.

SENATOR HUDSON

I've been at this for a long time. *I.E.*, I do know something about protocol.

SOFIA

I'm not convinced. In fact, if you had any sense of anything, you would have taken a place behind the President and kept it, if for nothing else, then for the war. One doesn't *have* to side with those other Democratic hermaphrodites. Not all the time. It's always best to be your own man. And furthermore, there was no need to have given such a mealy-mouthed speech in support an issue which the President, as a God-fearing Christian, has the rightful duty to –

SENATOR HUDSON

DAMN THE PRESIDENT! And damn you! I am not here to suck his foot . . . !

SOFIA

Alright! I take it back. And let's not make ugly. Please! Not this close to the hour when we can be fashionably late.

SENATOR HUDSON

Who started this?

SOFIA

If I did, I want it finished. If I get any more worked up, I'll start sweating, my make-up will run, and I'll go to Marilyn's party looking like something out of "Night of the Living Dead."

SENATOR HUDSON

The world is nothing to you but how you look in it.

(Leonard enters)

LEONARD

And she looks divine, doesn't she? Like a 1940's movie star. Which one, now: Rita Hayworth? Lana Turner? . . . Lauren Bacall . . . ?

SENATOR HUDSON

Edward G. Robinson.

(Sofia throws a hairbrush. Barker ducks and it misses him)

LEONARD

Yet more dissention from my favorite pair of warmongers: a father who is a Democratic Socialist –

SENATOR HUDSON

*Ahem!* Honest progressive!

LEONARD

. . . and an enigma even within his own party, and the Gibson Girl of the Republicans – mother. Whom you are accompanying to the party as an *uninvited* guest, I see.

SENATOR HUDSON

Uninvited . . . ?

(Leonard goes to the liquor cabinet for a bottle)

SOFIA

It's nothing. Leonard is talking out of his head again. And Leonard, leave that liquor be.

LEONARD

Oh, please.

SENATOR HUDSON

So, this is what your life has come to. This is how you're planning on spending your mid-life capital.

LEONARD

I could always do worse.

SENATOR HUDSON

You'd say that, wouldn't you?

LEONARD

I'd say I've come to accept the pitiable circumstances as they are.

SENATOR HUDSON

What in the hell is that supposed to mean?

LEONARD

Ask her.

SOFIA

Please don't drag me into this.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll tell ya, boy, if this were my house –

SOFIA

Well, it isn't.

LEONARD

Right! Grandfather left the whole shootin' match to mother.

SOFIA

And I'd like to think my father's spirit remains here. To watch over us. Continually.

SENATOR HUDSON

So *that's* why we haven't jumped bones in Lord knows how long!

SOFIA

That is disgusting! And in front of your own child.

(Leonard scoffs as he takes the bottle)

LEONARD

I'm taking this. I'll replace it later.

SENATOR HUDSON

I b'lieve your mother said to let it be.

LEONARD

And when was the last time I heeded either of you on anything?

SOFIA

Leonard, you know what happens when you get juiced.

LEONARD

Why, yes! I emerge from my cocoon and display my natural colors! And on that, please, let *me* be – thank you very much.

SENATOR HUDSON

Speaking of which, we ought to get together and talk sometime.

Talk?

LEONARD

SENATOR HUDSON  
I b'lieve that's what I said, yes.

LEONARD  
Why? And what would be the point?

SENATOR HUDSON  
Not now. It can wait.

LEONARD  
Father, what's the problem?

SENATOR HUDSON  
Alright – You tell me.

LEONARD  
Tell you what . . . ?

SENATOR HUDSON  
*You tell me.*

LEONARD  
What in the world would I –

SENATOR HUDSON  
Yes?

LEONARD  
Alright . . .

SENATOR HUDSON  
Good.

LEONARD  
You win. I'll come clean.

SENATOR HUDSON  
At last!

LEONARD  
Only . . . Well, it does sadden me to trouble you further. This being an election year, that is.

SOFIA

Are you saying you're a Republican?

SENATOR HUDSON

Either that, or he's –

LEONARD

Stop!

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, boy, being such a young oddball growing up, I'm little hard pressed to know what to call it.

LEONARD

Sure, daddy! A middle-aged son who can't, for the life of him, get his shit in one sock, who is a running joke amongst his parent's friends, whom you'd give up for adoption if anybody'd have him, and who, as a child, was such an anomaly that – by golly – the pathetic bastard would have to be *queer* . . . or something of that reprehensible nature.

SENATOR HUDSON

And it's nothing to be ashamed of. Truth be told, I'm alright with it. And your mother . . . at the very least won't stone you to death. Hell, the Vice President's got a gay daughter. And folks seem to be taking it well.

LEONARD

And that greases the wheels right nicely, doesn't it? If some neo-conservative *cur* can have a lesbian daughter and make it socially acceptable, then surely, some old used up flaming liberal windbag from the south can stand by his gay son and –

SENATOR HUDSON

Don't say "flaming liberal". It's like calling a mentally challenged kid a retard.

LEONARD

Well, pardon my French!

SENATOR HUDSON

And, for the fifty-seventh hundredth time, I am an honest progressive!

SOFIA

Whatever it is, you all share the same stink.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, let's cease all this. Both of you. Now, Leonard, you're my son! And it does not matter one wit to me as to who, or what you lay with. Now –

LEONARD

Father! I AM NOT GAY! And will you get it into your honest . . . whatever it is skull that it's never gonna be that easy for you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Then, what in Golgotha Hill is wrong? A grown man, passed middle age, and still squatting with his mama and daddy? It ain't natural. What in the hell ails you, *boy*?

LEONARD

Stop calling me that?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm your father. I brought you here, and I ought to be obliged to call you whatsoever I please.

LEONARD

How about by my Christian name?

SENATOR HUDSON

It doesn't suit me just yet.

LEONARD

Well, I've got one for you that suits me now –

SOFIA

Leonard! Go! And take that Godforsaken bottle with you!

LEONARD

Y' know what Mabel used to say? When a family fussed and argued amongst themselves, it was due to the fact that there was love between them. The poor woman. She tried to see good in everybody. Even amongst the undeserving.

(He takes the bottle, moves toward the door, then stops)

Oh! A postscript, daddy: if I were you, I'd tread very lightly at Marilyn's tonight since you were, in fact, *initially* uninvited. That's right! You were not on the *initial* guest list.

(He exits)

SOFIA

Take it from me, Senator: what keeps me out of a straitjacket is the fact that I know as little of my son and his multitudinous crap as I care to. And maybe we

ought to count our blessings over the fact that he spends most of his waking hours bumming around the house. And shuns the public eye.

SENATOR HUDSON

Otherwise, he'd be an embarrassment?

SOFIA

You said it, I didn't.

SENATOR HUDSON

What kind of a mother are you to think such of your own child?

SOFIA

I gave him his life. Ergo, Leonard and I are even.

SENATOR HUDSON

And what was he saying? . . . About me not being on the guest list?

SOFIA

I shouldn't have to tell you . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Tell me anyway –

SOFIA

Barker, finish getting ready. It's already past the hour to be fashionably late.

(Sofia exits. Fade out)

(Lights rise on interview with Esther Bailey)

INTERVIEWER

State Senator Bailey, while you are aware of another African American – an Illinois state senator by the name of Barack Obama, who has won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in Illinois – you, having won the Republican nomination, as well as the endorsement of President Bush, will, if elected, not only become the first African American senator from the South since Reconstruction, but the only African American woman. Now, as you know, the incumbent – Senator Barker Hudson III – has held his seat for over forty years –

ESTHER

Too long! Senator Hudson's platform – it's *old*. Antiquated! Now, I'm not *disparaging* his age, but let's face facts: how many years has it been since this man has led the way on anything of any real significance, anything which matters to voters TODAY? Even before the Reagan Revolution, patience for his "southern



fried liberalism” – which was nothing but Northeastern elitism with a southern twang – had already worn thin. It was proven to be a philosophy and a movement that is as weak and ineffectual as spit on a wildfire.

INTERVIEWER

However, the Senator insists that his views are not liberal, not elitist, but –

ESTHER

*Progressive*. Or, as he likes to phrase it, “Honest”. Which is a white-faced lie: there is no such thing as an *honest* progressivism due to the fact that it is nothing more than Socialism with an ugly grin.

INTERVIEWER

Now, we should mention that Senator Hudson was the only southern Democrat who backed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 –

ESTHER

And – though he’s been coasting on this action for years – we, as African Americans, and the nation, will never cease to be grateful. But, let me say that, subsequently, the Senator has towed the liberal-elite *slash* progressive line, again and again and again. And we the people of this state are tired of it. And of him.

INTERVIEWER

State Senator Bailey, as a candidate for the U.S. Senate, you consider yourself not exactly a Republican, but a – what? *Nationalist*?

ESTHER

Yes, absolutely! And I do not blush behind this definition. Of course, I remain committed to Republican party principles of limited government, the eventual elimination of the income tax, a strong defense, and strict adherence to social conservative values. Yet my heart beats with the red blood of Nationalism. Which is, as far as I am concerned, the unfettered love of ones country of birth over all others.

INTERVIEWER

Now, I hear that you’re also a single mother. How on earth do you –

ESTHER

Commitment! Surely, my daughter comes first, but my commitment to public service is, like the raising of my child, from the heart.

INTERVIEWER

Finally, Senator, you wanted to share a few words from someone close to you.

ESTHER

I do. A woman who happened to be a great influence in my life, Harriet Bailey. I did not know my biological parents. *Personally*, that is –

INTERVIEWER

Which is to say . . . ?

ESTHER

I happen to be fully aware as to *who* my biological father is –

INTERVIEWER

Is this a fact, Senator?

ESTHER

Very much so –

(Interviewer is about to interject)

For the time being, however, I've made the choice to –

INTERVIEWER

Remain discreet?

(Esther nods)

Understood.

ESTHER

In any event, I grew to so love Mrs. Bailey that, when she passed, I – I took her surname.

INTERVIEWER

She meant a lot to you.

ESTHER

She'd been a schoolteacher. The women who raised me, two sisters, by the way, lived practically next door to her. I recall her house as always being filled with books. Mrs. Bailey taught me in school by day and, at night, she'd let me stay with her and peruse her books. And she passed so many of her religious and conservative beliefs down to me, as well.

Before she died, she wrote me a letter. I was in college at the time, and I have it here. May I read it?

INTERVIEWER

Please.

## ESTHER

Dear Esther,

I hope the meager strength I have remaining will allow me to complete this message. I've watched you grow from a sweet, precocious little girl into a determined young woman. And I am proud and unashamed to say that I had a hand in your upbringing. It will remain for me the crowning achievement of my very short stay in the world.

Since losing a husband so early in my marriage, I have had nothing in the way of family for most, if not all, of my adult life. So, I must tell you that I am happy to have had the good fortune to mentor you. And I, along with those two marvelous and dear sisters who raised you, have given you more than you will ever need to make your way along this arduous journey.

Esther, whatever the current social and political climate, there is still no country other than the United States of America where a woman or man of any color or nationality may realize their full potential. Many have come and gone to prepare the way for you. And it is my hope and prayer that you make a promise of service – in some way – to others, as well as a promise of commitment, defense of spiritual values, and of sacrifice. Please keep within your heart the will to carry out what is justly a sacred mission.

May God keep you and be with you throughout your days.

Sincerely,  
Harriet Bailey

(Fade on the interview)

(Lights up on Sam and Barker, who have been watching the interview on TV in the campaign office. Barker glances at Sam)

SENATOR HUDSON

Look's like you're fixing to vote for 'er yourself.

SAM

She sure is pretty. And smart. *And a problem.*

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, don't let that problem honey-talk you into not only managing her campaign, but walking her home from school, too.

SAM

Oh, hush up, Barker.

(Barker sniggers and turns off the TV)

How'd that party go at Marilyn Winston's the other night?

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, aside from the fact that if Sofia had not, at the very last minute, kissed Marilyn's fanny to get me on the guest list, and aside from the fact that, had I known I'd been omitted, I would have sat home and watched boxing on TV, and aside from the fact that I went anyway just to maintain protocol . . . aside from all that – it stunk!

SAM

Why am I not surprised?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll tell you, Sam, I've not known of a woman so full of well-rotted horse manure as Marilyn Winston. I can't see how Bill tolerates her.

SAM

I'll tell you: she's got money. And a cushy ass – for a woman of her age, that is.

(They laugh, then look at a magazine photo of Esther)

SENATOR HUDSON

Call me crazy, but I could swear I've seen this Bailey woman somewhere before.

(Silence. Sam hands Barker a hard copy of stats)

SAM

While you're trying to conjure faded memories, I take it you're aware that you've been dropping in the polls fairly steadily for the last five years, or so.

