

THE LOSING END

A Play in Two Acts
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CHARACTERS

ESTHER BAILEY

African American Woman. Late-forties. U.S. Senator. Republican.

ROBERT BRILL

White male. Forties. Independent Senatorial candidate.

EMILY

African American woman. Twenties. Esther's daughter.

SIMON DELLINGS

White male. Seventies. Wheelchair bound.

NOELENE

White female. Sixties. Robert's mother.

ROSS COLLINS

White male. Early thirties. Democratic Socialist Senatorial candidate.

CORA KNOWLES

African American female. Fifties. Esther's campaign manager.

INTERVIEWER/COMMENTATOR/DEBATE MODERATOR

Female (White, Hispanic American or Asian American). Early forties.

PLACE AND TIME

Somewhere in the American South. 2016.

“Let the sun go down on you like King Harold at the battle of Hastings – fighting gloriously. Maybe a loser but what a loser! Greater in defeat than the conqueror. Certainly not a coward that rusted out lurking in his tent.”

Zora Neale Hurston

for Democracy

NOTE: It is important that the voice of Donald Trump *not* be heard among the 2016 voices and sounds in the opening sequence, which is in darkness. In fact, during the entire course of the play, Trump is not mentioned or referenced at all. My wish is that all which bespeaks of or is representative of Trump and/or the Trump “dilemma”, if you will, be embodied in the characters of Robert Brill, Brill’s mother Noelene, Simon Dellings, as well as a foreboding “presence” which hangs over the play.

ACT ONE

(Darkness. Election Year 2016. Voices, speeches and the like from Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, et al . . . commentary from CNN, MSNBC, Fox News . . . Bill Maher, Chris Matthews, Glenn Beck, Rachel Maddow, etc. . . . 2016 hit songs from Drake, Rhianna, Bruno Mars, and so forth. The sounds soon blend into a dense, cacophonous noise. After a few moments, an overhead spot fades in on Esther. Sounds from 2016 end abruptly)

ESTHER

Yes! I've changed.

(Lights rise on Esther sitting in a TV studio being interviewed)

INTERVIEWER

Why should we believe you?

ESTHER

I want the voters to see that –

INTERVIEWER

Senator . . .

ESTHER

Look, I'm well aware as to what I'm up against –

INTERVIEWER

. . . Just a minute! For the past six years, as a self-proclaimed nationalist, you've taken an extreme, uncompromising position which –

(Esther attempts to speak)

. . . which was one voice among many that divided the country. And what's causing the precipitous drop in your poll numbers – locally and nationally – is the fact that your constituents, hearing about this "change", now perceive you as weak and ineffectual . . .

ESTHER

And I need to address that . . .

INTERVIEWER

. . . Not to mention the adjoining fact that you have a challenger who has, in a sense, taken up this hardline mantle –

ESTHER

I cannot speak for my challenger. I can only emphasize –

INTERVIEWER

That you've changed?

ESTHER

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Why now?

ESTHER

Alright: the truth is that, over the years, I'd become quite rigid in the belief that I was a Christian first, an American second, and a diehard nationalist at heart. I was convinced that the future of this country, its identity, had to be grounded in the principles of nationalism, that the state and its interest should be sovereign –

INTERVIEWER

Sovereign! Scary word!

ESTHER

Sure. However . . .

INTERVIEWER

Are you saying –

ESTHER

Let me finish.

(Interviewer acknowledges)

Patriotism, from what I can gather, is defined as when love of your own country comes first, and nationalism as when hatred for countries other than your own come first. Over time, I came to realize that – as an American – I am, after all, a part of the world and have to live in it. I felt very uncomfortable with what I was turning into. And what brought all of this about, I think, was when I began putting too much of my head – my *hot* head, if you will – into politics at the expense of my humanity.

INTERVIEWER

That's awfully sappy, Senator. Just admit to the fact that you were an extremist –

ESTHER

I won't admit to . . .

INTERVIEWER

In the true sense of the word.

ESTHER

Whatever the label I happen to be pelted with, I'll simply state that even a politician needs to grow. As America grows. And let me add that, as a Christian –

INTERVIEWER

Could your Christian faith have played a part in . . .

ESTHER

I was coming to that – yes! Christianity . . . faith in God . . . is anything but nationalistic. Or even extreme. The teachings of Jesus are, in a sense, holistic. And lead to a life of compassion, of love and awareness . . .

INTERVIEWER

Senator, I have to ask: are you becoming a *moderate*?

ESTHER

Of course not. I'm just rethinking my commitment to nationalism.

INTERVIEWER

But –

ESTHER

And I now see that nationalism vis-a-vie the Constitution represent, at *best*, a very bad marriage. There's simply no future in America for it. And I've got to add that a re-reading of George Orwell also helped bring me around.

INTERVIEWER

Senator – again – it sounds as if –

ESTHER

I'm coming out of the closet?

INTERVIEWER

That's not funny, Senator. People don't use that term anymore.

ESTHER

But you get the drift, correct?

INTERVIEWER

Senator –

ESTHER

Correct?

INTERVIEWER

Of course.

ESTHER

Good! And let me state that I will, until the day I die, remain a stalwart of conservative principles: lower taxes, smaller government, a strong military, and a defender of social conservative values . . .

INTERVIEWER

And what in the world leads you to believe that the G.O.P. of today . . .

ESTHER

. . . I believe, as far as the establishment Republicans who still dominate the party's center are concerned, we will maintain our footing.

(The Interviewer scoffs)

I've changed. Yet I can't help it if I still have faith in my party.

INTERVIEWER

Fine. Now, as for your newfound support of LGBT Rights, Gay Marriage –

ESTHER

If conservatism is to have a fighting chance, it must be inclusive.

INTERVIEWER

And what brought you around? After all this time?

ESTHER

The truth is that I've always supported the rights of the LGBT community. I only thought it prudent to wait until the rest of the country came around before seeking to change the law.

(Again, the Interviewer scoffs)

That's my answer.

INTERVIEWER

And I suppose in having a gay campaign manager –

ESTHER

No! Cora Knowles is –

INTERVIEWER

. . . most likely the first and only openly gay female African American campaign manager in American politics –

ESTHER

I'm no opportunist. And please don't mock her –

(Interviewer tries to interject)

. . . or me. And for your information, Cora Knowles is, before anything else, an *effective* campaign manager. With a proven track record. This is why she was chosen.

INTERVIEWER

Sure. But what I meant –

ESTHER

I know what you meant –

(Interviewer is about to interject)

And that's as far as I'm going with it.

INTERVIEWER

So: in your mind, this newfound "change" will garner votes – much needed votes, in fact. Considering the reality of your poll numbers –

ESTHER

The numbers are down, but keep in mind I'm not out yet. Far from it.

INTERVIEWER

We'll see.

ESTHER

Surely!

INTERVIEWER

Finally, Senator, a few words on an issue that is deeply troubling: recently, there have been death threats from anonymous sources directed toward you –

ESTHER

It concerns me. Yet I refuse to get too wrapped up in it.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, come on!

ESTHER

Listen, I'm a public figure. Worst of all, a politician. And who doesn't want to kill a politician?

(Esther laughs. Silence)

That's a joke.

(Esther awaits a response, then acknowledges when there is none. Fade on interviewer. Lights rise in the campaign office as Esther enters. Cora sits before a laptop)

CORA

I wish you'd take these damned threats seriously.

ESTHER

Including the one we got last night?

CORA

Excluding that one, which was an obscene phone call.

ESTHER

Aren't they all?

CORA

Esther . . .

ESTHER

I've got too long of a do-to list to get too preoccupied with a lot of hateful messages and badly written emails, as well as those who may or may not be lurking in yonder shadow to smoke me.

CORA

Well, at least help me out and share in the concern. Please!

ESTHER

Alright. *I'm concerned.* But I refuse to court fear. Yours or anybody else's.

CORA

"Fear is the beginning of wisdom."

ESTHER

Good! You know your Bible.

CORA

No, Suzy knows the Bible. Whatever scraps I know come from her.

ESTHER

I take it you still let her drag you to church.

CORA

On occasion. With our son.

ESTHER

Amen.

CORA

Y' know, I'll bet even Wonder Woman feels fear.

ESTHER

Can we drop this . . . ?

CORA

Aren't you, at least, afraid to die?

ESTHER

I refuse to concede anything to those bastards, whoever they are –

CORA

Who said anything about concession?

ESTHER

Come on, Cora! You know what will be said and what will be printed –

CORA

And what about when you wind up *dead*?

(Silence)

ESTHER

What do you want me to do?

CORA

To hell with how you *think* it looks. Address it publicly and make an effort to protect your damn self! For the campaign. And the voters. And for *me*. Okay?

(After a moment, Esther nods)

I'll hand everything over to the police. And since you're a national political figure, they'll work with the F.B.I.

ESTHER

I feel safer already.

CORA

Good. And the fact that you're taking action in protecting your precious ass just might, in the eyes of the public, help you.

ESTHER

Hmph!

CORA

As for the interview, I'll just say I'm glad the bitch didn't scratch too hard.

ESTHER

Oh, she doesn't scare me. I've interviewed with her before. And despite being a liberal and knowing what buttons to push and how and when to scratch, to her credit she'll avoid drawing blood.

CORA

With the stakes as high as they are, though . . .

ESTHER

You worry too damn much.

CORA

I can't help myself.

ESTHER

Didn't somebody say a campaign manager was like a normal person, only *cooler*?

CORA

The current situation is too dire. I don't have the luxury to be cool.

ESTHER

Cora, my dear, like the interviewer said: you're breaking ground! Now take a deep breath and savor the moment . . .

CORA

I can think about all of that when –

ESTHER

. . . And *cool it!*

CORA

After we get your numbers out of the shitter. Which are, in fact, dropping further.

ESTHER

I know.

CORA

But . . . it can be fixed. We've got time.

ESTHER

Okay! Meanwhile . . . *what the hell did I do?*

CORA

You came out of the closet.

ESTHER

Dammit, Cora!

CORA

Sorry. That really isn't funny.

ESTHER

We were at fifty-nine percent a year ago.

CORA

Past history. Now you've got barbarians at both ends of the gate: there's this flaming socialist prick Ross Collins and, at the other end, some Neo-Nazi nightmare –

ESTHER

No one can confirm that Brill has had any affiliation with those groups. For now, it's talk.

CORA

Be that as it may, they're both kicking the shit out of you.

ESTHER

Thank you! And now that I'm all too aware of the fact that I'm in a hole –

CORA

Keep stressing that there's been change. You've left nationalism flapping in the wind and are now among those who are supposed to know how to govern. Not just make noise. A Republican with sense, as my mama would put it. And before anything else, you've got to address these economic issues. Screw all the cultural and ideological B.S. Nobody cares a damn about that, anyway, except those extremist hot heads. Real folks, those whose attention you're trying to get, need their daily bread, among other things.

ESTHER

And in order to reap the bread, daily –

CORA

No, they've got to be able to *buy* that bread daily. The world starts to get awfully small when you can barely afford to set your dinner table at night. And if it gets to the point where hunger is the only option, be damned sure anger won't be too far behind.

ESTHER

Hunger and anger! Sounds like I'm being primed to be a Socialist.

CORA

I'm trying to help your ass win!

ESTHER

Sure.

CORA

Esther . . . ?

