

IT'S A FREE COUNTRY

A Play in One Act

By

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CHARACTERS

LOUISA "LOU" CLAY (late 50s): Lou is an androgynous dandy from the South. She is normally quite polished in a suit and tie, with a perfect bobbed haircut and unlit cigar, which she wears in her suit's breast pocket and habitually rolls between her fingers and pretends to puff. But when we meet her, she's all that—and a bit disheveled. A few decades ago, Lou wrote a cult classic, feminist novel that recently debuted as a TV series—and it's a massive hit. When the show premiered a few weeks earlier, Lou, who has always been publicity shy and is a loner to boot, decamped—alone—to her house in the country.

RAMONA FRY (early 20s): Lou's queer niece lives in Lou's apartment in the city. Ramona, who also grew up in the South and sounds like it, is trying to make her own way in the world, although she worships her aunt and wants to be a famous writer—and consequential—like her.

NELL RICHARDS (late 60s): Lou's agent, friend and port in the storm. Lou has been with Nell, an old school and venerable force in the publishing world, since she published "the book" some 30 years ago. Nell and Ramona, however, clash, generationally and jealously as they vie for Lou's loyalty and affection.

SETTING

Late fall 2021 inside Lou's house somewhere in "the country" beyond New York City.

ACT ONE
Scene One

(It's late afternoon on a cold and dreary day. LOU's country house, however, is warm and cozy—very *hygge*—with lit candles and flames in the living room fireplace at stage left.)

(Before the fire is a coffee table with a nearby rocking chair and sofa and, in that back corner, a staircase leading to the top floor.)

(A dining table with one chair at the head of it is stage right, a few feet from the house's front door. Running along the walls are a bunch of bookcases and a couple of extra chairs. Books abound inside of these rooms.)

(An opening in the wall at the back of stage right leads to the kitchen, but we can't see inside it. Beside the kitchen's entrance is a stocked bar cart.)

(LOU's antiquated flip phone, resting atop the coffee table, RINGS, shocking the silence, and playing some version of the opening notes of "God Only Knows" by The Beach Boys.)

(LOU, in her bespoke suit and tie, emerges as though from the Victorian era—but actually from the kitchen at stage right—and rushes to locate her phone. She takes the last drag off a cigarette then flicks the butt into the fire.)

(She finds the phone, looks at the caller ID and answers it—pissed off. LOU's voice has the remnants of her formative years in the South, and she delights in accentuating those roots.)

LOU

What! Well, aren't you about as useful as tits on a bull? Go crawl back under your rock, you garbage excuse for a person. Off to hell you go.

(LOU throws the phone on the sofa then, not knowing what to do with herself, takes the air freshener off the mantel and sprays some around the room. She returns it when she's finished.)

(LOU picks up her phone and looks at it—it's an enemy—then sits in the rocking chair and places a blanket over her lap. She retrieves an unlit cigar from her suit's breast pocket and puts it in her mouth. There is no sound but the CRACKLING of flames. LOU looks at the phone in her hands.)

(It RINGS again, playing the same notes of "God Only Knows." LOU smarts at the noise, looks at the caller ID and is relieved.)

LOU — CON'T.

Hi, Nell... yes, she is well on her way... uh-huh, she read it to me over the phone... I will, to the best of my ability. *Forensics*. Got it... OK, but *don't fight*. It exhausts me and I am up to my eyeteeth in exhaustion. Alright. Bye, bye.

(LOU flips the phone shut and puts it back in her lap, and the cigar back in her mouth. She slumps a bit lower in her chair, pulls the blanket close to her chin and doesn't move.)

(The fire CRACKLES, which, once again, scares her. And she jumps.)

(LOU's phone RINGS again. She quickly glances at who it is and answers right away. She's annoyed with this thing ringing all the time and doesn't want to give it another chance to unnerve her. LOU leaves the cigar in her mouth and speaks around it.)

LOU — CON'T.

Would you please get here already so I don't have to die alone? Yes, I saw your text and no I don't need anything... you're not supposed to text and drive so it shouldn't matter that I didn't text you back, now, should it? You know I don't feel the need to *text anybody* at any time, so don't take it personally, alright? Alright. Bye, bye.

(LOU flips the phone shut and tosses it on the coffee table. She summons the strength required to remove the blanket from her body then lifts herself out of her chair. More like crawls out of it. She keeps her cigar in her mouth and stands before the fireplace.)

(LOU takes a log from a stack of dry wood, opens the screen, tosses the log on the fire and watches sparks fly. Then, she grabs the tongs, lifts the newly lit log and raises it to her mouth. She's just about to light the cigar off the log when...)

(A key WORKS the front door at stage right, so LOU returns the log to the fire and turns to see RAMONA standing in the doorway, carrying a stack of mail and wearing a backpack. Her arrival startles LOU—everything in these moments startles LOU—though she tries to not show it.)

(RAMONA wears Doc Martens, jeans and a sweater, a peacoat and knit beanie. She lets herself in, takes off her cloth mask and walks toward her aunt.)

RAMONA

Please tell me you were not about to...?

LOU

I thought you were at the store?

RAMONA

I thought you weren't smoking?

LOU

I'm not... at this particular moment.

RAMONA

Aunt Lou! Only Russians and Fran Lebowitz smoke anymore...

LOU

And, oh, what lucky souls they are! What I wouldn't give to be in their smoke-filled midst right about now... hey, how'd you get here so fast?

(RAMONA goes into play-acting mode. She swans around like a character out of Chekhov, removing her hat and clutching it to her breast then letting her backpack drop by the sofa. She uses her best version of a Russian accent.)

RAMONA

My dear *Tsarina*. My chariot had already arrived here at your *dacha* when I thought to ask, but I would have gone back if you were in need of provisions from the... uh...

(she fumbles for a fancier word but gives up)

... *Stop & Shop*.

LOU

(playing along now, too, with her own faux accent)

Spasibo, Anastasia. And how are you this fine winter's day?

RAMONA

But it is still autumn. It is not yet winter.

(LOU approaches RAMONA with tenderness.)

LOU

To me it is winter... yet you always look like spring. Remind me what it is like to teem with beautiful youth.

RAMONA

The question is not how am I, *Tsarina*, but how are you?

LOU

Your queen is just fine, my daughter. No need for special attention. You know I abhor such silliness.

RAMONA

There is nothing silly about it. You see what they did to us in Mother Russia? What is to stop them from doing that here?

(LOU holds out her hand and RAMONA kisses it.)

LOU

That is why it is up to you to restore us... to sanity, reason and decorum. Will you do that for us?

(LOU motions to their surroundings—her kingdom.)

LOU — CON'T.

For all of us?

(They crack up laughing. Then LOU assesses her niece. She touches her hand to her cheek, and

they get real. LOU gestures to the mail in RAMONA's hands.)

LOU — CON'T.

Is that it?

RAMONA

Nope.

(reaching into her coat pocket)

This here's the shit sandwich you've been waiting for.

(RAMONA withdraws a previously opened envelope and hands it to LOU. LOU looks at it, then at RAMONA, but doesn't take it.)

LOU

Perhaps a lunatic was simply a minority of one?

(off RAMONA: huh?)

Orwell, you ninny.

(LOU walks away toward stage right where jackets hang on hooks by the front door. She sticks her cigar back in her pocket and digs into the pockets of a coat to retrieve a pair of leather gloves, which she finds and puts on.)

(RAMONA puts the mail on the coffee table and removes her coat. Then she walks over to the fireplace to warm up. Her cellphone PINGS with a custom tone signaling a new text. RAMONA looks at the phone then puts it back in her pocket. She may or may not have noticed that LOU smarted a bit at the sound.)

(RAMONA looks atop the mantel, picks up a remote control and turns on speakers. Soft music PLAYS.)

RAMONA

I swear I could feel your fire the whole way up.

(to LOU re: the music)

Are you using the speakers?

LOU

Here and there... I mostly listen to the news, but only if I'm feeling particularly fatalistic.

(LOU walks over to the coffee table and picks up the envelope. She studies it before sitting back

down in the rocking chair to contemplate opening it. She puts the cigar back in her mouth and sucks on it. RAMONA watches her.)

LOU — CON'T.

(re: the gloves)

Nell said to try to keep *the integrity* of the letter.

RAMONA

I can assure you there is nothing in there remotely resembling integrity.

(Still, LOU opens it, and reads to herself.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

What else did she say?

LOU

Hmm?

RAMONA

What did Nell say to do?

LOU

(re: the letter)

Is it too much to ask for correct spelling? You didn't tell me he spelled dyke *d-i-k-e*.

RAMONA

Maybe he's Dutch?

LOU

Well, he got bitch and cunt right, so I guess we'll give him that.

RAMONA

It is a death threat after all. Can't expect it to be *literate*, now, can we?

LOU

On the contrary, that's all the more reason it should be perfect. If you're going to take the time to write, address—to *find* an address—then stamp and mail a real live death threat, then at least make it pop!

(reading some more...)

The syntax on this thing! How can I take this seriously?

RAMONA

I doubt he concerned himself with syntax, Aunt Lou. Let alone even knows what it means.

LOU

Well, if you're gonna send this to a writer, at least make it intelligible, for Cooter Brown's sake.

RAMONA

What else did Nell say?

LOU

(still immersed in the letter)

Hmmm?

RAMONA

Who else got one?

(LOU returns the death threat to its envelope and walks with it across the room, then disappears inside the kitchen.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

Why won't you tell me?

LOU

(offstage in the kitchen)

There's nothing to tell.

RAMONA

Aunt Lou!

LOU

(offstage)

The director, producers, I think. Juna...

RAMONA

Juna got one?

LOU

(offstage)

An email. Or emails, I should say.

RAMONA

Holy shit.

LOU
(offstage)
Ain't nothing holy about it...

RAMONA
Who else?

(LOU rejoins RAMONA in the living room. She does not have the letter with her.)

LOU
Her manager, agents, publicists, attorneys... probably her third-grade teacher got one. It's like Oprah around here: *You get a death threat and you get a death threat...*

RAMONA
It's so crazy.

LOU
Yep, the teenaged star of my spectacularly successful television show received a glut of death threats and all I got was this lousy letter.

RAMONA
Score one for Louisa the Luddite.

LOU
I knew it would pay off someday.
(pretending to school RAMONA)
Now do you believe all this technology is evil?

RAMONA
Don't be such an old...

LOU
I am old. I feel old, anyway. I'm just surprised I haven't gotten one here... it's positively terrifying that anyone can find out anything about anyone. But you scrubbed here, right? This address is no longer online?

RAMONA
I'm working on it...

LOU
Shit, Ramona.

RAMONA
I found someone who can do it. Just gonna take a while.

LOU

And we should change my cell number again...