SENATOR HUDSON

Like every other swinging dick in congress.

SAM

Let me remind you, senator, that women also serve in the United States Congress.

SENATOR HUDSON

Who, I presume, bear witness to sagging numbers, too?

SAM

As aged women bear witness to their sagging bosoms. Now take a look at that.

SENATOR HUDSON

Forty-six percent! Are you shittin' me?

SAM

It looks like the days of those sixty-five percent or better margins are over. Long over. And with that, be sure to smile good and talk sweet at those two fund raisers. Money isn't coming in like it used to. Even from some of the in-state contributors.

SENATOR HUDSON

And it's all due to her.

SAM

Half of it, according to the indicators. And the other half . . . well, let's say a lot of 'em are starting to think you're giving a little too much lip service toward the fringes of the liberal cow pasture.

SENATOR HUDSON

And for the last time –

SAM

They don't give a shit what you call yourself. A progressive Democrat in a southern state is bad enough. But you don't need to *channel* Eugene Debs, too.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I repeat –

SAM

As far as the enemy is concerned, you are a cut and dried socialist. This is politics American style. Quit expecting people to be smart enough to know the difference.

SENATOR HUDSON

Hmph.

SAM

What's more, young people, those of voting age, Esther Bailey's big with them.

SENATOR HUDSON

A Republican?

SAM

Well, Reagan was big with the young crowd. This woman's no Reagan, but they're feeling the love, just the same.

SENATOR HUDSON

Speaking of love, I have yet to hear anything from her about a husband.

SAM

She's divorced. With one daughter.

SENATOR HUDSON

Any boyfriends?

SAM

None that anybody knows of. I can get somebody to investigate it, though. A young bird like her has got to be keeping some male company. And while they're looking for that, I'll get him to see what kind of *female* company she entertains.

SENATOR HUDSON

Meaning?

SAM

*We'll see if she plays with both hands.* There's no law that says we can't look.

SENATOR HUDSON

And do you think any of it will make a difference to anybody?

SAM

We need to beat this woman with any kind of ugly stick we can find. Who knows? Maybe we'll scare up something useful.

SENATOR HUDSON

Sounds like you're puttin' together a darned peep show.

SAM

If I am, it's for voter consumption only. So, take it easy.

SENATOR HUDSON

Humph.

SAM

Now, listen: I want you to stay here in your home state and campaign hard. Come down on this woman like a German Blitzkrieg. Also, it wouldn't hurt to rub elbows a little more with some of these Hispanics. They say you're out of touch with them. Go online, enter "Spanish Dictionary", and memorize a word, or two. And I'm not talking about words for Mexican food. Any dumb white man knows them.

SENATOR HUDSON

Humph.

SAM

Now you've still got an edge over this lady, but that's all it is. An edge.

SENATOR HUDSON

Are you saying I could lose this time?

SAM

I don't wanna bust your bubble, but –

SENATOR HUDSON

I could lose.

SAM

With the way the demographics are changing and with this Hispanic and now, East Indian influx – many of whom vote Republican, by the way – the black vote won't carry you like it once did. And we're losing some of those votes, at that.

SENATOR HUDSON

And who are those black folks gonna turn to? They surely won't vote for a Republican, not in the south. I don't care what color he or she is.

(Silence)

Sam?

SAM

She's stirring 'em up. And pulling some of 'em, too. Not a whole lot, but enough to make a noticeable dent. And, I've got to tell you, that little pat on the fanny you gave to same-sex marriage in that senate speech won't help things much. In fact, it's a big part of why they're flying to her.

SENATOR HUDSON

I said nothing in support of marriage for gay folks. I was talking about –

SAM

A compromise – more or less, but –

SENATOR HUDSON

Right! A way to allow all the Christian hotheads to step back and . . .

SAM

No matter how you slice it and dice it, Barker, people aren't buying it.

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, Sam, I can't help it, but . . . I've been doing some thinking on this same-sex marriage business. I've been thinking on it – yes, I have!

SAM

Careful, Barker. Folks don't take it too well when a politician thinks too much.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, stuff all that.

SAM

What's on your mind?

SENATOR HUDSON

I get the itching-sense that, pretty soon, it's gon be written into the law of the land. While all that stood against it goes the way of Jim Crow, knee britches, and the Charleston.

SAM

And if it does, that monkey won't be on your back. At least not for as long as you have to worry about holding down your job in Washington –

SENATOR HUDSON

Yes, I know . . .

SAM

You're not thinking what I surely hope you're not thinking, are you?

SENATOR HUDSON

I *am* thinking on it.

SAM

Barker, have you lost your mind?

SENATOR HUDSON

A man can think, can't he? You know, back in '64 when I stood up for Civil Rights –

SAM

That was a whole different slice o' turkey –

(Barker is about to speak)

Barker, on this thing, you are losing your people. Inch by inch, they're starting to run away from you. Now, goddammit, do what needs to be done to save yourself.

(Silence. Barker studies the magazine photo of Esther again)



Still can't place her?

SENATOR HUDSON

There's just something oddly familiar about her, Sam. It's like I know her.

SAM

Pretty woman. Maybe you bumped into her somewhere.

SENATOR HUDSON

I don't know.

(Fade on Barker and Sam)

(Lights up on David and Esther, who have been watching a recording of her interview on TV in the campaign office. It has just concluded)

DAVID

You looked delicious giving that interview.

ESTHER

Careful, now.

DAVID

Real. Bold. Straightforward. *Sexy*.

ESTHER

That's what I'm afraid of.

DAVID

Looking sexy?

ESTHER

It could get me into trouble.

DAVID

Not if you know how to work it.

ESTHER

You give me too much credit.

DAVID

Hey, whatever gets the vote, right?

ESTHER

What are you saying? That I should I wear a mini skirt next time?

DAVID

Wouldn't hurt.

(She hits him playfully)

You're the smartest woman I know. And you'll win this election. I'll see to it.

ESTHER

I can't just win. I've got to bury this guy.

DAVID

Sounds personal.

ESTHER

More fuel for the ride.

DAVID

Whoa! Personal feelings toward your opponent? What the hell's going on?

ESTHER

Nothing to worry about. I'll be fine. As long as I get to whip his ass – at the ballot box. Now – what have you got?

DAVID

As before, I had the staff dredge up what they could. Legally, that is. And I've added a few things myself only because I've grown up here and have followed things a little.

ESTHER

Well?

DAVID

*Well* – the law firm, where he's still a senior partner – Hudson and Warren – was founded by his great-great grandfather. Meaning the firm has been around for a while, established during the Antebellum South.

ESTHER

The man is older than I thought.

DAVID

Cute. Anyway, there doesn't seem to be evidence of any nefarious undertakings during his time as an attorney. Let's see . . . over the years he's been retained by

some major corporations . . .

ESTHER

Wasn't he a war hero?

DAVID

He served during World War II, but never saw any combat . . .

(Silence. David peruses the information)

ESTHER

That's all you've got?

DAVID

Well . . . during his time as a state senator, I did see something about an issue involving his maid.

ESTHER

His maid?

DAVID

Think Strom Thurmond . . . Thomas Jefferson, *Sally Hemmings* –

ESTHER

Whoa!

DAVID

Right. And the story has a twist in that the talk didn't stop with an affair but ends with the back-alley abortion of Senator Hudson's lovechild.

ESTHER

Holy shit.

DAVID

None of this can be substantiated. Which means, there's nothing we can use.

ESTHER

You're sure?

DAVID

I wouldn't touch it. Listen, his numbers are down. And he's hanging on by a thin margin. The man is vulnerable! And you've got plenty of time to wreck his house just by sticking with his record, which – since Clinton was in office – has gotten unabashedly liberal of late.

ESTHER

Now isn't his wife –

DAVID

Yep. A Republican.

ESTHER

And they're still married?

DAVID

Love is blind. Anyway, it's no great secret, but she keeps quiet about it. And won't publicly endorse anyone who runs against her husband. That is, until now.

ESTHER

Which means, I probably should have . . .

DAVID

Right! It's why the Senator was not invited to the party. Marilyn Winston, Representative Bill Winston's wife – you know him – has been following you. Are you familiar with her?

ESTHER

I've met her, but . . .

DAVID

This woman has taken a liking to you and made it her business to get you that invitation to that party and meet the Vice President and his wife –

ESTHER

And rub elbows with all the other big wheels. Damn!

DAVID

It's okay. She tells me she's in the process of putting something else together for you. And she was cool with you not attending solely because it was a family issue.

ESTHER

My daughter . . . Something going on at school . . . I promised . . .

DAVID

It's all good. Don't worry. Now . . . there's more: as you've probably surmised, the senator's wife, Sofia, was in attendance. The former Sofia Clements of –

ESTHER

Clements' Online Department Stores –

DAVID

*Soon-to-be* online. Founded initially as a brick-and-mortar by her father, T. Rayburn Clements, and passed down to her when the old man died. She and Marilyn have been close all their lives, they're like sisters. In fact, that whole sewing-circle of "sisters" happens to be in your corner.

ESTHER

Are you saying –

DAVID

The seven-headed monster wants to back you!

ESTHER

The seven most powerful individuals in the state, who happen to be women, by the way –

DAVID

Who, when you're on their good side, make good things happen. They come to the table and deal one hand, there's political influence. They deal the other, philanthropy. They've got most of this town, if not most of the state, between their knickers.

(Silence)

What's wrong?

ESTHER

A thought.

DAVID

Spill it.

ESTHER

During the sixties, didn't the NAACP get on Sofia's ass about her hiring practices?

DAVID

In the 1960's at all of her stores she had an unwritten code of not hiring African Americans to work on the floor. They worked in the cafeterias, in the stockrooms, in the warehouses, but never as salesclerks.

ESTHER

And they say her motives, unlike her actions, weren't exactly black-and-white?

DAVID

In sixty-four, when the senator backed the Civil Rights Act, and while Sofia was still a southern Democrat, the seven-headed beast lost a head and became a sextet.

ESTHER

They disowned her.

DAVID

According to rumor. And the assumption is that she held off on the implementation of equal opportunity at her stores –

ESTHER

To prove that she was as white and Confederate as anybody.

DAVID

In so many words.

ESTHER

So – to recap – Marilyn Winston, Sofia Hudson, and their back up chorus of dragon ladies want to support *me*?

DAVID

It's hard to stomach, I know, but if you're on the Republican ticket in this state, this is the one partner you've got to waltz with. Which isn't so bad really. I mean, it's not uncommon seeing girls dancing together at parties. Right?

ESTHER

Sure.

DAVID

Listen – charm them, flatter them, take pictures with them, plant flowered smooches on their asses, if you have to, and they'll stuff lots of *dinero* into your campaign stocking. C'mon! You're a politician. If it smells like a cesspool in a swamp, hold your nose and win the election!

(Blackout on David and Esther)

(Lights fade in on Barker being interviewed)

INTERVIEWER

Senator Hudson, all current polls show the race to be closer than it's ever been for you. And your approval rating is at an all-time low. Would you care to comment on this?

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, ratings, charts, figures . . . I'm afraid they don't mean a whole lot to an ol' hound dog like m'self. I counterbalance all of that, if you will, by staying on-message. And taking that message to the people. I have always operated in this fashion and have never ceased to pull through.

INTERVIEWER

However, Senator, the numbers do suggest . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Listen, I've been around for a long, long time. In fact, my length of stay in the senate has been for about as long as you are old, I would surmise. Therefore, I do not worry over such things as numbers and figures. I would prefer to leave such bothersome matters to you journalists. After all, you people are paid good money to stir up this nonsense.

INTERVIEWER

Certainly. Senator, you also must be aware of the fact that, since President Bush has taken office, your support among African Americans has dropped precipitously. And it appears as if a number of them will vote for a Republican – your challenger, Esther Bailey. You maintain an edge with black and now, Hispanic voters. However, you must admit that this is quite a compelling phenomenon, considering that we are talking about the South.

SENATOR HUDSON

A phenomenon! Like Elvis Presley was a phenomenon. And with all due respect to my opponent, she is just that – a *political phenomenon*. She's a smooth talker. And she's got some numbers, as far as voters go. But the people want a proven leader. Not some flavor-of-the-month neophyte.

INTERVIEWER

Finally, a few words on same-sex marriage: in a senate speech, you gave your support for a *compromise*.

SENATOR HUDSON

Yes, which I still support. However, that support, or – rather – my views on this issue are currently . . .

INTERVIEWER

Does this mean you're –

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll just say that am giving my stance on this issue a great deal of thought.

INTERVIEWER

Care to elaborate?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll simply leave it at that.