ESTHER

If you're about to ask if I'm okay, stop. I'll live.

CORA

Well, we'll all *live* –

ESTHER

But you think I'm off my game?

(Cora acknowledges)

Y' know . . . I happen to be one of those mortal souls who'd been blessed to have a mentor: Miss Harriet Bailey. She'd been my high school English teacher. As well as my rock and my north star. The fact that I never knew my birth mother didn't worry me. With Miss Harriet, I didn't care. I had all I needed.

CORA

So, what's the problem?

ESTHER

I think I've outgrown her.

CORA

Come again . . . ?

ESTHER

You heard right. By more than a few ideological feet.

CORA

Well . . . it had to happen sometime. Sure, it's more than a little late in the day –

ESTHER

To finally become my own woman?

CORA

And what's wrong with that?

ESTHER

As Miss Harriet yet lived, the woman was committed to the party of Lincoln. And was proud of the fact that she'd been one of the few African Americans who voted for Eisenhower. And Goldwater. And Nixon. And Reagan. She told me that black people were, at heart, a conservative people. And though she didn't articulate it, I believe she did espouse the idea of nationalism as a tool that our people would do good to make use of. Now, mind you, she wasn't referring to Garveyism or *Black* nationalism, which she hated. But –

CORA

Something bigger than her color?

ESTHER

Cora, what I'm trying to say is – *I'm changing*.

CORA

And since it couldn't be brought on by menopause, not yet anyway –

ESTHER

It scares the shit out of me just the same!

CORA

Listen, Esther, you've got this! If there is anyone in this whipped world who is

strong enough to whether change, it's –

ESTHER

Wonder Woman?

CORA

Let's wallow in this mire some other time. These are working hours. And we're burning daylight.

ESTHER

You're right.

CORA

As usual.

(They laugh)

And by the way . . . *thank you*.

ESTHER

What for? . . . Oh, the interview.

CORA

Isn't it funny? She's the liberal, yet it didn't stop the heifer from wanting to make something out of who I was.

ESTHER

It's what I get for being a Republican. *And* a black woman.

CORA

And a Christian. With a lesbian campaign manager.

(They look at one another)

ESTHER/CORA

Shit!

(They laugh. Silence)

CORA

We have to keep winning, Esther. For the sake of women like us. We can't allow people to keep seeing and treating us as if we were some kind of . . . missing link.

ESTHER

An anomaly.

CORA

Damn right!

(Emily enters, unbeknownst to Esther or Cora)

ESTHER

It's something, though.

CORA

What?

ESTHER

By abandoning nationalism, I brought my numbers down. Then Robert Brill shows up preaching what might be the same sermon –

EMILY

And wipes you off the map. And let me guess why: could it be that this brand of Fascist, divisive indignation was better suited to the young white male ethos? . . . That it's a message the Right just won't buy coming from a black woman? . . . That there's a disconnect in the look and feel of it? . . .

ESTHER

Emily –

EMILY

. . . Sort of like a Zulu priestess in a prom dress?

CORA

Are you finished?

EMILY

What's more – I see you're finally getting up the nerve to take the threat of death seriously.

ESTHER

I didn't believe there was a need to draw unnecessary attention to any of it.

EMILY

Well, they are your people lobbing the threats. So, I guess you know them.

ESTHER

Let's change the subject and talk about that last article you wrote.

EMILY

We're busy people, mom. If this needed to be talked about –

ESTHER

Some things can't be discussed over the phone or by email. Now: about this damned article –

EMILY

I will, as always, have issues with your platform. Don't start to take it personally.

CORA

She's your mother.

EMILY

Again, I criticize the platform. Not –

CORA

Bullshit! You told a damned lie –

(Esther gently touches Cora's shoulder. She exits)

EMILY

I can explain –

(Silence as Esther listens)

It was the editor. He insisted . . . actually, he suggested that certain changes be made to –

ESTHER

Are you saying what you wrote just slanted in the wrong direction?

EMILY

The article had no false statements. We're not that kind of online magazine. And what makes you think I'd work for such people?

ESTHER

I know shit when I smell it –

EMILY

Mom . . .

(Esther picks up and reads a hard copy from the online article)

ESTHER

“ . . . Senator Bailey has even gone as far as to state that in cases of sexual assault, the burden of proof should be upon the woman to – “

EMILY

In fact, didn't you say on "The View" that . . .

ESTHER

I know what I said, which was *actually* spoken thus: "*In cases of sexual assault . . . it is in a woman's best interest to have a rock-solid account of what occurred.*"
Unquote –

(Emily is about to speak)

Yes! There is a difference.

EMILY

Acknowledged.

(Silence as Esther allows the moment to diffuse)

ESTHER

How are you?

(Emily is incredulous)

I asked how are you doing?

EMILY

Why?

ESTHER

Oh, I don't know. I suppose it's due to a vested interest in the fact that you're my daughter.

(Silence)

What?

EMILY

Someone – someone will call soon –

ESTHER

For what?

EMILY

The magazine wants an interview.

ESTHER

With me?

EMILY

They'll call and let you know.

ESTHER

Wait a minute – didn't the folks at that magazine already announce –

EMILY

Yes, the editorial staff is endorsing Ross Collins –

ESTHER

But . . . ?

EMILY

Don't laugh, *but* . . . well, I suppose this "change" you're undergoing piqued their interest.

(Esther laughs)

The thing is I would do it myself –

ESTHER

And why not? A fired-up know-it-all liberal daughter in a face-to-face interview with her tight-assed conservative mother! Better jump on that, girl.

EMILY

I thought you took this campaign seriously.

ESTHER

Alright! You *are* as smart as I'd thought. And I do, thanks very much. That being said, tell those bastards the answer is *no*. And I would not concede to spit in their direction.

EMILY

Okay.

ESTHER

Okay. Now are you sure nothing's wrong?

EMILY

Mom . . . please –

(Esther reacts)

If nothing else, *I'll live*.

(Emily exits. Cora re-enters. Seeing that Emily has left, she gazes at Esther, who shakes her head. After a moment, Esther exits. Lights fade)

(Lights rise in the same television studio. This time, Robert Brill is being interviewed)

ROBERT BRILL

. . . and please, PLEASE, do not ever refer to me as a –

INTERVIEWER

Excuse me, but I didn't say . . .

ROBERT BRILL

You people always bring this up. And I'm tired of it . . . !

INTERVIEWER

. . . Mr. Brill –

ROBERT BRILL

State Senator Brill, please.

INTERVIEWER

Alright, *State Senator* –

ROBERT BRILL

And if you keep hammering me with this –

INTERVIEWER

. . . can you explain then as to why so many young men who are members of such groups –

ROBERT BRILL

I have no idea.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, please!

ROBERT BRILL

Look, I am not some goddamned –

(Silence)

Excuse me – I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER

Let's take a break –

ROBERT BRILL

No! I want to continue. Please.

INTERVIEWER

Sure.

(He takes a moment for a drink of water. Pause)

ROBERT BRILL

Whoever these young men are . . . I will concede, yes – they express a great deal of anger. But most likely for being marginalized and spat upon by –

(Interviewer is about to interrupt)

. . . The truth is they are articulating something which is clearly, like a raving Maenad, eating the country alive. In fact, what you refuse to see is that we're dealing with something which cuts into every dark American corner. Yes, more than a few white people are angry. Justifiably angry. And so are black people, who've never had an issue with expressing anger. And never get pushback for it either.

INTERVIEWER

Now, hold it –

ROBERT BRILL

And believe it or not, a great many in the liberal elite such as yourself are angry, too.

INTERVIEWER

Really?

ROBERT BRILL

Although . . . the truth is I wouldn't know. I don't spend a lot of time cavorting with you people.

INTERVIEWER

Perish the thought!

ROBERT BRILL

You've got it made! But who is looking out for the rest of us, for our interests?

What makes us angry –

INTERVIEWER

Excuse me, but –

ROBERT BRILL

Okay – if it will make you happy – the anger is equally shared. Everybody who's worth anything is pissed off. I am running for the U.S. Senate because I believe I am best suited to take this message directly to Washington and challenge the elite powers to, for once, listen to us.

INTERVIEWER

And as for the fact that you're running with no party affiliation –

ROBERT BRILL

Like our founding father, George Washington, I despise political parties. There's not a plugged nickels worth of difference between any of them, especially the rotting monoliths of the Democratic and Republican variety. They are equally corrupt and stubbornly recalcitrant. Which has been one of the recurring problems with the America-hating elites: you remain unwilling to at least listen to the *outsiders* who are willing and ready at the drop of phrase to fight for this country.

INTERVIEWER

Now, Mr. Brill –

ROBERT BRILL

I am a state senator!

(He removes the mike and rises)

INTERVIEWER

What are you doing . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

Kiss my ass!

INTERVIEWER

Wait a minute . . .

(He exits. Lights fade in TV studio. Lights rise on Brill in DS limbo. Noelene enters)

ROBERT BRILL

What's the matter with them, mother? Am I not making it plain?

NOELENE

Those of us who are among the chosen hear and believe, son. As for the rest, it simply was not given to them to understand.

ROBERT BRILL

But I thought –

NOELENE

Remember what Mr. Dellings taught.

(Simon Dellings appears in US limbo)

ROBERT BRILL

Would that he were with us still.

NOELENE

The fire in your heart was once his.

ROBERT BRILL

And for that . . . he yet lives.

SIMON DELLINGS

She's right. They will never know you. They lack the capacity to understand even the fullness of their own thoughts.

ROBERT BRILL

I know.

SIMON DELLINGS

Then stop letting them see you sweat. And, for God's sake, do not lose your cool with these damned people. It's what they expect from us. And what they usually get.

ROBERT BRILL

I'll work on that. Thanks.

SIMON DELLINGS

You're young, handsome, educated and articulate with the God-given ability to lead. Use what you have, son. Learn to listen, but – more importantly – learn to counter with perceived servility. Yes, this is hard, I know, especially with those who must deal with, but –

ROBERT BRILL

It's not as if it's never been done.

SIMON DELLINGS

Precisely! It's important to see them as the weak, ineffectual children that they are. Never let on as to what the eventual outcome will be. Like an actor, this must serve as subtext, something those subversive swine will never be able to decode, yet something which will, no doubt, affect them profoundly. Then soon, very soon, you will have broken into the skull of America. And proceed to save this country from herself. Or she will be razed. As was Carthage. It is the Creator's will. It is our will.

ROBERT BRILL

Sometimes, though, I ask . . . *why me?*

ROBERT BRILL

Do not question this, son. Never question. Accept it.

SIMON DELLINGS

Amen.

(Fade on Simon Dellings as Noelene hugs her son)

NOELENE

I am so blessed! And so utterly happy! Who would have known that one such as I would give birth to a son whose destiny was to lead? . . . That something as grand as this would be in the cards for me?

ROBERT BRILL

Next thing I'll hear is that I'm anointed.

NOELENE

Well . . .

ROBERT BRILL

That would be blasphemy, mother.

(She acknowledges)

Let's not get too ahead or too filled with ourselves. We'll trust in God.

NOELENE

And that same God trusts you, my son.

ROBERT BRILL

And, as instructed, I will accept the fact that our day is at hand.

NOELENE

And nothing will stop you. Or your campaign. Only . . .

ROBERT BRILL

Here we go again.

NOELENE

I'm sorry, but . . .