RAMONA

You're getting calls, too?

LOU

(lying)

Just a precaution... what the hell are they gonna unearth about me this time? Just plain evil. Technology strips you of your own free will. Remember that the next time almighty Amazon *suggests* which book you should read next.

RAMONA

Or you can't wait to get the new Ann Patchett delivered straight to your kindle?

(LOU playfully sticks out her tongue at RAMONA, who laughs, then LOU walks over to put the gloves back in the coat from whence they came.)

(RAMONA's cellphone PINGS again—this time with a different tone—she glances but ignores the text.)

LOU

You gonna answer that anytime soon?

RAMONA

It's not important.

LOU

Then turn it off, maybe? Do us both a favor?

(LOU takes her seat in the rocking chair and, RAMONA, ignoring LOU's request, puts her phone in her pocket.)

RAMONA

They must have really hated the last episode.

LOU

Which one was it?

RAMONA

Are you really not watching?

LOU

Not on your life.

RAMONA

Man, you have willpower. It's when Juna... uh, *Cady*... finally *fights back*...

LOU

Must be worse on TV than just words in a book.

RAMONA

And the fact that no man wants to see a woman turn the rape tables on a *bro*...

LOU

Did they let him live?

(off RAMONA's nod)

They're supposed to, you know. Follow the book.

RAMONA

Those *Proud Boys*... can you imagine those testosterone levels? Through the roof!

LOU

Nothing like a rebellious woman to enrage a stupid man... at least we're introducing 'em to literature. That's what I tell myself.

(afraid to ask)

Anybody saying anything good?

RAMONA

Are you kidding? Aside from the hate groups, trolls and usual dipshits, people love it. And you know the book is back on the best-seller lists? A whole new generation is reading it—women and men this time around.

LOU

(confidentially)

What do *you* think?

RAMONA

It's fucking great, Aunt Lou. I mean it. Some say it's even better than the book.

(off LOU)

But not many... the book will always be in a class by itself.

LOU

What are you not telling me?

RAMONA

(off LOU)

Nothing, it's just... I still can't believe you wrote it... and why? Especially how young you were. It's so *dark*.

LOU

The world is dark, Ramona, and the older I get, the more insane—and inane—it seems to get. Feels like dystopia around here. But who knows? Maybe it's the natural progression of things.

RAMONA

I don't know about that... the *natural* part anyway.

LOU

But you're either in or you're out, right? You're either in the world... online... or you're a phantom. A specter taking up space but not a part of things. Don't you always say that?

RAMONA

It's the way we live now.

LOU

Then I'm happy to be a specter. Because this world? The one we're in? I don't know about this one. You hungry?

RAMONA

Not really.

LOU

Something to drink?

RAMONA

I just want to warm up a minute.

LOU

Suit yourself...

(remembering RAMONA's text)

So, what's with the different sounds on your phone?

(RAMONA shrugs and LOU covers her legs with the blanket and puts the cigar back in her mouth. She looks at herself and sees FDR.)

LOU — CON'T.

See? Not only are you my only surviving child, *the grand duchess Anastasia RamonaRomanoff*, you're the Eleanor to my

LOU — CON'T.

Franklin, bringing news from the mines... or at least my apartment.... Did you bring some of that fun stuff, too? I'm almost out.

(RAMONA reaches for her backpack and withdraws a jar of gummies, which she puts on the coffee table.)

LOU — CON'T.

Who'd a thunk I'd become a stoner at such a *mature* age?

RAMONA

It suits you. Makes you weird as hell, but kinda fun, too.

LOU

What an endorsement. But don't ever tell your parents, you hear? I'd be mortified if they knew we got high together... even though I plan to never speak to them again.

RAMONA

Aunt Lou...

LOU

I can just see my sister, thinking I'm corrupting a whole 'nother generation of our already positively corrupt family. Don't want to provide them with any ammo, ya hear? I'm just worn slap out with all that.

(RAMONA holds up her right hand as a promise.)

LOU — CON'T.

I figured I'd make some pasta. We could use a little comfort food. Unless you want something else?

RAMONA

Pasta's good. But don't go to any trouble.

LOU

It's fine.

(a beat, muttering)

Nell's gonna join.

RAMONA

What? Why?

LOU

Oh, do behave, Ramona. Say that you will.

RAMONA

You know I will... I just don't know why she needs to come up here and make a mess of things.

LOU

You'll sleep on the couch, OK?

RAMONA

(acquiescing)

So, she thinks it's serious?

LOU

Well, he did call me a hen cunt, after all. That's enough to raise anybody's hackles.

RAMONA

What does that even mean?

LOU

Don't you worry, Ramona. I'm finer than frog hair split four ways.

RAMONA

Whatever you say, *Louisa*. You're gonna make believe anyway, just like you always do. No matter what I do or say.

LOU

Now you're gettin' somewhere.

(RAMONA moves away from the fireplace and takes a seat on the couch. She takes off her shoes and puts her feet up on the coffee table.)

RAMONA

Have you ever gotten one before?

LOU

A death threat? I don't believe so.

RAMONA

Don't you think you'd remember?

LOU

I would, which is why I don't think I have. Or maybe Nell kept it from me if I did?

(The mention of NELL's name is awkward, especially in this context, and LOU moves away from it.)

LOU — CON'T.

So, anything to tell me about Rio before the great arrival?

RAMONA

Please don't change the subject.

LOU

OK, but let's not make more of this than it is. Can we do that, please?

RAMONA

Aunt Lou!

LOU

Niece Ramona!

RAMONA

This is serious.

LOU

Every *halfway decent* American gets a death threat these days... politicians, poll workers, even PTA members, for Cooter Brown's sake. Haven't you been paying attention? *World gone mad*. But it doesn't mean anything's gonna come of it.

RAMONA

It might?

LOU

I don't revolve my life around *might*... say, what does your favorite aunt have to do to get a cocktail around here? Will you make us a drinkety-drink?

(RAMONA rises and heads for to the bar cart. She considers her options then starts mixing drinks.)

RAMONA

What'll it be? An old-fashioned?

LOU

Yes, an old-fashioned for the old lady...

LOU — CON'T.

(cozying herself and play-puffing on
her cigar)

Your parents still sober?

RAMONA

Yep.

LOU

That's some struggle bus they're on right there.

(chuckling)

My sister must be so fucking miserable. If she can't have a
drink, what's left for her in this world?

RAMONA

The lord and savior seems to have filled the void.

LOU

Don't remind me. Suspicious timing, wouldn't you say? You
wanna know something?

RAMONA

I know you're gonna tell me.

LOU

I am just tickled to death that my waiting finally paid off
and you're now of age to be a proper adult with me.
Knocking back cocktails. Procuring those delightful gummy
candies and engaging in all kinds of improper behavior that
I do so enjoy.

RAMONA

As do I.

LOU

I waited a very long time for a family member who I liked...
but more important could trust... and read books with and
talk to about all kinds of things no one in our clodhopping
family ever found even remotely interesting. Decades I
waited.

RAMONA

You could have had one of your own?

LOU

What a perfectly ridiculous thing to say to me. Besides,
now I have you. You're just like a daughter to me, only

LOU — CON'T.

fully formed and fleshed-out and neither of us was harmed in the process. I say that's the way to do it.

RAMONA

Did you ever consider it?

LOU

Nope. Not once never ever... I never would have been able to look after a child *and* write. It took me nearly 10 years to write that thing—authorities would have charged me with sheer neglect! And then where would I be, or any of us for that matter, without *that damned book*?

(considering her cigar)

Plus, there's no guarantee I wouldn't have had a lemon.

RAMONA

You most certainly would not have had a lemon.

LOU

Think of all the lemons out there in the world, and their parents, most of whom are lemons, too, by the way, pretending that everything is just fine and dandy and that their kids are wonderful and oh-so special and interesting when, in fact, they are all just a pack of run-of-the-mill, every-day, dried-up Eureka lemons.

RAMONA

We got lucky.

LOU

Sure did. And don't you ever forget it. Nothing against your parents, though. Even if a slap on the wrist caused them to miraculously turn overnight from the gutterslush drunks they are into a couple of teetotaling, bible-thumping lunatics.

(LOU rocks in her chair, plays with her cigar and thinks...)

LOU — CON'T.

And *not* being a lemon parent doesn't necessarily mean you won't have a lemon child. Remember that if and when you ever decide to bless this world with procreation.

(LOU's phone RINGS. She looks at who's calling then mutes it and turns the phone off.)

LOU — CON'T.

That's enough for one day.

RAMONA

Who is it?

LOU

(lying)

Somebody selling something I don't want or need.

(LOU rises from the chair, takes a poker and stokes the fire.)

LOU — CON'T.

Seriously, how are things with Rio? Everything OK over there?

RAMONA

Sure.

LOU

Doesn't sound *sure*. Why won't you tell me?

RAMONA

I can't believe Nell's coming...

LOU

It'll be fine. Just don't bring it up.

RAMONA

She's gonna bring it up. Are you kidding? The fact that I *hang out* with her granddaughter is the only reason she has any interest in me whatsoever. And because of you, of course.

(LOU returns to her seat in the rocker.)

LOU

Maybe she won't bring it up. Now with all this other stuff going on. Maybe you'll catch yourself a break.

(RAMONA just looks at LOU—they both know that's bullshit. RAMONA takes her time between concentrating on making their drinks and interacting with LOU.)

LOU — CON'T.

How's your mother doing with you telling her you're queer?

RAMONA

She's so weird.

LOU

She's not *weird*.

RAMONA

What would you call it?

LOU

Your mother is a weak woman, under the spell of a lizard-brained husband, that's all. Since they met, back in high school. I was there and told her that very day and every day thereafter, *That boy is a lizard brain and it would serve you best to go on without him.* And now? After all these years? It's almost not even their fault they've lived such *fixed* lives.

RAMONA

Isn't it, though? Their fault?

LOU

I said *almost*.

RAMONA

You had a *fixed life* and look at you.

LOU

Yes, but I'm me. Most people aren't me. Or you. They have no conception of what it means to be queer. In any, all and every sense of the word. We're queer people, and they're not. We would never be *susceptible* like them. We've had to develop critical thinking skills, so we know who's out to get us.

RAMONA

They asked about you.

LOU

Course they did, coz your mother wants me to turn the money spigot back on. You didn't tell her anything, did you?

RAMONA

You told me not to.

LOU

Good. I can't stand a blabber, you know. I only told you because of the letter. Nell told me I might have gotten one at the apartment.

RAMONA

They'll be in the city for Christmas.

LOU

Oooh, the judge is letting them take a holiday? How nice for them and how tragic for democracy.

RAMONA

Will you be back by then?

(off LOU)

What should I tell them?