(Fade out)

(Lights rise on Esther giving a stump speech)

ESTHER

The people need to know what they are getting when they cast their ballots on Election Day. What they don't need is a political shape shifter. And I'm not sure if the people of this state, even after forty-plus years, know who Barker Hudson is. During the nineteen-sixties, like everyone else who was stoned and radical, he was a liberal Democrat. For much of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, he was what some would call a centrist, or – if you know what you're talking about – the devil in an overcoat. Then, during the nineteen-nineties, with his partner-in-crime Bill Clinton occupying the White House, he removed his clothes and, once again, bared himself as a liberal. And today, he lowers himself even further by having the indecency to stand before God-fearing Southerners and call himself an "Honest" Progressive.

Senator Hudson – do you want to come out of the closet and run for this office as someone who knows where they stand? Or shall I wear the pants and demonstrate what strength of character and love of ones country truly is?

(Fade on Esther)

(Lights rise on Barker and Sofia having supper)

SOFIA

Just spoiling for a fight, aren't you?

SENATOR HUDSON

I do not fear anything.

SOFIA

The Bible says fear is the beginning of wisdom.

SENATOR HUDSON

Hmph.

SOFIA

Barker, what about me? What about my reputation?



SENATOR HUDSON

You're not the one who's gon be voting.

SOFIA

But I'm your wife. And what you do affects me.

SENATOR HUDSON

Sofia, the amendment will fail. We already know we don't have the two thirds majority to pass it. And I'll lay odds Junior up in the White House knows it, too.

SOFIA

I'm not concerned about it passing. I know it won't pass. But think about it politically. You still don't have to vote it down. Stop being such a lackey for those Democratic stooges and be your own man!

SENATOR HUDSON

Did it ever occur to you that there are Republicans who won't vote for the damn thing either?

SOFIA

Yes, but I'm sure they're backed by strong reasoning.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I am not?

SOFIA

No! People won't see it that way if you're a Democrat. Don't you know anything?

SENATOR HUDSON

If it'll make you feel better, I still haven't quite decided how I'll vote.

SOFIA

And I have no idea as to what in the world you have to ruminate over.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll tell you: whether, or not to have you beheaded! At least for as long as it takes me to enjoy a quiet dinner.

SOFIA

This is not a joke.

SENATOR HUDSON

Neither is an ulcer! Now slap on a muzzle and cool it!

(Silence)

SOFIA

I don't suppose it's occurred to you that not *all* of your liberal colleagues are as malleable on this issue as you seem to be. Why, isn't that closet lesbian Hillary Clinton against it?

SENATOR HUDSON

And who's ass did you pull that out of?

SOFIA

Open your eyes! It's all over her.

SENATOR HUDSON

My eyes are as open as your big mouth. And I fail to see . . .

(Leonard enters and takes a place at the table)

LEONARD

I love it when a family eats together. There's such empty reassurance in it.

SENATOR HUDSON

Humph.

LEONARD

By the way, I watched your interview.

SENATOR HUDSON

Really?

LEONARD

Watched it this morning.

SENATOR HUDSON

For what it's worth, what did you think?

LEONARD

Well, father, I felt it was quite brave of you to state publicly your intention to . . .

SOFIA

Let's not talk of that at the dinner table. Besides, I've been thinking.

SENATOR HUDSON

Uh oh!

LEONARD

Shall I run for cover?

SOFIA

Keep still! Especially you, Barker. It might prove beneficial.

SENATOR HUDSON

When are you leaving?

SOFIA

I was thinking you might want to consider retiring.

SENATOR HUDSON

What for?

SOFIA

It seems, after so many years, that you've worn yourself out.

SENATOR HUDSON

It doesn't seem so to me.

SOFIA

One never knows how one looks to others, dear.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I could give a good shit how I . . .

LEONARD

Did you ever happen to uncover as to why you weren't initially invited to Marilyn's party?

SOFIA

Leonard, I am speaking with your father. Will you excuse us?

LEONARD

I've just started eating.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I have no inclination whatsoever to retire.

SOFIA

Don't you know you're going to lose this election?

SENATOR HUDSON

Do you know something I don't?

SOFIA

I'm willing to admit to something which you will not: the truth.

SENATOR HUDSON

So you want me to save face?

SOFIA

I wouldn't want to see you embarrassed.

LEONARD

Mother, please, have the decency to tell him. Clearly, he doesn't know.

SENATOR HUDSON

Know what?

SOFIA

Will you stay out of this?

LEONARD

I'm as much a part of it as –

SOFIA

No, you're not! Now go back to your bottle of cheap liquor and let us alone!

LEONARD

Cheap liquor! In this house! For shame!

SENATOR HUDSON

ALRIGHT! I'm not gon sit here much longer and play the horses left ass-cheek. Somebody better grow a pair and tell me something. Boy, how 'bout it?

LEONARD

Call me *boy* again and I'll stab you in the eye with this fork.

SENATOR HUDSON

If you think you're man enough to –

LEONARD

Try me again!

SOFIA

Nobody's trying anybody! Barker! . . .

LEONARD

Father, you weren't invited because –

SOFIA

I declare, Leonard, will surely be the death of us all, of this whole family!

LEONARD

Mother, you give me too much credit . . .

SOFIA

Not another word . . . !

LEONARD

The cat's gonna leap from the sack sometime –

SOFIA

I said HUSH!

(Silence)

SENATOR HUDSON

So that's it, then?

(Silence)

To hell with it. In fact, to hell with you all!

(Barker rises and exits in a huff)

LEONARD

I do wish Mabel were here.

(Sofia glares at him. Fade out)

(The commentator is heard/seen)

COMMENTATOR

. . . As for the U.S. Senatorial race, the day finds the two candidates sharing the stage, not as opponents, but as speakers at the opening ceremony of the new African American Cultural Center, of which Ms. Bailey sits with the newly formed board of directors. Both candidates were among many state and local officials in attendance, as well as educators, community leaders, and the like. The ceremony took place this afternoon . . .

(Lights rise on Barker giving a speech at the dedication. Esther and David stand behind him)

SENATOR HUDSON

. . . and we hope with the dedication of this African American Cultural Center that it will serve and enrich the minds, hearts, and spirit of the members of this community and beyond. Thank you.

(Sound of applause. The senator and Esther face one another and shake hands)

Ms. Bailey, please allow me an introduction.

ESTHER

I have heard a great deal about you.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I you.

(He notices David)

ESTHER

Oh, this is my campaign manager, David Littlejohn.

DAVID

Hi.

SENATOR HUDSON

Hello, sir. Listen, would you excuse us? I'd like to have words with Ms. Bailey, if you don't mind.

DAVID

Well . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

I hope I'm not out of order.

ESTHER

Its fine, David. I'll meet you back at the van.

DAVID

Don't be too long.

(He exits)

SENATOR HUDSON

Well! You're the lady who's running against a certain ol' dog for a U.S. Senate seat.

ESTHER

Looks that way.

SENATOR HUDSON

Now why would something as young, pretty and full-o'-beans as yourself want to get roughed up in politics? Are you married?

ESTHER

Excuse me?

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, no! Excuse *me*. I certainly don't mean to imply . . .

ESTHER

I'm divorced, Senator.

SENATOR HUDSON

Divorced? Well! I reckon that leaves plenty of time for mischief, doesn't it? –

(Pause as Barker waves at a constituent)

You know, Ms. Bailey, neither the current times nor this campaign are for the faint of heart.

ESTHER

Oh, I'm sure I can hold my own. I live to fight!

SENATOR HUDSON

Is that so? Well, in that case, I reckon I ought to be impressed. Or, scared –

(Pause. He waves at someone else)

Now, didn't I hear that you went to some big-time Ivy League college up north?

ESTHER

I went to Columbia University.

SENATOR HUDSON

Is that so? Now I find that troubling. Indeed! I find it troubling that a woman like y'self, claiming to be a southerner all the way down to her shoes, running for office in a southern state, had to flit way up to New York to go to college 'cause you didn't think these southern schools were good enough for you.

ESTHER

Senator . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Listen, let me – just hold it. And let me give you a dollop of advice –

ESTHER

I'd rather not . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Listen, now: I've got the edge over you. Not by much, but it's still an edge. Folks in this state know me. I *have* them, like all the other little perks and pieces of artillery I carry in my pants pocket like my car keys. Y' see, there are things I have just at the ends of my fingertips which have never ever failed me.

ESTHER

What are you trying to say?

SENATOR HUDSON

Unless you want to end up looking as inept as some soft-headed housewife –

ESTHER

I need to go –

SENATOR HUDSON

Hold on! I'm not through!

ESTHER

Watch your tone!

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm sorry.

ESTHER

Don't bother. And let me tell you something, you sexist, ass-licking son of bitch – I'm gonna beat you running!

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, forgive my impropriety! I certainly did not mean to upset you. I will surely watch my tongue from now on, lest I get you so worked up to where you'd fall off your high heels. And brand-new ones, at that! Oh, no! I could not abide it!

ESTHER

Look –

SENATOR HUDSON

Face it, honey – this is not your game. And if I were you, I'd run like a spooked alley cat, because it's only gon get good and worse from here.

ESTHER

You would risk –



SENATOR HUDSON

I've been at this for a while. I'm not so dumb as to play that card out in the open.

ESTHER

You'll throw a curve ball, in other words.

SENATOR HUDSON

From which you'd be smart to duck and run.

ESTHER

Hit the bitch below the belly and take no prisoners.

SENATOR HUDSON

What do you think this is, Pokemon?

ESTHER

No matter how many skirts take charge, it's still a man's game, right?

SENATOR HUDSON

It's a *winner's* game, Ms. Bailey. And I will win. I just think it proper to give you a good spoonful of what you're up against.

ESTHER

In other words, you'll bury me alive?

SENATOR HUDSON

No. Just up to your neck.

ESTHER

And not my mouth?

SENATOR HUDSON

Is there something you're trying to tell me?

ESTHER

Nothing you don't already know.

SENATOR HUDSON

Politics aside – I've seen you somewhere, haven't I?

ESTHER

Have you?

SENATOR HUDSON

I mean, have we met somewhere?

ESTHER

You tell me.

SENATOR HUDSON

Don't play footsy under the table with me, Miss. Simply answer me straight: it appears that I have seen you. And I'd like to know if I am right, or if I'm losing my mind.

ESTHER

Would you believe it if I were the devil?

SENATOR HUDSON

No, not at all. Besides, I've not laid eyes on the devil.

ESTHER

Are you sure?

SENATOR HUDSON

What are you implying?

ESTHER

Nothing. Nothing at all. In fact, I'm no devil. *I'm worse.*

(Exasperated, he turns to exit)

Does the name *Odessa Hopper* mean anything to you?

(He stops and turns back to her, horrified)

SENATOR HUDSON

By God! You are the devil!

ESTHER

I've been watching you for a long time.

SENATOR HUDSON

The devil himself! Standing before me!

ESTHER

Oh, c'mon! You don't buy that. Besides, I'm a woman.

SENATOR HUDSON

What do you want?

ESTHER

Stop worrying. I won't leak anything to the press. *Yet*. So, you won't have to do a Grover Cleveland. *Yet*.

SENATOR HUDSON

I asked you a question – what do you want?

ESTHER

To run for the U.S. Senate. More directly, to be elected to the U.S. Senate –

SENATOR HUDSON

THAT IS NOT AN ANSWER! Now, what do you want? Is it money?

ESTHER

Hell, no! You don't get off that easy. As for what I want . . . I'll make a deal with you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh?

ESTHER

Lose the election . . . well, maybe not lose it, but – bow out. With southern grace and decorum. And everything I know stays with me. But, put up a fight and try to hang on by that razor thin margin *and win* – and that could happen – I will use what I know to take you down.

SENATOR HUDSON

*Take me down, huh?*

ESTHER

To the matt. In the worst possible way.

SENATOR HUDSON

Do you know what you're asking for?

ESTHER

*Do you?*

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, to hell with it! You are either full of crap . . . or you're bluffing.

ESTHER

There's only one way to find out.

SENATOR HUDSON

I will win this election.

ESTHER

You'll call my bluff, in other words?

SENATOR HUDSON

Precisely! *Esther*.

ESTHER

In that case, let me ask: was it consensual? Or did you take her like a philistine? Please, tell me the truth. I demand it.

SENATOR HUDSON

Girl, you must think awfully high of yourself –

ESTHER

Don't you call me *girl*. Now answer the question: was it consensual?

SENATOR HUDSON

As a matter of fact, *I paid the woman*. In cash! Furthermore, I have never so much as allowed the poisonous thought of taking a woman against her will to inflict my mind. That's not to say I haven't erred a time, or two. I have strayed. I have made mistakes. But I could not lower myself to something so deplorable as to . . . *violate* a woman. And that is the truth. So help me!