ROBERT BRILL

Rebecca is a fabulous campaign manager. And I'm blessed to have her.

NOELENE

And are you certain she wasn't sent from the other side?

ROBERT BRILL

How could she have been. Besides, I know her.

NOELENE

As Caesar knew Brutus. And as Jesus knew –

ROBERT BRILL

Now you're insulting me.

NOELENE

Son . . .

ROBERT BRILL

And I still fail to understand how in the world we got to this.

NOELENE

She's awfully easy on the eyes, for one thing.

(Robert scoffs)

And the way she looks at you –

ROBERT BRILL

She's a married woman.

NOELENE

And when has that ever . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

Haven't I made it a sacred habit during the campaign to never be alone with

her? And for that matter, with any other woman? Single or married? Besides . . .

(Silence)

NOELENE

Yes, your *condition* notwithstanding . . . which she knows nothing about. Correct?

ROBERT BRILL

How could she?

I know what I'm doing. Rebecca, in managing this campaign, has given it legs. She's helped to make it legitimate. Because of her, people take me seriously.

NOELENE

Well, haven't I . . .

ROBERT BRILL

Mother, I'll be fine.

NOELENE

Of course. Afterall . . . who am I to doubt that.

(Noelene exits. Overhead spot fades in on Robert as he stands CS to deliver a speech)

ROBERT BRILL

I am a man of faith. I pray daily. I read the Bible. And I trust in God.

I also have the audacity to hold fast to a fervent and abiding love for this country which I will never apologize for . . . a country in which I will do whatever necessary to protect and defend from all enemies, foreign and – especially – *domestic*.

Yes! *Especially domestic!* The enemy that is currently within is our deadliest threat ever. And as a man of prayer, I know with all my heart whom God has chosen to lead this battle. I say this not with arrogance or self-centeredness, but from duty. And the will to serve. And your support and vote to take the seat as a United States Senator and as registered Independent will help me help *you* take back your country. Once and for all!

You see, part of the problem is with who occupies that office as we speak. Esther Bailey has been given her chance. And she has failed miserably. She had been sworn in as a warrior of nationalism, Christianity and sacred conservative values. Over time she has allowed her strength of character and commitment to be eroded. And now she must be done away with – *she must be made to pay!*

The transition to such sordidness of one who had held promise is, indeed, tragic. And I deeply regret that she receives threats on her life, however . . . one reaps what is sown. I concede – it is regrettable. Yet consequences are always uncompromising. Aren't they?

(Fade on Robert Brill)

(Overhead spot fades in on Ross Collins in DS limbo)

ROSS COLLINS

"There can be no progressivism in the true sense without Democratic Socialism. Such an implementation would be akin to running a marathon on one leg."

Unquote.

(Overhead spot fades in on Emily in US limbo)

EMILY

I suppose I should be impressed.

ROSS COLLINS

I hope so. I need all the help I can get.

EMILY

Really?

ROSS COLLINS

Come on, Emily!

EMILY

You're a stupid son of a bitch if you think I'm gonna make this easy.

ROSS COLLINS

Okay, I was a fucked-up kid. At the time.

EMILY

But now you're a grown up. And aware of what are known as consequences.

ROSS COLLINS

No. It's more like now that I'm running for political office, like every other schmuck with a skeleton in his closet, I've got to cover my bases. And my ass.

EMILY

How, exactly?

ROSS COLLINS

I don't know – Look, with this campaign . . . I knew I'd be up against your mother. And, of course, I'd be asking for trouble if we didn't talk and – and see where our heads are.

EMILY

Well, if the truth comes out it can always be denied it. In fact, being a man, there's a good chance of deflecting the whole thing.

ROSS COLLINS

Jesus . . .

EMILY

What's to worry about? It's not like it hasn't ever happened. Bill Clinton did it. So did Clarence Thomas –

ROSS COLLINS

I'd like to think I possess a bit more integrity . . . I mean – Dammit, Emily! This isn't about groping in some dark corner, or . . . No! I mean –

EMILY

Ah! You admit –

ROSS COLLINS

I'm not admitting anything!

EMILY

Relax! No need to sweat it. In fact, there's a reason why I've kept it under my wig for this long.

ROSS COLLINS

Good!

EMILY

Although . . . if I were an evil, cut-throat bitch, I'd –

ROSS COLLINS

What? Blackmail me?

EMILY

Certainly not for money.

ROSS COLLINS

But you can find other ways to threaten me, right?

(She turns to exit)

For God's sake . . . *it was a long time ago!* What's done is done. You're right, I'm a grown up. Now you be as such and deal with it.

(Emily stops)

EMILY

Why am I here?

ROSS COLLINS

To make sure you understand exactly what is at stake.

EMILY

And that's it?

ROSS COLLINS

I'm not here to apologize. You wouldn't want that.

EMILY

Of course not.

ROSS COLLINS

I just hope you're aware as to how dire the situation is. If what happened hits the streets, there's a pretty good chance that mine will not be the only ship to go down.

EMILY

Y' know, there is something so utterly pathetic about a man who thinks too much of himself.

ROSS COLLINS

I'm sorry if you can't accept the fact that this is not just about me –

(She laughs)

Alright: I did a terrible, terrible thing. And I will account for my sin. However, there is a bigger issue. And that is –

EMILY

I get it, Ross Collins!

ROSS COLLINS

Do you?

EMILY

More than you'll ever fathom. The fact that I'm cognizant of the dreaded outcome if the cat should happen to leap from the sack is just my fucked-up luck. However, like my mother, I happen to be more than a little selfish at heart. I despise Robert Brill. Yet my inherent selfishness is what fuels my motivation for

sitting on the truth. Ergo: your dirty little secret is safe with me for one reason – I won't give her the satisfaction of being confirmed in her attitude toward me.

ROSS COLLINS

Confirmed about what?

EMILY

It's personal. And beyond your purview.

ROSS COLLINS

That's stupid.

EMILY

Look – do not bother me anymore.

ROSS COLLINS

Or you'll go public?

EMILY

Worse! I'll fucking castrate you while you sleep.

(Ross laughs)

DO I LOOK LIKE I'M JOKING . . . ?

ROSS COLLINS

WHOA! Emily! . . . Please!

(Silence)

Listen . . . thanks. For hearing me out. This campaign needs all the support it can get –

EMILY

Oh, fuck the campaign! And fuck you, Ross Collins!

(A sudden thundering gunshot is heard. Ross and Emily are startled)

Oh, no! . . . Mom!

(Emily runs off. Blackout)

(Lights rise on the Commentator)

COMMENTATOR

An attempt was made on Senator Esther Bailey's life today during a luncheon given by The Local Coalition of African American Ministers. A lone gunman fired a shot at the Senator, a gunman who was soon overtaken by security. No one, including Senator Bailey, was harmed. More on this is in the coming hour.

(Fade on the Commentator as lights rise on Esther and Cora in the campaign office. A bottle of good whiskey is seen. Cora is reading a press release on her laptop and Esther is talking to Emily on her phone. Both women have calmed somewhat following the ordeal)

ESTHER

Yes, they were right. No one was hurt. Including me . . . No – no that isn't necessary . . . Honey, I'm fine. I won't let this rattle me. And neither should you . . . Alright, Emily. Bye.

(She shuts off the phone, then pours whiskey into a glass and drinks)

CORA

“ . . . the gunman, however, refused to give his name and carried no identification. Upon being fingerprinted, it was found that he'd held prior convictions and had served time in prison for armed robbery and burglary. Upon his last prison release, he became a born again Christian and evangelical minister – ”

(Esther laughs derisively)

Oh, Esther!

ESTHER

I never got a look at him, Cora.

CORA

I did.

ESTHER

Well?

CORA

Well . . . he was white.

ESTHER

That wasn't funny.

CORA

At the very least, nobody took any bullets.

ESTHER

Right. There'd been but one bullet. Meant for me.

CORA

And you dodged it.

ESTHER

Thank God!

CORA

If the God you serve is real –

ESTHER

Don't start that mess. Not now. Please!

(Silence. Esther pours then downs another drink)

I won't quit.

CORA

You're sure?

ESTHER

I won't be talked out of it, either.

CORA

I of all people would not deign to try and talk you out of anything. Unless you wanted to blow your brains out –

(Esther reacts)

I'm sorry.

ESTHER

You're still with me, then? Down the line?

CORA

Does that question even need to be –

ESTHER

There's a chance that the next bullet will get us both. So, yes! I need to ask. If these extremist hotheads hate me, be good and sure they hate you double-worse.

Now I gotta know, baby. In fact, I'll ask: are *you* afraid to die?

CORA

Of course, I am. And I won't apologize for admitting it.

ESTHER

Then it might be time to think about . . .

CORA

You're not getting rid of me. So, stop trying.

ESTHER

Go and talk to Suzy.

CORA

Don't worry about Suzy. I'll deal with her.

ESTHER

The two of you have a child –

CORA

I know. And I ain't got to be reminded of it . . .

ESTHER

Understand that I'm only concerned –

CORA

Esther, if you stay in, I stay. And we need to get off this subject and get to work on this campaign –

ESTHER

Cora . . .

CORA

Goddammit, we have to stay in! Both of us! If you won't quit, if you want to stand up to these bastards, then I stand, too! Now I'm done talking.

(Silence as Cora busies herself)

ESTHER

You must see an awful lot in me.

CORA

And you better see it, too. Or somebody will get their righteous ass beat.

ESTHER

And I sure can't have that.

(Silence)

CORA

Back when you were so full of yourself, speechifying on how bad gay marriage and the gay lifestyle was, as if folks like us carried the Bubonic Plague . . . I hated talk such as that. And I hated you. But, over time, I saw change. Like you'd said. My father once told me a liar can be detected by the eyes. In an interview, you confessed as to how wrong you'd been about us. I listened, and I watched your eyes. I saw truth in them, Esther. Don't laugh, but it reminded me of how liberals saw Barry Goldwater. They hated him, too, but – over time – he became lovable to them.

(They laugh)

ESTHER

If I ask too much . . .

CORA

My commitment is solid. No more worrying. Okay?

(Esther nods, then pours another drink for herself and Cora. They toast, then drink)

ESTHER

I swear . . . a gunshot split my ears . . . and that was it. I didn't see him. I heard the shot . . . but . . . I never saw who it was.

(Blackout)

(Overhead spot fades in on Brill in US limbo)

ROBERT BRILL

Let us pray: Dear Lord, I ask that you touch Senator Bailey's heart . . . and I ask that you work with her mind. Help her to see the utter futility in her quest for re-election. Lead her to the understanding that the world is a wholly different place now, by your doing, of course. And that there is no longer a political life in it for her. Help her to save herself, Lord. To heed the dire message you've sent. And will continue to send until this poor, misguided child of subversion heeds and awakens. Then steps out of the race for good. For her own sake, Jesus – see that she comes to her senses.

Amen.

(Blackout)

(Overhead spot fades in on Ross Collins)

ROSS COLLINS

Once again: *“there can be no progressivism in the true sense without Democratic Socialism. Such an implementation would be akin to running a marathon on one leg . . .”*

(Ross chuckles)

Unquote.