LOU

That they sure as hell are *not* welcome in my apartment, even if I'm not there. You hear me? You're welcome to see them, of course. They're your parents and I won't stand in your way. But not under my roof.

RAMONA

Are you really never going to see them again?

LOU

I see you.

RAMONA

What does that have to do with it?

LOU

You're enough family for me. And now we live together.

RAMONA

But you're not there.

LOU

What are you? A double agent? Working both sides?

RAMONA

I would just like us to be...

LOU

What? A warm and cozy family? That doesn't exist the way you want it to. Never did, I'm afraid.

LOU — CON'T.

(off RAMONA)

And you have to stop making excuses for them. I know it's hard for a kid to speak up, especially when it's their father knocking 'em around and their mother doing nothing about it.

RAMONA

It was one *drunken* time...

LOU

I will never accept a man beating on a woman under any circumstances. You hear me? Ever. Least of all his own daughter. Or wife.

(They're quiet a moment.)

RAMONA

Mom says it's wrong to cut her off.

LOU

Tell her to tell that to the judge...

RAMONA

... just when she needs you the most.

LOU

Or better yet, tell her to leave her husband. I gave her every opportunity to become an independent person and now, she is too far gone and I don't see her making her way back. And I have had just about enough.

(off RAMONA)

I have decided to protect myself, Ramona. And to take care of you. But let's not talk about that anymore, OK? Let me just thank you for holding down our *city palace* while I'm up here. You happy there?

RAMONA

You're impossible.

LOU

Could be.

RAMONA

Everyone's worried you're turning into a recluse. Going all *Grey Gardens* on us.

LOU

Oh, so you are all talking about me, aren't you? Blabbing away...

RAMONA

And now? This is gonna make it worse.

LOU

Obsessed, you are.

RAMONA

We just care about you and want you to be OK.

(off LOU's sneer)

I care about you.

LOU

For the record, my sweet, I am not a recluse. I would never dream of becoming such a cliché: the reclusive writer. Give me some credit, please? And besides, you can't be a recluse living in a major metropolitan area.

RAMONA

But you don't.

LOU

My primary residence is in a major metropolitan area.

RAMONA

Same with Garbo. And she was a dyed-in-the-wool, bona fide recluse.

LOU

And how did that work out for her? All she wanted was to be left alone and she never was. They hounded that poor woman. Cecil Beaton around every goddamn corner.

RAMONA

And now they're hounding you.

LOU

No one is *hounding* me. Except that poor sod, the death-threat letter writer with positively no acumen for syntax.

RAMONA

But for someone like you, who is so well-known yet unknown at the same time. Who hides from fame and attention...

LOU

I don't hide from anything, except maybe reporters calling me all the time after your parents got themselves *fucking arrested!* That is something I do in fact hide from and you can tell them so yourself.

RAMONA

But now you're back in the conversation...

LOU

I am not in any conversation!

RAMONA

What would you call it?

LOU

I'm just tired, OK? Taking a break from life... what do you mean I'm in the conversation? What are those internet sites saying about me?

(off RAMONA)

Tell me, Ramona.

RAMONA

(a beat)

That you're performative.

LOU

What does that mean? I hate all this new *language*, I have to say... I am NOT performative. What is *performative* about me?

RAMONA

You know... the clothes, the hair, the *cigar*.

LOU

I have been this way the whole of my life. This is me. Same as when I was five years old. You've seen the pictures!

RAMONA

I'm just saying... you told me you want the truth? Well, people like to speculate.

LOU

Oh, so I should be like every poor sod out there, putting every screaming thing I do on the computer so I can *be seen* and *speak my truth*?

RAMONA

Aunt Lou...

LOU

Because everyone out there thinks the sun comes up just to hear them crow?

RAMONA

That's not what I...

LOU

(interrupting)

Because if a tree falls in the forest and you didn't take a *selfie* in front of said tree, then one has to wonder if it ever really fell? Let alone actually existed...

RAMONA

Aunt Lou! That's not...

LOU

(interrupting again)

Because human beings can't just simply *be* anymore?

RAMONA

I'm *not* saying that!

LOU

(once more)

Please shoot me if you ever see me on *Twitter*, OK? Take me upstairs, load the old Winchester and BLAM-O! Blow my head the hell off of my body, never to be seen or heard from again. A lot of people would like that, you know.

RAMONA

You have a Winchester?

LOU

Course I do. I'm a Southern woman living in deplorable times.

(off RAMONA)

And now? With all this? The *Gun That Won the West* gives me at least a modicum of control over my own destiny.

RAMONA

Where is it?

LOU

Don't you worry. It's in a safe place.

RAMONA

Famous last words.

LOU

Well, you didn't even know I had it, and you've been here before. So there.

(They're both quiet a moment.)

RAMONA

All I'm saying is that never giving interviews...

LOU

Rarely, not never...

RAMONA

Rarely giving interviews and never having any kind of presence in the culture...

LOU

Presence in the culture... do you hear yourself? Who in the world taught you to talk like that? It certainly wasn't me. I only teach you good things. Smart things.

RAMONA

Aunt Lou, it's true. You never set the record straight.

LOU

What record, Ramona? I've written two books in thirty years. *One* was a hit and the other was put out of its misery in no time at all. What have I got to set straight?

RAMONA

(incredulous)

One was a *hit*?

LOU

A best-seller or whatever you want to call it.

RAMONA

Try cult classic.

LOU

OK, OK... it's not what I intended.

RAMONA

And now? With the show?

LOU

Unintended consequences...

RAMONA

Stratosphere...

LOU

And death threats.

RAMONA

So you are worried?

LOU

No, no... it's just...

RAMONA

Why did you say threats plural? Has there been more than one?

(off LOU's shrug)

Do the cops know? The FBI? Has Nell told them yet?

LOU

Just keep the letter, she said. And don't spoil it. She'll be here soon.

RAMONA

Jesus.

LOU

Jesus on a bike with a popsicle. But you tell those internet sites, or social media whatchamacallits, when the subject of yours truly comes up, you tell them that I'm happy as a dead pig in sunshine. Coz that's the truth.

RAMONA

I wish you'd tell them. Or I can... *officially*.

(RAMONA comes over to LOU with their drinks. She clinks the glasses together then hands LOU her old-fashioned.)

LOU

Thank you, *Anastasia*.

RAMONA

You're welcome, *Tsarina*.

(RAMONA plops on the couch and sips her drink.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

So, have you thought any more about my interview? No pressure.

LOU

Sounds like pressure to me.

RAMONA

Not at all. Just people knowing you're my aunt is enough. And I add to your mythology, too. Don't you think?

LOU

My mythology?

RAMONA

Now there's someone really close to you—your own niece—who knows all about you but won't spill the tea.

LOU

No one knows all about me...

RAMONA

You know what I mean. And I'm out there in the world, too, making a name for myself... at least trying to... it's time for you to move on from the old way of doing things, Aunt Lou. Introduce yourself to a new generation. They're crazy about the show, and will be about you, too.

LOU

I don't appreciate you putting this pressure on me, Ramona. You know I'm not built for it.

(There's a moment of silence between them.)

RAMONA

You're right. I'm sorry. And it might be even better if you don't do it. Builds the *mystique* even more.

LOU

Are you trying to trick me? What's that? A crisscross or something?

RAMONA

A crisscross?

LOU

You trying to get me to do what you want by pretending you don't care if I do?

RAMONA

God, you're paranoid.

LOU

I have a lot to be paranoid about, in case you haven't noticed.

RAMONA

Then you'll be happy to know that's not at all what I'm doing.

LOU

It's not?

RAMONA

I wish I were that clever.

LOU

Hmm.. I don't know about you.

RAMONA

What don't you know?

LOU

Might be a lemon after all.

(LOU chomps some more on her cigar. Then she lifts the drink to her lips but pauses before sipping.)

RAMONA

What?

LOU

This isn't poison, is it? Anthrax or something?

RAMONA

Why in the world would I poison you?

LOU

Maybe you sent the letter? Maybe you want to kill me for publicity? For clicks.

RAMONA

It's a good thing you write alternate histories instead of whodunits.

LOU

Yeah, well... you tell someone you rewrote your will to leave them all your money and look where it gets you.

(LOU sips her drink and keeps a playful stink eye on RAMONA.)

RAMONA

Have you told Nell?

LOU

I'm not dead yet! She'll find out soon enough...

(off RAMONA)

Not tonight, don't worry. After I'm gone. But what do you have against Nell? Beside the fact she won't represent you because, my dear, you are not yet a writer.

RAMONA

I don't know that she's been as good to you as you like to think.

LOU

Oh really? My agent and dearest friend who has stuck with me for three decades, and who is at the top of her field..

RAMONA

Not anymore...

LOU

Look at you livin' in high cotton. What do you know? You are the queer offspring of a couple of conspiracy-believing, bible-thumping traitors with a slap on the wrist when they should be in jail. You haven't got a clue... and she introduced you to your girlfriend, I might add. Her *granddaughter*. I would expect you to be a little more grateful when it comes to old Nell. Sometimes you make me madder than a wet hen.

RAMONA

Don't you mean a *hen cunt*?

(LOU chuckles at this then motions to the gummies on the coffee table.)

LOU

So, what'd you get me this time?

RAMONA

The same as before, so you only want to take half, OK? They're really strong.

LOU

Just the way I like 'em. Maybe I'll start taking wholes before too long. I think my tolerance has gone up.

(RAMONA opens the jar, retrieves a gummy and hands it to LOU, but LOU doesn't take it.)

LOU — CON'T.

I don't think it's a good idea tonight. What with Nell coming and all.

(RAMONA puts the gummy back in the jar.)

RAMONA

Good point. Being high around Nell? What a buzzkill.

(imitating NELL)

Baby, Baby, Baby. How do you stand all that?

(LOU picks up the jar and has a look.)

LOU

Oh, stop it, you. I'm just afraid where my mind might go. I prefer these bringing daydreams. Not nightmares.

(LOU drops the gummies on the coffee table.)

RAMONA

You can always get more at the dispensary. You don't need to wait for me.

LOU

I don't want to go in there. I don't want to have to talk to anybody.

RAMONA

You can buy them online. Have 'em delivered.

LOU

Then they'll know where I live.

RAMONA

You can use a pseudonym.

LOU

Nothing pains me more deeply than shop talk. Small talk. It's the lowest form of conversation. You know that.

(They sip in silence for a few moments.)

RAMONA

So, Nell really didn't say anything more?

(off LOU)

I should know what we're in for.

LOU

We're not *in for* anything... but what can I tell you...?

(LOU rises from the rocking chair and heads to the bar, where she tops off her drink.)

LOU – CON'T.