ESTHER

I don't believe you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, that's your problem. And let me warn you, Miss, that if you should so much as deign to feed such libel to the press during this campaign, I will surely make you pay. In fact, seeing as you are as gutless as a hog after a killing for raising the hellish tale, I will proceed to crush you with all of the weight of my feet in these shoes. And in so doing, there won't be enough of you to feed a lowdown grub worm.

Prepare yourself, *girl*. You have been warned.

(Lights fade on Esther as Barker exits, then enters the campaign office where lights rise. Sam is working)

Sam! We've got a problem: we've got to win this election.

SAM

Would this be a rhetorical statement, or do you know something I don't?

SENATOR HUDSON

Stuff that! Now you and the staff and . . . whoever need to go digging. I mean dig up as much shit on this Bailey woman as you can step in.

SAM

What's going on?

SENATOR HUDSON

We've got an election to win! Now you and I know there's not a politician alive, dead, or otherwise, man or woman, who didn't have at least one or two skeletons taking up space in their closet. It's just the nature of the beast, so to speak. This heifer is a state senator, yet she's putting herself up as some kind of water walker. I don't believe in water walkers. But I do believe in closets as I believe in skeletons. And, somehow, somebody's got to find what bag o' bones is taking a snooze behind Ms. Bailey's closet door.

SAM

Fine.

SENATOR HUDSON

And listen: I do not want this woman merely beaten. I want to break her. Do you hear me? BREAK HER! Goddammit! Who the hell does she think she is? Did you know she didn't have the decency, after being born and bred in this state, to attend a southern college? Hell, no! She took her fancy self on up north and went to Columbia University.

SAM

I'm impressed.

SENATOR HUDSON

Precisely! And as sure as I was born of a woman, this wench has got some grand scheme in place for herself. I wouldn't be surprised if she tried to run for President! It would make sense. This senate office is nothing but a step ladder for her. Stuff frailty! AMBITION – *thy* name is woman! *And thy name is Esther!* For this, *I* am the candidate for the people. God Himself bestowed this gift to me. And I will go as far as to beat some son of a bitch plumb out of his clothes to keep what the Almighty has surely given.

SAM

I hate to sound sacrilegious, but that Senate seat belongs to the *people*.

SENATOR HUDSON

Barker Hudson *is* the people!

SAM

Good Lord! You've gone from channeling Eugene Debs to Fidel Castro!

SENATOR HUDSON

Who are you working for?

SAM

I'm working for you, but . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Which means you've got to go along with what I say, right?

SAM

Listen –

SENATOR HUDSON

RIGHT?

SAM

GO TO HELL!

SENATOR HUDSON

This is my campaign, Mr. Reynolds. And, if so choose . . .

SAM

You want me to quit? Give the word and I'll let you slap me in the ass with the doorknob if you want to. Go ahead!

(Silence. Barker is suddenly shaken)

SENATOR HUDSON

She's gon beat me, Sam. I thought I'd die in the senate. I will surely lose this time, though, with the way things look. The ol' dog can't run down this rabbit.

SAM

What the hell's wrong? Are you okay? Barker?

(Silence)

You want a whisky?

(Again, silence. Sam then pours whiskey for

himself and Barker)

SENATOR HUDSON

She's got something on me. Something that'll sure as shit finish me for good.

SAM

And what's that? She's not carrying your child, is she?

SENATOR HUDSON

There's a perverse Freudian irony in that question, Sam.

SAM

What . . . ?

SENATOR HUDSON

Nothing, nothing at-all. I'm just old. Too old, maybe.

SAM

Oh, stop it, now. You've got at the very least twenty more years left in you. Look how long Strom Thurmond hung around.

SENATOR HUDSON

Right! In a wheelchair. And I'll bet you anything he peed in a bag, too.

SAM

He held a tight grip on that senate seat, though. No matter where he had to pee. You can do that.

SENATOR HUDSON

Pee in a bag?

SAM

No, Barker, fight! And hold on. If you still want to be senator. You do still want it, don't you?

SENATOR HUDSON

Does it matter?

SAM

Barker, are you alright? I swear to goodness, it looks as if something has scared the color out of you.

SENATOR HUDSON

I've seen a ghost. And, let me tell you, whoever said they don't scare you . . . was a damned liar.

(He gulps down the whiskey. Silence)

Y' know, Sofia said I ought to think about quitting. Retirement, she said. She told me I was looking old and worn out. I swear to goodness, that woman is a bulldozer. With well-tuned instincts. You know, when you sit and think on it, *she* ought to have been a senator. In fact, with the heartless drive that woman's got, hell, she could've been a damned emperor. To hell with the presidency. Give that woman the throne.

Any changes in the numbers?

SAM

Some have you ahead by a point, or two. Others have you even.

SENATOR HUDSON

Let's go after her – this Esther Bailey. I know money isn't what it used to be, but let's use what we have in the best way we know to run down this rabbit. If the ugly stick is what we need . . . let's swing the damn thing.

SAM

You still want to break her?

SENATOR HUDSON

In seven pieces.

(Blackout on Barker and Sam)

(Lights fade in as commentator begins speaking)

COMMENTATOR

With about a month to go before the scheduled senatorial debate, polls show the race to be tightening dramatically. In fact, the opponents appear to be in a dead heat in certain quarters. Thus, campaigning by both candidates has taken an aggressive, at times ugly, turn. I spoke yesterday with Senator Hudson's campaign manager, Sam Reynolds.

SAM

The Senator and I have been friends since we were children, and I've managed his campaign from the start, from the days when both of us were thinner and had a lot more hair. Which means, I know the man from the outside in.

COMMENTATOR

As I'm sure you've seen, polls indicate that your candidate is in trouble.

SAM

No, no. That is not true. As Senator Hudson has repeatedly stressed, this sort of



thing at this juncture during an election is nothing new to us.

COMMENTATOR

Many pundits, however, would take issue with that statement: the Senator held a commanding lead over practically every challenger since his initial victory in 1960. For the past two re-election campaigns, though, those leads have dropped successively –

SAM

We know who the people want to represent them. And I assure you –

COMMENTATOR

What you're telling me is that neither you, nor the Senator are willing to acknowledge –

SAM

Believe me, we are aware of where we stand. Barker Hudson stands as a man of principle. He is a passionate man of justice and firm, honest leadership. And, let me tell you, he fights to win! And he will win!

(Fade on Sam)

COMMENTATOR

And, earlier today, I spoke with the campaign manager for Republican challenger Esther Bailey, David Littlejohn.

DAVID

It's too sad to watch. These two, the Senator and his campaign manager, are clearly in a state of complete denial to the changes unfolding before their eyes. This is a new day! A new frontier is before us: a new *American Nationalism*. And Esther Bailey represents this. She's real, bold, straightforward, a problem solver. She has integrity. And Barker Hudson will find himself with his back to this wall of integrity and the denial will no longer serve him.

(Fade on David)

COMMENTATOR

Meanwhile, the campaign for the U.S. Senate rages on and on . . .

(Fade on the Commentator. Lights rise on Barker giving a speech)

SENATOR HUDSON

As your senator, you've known me to be a man who has been unafraid to put himself aside and make your needs, your concerns, my priority. On this virtue, I

have never wavered. Since 1964, when I placed my very life on the line to ensure that all – and I do mean *all* – Americans abide in a nation where the Constitution lives up to its word and letter, I have lived as a man of the people. There is nothing better, or – if you will – revolutionary, for which I may commit my life than to fight on their behalf.

Yet, it appears there are those who would use this office of the people to sate their hunger for power and prestige in the eyes of the people. Those who, with lust for such a prize, would – in turn – shroud and obscure a vileness of the soul that should bar them from public service, a service which is, in my view, a privilege to be extended, rightfully and judiciously, only to those persons proven to be of high and exemplary character.

As you will see, friends, a sordid character will, in time, reveal itself in all its unattractiveness. My opponent displays herself as a woman of morals, in possession of a well-honed intelligence, and a reverent spirit. And you will bear witness as this exquisitely wrought lie falls from her to reveal *the truth!*

I stand here to say that the American people are tired of those who would abide with lies in high places. We expect more from such people. And it must be said that we, above all, seek more from our women. And there is a word for a woman of such low disposition, a word I cannot not utter in decent and respectable company. One can think it. Yet should not deign to utter it!

(Fade on Barker. Lights rise on Esther and David, who have been watching Barkers speech. David turns the TV off)

DAVID

Anything I need to know? Anything you want to tell me?

ESTHER

There's nothing to tell. Not really.

DAVID

You're saying you've been upfront with me from the start, right?

ESTHER

Of course. What's the matter? Can't we fix this?

DAVID

Let me hear it from you. Who's Lillian Gilmer?

ESTHER

David . . .

DAVID

Just tell the story from your end. If it's gonna get fixed, I need to hear it all.

ESTHER

I can't.

DAVID

Why not?

ESTHER

This involves a friend. And if his name should get out . . .

DAVID

This is about stopping something that could sabotage your campaign. Now, what happened?

ESTHER

Alright. The – the church I go to, that I'm a member of, the pastor, James Day, is a very close friend of mine. He's like a father figure, the father I never had. He gives me advice, moral support. And he loves my daughter.

DAVID

What about his wife?

ESTHER

She's there for us, too. We're like family.

DAVID

Okay.

ESTHER

One day, he took me aside and – and confided in me.

DAVID

And?

ESTHER

David, this has got to be –

DAVID

It won't get out. I'll see to it.

ESTHER

He told me of someone he was seeing. He – he was having an affair. With a young woman across town. Lillian Gilmer, like the report said. I couldn't figure out how he'd come to know someone like that . . . that is, after I'd seen her myself. Anyway, he told me he'd tried to stop this thing with her, but – at least, according to him – for some reason, he couldn't. So, we prayed about it. Together.

A few weeks go by, and we talked. He let me know that the affair hadn't ended. I threatened to inform the church elders. I mean, it wasn't a threat. Not really. I was trying to help him. And I'd thought – I'd thought it the right thing to do. A few weeks later, from what I could see, he got better. He certainly looked better. One day, though, one Sunday, this woman showed up at church. And Rev. Day nearly had a heart attack, it shocked him so.

I decided to do him a favor and visit this woman. And talk to her. I can't fathom as to how anybody saw me go there . . .

DAVID

What did you do? When you went to see her?

ESTHER

I spoke to her.

DAVID

That's it?

ESTHER

Yes.

DAVID

Are you sure?

ESTHER

Yes, David!

DAVID

Okay, if what you're telling me about this . . . friend of yours is true –

ESTHER

What are you saying?

DAVID

You're telling me you only went to talk to her?

(She scoffs)

And that's it?

ESTHER

Why are you interrogating me . . . ?

DAVID

And like the report said – Listen! As it read in the report, when you went there,

did you know she was a –

ESTHER

Prostitute, yes. I also knew that she used drugs. I knew that she sold drugs. I found this out later from Rev. Day.

DAVID

And did you know anything else about her sex life?

ESTHER

No.

(He hands her a hard copy of a press release, which she reads)

DAVID

Here's yet another press release. We got hold of it this morning. A year ago, her three-year-old was taken from her by CPS after a neighbor noticed that the front door of her house was left unlocked, and the child was out walking the streets. Alone. She took the kid back to the house where she found his mother –

ESTHER

“. . . in intimate contact with another woman . . .” Hold on – you can't possibly believe –

DAVID

It doesn't matter what I believe.

ESTHER

Well, I don't see how anybody –

DAVID

Think like the voters, Esther.

ESTHER

Nobody in their right mind would run with this.

DAVID

Is that what you're praying for, or are you really that naive?

ESTHER

Go to hell!

DAVID

You haven't heard chapter two of the story yet.

ESTHER

Which is?

DAVID

Somebody contacted your ex-husband.

ESTHER

*And?*

DAVID

He says that twice he's had to take you to court for –

ESTHER

The judge dismissed it, David. Both times.

DAVID

Doesn't matter.

ESTHER

What the hell do you mean, it doesn't matter?

DAVID

Aside from paying a drug addicted, drug selling lesbian prostitute for sex, it will come out that you neglected your own child for a career in politics.

ESTHER

THAT IS A LIE! . . . First of all, when my husband and I got divorced, he fought like an animal for custody of our daughter. He lost. And now the man spends his life looking for ways to upend me. And secondly –

DAVID

Where is your daughter now?

ESTHER

She's – None of your damned . . .

(She is about to cry)

DAVID

What? Are you gonna cry?

ESTHER

No.

DAVID

Do you want to quit?

ESTHER

NO! I won't quit –

DAVID

Then, act like it!

ESTHER

David, please, this visit with Lillian Gilmer –

DAVID

You think you need to convince me?

ESTHER

What else can I do? I only spoke to her. And I say this as a Christian, as a servant of God –

DAVID

And I say you're still full of shit! Goddammit, Esther! Will you pull your head out of your sacrosanct ass and think like a candidate!