I’m Ross Collins. And I am a Democratic Socialist. And the repeated quotation is from a man who served as my mentor even up to his passing – the late Senator Barker Hudson III. A man who identified himself as an honest progressive. Interestingly enough, like Mr. Brill and, sure, like my late friend, the senator, I do not apologize or blush behind who I am. I stand for the ideal of Democratic Socialism, which I believe can work in a free market society. I have no issues with free markets. All I ask is that no one be left out, that all Americans have a place at the table. I am not against Capitalism. Yet I ask – no, demand! that a concerted effort be made to remove the sin of exploitation of the common man by the wealthy and the powerful.

Contrary to certain opinions, there is nothing at all wrong with depending upon the government – if by dependence we mean to a government committed to the welfare of its citizenry and not their subjugation.

I, Ross Collins, dare to run as a Democratic Socialist in a southern red state because, even here, there are people who are tired and need to be heard.

(Robert Brill enters)

ROBERT BRILL

I do believe such talk will get you killed, sir.

ROSS COLLINS

Is that a threat?

ROBERT BRILL

A warning. Get with the damned program. This isn’t the 1930’s. Nobody is going to buy or tolerate this crap. And that goes for a lot of self-respecting liberals, what few there are that yet live, that is.

ROSS COLLINS

My! I thought an ass-sucking zealot like yourself would come up with something a little more relishing to put me in my place. Though I suppose if I were a Jew –

(Brill is about to respond)

Hold your tongue, Mr. Brill. Someone might be listening.

ROBERT BRILL

You don't know me, so – please – cease from trying to get personal.

ROSS COLLINS

Excuse me?

ROBERT BRILL

State Senator Brill, if you please.

ROSS COLLINS

You're a touchy sort.

ROBERT BRILL

I simply demand respect.

ROSS COLLINS

And what do they say about those who demand respect . . . ?

(Brill advances)

Point taken.

ROBERT BRILL

Just watch your damn mouth.

ROSS COLLINS

By the way, you are aware that the polls have me ahead? By a few margins, but ahead, nonetheless, right? That being said, how far do you think you'll go? Realistically?

ROBERT BRILL

I plan to go the distance. Full throttle.

ROSS COLLINS

On this particular platform?

ROBERT BRILL

The Good Lord and *they* – the people, will support me.

(Ross Collins chuckles)

Come to think of it, Mr. Collins, you're right: we are quite similar. Why, look closely at our constituencies. Both are tired and angry. Damned angry. For the same reasons, basically. Admit it.

ROSS COLLINS

The country –

ROBERT BRILL

. . . is failing them. Get it?

(Ross Collins smiles and acknowledges)

This race is between you and me, Ross Collins. This fight is ours. Esther Bailey and all that she represents, at this point, are mere footnotes.

ROSS COLLINS

The black woman goes down, and it's a white man's game once again –

ROBERT BRILL

Oh, for once, cut the damned spigot on that bleeding heart and think about what you'll say after I beat your degenerate socialist ass.

ROSS COLLINS

Now who's showing disrespect?

(Brill laughs)

Fine. And for what it's worth, *State Senator*, good luck with your campaign.

ROBERT BRILL

I'm a Christian. I've never believed in luck.

(Robert Brill exits. Fade on Ross Collins)

(Crossfade to the Commentator speaking with Cora)

INTERVIEWER

I understand that there is new information that's been acquired on the campaign of your challenger, Robert Brill –

CORA

We've released information to the press on the fact that the Brill Campaign has received and continues to receive donations from at least three extremist organizations . . .

INTERVIEWER

Among them are the American Freedom Party –

CORA

Correct, as well as a group based in St Louis, Missouri known as the Council of Conservative Citizens. And Stormfront, which is based in Florida.

INTERVIEWER

Stormfront! Well, it now seems that Senator Bailey has all the proof she needs to call out –

CORA

They are extremist and White Nationalist, yes. And though Mr. Brill is not an actual member of –

INTERVIEWER

Miss Knowles, he might not call himself as such, however –

CORA

What matters is that we're getting a more detailed portrait, if you will, of the candidate known as Robert Brill. We've also uncovered a very close association with the deceased White Nationalist writer Simon Dellings.

INTERVIEWER

Who is said to have laid the literary foundation for the Alt-Right.

CORA

Precisely. We have conclusive, bald-faced evidence that this man was, in point of fact, State Senator Brill's mentor.

INTERVIEWER

This sounds like a real game changer.

CORA

And change is what must be stressed to our constituents. Esther Bailey has *changed* for the better! She has come to terms with her potential as well as her role as a representative of the people of this state and the nation. She is not perfect. Nor has she ever put herself up as the model of perfection. She is a work in progress. God is not finished with her. There is still so much that she can do. And we're asking the voters to stick with her, not due to the fact that both alternatives represent ultimate disaster, but because Esther represents limitless promise. And results! I know what I'm talking about!

(Fade on Cora)

(Lights rise on Esther coming to the end of a stump speech)

ESTHER

. . . Yes, believe it! I now represent the “sane” wing of the Republican Party.

(She laughs)

I mean no offense. If anything, I remain committed to all that motivates and identifies with the G.O.P. I’ve only discarded the anger. And I merely wish to make such principles work. For all Americans.

(Noelene enters)

NOELENE

I do wish you’d show as much concern for your child.

ESTHER

Excuse me?

NOELENE

You know who I am, don’t you?

ESTHER

Yes, but –

NOELENE

Oh, that business with you and your daughter not getting along is all over the place.

ESTHER

I guess if I lowered myself to read some of that trash, I’d –

NOELENE

There is contention in your household, is there not?

ESTHER

Would it be any of your business if there were?

NOELENE

I’m sorry. After all, who am I to –

ESTHER

Good day, Ma’am.

NOELENE

You're wasting your time with this campaign.

ESTHER

Where have I heard that before?

NOELENE

What I say carries weight, Miss. More than you'll ever be able to manage.

ESTHER

If there's anything other than BS in this, speak it now.

NOELENE

I do pity you, Senator. And though undeserving, I pray for your soul.

ESTHER

According to the Bible, we are all undeserving because we are all sinners.

NOELENE

I beg your pardon, but I have been saved from sin. And this election, for you, is a lost cause.

ESTHER

Fine. Anything else?

NOELENE

See to your child, Senator. Before it's too late.

ESTHER

Is there something I should know?

NOELENE

Maybe.

See, like yourself, I raised my child alone. Robert's father had dropped out of the game when he'd had been an infant. I worked, scuffled, did whatever I knew to keep my boy fed and provided for. He wanted to quit school and support me, but I forbade it, as my will had been for him to finish school and even complete college, which he did.

He even went so far as to cheat death. Twice!

(Esther is incredulous)

Do not laugh, Miss. I believe in my heart that my son is a gift from God Himself. He's charmed, Senator. Protected by grace. It would surprise you to know that I nearly aborted him. My own child. I found myself pregnant right after my

husband was sent to prison. I went ahead and made an appointment to terminate the pregnancy. I sat in the clinic and . . . I don't know, for some divine reason decided not to go through with it. So . . . I walked out. And went home.

ESTHER

And carried a child to term. Bless you, ma'am.

NOELENE

For giving birth to the child who would become Robert Brill? That warrants a blessing? My! That is awfully "white" and noble for one such as you.

ESTHER

I am a Christian, ma'am. We are all children of –

NOELENE

Some of us, Senator. Some.

ESTHER

I beg your pardon?

NOELENE

There are those of us who live as the sons and daughters of God. While others remain the descendants of the Fallen. And bear the curse.

(Esther turns away)

That had been the first sign of my sons charmed, blessed life . . . making the decision not to kill him in the womb.

(Esther stops)

Wouldn't you care to hear of the second?

My husband returned home after serving fifteen years in prison. He'd been a little loaded, having visited one or two bars on the journey back. I felt sympathy and told him that if he went to lie down for a while, I'd make him something to eat later. Robert was sixteen and got all over me for letting that man back in the house, father or no father. At the time, Robert had an after-school job and did what he could to help out. He'd gone to work, then saw me and his father in the heat of an argument when he got back home. That good for nothing man said Robert couldn't be his son if I'd had an abortion. And I tried with all my mother's wit to convince him that I never saw it through. He wasn't buying it. And claimed that I must have had someone else. We kept a rifle in the house. He had it and was aiming at me when Robert jumped between us. Robert grabbed the barrel and – and his daddy shot him.

My son nearly died. Yet the hand of God saved him again. He recovered,

Senator. He lived!

The time to begin defending our country is now! The hour for taking it back is now! And my boy represents that first shot off Fort Sumpter! That's right, Senator: this is, in point of fact, the beginning of the second political insurrection, *in the true sense of the term*. And we'll get it right this time. I guarantee it! I tell you this to point out the utter futility in attempting to wage a campaign against us. Not only did he beat death *twice* . . . he will destroy you and that socialist imp Ross Collins. Just as sure as I am standing here.

If you know what's best . . . drop out of the race. And go home. And see to your child.

(Noelene exits. Lights fade)

(Lights rise on News Commentator)

COMMENTATOR

. . . As for the U.S. Senate race, the challengers Robert Brill and Ross Collins appear to be in a virtual dead-heat, while incumbent Esther Bailey trails by nearly ten points. In fact, the next four months are crucial for the Senator, who must draft a strategy toward closing her current gap, or reach a proverbial point of no return in her re-election bid . . .

(Fade on Commentator. Lights rise on Cora and Esther in the campaign office)

ESTHER

. . . But that's where the seat of the hatred is. Those are Robert Brill's people now. They won't listen to me.

CORA

We can find a way to turn them, or at least a good number of them, if we try.

ESTHER

Cora, this is the white working class. Once, sure, a Republican like me could sit and have coffee with such folks. Not anymore. Brill has poisoned the waters. And their heads. Now days, they'd just as soon blow up the house. With me in it.

CORA

Go and talk to them, anyway, and try to diffuse the situation. And *listen*, too, as a matter of fact. They might holler and curse you to a dog, but at least –

ESTHER

They won't shoot me?

CORA

There will be protection. The FBI has seen to that.

ESTHER

Sure.

CORA

Sit with them and lend them an ear. Make them feel that somebody is, at least, considering what they have to say. Reassure them that you're still on their side. I think when it's all said and done, Hillary Clinton will realize in ignoring these people she committed a grave error.

ESTHER

And, Lord knows, I'm no Hillary Clinton.

CORA

No, but you are on the verge of drowning! And the time is ripe for you to grab whatever kind of stick, ugly or otherwise, and save the damn ship.

ESTHER

Since I got into politics, I worry over the fact that God doesn't like ugly.

CORA

God is not a politician. And never had to run for nothing.

(Cora goes to her laptop)

I'll go ahead and set it up. And we'll announce this meeting at the press conference in the morning.

ESTHER

It's too bad there's no sex scandal to throw on Brill's head.

CORA

Lord, no! In that regard, the man is beyond reproach.

ESTHER

Never married. No girlfriend. In fact, did he ever have a girlfriend?

CORA

Well . . . as they say – “according to rumor . . . “

ESTHER

Is he –

CORA

No. And it's impossible for anybody that fucked up in the head to be gay.

ESTHER

Now, Cora . . .

CORA

What they're saying is . . .

ESTHER

Does he have problems?

CORA

It can't be proven, but the word on the street is that Brill has "man problems". For which he refuses treatment.

It's only talk. And not worth repeating.

(Cora is now reading an email)

ESTHER

Did you read the latest polls?