My letter and Juna's emails were essentially the same. *I'm gonna kill you, you filthy cunt* kind of thing. So unoriginal. The men... theirs were different. They were more, *You let us down. You're gonna pay, traitor...* you said yourself there's been a lot of stuff online. With those... what are they called again?

RAMONA

Incels.

LOU

Right. *Involuntary celibates.* What a thing. Apparently, they have *watch parties* to celebrate what they see as *male domination.*

RAMONA

Don't forget the white nationalists and all the other misogynist scumbags out there...

LOU

Oath Keepers. I'll give you an oath to keep, you shitbird. Nell says there have been conversations on the dark web. Do you know...?

RAMONA

(interrupting)

Yes, Aunt Lou. I know what the dark web is... I'm surprised Nell does, too.

LOU

Truth be told? She just found out and told me.

RAMONA

Sounds about right... so this is, like, bigger than we thought? It's a real thing?

LOU

Seems it could be.

RAMONA

Jesus.

LOU

Jesus on a bike with a melting popsicle.

(Now RAMONA rises and heads to the bar. She joins LOU there.)

RAMONA

(sinking in)

It's a real threat.

LOU

That's why it's a good thing we're here. They don't know about here. You're taking care of that, right?

RAMONA

Shouldn't be much longer.

LOU

And the phone. We'll change the number once more.

(LOU clinks her glass with RAMONA's and returns to the fireplace, leaving RAMONA at the bar. LOU ponders the flames a moment then takes a seat on the couch.)

RAMONA

I guess it's not so terrible after all that you're a recluse. Might be what saves you.

LOU

Hardy har har. Aren't you stark-raving hilarious? Tell me something good, would you please?

RAMONA

There's nothing to tell.

LOU

Don't be shy with me.

RAMONA

And don't you look at me that way.

LOU

Like what?

RAMONA

Like you know something I don't.

LOU

I am faced entirely in the opposite direction! I'm just happy for you. Rio's your first girlfriend.

RAMONA

She's not my girlfriend.

LOU

I thought she was?

RAMONA

We're just hanging out. Nothing's like, official.

(off LOU)

You're such an old.

LOU

I never said I wasn't...

(thinking)

So that's what those different sounds are. On your phone? Different sounds for different women?

(RAMONA reaches for the remote and turns up the MUSIC. LOU cracks up—she figured it out.)

LOU — CON'T.

How many are there?

(RAMONA turns up the MUSIC really loud.)

LOU – CON'T.

OK, you can stop now. But good for you! This is what you should be doing. You're in springtime.

(RAMONA lowers the volume.)

LOU – CON'T.

I do like them, by the way. The speakers. I like to take some of that fun stuff, put on music and just drift away..

RAMONA

Do you see anyone up here? Or is it all solitude all the time?

LOU

You read *A Room of One's Own*, didn't you? Ms. Woolf had it all right.

RAMONA

Yeah, and look what happened to her with all that solitude.

LOU

(dreamily)

Such a beautiful suicide she was. It's just..

(She catches something in herself.)

RAMONA

What?

(a beat)

You don't have to tell me.

(LOU makes to speak but clams up and looks away.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

But you can. If you want.

LOU

Or you can tell me about Rio. How bad can it be? What, is she straight or something?

RAMONA

You're impossible.

LOU

If you're not gonna tell me about Rio, at least tell me about your *blog*.

RAMONA

It's a *substack*.

(RAMONA takes a seat on the couch.)

LOU

Like calling it by another name makes it any better.

RAMONA

(off LOU)

It pains you so deeply to even say it, doesn't it?

LOU

It does.

RAMONA

You said yourself--this is how we live now.

LOU

You said that. I said *world gone mad*. Everyone and their idiot brother-in-law has something to say about every damn thing.

RAMONA

Have you read it?

LOU

Maybe.

RAMONA

Annnnnnd you hate it.

LOU

I didn't say that.

RAMONA

But you do.

LOU

Hate is a strong word, Anastasia.

RAMONA

So...?

LOU

Maybe I'll do it. I need to think about it some more. See how this all plays out, OK?

RAMONA

It would be so awesome if you did it.

LOU

Please don't use that word with me. There is nothing *full of awe* about me talking to you and your *substack*. It's a lazy word used by lazy people.

RAMONA

We can discuss why you finally agreed to sell the rights? Let them adapt it after all this time?

LOU

Duly noted.

RAMONA

So... why did you?

LOU

You know I don't like to talk about these things. Ask Nell. She'll tell you.

RAMONA

It's *your* book.

(LOU considers RAMONA and then, albeit reluctantly, she tells her.)

LOU

I sold it because I haven't had a good idea in a long time and this show, and its resurrection of the book, will support me—us—till the day I die... or write something worthwhile, whichever comes first. And as I haven't written anything decent in a while... and with all this recent activity? The day I die may be sooner than we think.

RAMONA

Don't say that.

LOU

Do you know how many offers I've had over the years?

RAMONA

To do a show?

LOU

Or movie. Sandra Bullock wanted to do it.

RAMONA

No way! When?

LOU

When it first came out. To play Cady, Juna's part.

(thinking)

Lemme see... Lisa Bonet, Winona Ryder, Julia Roberts...

RAMONA

You said no to Julia Roberts? Who in the hell says no to Julia Roberts?

LOU

Who knows if it was true? That's what Nell said at the time.

(off RAMONA)

Said they were all interested, and I could have the pick of the litter.

RAMONA

Why didn't you? If it was true and Old Nell wasn't lying like I have a feeling she does more than you care to admit.

LOU

Would you behave, please? She's gonna be here any minute... You have to understand, I got really famous really fast. And it wasn't, like, fun famous. It was scary... writers were celebrities back then... with paparazzi staking 'em out... Page Six and all that gossip...

RAMONA

It's much worse today.

LOU

That was a tiptoe through the fucking tulips compared to the internet. Back then I thought I'd have ideas forever, which, of course, I didn't and I don't, but that's what one thinks when they're young. That they'll always find a way... and *survive*. Thankfully, I had Nell to protect and guide me all these years. And help me maintain a decent income, which you should be thankful for, too.

RAMONA

Thank heaven for Old Nell!

LOU

That's right. We all should.

(LOU jumps when there's a KNOCK on the door and NELL's voice can be heard through it.)

NELL

(offstage)

Knock, knock! Louisa! Open up! I can't find my key! Baby, Baby, are you in there?

(RAMONA stays put on the couch and rolls her eyes, miserable at NELL's arrival, as LOU heads for the door but, before she can open it, NELL finds her key and lets herself inside.)

(NELL is quite an impressive sight with a perfect coif, cashmere cape and fancy handbag. She is dressed to the nines—Chanel suit, pearls, fancy reading glasses hanging around her neck, etc.—just out of work and arrived on LOU's doorstep in a whirlwind.)

NELL — CON'T.

Is everyone all in one piece? I tried calling but it went to voicemail.

LOU

I turned my phone off.

NELL

You're getting calls now, too?

(LOU doesn't respond, but RAMONA heard this and realizes LOU's kept that from her.)

(NELL races over to hug LOU and hold her close. RAMONA stays seated and stares at the fire.)

NELL — CON'T.

Everything's going to be OK, Louisa. I'm taking care of it. Nothing's going to happen on my watch.

(finally acknowledging RAMONA)

Hello, Ramona.

RAMONA

Nell.

(to LOU)

Since when does she have a key?

NELL

*She has had a key since before you felt up your first Girl Scout, so don't you worry about *she* and her key.*

LOU

(to NELL)

We were just thinking about dinner. You hungry?

NELL

You know I don't eat anything.

LOU

Suit yourself.

(LOU returns to her seat in the rocking chair as NELL wanders over to the bar to peruse the goods. She spies an olive and pops it in her mouth. She looks at the bottles of wine and lifts them to read the labels.)

NELL

I'll just pour myself a glass and play catch-up. In the meantime, you will be very happy to know that while I may come empty-handed, Louisa, I am bearing excellent news.

(NELL focuses on pouring the glass while LOU and RAMONA wait for her to share her news.)

LOU

Yeah? What is it?

NELL

(pouring)

I have been dreaming of a drink all day long.

(NELL finishes pouring, sniffs the bouquet then heads over to the couch. She sets down her drink on the coffee table and takes off her cape.)

RAMONA

Still waiting over here, Nell...

LOU

(to RAMONA)

Take her coat, would you please?

NELL

It's a cape. Cashmere. Isn't it fabulous?

(RAMONA does as she's told, takes NELL's cape from her and walks over to hang it on a hook by the front door.)

LOU
(to NELL)

So, what is it?

NELL
(excitedly to LOU)

It seems an arrest is imminent.

(to RAMONA)

Happy now?

(RAMONA doesn't respond. She just walks back to the couch and takes a seat. NELL sits down beside her and RAMONA moves a few inches away from her.)

LOU

How do you know?

NELL

That reporter I've been talking to? From Reuters?

RAMONA

What reporter?

NELL

She said the police have been contacted... I'm not sure who or how... not that it matters...

LOU
(worried)

That means it will be public soon.

NELL

That means it will be over soon.

(NELL raises her glass to LOU.)

NELL — CON'T.

Such a relief. Aren't you relieved?

(But LOU doesn't respond, so NELL keeps going.)

NELL — CON'T.

(taking a sip)

This is delicious. Just what I needed. We sure did dodge a bullet with this one, didn't we?

RAMONA

(to NELL)

You really think it's over?

NELL

What did I just say? I took care of it. Now, all we have to do is sit back and relax and wait for the all-clear.

RAMONA

From a reporter?

(LOU rises from the rocking chair and holds out her hand for RAMONA to take, which she does, letting LOU lift her off the couch. LOU leads RAMONA toward the kitchen at stage right and speaks in her now-familiar, faux Russian accent.)

LOU

Come, *Anastasia*. Let us sate ourselves with a meal. It seems the revolution is not yet upon us, so I will fortify you for the resistance.

BLACKOUT.

End scene.

Scene Two

(LOU, RAMONA and NELL sit at the dining table, eating, drinking wine and trying to relax in their sea of skittishness. LOU sits at the head of the table—facing the audience—and RAMONA and NELL flank her—RAMONA to her right and NELL at her left.)

(NELL and RAMONA's phones are on the table next to their plates. They frequently check to see if there's any news.)

RAMONA

When will you know for sure?

NELL

(looking at her phone)

It seems they traced an IP address.

(reaching for LOU's hand)

I was so happy I could deliver the news in person.

RAMONA

You really didn't have to.

NELL

Of course, I did. This has been from hell.

(to LOU)

I couldn't leave you all by yourself.

(RAMONA rolls her eyes.)

NELL — CON'T.