ESTHER

I did nothing wrong –

DAVID

Esther! Do not attempt to conjure God out of thin air to back up what will be perceived as bullshit. You lack the imprimatur of being a man. You're a woman *and* you are black. Now figure it out.

ESTHER

Okay, again . . . what do I –

DAVID

Be real! Be bold! Be straightforward! *Be Esther Bailey!* And tell me again what happened when you went to see Lillian Gilmer.

(Silence)

ESTHER

I did a favor for a friend . . . and I went to speak with her. That's all. And I say this not as a senatorial candidate . . . not even as a Christian . . . not even as a black woman . . . but, as a woman *first*. As Esther Bailey.

(He kisses her cheek)

DAVID

Better. Tell that to the press. And I've got an idea: for your next speaking engagement, bring your daughter and have her make a short introductory speech for you. Okay?

(She nods)

ESTHER

David? There's something I should tell you about Barker Hudson.

(Silence. She thinks for a bit, then –)

That thing about his maid . . . maybe we should give it another look.

DAVID

Come to think of it . . . yeah. Maybe we should.

(David exits. Blackout)

(End Act One)



**ACT TWO**

(Lights rise on Barker watching the Commentator on TV)

**COMMENTATOR**

Good evening. Breaking news: there is the scent of scandal in the air. A scandal presently clouding the re-election campaign of incumbent Senator Barker Hudson III. It has come to our attention that, in the early 1960's, Senator Hudson employed an African American housekeeper by the name of Mabel Samms. According to sources, not only was Senator Hudson engaged in an illicit affair with this woman during her employment at the Hudson household, but the affair ended with the abortion of Senator Hudson's out-of-wedlock child –

(Sofia enters and turns off the TV)

**SOFIA**

Frightening, isn't it?

**SENATOR HUDSON**

Huh?

**SOFIA**

That you'd attempt to keep a thing like this from me.

**SENATOR HUDSON**

Now, wait a minute . . .

**SOFIA**

The fact that you made such a Herculean effort to hide it made it that much more obvious.

**SENATOR HUDSON**

You mean to say this whole damned time . . .

**SOFIA**

And don't you dare get angry with me for not blowing the whistle on you and your . . . **URGES!** I declare, you'd think that, with men, it's nothing more than going to the toilet.

**SENATOR HUDSON**

It's kind of funny when you put it like that –

**SOFIA**

Oh, shut up!

SENATOR HUDSON

You must think I'm a foolish ass, don't you?

SOFIA

No, Barker. It's me who is the foolish ass. I watched my own father trudge like a soldier toward that same mud puddle with our maid, Alberta. She stayed with us until I was fourteen. Then one day, she was gone. Daddy said she'd gotten sick. The next thing I knew, I was spying him and Delano, our driver, packing baby things into the car. They couldn't have been for mama – mama was dead. Which means, somewhere in this world of darkness, I've got a half brother or sister. And have likewise suffered a great conditioning, practically since birth: I'd come to think all white southern women of high social standing had a husband who, on one or several occasions, played hide-the-salami with the black help.

(Leonard enters, drunk)

LEONARD

Of course, if I were you, father, I'd own up to it. I can't see who'd blame you for trying to find a respite from this shit.

SOFIA

Would you get lost? Your father and I are . . .

LEONARD

Do you know . . . do you know I can still taste Mabel's milk? I fed from her breast until I was five. And do you recall, mother, when you tried to get me to take from your breast? And how I thrashed and wailed until you relented . . . and returned me to Mabel.

SOFIA

Why can't you go and be a drunken ass somewhere else . . . ?

LEONARD

. . . Mabel . . . It was all my fault. I loved that woman. And she was so unafraid to show love in return.

Her boys . . . they were as brothers to me. Oh, how we ran and played! I even taught the youngest, Phillip, how to swim in the pond where we'd fish sometimes.

I, too, knew of you and Mabel, daddy. You'd send her to the basement . . . to retrieve some item, or what-not. Yet, I knew she only went there to wait. Once, I saw the whole thing . . . both of you . . . through the basement window. And how wicked I was! I went and told her boys. They said I was lying. And they beat me up. Then I said I'd show them . . . just to stop them from beating me.

SOFIA

Leonard, you shouldn't drink. When you do, you talk too much.

LEONARD

What are you scared of Mother?

SOFIA

I fear nothing!

LEONARD

Just like father.

SENATOR HUDSON

What is this?

SOFIA

Not a thing.

SENATOR HUDSON

Don't treat me like some delinquent child. What in the hell's going on?

LEONARD

Aside from the fact that Mother knew more about those whores than you ever did . . . as did I, even . . . Well –

(He laughs. Silence)

You attended that party as an uninvited guest. That's what's going on –

(Barker is about to respond)

The truth will come out soon enough. Right, mother?

(He exits)

SENATOR HUDSON

Do you want a divorce?

SOFIA

We're passed that, aren't we?

SENATOR HUDSON

I need to break from the campaign and go to Washington after the weekend to vote on this amendment.

SOFIA

Have you decided which way you'll go? What I mean is, with the campaign, I'm certain you'll do – at the very least – what is politically expedient.

(Silence. Barker eyes her)

Well?

SENATOR HUDSON

Let's talk about Marilyn Winston's party.

SOFIA

Oh, enough about that goddamned party –

SENATOR HUDSON

Why *wasn't* I invited? *Initially?*

SOFIA

I'll say again – I shouldn't have to tell you.

SENATOR HUDSON

And I'll say again – tell me anyway.

SOFIA

Why? When, on your part, it's surely been figured out already?

(Silence. Barker laughs)

Anyway, it's – it's not like some grand betrayal. Besides, it had to happen sometime.

SENATOR HUDSON

When the proper candidate came around the bend, in other words, right?

SOFIA

Marilyn invited her . . . but she had to cancel. Something having to do with her child.

SENATOR HUDSON

Humph.

SOFIA

That being said, how will you vote?

SENATOR HUDSON

And why should you care? When it's now as plain as a wart on a toads behind that you're gon *publicly endorse* that Bailey woman. So why in Sherman's whiskers would you give a shit as to how I'd vote?

SOFIA

I'm concerned, Barker. Is that so difficult to fathom?

SENATOR HUDSON

Sofia, we are not joined at the big toe. If you want to make it easier to attend to your business and me to mine . . .

SOFIA

Will you stop it with that? We don't have to march down that road.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, no?

SOFIA

How will you vote?

SENATOR HUDSON

Alright, I plan to vote against it. Not due to having any feelings one way, or another about gays, but because I think it impractical.

SOFIA

*Impractical?*

SENATOR HUDSON

Ultimately, I think the issue needs to be decided by the states or discussed and debated in the same fashion as was Civil Rights. And also, well . . . there is, in my view, a legitimate compromise to offer.

SOFIA

That's a laugh!

SENATOR HUDSON

Sofia, please.

SOFIA

As for Civil Rights, it's not the same thing.

SENATOR HUDSON

I believe it is.

SOFIA

Well, it isn't.

SENATOR HUDSON

Sofia . . .

SOFIA

Dammit, it's not! Civil Rights was one thing, but now they're talking about faggots and lesbians marrying each other. And what's next? Where do you draw the line? And when in the hell does it end?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm only voting. Now please cool it before your damn hair catches fire.

SOFIA

Goddammit! Take me seriously, or else –

SENATOR HUDSON

What?

SOFIA

I will divorce you!

SENATOR HUDSON

I thought we were passed all of that?

SOFIA

I don't care! I will file for a divorce and use all means within my control to publicly humiliate you.

SENATOR HUDSON

And what did you have in mind? If you're thinking of running with how I bumped uglies with the black help, somebody's beat you to the punch on that one.

SOFIA

I'm not talking about Mabel.

SENATOR HUDSON

What, pray tell?

SOFIA

I'll just say I've got other guns up my privileged and southern pedigreed sleeve.

SENATOR HUDSON

Or how 'bout up your privileged and southern pedigreed dress! And if you want to humiliate me publicly, please tell of how you won't uncross your privileged and southern pedigreed legs long enough so your husband could at least smell your privileged and southern pedigreed coochie! Haven't in God knows how many years! Why don't you fill 'em in on that li'l news item?

SOFIA

You can't mean this?

SENATOR HUDSON

Am I blushing?

SOFIA

Barker, at our age –

SENATOR HUDSON

This was long before we got to *our age*, Miss Clements. Long before.

SOFIA

I'd thought since you appeared to be getting enough of it elsewhere, you wouldn't have to worry me with it whenever . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

*Elsewhere?* With who? Mabel?

SOFIA

Her. And *Odessa Hopper*.

(Silence. Barker is stunned)

Didn't I tell you I had other guns up my pedigreed sleeve? And, yes – as you so crudely pointed out – up my pedigreed dress, as well?

SENATOR HUDSON

What do you know?

SOFIA

That you were seeing her quite regularly. And paying her. And with the way the two of you were carrying on, it was clear that you were enjoying yourselves –

SENATOR HUDSON

What else?

SOFIA

You discovered, in a sense, when it was too late, that she was pregnant with your child.

SENATOR HUDSON

And?

SOFIA

Unlike Mabel, this one chose to bear your child. Afterwards, for some reason, something broke and she lost her mind. To which, you had her committed.

SENATOR HUDSON

*Anything else?*

SOFIA

Is there more, Senator?

(Silence)

SENATOR HUDSON

Who do you talk to? Where do you . . .

SOFIA

I belong to a coterie of individuals who own half of what stands in this city and, for that matter, this state. And as a member of the ownership class, you either know everything about what's owned, or you know someone who can uncover what is unknown. I learned from my daddy that, if one has the means, it is good to safeguard oneself in such a way.

SENATOR HUDSON

So, let me see if I have this straight: my dancing 'round the stump with Mabel is easier for you and your "coterie" of lizard-women to stomach than for me to take a stand for something which may, in point of fact, be a right guaranteed under the Constitution?

SOFIA

Oh, for pity's sake, will you wake up! I declare, sometimes you're as naïve as the liberal you are. Yes – LIBERAL! And I don't give a damn how it's put or what you *prefer* to call yourself.

SENATOR HUDSON

Fine! And you are right: I have never claimed to be the fastest gun in Dodge. Now will you please do me the courtesy of explaining to me how . . .

SOFIA

In other words, we are all good and aware of what stick to point at whom and which one to leave in our britches. If you can keep this under the rug, Marilyn caught Bill messing with some floozy young enough to be his daughter. And thank God for everybody that the child was, at least, of voting age, if you know what I mean.



SENATOR HUDSON

Are you saying ol' Bill got the gal to vote for 'im, too?

SOFIA

Just be sure it's not aired with your filthy linen.

SENATOR HUDSON

Come to think of it, there's no reason to get so beside yourself over this thing. It's nothing at all like sixty-four and what we went through with Civil Rights. With this gay marriage business, yes – folks will hem and haw, they'll talk and whisper, but, hell, that's about all they'll do.

SOFIA

AND THAT IS THE POINT! I can't take the talking and the whispering! I CAN'T! AND I WON'T HAVE IT! My friends – Do you know what they call you? An odd rooster! "*Sofia, that husband of yours . . . he's an odd rooster, isn't he?*" In fact, you ought to hear how Marilyn runs on and on about how she pities me. Yes, Marilyn! Why would a woman whom I've known and loved like a sister talk in such a way about my husband? To my face?

SENATOR HUDSON

If it was me, I'd tell 'er to –

SOFIA

Please! Do not wound what I am trying to hold to.

I will concede the times, in some ways, are different now. But a lot is the same when you're closer to home. You refused to listen to reason and voted for that damned Civil Rights Bill and it never seemed to phase you when those women quit speaking to me for four solid years. Oh, I could deal with the stones thrown at our windows, the threatening phone calls. The fact that I had to close one of the stores when business went down after a bomb threat. I could even deal with the swastika some imbecile painted on the front of the house. Don't you remember? A swastika! Wasn't that rich? I could handle everything else, but to lose my friends . . . Good Lord! It was like losing my life.

And I have to admit, I felt terrible when the NAACP threatened to sue just to get me to open salesclerks' jobs to black people. But I needed to keep those doors closed, not for having anything against black people, which I didn't – and I still don't. I just . . . *I wanted my friends back!*

And, through all of it, you'd been so blithely preoccupied with civil righteousness that you were blind to the fact that, like your illicit plaything, I was nearly committed.

(Barker reacts)

Yes, Barker! It's what finally brought Marilyn around. To keep me from going off

of the deep end, she persuaded them to let me return to the fold. After which, they convinced me to break ranks and support Nixon and leave you to stand square shouldered with Hubert Humphrey. After the election, Marilyn threw a party at her house to celebrate Nixon's victory. And I was invited. She stood at the front door to welcome me with opened arms. I fell into them. And felt as if I'd come home.