CORA

Esther, I'm managing the campaign. Until it's finished, polls, coffee and a shot of bourbon here and there are what I subsist on.

ESTHER

Then you're aware of the latest indicators: if not for Ross Collins, Robert Brill would have the edge. And beat me by a solid margin.

(Cora suddenly appears alarmed by the email she is reading)

Anyway . . . impotence and polls notwithstanding –

CORA

Esther, sorry, but . . . come and look at this.

(Esther stands by Cora and observes)

It's about Emily.

(Silence as she reads)

You know anything about this?

(Esther reacts with restrained horror from what she has read)

Esther? . . .

(Fade on Campaign Office. Crossfade to Commentator interviewing Ross Collins)

ROSS COLLINS

. . . Yeah, it happened in college. We went to the same school. And it's not something I'm proud of or really want to talk about . . .

INTERVIEWER

In other words, you were a participant –

ROSS COLLINS

NO! Absolutely not! I didn't say that. I believe I said –

INTERVIEWER

. . . That, if anything, you were a witness to what had happened, correct?

ROSS COLLINS

More, or less. I mean, not really. Again, I'm ashamed to admit . . .

INTERVIEWER

Was Ms. Bailey acting against her will?

ROSS COLLINS

It was plain to everyone that she wasn't. In fact –

INTERVIEWER

Was she drunk?

ROSS COLLINS

Clearly.

INTERVIEWER

Then isn't it reasonable to assume –

ROSS COLLINS

I repeat –

(Interviewer attempts to interrupt)

No one forced her.

INTERVIEWER

Still . . .

ROSS COLLINS

And let me add that this should in no way reflect upon Senator Bailey's re-election campaign. This is, after all, a family issue. And, to tell you the truth, it should have remained private. And I think I've said too much.

(Fade on interviewer. Emily enters)

EMILY

A little pre-emptive strike, I suppose.

ROSS COLLINS

It wasn't my idea.

EMILY

Which one: to rape me or paint me as a slut rag?

ROSS COLLINS

You know what your problem is: you're spoiled. And –

(She spits in his face. He wipes his face with his hand)

Get with the program and understand the world as it is, Emily. This is not a goddamned birthday party.

EMILY

Which means if I had balls, you'd have them.

ROSS COLLINS

I did what I had to do.

EMILY

Which meant telling a lie.

ROSS COLLINS

Who hasn't?

EMILY

A goddamned lie!

ROSS COLLINS

Okay! It was fabricated and pre-empted. There'd been grapevine that the real

story was about to be leaked. No one wanted to risk it catching fire. So, yeah, my people did what was needed in order to subvert –

EMILY

And I expected a socialist to have integrity.

ROSS COLLINS

The same is said of vegetarians. Stop being naïve.

EMILY

Fuck you, Ross.

ROSS COLLINS

And we'll all be fucked, as well, if this crap doesn't stop here.

EMILY

You're so full of shit, it's pathetic . . . !

ROSS COLLINS

Emily, this isn't about me –

(Emily reacts)

If it were, I'd deal with it a lot differently. The terrain has been altered, however, not just with this election, but for the fact that Brill is in the picture. Emily . . . the last thing anyone – ANYONE wants is for this man to win. That would be catastrophic, to say the least. The mood of the country is at its worst since the fucking Antebellum. The ground is fertile for someone like Brill. And his influence is spreading like a plague, even outside the state. Not to mention the fact that he's getting a mountain of out of state contributions. *And not just from fringe groups.* Your mother, with all due respect, doesn't stand a snowflakes chance over a campfire this time. *We cannot risk anything.* If you blow the whistle, I could be out. Finished. *And Brill could win.* Do you want that?

(Silence)

I need your help.

(She laughs derisively)

This is bigger than us, Emily.

EMILY

No shit?

ROSS COLLINS

Please.

EMILY

As a matter of fact, I'd always wanted to be important. To feel crucial . . . essential . . . to something big. And after all these years . . . look at me! Emily Bailey! Holding an entire U.S. election right between her Black woman's tits. Whoever said "be careful what you wish for" knew what the hell they were talking about, didn't they?

ROSS COLLINS

Alright, the *country* needs you. Will that suffice?

(Ross Collins exits. Lights rise on Esther)

ESTHER

Whatever happened . . . I'd appreciate it if it's kept to yourself. What's done is dead. And I don't care to know.

EMILY

Thank you. Now I won't have an excuse to lie or apologize.

ESTHER

I only wish I could put my finger on what exactly is going on with you . . .

EMILY

Can I at least ask a question?

ESTHER

Knock yourself out.

EMILY

Would you care to know if any of this is *true*?

ESTHER

Again, Emily, I don't care –

(Emily laughs)

For once, show some respect. For me. And if you can manage it, for yourself, too.

EMILY

In other words, I'm finally being taken seriously.

ESTHER

Go to hell!

EMILY

It must feel great to be so superior. To everything. Even yourself.

ESTHER

That does not make one word of sense.

EMILY

Sure, it does, mom. But as stated – *you don't care*. And therein lies the problem.

ESTHER

If you have something to say –

EMILY

What would be the point?

ESTHER

Goddammit, Emily, I raised you better. I know I did. And to behave in such a way, regardless as to when it happened . . .

(Silence)

I want to know what in the hell got into your damn head?

EMILY

Didn't I just hear –

ESTHER

It was to get at me, wasn't it? All this to make me look bad. If that's so, just have the decency to admit it –

EMILY

No, mom, it wasn't politically motivated. And how dare you. *HOW DARE YOU!*

(Silence)

ESTHER

Emily . . . my daughter . . . if I somehow failed as a mother –

EMILY

Failure is not an option. You're a parent. And parents must at least display the semblance of perfection. Otherwise, young folks might end up worse than what they're destined for.

ESTHER

What are you talking about . . . ?

EMILY

That day on “The View” . . . when the conversation turned to *rape* . . . you said something about women taking responsibility for themselves . . . “*Though the mere thought of rape itself is horrible enough, still . . . a woman needs to exercise good judgement and not put herself in harms way*” . . . and you even had the gall to wonder if half of what women refer to as rape could even be classified as such. Whoopi Goldberg and Barbara Walters gave you the verbal ass kicking of the moment. And rightfully so. But you stood pat. “I won’t apologize for being raised better!” That’s what you said! In all your defiant, superior and dignified arch-conservative black womanhood! *You were raised better*. Someone then asked if you’d hold your own daughter to such standards. “Even more so,” you said. “*Even more so!*”

That’s when it occurred to me that . . . how I’d been violated . . . could never be brought to light. And with that . . . I came to know what *real* vulnerability is. As if I’d finally become aware of the entrenched distance between me . . . and my mother.

ESTHER

Emily . . . were you . . . ?

EMILY

“*Though the mere thought of rape itself is horrible enough, still . . . a woman needs to exercise good judgement and not put herself in harms way.*”

ESTHER

Sweet Jesus!

EMILY

Unquote.

ESTHER

Why did you wait so long to say anything . . . ?

EMILY

What good would it have done when, unaware of anything else – including the truth – you knew the whole story *BY ROTE*?

(Silence)

ESTHER

Do . . . do you know –

EMILY

. . . *who it was?* I'll put it this way: if the truth reveals itself . . . the bad guy could win the election . . . but the *perpetrator* could lose.

ESTHER

The bad guy . . . ? What –

EMILY

It's a foregone conclusion that you don't stand a ghost of a chance at being re-elected. Therefore, it's important, crucial, in fact . . . that Ross Collins stay in the race . . . *and win*. And that Robert Brill *lose*.

(Silence as Esther absorbs the information)

ESTHER

That Socialist . . . *bastard*.

EMILY

And keep in mind that his opponent, Robert Brill, may not sport the name tag of a white supremacist glee club, but it's no longer a secret as to who is picking up his tab. And who he has to answer to.

ESTHER

And I'd been a fool not to have . . .

(Silence)

So, this is what "happened" to us.

EMILY

And with that . . . we uncovered our differences. At least I did.

ESTHER

We don't have to let it end us –

EMILY

Mom . . .

ESTHER

In fact, to hell with the damned election . . . !

EMILY

If you mouth so much as one word, I'll deny it!

ESTHER

What?

EMILY

Don't make me embarrass you.

ESTHER

After what this man did –

EMILY

Stop reminding me. I know what he did. And I'll deal with it.

ESTHER

How in the world did you come to be so stupid . . . ?

EMILY

When the situation is this dire –

ESTHER

Oh, bullshit!

EMILY

Mom, please! Just . . . try not to get shot. You are going to lose this election. And staying alive is the only feasible action left to take.

ESTHER

What about you?

EMILY

Don't worry. *I'll live.*

(Emily exits. Esther, visibly crushed, is left alone with her thoughts. Lights fade)

(End Act One)

ACT TWO

(Lights rise on the Commentator)

COMMENTATOR

. . . And what is fascinating about this particular senatorial race is how Senator Brill has not only maintained impressive numbers but has proven himself to be a highly competitive and formidable candidate with a seemingly stubborn staying power among the electorate. This in spite of clear evidence of support from far right and White Nationalist organizations. And in spite of having no party affiliation. No one expected Mr. Brill to get this far . . .

(Fade on commentator as Robert Brill enters)

ROBERT BRILL

“ . . . And it shall come to pass in the last days . . . I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

(Noelene enters)

Though I'm not yet old . . . the dreams come.

NOELENE

What dreams, son?

ROBERT BRILL

Mother . . . do you, at times, wish there was some other way for me to fulfill my promise other than in politics?

NOELENE

I don't question the will of God.

ROBERT BRILL

On occasion, I do.

NOELENE

God's people are not perfect.

ROBERT BRILL

Oh, no! In fact, Descartes had something to say about perfection.

(Noelene is incredulous)

Nothing. I'm just . . . thinking aloud.

NOELENE

Is there something wrong?

(Silence)

ROBERT BRILL

Y' know, Rebecca . . . she's aware of the fact that you don't trust her.

NOELENE

And I could care less as to what that woman thinks . . .

ROBERT BRILL

She also says you have too much presence in this campaign.

NOELENE

Excuse me . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

She feels it doesn't bode well to have an unmarried candidate's mother hanging on his coattails every time he's seen. And, to tell you the truth, mother, I agree with her.

NOELENE

Do I not have a right to help?

ROBERT BRILL

If there was anything to offer, sure. But face it, you know nothing of strategy or –

NOELENE

I'm not stupid.

ROBERT BRILL

No one has said that. However, you have no experience in running a campaign. Making phone calls from the campaign office, knocking on doors, passing out fliers – there's always a place for that, but . . .

(Silence)

Why are you looking at me in that way?

NOELENE

I'm concerned.

ROBERT BRILL

About?

Your sanity. NOELENE
 Come again? ROBERT BRILL
 There've been dreams? NOELENE
 One particular dream, yes – ROBERT BRILL
 And what was its nature? NOELENE
 I am not losing my mind. ROBERT BRILL
 You're sure about that? NOELENE
 Damn you, mother. ROBERT BRILL
 Be careful of what you say. NOELENE
 I'm in control of my faculties. Rest assured of this – ROBERT BRILL
 Yet something agonizes you. NOELENE
 (Silence)
 ROBERT BRILL
A dream, mother. Last night in my sleep . . . I do believe that God sent me a vision . . . of someone who seeks to take my life.
 All who work this campaign, those in my immediate staff, are people whom I've known or who've been thoroughly vetted.
 NOELENE
 But what do they carry in their hearts?