Don't be so sensitive, Ramona. What are you going to do? *Cancel* me. See if I care. Hell, I'll write the hashtag. *Cancel Old Nell*.

RAMONA

This is all just so insane.

NELL

The world has always been insane. Remember Caligula for Christ's sake? Vlad the Impaler?

LOU

(to RAMONA, playing)

Rasputin?

RAMONA

(playing right back)

He did such a number on you.

NELL

And all the other monsters before, since and still to come? But the bright side? This is going to drive ratings even higher—through the roof! I can't wait for you to count all those Emmys!

(off RAMONA)

I'm just choosing to be positive. Just an ever-so-slight recalibration of the mind.

(RAMONA rises from the table.)

LOU

(to RAMONA)

Where are you going?

RAMONA

I have to go to the bathroom.

(off LOU)

Am I not allowed to go to the bathroom?

NELL

I don't care where you go, Ramona.

RAMONA

(to LOU; is she going to let NELL talk to her that way?)

Seriously?

LOU

(reaching for RAMONA)

Do you have to? Right now?

(RAMONA sits back down; it's not every day that LOU shows some vulnerability. NELL, meanwhile, keeps rattling on.)

NELL

It doesn't make me a bad person, does it? Just looking for a silver lining in a trying time. I can't change the world we live in.

(to LOU)

You did that with your book and look at the thanks you got?

RAMONA

What do you mean? She inspired countless women all over the world to take no shit. And be proud to stand up and call themselves feminists.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

And for that, they'll fight her to the death... do everything they can to silence, hurt, ruin her with everything they've got...

(to LOU)

... but they will never succeed, my dear. Take it from me.

RAMONA

(under her breath)

I will take nothing from you...

LOU

Ramona...

RAMONA

(pleading with LOU)

Ramona? What about her?

NELL

(to RAMONA)

If you ever write anything worthwhile, you'll want plenty from me, won't you? Let's see how much you loathe me when I can make you famous.

LOU

OK, that's enough.

NELL

And rich! Like your Aunt Lou.

(RAMONA shakes her head and snickers.)

LOU

Both of you.

NELL

Who knows? Maybe she'll be a decent writer *someday*.

(to LOU)

Her *blog* isn't half bad.

(This gets RAMONA's happy attention, although NELL refuses to make eye contact with her.)

RAMONA

You've read my substack?

NELL

Let me know if anything comes of it and I'll see what I can do.

RAMONA

What'd you think?

NELL

(back to LOU)

All I'm saying is Emmys, Emmys, Emmys. You wanted to make some money? Decided to fly back into the sun?

LOU

Icarus isn't a great example, Nell...

NELL

Well, you're about to make more than we even thought possible. You'll be set for life!

RAMONA

And all you have to do is survive a couple a death threats.

LOU

And what if I don't?

NELL

We all know they'd love a second season, so I guess life would go on.

(off LOU)

Oh, so you're the only one who gets to make off-color jokes? Well, *pardonez-moi, Bebe!*

RAMONA

(to NELL)

Could they commit to another season right now?

NELL

They can do anything they damn well please. They have very deep pockets. But she would have to let them go beyond the book and, so far, she hasn't wanted to do that, have you, Louisa?

(to RAMONA)

We'll have to work on her...

NELL — CON'T.

(to LOU, rubbing her hands together)
Come on, Baby. You said yourself you want to make a whole lotta money! Let them expound upon your brilliant intellectual property and go *three* seasons!

RAMONA

Do I hear five?

LOU

You know, you two like to pretend you don't like each other, but you sure are a hell of a lot alike.

(RAMONA makes a face.)

NELL

Oh, please. Am I really so terrible? I've had a killer run over here, Ramona. You try staying at the top of a man's game for *decades*. What have you ever accomplished?

RAMONA

Give me a little time, would ya?

NELL

Take all the time you need. Just know that this life is long and bumpy as hell... with shifting loyalties... and everything beats the crap out of you. Everything. And, right now, you don't even know all the things you don't know.

(to LOU)

What the hell did we know at her age?

LOU

Or now for that matter?

NELL

You know plenty, Louisa. You're a genius, and don't ever forget it.

LOU

One good idea in a lifetime does not a genius make.

NELL

In your case, it does. Sprung from the head of Zeus, she was. Like the great Athena, armed for wisdom and war.

LOU
(to RAMONA)
Welcome, my dear, to the war stage.

NELL
The sequel!

RAMONA
(to LOU)
You were already writing the book at my age, weren't you?

LOU
Sure was.

NELL
But she had no idea what lay in store. Did you, Baby?

LOU
How could I?

NELL
(to RAMONA)
The bidding war and magazine covers... the protests, marches
and book burnings.

RAMONA
I can't believe there were book burnings...
(to LOU)
How did you deal?

LOU
There's an old expression: *Don't throw a rock then hide
your hand*. But that's what I did—the book was the rock...

NELL
The size of Ayers Rock.

LOU
... and people don't like that. They want you to stand there
and take their punches. I call it *the impunity of the
anonymous*...

NELL
Louisa was *infamous* when the book came out. But, as they
do, the hordes soon moved on to torment someone else. But
she had galvanized the women's movement, which, as we all
know, is in constant need of galvanizing. The book was an

NELL — CON'T.

inflection point. And is once again today, thanks to that fabulous show!

(to RAMONA)

Did you watch the last episode?

(laughing)

I mean, when have you ever seen a *woman sodomize a man*? And with a *whip handle*?

(to LOU)

I'm so glad you *finally* let me sell it for you.

(to RAMONA)

Would you like to hear something you probably don't know about your aunt?

RAMONA

Of course! She never tells me anything.

LOU

Builds my *mystique*, didn't you say?

NELL

I knew it. The second I started reading... *gold*. Women never getting the vote, no Seneca Falls or suffragette white. Instead, *captive, brutalized, silenced*. I knew at once this was something different. *Startling*. A rage against the patriarchy in a way that it hadn't been raged against before.

(to LOU)

And so prescient when you look at today...

RAMONA

Or any time in the lives of women, really...

NELL

That is true. I'll give you that.

(RAMONA is proud of herself, holding her own with these two formidable women.)

LOU

I thought I was writing just for me.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

It was a gloomy day like today and my nephew, who was just a toddler at the time, stumbled into the room and my first instinct was to hide the manuscript—from a three-year-old! I didn't want him to see what I was reading. It was so

NELL — CON'T.

unnerving and terrifying and thrilling... I knew right then and there that I had to represent this book, and its extraordinary author, my darling Louisa.

(to LOU)

Do you remember our first meeting?

LOU

It's what every writer dreams about.

(to RAMONA)

I had sent it to, I don't know, a dozen agents? Nell was the only one... no one wanted to touch it. The waiting was agony.

NELL

It was *two days*.

LOU

I must have smoked a carton of cigarettes waiting to hear.

(to RAMONA)

I was a real smoker back then.

RAMONA

As opposed to the *fake* one you are today?

(to NELL)

You read 800 pages in two days?

LOU

It was longer then. Nell worked with me to edit and shape it. Really took the time.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

So, you may want to be *slightly* less antagonistic toward me moving forward...

LOU

(to RAMONA)

I couldn't have done any of it without her.

NELL

Your aunt came highly recommended from another writer of mine. Very famous then but not any longer.

(to herself)

God, whatever happened to him?

(back to LOU and RAMONA)

But it was in the literati ether that Louisa was this genius at Iowa...

LOU

(to RAMONA)

I had just moved to New York.

NELL

Who had been working for years and years on *this book*, which, for me, was a much-appreciated departure from that brat-pack dreck that was all the rage at the time. So, when I finally got my hands on it, I hopped right to. Didn't I?

LOU

Sure did. And about a week after I submitted..

NELL

It was *two days*...

LOU

Two days later, my phone rang..

NELL

It was yours truly.

LOU

Saying..

NELL

Hello, Miss Clay? This is Nell Richards, and I simply must represent you and your extraordinary book.

LOU

And I said, *Why, that would be just fine.*

RAMONA

(incredulous)

That would be *fine*?

LOU

Just fine.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

Here I was, the greatest literary agent in Manhattan... on the planet! I was the tits, Baby.

(to LOU)

Still am, thanks to our wonderful show!

RAMONA

(to NELL)

What did you say? To Aunt Lou?

NELL

I said, *Good, then that's done. When can you grab a steak and a martini to celebrate?* And that's exactly what we did.

LOU

The next day.

NELL

It was?

LOU

Well, the next evening. We went to the Pool Room at the Four Seasons and I just couldn't believe any of it.

NELL

Le Tricorne!

(explaining to RAMONA)

A tapestry Picasso made for the Ballets Russes that hung in the restaurant.

LOU

I was 28 years old.

NELL

She was in springtime!

LOU

I was the personification of the vernal equinox.

NELL

We ate cotton candy...

LOU

And had *several* martinis.

NELL

And she knew, finally, that she would never have to go back home and live the life of a lemon.

(NELL has moved LOU with that last line.)

NELL — CON'T.

(to RAMONA)

Cotton candy was a Four Seasons specialty back then...

RAMONA

That's so weird.

NELL

You're right. That is weird. But the next thing you knew we had a bidding war on our hands. The book was the *cause celebre* of the literary world, and Louisa, its newest darling.

RAMONA

I can't even imagine...

LOU

It was horrible.

NELL

It was sensational! I've only seen anything like it a few times my entire career. Meteoric! But they weren't mine. But Louisa?

(to LOU)

It was wonderful, wasn't it?

LOU

It was decidedly *not* wonderful.

NELL

I loved every fucking minute of it! Never had anything even close to it again. Those were the days of book parties, incredible book parties. Remember Indochine and Odeon and, of course, *Nell's*?

(to RAMONA)

No relation.

RAMONA

I didn't think so...

NELL

Do you know who came to Louisa's party? At The Limelight...

RAMONA

What's that?

NELL

A Gothic Revival church—*deconsecrated*, I hope!—with beautiful stained-glass windows... at the time, it was one of the top nightclubs in the city, where thousands upon

NELL — CON'T.

thousands of people came to celebrate your Aunt Louisa and her remarkable debut.

LOU
(an aside to RAMONA)

Hundreds, *maybe*...

NELL
And do you know who was there?
(to LOU)

Do you remember?

(RAMONA, mesmerized and feeling more comfortable with NELL, fills her wine glass and wants her to keep talking.)

RAMONA
Who?

NELL
Warhol.

RAMONA
Stop it.
(to LOU)
You never told me that.

LOU
Because it's not true.

RAMONA
(to NELL)
It's not?

LOU
He was already dead.

NELL
Well, he went to somebody's book party. Someone else I represented. What does it matter? In any event, I was one of only a handful of women who were at that level back then...

RAMONA
What else is new?