SENATOR HUDSON

It's hard for me to fathom you, Sofia. I cannot believe you exist. You've been stuck in that woman's bosom for so long that you would let her spit in your face, then lick it off with your own tongue if she told you to do it.

SOFIA

As a matter of fact, just stay focused and deal with this mess with Mabel? As for everything else . . . know where I stand.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll ask again: do you want a divorce?

SOFIA

I want to be taken seriously! And do think again as to how you'll cast that vote.

(She is about to exit)

SENATOR HUDSON

I'd been . . .

(She stops)

. . . I'd been promised that when you left the Democratic party . . . there'd be no public endorsements.

SOFIA

The situation has changed.

SENATOR HUDSON

So much that you'd endorse a *black woman* . . . !

SOFIA

As I said: situations change, times change.

SENATOR HUDSON

Or, rather, the call of Nationalism makes strange, yet accommodating bed fellows.

(Silence)

I hope you know what you're doing.

(Sofia exits. Fade in on Sam, whom Barker joins)

SAM

It's dumb to ask, but . . . did she mean anything to you?

SENATOR HUDSON

I don't know. Mabel was a sweet woman. I think, though, she believed she'd get something out of it. That's why she was so willing.

SAM

I've never strayed myself. I guess I'd like to know what goes through a man's head with this kind of thing.

SENATOR HUDSON

Nothing, Sam. You do it, then look for a way to keep from getting caught. I reckon if stuff was "going through your head", you *wouldn't* do it. Hell, the day might come when the whole idea of a sex scandal, like sex and lying, will seem rather quaint . . . when folks just won't give a shit from being so damned numbed by it all.

What are the damages?

SAM

In the black community, the numbers are dropping. And, with that, I need to ask: you wanna cancel the debate?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm not sure.

SAM

Well, are you, at least, gonna address this thing?

SENATOR HUDSON

You mean admit to it? Publicly?

SAM

It might help. Get in front of people. And speak in plain English, not as a candidate, but as Barker Hudson.

SENATOR HUDSON

Barker Hudson?

SAM

It should be very easy for you.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'd beg to differ.

SAM

Come again?

SENATOR HUDSON

Who is that, Sam? Barker Hudson? Who in the devil is this man?

SAM

Barker, this is a political campaign. It's not a good time to start digging through your navel.

SENATOR HUDSON

Well . . . can any this be fixed?

SAM

Fixed? All you've been doing these past two elections is squeezing through. I'd thought we'd get by and do the same thing now, but . . . *Maybe* if this'd been some run-of-the-mill affair with some run-of-the-mill *white* tramp, maybe –

SENATOR HUDSON

But this is a black maid and the black vote we're talking about.

(Sam nods, sadly)

Perhaps you're wrong, Mr. Reynolds. Maybe all that's left is to either stick your head in your navel, find religion . . . or, get drunk.

SAM

Listen: I'm your campaign manager, but I'm also your friend. We've been together since we were in knee britches and sucking on our nannies' tit. I will not let you go down like some bum. You and me will keep swinging until this election is finished. And we'll swing on after then, if you still want to. You hear me?

SENATOR HUDSON

I appreciate that, but . . . Sam . . . listen, there – there's something you need to know . . . about, uh . . . about this Esther Bailey. I think I ought to reveal it now before that skeleton resurrects itself from my closet and does it for me.

SAM

What is it?

SENATOR HUDSON

Any whiskey around?

SAM

Over by the cabinet.

(Barker gets whiskey and pours a glass for himself and Sam. Barker gulps the drink down)

SENATOR HUDSON

Sam, I – I *knew* her mother. Esther Bailey’s mother. I knew her . . . in how the Bible puts it.

SAM

*In how the Bible . . . ?*

(Barker nods. Silence. Then – )

Help me, Jesus!

SENATOR HUDSON

*And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales . . .*  
You’re not gon die on me, are you?

SAM

No, no. I’m just . . . trying to get my . . . Good God –

(Sam gulps down his whiskey then pours another for him and Barker)

SENATOR HUDSON

Have you spoken with Rev. Wynard, yet?

SAM

No, but – but one of the staffers informed me that . . . he’s still behind you. Thick and thin.

SENATOR HUDSON

Rev. Wynard’s a good man.

SAM

He still believes in you.

SENATOR HUDSON

And he’s had my back from the start, hasn’t he? And I, his. As well as the whole

of the black community. Those are *my* people, Sam. I'll always be comfortable and will always feel t' home with them. When I cast that vote in '64, I knew I'd catch hell – I knew it! But it didn't matter. I'd been to the mountain top, too. Just like Dr. King. As a matter of fact, with my colleagues in the senate in the East Room of the White House joining President Johnson as he signed the Civil Rights bill into law . . . Dr. King was there. The President would sign, then turn to shake his hand. And as Dr. King moved back into the fold of the crowd of senators, he noticed me. He knew who I was. And how much all this would cost. He stepped over, looked me in the eye and shook my hand: "Thank you, Senator Hudson. Thank you."

That will remain the one crown on this head of disillusion, Sam: standing up for my people and their cause.

SAM

In the way you, more or less, stand for gay folks and their cause?

(Silence)

SENATOR HUDSON

I b'lieve I need me another whiskey. You want one?

(Sam shakes his head. Silence)

SAM

Esther Bailey . . . *You knew her mother?*

(Barker nods)

Well, I won't ask for any details, but –

SENATOR HUDSON

What?

SAM

Truth is, I wanted to speak on this earlier . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

You're not gon quit on me?

SAM

As a matter of fact, I'm tired, Barker. What's more . . . Good Lord! It's all a little too much . . . managing a campaign for a politician to beat his own child.

SENATOR HUDSON

As I fight to hold this office, she is no child of mine. She is a political opponent.

An adversary. The enemy itself.

SAM

Well, I'm sorry, but it's an awful lot for a man of my age to take down – Not to worry, though. Rest assured that I'll throw myself one hundred percent behind you. But for the last time. After which, old friend, I'm out. I am not dying. But our breed of politician just might be. I don't know. Either way . . . this is my last hurrah.

(Silence. Then Sam exits)

(Fade in on Esther speaking)

ESTHER

. . . As for Senator Hudson's actions, what more can one say? Or, add, really? Once again, the voters have been let down by another career politician. This is what the people of this state have been re-electing for over forty years. And I know there are feelings of betrayal and anger amongst the voting populous. But now you know the truth and you've seen where you were. Take action and determine where it is you want to go.

(Fade on Esther as lights rise on Barker)

SENATOR HUDSON

For forty-six years, I have served with a full heart as your senator. Being a public servant – your servant in the public arena – has absorbed my entire being. And I have not a single regret for the time I have served. Not one!

And, yes, good people, I have transgressed in my life. While I am proud to serve as your lawmaker, I cannot escape the hard and cruel truth that I am also a man – of flesh, bone, mind . . . and mortal stains. And I have erred, citizens. Oh, yes! How I have transgressed!

No one else is at fault for this misadventure. I, the man before you, am solely accountable. To quote Seneca: *There is no person so severely punished as those who subject themselves to the whip of their own remorse* – end quote. Yes, it is, indeed, awful to be held accountable for sin. And I would wager that the gravity is several times greater when one stands naked before the pitiless eye of self-reproach.

As a man, as your elected leader, I can only bow with humility and ask for mercy. Yes! One such as I would beg the many valued voters of this state for clemency.

(Fade on Barker as lights rise on Sofia giving a speech. Esther is in attendance)

SOFIA

. . . And your vote for Esther Bailey is a vote for the future of this state. People, the future is here with us today! Let's not take chances. Let's quit shucking and jiving and making do with worn out solutions that didn't even work in their time. In other words, the old, tired liberalism is as dead as socialism! Let's prepare for what's new. And because I care so deeply for the future, I am willing to go out on a limb, assert my audaciousness, and give my full support to a woman of tomorrow! An unabashed Nationalist – Esther Bailey!

(Applause, which slowly gives way to quiet)

ESTHER

I must say – you are an extraordinary woman.

SOFIA

Oh, please, honey. I take credit for nothing.

ESTHER

Well, I am concerned about your husband.

SOFIA

Why?

ESTHER

I guess because –

SOFIA

Listen, this sort of thing doesn't affect us at all. We enjoy it, in fact. Honey, we're married. And we'll stay married till either God, the devil or mere attrition gets tired of the arrangement.

ESTHER

The two of you are okay with this?

SOFIA

My dear, it's not like you and I are sleeping together.

ESTHER

Oh, no!

SOFIA

Although, to the unwitting observer, I guess it does look like one of those odd marriages where the husband flits down one road and the wife flits up another road – looking for trouble –



ESTHER

*To the right or to the left –*

SOFIA

Exactly – oh, my!

(They laugh in spite of themselves, then exit as lights rise on Barker being interviewed)

INTERVIEWER

Am I correct, Senator Hudson, in confirming your statement making clear your determination to stay in the race, as well as take part in the debate against your challenger?

SENATOR HUDSON

I have concluded that there is no legitimate reason for me to tuck my tail between my legs, then crawl to the nearest hole and hide. That would be repugnant. No! I will continue to fight in this campaign. And I will win and remain a senator – an honest progressive – for the people.

(Fade on Barker)

INTERVIEWER

You heard it, folks. Despite weathering a substantial bruising following word of a sex scandal, Senator Hudson vows to soldier on, even agreeing to take part in the upcoming senatorial debate.

(Fade on interviewer. Lights rise on Esther and David who have been watching the previous exchange with Barker on TV)

DAVID

How long have you known?

(David turns off the TV)

ESTHER

Since I was nine. I was sat down and my life story up to that time was revealed.

DAVID

Who else knows?

ESTHER

Just you and me. And the Senator. I wanted to tell you earlier . . .

DAVID

Esther, it's getting to the point where I'm downright afraid of you.

ESTHER

I know –

DAVID

Do you not trust me?

ESTHER

With all of my heart. And if you want to quit . . . I won't blame you. I won't try to stop you. I'll understand.

DAVID

Is this the extent of it?

ESTHER

What do you mean?

DAVID

I mean . . . You're not gonna pull anymore bullshit baloney out of your ass . . . ?

ESTHER

David –

DAVID

We're less than a month from Election Day . . .

ESTHER

Give me a break, will you?

DAVID

No, how 'bout giving me one!

(Silence)

Fuck it!

ESTHER

What . . . ?

DAVID

I said to hell with it! And to hell with him! That old bastard. I'm not gonna give it up. We will win this election. This is on him, not you. Esther Bailey is the mere product of his philandering. And you're just as surprised by it as anyone else. At

least, that's how we'll play it. I mean . . . if it should be revealed –

ESTHER

No! After the election – *when we win* – I want to get with the press and . . . tell the truth. My gut tells me the people . . . they'll understand.

DAVID

Are you sure?

ESTHER

It's like you said – none of it is on me, right?

(Silence)

I'm sure about this, David.

DAVID

I guess this *has* been personal, hasn't it?

ESTHER

It's a big part of what keeps me in the race. Besides, *all politics is local*. And the personal is about as local as it gets. Sort of.

DAVID

And if, by chance –

ESTHER

If *he* should win, the senator is well aware of the consequences.

DAVID

Either way, then –

ESTHER

He, or I . . . we come clean.

(David acknowledges)

David . . . I'm so sorry –

DAVID

No, no . . . I get it. And again – fuck him!

ESTHER

Thanks.

DAVID

Still, from where I'm sitting, there's no reason why this can't stay buried. You and he can live positively-ever-after and take this dirty secret to the grave.

ESTHER

David, I've lived most of my life as a dirty secret. And when I got old enough, I decided to prove to myself that I could be more than that – an error made in sin – some white man's lurid blunder – a stain on his expensive linen that he had to hide. If this man did not want to claim me, I would claim him by beating him at his own game. Then he'd see what his filthy door prize – his dirty secret – had always been capable of.

Moreover . . . there's something that I'm still not sure of.

DAVID

If the thing between them – the senator and your mother – was consensual.

(Silence)

Well, look . . . don't let that poison your mind. You'll win this election. I'm sure of it. Just . . . try to stay sane, huh?

(Silence as he exits)

(Lights rise on debate moderator)

MODERATOR

Good evening. Welcome to the 2004 U.S. Senatorial Debate, the purpose of which is to help you, the voters, make an informed decision. Let's start by introducing our candidates . . .

(Esther and Barker enter, each taking a podium)

. . . beginning with the incumbent, Democratic United States Senator Barker Hudson III. And the challenger, Republican State Senator from the eighth district, Esther Bailey. Both candidates are aware of the ground rules. And each candidate will be given one and a half minutes for opening statements. Beginning with Democratic incumbent, Senator Hudson.