ROBERT BRILL

The love of God. And a willingness to do anything to defend this country.

(Silence)

Mother – *I saw a face*. And it's rather odd . . . now that I'm awake . . . I can no longer recall it. Yet in the heat of that nightmare . . . *God showed the face* . . . of one who seeks to kill me.

NOELENE

A face?

ROBERT BRILL

I'm unsure as to if it'd been a man or a woman . . . But no – no! It couldn't be Rebecca. I can't accept that. And I repeat: I am *not* losing my mind!

(Silence. Noelene embraces her son)

NOELENE

I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress.

ROBERT BRILL

In Him I will trust.

NOELENE/ROBERT BRILL

Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence . . .

ROBERT BRILL

Yes!

NOELENE

. . . Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day. Amen.

ROBERT BRILL

Amen.

NOELENE

You've beaten death twice, my child.

ROBERT BRILL

But . . . what of the dream?

NOELENE

I can only attribute it to the devil. He works in mysterious ways, too.

(Silence)

ROBERT BRILL

Mother . . . I ask again: *why me?*

NOELENE

As was told – never question that. Accept it. Keep reading your Bible. Pray. And never forget what I’ve taught you.

(He acknowledges)

And do not ever refer to me as stupid again.

ROBERT BRILL

Mother –

NOELENE

I mean it!

ROBERT BRILL

This woman is no pushover. Aside from the fact that she’s smart, Rebecca is assertive and strong like . . .

(Silence)

. . . like you.

(Silence)

Fine. You’ll remain with the campaign. And I’ll . . . I’ll talk to Rebecca.

NOELENE

And put that know-it-all bitch in her place. Before I have to.

(Noelene exits as Simon Dellings fades in)

SIMON DELLINGS

You need her.

ROBERT BRILL

As I still need you.

SIMON DELLINGS

Oh, I was merely a good influence. Or at least I hoped to be. That woman, however – she is a rock. A blessing, my son.

ROBERT BRILL

Amen.

SIMON DELLINGS

Would that I had been blessed as such.

As with you, I'd not known much of anything of my father. As with you, my mother would raise me alone. In a *black* neighborhood. Such a place was all the good-for-nothing wench could afford. Or perhaps she had no desire to better her condition. She'd take in a black lover, a dope peddler who'd teach me the ways of dealing drugs. The man grew to like me, and I him, when I think on it. In fact, I developed a loyalty which I held fast to even on being arrested for dealing and the illegal possession of a firearm. I refused to offer his name to the police even in exchange for leniency. I'd carry the full weight of my sentence, which was three years in juvenile detention.

While detained, I'd meet a young man very much like yourself who'd been well read, educated and acutely intelligent. He helped me to find myself, Robert. I'd been so lost, so blind . . . he awakened me to the knowledge of my ancestry and predetermined place in history and the future. He'd introduce me to books and to philosophy from men like me, who looked like me and shared my anger and hatred of our circumstances. He would prove to me that I belonged to a race that did not – *could not* have originated from brutes. I tell you, Robert, though behind bars and deprived of physical freedom, I experienced what few men have or will ever have the blessing to witness: spiritual freedom . . . a freeing of the soul!

I would now become a man of action. And I realized within the darkest reaches of my heart that I had to fulfill some vital act to seal my commitment: upon release, I returned home to find the circumstances just as they'd been before I left three years ago. I stood in my mother's bedroom . . . just past midnight. . . the no-account woman asleep with a different black, degenerate lover this time. I could feel the bile rising in my stomach . . .

I'd kill him in his sleep, Robert. I'd stab him to death. I did! I'd kill him, then pray with deep urgency to the Father above for forgiveness. Which He, in his infinite wisdom and forbearance, no doubt extended. As if He'd understood.

As for my sorry mother, she'd awake and curse me to Satan for not at least waiting until the black bastard was awake to kill him to his face. *A man worth his salt would have done as such!*

(They laugh. Silence)

As to what became of that woman, my mother . . . I am in the dark. And I don't care. Yes, she was my mother. And I do pray for her, from time to time. But there is no love, no longing. My heart is moved by something much bigger and more

worthy of love.

Robert . . . I love you more than I have or will ever love any man or woman. Looking at you, I now realize that my work in this world is done. And I am satisfied.

ROBERT BRILL

Yet, sir . . . I dream. And my dreams torment me.

SIMON DELLINGS

Mere weakness, my son. See it as such.

ROBERT BRILL

Thank you.

SIMON DELLINGS

I took the time to listen to the “Faust” opera yet again the other night. Ah, yes! Such life lessons are in that work. And I do believe Faust would have been better served if he’d killed himself, as he’d intended at the beginning of the piece . . . rather than deal with the devil.

When you are elected, my son, avoid such a trap at any cost. Stay resilient. And refuse to make a single concession or Faustian bargain with the opposition. The day for compromise and political horse trading is as dead as alchemy. Do not concede power to anyone or anything. Men and women are needed who will take and hold power as if it were their next breath. Power is the key! And let America bear witness to the utter senselessness of clinging to a system which has outlived its usefulness.

Do you understand?

(Robert nods)

The diabetes which has poisoned my body has numbered my days. I entrust everything to you. Carry on. Destiny is set. And everything is down to time.

(Fade on Simon. Lights rise on Cora who has been observing them)

ROBERT BRILL

Amen.

(Fade on Robert. Lights now rise on Esther in her campaign office with Cora)

CORA

And what, pray tell, is our destiny?

ESTHER

When I was young, I thought I knew. Now . . . I only know what I want.

CORA

That's saying a lot. Considering the fact that there are plenty of grown-ups like us who don't.

ESTHER

Or who have the luxury of a predetermined life.

CORA

Luxury, you say?

ESTHER

Yes. Having it all spelled out from birth.

CORA

Sounds more like a curse, if you asked me.

ESTHER

Maybe.

(Silence)

Cora . . . I think I need to pray, but . . .

CORA

But?

ESTHER

I'm afraid to.

CORA

If you can't pray . . . have a talk with your child.

ESTHER

Not now.

CORA

When?

ESTHER

In time.

CORA

What's wrong with now?

ESTHER

Come on, Cora. It's late in the evening and late in the campaign.

CORA

I'm sure it won't hurt to take just a little break and –

ESTHER

Well, I can't! We're hanging on a weak limb by thin claws. And if we go down . . . well, I won't go without swinging whatever sized stick we're left with. If I lose, then let me be seen fighting! And not hiding behind my daughter – that's what they'll print, that's what they'll think. Face it. The opposition already smells enough blood in the water to choke a whale.

CORA

You're sure Emily was upfront about what happened?

ESTHER

I believe her, yes.

That stupid girl! Stupid, stupid girl . . .

(Silence)

The thing about prayer is . . . I don't know how. I never knew how to pray! I've been a Christian for as long as I've been able to wash myself. Yet my prayers . . . Oh, God! My pitiful praying was always just that. Pitiful! Lacking in any degree of finesse.

CORA

They tell me God listens to the heart. And you ought to know better.

ESTHER

Do I?

CORA

Esther, please. Go to Emily. I can manage here. I'll talk to the press and tell them you're taking a day of personal time with your daughter –

ESTHER

When I'm ready. Not now.

CORA

What is the matter with you?

ESTHER

I won't give them what they want. I know what they expect.

CORA

Sweet Jesus.

ESTHER

Exactly! If I were *white, male* and Republican, they'd see to letting me slide. But a black Republican *woman* – oh, hell, no! Those bastards are just waiting and watching for this tight-assed conservative bitch to show her inept colors.

CORA

I thought only liberals stooped to that kind of paranoia.

ESTHER

And who would have thought I'd one day wind up in those shoes.

CORA

Oh, screw all that! Go home!

ESTHER

WHEN I'M READY! Now leave me be about my daughter. As a matter of fact, run my campaign and let my private life alone.

CORA

Sure! What little campaign there's left to run.

ESTHER

Okay, we're low in the polls and running short of money. But you're old and experienced enough to know how to use what you've got.

CORA

In other words, *one monkey don't stop no show!*

ESTHER

That's right! So run the damn show.

CORA

I would. But considering the sorry state of the headliner –

ESTHER

Fuck you.

CORA

Fine! Now maybe I'll just quit.

ESTHER

Don't let me stop you! Hell, the campaign's gone to shit anyway.

(Silence. Cora slowly steps over and takes Esther's hand. They embrace for an extended moment as Esther weeps, then recovers and prays)

Lord . . . be with my child. Let her know of the love I have for her . . . a love which I've never known how to express. Let her know how much I love her . . . and need her to be happy. Please.

CORA

Amen.

ESTHER

Amen.

CORA

For what it's worth . . . that won't so bad.

ESTHER

Hmph.

(Cora laughs)

In fact . . . I think I could use a drink now.

(They laugh)

CORA

What the hell!

(Cora gets glasses and the whiskey and pours. She and Esther then toast and drink)

This stuff ain't bad.

ESTHER

It belonged to my now deceased and estranged father.

CORA

Barker Hudson? You're kidding!

ESTHER

Would you believe he left me two whole crates in his will?

CORA

Damn!

(They laugh tentatively. Silence)

This campaign ain't turning out so good.

ESTHER

No, but . . .

CORA

We must soldier on.

ESTHER

To the death, if I need to. Even if it kills me.

(Cora refills the glasses. They drink. Silence)

Ross Collins . . . he'd been a senior. And she, a freshman. He and Emily'd known one another. He and . . . and a few friends, like the news report said, threw a party at a house – where this sort of thing usually happens. Always in some back room at some damned party where nobody can see anything! . . . Emily said she'd gone to the bathroom, which was just off from one of the bedrooms in the house, having no idea she'd been followed. When she stepped out, a man – she couldn't see him – threw a coat over her head, grabbed her, then threw her on the floor – not the bed, but the damn floor, like an arm full of dirty clothes. She felt him squatting on her chest to hold the coat in place . . . while he pulled down her pants . . . then tore off her underwear –

(Cora places a hand on Esther's arm. Esther pauses)

She wasn't able to pull the coat off until it was over. And there he stood, zipping his fly, buckling his belt . . . sweating and panting like some big rough dog.

(Esther pours a drink)

I want to make it known . . . but Emily . . . she's says she'll deny every word. Damn! The girl must be stupid, scared . . . or –

CORA

A sacrificial lamb?

(Esther drinks)

ESTHER

She should have reported it. Why the hell didn't she get up and go to the damn police? And report it? *It's what I would've done.* What the hell was the matter with that girl? What was in her head? WHY THE HELL DIDN'T SHE REPORT IT *THEN?* WHEN IT HAPPENED . . . ?

CORA

You know why.

ESTHER

I don't know why! And I don't understand it!

(She throws the glass against a wall. We hear it break)

Stupid girl. Stupid girl!

(Blackout)

(Lights rise on Ross Collins speaking with Commentator)

ROSS COLLINS

. . . Yes, that's right! To lay the groundwork for a vibrant healthcare system with access for all Americans will be my first priority. Next, I want to initiate a second labor movement in this country. It is a fact that the workplace in America is far too authoritarian. Let's see what government can do to give the common man – the worker – a stronger voice and a more decisive place at the table. And third, there's the environment . . .