NELL

(an aside to LOU)

Our resident Gen Z expert on gender inequality...

(back to RAMONA)

But *that book!* I had to grovel to the men around me, all the time... publishers, editors and, hell, even my own clients sometimes.

(reaching for LOU's hand)

But when Louisa came along, I was thrilled to have a woman; a strong, compelling, brilliant woman who was writing complicated, powerful, consequential books.

LOU

One book.

NELL

Yes, but that book—*her book*—was unlike anything else that ever existed. It has been the honor of my life to have had at least something to do with it.

LOU

You had everything to do with it, Nell. None of it would have happened without you.

(to RAMONA)

I wasn't even sure I'd try to publish it. Just sent it out into the world to see what might come back. And Nell, well, she convinced me it was the right thing to do. To share it...

NELL

And the rest, as they say, is history.

(to RAMONA)

Or should I say *herstory* or some such bullshit?

(RAMONA makes a face, and they are quiet for a moment. NELL is in a deep emotional place and RAMONA marvels at what she's just heard. LOU pats NELL's hand, which still rests atop her own.)

LOU

(to RAMONA)

Nell was the first... the *only* person who made me feel truly alive... in a pure way... until you came along.

RAMONA

(to LOU)

Why is it so hard for you to tell me these things? You don't have to hide from me.

(A text PINGS on RAMONA's phone—this time with yet another ringtone. LOU chuckles. RAMONA looks at her phone then furtively at NELL and puts the cell away in her pocket.)

NELL

Is that Rio?

(But RAMONA rises and takes some dirty dishes toward the kitchen. After she disappears...)

NELL — CON'T.

(calling after RAMONA)

What was that about *hiding*?

(whispering to LOU)

What in the world happened with those two?

LOU

I don't know.

NELL

Come on, Louisa. That girl tells you everything.

LOU

Not about this. I'm as in the dark as you.

(RAMONA returns to retrieve more dishes, but LOU puts her hand over hers to get her to stay. RAMONA takes a seat.)

LOU — CON'T.

Aren't you glad Nell gave you all that hot gossip about me?

RAMONA

It's not *gossip*...

(to NELL)

But, yes. Thank you. I appreciate you helping my aunt.

NELL

Oh, you do, do you? How nice. Well, you're welcome.

(to LOU)

Why does it always take people so long to see the light?

RAMONA

(to LOU)

I don't know why you had so much trouble handling all that fame. I would have loved it.

LOU

Would you now?

RAMONA

What's not to love? Success. Money. Cotton candy at The Four Seasons?

LOU

Well, it's not there anymore.

RAMONA

What?

LOU

The Pool Room. It's gone.

NELL

Le Tricorne, too. It's at the historical society now.

LOU

Another relic.

(to NELL)

Like us.

(NELL frowns: *Speak for yourself.*)

RAMONA

There are Pool Rooms nowadays, too.

(LOU and NELL share a look—it's not the same.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

They just have different names and different crowds.

(Now NELL's cell PINGS with a text and she looks expectantly at her phone.)

NELL

Shit on a goddamn shingle.

LOU

What is it?

NELL

(reluctantly tells them)

It was a false alarm.

NELL — CON'T.

(reading the text)

The reporter says law enforcement isn't acting. Something about state laws governing criminal threats..

RAMONA

They're not even looking?

(LOU rises and NELL and RAMONA follow her with their eyes as she heads to the bar and grabs another wine bottle, which she brings to the table. She pours glasses all around.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

What else?

(NELL takes a moment.)

NELL

She says she's trying to identify who is behind it... the motivation blah, blah, blah. But, so far, no arrests.

LOU

Is she going public?

NELL

She doesn't say.

LOU

Can you find out, please? I can't have them digging around for a story. Or have my phone ringing off the hook with reporters.

RAMONA

(to NELL)

How does she know about this?

NELL

I don't know.

RAMONA

You don't know?

NELL

No, Ramona. I don't. What are you insinuating?

RAMONA

Just curious how a reporter knew about this before the cops.

NELL

We don't know that. We don't know anything, really.

RAMONA

You said it was over.

NELL

That's what I thought.

(to LOU)

It could be anyone, or more than one person. We really have no idea.

RAMONA

Old Nell to the rescue, which isn't any rescue at all.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

At least I'm trying! What are you doing to help?

(to LOU)

I told you she shouldn't know about this.

RAMONA

I got the letter, Nell. I was there when it came. And I'm trying to get this address scrubbed off the internet so she can stay here in peace. What are you doing besides making things worse?

LOU

Would both of you just stop already!

(It's quiet for a moment.)

NELL

(pinched)

Where is it? The letter. May I see it, please?

(LOU nods at RAMONA, who rises and retrieves the letter from the kitchen. When she's gone...)

NELL — CON'T.

(whispering)

I told you you shouldn't have told her.

LOU

You wanted to see it, didn't you? Well, I did, too.

(RAMONA returns to the table and hands the envelope over to NELL.)

LOU — CON'T.

Wait a second.

(LOU goes to retrieve her gloves once again from the coat by the front door.)

(LOU hands the gloves to NELL, who puts on her readers and the gloves and opens the letter. LOU retakes her seat at the head of the table.)

(NELL stops reading and leaves the letter on the table beside her. Everyone just looks at it then tries to ignore its presence. LOU speaks after a few beats...)

LOU — CON'T.

I always knew the world was full of horrors, but I had no idea just how much... and how many. It's like a rock was turned over in the middle of the night and out crawled a thousand rattlesnakes.

RAMONA

A lot more than that...

NELL

(trying to be reassuring)

It's a harmless old crank, Louisa. So many are just miserable and despicable, harmless old cranks.

RAMONA

Not all of 'em...

(NELL takes the letter and puts it back in the envelope. Then she rises and goes in search of her handbag, which she finds and where she places the letter.)

(Once again, RAMONA's phone PINGS, but this time, it's a different sound: an alert. NELL and LOU turn to her. RAMONA looks at her phone.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

Holy shit.

NELL

What?

RAMONA
(hesitating before reading)

Some kind of plot.

NELL

What???

RAMONA
(reading and searching)

Juna.

NELL

What do you mean *Juna*?

RAMONA
A kidnapping or something. It's a developing story.

NELL
It's a fucking TV show, for Chrissake. What is wrong with people?

RAMONA
(to NELL)
Anything from your reporter?

(NELL returns to the table, grabs her phone and moves toward the kitchen to make a call.)

NELL

Let me call her...

(NELL disappears inside the kitchen and LOU, mute for a while now, rises and heads to the bar. She opens a drawer and retrieves her surreptitious pack of cigarettes, lighting one to the surprise then resignation of RAMONA.)

(LOU returns to the table with an ashtray and smokes to try and tamp down her fear.)

RAMONA

What do we do now?

(LOU doesn't say anything. She just sits back down, this time in the seat NELL vacated at the table, which faces the kitchen doorway.)

NELL

(offstage, into her phone)

What in the goddamn hell is going on?

(Somewhere just outside the house, a car's engine BACKFIRES and peels off with SCREECHING TIRES, scaring the hell out of RAMONA and making her jump. This time, however, LOU doesn't budge. She's in a trance with her cigarette and smoke rings.)

(NELL, having heard the screech, appears in the kitchen doorway, nerve-racked and afraid.)

NELL — CON'T.

What was that?

LOU

(to NELL)

It's happening again, isn't it?

NELL

(to LOU)

I'm taking care of it.

LOU

Where's Juna?

NELL

I'm trying to get through.

LOU

Where the fuck is Juna, Nell? Just fucking find her!

(LOU bangs her hand down hard on the table and angrily turns away from NELL. RAMONA just sits there, confused and helpless. NELL makes a motion toward LOU then turns away, retreating instead into the unseen space inside the kitchen.)

BLACKOUT.

End scene.

Scene Three

(Later that night, they're all a bit worse for wear. The dining table has a few wine bottles left on it, but the trio has moved into the living room. LOU sits in her rocking chair, drinking bourbon, while NELL is horizontal on the couch and RAMONA sprawls across the floor.)

(A pack of cigarettes, lighter and ashtray rest on the coffee table, along with LOU's phone, which is now turned back on. LOU looks at it for a moment then puts it back down.)

NELL

How long does it take?

LOU

Shouldn't be much longer.

NELL

I can't believe I let you talk me into this.

LOU

Just relax and daydream.

NELL

It's nearly midnight! And why didn't you take one? I thought you were going to do it with me?

LOU

(to RAMONA)

Would you put something on, please? Something quiet.

(RAMONA rises and does as she's told, settling on some soft music at low volume.)

RAMONA

(to NELL)

It really does open you up...

NELL

I don't want to be *opened up*, Ramona. I'm not in the market for an autopsy.

RAMONA

It digs into the nooks and crannies. Right, Aunt Lou? Tells you everything you need to know. Or want to.

(LOU doesn't respond.)

NELL

You can't blame her for wanting to *know* you, Louisa. After me, she's the only family you've got left. Now that your *patriotic* sister and that shithead husband of hers got mixed up in all that nonsense in D.C.

(RAMONA plops on the couch next to NELL, pushing NELL's legs away so they're sitting side by side.)

RAMONA

I know you wish it did, Nell, but all the *baby babies* in the world won't buy you entree into our family.

NELL

Don't be ridiculous. I have my own crazy family, thank you very much. Although no one has been there for *Aunt Lou* like Old Nell, isn't that right, Louisa? Our friendship goes deeper and wider than anyone could imagine.

(RAMONA rolls her eyes at this, so LOU gives her a bit of red meat.)

LOU

(to RAMONA)

What else do you want to know?

RAMONA

Really?

LOU

God only knows what's gonna happen with all this. Might as well get some truth out.

NELL

(re: RAMONA)

Oooh, look at her, drooling like a rabid rottweiler. Licking those chops...

(suddenly distracted)

Wait a minute... my hearing... it's really good all of a sudden. Like, superhuman.

RAMONA

It means you're high.

NELL

It helps with hearing?

RAMONA

(to LOU)

I can't believe you thought this was a good idea.

LOU

It'll lighten things up till we hear about Juna. Speaking of which, Nell, where's your phone?

RAMONA

I'll get it.

(LOU looks at her own phone and makes sure it's turned on as NELL marvels at her suddenly sharp hearing. RAMONA heads for the dining table and retrieves NELL's phone. She brings it back and puts it on the table by LOU's.)

NELL

Have I been deaf all these years? I can't imagine all that I've missed.

LOU

Listen for intruders, Nell... keep those ears perked, and don't let anybody get too close.

NELL

Don't try to scare me.

LOU

Just sit back and give those Dumbo ears a listen. Keep us safe.

(to RAMONA)

OK, then. Shoot.

NELL

So, what we want to know is...