SENATOR HUDSON

Thank you. I am happy to be a southerner – by birth, by blood, by creed. I love my state as I love my country. And I love serving the American public.

As a state senator, I have been a proud champion of the working man. Of Civil Rights. And the equal treatment of women. Also, offering more than my share to rebuild and improve our public schools and revitalize the system of education in our district for all children, regardless of color or economic status – one year prior

to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Soon after, I became active on the national level, serving as a United States Senator as well as a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

I take pride in public service. It is an honor and privilege I value as I do my very life. Yes, I have erred. I have made mistakes. Yet, I never, nor will I ever, allow such anomalies of the spirit to defame my endeavors in the public forum. You know my record. I have never let you down. Thank you.

MODERATOR

And now – State Senator Bailey.

ESTHER

Yes, thank you. I, too, am a southerner. As well as a Christian. And an American. And yes – I dare state that I am a Nationalist. My background, however, is rather vague: I did not know my mother. She died when I was an infant. I also have no recollection of my father. I can only go with what my foster parents – two women – told me: *that he was a white man who'd had relations with my mother.*

(Barker coughs, then takes a drink of water)

While serving as a state senator, I made it my business never to stray from my conservative values, which are my foundation. And I have not been hesitant in allowing those values to inform every decision, to inform every bill I would aide in drafting, every vote, every word and letter of every speech I have given on that senate floor. There is not a single solitary liberal, or – for that matter – *progressive* bone in my body. In other words, I stand in defense of party and Nationalist Conservatism. And I make no apologies for it. On this, I will end.

MODERATOR

Thank you, Senator. Let's begin our debate. We'll start with questions relating to the War in Iraq. Senator Hudson, while you were among a majority of lawmakers to vote jointly for the invasion, subsequently, you have become one of its most ardent opponents.

SENATOR HUDSON

That's right. As a veteran of World War II, having not only participated in that war, but having studied it as well, and having lived to observe the tragedy of the war in Vietnam, I know the danger of initiating any major action based on what came to be revealed as a dubious objective. As the battle wore on, and as the search for weapons of mass destruction seemed more and more a mere fools errand, I soon thought it best to rethink my position before sending more of our precious children into battle . . .

ESTHER

In other words, Senator Hudson would have us jeopardize the safety and security

of this country –

SENATOR HUDSON

. . . As I care deeply for my countries safety and security, I will stand upon my opposition to the Iraqi invasion. I love my country. And this love should not preclude my right to condemn my countries actions, yet even in time of war. As Benjamin Franklin stated – *“Those who would sacrifice liberty for – “*

ESTHER

Y’ know, it is deeply offensive when cowardly liberals throw this particular quote from Franklin around as an excuse for flat-out weakness and ineptitude . . .

MODERATOR

Let’s move on. Senator Bailey, you are running for office not necessarily as a Republican, but as a Nationalist.

ESTHER

That’s right.

MODERATOR

Can Nationalism, in whatever form, work within a democracy, or will democracy as we know it in this country suffer under such a governmental system?

ESTHER

First, one must acknowledge the hard fact that America is not, nor was ever, a democracy –

SENATOR HUDSON

*Oh?*

ESTHER

We are a Constitutional Republic . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

And what, in your view, is that exactly?

MODERATOR

Senator Hudson . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

Is your view of a Constitutional Republic compatible with the actual Constitution and the rule of law, or will it simply boil down to a system in which all the toys are on your side of the box?

ESTHER

Look –

SENATOR HUDSON

You and everybody in your fan club, that is?

ESTHER

I'm talking about a governmental system that puts the people of this country first over all others, and a government which demands that a fervent love of ones country –

SENATOR HUDSON

*Demands?*

MODERATOR

Senator, you'll be given a chance to speak . . .

ESTHER

What is needed is a plan of action –

SENATOR HUDSON

To overthrow Democracy?

ESTHER

I am an American citizen, Senator!

SENATOR HUDSON

Speak like one!

MODERATOR

Senator Bailey, what, in fact, in your view, *is* characteristic of a Constitutional Republic *vis a vis* a democracy?

ESTHER

Again, it all boils down to the best system of government that can put the will of the people first –

SENATOR HUDSON

I thought you said you were a Nationalist?

MODERATOR

On to the subject of same-sex marriage. Senator Hudson, in addition to voting against a proposed amendment to the Federal Constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman, you proposed – in your words – a compromise.

SENATOR HUDSON

Yes. For those opposed to and for those who support same-sex unions, I believed there was a way to appease both sides while protecting the institution itself –

ESTHER

Yet allow liberal radicals to shoot the institution in the back.

SENATOR HUDSON

Again, my proposition –

ESTHER

Is still detrimental to the sanctity of marriage.

SENATOR HUDSON

Let me be clear: what I support is way for our gay brethren to –

ESTHER

In a society that espouses religious liberty, however . . .

SENATOR HUDSON

We are a nation of laws! And on the issue of religious liberty –

ESTHER

And I am calling on the Senator to respect the rule of law.

SENATOR HUDSON

Laws can be changed.

ESTHER

You cannot change what you do not have the authority to change.

MODERATOR

Ms. Bailey, the Senator is speaking.

SENATOR HUDSON

Once again, as a man who has spent many an hour on the floor of the senate –

ESTHER

And who clearly has the judgement of a –

SENATOR HUDSON

That's enough, Miss!

MODERATOR

Senator Bailey, you'll have time to speak.



SENATOR HUDSON

And if marriage is so damned high and holy, why in a monkey's red ass did you get a divorce?

ESTHER

We're not discussing divorce.

SENATOR HUDSON

We are discussing marriage, Ms. Bailey. Something you hold in the highest esteem. And if this is so, what got into your pretty head to make you wanna stuff all that and jump ship?

ESTHER

None of your business.

SENATOR HUDSON

It was *you*, wasn't it? The poor son of a bitch got to the point where he couldn't take you anymore!

MODERATOR

Senator Hudson, this is uncalled for.

SENATOR HUDSON

Tell us if it got to where it wasn't even a marriage, but a struggle for power.

ESTHER

You bastard!

SENATOR HUDSON

You've got that one ass-backwards, don't you?

MODERATOR

Enough! Ms. Bailey, your response.

ESTHER

The Senator does not give one good damn about marriage, or anything else that is sacred and American. He and every other liberal and, for the record, progressive *slash!* socialist *slash!* Communist are hell-bent on destroying it from the foundation up!

SENATOR HUDSON

For your information, my dear, I belong to a generation that helped to build this great country.

ESTHER

Boloney! If you'd built anything, you'd have respect for it.

SENATOR HUDSON

Respect! A word which you, clearly, know nothing about.

ESTHER

I suppose you'd like to teach me.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'd rather teach a cur dog to piss on a rock.

ESTHER

In the way you piss on the country? In the way you'd piss on your own –

SENATOR HUDSON

Now, you look here, girl –

ESTHER

*I told you not to call me GIRL?*

MODERATOR

Let's have order! BOTH OF YOU!

ESTHER

GET IT THROUGH YOUR THICK HEAD THAT I'M NOT YOUR  
GODDAMNED GIRL ANYMORE! You gave up that right and that privilege!  
And what you're left with is an ADULT – a grown woman WHO WILL KICK  
YOUR OLD ASS HERE, AT THE BALLOT BOX AND ANYWHERE ELSE IF  
YOU CALL ME *GIRL* ONE MORE TIME!

(Silence. Esther is stunned at her sudden outburst)

SENATOR HUDSON

Thank you for making this easy.

ESTHER

Go to hell!

SENATOR HUDSON

And before I traipse down that hot tarred road to perdition, let me also say that  
you've got a lot to learn.

ESTHER

And it seems that you've got just as much to lose.

SENATOR HUDSON

Were you so dumb as to think that you could throw a noose around my neck?

ESTHER

I think you took care of that yourself.

SENATOR HUDSON

Fine! LET IT BE KNOWN FOR ALL TO HEAR: I ADMIT TO THE FACT THAT I KNEW THIS CHILDS MOTHER. *In more ways than one!*

MODERATOR

Oh my.

SENATOR HUDSON

Satisfied?

(Esther is silent)

Now let me also state that I did not take the woman against her will. In fact, the woman was no damned girl scout selling sugar cookies. Oh, no! She made a life of giving it to the highest bidder, myself among them. And seeing as I walked away with the proverbial door prize, I must have bid awfully high that day.

And let me tell you something else, Miss: men and their monkey business is as common as stepping in shit. Everybody knows that. And everybody's big enough to deal with it. All, that is, except you. There is not one swinging dick who stood flat-footed in the political arena – from King David to Bill Clinton – who is guiltless. You were the ill-gotten gain of carnal knowledge. And what you'll come to see is that it will take more than that to rub me out. The people of this state know a leader when they see one. I have over forty years resting under the waist-strap of these bloomers. Which means I'm here to stay! And nothing, least of all that which is *illegitimate*, a stain made in sin which has long since been washed, rinsed and forgotten, will ever take me down! Nothing! You hear? NOTHING!

(Esther scowls, then steps over to Barker and spits in his face. She then exits as Barker takes out a handkerchief, wiping his face)

MODERATOR

And that concludes the 2004 Senatorial Debates. Thank you for tuning in.

(Black out on debate)

(Fade in on Barker at home. Except for having removed his shoes and socks and having rolled up his pants to just below his knees, he is dressed as he

was during the debate, though his tie may be undone. He wears a campaign boater and holds a half empty bottle of whiskey. He is drunk, standing as if aboard a ship rolling and tossing through a storm)

SENATOR HUDSON

*“ . . . The skipper he stood beside the helm . . . His pipe was in his mouth . . . And he watched how the veering flaw did blow . . . The smoke now west, now south . . . Then up and spake an old sailor . . . Had sailed the Spanish Main . . . ‘I pray thee, put yonder port . . . for I fear a hurricane’ . . . ”*

(Sofia enters)

*“ . . . Colder and louder blew the wind . . . A gale from the northeast . . . The snow fell hissing in the brine . . . And the billows frothed like yeast . . . ”*

SOFIA

What in Sam Hill’s old britches . . . ?

SENATOR HUDSON

*“ . . . Down came the storm, and smote amain . . . The vessel in its strength . . . She shuddered and paused like a frightened steed ”* – Wait a minute . . . Are you the only one who showed up? Where are all the supporters I invited?

SOFIA

I can’t tell who’s worse. You, or Leonard. I can’t do a thing with either of you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Perhaps you just outgrew us.

SOFIA

Oh, hush! While you were making a monkey of yourself at that debate, I was bailing him out of jail.

SENATOR HUDSON

Again?

SOFIA

The police pulled him and some other loser over for driving drunk.

SENATOR HUDSON

Good Lord.

SOFIA

What are we going to do with him?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'll know . . . as soon as I figure on what I'll do with myself.

SOFIA

In all my blessed years, I've never seen you look so ridiculous.

SENATOR HUDSON

Try and recall the last time I tried to get in your panties.

SOFIA

For your information, Senator, this is not the time for levity.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, PHFFFT!

SOFIA

If you have a shred of decency left in your body, you'll go plug a hole in the ground, stick your head in, and never pull it out again.

SENATOR HUDSON

And that being said . . . I've got to determine as to whether I shall continue to run . . . or, if I've cancelled my horse out of the race.

SOFIA

I do vow, as one who is supposed to be a wife, I have never been so humiliated –

SENATOR HUDSON

PUBLICLY HUMILIATED! HA! HA! The tables have turned, haven't they, Mama Clements? Speaking of which – what do you think of your half-daughter? You still want to endorse her?

SOFIA

Oh, leave me alone!

SENATOR HUDSON

What's the matter? Wouldn't mother and daughter sit pretty with the rest of those lizard women?

SOFIA

You are cruisin' for a bruising!

SENATOR HUDSON

Would you care to step outside and say that?

SOFIA

A woman could grow accustomed to despising men, being married to you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Well . . . you'd know how to attend to that, I suppose.

(Silence. Sophia is incredulous)

Want me to spell it out?

SOFIA

Are you trying to get rid of me?

SENATOR HUDSON

I'm trying to get a bead on what it is you want, is all.

(Silence)

SOFIA

I can't divorce you, Barker. After all is done, there is something which I refuse to concede.

SENATOR HUDSON

That's it?

SOFIA

Would there be a need for anything more? And since we're here, please feel free to fill me in on any other illegitimate offspring peopling the political concourse.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, Sophia . . .

SOFIA

I wouldn't want any more surprises. So, please, let me know now. Is this Barack Obama one of yours, too?

SENATOR HUDSON

I don't think so.

SOFIA

*You don't think so!* Lord, help me! What did you do? Breed the whole 109<sup>th</sup> Congress?

SENATOR HUDSON

Will you stop it. You sound silly.