(Overhead spot fades in on Robert Brill)

. . . Climate change represents a clear and present reality as well as a clear and present danger in our world –

ROBERT BRILL

Prove it!

ROSS COLLINS

I believe the science speaks for itself.

ROBERT BRILL

Bull!

COMMENTATOR

Excuse me, Mr. Brill – I’m sorry – *STATE SENATOR* Brill. I’ll be with you in a moment.

ROBERT BRILL

What’s wrong with right now?

ROSS COLLINS

Save it for the debate, Brill.

ROBERT BRILL

Screw that! I want you to prove to me and to the American people here *and* now that a changing climate is the big bad wolf you liberal and socialist bums say it is.

COMMENTATOR

You’ll have your chance, sir –

ROSS COLLINS

It’s okay. I cede the floor. Besides, I’ve got time.

(Ross Collins exits)

ROBERT BRILL

WHAT ARE YOU RUNNING FROM, COLLINS? WHAT?

(Brill looks at the Commentator)

Well?

(Silence. She starts to exit)

Are you afraid of me, too?

COMMENTATOR

No. I have another engagement.

(She exits. Esther fades in)

ESTHER

I do not fear you.

ROBERT BRILL

Oh!

ESTHER

Nor do I hate.

ROBERT BRILL

Don't lie.

ESTHER

Sir, I am a Christian.

ROBERT BRILL

Ah! I incur your prayers, then?

ESTHER

In time. When the spirit will move to me to do so.

ROBERT BRILL

Which isn't today, I presume?

ESTHER

Of course not. This is the last leg of a campaign. And politics – like a bad marriage or great sex – reduces people to their baser instincts.

ROBERT BRILL

Thus, we're little more than two animals ready to cut one or the other to thin, edible ribbons.

ESTHER

And who in God's name would *pray* and ruin the fun?

ROBERT BRILL

Ye shall know them by their fruits. And yours, Madam Senator, fall rotten like scales from the eyes of the blind.

ESTHER

Well, I damn sure ain't about to make this easy and throw in the towel.

ROBERT BRILL

Oh, no! Absolutely not! Yet, as you say, it is quite late in the evening, isn't it?

ESTHER

With plenty of time yet to be beaten.

ROBERT BRILL

We shall see. Now permit me to ask you a rather tough question, if you wouldn't mind.

ESTHER

Certainly.

ROBERT BRILL

There's talk among the liberal cognoscenti and even amongst those who refer to themselves as Republican that I'm a false prophet. What's your opinion on this?

ESTHER

I don't take it seriously.

ROBERT BRILL

Oh, no?

ESTHER

As far as I'm concerned, you're a lightweight, far too insubstantial to bear any resemblance to a prophet, false, dead or otherwise.

ROBERT BRILL

Is this your belief or an attempt to convince yourself?

ESTHER

I never knew how to kid myself, sir.

ROBERT BRILL

Even when the media – of which your own daughter, who writes for a leftist magazine, is part – props me up as not just a false prophet, but a literal false Christ –

ESTHER

I don't care what the media says. *I'm* saying that you cannot scare me.

(Brill laughs)

Did you not ask my opinion, or was it a trick question?

ROBERT BRILL

What do you think?

ESTHER

I think that everybody wants something, Brill. What do you want? And what's the price?

ROBERT BRILL

I think that's better left between me and my God.

ESTHER

Who, by the way, is the same God I worship.

ROBERT BRILL

I wouldn't be too sure, if I were you.

ESTHER

What?

ROBERT BRILL

It's like this, Senator: we sit on the brink of a political and social uprising that will break this country into three parts.

ESTHER

Only three?

ROBERT BRILL

As a Christian, you ought to know the Bible: "*And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon was remembered before God . . .*"

ESTHER

" . . . *to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath –*"

ROBERT BRILL

Amen.

ESTHER

Baloney! Thinking high of yourself notwithstanding, I won't give the pleasure of calling you a false prophet. Not when I know a weak, *impotent* and angry asshole when I see one.

ROBERT BRILL

Who told you I was impotent?

(Esther is about to exit)

GET BACK HERE!

(She stops)

ESTHER

Watch your damn tone.

ROBERT BRILL

Screw that! Who said I was *impotent*?

ESTHER

It's not a question of what I heard, but what I sense.

ROBERT BRILL

I won't do it. I will not crawl into some gutter. There's no need. Your poll numbers are festering in the proverbial shitter while mine are climbing to glory –

ESTHER

. . . While getting the devil's pie delivered through the back door.

ROBERT BRILL

Do not question my integrity.

ESTHER

The stakes are too high for that.

ROBERT BRILL

Precisely! I am fighting for the life of the nation.

ESTHER

Y' know, there'd been a day when associating with Communists would wreck a campaign just as sure as bad body odor would kill a first date. Who would think in the 21st century, a certain candidate's ties to Neo-Nazi's, White Nationalists and other such screwballs would mean so little. In fact, his constituents will not only wink and nod, but just might give the son of a bitch the vote, the nomination and, hell, the goddamned office, to boot!

ROBERT BRILL

People are angry, Senator, and well aware of the high stakes. They just might do anything in response to them.

ESTHER

In that case . . . somebody has to either beat you –

ROBERT BRILL

Or, what? Kill me?

ESTHER

As you said – *the stakes are high*.

ROBERT BRILL

Dangerous times, indeed.

(Esther turns to exit)

Of course, if I am so formidable, you can always eliminate me yourself.

ESTHER

Oh, come on!

ROBERT BRILL

I never play.

ESTHER

It's not worth it.

ROBERT BRILL

Perhaps not to you, but what of the country? Wouldn't it be owed to them –

ESTHER

Sounds like you're asking for it.

ROBERT BRILL

Ah! A death wish! Which would be convenient, would it not?

ESTHER

Oh, to hell with it, Brill. I'll see you at the debate.

ROBERT BRILL

I believe I am a state senator –

ESTHER

Oh, KISS MY ASS!

(She exits. Fade)

(Lights rise on debate moderator)

MODERATOR

Good evening. And welcome to the 2016 U.S. Senatorial debate.

(Lights rise on three podiums. Esther, Robert Brill and Ross Collins enter, each taking a place behind a podium)

And here we have our candidates. First, the incumbent, Republican U.S. Senator Esther Bailey. Next, her Independent challenger, State Senator Robert Brill. And, finally, Educator and Democratic Socialist Ross Collins. Let's begin with opening statements. First from incumbent Senator Esther Bailey.

ESTHER BAILEY

Thankyou. As is known, I began my tenure in the U.S. Senate as a nationalist with the belief that my position be a sword to divide those committed to America from those whom I perceived to be intent on her destruction. Ultimately, I'd see the fallacy of such a stance, and how corrosive it was not just to the American ethos . . . but to my own inner wellbeing.

(Brill chuckles derisively)

I remain committed to the Republican Party and its principals, yet – henceforth – my determination is to seek not to break the country apart, but to reach out to my liberal and independent brethren in Washington and draft solutions palatable to the people, and no longer merely tow the party or ideological line. I understand that the numbers are not in my favor, yet . . . I ask for a second chance. And to be allowed to put this newfound change into action. I promise, you will not be disappointed.

MODERATOR

Thank you, Senator. Now, State Senator Robert Brill –

ROBERT BRILL

If no one objects, I'd like to forego an opening statement.

MODERATOR

Well . . .

ROBERT BRILL

If it's okay . . . ?

MODERATOR

Sure. I don't see why not.

ROBERT BRILL

I'd appreciate it.

MODERATOR

Fine. We'll move on to Democratic Socialist challenger . . .

ROSS COLLINS

I'm Ross Collins. Democratic Socialist. And I believe the title speaks for itself.

MODERATOR

Alright, then. On with the debate. Let's start with immigration. Recent figures have shown that undocumented immigration from Mexico has declined dramatically over the years, by double digits, in fact. However, we now witness a surge in immigration from further south, from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, individuals – many of them children – fleeing, not political or social oppression, but violence and gang war. Senator Bailey, I'll begin with you. Are there any workable solutions to this . . . dilemma, if you will?

ESTHER

Well, before anything, what needs to be discussed is a comprehensive immigration policy. It's clear that the issues which drove undocumented immigration from Mexico are not those which created the current problem with migrants from Central America –

ROBERT BRILL

Be sure to mention that a weak and facilitating establishment liberalism, which you are now flirting with, was and is at the heart of both problems . . .

MODERATOR

You'll have your turn, Mr. – I'm sorry, *State Senator Brill*. So, please!

ROBERT BRILL

Is it not proper that this woman who bears the mantle of an elected government official at least make an attempt at what is factual . . . ?

ESTHER

If I can be allowed to finish.

ROBERT BRILL

Go ahead. But watch yourself.

MODERATOR

Yes, do proceed, Senator.

ESTHER

For the record: I am a Republican committed to conservatism. As to the question: what is crucial is that we initiate an effective strategy on immigration. Otherwise, we're only engaging in armchair repartee and parlor games.

MODERATOR

And what ideas would you present for an immigration strategy?

ROBERT BRILL

Allow me to jump in –

MODERATOR

State Senator . . .

ROBERT BRILL

If we let this woman talk any further, we'll be submersed to the point of no return in the very parlor games and armchair gimmicks she professes to avoid . . .

ESTHER

To begin, we must look at ways that would give honest, law abiding and hard-working people a path to citizenship –

ROBERT BRILL

Absolutely not! We should never get into the habit of breaking the law to create new law . . .

ESTHER

. . . After all – what better way to create value than strive as a nation to keep families together . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

If families must be torn asunder to preserve the law, so be it.

ROSS COLLINS

How Christian!

MODERATOR

Senator Bailey, is there anything more you'd like to add . . . ?

ESTHER

Yes, one more thing: As it relates to undocumented immigration from Central America, I believe an examination of its causes are essential to –

ROBERT BRILL

Didn't you tell us – sometime in the not-too-distant past – despite undergoing some sort of mind-blowing, seemingly drug addled change, that you were still conservative? And, at the very least, a *simulated* Republican?

ESTHER

Again, my heart is in the Republican Party. Yet I am also practical –

ROBERT BRILL

You dare say that your Republican constituents are *im*-practical?

ESTHER

Sir . . .

ROSS COLLINS

May I have a word?

MODERATOR

I was just getting to you, Mr. Collins . . .

ROSS COLLINS

Yes – What needs to be stressed first, in my view, is that the Central Americans are, in point of fact, refugees. And must be treated as such. Therefore . . .

ROBERT BRILL

I've heard enough. Can we move on?

MODERATOR

State Senator, might we give your opponents a chance to speak?

ROSS COLLINS

Thank you! I mean, come one! *What would Jesus do?*

ROBERT BRILL

Are you mocking me?

MODERATOR

Gentlemen –

ROBERT BRILL

Alright, though I am neither a Democrat or Republican, I am, however, *practical*. Practical in the fact that I could care less as to the reason or root cause of those seeking to invade my home. My one duty . . . my only responsibility to myself, my family and my property is to do all I can to keep the –

MODERATOR

Language, sir!

ROBERT BRILL

Furthermore, if the government chooses to ignore the rules and mollicoddle these Godforsaken *immigrants*, what in the hell do the American people have to gain? How do I and my neighbors and fellow taxpayers benefit by allowing hordes of poor unskilled undereducated disease ridden –

MODERATOR

State Senator Brill!

ROBERT BRILL

I'm done.

MODERATOR

Good. Let's move on and talk a little about climate change.

ROBERT BRILL

Why?

MODERATOR

Excuse me . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

I thought we were here to debate the pressing issues of the day.

MODERATOR

And is climate change not . . . ?

ROBERT BRILL

The climate is always changing. And it's been so since the earth was created. So, what's the big deal?

ROSS COLLINS

Clearly, there's a problem –

ROBERT BRILL

Amen! And the problem is not with the climate.

ROSS COLLINS

I can only guess.

MODERATOR

In any event, the current data has shown dramatic increases in –

ROBERT BRILL

We're wasting time.

ESTHER BAILEY

What would you like to talk about, sir?

ROBERT BRILL

Something that makes a difference in the lives of the people of this state. Situations, attitudes and such, that affect them. And drive people to anger.

MODERATOR

Like?

ROBERT BRILL

Are you mocking me, too?

MODERATOR

No, State Senator. I am the moderator. And I set the rules and parameters of this debate.

ROBERT BRILL

At the expense of what the people want to hear.

MODERATOR

Y' know, sir, I'd be happy to allow you to just –

ROBERT BRILL

What? Leave?

ESTHER

Oh, no! We can't have that. I mean, if he leaves, the viewership goes down.

ROBERT BRILL

Alright! Let's talk about something important. Such as who this country belongs to.

MODERATOR

The answer to that isn't up for discussion.

ROBERT BRILL

Listen to that, Senator Bailey! Once upon a time, when your head was screwed in right, you would have had a woman such this for lunch!

ROSS COLLINS

I think I should be the one to exit –

ROBERT BRILL

Don't move a damn inch, Collins. I'm saving yours for last.

ESTHER

Which means I get mine first.

ROBERT BRILL

I wouldn't have it any other way.

MODERATOR

Alright! This has gone far enough . . .

ESTHER

Perhaps we should humor this gentleman. Just for a little while.

ROSS COLLINS

Sure. I'm game.

MODERATOR

As if we have a choice . . .

ESTHER

In fact, I've got a better idea: let's turn up the volume and talk about political and social extremism . . . anti-Semitism and racism . . . homophobia . . . police shootings of black youth –

ROBERT BRILL

Police shootings of black youth? Are you serious?

ESTHER

I'm not smiling.

ROBERT BRILL

Lady, if this were a certain time in American history, one such as yourself would be slapped as a turncoat.

ESTHER

For your information, such issues move Republicans as deeply as –

ROSS COLLINS

In which direction are they moved?

ROBERT BRILL

The extremism you speak of comes exclusively from the radical left. And if there is any racism, anti-Semitism, or – for that matter – homo-*whatever* . . . well, all of that was borne from the mire of liberal extremism . . .

ROSS COLLINS

You've got to be kidding . . .

ROBERT BRILL

Racial hatred, hatred of Jews and . . . none of this is my doing or my fault.

MODERATOR

No one said . . .

ROBERT BRILL

In fact, the jury's still out on whether any of the issues have any real basis in fact.

(Ross Collins laughs)

How much racism and Anti-Semitism have you seen, Mr. Collins?

ROSS COLLINS

Don't take it there, Brill.

ROBERT BRILL

What about homophobia?

ROSS COLLINS

Hurray! You can say the word, after all!

ROBERT BRILL

Here's one for you: sexism.

ROSS COLLINS

What of it?

ROBERT BRILL

Ever bore witness to the poor woman who's been victimized by it? Or, rather, have you ever –

ROSS COLLINS

I've never –

ROBERT BRILL

Yes?

ROSS COLLINS

This isn't the place to get . . . I mean –

ROBERT BRILL

Come again . . . ?

ROSS COLLINS

I won't admit to . . . No! I mean – Look, I've never . . .

MODERATOR

Let's stop this.

ROBERT BRILL

Admit to what, Collins? That you're as much a victim of your own manhood as –

ESTHER

What he's referring to has nothing to do with manhood.

ROBERT BRILL

As if you would know.

ESTHER

The same could be said of you.

ROBERT BRILL

What did you say . . . ?

(A loud, reverberating gunshot is heard. Everyone, including Brill, looks)

ROSS COLLINS

SENATOR BAILEY!! GET DOWN . . . !

(Collins pulls her down just as something – someone – catches Brills eye)

ROBERT BRILL

Rebecca . . . ?

(Another reverberating gunshot. Brill takes the bullet)

ROSS COLLINS

JESUS CHRIST! . . .

ESTHER

. . . NO!

(Brill falls, gripping his chest. Noelene enters, rushing to her sons side)

NOELENE

My boy! Oh, God!

(She takes him in her arms. Ross Collins feels pain in his chest)

ROSS COLLINS

Oh, no . . .

ESTHER

What's wrong?

ROSS COLLINS

My heart! I've gotta . . . Oh, man!

(He is about to collapse when Esther grabs him)

MODERATOR

We need a doctor! NOW!

(Moderator and Esther are now at Ross Collins side.
Brill looks upon his mother)

ROBERT BRILL

Oh, curse me! Curse me, mama –

NOELENE

I warned you. Oh, son, how I warned you . . .

ROSS COLLINS

Call an ambulance.

MODERATOR

It's on the way.

ROBERT BRILL

. . . Yes . . . yes, you warned me. Oh . . . *Rebecca!*

(Brill dies in his mothers arms)

NOELENE

No! NO! Damn you! DAMN ALL OF YOU!

(She weeps)

How could I have been wrong? How is it possible that I . . . that WE! . . . could be wrong? My son was blessed! And I could not have been wrong! We believed! WE ALL BELIEVED! NO! NO! *WE COULD NOT HAVE BEEN WRONG!*

(Blackout)

(Lights rise slowly in Esther's campaign office where she sits deep within her thoughts. After a moment, Cora enters)

CORA

Are you alright?

ESTHER

I'll live. Maybe.

CORA

Any word on Ross Collins?

ESTHER

They say it was a panic attack. Of course, we all thought worse, but . . . he'll recover.

CORA

Which means –

ESTHER

The son of a bitch is still in.

CORA

That's one opponent down, though. Look on it as a blessing.

ESTHER

Cora, if that wasn't so callous, I'd say you were a fool.

CORA

Why were we here for the past year, or so? Surely it wasn't for lack of anything better to do. Besides, with Brill gone, things just might have a chance of normalizing.

(Esther scoffs)

And don't even think about dropping out.

ESTHER

Why not? Who would be crazy enough to keep putting up with this shit? WHO?

(Cora suddenly gets a message on her phone. She reads it)

What is it?

(Silence)

What?

CORA

Brill . . . Brill yelled a name just before he was shot.

ESTHER

A woman's name –

CORA

Rebecca?

ESTHER

That's right – Hold it . . .

CORA

It says her intention was to kill *him*.

ESTHER

But wasn't she his campaign manager . . . ?

CORA

Who intended to kill *him*!

ESTHER

And not *me*?

(Cora reads from her phone)

CORA

Upon confessing to the murder, Rebecca Niles, campaign manager for Robert Brill, stated that, quote: “. . . support of the Brill candidacy is now untenable due to an undisclosed circumstance.”

ESTHER

Come again?

(Lights rise on Noelene in US limbo, her hands and upper garment stained with her sons blood)

NOELENE

I'd warned him. I swear to the living God, I tried to warn him.

(Cora reads)

CORA

However, there is also a statement from the candidate's mother . . .

NOELENE

. . . I confronted her . . . I suspected feelings had developed between this woman and my son. And I confronted her. To her credit, she would not deny the fact that she had fallen for him. Yet her intention was to reveal nothing until after the campaign. In my view, Rebecca Niles was in possession of something awful and distrustful. And my abiding mother's love compelled me to stop this woman at any cost. One night, I . . . I revealed to her my sons condition. And she laughed. I would repeat it to her. Over and over. Until the truth cut into her flesh like a righteous sword, leaving something which would remain noticeable, always open. Painful. And harmful.

(Fade on Noelene)

CORA

Unquote.

ESTHER

Sweet Jesus –

CORA

Ain't it a bitch!

(Esther swiftly gets the whiskey and pours drinks for herself and Cora. They pause, then drink)

A damned campaign manager, taking out her own candidate for . . . for what, exactly?

ESTHER

Weakness, or the perception of it. That woman . . . and Brill's people . . . uncovered his . . . sexual impotence . . . then saw it as vulnerability on his part. And his mother knew how they would react if the truth came out.

CORA

Lord! It's a sickness. A damn sickness. I wish I was home with my father raising rottweilers.

ESTHER

But in choosing politics, you still went to the dogs.

(Emily enters)

EMILY

Looks like we dodged a bullet.

ESTHER

Looks that way.

CORA

Esther . . . we'll talk later. I'll leave ya'll to yourselves.

ESTHER

Thanks.

CORA

Just promise me the two of you will have the decency after all that's happened to go easy on each other.

(Cora exits)

EMILY

I won't ask if you're alright.

ESTHER

Don't.

EMILY

You're tough. And a fighter. You've never had a problem in finding the way back to your feet. No matter what hit the fan.

ESTHER

And to that, I guess I ought to say –

EMILY

No need to thank me, either.

(Silence as Emily struggles with her words)

Look, mom . . . I'm just happy – I'm glad that you didn't . . .

ESTHER

Take your time.

EMILY

I mean . . . if you'd been shot . . .

ESTHER

The door would have opened just a little further for Ross Collins to waltz in –

EMILY

Do not put words in my mouth . . .

ESTHER

. . . perhaps with *you* . . .

EMILY

Mom! Stop it!

ESTHER

. . . as his partner.

(She is about to curse Esther, but avoids it)

If you want to call me a bitch, go ahead. One can't allow the fact that I'm your mother to stop you. Go on!

EMILY

No. I won't give that pleasure.

(Emily is now crying bitterly)

ESTHER

I'm sorry.

(Emily slowly recovers)

EMILY

I'm happy you weren't hurt.

Sometime, maybe . . . maybe I'll muster the spine to forgive that bastard, Ross Collins. Women have done it. Why can't I?

ESTHER

In other words, take your life back.

EMILY

It's what you would have done. Right? Besides, there's a lot to be said for his philosophy.

ESTHER

Socialism . . . ?

EMILY

Democratic Socialism. There's a difference.

ESTHER

Where?

EMILY

Mom, please don't show your ignorance.

ESTHER

It's not ignorance. Maybe I'm concerned –

EMILY

About being beaten?

ESTHER

Excuse me?

EMILY

Ross Collins was a fuck. But his outlook was spot on. We're talking about a philosophy . . . a way of life for and about the common man. It's the wave of the future.

ESTHER

Oh, Emily . . .

EMILY

I'd tell you to get with the program, but . . .

ESTHER

If I didn't know better, I'd say you're carrying the man's child.

EMILY

You are a sick woman.

ESTHER

Sickness hasn't a damned thing to do with it. *I'm concerned!*

EMILY

Either way . . . he'll have my full support.

ESTHER

Of course. And I won't take it personally.

(Silence)

Emily . . . Look . . . about everything . . . I – I am sorry.

(Silence)

Okay?

(Still silent. Emily stares at her mother, then exits.
Alone, Esthers emotions rise, and she is soon
fighting tears)

(Lights fade. End of play)