RAMONA

Wait, what?

(RAMONA looks to LOU to intervene but she doesn't.)

NELL

... what happened between you and Rio?

RAMONA

(to LOU)

I thought I was asking the questions?

LOU

(shrugging)

Think of it as a palate cleanser before the main course.

RAMONA

I hate it when you gang up on me.

NELL

Oh, grow up, Ramona. And just tell us already. You'd think you knew who took the Lindbergh baby the way you've been keeping this a secret.

RAMONA

Nell, believe me, you don't want to know.

NELL

Oh yes, we do. We want to know every heaping morsel. Don't we, Louisa?

LOU

What could be so bad?

RAMONA

You're making my parents seem like sympathetic characters right about now.

NELL

Just spill it already.

RAMONA

OK, but don't say you didn't ask for it...

(RAMONA takes a beat.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

I am sorry to say, Nell, but Rio is a drug addict and, frankly, I don't want to be involved with a drug addict, romantically or otherwise.

LOU

That's a mighty strong accusation.

RAMONA

You think I'd say it if it wasn't true?

LOU

What kind of drugs? Like hard stuff?

(RAMONA nods. She and LOU look to NELL.)

NELL

I know Rio can be a fuck-up sometimes...

RAMONA

Coz she's a drug addict...

NELL

I don't see her very often.

RAMONA

Coz she's a drug addict.

NELL

She has her own life now that she's a young woman. I don't hear from her that much...

RAMONA

Coz she's a drug addict!

LOU

(to RAMONA)

Do her parents know?

RAMONA

I don't know. I don't think so.

(to NELL)

Do they?

NELL

I mean, it's one thing to *dabble*... I've dabbled... hell, I'm dabbling right now! But it's another thing entirely to be an addict... to *say* someone's an addict.

RAMONA

Don't blame me. You asked for it and I'm just the messenger.

NELL

So, you no longer see her? You dumped her?

RAMONA

I did not.

NELL

What did you do?

RAMONA

I've been trying to figure things out.

(to LOU)

Like, with my parents, at some point you decided to cut them off, right?

LOU

Yes, after...

RAMONA

... after *trying* to save the relationship?

LOU

... after trying to *salvage* any relationship we might have once had...

RAMONA

But they're family, so you have to try, right? You tried the best you could?

(LOU doesn't say anything; she may not have an honest answer.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

I've only known Rio a few months.

NELL

So you have no responsibility to her?

RAMONA

I don't know that I do.

(to LOU)

Do I?

(to NELL)

You're her grandmother... you and her parents... friends... you're the ones who should be involved. Helping her... seems like a better use of time than leaking to reporters.

LOU

Ramona!

NELL

You are a nasty, ungrateful and selfish young woman.

RAMONA

I'm selfish?

NELL

I'm glad things didn't work out with you two.

RAMONA

I'm selfish??? I've tried to help her! Maybe if you got your head out of my aunt's ass for a hot minute you'd know something was wrong.

LOU

That's enough!

NELL

You've got a lot of nerve, Kiddo. A hell of a lot of nerve. And I don't know what happened between us to make you dislike me so much. All I've ever done is look out for Louisa... and you, by extension. Your whole family. Saw to it that you were taken care of.

RAMONA

Oh really?

NELL

Yes, really. I stood by her for decades. How many agents let alone *people* would do that? Stick around for so many fallow years? No offense, Louisa.

LOU

None taken. It's the truth.

NELL

(continuing to RAMONA)

I don't make any money if my client doesn't make money, did you know that? Still, I kept Louisa as a client, happily, and, I might add, helped her make some pretty wise investments so that she could support you and your family. Did you ever stop to ask how she paid your tuition? College? I have been loyal to Louisa in ways no one else has ever been. And I did it out of love and unfettered admiration.

RAMONA

Yeah, I bet you *loved* and *admired* it when my parents got arrested and everyone was talking about her all over again. When she was back in the news; then you got your wish, didn't you? You finally got her to do what you wanted and sell those rights. How much did you make in the deal? Profiting over someone's pain...

NELL

Louisa *decided* to sell of her own volition... I just did what anyone who cares about her, and looks out for her, would do. I *executed her wish*...

RAMONA

That's rich...

NELL

... as I have been doing, at her behest, for *thirty years*. Through *everything*. So, don't you tell me what I have or haven't done for Louisa.

LOU

Both of you, that's enough.

NELL

(to RAMONA)

You have no idea what you're talking about, little girl.

RAMONA

(under her breath)

I know a hell of a lot more than you think, *Old Nell*.

LOU

Goddamn it, I said stop!

(NELL, really high now, angry, confused and upset that LOU just yelled at her, starts crying but sort of laughing at the same time.)

NELL

What a way to talk to me.

(to LOU)

What have I done for her to talk to me that way?

RAMONA

(to LOU)

I knew this was a bad idea. And I'm not gonna take care of her. She's on you.

(RAMONA makes to leave. She rises from the couch and starts walking toward the kitchen until NELL stops her.)

NELL

What are you gonna do now? *Ghost* me because I'm too much trouble? Take no responsibility for anyone except yourself?

(to LOU)

I am petrified for the future of this world. Everyone's so thin-skinned and emotional, yet quick to confront then disappear... behind their youth... or screens...

(to LOU)

Where does that leave people like us?

RAMONA

(to LOU)

Where does that leave relatives like us, Aunt Lou? How's all that thick skin treating you? Stuffing your emotions so far down you don't even know you have them anymore.

NELL

She has more emotion and *grit* in her wine glass...

RAMONA

(still to LOU)

Are you gonna say anything? Or are you just gonna let her swing at me all night?

LOU

You need to be real quiet right now, Ramona. You have said just about enough.

RAMONA

Her and all her *baby baby* bullshit. She's gonna get you killed! Maybe get all of us killed.

LOU

Nothing but quiet.

(RAMONA shuts up but remains standing. She just stares at LOU, waiting for her to do or say something. NELL, meanwhile, is nodding off and it's quiet for a moment.)

RAMONA

(to LOU)

Seriously, what am I supposed to do?

LOU

(re: NELL)

Lower your voice.

RAMONA

(quietly)

... host an intervention for someone I barely even know? And then what? No one wants to believe it, or deal with it, so they wind up blaming me because that's easier. And *I'm* the asshole?

LOU

What have you said to Rio?

RAMONA

I told her we should stop seeing each other for a while.

LOU

Did you say why?

RAMONA

Did you tell my mother why you won't be spending Christmas together?

LOU

She texted earlier, didn't she? Which text sound is hers?

(LOU lights a cigarette. RAMONA lifts the ashtray off the coffee table and hands it to LOU.)

NELL

(mumbling in her half-sleep)

Text sounds... text sounds?

LOU

Yes, Nell. Ramona has different text sounds for all the young women in her life.

RAMONA

And my mother. And you. Do you want to know what yours is?

NELL

(eyes still closed and cry-laughing a little more)

I'm probably a dirge. A funeral sound. I don't want to be a funeral.

(LOU's phone RINGS. She looks at the caller ID and ignores it. She quickly declines the call and turns the "God Only Knows" ringtone off.)

RAMONA

Who's that?

(LOU doesn't respond.)

NELL

I don't want to be a text sound... I want to be a *pet sound*...

(softly singing)

If you should ever leave me

Though life would still go on believe me

The world could show nothing to me

So what good would living do me?

(sings to LOU)

God only knows what I'd be without you...

(RAMONA moves once more to leave the room.)

RAMONA

On those horribly sung notes...

LOU

Ramona, wait. Please. I want to talk. Let me talk to you.

(RAMONA stops.)

LOU — CON'T.

Did you know that song was banned when it came out?

(RAMONA rolls her eyes.)

RAMONA

I'm gonna head back home.

LOU

You've been drinking. Stay till morning. Please. Let's talk.

(RAMONA reluctantly stays but won't take a seat.)

LOU — CON'T.

It wasn't that long ago, but some people in some places thought it was *blasphemous* to use the word God in the title of a song. Do you know what that means? What it really means?

RAMONA

Yeah...

LOU

Well, in case you don't, it's ecclesiastical Latin from the Greek *blasphēmos*, meaning *evil speaking*. Saying the word God in a pop song was thought, by a large number of people throughout these United States, to be *evil speaking*. Just like some thought, and still do, that my book is evil. That I'm evil.

RAMONA

Even more think you're a hero.

LOU

Perhaps. But who in the hell thinks there's evil in a song or a book... a person? Still, others believe them... and *join* them.

RAMONA

Say they'd kill for them.

NELL

The book is a work of fiction, for Christ's sake!

RAMONA

It's a manifesto.

(LOU studies RAMONA a moment then takes a drag off her cigarette.)

LOU

I would argue... for the record...

(A surprised RAMONA retakes her seat on the couch beside NELL.)

LOU — CON'T.

... that those who believe they are experiencing evil... *blasphemy*, if there is such a thing in this world, then *they* are that evil. And need to be called out and hauled to the trash. With authority, impunity and voice. Your voice.

NELL

Hear, hear!

LOU

(to RAMONA)

And that's what you'll do. You'll never keep quiet. You hear me? Now, ask your questions. Whatever you want. I've got nothing to hide.

(RAMONA will, but first, she negotiates.)

RAMONA

(re: NELL)

She needs to lay off.

LOU

(to NELL)

You're gonna leave Ramona alone about Rio, OK? That's your problem now. Can you handle it?

NELL

Mmmm...

LOU

You'll get on that tomorrow. Bright and early. Chop chop.

(to RAMONA)

Now go on. Shoot.

RAMONA

(thinking)

How come I know nothing about your love life?

LOU

Because I haven't had one in a very long while.

RAMONA

Why not?

LOU

Not interested. Next question.

(off RAMONA; she promised)

I am tired of being a person, OK?

NELL

She's depressed.

LOU

I am not depressed. Just tired of people. I don't want to deal with them anymore. Hell, I'm not sure I even want to be one anymore.

RAMONA

Was there ever anyone?

NELL

You bet your bippy there was. Louisa had a slew of *lovers*...

RAMONA

Ew, Nell.

LOU

(insulted)

What, ew?

RAMONA

No one says *lovers* anymore. It's gross.

NELL

(mumbling)

Lovers, lovers, lovers...

RAMONA

Real mature...

(to LOU)

So that's it? You're done? Gonna let all that andro hotness go to waste?

LOU

It's late December over here, Ramona.

RAMONA

It's still autumn.

LOU

I just want peace. I want to walk and read... drink my wine...

RAMONA

You can do that in the city... with me. If you want.

LOU

You know I love having you here. I do.