(Leonard enters suddenly. He is stripped to his underpants. He holds a bottle of whiskey. Like Barker, he is drunk)

LEONARD

*“O father! I hear the church bells ring . . . Oh, say, what can it be?”*

SENATOR HUDSON

*“Come hither! Come hither! My little son” . . . and bring me that bottle!*

SOFIA

Will somebody please shoot me in the head!

LEONARD

Behold! Mother, I come not to teach, not to comfort, but to *affront!* And join my father in the recklessness of his shame.

SOFIA

My only seed would have to take after you, wouldn't he?

SENATOR HUDSON

What did you expect? Our lone man-child in the ass-image of his mama?

SOFIA

Things would make a lot more sense around here if he was.

LEONARD

Oh, no, mother. Do not mock my daddy! And I will not, as Peter, deny him thrice, then fall to pieces when the banty rooster crows.

SENATOR HUDSON

Thank you, son. If I weren't such a no-good sinner, I'd give you a blessing.

SOFIA

If you weren't so sloppy drunk, I'd give you a good whipping – both of you!

SENATOR HUDSON

You'd only be giving us a good time.

SOFIA

Will you hush!

(Leonard climbs atop the table)

And get down from that table!

LEONARD

Show me the son who enjoys taking a whipping from his mama . . . and I'll show you anarchy curtailed –

(He slips and falls from the table)

SOFIA

LEONARD!

(They rush to him. Barker kneels to the floor and takes Leonard in his arms. His nose is bleeding)

LEONARD

Ask me, daddy . . . Ask me how I came to know of Odessa Hopper.

SOFIA

Shut your mouth!

SENATOR HUDSON

What are you doing? Call 9-1-1!

(She exits)

LEONARD

I followed you, daddy. 1964. The year you stood up for Civil Rights. I was so proud of my father. But I had to know. I snuck into the car . . . and lay in the back on the floorboard . . . while you drove to visit Odessa. I wanted to see my fathers whore for myself. I wanted to know her . . . as you knew her.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, God help us.

LEONARD

And after that first meeting . . . I couldn't get enough of her. I went back to see her. By myself. And I saw her again. Then I beheld the child in the crib. Odessa . . . she was so pretty. Thereafter, while you were in Washington . . . I'd ride to her on my bike. She'd take my hand and lead me into the house. She'd lay me on the bed – Oh, father! The sin! Oh, the sin!

SENATOR HUDSON

Hush, now, son.



LEONARD

And she told me what you'd said – that you had the sneaking suspicion . . . that I was a shade queer. And she laughed at me. And she kept laughing . . . until she woke the baby . . .

(Sofia re-enters)

SOFIA

What did he tell you?

SENATOR HUDSON

What did he – wait a minute – Did you know? . . . *Did you put him up to that?*

LEONARD

And what's more . . . out of this whole mess . . . I've got a half-black half-sister.

(He laughs)

Half and half! Like something you'd put in your coffee!

SOFIA

I thought if I'd left it up to him to report your . . . goings on . . . I'd keep it . . . well, between the family. I just never counted on him laying with her, too.

(Barker glares at her)

Quit looking at me that way. Dammit, I was trying to help you!

(Silence as lights fade)

(Lights rise on Esther waiting in the Hudson home. Barker, disheveled, soon enters in robe, slippers, and pajamas)

SENATOR HUDSON

Ms. Bailey, I am pleased you came. I apologize for my appearance. I've had a rough couple of days, if you know what I mean. Would you care to sit?

ESTHER

No. I can't stay long.

SENATOR HUDSON

Well, I need to sit.

(He does so)

Can I get you anything . . . ?

ESTHER

*I need to ask about my mother.*

SENATOR HUDSON

Yes, you do. Ms. Bailey . . . May I call you Esther?

(Silence)

Well, Ms. Bailey . . . I – I don't think you want to know about her.

(Silence. Slowly, Esther begins to understand)

ESTHER

Is it true that you had her committed?

SENATOR HUDSON

For her own good, yes.

ESTHER

And . . . she *was* willing, wasn't she?

SENATOR HUDSON

It would not have happened otherwise.

And with that, I've given some thought as to what I want to do as far as running is concerned: I've decided to – to drop out of the race.

ESTHER

What?

SENATOR HUDSON

I plan to meet with the press tomorrow morning and formally end my campaign. Which means you will be the next United States Senator from this state. You will win by default.

(Esther sits)

ESTHER

Why are you quitting?

SENATOR HUDSON

I've come to the sad conclusion that I'm tired. Sick and tired, to be honest. These days I get nothing out of it – haven't gotten anything out of it for the past two terms, truth be told. I never wanted to see this as a job, but – over time – it has

been reduced to just that: a damned job. And I'm turning it loose. Politics in America ain't like it used to be. These days, it is unfit for the faint of heart in ways unlike ever before. And I must confess, with old age, mine has become quite faint indeed.

ESTHER

It's a little perverse, but I . . . I almost want to thank you.

SENATOR HUDSON

You're not being perverse. Only honest.

ESTHER

For what it's worth, you have done a lot.

SENATOR HUDSON

Of what?

ESTHER

Haven't you had a long career in the senate?

SENATOR HUDSON

Ms. Bailey, you mentioned a while ago that you had no wish to display rudeness in my home. I ask you to stay true to that wish and refrain from insulting me with faux kindness.

ESTHER

Senator, I was only trying to be human and not play politics. I thought the situation called for it.

SENATOR HUDSON

Now you're begging for sympathy.

(She rises)

ESTHER

Good day, Senator.

SENATOR HUDSON

What have I done, Ms. Bailey? Tell me. What constitutes "a lot?" Make a list for me. And don't honey-talk me with the Civil Rights Act. Any fool knows about that one.

(Silence)

Just as I thought.

(She sits again)

You are correct, though – I have spent many years in the Senate. But, to what end, I ask myself? To what purpose? When I've spent those years chasing windmills, eager to show the electorate government at its best – a template for progressivism! – only to be labeled an odd rooster in certain circles and see my beloved base recede like the evening tide.

One wonders, in fact, if Democracy itself will matter in the years to come.

They say public opinion of government has never been lower. I've got news for you: it's always been low. Right from the days of the Continental Congress when some yeoman farmer believed he'd been doing fine under George III until a bunch of rabble raisers and such got it into their big heads that they could do better – all the way to the time of the Roman Empire, when – despite the senate surviving the fall of the Empire itself – somebody no doubt was pushing to have that group of ineffectual old goats executed.

It's no better now. I wish you could read the emails and such from some of these knuckleheads who call themselves a constituency. Folks so unabashedly stupid it'd scare the hair off Samson! I'd come to Washington in my youth – an idealist, dumbstruck with the belief that I could enlighten such a lot and breathe contented following a long career in the Senate. I'd come to find, however, that I could not breathe in shit. And I've been wading ever deeper in it through every election and re-election until I am sick at heart.

ESTHER

I had no idea you were this cynical.

SENATOR HUDSON

Cynical. Weak. A hypocrite. And as ineffectual as a mule put out to stud. And before age paints you grey, you just might find yourself marching in these well-worn shoes through the same cow paddy.

ESTHER

In other words –

SENATOR HUDSON

In other words, you might serve yourself better by staying out of this game, Miss. You will not persist in thinking highly of people, or even yourself, if you want to win at it.

ESTHER

I can't accept that.

SENATOR HUDSON

Hmph.

ESTHER

And your family?

SENATOR HUDSON

What of them? Do you want 'em?

ESTHER

No. What I'm asking is . . . Well, haven't you discussed this with them? And if you haven't, don't you think you should? Especially with your wife?

SENATOR HUDSON

No.

ESTHER

I don't get it. I'd thought you'd want – if anything – her support.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh, she supports my getting out, alright. Like a twelve-gauge supports running a wolf out of a hen house.

ESTHER

I think you've got it wrong about her.

SENATOR HUDSON

I'd like to hear how.

ESTHER

Well, to begin, it's clear to me that she still loves you. In fact, the other day she said, despite your political differences, the two of you will stay married until –

SENATOR HUDSON

*Until* she comes to her senses and poisons me. Listen: I do not “discuss” with Sofia. It would be politically and mentally disadvantageous to my well-being, what little of it I have left, that is. As for the bane of what some would dignify as a marriage let me say that women like her do not need husbands, they need prey: something they can run down and sink their teeth into. See that stags head above the mantelpiece? That's her work. When she was a girl of sixteen her daddy took her hunting and let her shoot that son of a bitch. And if she has her way, before I'm ready to take my next good squat on the pot, I'll be the next buck on that wall.

ESTHER

Alright, if you're quitting, what will you do?

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh . . . write a book, I suppose. I'll call it . . . *The Honest Progressive* – No. No,

not that. Come to think of it, the country may never sit well with progressivism. And perhaps I'd been a fool to endorse it. No, instead, I'll write my autobiography. And title it . . . *Default*: a man becomes a senator, only to default on his early promise. Which was quite promising, indeed.

Of all people, it was Sofia who put the idea in my head to run for the Senate. And I went on and took the bait, didn't I? Why not? At the time, it just . . . it felt like the beginning of everything. Kennedy was a senator and running for president – a young man! And there I was, thirty-seven years old and inspired by my young wife to run to represent my district and state. I ran against Morris Dillworthy. Seventy-five years old and counting. A man who was Mount Rushmore itself! Oh, to hell with cutting his face in one of those rocks. He was the rock itself! And impregnable, or so they all thought. And Sofia . . . Lord, Sofia! So young, happy and . . . so pretty. There we were. Both of us in the Democratic Party. And, oh, how that woman threw herself into my campaign. Always the first to knock on doors, pass out leaflets, make phone calls from the campaign office. She even made it her business to go out and make speeches for me. Sometimes with me. Oh, how she'd smile in those days! I fell in love with her. Again. The first time was at her coming out ball where I danced with her. Having such a woman behind me . . . I knew I'd win. I knew it. I knew it!

ESTHER

Well, Senator, I must say this: as an African American woman, I want to thank you for standing up for the Civil Rights Act.

SENATOR HUDSON

Oh . . .

ESTHER

It's nothing to brush off.

SENATOR HUDSON

You're right. On that same note, you might want to change feathers on this same-sex marriage business. Sooner than you think, the gay man and the lesbian woman will roll a seven with those dice and have their place at the table.

ESTHER

Do not expect me to go along with it.

SENATOR HUDSON

No, I won't.

ESTHER

On the other hand, you may be right.

SENATOR HUDSON

You think so?

ESTHER

Yes, I do, but . . . I need to get elected.

SENATOR HUDSON

That's right.

ESTHER

And when the country is ready for this –

SENATOR HUDSON

You mean you're not gon lead the opposition against it?

ESTHER

I don't think it's necessary that I do.

SENATOR HUDSON

*Au contraire*, Ms. Bailey. Your confederates are expecting a full yard from you. Not just two or three inches. They are a mad and volatile lot. They want you to lead – they expect you to *do!*

(Silence)

You'll be fine.

On the other hand, I don't think you'll get far with this nationalism business. It could turn out to be a scary proposal for a good many voters.

ESTHER

That's not the way I see it. For me, nationalism is a sword. It discerns between who truly loves this country . . . and everyone else.

SENATOR HUDSON

Or those who agree or who disagree . . . with you?

ESTHER

Senator, you can choose to join the rest of America or fuck off.

SENATOR HUDSON

Alright! I'll just *choose* to differ. And leave it as such.

(Silence)

ESTHER

Senator, I'm – I'm sorry, about the way I used my mother to try and blackmail you. It all blew up in my face. Such a rotten thing to do. I'm sorry.

SENATOR HUDSON

However, as the songs goes – “*It's All in The Game.*” Right?

ESTHER

I suppose.

SENATOR HUDSON

Of course, all this might have been avoided if I'd followed Grover Cleveland's lead from the start and “*told them the truth.*”

ESTHER

Actually, I – I found myself hoping you did take advantage of her. There'd be an excuse to hate you.

SENATOR HUDSON

Perhaps. I will say this: you look just like her.

ESTHER

I should be going.

(They rise)

SENATOR HUDSON

Your daughter . . . what's her name?

ESTHER

Emily.

SENATOR HUDSON

Emily. Would you do me a favor and tell her I said hi?

(She nods)

And, for what it's worth – good luck. Senator.

ESTHER

No, *Esther*. Please.

(Barker acknowledges, and they shake hands. She turns and steps away, but stops suddenly, turns back, stands before him, then embraces her father.)



Slowly he reciprocates as she cries softly while in his arms. After a few moments, they relax the embrace and look upon one another)

SENATOR HUDSON

You take care of yourself, now.

(She acknowledges, kisses his cheek, and turns away again. Barker watches her exit)

(Lights fade. End of play)