(NELL is out, and snoring. Outside, the SOUND of PEOPLE briefly interrupts the conversation. LOU and RAMONA listen for a moment when a snowball BLASTS against one of LOU's windows, startling them, but they recover when they hear the LAUGHTER of the kids who threw it as they run away.)

LOU — CON'T.

But I do better in this world alone.

(LOU just sips her drink. RAMONA treads lightly with what she's about to say.)

RAMONA

Is that because of *Ellen*?

(LOU looks at RAMONA with astonishment.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

None of this is your fault. You know that, right? Just like what happened *back then*... that wasn't, either.

LOU

How do you know about that?

RAMONA

(a beat)

My father told me...

LOU

Seems we are now entering into very dangerous territory.

RAMONA

My parents, actually. When they got sober.

LOU

Oh yeah? Which *step* is betrayal? I'd sure like to know because no one was ever supposed to know about that. She swore it. And she told him? And you?

RAMONA

She's just trying to understand... to find a way back to you.

LOU

Through you? Is that the plan? Well, she doesn't know anything about it.

RAMONA

She said you did what you could...

LOU

And neither do you!

RAMONA

... that you tried to save her. But your parents... they wanted to stay quiet... to keep it in the family... they wouldn't let you say anything..

(It's very quiet and tense, save the sound of NELL's snoring.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

Aunt Lou?

(very carefully and softly)

Is Ellen why you wrote the book?

(long beat)

And my mother? And all the women we can't save?

(LOU just looks at her but doesn't respond. Her anger is morphing into sweeping sadness.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

It's not your fault.

(RAMONA moves to the floor and sits beside the rocking chair, at LOU's feet. She puts her hands on her aunt's knees and rests her head there.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

You have to know that. And it's *still* in the family.

LOU

I should have stayed and fought them off.

RAMONA

You were a kid. You *tried* to save her.

LOU

I ran away...

RAMONA

To find help!

LOU

I *betrayed* her... the worst thing you can do to a person... and those dirtbags got away with it... raping and murdering a 13-year-old girl. My friend.

(It all comes back to LOU and the pain is too much.)

LOU — CON'T.

How is there anything in this world to explain that? And what I did... I never should have listened... and now? It's gonna be all over everything... everywhere. Someone's probably digging it up right now.

RAMONA

People will understand.

LOU

I bet your lizard-brained father is gonna call up reporters. Get my phone ringing off the hook, all over again, but this time it will be about *her*.

RAMONA

You tried to help.

LOU

But I didn't.

RAMONA

You couldn't. There's a difference.

LOU

Is there?

(Another beat.)

RAMONA

Does Nell know?

(And another.)

LOU

After all that work and time... we thought it might be helpful... to those who've had that kind of pain... Everything she did was to help me. Always. You need to know that and accept it as the truth.

(LOU throws her cigarette into the fire.)

LOU — CON'T.

And the fact that I might be a lemon after all.

RAMONA

Never.

(LOU touches RAMONA's cheek.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

(again, carefully)

What happened with my mom. Could that happen with us?

(RAMONA moves back to sit on the floor, against the lip of the couch. It's like she wants some distance between herself and whatever LOU's answer is going to be. LOU is as soft as we've ever seen her.)

LOU

It could. Things change... people... but us? I don't think it's possible.

RAMONA

I can't give up on her. She's my mother.

LOU

I hope you can get through to her. I really do. I just know that I can't. And I don't have it in me anymore to keep trying. You understand?

(LOU rises and stands before the fire. RAMONA rises and stands beside LOU.)

LOU – CON'T.

I got a phone call today. Phone calls, actually. Plural. It's not just one person.

(NELL's cellphone, on the coffee table, PINGS with a text. She doesn't stir. LOU reaches for the phone. She is shaken by what she reads.)

LOU – CON'T.

They're going to publish tomorrow.

RAMONA

Jesus.

LOU

Jesus on a bike with a melting, shit-flavored popsicle. But Juna's OK. Thank God. They made some arrests. Three men and a woman.

(Russian accent)

This is not good, Anastasia.

RAMONA

Aunt Lou?

LOU

Yeah?

RAMONA

(carefully)

Nell did this, didn't she?

(They both look at NELL, snoring away on the couch. LOU puts the phone back on the table.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

You know she did.

(NELL stirs and mumbles, and slowly wakes up.)

NELL

Don't talk about me like I'm not here. I have Dumbo ears, remember? I was dreaming... we were at the Limelight, dancing up a storm. Unfortunately, we were also wearing shoulder pads.

LOU

The Limelight's a flea market now, Nell, which means it's time for bed.

NELL

It was so beautiful. Warhol was there. We danced, but he was shot. Blood everywhere. That crazy woman shot him. When was that again?

(LOU goes over to help NELL off the couch.)

LOU

Time to sleep.

NELL

It was so bright. Andy Warhol in technicolor! Am I high?

LOU

Stoned out of your Chanel.

(LOU helps NELL over to the stairs.)

LOU — CON'T.

Ramona put everything in your room. Can you make it upstairs?

NELL

I'm invincible, Louisa. Don't you know that by now?

(to RAMONA)

I want to get some of those gummy treats. They are so lovely! Will you get some for me?

(They make it to the base of the stairs.)

LOU

Alright, come on...

(NELL bats LOU away, determined to walk up the stairs on her own. RAMONA and LOU watch her slow ascent.)

NELL

I can do it...

(climbing a stair or two)

And, yes, I told that reporter... so what? She's going to help us get *all* the money, Louisa. And *all* the Emmys. You'll be set for life. I took care of you *for life!*

(to RAMONA)

You, too, so make sure you remember that when you're heaping all that vitriol on Old Nell... remember who's always been on your side. Through everything. All this time.

(NELL slowly climbs some more stairs. RAMONA looks to LOU for her reaction to NELL's confession, but she doesn't really have one.)

NELL — CON'T.

I wish to God I had someone looking out for me like that.

(singing again)

God only knows what I'd be without you... Louisa, you have been my very own wonderful genius. And, for that, I am eternally grateful.

LOU

Tomorrow, you and Ramona are gonna leave bright and early. Take care of business with Rio and Juna. All of it. You got that?

NELL

Whatever you say.

LOU

Ramona's gonna stay with you a while.

(off NELL)

I don't want her alone in the apartment. And I don't want you complaining about it. I need you two to be friends, OK? She's gonna be responsible for my estate one day and you'll need to help her and not stand in her way. Will you do that for me? I won't ask for anything more.

(NELL nods and limps up the last few steps. She gives LOU one last look and disappears. RAMONA looks at LOU in anger and disbelief—what the fuck just happened?)

LOU — CON'T.

(to RAMONA)

Wake up and get out of here. Before I get up.

RAMONA

You won't come?

LOU

And make sure to get this address scrubbed, as soon as possible. I don't want anyone I don't want to see finding me here.

(LOU heads for the bar. She pours some bourbon into a glass and walks over by the front door, where she looks out a window. RAMONA takes a seat in LOU's chair at the head of the table.)

RAMONA

(quoting)

One chair is for solitude, two are for company and three? Civilization.

(off a surprised LOU)

Thoreau, you ninny. We live in civilization, Aunt Lou. There's no getting around it. You're either in the world or you're not.

(LOU continues looking through the window into the darkness outside.)

RAMONA — CON'T.

Well, I like civilization.

LOU

Good, coz it's your turn to mind it.

RAMONA

In a world gone mad. What about you?

LOU

All I know is I'm as tired as I ever was, and I don't see how anyone who's been at it this long isn't feeling it, too...

(looking at RAMONA)

... so, the question is, how to keep fighting?

RAMONA

What about what you said in the book?

(off LOU's blank look)

In the last episode? *Men are always inventing new excuses for killing women.* We have to change that. Once and for all.

(LOU doesn't respond. Instead, she walks over to the front door and checks the locks and makes sure the chain is attached.)

RAMONA – CON'T.

We can do that, right?

(LOU's cellphone rings with the familiar "God Only Knows" notes, startling the hell out of them both. LOU and RAMONA look at each other and, LOU, knowing what she's in for, walks over to the coffee table and answers the phone. But she doesn't say anything. She just listens.)

MALE CALLER (VO)

We know where you live, Bitch, and we're gonna take you off the face of this fucking Earth.

(RAMONA looks at LOU, who hangs up without any emotion. But RAMONA knows what that was. LOU carries on, although there's a resolve in her—like a decision has been made.)

LOU

You have everything you need?

RAMONA

Yeah. You?

LOU

Don't you worry about me.

(LOU heads toward the stairs.)

RAMONA

Aunt Lou?

(LOU turns to RAMONA)

Everything's gonna be alright... *right?*

LOU

Sleep tight. Don't let the lunatics bite. And make sure I don't see you in the morning, OK?

RAMONA

(teasing)

You sleep till noon so that shouldn't be a problem. But I hope you'll come back soon? To the city?

(LOU just smiles, then makes her way up the stairs as RAMONA finds a closet where she retrieves a blanket and a pillow and begins to make up the couch for bed. Before LOU disappears up top, she takes a last look at her niece.)

LOU

You take good care, Anastasia. You need to be strong so you can restore us, remember?

RAMONA

To sanity, reason and decorum? As you wish...

LOU

For all of us.

RAMONA

I am forever in your footsteps, *Tsarina*. Sleep you well, my queen.

LOU

And you, my daughter... oh, and the conversation tonight? Consider it our interview. Do with it what you will. All of it.

(RAMONA bows deeply, then LOU blows her a kiss and disappears upstairs.)

(RAMONA blows out a candle, dims the lights and makes sure the fireplace screen is closed.)

(RAMONA lies down on the couch and burrows under the blanket, making herself comfortable. She takes a deep inhalation of breath and readies herself for sleep as the LIGHTS FADE until it's pitch black.)

(A few moments later, the LIGHTS COME UP, but RAMONA is no longer on the couch, and neither are the pillow and blanket. And her backpack and coat are gone, too. RAMONA and NELL have already left and it's soft and quiet. Late morning sunlight pours in through the windows.)

(LOU appears at the top of the stairs, holding her phone. She looks below to see if RAMONA and NELL are still there.)

LOU – CON'T.

Nell, are you gone? Ramona?

(LOU is satisfied that they've left and dials 9-1-1 on her phone.)

LOU – CON'T.

Hello, I'd like to report an incident... can you come over right away? Yes, my name is Louisa Clay... yes, *that* Louisa Clay...

(LOU disappears back into her room, where she'll finish the conversation.)

(In a few moments, though, the stillness of the house will be disrupted by the sound of a GUNSHOT being fired, making a loud BANG and shaking the upstairs of the house.)

(In another moment, LOU's cellphone will RING, and the familiar opening notes of her ringtone will morph into the real version of the song "God Only Knows" by The Beach Boys as the lights slowly dim...)

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY