**ARBOROPHILIA, OR THE CHOPPING BLOCK**

**A FANTASIA IN TWO ACTS**

**By**

**Jacob M. Appel**

**CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY**

5 FEMALE / 2 MALE

**Gwendolyn Gage** A Democrat **(F/55)**

**Lily Gage** Gwendolyn’s older daughter **(F/26)**

**Laurel Gage** Gwendolyn’s younger daughter **(F/18)**

**Fairmont Fythe** A Republican **(M/28)**

**Dame Lucretia Bankmore Vandervelt** Fairmont’s employer, a wealthy and

 imperious woman **(F/70+)**

**Jimmy Duckfoot**  The owner of a small garden-supply store

 **(M/35)**

**A Female Poplar Tree** The object of Laurel’s love **(F/19)**

**SET & PROPS**

One half of the stage is the Gage residence, an upscale brownstone in an outer borough of New York City. The structure is split open so that we see the parlor. The windows of the parlor overlook a vacant lot, which occupies the other half of the stage. Jimmy Duckfoot’s garden-supply store stands on the opposite side of the vacant lot—though only the exterior is visible; potted plants surround the entrance. Two chairs adjacent to the Gage residence, on the side opposite the lot, can serve as other venues around the city (eg. Fairmont’s apartment, Lucretia’s office, etc). Most of the set should be left to the imagination. Light may be used to emphasize scene shifts when multiple characters remain on stage. Anyone attempting to portray these locations realistically will do so at his/her own peril.

**A NOTE ON THE POPLAR TREE**

The **Poplar Tree** should be on stage, in the vacant lot, at all times. The actor portraying the tree may either be the tree or may appear through a portal in the tree.

**A NOTE ON SUBTITLES**

The subtitles/scene headings are intended to be either projected or read aloud. A director might also consider (sparingly) reading/projecting selected stage directions.

**ACT ONE**

**1. “Laurel”**

*(Laurel enters the vacant lot and sits beneath the poplar*

 *tree. She is in love with the poplar tree, but the poplar*

 *tree is not in love with her. She attempts to seduce the*

 *poplar tree, but to no avail. She weeps silently.)*

 **2. “Gwendolyn”**

*(Gwendolyn enters the brownstone. Gwendolyn, to the*

*audience.)*

Love is out of control these days.

In my day, love was a straightforward proposition: one man, one woman…kisses, rings, vows….maybe a few letters or a bouquet of flowers, if you were lucky….then babies, at least one…two…four….I had the good sense to stop at two….and bickering, shouting, the carefully-timed throwing of dinnerware.…No bloodshed except in the most extreme cases….adultery, separation, divorce, alimony….You knew where you stood when I was a girl. But now! It’s a free-for-all. First, my younger daughter falls in love with a tree. I don’t mean metaphorically, either. This isn’t some sort of symbolic statement—an effort to humanize the destruction of our primeval forests. I mean she actually has romantic feelings for a tree. Look at her—eighteen years old and weeping all day like a willow. As though that wispy, undernourished, light-starved poplar in our vacant lot were the only tree in the forest….And now my older daughter—the sensible one—wants to marry a Republican.

**3. “Gwendolyn and Lily”**

 *(Lily enters the brownstone.)*

**GWENDOLYN**

A Republican?!

 **LILY**

I knew you were going to be judgmental.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m a judge. It’s my job to be judgmental.

 **LILY**

Fairmont didn’t believe me, but I warned him. I said: “Fairmont, darling, you don’t have a clue what you’re up against. My Mama is the most unreasonable person on the planet.” And was I right? Of course, I was right.

 **GWENDOLYN**

His name is Fairmont?!

 **LILY**

What’s wrong with Fairmont?

 **GWENDOLYN**

It sounds like a cemetery.

 **LILY**

I think it’s a distinguished name.

 **GWENDOLYN**

It sounds like a Republican cemetery….Or maybe one of those luxury automobiles from the twenties—something with running boards.

 **LILY**

Dammit, Mama. Fairmont is a human being. A tall, handsome human being. I don’t see why you can’t give him a chance.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Tall is no good. The blood doesn’t drain from the skull properly. He’s bound to burst an aneurysm.

 **LILY**

You’re making that up.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I never make anything up. I’m just frank. Some people are uncomfortable with the truth.

 **LILY**

Like when you claimed Abraham Lincoln was a Democrat?

 **GWENDOLYN**

He *was* a Democrat—in his heart. The rest was just for show…political expediency.

 **LILY**

You really are one of a kind—an American original….They should put you in a museum…or have you bronzed. My sister is in love with a tree. She is in love with a tree who is not in love with her—*that* is not in love with her. My sister is stalking a tree, dammit. And you’re concerned about Fairmont’s politics.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Don’t take this out on your sister. She has nothing to do with this. And please don’t call it stalking. That’s such a dirty word. I prefer unrequited love.

 **LILY**

Laurel is in desperate need of psychological help.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Now who’s being judgmental?

 **LILY**

*Yes*, I’m being judgmental. Given the choice between loving trees or….or not-trees, I’m extremely judgmental. Human beings do not marry trees.

 **GWENDOLYN**

In remote parts of India they do….and on certain Pacific atolls.

 **LILY**

Look around you, Mama. This is New York City, not some Pacific atoll. The first thing they teach you in psychiatry residency is that sanity is culturally specific. If one of my patients tells me he’s into cutting out the hearts of strangers, I don’t conclude the man is mentally fit because the ancient Aztecs *also* practiced human sacrifice….It’s not healthy, the way you humor her.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Better than making her cry the way you did! Telling her she had—what did you call it?

 **LILY**

Arborophilia. An unhealthy fetish for trees.

 **GWENDOLYN**

That’s right. Call it a sickness. And who are you to decide what’s healthy and what’s not healthy, Lily Gage? You’re no better than your father was. Always saying: This is unhealthy, that is unhealthy. As though being a doctor gave him special insights…..

 **LILY**

If Laurel were schizophrenic, you wouldn’t negotiate with her voices. If she had multiple personalities, you wouldn’t buy them two sets of birthday presents….I wish I knew a way to put this that might get through to you…. It’s a tall tree. All the xylem and phloem or whatever probably can’t get to the top. It’s bound to have a tree aneurysm.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Okay, have your fun….But trees are neutral, at worst. They don’t cause any harm…. Republicans are not neutral. Where on earth did you meet this Woodlawn anyway?

 **LILY**

Fairmont!
 **GWENDOLYN**

Woodlawn, Arlington, Shady Acres. Whatever. You haven’t been hanging out in banking houses, have you? Or evangelical churches, God forbid?

 **LILY**

I met him on a street corner—opposite the garden shop….He was looking at real estate.

 **GWENDOLYN**

That’s exactly what we need. Republicans on our block. There goes the neighborhood.

 **LILY**

He’s not moving here, Mama. He was just looking at property for his boss. She inherited a couple of parcels in the area….

 **GWENDOLYN**

A “couple of parcels”? Since when do you refer to land in terms of parcels? He’s corrupting you already….Soon you’ll be using the royal we….

 **LILY**

Papa was a Republican. Lily and I are half Republican.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You can’t be half Republican. That’s like being half contagious.

 **LILY**

This is all about Papa, isn’t it?

 **GWENDOLYN**

This is *not* about your father. This is about statistical evidence. Mixed political marriages don’t work—It’s a proven fact….

 **LILY**

If I have to hear another of your proven facts….Remember when you insisted that Paul Simon, the folk singer, and Paul Simon, the Senator from Illinois, were both the same person? Is this that kind of proven fact?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Any kind of Democrat will do. A union man—someone good with his hands….or maybe a college professor, some sort of intellectual….an illegal immigrant….a lesbian activist….I don’t care about gender, income, age….Is Ethel Kennedy still alive?....She could probably use some affection….But *no* Republicans. I’m afraid I’m going to have to put my foot down on this one.

 **LILY**

I’m twenty-six years old, Mama. I’m a doctor. You can’t put your foot down.

 **GWENDOLYN**

As long as I’m your mother, I’ll put my feet wherever I choose, thank you….If you wanted a Republican for a husband, you should have had a Republican for a mother.

**4. “Lily and Fairmont”**

*(Gwendolyn retreats to the rear of the apartment and sits*

 *down. Lily steps forward and crosses to the pair of chairs*

 *that serve as Fairmont’s apartment. Fairmont enters.)*

**LILY**

“If you want a Republican as a husband, you should have had a Republican for a mother.” I told you she’d react irrationally.

 **FAIRMONT**

She’ll come around.

 **LILY**

Laurel’s going to have Johnny Appleseed for a father-in-law, but *that* she can live with. She was crystal clear: She prefers trees to Republicans….My mother is not the sort of woman who comes around. My mother is the sort of woman who turns over in her grave—while she’s still alive.

**FAIRMONT**

We’re the last oppressed minority in this city. You can’t discriminate against black or Jews or homosexuals….You can’t even discriminate against cripples anymore—

**LILY**

—The disabled—

 **FAIRMONT**

You can’t even call a cripple a cripple anymore—but you can say more or less anything you want about a Republican and nobody so much as bats an eye….For a judge, your mother certainly lacks perspective.

 **LILY**

Can’t you stretch the truth? Tell her you’re a maverick? An independent?

 **FAIRMONT**

I could tell her lots of things. I could tell her I’m a cedar from Lebanon. I *could*—But I won’t.

 **LILY**

Maybe we could elope….

 **FAIRMONT**

Republicans don’t elope….Anyway, we really do need the old coot’s blessing. Otherwise, you end up wasting half your life in court…..And once you have kids, it’s all over. You’re talking visitation orders, shared holidays, joint custody. Forget the Gray Panthers. Those Grandparents’ Rights people are the *Gray Gestapo*….

 **LILY**

We could have a baby, you know….Now, I mean….

 **FAIRMONT**What would I do with a baby? I can’t even find my own car at the mall….

 **LILY**

I’m telling you that nothing short of a grandchild—maybe a whole conclave of grandchildren—is going to change her mind. Even then, I don’t know. This is a woman who once sued the Coca-Cola Company in Federal Court over seventy-five cents she lost in a vending machine. First, she wrote them a letter demanding her money back. They offered to return the money and she sued them anyway—for the twenty-three cents postage she paid on the letter….

 **FAIRMONT**

Trust me, baby. They didn’t call me “Smooth-Talking Fairmont” in business school for nothing. I’m going to be in your neck of the woods this weekend anyway….Dame Lucretia wants to survey her property for herself. While I’m there, I think I’ll just drop by your mother’s place and see if we can’t straighten things out. Nothing like turning on the personal charm. The old coot will see eye-to-eye with me in no time.

 **LILY**

Please stop calling her an old coot. She *is* my mother.

 **FAIRMONT**

The word coot will never cross my lips again.

 **LILY**

If you love me, you’ll have to love her too.

 **FAIRMONT**

Even if I do see an old C-O-O-T, I won’t call it a C-O-O-T. How about a slow-flying bird somewhat resembling a duck?

 **LILY**

She says your name sounds like a cemetery.

 **FAIRMONT**

Jesus H. Christ!....I was named after an automobile. The Hudson Fairmont. One of those beautiful stretch touring sedans from the Twenties with running boards.

 **LILY**

Are you for real?

 **FAIRMONT**

Of course not. I’m named after my father.

 **LILY**

And your father’s not named after a car?

 **FAIRMONT**

My father was named after a state….He was born on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic and my grandmother thought that naming babies after states was an American tradition….She’d read somewhere that Ginger Rogers’ real name was Virginia.

 **LILY**

Excuse me?

 **FAIRMONT**

My grandparents were German….Fairmont. The state next to New Hampshire.

 **LILY**

Next time around, remind *me* to fall in love with a tree.

 **FAIRMONT**

*(Flirting, mock jealous.)*

Have you been making eyes with the geraniums again?

 **LILY**

Okay, try to talk to Mama—if you absolutely have to. But please be careful. She *is* a criminal court judge. She could have you arrested….And if she *can* have you arrested, she *will* have you arrested.

 **FAIRMONT**

Keep in mind who you’re dealing with here. I work for Dame Lucretia Bankmore Vandervelt. I may get arrested, but I won’t *stay* arrested.

 *(Lily and Fairmont exit.)*

**5. “Laurel in Love”**

 *(Laurel, to the audience.)*

I’m in love….I’m eighteen and in love.

I didn’t plan it this way—it just happened. First, I tried dating boys. I didn’t mind, really. I just didn’t see what the big deal was about. So then a friend of mine said she’d had the same experience—and suggested dating girls. I didn’t mind that either, really, but that also didn’t seem like such a big deal. So I went back to boys—because it was all the same to me and there were more boys to choose from….And then I met *my darling*.

 *(Laurel makes a dramatic display of her affection for the*

 *poplar tree.)*

 So much for boys and girls….

**6. “Laurel visits the Garden-Supply Store”**

*(Jimmy enters and stands in front of the garden-supply*

 *store, sweeping. He sings while he sweeps—anything*

 *slightly old-fashioned and upbeat, yet romantic.*

 *Laurel approaches.)*

**LAUREL**

Excuse me…

 **JIMMY**

 *(Looking up, suddenly smitten)*

I….Uhm….Hi….

 **LAUREL**

Are you the tree doctor?

 **JIMMY**

Tree doctor. Shrub surgeon. Plant psychiatrist. The Florence Nightingale of horticulture—at your service.

 **LAUREL**

Maybe you can help me then….What do you have in the way of aphrodisiacs?

**JIMMY**

Aphrodisiacs...? *(He seems to think this is a species of plant.)* I’m afraid we don’t carry those. Could I recommend a sturdy dieffenbachia? Or a split-leaf philodendron? They do well in both sun and shade.

**LAUREL**

I need an aphrodisiac…an elixir…a love potion.

 **JIMMY**

Oh. A love potion.

 **LAUREL**

To make someone fall in love with me.

**JIMMY**

I can’t imagine an attractive girl like you needs a love potion….

**LAUREL**

But I do. *I do*. I’ve fallen in love—and she hardly knows I’m alive.

 **JIMMY**

 *(Looking disappointed)*

Maybe you’re underestimating her feelings….

**LAUREL**

Oh, I wish! But she spends all of her time with foliage. Flowering plants. Epiphytes. Tender young saplings. She won’t give me the time of day.

 **JIMMY**

How would you feel about a better offer?

 **LAUREL**

I’m not sure I understand….

 **JIMMY**

I was thinking….maybe…..you know….

 **LAUREL**

Yes?

 **JIMMY**

I thought maybe you might like to fall in love with me…..If that’s not too presumptuous a suggestion….

  **LAUREL**

I’m flattered….but I can’t….

 **JIMMY**

 *(Discouraged.)*

I guess I’m not your type.

 **LAUREL**

It’s not that at all….

 **JIMMY**You can’t blame a fellow for trying, can you? I thought you might like men *and* women.

 **LAUREL**

I do like both men and women.

 **JIMMY**

Romantically, I meant.

 **LAUREL**

Romantically? Romantically, I like neither men nor women.

 **JIMMY**

But you just said you’ve fallen in love with a woman.

 **LAUREL**

In love with a woman! Is that what you thought?

 **JIMMY**

That’s what you said. You just asked me for an aphrodisiac in order to make *her* fall in love with you.

 **LAUREL**

Not a woman….I’m in love with *her*!

 *(Laurel points at the poplar tree.)*

 **JIMMY**

….That’s a tree…..

 **LAUREL**

An Atlantic poplar. *Populus* *atlanticus.*

**JIMMY**

You’re in love with a tree?!

 **LAUREL**

But to her—I’m less than firewood.

**JIMMY**

You won’t go out with me because you’re in love with…her.

**LAUREL**

Please don’t take it personally.

 **JIMMY**

How can I not take it personally? You’re rejecting me for a tree.

 **LAUREL**

“Rejecting” sounds so harsh. How about: “Not preferring.”

**JIMMY**

I don’t get it.

 **LAUREL**

I don’t either. At least, not in a way that I can explain. One day last April—the final Friday before the final Saturday in April—

**JIMMY**

—Arbor Day—

**LAUREL**

Exactly. Arbor Day. I was sitting on the wooden bench under that poplar tree when the skies opened up. It rained and rained and rained—but I didn’t get wet. The poplar sheltered me with her leaves. I’ve never felt so safe, so at ease. And then I looked up into her shimmering branches and I was in love.

**JIMMY**

I’m losing out to a tree.

**LAUREL**

I was ecstatic for days on end. I’d never been in love before—and it was wonderful…. After that, no matter what happened to me—even when I had to have work done on my molars—it didn’t hurt, because I was in love. The dentist thought I was crazy to have seven root canals done without anesthesia, but I wasn’t crazy—I was numb with passion….I should have had my tonsils and my appendix taken out too—preemptively—but I didn’t think of that….When you’re in love, it’s often hard to think of practical things. All *I* could think of were ways to prove my love. I bought her a birdfeeder, so she’d have music early in the morning. I tied a pink ribbon around her trunk. I planted roses and violets all over the vacant lot….Only then I started to have my doubts. *I* loved *her*. But did s*he* love *me*? And how could I be certain?

 **JIMMY**

I imagine she’s not too communicative.

 **LAUREL**

She *could* communicate with me *if she wanted to*. I’m just sure she could.

But she doesn’t care….

 *(Laurel begins to sob.)*

**JIMMY**

Pull yourself together, miss. There are lots of other trees out there.

 **LAUREL**

Trees to hang myself from.

 **JIMMY**

It can’t be as bad as all that.

**LAUREL**

How do you know? Have you ever loved a tree before?

 **JIMMY**

No, I haven’t. But you’ll figure something out. Maybe try a few of the tricks from one of those women’s magazines….or *Better Homes and Gardens*….

**LAUREL**

Are you sure you don’t have *anything* that can help me?

**JIMMY**

Not a thing, I’m afraid. I’ve got products to help plants grow. Nitrogen supplements, phosphorous supplements, vermiculite. I’ve got lots of products to help plants die. Herbicides, weed killers, defoliants. But to make plants fall in love? Even modern botany has its limits.

**LAUREL**

I knew it was hopeless. But thank you for trying—and for listening. I’m sorry I’m such a wreck….

**JIMMY**

Not a problem. Say, do you have plans for this evening?

**LAUREL**

I’ll be sitting in the shade.

 **JIMMY**

How about after dark?

 **LAUREL**

I’ll be sitting in the dark.

**JIMMY**

Do you want company? Maybe we could talk about plants or something….

**LAUREL**

Look, Mr.—

**JIMMY**

Mr. Duckfoot. It’s a Native American name…..But call me Jimmy.

**LAUREL**

Please, Mr. Duckfoot….Jimmy. You seem like a very nice guy, but you’re barking up the wrong girl.

 **JIMMY**

You’re the boss, miss. Say, isn’t that tree a bit old for you?

 **LAUREL**

Don’t let the lightning scars fool you. She has only fifty-two rings. That’s not even twenty in human years.

 **JIMMY**

The perfect age.

**LAUREL**

Good bye, Jimmy. No hard feelings?

 **JIMMY**

No hard feelings. Of course not.

 *(Laurel walks to the tree and sits down. Jimmy calls*

 *after her.)*

Come back again. Any time.

*(To the audience.)*

It was bound to happen….I finally meet the girl of my dreams—and she’s in love with a tree. Go figure.

 *(Jimmy shrugs and continues sweeping; Laurel nestles*

 *against the tree and falls asleep, embracing it.)*

**7. “Lucretia Surveys Her Property”**

 *(Lucretia and Fairmont enter the vacant lot.)*

 **LUCRETIA**

This is my lot, isn’t it?

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

And that’s my tree, isn’t it?

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia. They are *all* your trees.

 **LUCRETIA**

And what’s that?

 **FAIRMONT**

That’s a young woman, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

Does she belong to me?

 **FAIRMONT**

No, Dame Lucretia….What I mean is: I’m sure you could afford her….But people aren’t allowed to own other people…. It’s a government regulation.

 **LUCRETIA**

It’s Bolshevism, that’s what it is. People can’t own people! All throughout history, people have owned people. The ancient Greeks owned people. The Romans owned people. The Pharaohs and the Tsars and the Norman Conquerors all owned people. How can a society call itself free if it denies people the freedom to own each other? But, fine. If we live in an age of oppression, so be it…..And since I don’t own that young woman, Mr. Fythe, prey tell what is she doing on my property?

**FAIRMONT**

I believe she’s hugging a tree, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

This will not do….Remove her at once.

 **FAIRMONT**

Begging your pardon, Dame Lucretia, but is that really necessary? I mean: She’s not bothering anyone.

 **LUCRETIA**

Not bothering anyone? What! Are you turning Bolshevik on me too….First Reagan and now you…..

 **FAIRMONT**

I only intended—

 **LUCRETIA**

Don’t intend anything! You’re far too poor to intend anything, Mr. Fythe. Employers intend. Employees effectuate. Have I made myself clear?

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

Are you familiar with adverse possession laws, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

No, I fear I’m not, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

Well, I am. Adverse possession means that if someone else continually occupies your property unchallenged for a period of time—forty years in this state—they can stake a claim to it. That makes it *their* property, not yours. So you understand why the young woman must be removed.

 **FAIRMONT**

I can’t imagine she’ll stay like that for forty years, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

Don’t be so sure, Mr. Fythe. There’s no telling what desperate measures a person may resort to in pursuit of financial gain. You know all those sappy songs about the crazy things young people do for love. You know which ones I mean: Those ballads about highwaymen who shoot themselves to warn their mistresses. Or is it the mistresses who do the shooting? Well, no matter. It’s stuff and nonsense, if you ask me. Nobody makes those sorts of sacrifices for love….But for money…for real estate…that’s a horse of a different color….Now do you understand why *I* do the intending and *you* do the effectuating?

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

I read the Bolshevik philosophers, Mr. Fythe. Know thine enemy….Well, this Mr. Mao tse-Tung says a journey of one thousand miles begins with a single step….and that girl is stepping on my property…. *You* see a young girl sleeping, Mr. Fythe. *I* see the camel’s nose in the tent….Rip Van Winkle slept for twenty years—and she can’t be half his age. Why shouldn’t she sleep for forty years?

 **FAIRMONT**

I admire your foresight, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

I do too….But I hate flattery….and obsequiousness. There’s nothing worse in the business world than a “yes-man.” Don’t you agree, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia. I mean: No, Dame Lucretia. I mean: Yes and No, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

The only trait I hate more than toadying is wishy-washiness.

 **FAIRMONT**

I couldn’t agree more, Dame Lucretia. I’m with you on that one hundred and ten percent.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Catching sight of the flower shop.)*

What are those, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

I believe they’re flowers, Dame Lucretia. That looks like a garden shop.

 **LUCRETIA**

Would you kindly inform that dopey-looking fellow that I’d like a word with him.

 **FAIRMONT**

Before or after I remove the girl?

 **LUCRETIA**

Must I tell you everything? It taxes the brain….Use your discretion, Mr. Fythe—and please make sure you use it wisely.

 *(Fairmont speaks to Jimmy, but we do not hear their*

*conversation. Jimmy approaches Lucretia.)*

**JIMMY**

What can I do for you, ma’am?

**LUCRETIA**

Are those your plants in that lot?

**JIMMY**

They sure are. We’ve got petunias, geraniums, impatiens….Impatiens are good companion plants—if you’re looking for a friend, but can’t handle a dog or a cat.

 **LUCRETIA**

Kindly remove them at once.

**JIMMY**

Remove what?

**LUCRETIA**

Your plants. They’re trespassing on my property.

**JIMMY**

I don’t follow, ma’am.

**LUCRETIA**

Let me help you follow. This is your plant shop. Right?

**JIMMY**

Yes, ma’am.

**LUCRETIA**

And someone owns the land it’s built on.

**JIMMY**

I do. Free and clear.

**LUCRETIA**

Good for you.

**JIMMY**

Thank you, ma’am.

**LUCRETIA**

Well, I own this vacant lot. Free and clear. And your plants are trespassing upon it.

**JIMMY**

I thought the city owned the lot.

**LUCRETIA**

You thought wrong. Now if you’ll do me the small favor of carting off those pots….

**JIMMY**

But if you’re not using the land….

**LUCRETIA**

It’s a matter of principle, young man. Never underestimate the importance of principle.

**JIMMY**

I’ve been storing plants in this space for years.

 **LUCRECIA**

More than forty years?

 **JIMMY**

No. About twelve, maybe thirteen….

**LUCRETIA**

Then you’ve received something for nothing. I should have charged you rent….In any case, I do intend to make use of this land. I’m going to dig a quarry.

**JIMMY**

You can’t be serious, lady.

**LUCRETIA**

I make a point of never being anything other than serious, young man. This city is built upon bedrock. Bedrock is valuable.

**JIMMY**

Since when is bedrock valuable?

 **LUCRETIA**

Since I’ve decided to start mining it….If you must know, I think people are tired of all this modern architecture with steel and glass and whatnot. Flimsy, that’s what it is. People are hunkering for something stronger, solid—a return to the Stone Age….That’s what I plan on doing, young man. Leading our nation back to the Stone Age. No need to import steel from China when we have bedrock right here…. Besides, if I mine all of the bedrock out from underneath the city, I’m confident people will pay a pretty penny to buy it back.

**JIMMY**

But you can’t build a quarry in the middle of a residential neighborhood. There must be zoning requirements, bureaucratic rules….

**LUCRETIA**

Can’t never could do anything. I *can* build a quarry and I *will* build a quarry.

**JIMMY**

But this is the United States of America. I have rights.

**LUCRETIA**

And I have *more* rights. Take my advice, Mr.—

**JIMMY**

Mr. Duckfoot. It’s a Native American name.

**LUCRETIA**

Take my advice, young man. Ask yourself why I’m worth seven hundred billion dollars and you sell plants for a living.

**JIMMY**

I’m a plant surgeon.

**LUCRETIA**

You’re complacent, that’s what you are. Do you think I was born wealthy? I grew up just around the corner from here. My father wrote advertising copy for thimbles. Ma's Old Fashioned Root Beer. Conkey's Yeast with Cod Liver Oil. Fry's Celebrated Ice Cream. Can you imagine any job more humiliating, more irrelevant, that writing slogans to be worn on women’s fingers? But my father’s problem was that he enjoyed it. The highlight of his adult life was coining the phrase: “Sew it up for Herbert Hoover.”

**JIMMY**

What’s wrong with liking what you do?

**LUCRETIA**

What’s wrong with liking what you do?! That’s the sort of defeatist attitude that gets you nowhere in life….With that approach, you’ll still be selling plants at my age.

**JIMMY**

If I’m lucky.

**LUCRETIA**

If you’re a fool. Do you know how I made my fortune, young man? Every year my father took us to the National Thimble Advertising Men’s Convention in Omaha, Nebraska. A fascinating place for a young girl, let me tell you. But I looked out the window of the train one afternoon and I saw a fleet of small aircraft. Do you know what those planes were doing, young man?

**JIMMY**

No, ma’am.

**LUCRETIA**

They were seeding clouds. That’s what they were doing. Making it rain.

**JIMMY**

I’ve heard of that.

**LUCRETIA**

I was only thirteen years old—but already I saw the untapped potential. If you can make it rain in one place, you can keep if from raining in another. The Bolsheviks in the Kremlin figured that out ages ago. That’s why it never rained on their parades….I made my fortune diverting weather, young man….Creating artificial droughts and selling water at a premium.

**JIMMY**

I wouldn’t be willing to make my living that way.

**LUCRETIA**

Of course, you wouldn’t. That’s why you’re doomed to sell geraniums and so forth. Which is entirely your prerogative—as long as you don’t store them on my land. Now if you’d like to challenge me on this, that’s your prerogative as well. But I warn you that I will not be contravened in this matter. Mr. Fythe, tell this young man what happened to the last nitwit who disobeyed my orders.

 **FAIRMONT**

He drowned.

 **LUCRETIA**

*How* did he drown, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

We seeded the clouds over his head so that it rained on him everywhere he went—and one day we overdid it and washed him out to sea.

 **JIMMY**

That’s murder.

 **LUCRETIA**

Murder is such a dirty word, Mr. Duckfoot. I prefer the term progress.

 **JIMMY**

Some progress!

 **LUCRETIA**

Do you hear anything, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

No, Dame Lucretia.

 **LUCRETIA**

Well, I do. I believe I hear thunder approaching Mr. Duckworth’s petty little shop.

**JIMMY**

 *(Grudgingly.)*

 Okay, I’ll move my pots, lady. But this isn’t over yet.

**LUCRETIA**

The truth is you should be thanking me. A quarry will do wonders for your business. It will revitalize this entire blighted excuse for a neighborhood….And all for free. I do a great public service—and what can I charge the public for the service? Absolutely nothing.

*(Lucretia, to Fairmont.)*

Dispatch that young woman and meet me back at the office.

 *(Lucretia exits. Jimmy begins removing his plants.)*

**8. “Fairmont Pleads His Case”**

*(Fairmont looks at Laurel as though he is considering*

 *waking her, but he doesn’t. Instead, he crosses the vacant*

 *lot and enters the brownstone.)*

**FAIRMONT**

Judge Gage?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Either I already have one or I don’t want one.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m not selling anything, Judge Gage. I just wanted a moment of your time.

**GWENDOLYN**

Do I know you?

**FAIRMONT**

I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. I’m Fairmont Fythe. I’m going to marry your daughter, Lily.

**GWENDOLYN**

Oh, the Republican. It is *not* a pleasure. And you are *not* going to marry my daughter. I’ve already put my foot down.

**FAIRMONT**

Can’t we discuss this like reasonable adults? Will you at least hear me out, Judge Gage?

**GWENDOLYN**

Don’t call me Judge Gage. It’s tacky—like calling me Doc or Coach….

**FAIRMONT**

 *(Tentatively)*

Gwendolyn?

**GWENDOLYN**

Your Honor.

**FAIRMONT**

Yes, of course….Your Honor….Will you please give me a few minutes of your time? If I were a defendant in your courtroom, you’d do that much for me.

**GWENDOLYN**

If you were a defendant in my courtroom, you wouldn’t be a Republican. Now state your case—and make it quick. I’ve heard it all before.

**FAIRMONT**

It’s so simple, really. I’m in love with your daughter. Your daughter is in love with me…. Love isn’t about categories, Your Honor. Rich people marry poor people. Old people marry young people. Whites marry Blacks, Jews marry Christians, tall people marry short people, dog lovers marry cat lovers, night owls marry early risers….So why shouldn’t a Democrat marry a Republican?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Spare me the schmaltz….Love *is* about categories. Certain essential categories. We don’t let single people get married to married people. We don’t let adults get married to young children. We don’t even let living people marry dead people….I’m confident that someday there’ll be a law preventing Democrats from marrying Republicans—that we’ll look back on inter-party dating with horror, the way we now look back on witch burning or crucifixion—but in the meantime, I can’t stand by and do nothing when the stakes are so high—when my daughter’s future happiness is at stake. People who marry across political lines do so at their own peril. Quite frankly, it’s unnatural.

 **FAIRMONT**

You would never dare say that about race…or age…or height….

 **GWENDOLYN**

No, I wouldn’t. Because people don’t choose to be Black or old or tall. But people do choose their political affiliations. It is not who you were born to which I object, Woodlawn, it’s who you’ve chosen to become.

 **FAIRMONT**

We’re not seeking your permission to get married—that’s going to happen one way or another. But we’d like your blessing.

**GWENDOLYN**

And I’d like it to rain candy bars….Has Lily told you what my greatest virtue is?

**FAIRMONT**

You’re principled?

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m pig-headed, Woodlawn. It’s a much underappreciated gift.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m sure it is.

 **GWENDOLYN**

That’s what makes a person great. Take Susan B. Anthony. Martin Luther King. Mahatma Gandhi. Stubborn as mules, all of them.

 **FAIRMONT**

I never thought of it that way.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m not closed-minded, you must understand. I’m extraordinarily open-minded. I recognize that in theory—in the abstract—all philosophical and moral and political ideas have equal value. Liberals have a point and Conservatives have a point. Capitalists have a point and Socialists have a point. Jews, Christians, Muslim, Hindus, Atheists and followers of the Reverend Moon all have a point. I’ve been around the block enough times to realize that perfectly decent, straight-thinking human beings believe the world is round, and perfectly decent, straight-thinking human beings believe the word is flat. Am I making myself clear, Fairmont? As a philosophical matter, many systems of government and social organization have unique advantages—and, in the abstract, I can understand why we might all be better off living in a people’s commune or under a benevolent dictator. But life isn’t about theory, you must understand. Life is about practice. You decide to believe in something and then you keep believing in it until the cows come home. Otherwise, you unravel. My ex-husband was a surgeon and his creed was, “Sometimes right but always certain.” It works well for judges too.

 **FAIRMONT**

That’s the most backwards way of thinking about things I’ve ever heard.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’re entitled to your opinion.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m here telling you that I’m in love with your daughter and all you can say is, “Sometimes right but always certain.” For heaven’s sake, don’t you have any faith in Lily’s judgment? Can’t you give us the benefit of the doubt?

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’ve tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. I’ve tried to convince myself that some people are Republican by accident…by a cruel trick of fate….Their fathers were Republicans, their grandfathers were Republicans. It’s passed down from generation to generation like cretinism or precocious dementia. That might excuse a small child. Or a person of particularly low intellect. But, by all appearances, you’re a lucid, fully-functioning adult. Being born a Republican is just not an excuse…..

 **FAIRMONT**

I *wasn’t* born a Republican.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You weren’t?

**FAIRMONT**

No, I wasn’t. My parents were working-class Democrats. My father did leather-cutting in a shoe factory near Burlington, Vermont. He went door-to-door for Estes Kefauver in 1956; he got lots of doors slammed on him….Also lots of blisters….My mother was a precinct leader for Walter Mondale. You’d have liked my parents, I suspect. The salt of the earth.

 **GWENDOLYN**

So what went wrong?

 **FAIRMONT**

You mean: What made me switch parties?

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’re not a Bible-thumper, are you? Because if you’re one of those born-agains, you can step out that door this very instant. I already made an exception for Jimmy Carter, but enough is enough. As someone who gave birth to two daughters, I say you get to be born once—and that’s that.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m not religious, Your Honor.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I should hope not.

**FAIRMONT**

Do you know what made me a Republican? I’ll tell you what. Jury duty.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Jury duty?

 **FAIRMONT**

There’s nothing to reduce your opinion of your fellow human beings like encountering a jury of your so-called peers….It was horrifically demoralizing. One of the standard questions they ask prospective jurors is: Name somebody you admire.

 **GWENDOLYN**

What’s wrong with that question? I ask it all the time during jury selection.

 **FAIRMONT**

It’s not the question that’s the problem. It was how people answered.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I make a point of never listening to the answers.

**FAIRMONT**

Of the twenty people in my pool, twelve couldn’t think of one person they admired. Not a political or religious leader. Or a member of their own their own families. No one. And that doesn’t include the man who asked if he could name his dog.

 **GWENDOLYN**

At least seven of the people had something to say. That’s a more than a third of your sample.

 **FAIRMONT**

The woman in front of me said Eleanor Roosevelt.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Nothing wrong with Eleanor Roosevelt.

**FAIRMONT**

The woman next to her said: “I can’t think of anyone. Can I also say Eleanor Roosevelt?”

 **GWENDOLYN**

At least she was receptive to new ideas.

 **FAIRMONT**

They dismissed the first woman. They took the second woman on the jury.

 **GWENDOLYN**

All right. For the sake of argument, let’s say the jury system is a tad deficient. What on earth does this have to do with your defecting to the enemy?

**FAIRMONT**

I’d just returned from the Peace Corps at the time—

 **GWENDOLYN**

—You were in the Peace Corps?

 **FAIRMONT**

Remember, I was a Democrat back then. I’d been working in South Fredonia, at the mouth of the Volta, training the local villagers in basic anthropology. The theory was that if you taught the Fredonians to observe themselves, you wouldn’t need to send in outsiders to observe them.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Did it work?

 **FAIRMONT**

We don’t know. They cancelled the project before we taught the villagers how to report the data….Budget cuts.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You mean the Republicans cancelled the project. That’s what Republicans do. They cancel things.

**FAIRMONT**

In any case, I was waiting in the jury room—it’s sort of like waiting at an airport terminal, only the planes never come—when I looked around me at all of those ignorant, lazy, self-absorbed, pot-bellied, cologne-soaked, nose-picking, crotch-scratching buffoons…. and I suddenly realized I didn’t like these people. Not one bit. I cannot describe to you how liberating an insight that was. All my life, I’d been saddled with this desire to help my fellow human beings. But if my fellow human beings were a pack of degenerate half-wits, why bother? From that moment forward, I decided I was only going to look out for Number One…. So I became a Republican—on the spot. When the judge asked me who I most admired, I said: “Myself.”

 **GWENDOLYN**

So you’re not really a Republican. You’re just selfish.

 **FAIRMONT**

Call it what you like, Your Honor. I ask what my country can do for me, not what I can do for my country….But when I say “me,” I mean me and Lily….I wouldn’t want you to come away with the impression that I’m not a team player.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m sure you’re a team player, Woodlawn. But you’re on the wrong team….Now if you’ll excuse me—

 **FAIRMONT**

Very well, Judge Gage. Have it your way….I tried to be reasonable....tried to show you some charm….but they didn’t call me “Don’t-Take-No-For-An-Answer Fairmont” in business school for nothing.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Well, my answer is still NO. Take it or leave it.

 **FAIRMONT**

One more thing, Judge Gage.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Yes?

**FAIRMONT**

Is that your watering can under the window?

 **GWENDOLYN**

It’s my daughter’s. Why?

 **FAIRMONT**

You’ll have to remove it.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’ll do no such thing.

 **FAIRMONT**

And if that’s your daughter hugging that tree, you’ll have to remove her too. Dame Lucretia wants her parcel cleared at once.

 **GWENDOLYN**

*Her* parcel? Nobody owns that lot.

**FAIRMONT**

Actually, my employer owns that lot and she intends to dig a quarry on it.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You intend to dig a quarry on the vacant lot?

 **FAIRMONT**

I don’t intend. I just effectuate. Prepare yourself for a great deal of blasting.

 **GWENDOLYN**

But what about the wisteria? The poplar tree?

 **FAIRMONT**

Technically, it’s all Dame Lucretia’s. But I bet if you made off with some firewood, nobody would raise any questions.

 **GWENDOLYN**

My daughter is in love with that tree, young man!

 **FAIRMONT**

That can’t be helped….There are plenty of trees in the forest.

 **GWENDOLYN**

If you harm that tree, you’ll break my baby’s heart….I don’t see how can you be so cavalier about this.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m a Republican. I look after what’s mine…. Now if you were my mother-in-law, of course, things might be different. Then *you’d* be mine. Lily’s sister would be mine. Under those extenuating circumstances, I might be able to persuade Dame Lucretia to dig elsewhere…. A blessing, Your Honor. All we need is a blessing.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Good afternoon, Woodlawn.

 **FAIRMONT**

Here’s a philosophical question for you to mull over. If a tree falls on a blasting site, let’s say near a quarry, and nobody can hear the tree fall because the blasting is so loud that it leaves everyone within hearing distance permanently deaf, and shatters all of the glass in the neighboring buildings, creating a thunder of cracking mirrors and window panes, augmented by the peeling of church bells and the groaning of small children trapped beneath falling appliances, did the original tree actually make a sound?….Think it over….

 *(Fairmont exits.)*

**9. “Laurel in Love”**

*(Laurel, to the poplar tree.)*

**LAUREL**

Hi, darling. I brought you some lukewarm water. And a sack of fertilizer….A special blend specifically for poplars and cottonwoods…. Don’t thank me. I don’t care….I’ve decided I’m going to love you anyway. Whether you want me to or not. You can’t stop me. It’s all a matter of willpower and perseverance. I want to be with you more than you don’t want to be with me. In the long run, I’ll wear you down….But you don’t know how I’m suffering. I don’t have anyone I can talk to….People like to pretend they care about trees. They give money to the Sierra Club. They try to prevent forest fires. But when you really make a commitment to someone from another species—another kingdom—people treat you like some kind of nutcase…..The world isn’t setup for people to love trees. It’s designed for human beings to love other human beings….Everyone is so species-centric. At least here in New York…. Maybe we could move to India….To one of those remote villages where young maidens marry saplings….That’s it. Your roots aren’t too deep, are they? We could find a way to have you transplanted…..

**10. “Lily and Laurel”**

 *(Lily enters the vacant lot and approaches Laurel.)*

 **LILY**

Is there room for two under that tree?

 **LAUREL**

Aren’t you afraid you’ll come down with arborophilia?

  **LILY**

Please let me have a seat. Just for a minute or two.

 **LAUREL**

It’s a free country.

 **LILY**

Can’t we be friends again?

 **LAUREL**

I’m not the one who started all this. I’m not the one who accused you of throwing your life away….I’m not the one who told Mama that the only two paths for me to choose from were college or the loony bin.

 **LILY**

 *(Lily seats herself beside Laurel.)*

Look, I’m sorry I said what I did. I was just concerned about you….You seemed so unhappy.

**LAUREL**

I’m feeling much better now.

 **LILY**

You are?

 **LAUREL**

I realized how ridiculous I was being. After all, I’m not the first girl ever to suffer from unrequited love….

 **LILY**

I’m glad you’re looking at things more clearly.

**LAUREL**

It’s all about strategy. Now I understand that I’ll have to wait her out….That I have a whole lifetime ahead of me to win her over….

 **LILY**

Are you saying that you’re planning to stay out here indefinitely?

 **LAUREL**

I was too over-anxious before. Desperation isn’t attractive.

 **LILY**

You mean to say that nobody’s told you?

**LAUREL**

Told me what?

 **LILY**

I don’t know how to say this….I’m afraid you’ll hold it against me….

 **LAUREL**

What? Tell me!

 **LILY**

They’re digging a quarry here. Starting next week. They’re going to chop down all the trees on the lot.

 **LAUREL**

Oh my God! We’ve got to stop them….You have to help me. We’ll chain ourselves in the branches—like those activists in California.

**LILY**

Try to think about this sensibly, honey. If she doesn’t love you, she doesn’t love you…. What’s the use of being fixated on a doomed tree anyway?

 **LAUREL**But I love *her*!

**LILY**

In the long run, you’ll be thankful you didn’t lash yourself to a tree that ended up a mast or a ream of paper.

**LAUREL**

If anybody so much as plucks a leaf from her branches, I’ll….I’ll…

**LILY**

Dame Lucretia owns the land, honey. She was here first. The law is on her side.

**LAUREL**

If I were in love with a human being, you wouldn’t be so cavalier about my feelings….

**LILY**

But you hardly know this tree, honey. Would you consider speaking to someone—a therapist who specializes in this sort of thing?

**LAUREL**

What for?

**LILY**

Maybe an expert would have insights….

**LAUREL**

So you still haven’t given up on sending me to a shrink. Why do you have to pathologize everything? Just because I’m heartbroken doesn’t mean I’m crazy.

**LILY**

Of course not, honey. It doesn’t have to be a psychiatrist….Maybe someone into alternative medicine. A Chinese herbalist or Native American healer. You know: some sort of quack.

**LAUREL**

Nobody sent Apollo to therapy for loving a laurel tree.

**LILY**

That was ancient Greece, honey. They were all a bit loopy.

**LAUREL**

You really have an answer for everything, don’t you?

**LILY**

More or less. That’s what medical school is for.

**LAUREL**

Well, think up an answer for this: How can I save the poplar tree?

 **LILY**

You can’t save that particular tree, honey. But if trees are so important to you, the best thing to do is to get yourself a good education and put yourself in a position where you can save other trees in the future. Have you considered forestry school?

 **LAUREL**

 *(Sobbing.)*

It’s so unfair….You always get everything and I get nothing….

 **LILY**

Please, honey. I love you. You’re my sister.

 **LAUREL**

Deep down, you’ve always wanted this….Do you remember when we were little kids and you showed me how to have a tea party with turpentine?

**LILY**

That was so long ago…

**LAUREL**

And when you lured me down to Papa’s workroom and put my head in the vice….

**LILY**

We were joking around….

**LAUREL**

And when we were playing the Mafia game and you tied my legs to those cinderblocks and tried to push my off Grandpa’s boat.

**LILY**

I just wanted the game to be more authentic, honey. You didn’t get hurt.

**LAUREL**

Only because I was too heavy to lift over the gunwales….

**LILY**

You’re overreacting. You’re starting to sound as paranoid as Mama.

**LAUREL**

You don’t love me. You hate me. And I hate you too…. You’ve always wanted to ruin my life….And now you’re going to destroy the only thing in the world that matters to me….

 *(Laurel runs into the brownstone, sobbing, and slams the*

 *door.)*

 **LILY**

Please, Honey. Come back. I have nothing to do with this….

 *(She knocks futilely on the door.)*

**11. “Gwendolyn and Lucretia”**

 *(Fairmont enters Lucretia’s office. Gwendolyn opens the*

 *door of the brownstone, passes Lily, and approaches*

 *Lucretia office. At the same time, Lily retreats into the*

 *brownstone. Lily and Laurel sit on opposite sides of the*

 *parlor, not speaking, until the light fades out on them.)*

**FAIRMONT**

I didn’t expect to find you here, Judge Gage.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’ve come to have a word with your employer.

 **FAIRMONT**

Dame Lucretia doesn’t hold office hours….If you have a message for her, I’ll be certain to see that she gets it.

 **GWENDOLYN**

“Dame Lucretia doesn’t hold office hours.” Who the hell does she think she is? The Wizard of Oz? You tell the old coot that she can either have a word with me right now or she can have a word with my attorneys in the morning.

 **FAIRMONT**

I don’t intend to let you speak about my employer in that manner.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You *don’t* intend, remember. You just effectuate. Like a good war criminal…. Now kindly step out of my way.

 **FAIRMONT**

You’re trespassing. This is a private office….

 **GWENDOLYN**

Can you prove that? Do you have the deed?

 **FAIRMONT**

The deed is in a vault at our headquarters.

 **GWENDOLYN**

If you can’t produce a deed, how do I know this place is yours? But I tell you what….I’ll give you a chance to go look for it. At your headquarters. And while you’re looking, I’ll have a brief chat with your employer. Then, if you come back with the deed, I’ll be more than glad to depart….

 **FAIRMONT**That’s outrageous. Do you know how many properties we own? Not to mention corporations, limited partnerships, patents, trademarks, timber rights, mining rights, light and air rights, easements, negotiable securities, and debts. That includes good debts, bad debts, public debts, private debts, and debts subject to limitation. We own enough debt to foreclose on every major government and financial institution in the world simultaneously. Do you really expect me to sort through all of those documents for one piece of paper? It could take months to find that deed.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I have months if you have months.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia enters and pushes Fairmont aside.)*

It’s all right, Mr. Fythe. I’ll speak with her….

 *(To Gwendolyn.)*

Who are you and why are you here?

 **GWENDOLYN**

My name is Gwendolyn Gage, *Judge* Gwendolyn Gage, and I’m here to discuss your plans to build a quarry on Maple Avenue.

 **LUCRETIA**

I’m not looking for any investment partners, if that’s what you’re after. I prefer to run a one-woman show.

 **GWENDOLYN**

And I’d prefer that you ran your one-woman show someplace else.

 **LUCRETIA**You’re not one of those so-called environmental persons, are you?

 **GWENDOLYN**

I want to talk with you about the trees growing on the vacant lot.

 **LUCRETIA**

Don’t you worry about them. They’ll get their due.

**GWENDOLYN**

It’s a particular poplar tree that I’m concerned about, a tree that means an awful lot to our family…our community….If you knew how many hours I spent under that tree as a girl. Nothing romantic, you understand—just innocent fun…. There used to be a swing attached to one of the branches….and I would swing, swing, swing….I used to dream I could swing my way up to the clouds….Instead, I lost my grip and swung myself clear across the avenue into Mrs. Fernwood’s hydrangeas….Old Mrs. Fernwood gave me such a talking to—but then Judge Fernwood, her husband, tucked a chocolate bar into my pocket when she wasn’t looking. That’s when I decided I wanted to be a judge.

**LUCRETIA**

I have no patience for sentimentality. You act as though this land has always been a vacant lot.

**GWENDOLYN**

It has been a vacant lot since I was born—and that’s more than fifty years ago.

**LUCRETIA**

Well when *I* was growing up, it was a thimble factory.

**GWENDOLYN**

You grew up in our neighborhood?

**LUCRETIA**

Just around the corner. And one day when I was fourteen, my father won an achievement award from his company—the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation—and they invited him on a tour of the factory….What you call your vacant lot used to be the site of the nation’s leading manufacturer of sewing paraphernalia.

**GWENDOLYN**

That explains all those pins and needles we used to find when we were kids.

**LUCRETIA**

I say it *used* to be the site of the nation’s leading manufacturer of sewing paraphernalia. Because one afternoon someone lit a cigar during a gas leak—and blew the entire building to smithereens.

**GWENDOLYN**

Oh my lord!

**LUCRETIA**

That happened to be the day of my father’s tour.

**GWENDOLYN**

I’m sorry.

**LUCRETIA**

Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault. It was the fault of the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation…The other families all reached a financial settlement with the company. I insisted that my mother sue the Greater Amalgamated Thimble and Twine Corporation for their very last strand of thread….We won everything. Even the crater where the building once stood.

**GWENDOLYN**

I had no idea.

**LUCRETIA**

It’s a memorial tree. If you look closely, there’s a plaque at the base. The plaque reads: “Just sew you’ll remember.” Sew…S-E-W.

**GWENDOLYN**

And now you want to tear it down?

**LUCRETIA**

I let the tree stand during my mother’s lifetime. To her, it was important. But she died last month at the age of one hundred six. And now I ask myself: What do I need with a poplar tree?

 **GWENDOLYN**

But you can’t do this. I know this may sound a bit strange, but my daughter is in love with that tree, Mrs. Vandervelt.

 **LUCRETIA**

Symbolically?

 **GWENDOLYN**

No, actually. She has real romantic feelings for the tree….She feels about the tree the way you feel about money….

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Genuinely moved for a moment.)*

The way I feel about money….That’s rough….But no matter. Progress and misery are preferable to happiness and stagnation.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Please be reasonable, Mrs. Vandervelt. You can’t just show up like this after all these years and start chopping down trees….

 **LUCRETIA**

Oh, but I can, Mrs. Gage. First come, first serve. That’s the law of real property. You’re a judge—you’re supposed to know these things.

**GWENDOLYN**

Maybe we could raise funds….Buy the land off you….

 **LUCRETIA**

It’s not for sale.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’re going to break my daughter’s heart, Mrs. Vandervelt. Have you no compassion? You understand what it’s like to lose someone you love at a young age….

 **LUCRETIA**

I have a substantial reserve of compassion, Mrs. Gage. That’s because I make a point of never drawing from it….Which reminds me, I believe I saw your daughter the other morning. Hugging my tree.

 **GWENDOLYN**

That’s possible. She does that a lot.

 **LUCRETIA**

Well, I expect you to remove her at once. I can’t have children gallivanting about on my property….She’s liable to fall into the quarry….Or get blown to kingdom come. My rule is blast first, look later. It serves me well.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’ll talk to Laurel this evening.

 **LUCRETIA**

You’ll talk to her *this afternoon*. If she’s still there this evening, I might have to bring on a drought.

 *(Lucretia exits, followed by Fairmont. Gwendolyn return*

 *to the brownstone. )*

**12. “Jimmy”**

*(Jimmy, to the audience.)*

Hate is out of control these days….When I was a kid, you knew what you hated…. homework, bullies, cooked spinach….and adults knew what they hated too….taxes, potholes, foreigners….Different people often hated different things….I had a great uncle who hated children with a passion….He used to give me a wooden nickel for my birthday and warn me not to spend it all at once….He’d laugh when he said that….But at least he was consistent….There’s something reassuring about knowing what you hate…. Much better than waking up one morning and realizing that you despise something or someone you thought you loved. Take plants, for instance. All my life, I’ve been happy tending my flowers and vines…growing a few vegetables out back….Who needs women, I always thought, when you’ve got bromeliads….But then I fell in love with a girl who’s in love with a tree, and now the very thought of foliage makes me sick to my stomach….It’s amazing how hatred can overtake you so suddenly like that! The strangest part is that I spend very little time thinking about how much I love Laurel and most of my energy focused on how much I hate that damn poplar.

**13. “Jimmy and Laurel”**

 *(Jimmy approaches the poplar tree, fist raised.)*

You think you’re really something, don’t you? Well, I didn’t go to plant college to get shown up by a damn poplar….One of these days you’re going to come down with root rot or bark cankers or cottonwood blight, and we’ll see who’s so green and leafy then….Sure, give me the silent treatment….You’re lucky I’m a gentleman, dammit, or I’d sick a jar of gypsy moths on you…..

 *(Laurel comes charging out of the brownstone.)*

 **LAUREL**

Hey! What are you doing?!

 **JIMMY**

 *(Surprised.)*

I was just talking to your friend.

 **LAUREL**

It sounded like you were shouting.

 **JIMMY**

Oh, that....I was administering sound therapy. It’s the newest technique in plant care. Do you see those yellow leaves on the upper branches?

 **LAUREL**

I don’t see anything….Is my darling sick?

 **JIMMY**

I was afraid it might be a case of Dutch elm disease….But I think I managed to shout it down.

 **LAUREL**

I thought Dutch elm disease affected elms.

 **JIMMY**

Can’t hurt to be too careful.

 **LAUREL**

I guess not.

 **JIMMY**

Are you going to hang out here under the tree today?

 **LAUREL**

*(Shouting)*

Today—and every day for the rest of my life.

 *(To Jimmy)*

Should I keep up the shouting?

 **JIMMY**

Oh, no. You don’t want to overdo it. Say, would you like some company?

**LAUREL**

 *(Looking at the tree.)*

I already have some company.

 **JIMMY**Three’s a crowd, I guess….

 **LAUREL**

It’s not that—It’s just I want as much time with my darling as possible….Before Lily tries to destroy her….

 **JIMMY**

Lily?

 **LAUREL**

You’re such a kind man, Mr. Duckfoot. I imagine you’ve never hated anyone.

 **JIMMY**

I’ve never hated another human being.

 **LAUREL**

And I suppose nobody has ever hated you either….

 **JIMMY**

I had an uncle once who thought that children should be melted down for energy…. He actually patented a recipe for a baby-fueled automobile before they had him committed….

 **LAUREL**

Then you know what it’s like….My own sister hates me….

 *(Laurel bursts into tears; Jimmy comforts her.)*

 **JIMMY**

It’s okay. I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that.

 **LAUREL**

But it *is* that bad. She’s trying to ruin my life…..

**14. “Fairmont and Lily”**

*(Fairmont and Lily enter Fairmont’s apartment.)*

 **LILY**

She blames me! She thinks I’m trying to ruin her life.

 **FAIRMONT**

But that’s absurd. Dame Lucretia is trying to ruin her life.

 **LILY**

She’s only a girl. It takes a lot of living to figure out who your enemies are.

 **FAIRMONT**

Sometimes it takes a lot of dying too. Take Julius Caesar, for example.

 **LILY**

Why do you have to do that?

 **FAIRMONT**

Do what?

 **LILY**

You know what.

 **FAIRMONT**

You mean: Make witty side comments when you’re discussing something serious.

 **LILY**

Yes, that.

 **FAIRMONT**

It’s a man thing.

 **LILY**

So is castration.

 **FAIRMONT**

Whoa! It’s not my fault that your sister’s lost her marbles.

 **LILY**

Whose fault is it then? You go tell Dame Lucretia where she can stick her quarry.

 **FAIRMONT**

I don’t think Dame Lucretia would appreciate that.

 **LILY**

You’ve got to get her to change her mind.

 **FAIRMONT**

I don’t have that sort of influence—

 **LILY**

But you told Mama

 **FAIRMONT**

I was bluffing.

**LILY**

You’ve got to try….

 **FAIRMONT**

You don’t know what you’re asking.

 **LILY**

I know exactly what I’m asking. I’m asking you to stand up for yourself. I’m sick and tired of hearing: “Dame Lucretia this” and “Dame Lucretia that.” Why don’t you favor *her* with some of you witty side comments?

 **FAIRMONT**

She’s liable to churn up a hurricane against me.

 **LILY**

I’ll buy you an umbrella….

 **FAIRMONT**

What am I supposed to say? That we should forgo a trillion dollar business venture because a school girl is suffering from delusions.

 **LILY**

That would be a good start.

 **FAIRMONT**

Dame Lucretia made me what I am, Lily. She transformed me from an unwanted juror into a man of importance. I know she can be difficult at times, but she’s a woman of great personal loyalty—at least to those who are loyal to her.

 **LILY**

You’re more delusional than Laurel is. Do you really think that old windbag would blink twice before firing you? Or shed a tear if you got hit by a bus? Employees are employees are employees. All interchangeable. All expendable. I see it every day in the psychiatric wards—poor sops who can’t believe their services are no longer needed. In the old days, companies used strong arms tactics like union-busting to keep their workers in line. Now they use loyalty. It’s all the same—just more subtle. False loyalty is our great national quicksand.

 **FAIRMONT**

Okay, okay….I’ll try….

 **LILY**

 *(Hugging Fairmont, as though he were going off to war.)*

Be brave, honey. Remember, rich people are just like poor people—only better.

**15. “Dame Lucretia Claims Her Property”**

*(Lucretia enters. Lucretia takes Fairmont by the arms and*

 *steers him toward the vacant lot.)*

**FAIRMONT**

Begging your pardon, Dame Lucretia. I don’t understand what the urgency is.

 **LUCRETIA**

Of course, you don’t….Ever since I saw that girl on my lot, I haven’t been able to get a wink of sleep….I keep thinking I could die and it could take forty years to advance my estate through probate….

 **FAIRMONT**

Are you sure this is a good place for a quarry, Dame Lucretia? All of that blasting might lead to litigation.

 **LUCRETIA**

No harm in a little bit of litigation now and again. It’s good for the blood.

 **FAIRMONT**

I was just thinking—

 **LUCRETIA**

Well, please don’t….

 *(To Jimmy)*

You! How would you like a job?

 **JIMMY**

I already have a job.

 **LUCRETIA**

A better job. Working for me.

 **JIMMY**

Maybe. What kind of work?

 **LUCRETIA**

Do you possess an axe?

 **JIMMY**

Right here in the shop.

 *(Jimmy brandishes the axe.)*

 **LUCRETIA**

That’s good. Indeed. Ready for your first assignment?

 **JIMMY**Depends what it is.

 **LUCRETIA**

I need you to fell that tree over there.

 **JIMMY**The poplar?

 **LUCRETIA**

If you say so.

 **JIMMY**

But that’s Laurel’s tree.

 **LUCRETIA**

That is where you are mistaken. That is *my* tree. And I’m willing to pay a considerable sum to have it removed.

 **JIMMY**How considerable a sum?

 **LUCRETIA**

Let’s just say you’ll never have to sell another geranium again.

 **JIMMY**And if I refuse?

 **LUCRETIA**

It will be removed anyway.

 *(Jimmy approaches the tree with the axe.)*

**LAUREL**Jimmy! What are you doing?

 **JIMMY**

It *is* her tree, Laurel.

 **LAUREL**

According to whom? Because she has some old piece of paper tucked away in a vault?

 **LUCRETIA**

Yes, to be precise. That’s exactly why it’s mine.

 *(Lily and Gwendolyn enter the lot from the brownstone.)*

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m afraid the law is on her side, darling….

**LAUREL**

That’s like saying the law was on the side of the slaveholders….Someday we’ll look back in horror at what has been done to trees in the name of progress….

 **LUCRETIA**

Progress is also on my side…. Now if you’ll please step away….

 **LAUREL**

Jimmy! If you really do love me, Jimmy, please don’t do this….

 **JIMMY**

 *(Jimmy is torn. Eventually, he lowers the axe.)*

I can’t do it, lady. I’m sorry. Find yourself another lumberjack.

 **LUCRETIA**

Very well. No sun for you this summer…. How are you with an axe, Mr. Fythe?

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m afraid I can’t do it either, Dame Lucretia, as much as I’d like to. Miss Gage is going to be my future sister-in-law. That would be a conflict of interest.

 **LUCRETIA**

Surrounded by traitors on all sides! Very well, give me the axe….I’ll chop the ugly little tree down myself.

 **JIMMY**

Hey! There’s no need for name-calling.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Wait a second. Let’s see the deed. Before you go chopping down any trees.

 **FAIRMONT**

Again! You and your deeds!

 **LUCRETIA**

This land has been in my family for sixty-one years. Sue me and I’ll produce the deed.

 **LAUREL**

This is insane. Why should the land be hers just because she was here first? We’re the ones who’ve been using the land…who’ve planted the flowers….who’ve picked up the litter….Aren’t we entitled to something?

 **JIMMY**

Hold on a second. Who says she was here first? Technically speaking, *I* was here first. Or at least my ancestors were.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Your ancestors owned this land?

 **JIMMY**

They were Manhattan Indians. Most of them, that is. A few were Brooklyn Indians too. I guess that makes me entitled to something.

 **FAIRMONT**

He has a point, Dame Lucretia.

 **GWENDOLYN**

 *(To Lucretia)*

Can you trace your title back to a treaty with the local Native Americans?

 **LUCRETIA**

Stand back, I tell you.

 **LAUREL**

That means Jimmy owns the land. And you won’t build a quarry on it, will you?

 **JIMMY**What do I want with a quarry?

 **LAUREL**

You’re my hero. I’m not in love with you, Jimmy. But you’re my hero.  **LUCRETIA**

I don’t see what’s so heroic about being descended from Indians. Whether or not they were here first.

 **FAIRMONT**

If you give him back his land, maybe we could build a casino….They sometimes have trees in casinos, don’t they?

 **LUCRETIA**

We’ll give them back their land when they give us back our smallpox.

 **LAUREL**

Sorry, Mrs. Vandervelt. First come, first serve—and Jimmy came first.

**POPLAR TREE**

In any case, that’s not strictly accurate.

 **JIMMY**

What’s not accurate?

 **POPLAR TREE**

About your ancestors being here first. That’s a highly human-centric approach that distorts the pre-historical record in order to perpetuate the subjugation of the plant kingdom.

 **LAUREL**

You tell them, baby!

 **POPLAR TREE**The first poplars and cottonwoods probably appeared in New York two hundred to three hundred thousand years ago.

**LUCRETIA**

Can you prove that?

**POPLAR TREE**

One of the devices used by the dominant species to maintain its authority is an irrational reliance on written records. In the plant kingdom, physical possession is accorded far more weight. To put it bluntly, Quarry Lady, my roots are deeper than yours.

**LUCRETIA**

I’ve had enough of this. I’m not negotiating with trees.

You’ll hear from my attorneys—all of you!

 *(Lucretia storms off stage.)*

**POPLAR TREE**

Do you suppose it was something I said?

 *(Lights out.)*

**END OF ACT ONE**

**ACT TWO**

**16. “Fairmont receives a summons”**

*(The lights rise on the two chairs that serve as Fairmont’s*

 *apartment. Fairmont is perusing a stack of letters. Lily is*

*reading a magazine, perhaps* Better Homes and Gardens*.)*

 **FAIRMONT**

How do you like this: A love letter. “I’ve loved you all of my life…even though I just met you yesterday.”

 **LILY**

You shouldn’t read the neighbor’s mail.

 **FAIRMONT**

I like to stay informed.

 **LILY**

You’re liable to end up in jail.

 **FAIRMONT**

That’s what’s wrong with the penal system. It punishes self-improvement. Listen to this bit: “When I was a young child, all of my friends dreamed of becoming firemen or ballerinas or astronauts. I dreamed of passing eternity in your arms.”

 **LILY**

Must you read that?

 **FAIRMONT**

Too sappy for you?

 **LILY**

More like the ramblings of a borderline personality.

 **FAIRMONT**

Do you mean that when you were a child, you never dreamt of passing eternity in my arms?

 **LILY**

Eternity is an awfully long time.

 **FAIRMONT**

A lifetime, then.

 **LILY**

A lifetime is an awfully long time.

 **FAIRMONT**

My kingdom for a direct answer! When you were a child, did you ever dream of falling in love someday?

 **LILY**

I knew it would happen eventually. Everybody manages to fall in love….It’s practically pandemic.
 **FAIRMONT**

But did you fantasize about it? Did you aspire to it?

 **LILY**

Since when did you get so sentimental?

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m not being sentimental. I’m being highly practical. If I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you, it seems to me that I’d want to know the exact circumstances under which this turn of events came to pass.

 **LILY**

You were single. I was single. There weren’t any trees available….What else is there to say?

 **FAIRMONT**

That’s it? “There weren’t any trees available”

 **LILY**

I wasn’t the sort of child who daydreamed about romance…..You have to remember what my house was like growing up. What’s that song from *Damn Yankees* about the baseball season—You know, how their marriage falls apart from April to September. Well, with my parents, it was August through November. Election season.

 **FAIRMONT**

The old C-O-O-T was like that even when you were a kid?

 **LILY**

It got worse every year. My parents married for looks—and then their looks faded….Winters were fine, but things started heating up during primary season….By Election Day, they were at each other’s throats….What makes it even more ridiculous was that they didn’t disagree about very much. My father was an extremely liberal Republican. My mother was an extremely conservative Democrat. But it wasn’t about substance for them….it was more about bragging rights—like rooting for a sporting team. Election Day was like the Super Bowl and the World Series and the Indianapolis 500 all rolled into one. Politics was the symptom, not the disease. They could just as easily have battled over whether to starve a cold or a fever.

 **FAIRMONT**

Did you have any dreams at all when you were a child?

**LILY**

Only one.

 **FAIRMONT**

Progress! A straight answer….Well? Are you going to tell me?

 **LILY**

You promise you won’t laugh.

 **FAIRMONT**

I won’t laugh.

**LILY**

Promise.

 **FAIRMONT**

I swear.

 **LILY**

On Dame Lucretia’s grave.

 **FAIRMONT**

Jesus Christ!

 **LILY**

Fine. You know what I wanted to be when I grew up? Not a doctor.

**FAIRMONT**

Not a doctor?

 **LILY**

That’s right. *Not* a doctor. And especially not a head-shrinker….It drove my father crazy. He dressed us up as doctors every year for Halloween—and I cried and cried and refused to go trick-or-treating. Finally, we compromised. Laurel wore a white coat and went as a doctor and I got wrapped in bandages and went as a patient….But it worked out okay because everybody thought I was a mummy and she was a mad scientist.

 **FAIRMONT**

So when did you change your mind?

 **LILY**

I didn’t—Not consciously. It just happened….Reality set in.

**FAIRMONT**

Are you saying you don’t like being a psychiatrist?

 **LILY**

Oh, no. I like it just fine….But when I was a girl, it was my worst nightmare….It’s amazing how adulthood does that to you. It transforms your worst nightmares into your vision of the good life….Whoever would have though it? Lily Gage—A psychiatrist. I always thought I’d grow up to be the opposite of a psychiatrist….That I’d spend my life driving sane people crazy.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m not going to say it.

 **LILY**

Good. Don’t.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m going to think it, but I’m not going to say it.

 **LILY**

When you’re done thinking it, let me know.

 **FAIRMONT**

Okay, I’m done. But I am curious. Why didn’t you want to be a doctor?

 **LILY**

It’s so damn bourgeois ….And what’s more bourgeois than being a psychiatrist….? Listening to other bourgeois people complain about how bourgeois their lives are….And then they go home to their bourgeois spouses whom they’ve complained about all afternoon and complain about paying so much fucking money to their goddam bourgeois psychiatrist.

**FAIRMONT**

Do you think *I’m* bourgeois?

 **LILY**

Of course, but at least you don’t complain. You’re contentedly bourgeois. Like Madame Bovary’s husband.

 **FAIRMONT**

Thanks.

 **LILY**

Don’t mention it.

**FAIRMONT**

Do you know what I dreamed of when I was a kid?

 **LILY**

Me?

 **FAIRMONT**

Why do you have to do that?

 **LILY**

Do what?

 **FAIRMONT**

Fish for compliments.

 **LILY**

It’s a woman thing.

**FAIRMONT**

You’re the most beautiful woman in the world. Satisfied? You could beat out Helen of Troy in the Miss Ancient Universe contest. Now can I tell you what I dreamed of when I was a kid?

 **LILY**

Don’t make fun of me.

 **FAIRMONT**

I dreamed of not having to follow rules.

 **LILY**

You mean: Anarchy?

 **FAIRMONT**

More like personal anarchy.

 **LILY**

Your parents must have loved that.

**FAIRMONT**

They never knew….On the outside, I was the model young citizen….I set up a lemonade stand to raise money for Al Gore….But inside I was a seething radical….A Bakunin among union Democrats….I dreamed of being able to wake up in the morning and do whatever I damn pleased.

 **LILY**

It sounds to me like you wanted to be rich.

 **FAIRMONT**

That’s what being rich is about, isn’t it? Not having to follow rules.

 **LILY**

Not having to wait on line to board the airplane.

 **FAIRMONT**

Not having to sit in the mezzanine at the opera.

 **LILY**

Not having to have sex with strangers for money.

 **FAIRMONT**

Excuse me?

 **LILY**

I’m just saying—Hypothetically.

 **FAIRMONT**

It’s funny, isn’t it? After all that, you ended up a shrink and I ended up at the beck and call of Dame Lucretia.

 **LILY**

Real funny. Ha. Ha.

 **FAIRMONT**

I was just saying—

 **LILY**

—Don’t say….And don’t read the neighbor’s mail anymore.

 **FAIRMONT**

I have to read something.

 **LILY**

You get plenty of your own mail.

**FAIRMONT**

Bills, sweepstakes forms, advertising circulars. Letters from Nigerians explaining how they need my help to retrieve the looted wealth of the former Belgian Congo….Do you know what I found in the mailbox today?

 **LILY**

The looted wealth of the former Belgian Congo?

 **FAIRMONT**

A jury summons! That’s what I got.

 **LILY**

That’s awful.

**FAIRMONT**

You’re telling me.

 **LILY**

Can’t you get out of it?

 **FAIRMONT**

Do you know what I did last time? The judge asked me: “Can you be fair?” And I answered: “Sure, *I* can be fair. What’s unfair is that I have to be here because that guy committed a crime.” Then I pointed straight at the defendant—like goddam Perry Mason or something—and they still didn’t send me home. Just back down to the jury room to wait some more….Everybody’s entitled to a speedy trial except the jury.

 **LILY**

Tell them you’re a bigot….and that you go to the bathroom a lot….Tell them that you’re an incontinent racist.

**FAIRMONT**

It’s hopeless. They’d just make me wet my pants….

 **LILY**

Bring diapers.

 **FAIRMONT**

You know what’s wrong with this world? A man doesn’t vote, and doesn’t pay his taxes, and doesn’t have a driver’s license—and, after all that, he still ends up on jury duty. It’s un-American.

 **LILY**

Can’t Dame Lucretia help you?

**FAIRMONT**

She could, but she won’t. Not after I refused to chop down that blasted tree….

 **LILY**

She’s still upset about that?

 **FAIRMONT**

Haven’t you noticed it’s rained for twenty-one straight days….but only on our block? We’re catching up with Noah….

 **LILY**

I was wondering….

 **FAIRMONT**

Yet another idea Dame Lucretia acquired from the Soviets….You better help me sandbag the porch before we end up exchanging letters with the neighbors in bottles.

 **LILY**

How long will this last?

 **FAIRMONT**

Stalin had it rain eight years over a village whose name he didn’t like. He’d never actually been there—just didn’t like the name….So it rained every day from 1946 to 1954….Dame Lucretia models herself after Uncle Joe. She wants to be remembered as the Joe Stalin of capitalism….By my calculations, that gives us two thousand eight-hundred nineteen days to go….

 *(Lily and Fairmont exit.)*

**17. “Laurel and Jimmy”**

*(Jimmy enters and begins sweeping. He sings while he*

 *sweeps—anything romantic and mournful. Laurel*

 *approaches him.)*

**JIMMY**

Any word?

**LAUREL**

Nothing. Not even a whisper….

**JIMMY**

I’m sorry.

**LAUREL**

Are you sure you don’t have anything that might help? Maybe some special variety of fertilizer?

**JIMMY**

I got nothing. Try to look on the bright side: Most trees don’t ever make a sound—unless they fall in the forest, I guess. For a human being, she seems silent—but for a tree, she’s been pretty vocal. Maybe she’s talked herself out.  **LAUREL**

Is it normal? For a tree to stop talking like that?

 **JIMMY**

Does it really matter whether it’s normal? It is what it is. If she doesn’t want to talk, she doesn’t want to talk…..A jar of termites might do the trick, but I imagine that’s not what you have in mind.

 **LAUREL**

You’re jealous, aren’t you?

 **JIMMY**

How could I not be jealous?

 **LAUREL**

It was really good of you to do what you did—Not cutting my baby in half, I mean.

 **JIMMY**

That old lady needed to be brought down a notch....several notches….Besides, how could I do that to something—someone—you love?
 **LAUREL**

Have you ever been in love?

**JIMMY**

I’m in love with you.

**LAUREL**

I mean before that.

**JIMMY**

You mean with somebody else?

**LAUREL**

I’m not the only girl in the neighborhood.

**JIMMY**

You are for me…. Anyway, I’ve never understood how anyone could be in love with two people. Love is supposed to be forever, isn’t it? So if you fall out of love, you weren’t really in love to begin with. You were just confused.

**LAUREL**

Did you ever *think* you were in love?

**JIMMY**

Oh, lots of times. But I was wrong….Until now, that is.

**LAUREL**

How do you know?

 **JIMMY**

I don’t think it’s a matter of knowing. I think it’s a matter of deciding.

 **LAUREL**

But I’m not in love with you.

 **JIMMY**

Not yet.

 **LAUREL**

Please, Jimmy. You’re such a decent guy….. I hate to see you torturing yourself like this….

 **JIMMY**

Then fall in love with me.

 **LAUREL**

I can’t.

 **JIMMY**

You *won’t*.

 **LAUREL**

Can’t. Won’t. Does it matter?

 **JIMMY**

Of course it matters. If it were an impossibility, like changing lead into gold, then I’d have no choice but to give up….But if it’s just a matter of personal preference—of taste, if you will—then it could easily change. It’s sort of like allergies. All of your life you eat pineapples—little cubes on toothpicks, pineapple cream pies—you can down pina coladas by the dozens—and nothing happens. And then one day you ingest a small piece of pineapple, maybe as a sweet-potato garnish on Thanksgiving, and you wake up covered in hives. You see what I’m saying.

 **LAUREL**

That I might grow allergic to poplars?

 **JIMMY**

That preferences change. Nothing is written is stone.

 **LAUREL**

But you can’t lead your life waiting for someone’s preferences to change, Jimmy.

 **JIMMY**

Why not? *You* do…. I’ve decided I’m going to love you whether you want me to or not.

 **LAUREL**

So you’re going to wait for me while I wait for her?

 **JIMMY**

Exactly. I’m going to pull my chair up right here and wait under this tree until you give in. It’s all a matter of willpower and perseverance. I want to be with you more than you don’t want to be with me. In the long run, I’ll wear you down….

 **LAUREL**

This is crazy, Jimmy….I’m going to wait here forever.

 **JIMMY**

Then I’ll wait here forever and a day.

 **LAUREL**

By my forever is longer than your forever and a day…. I’m younger than you are…and a woman…. You need to think about life expectancy, demographics…..You could die out here.

 **JIMMY**

She’s a tree—She’ll outlive both of us. Have you thought about that?

 **LAUREL**

Great. So we’ll both die out here.

 **JIMMY**At least, we’ll be buried side by side.

**18. “Laurel and Lily”**

 *(Lily enters and approaches the tree.)*

 **LILY**

You have a minute?

**LAUREL**

I have an eternity….but I don’t want to talk to you.

**LILY**

Please.

**LAUREL**

Did you bring your cinderblocks? I bet you’re strong enough to get me over the gunwales this time around.

**LILY**

Don’t be like this, Laurel….I’m sorry I was a lousy big sister.

**LAUREL**

I’m sorry too.

**LILY**

I’ll accept your apology if you’ll accept mine.

**LAUREL**

I wasn’t apologizing. I was saying that I’m also sorry you were a lousy big sister.

**LILY**

 *(To Jimmy)*

Can you please give us some privacy?

**LAUREL**

I’m afraid we’re stuck with him. He’s stalking me.

**LILY**

Do you want me to do something—phone the police?

**LAUREL**

Oh, no. I don’t mind. It’s kind of nice to have company.

**LILY**

Well, if he gets out of hand.

**LAUREL**

I read somewhere that stalking is the highest form of flattery.

**LILY**

You have lost it.

**LAUREL**

I thought you’d come to apologize.

**LILY**

I thought so too—I mean: I did come to apologize…. I’m sorry.

**LAUREL**

For what?

**LILY**

Just in general….I’m sorry for everything….

**LAUREL**

Some apology. You don’t even know what you’re sorry for.

**LILY**

I’m sorry for saying you needed psychiatric help just because you have a crush on a tree.

**LAUREL**

It’s not a crush. It’s true love.

**LILY**

I’m sorry for that too.

**LAUREL**

You’re sorry I’m in love with a tree?

**LILY**

I’m sorry I said *you needed psychiatric help* for being in love with a tree….It was very closed minded of me…and you have my complete blessing….In fact, Fairmont and I would love to have the two of you over for dinner any time….Or I suppose a picnic out here might be a bit more feasible logistically….I could chop us up a nice green leafy—steak. You’ll eat steak, won’t you?

**LAUREL**

Is that all you’re sorry for?

**LILY**

Should I be sorry for something else?

**LAUREL**

How about putting my head in the vice?

**LILY**

That too.

**LAUREL**

And the concrete blocks?

**LILY**

I regret my entire childhood, okay?

**LAUREL**

Even the turpentine?

 **LILY**

The turpentine….and the night I promised you a ride in the washing machine and put it on permanent press….and all those times I poured baby shampoo into your eyes to find out whether it really didn’t hurt….and when I set all of your dolls on fire for my science experiment on grieving and loss. I really was a crummy sister, wasn’t I?

 **LAUREL**

Do you remember how you used to say: “I’m doing this in the name of science?” and then you’d tear up my drawings to time how long I cried.

 **LILY**Did I really do that?

 **LAUREL**

Or all those times you’d tell me some really horrible lie—like that grandma had died—just to see my reaction.

 **LILY**

I guess there was a little bit of psychiatrist in me even them.

 **LAUREL**

I’m just thankful you didn’t turn out to be a surgeon.

 **LILY**

Me too….

 **JIMMY**Say, what’s wrong with surgeons?

 **LAUREL**

He’s a plant doctor.

 **JIMMY**

The Florence Nightingale of horticulture—at your service.

 **LILY**

I thought stalking was a *silent* art form.

 **LAUREL**

That’s lurking. Stalking and lurking often go hand-in-hand, but they are not the same thing….For instance, you could be stalking someone who you already know—by spending all of your time with them—and that wouldn’t require lurking….Or you could be lurking for a different purpose entirely—you could be casing a jewelry store, for example, or you could be a flasher or a peeping Tom….which would make you a pervert, but not a stalker…..Don’t they teach you anything in medical school?

 **LILY**

I guess I wasn’t there the day we covered lurking.

 **LAUREL**

Stick around a bit and I’ll give you a crash course….Lurking, stalking, unrequited love….People often confuse stalking with unrequited love, but they’re not at all interchangeable. Love is a motive. Stalking is a means. Sort of like freedom fighting and terrorism….Keep an eye on Jimmy and me for a while and you’ll get the hang of it.

**LILY**

Does this mean we’re friends again?

 **LAUREL**

Yeah. We’re friends again.

 *(Lily and Laurel hug.)*

 **LILY**

I’m so relieved. I couldn’t handle having you and Mama angry at me at once.

 **LAUREL**

Is Mama angry at you?

 **LILY**

Not yet. But she will be soon….

 **LAUREL**

You’re eloping with Fairmont, aren’t you?

 **LILY**

No—he won’t do that….I need your support on this one….I’ve become a Republican.

 *(Lily crosses into the brownstone as the opening of the*

*next scene unfolds.)*

**19. “A revelation”**

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’ve what?!

 **LILY**

This way we won’t be an inter-party couple. I’ll be a Republican. Fairmont will be a Republican.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’ll be dead before my time.

 **LILY**

We’ll both be very moderate Republicans.

 **GWENDOLYN**

This is your father’s doing, isn’t it?

 **LILY**

It has nothing to do with Papa.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Everything has to do with your father….McGovern would have won if not for your father!

**LILY**

McGovern would have won if not for Papa. How in the world is that?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Fine. He wouldn’t have won. But the margin of loss would have been smaller.

 **LILY**

By one vote.

 **GWENDOLYN**

That’s the beauty of democracy. Every vote counts.

**LILY**

Just once in your life, can’t you be excited for me?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Can’t you tell I’m excited? Look at the blood vessels throbbing in my head.

 **LILY**

Well, it’s done. I’ve made my decision. It’s too late to change.

 **GWENDOLYN**

It’s never too late to change. FDR started off as a Republican.

 **LILY**That’s not true.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Well, he was rich. That counts for something….Please, honey….Don’t bring this sort of shame on our family….People will talk…..Where did I go wrong?

 *(Gwendolyn begins to cry.)*

**20. “A second revelation”**

 *(Fairmont enters, whistling. He knocks on the Gages’*

*front door and Gwendolyn rises to answer it.)*

**GWENDOLYN**

Coming! One second.

 *(Gwendolyn opens the door.)*

It’s you. What are you in such a good mood about?

 **FAIRMONT**

I had jury duty.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’re in a good mood because you had jury duty? That’s a first. What did you do, send some innocent defendant to the gas chamber?

**FAIRMONT**

We convicted, all right. Nigerians. A whole syndicate of them.

 **GWENDOLYN**

The men who keep emailing me about the looted treasures of the former Belgian Congo?

 **FAIRMONT**

Those would be the ones.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Well, I’m glad the law has caught up with them—but you shouldn’t take pleasure in other men’s misfortunes, especially when they involve long prison sentences.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’d never take pleasure in such a thing.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Then why the grin?

 **FAIRMONT**

Because I’m happy.

 **LILY**

I think he may be suffering a psychotic break—some sort of jury-induced mania.

 **FAIRMONT**

There’s nothing to worry about, darling—I’m perfectly sane. Just giddy. You’re not going to believe this, but the eleven other jurors were all Fredonian immigrants.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Those people you studied.

 **FAIRMONT**

I didn’t study them….I taught them how to study each other.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Before the Republicans cancelled the experiment.

**FAIRMONT**

Those Republicans are terribly misguided, aren’t they?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Excuse me?

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m a Democrat now. I converted this afternoon.

 **LILY**

I’m going to call for an ambulance. Maybe they can reduce the swelling in his skull….

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m fine, honey. Really. I just had the most remarkable afternoon.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You’re a Democrat!?

 **FAIRMONT**

I’ve never had an experience like it before….These Fredonians—my fellow jurors—They were the most amazing people I’ve ever encountered….

 **GWENDOLYN**

Maybe you’re right, Lily. He does sound feverish.

**FAIRMONT**

They were so stunningly self-aware. Their entire lives were like one long experiment in cultural anthropology—They didn’t even have to speak to each other in the jury room. They just looked at one another and reached an understanding.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You mean you didn’t deliberate?

 **FAIRMONT**

We didn’t need to. We were all in agreement….We didn’t say one word to each other all afternoon—we simply smiled at each other and then the foreman returned the verdict. When the judge polled us individually, we were unanimous.

 **GWENDOLYN**

And you’re really a Democrat now?

 **FAIRMONT**

Our experiment in Fredonia worked. Think how wonderful it would be if we could teach Americans to observe each other…..

 **GWENDOLYN**

You don’t know what this means to me: Another convert to the party of Lincoln.

 **FAIRMONT**

Excuse me?

 **LILY**

I think you’ve both gone mad.

 **GWENDOLYN**

*I’ve* gone mad? You’re the one who abandoned a perfectly decent young man like this Woodlawn to cavort with the enemy.

 **FAIRMONT**

I’m confused.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Lily here’s decided to abandon the party of her ancestors.

 **LILY**Some of my ancestors.

 **GWENDOLYN**

The ones with opposable thumbs.

 **FAIRMONT**

Did you really become a Republican, honey?

 **LILY**

It was for us—so we wouldn’t be an inter-party couple.

 **GWENDOLYN**

You raise them to be principled—You make sure to bring them with you into the voting booth, even if it holds up the line—and still they turn out unfit for civilized society.

 **FAIRMONT**What does it matter? She’ll convert back.

 **GWENDOLYN**

It’s too late for that. That’s like converting back from adultery.

 **LILY**

Don’t be so melodramatic, Mama.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I’m not being melodramatic….When I disown you and go around wearing sackcloth and ashes to mourn the loss, then I’ll be melodramatic….

 **FAIRMONT**

This isn’t a day for mourning. It’s day for celebration.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I beg to differ….Do you think I can purchase a hair-shirt on the Internet?

 **FAIRMONT**

What a strange world we live in…..A man never registers to vote, never files a tax return, never acquires a driver’s license….and still he finds himself lucky enough to be called for jury duty.

**21. “A third revelation”**

 **GWENDOLYN**

What did you just say?

 **FAIRMOMT**

I was saying how lucky I was to be called for jury duty….

 **GWENDOLYN**

—No, no. Before that. About registering to vote.

 **FAIRMONT**

Oh, I haven’t registered to vote in years. Not since I became a Republican, in fact. Imagine: I didn’t want to be called for jury duty again. What a fool I was!

 **GWENDOLYN**

So you’ve never actually *voted* for a Republican?

 **FAIRMONT**

No, I guess not….But I would have.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Would have, could have, should have. The point is that you haven’t. Republican is as Republican does.

 **LILY**

Don’t sound so surprised, Mama. I never registered to vote either….

 **GWENDOLYN**

You haven’t? After all those times I took you into the voting booth with me.

 **LILY**

I don’t even know where my polling place is.

 **GWENDOLYN**

I think I may weep.

 **FAIRMONT**What’s wrong, Your Honor?

 **GWENDOLYN**

Nothing’s wrong. Nothing at all….Isn’t this wonderful? You’re both a-political….

 **FAIRMONT**

I wouldn’t go that far. I have opinions—

 **GWENDOLYN**

Opinions matter for nothing. If you don’t vote, your opinions don’t count…..I don’t know what to say. Why didn’t you tell us sooner?

 **LILY**

So you’ll give us your blessing, Mama?

 **GWENDOLYN**

This is just absolutely wonderful! Welcome to the family, Woodlawn.

 **FAIRMONT**

Fairmont.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Woodlawn, Fairmont. Live a long time and it won’t matter.

**22. The Chopping Block**

 *(Lucretia knocks on the door of the Gage brownstone.)*

 **LUCRETIA**

Little people! Open up. I have a little surprise for you.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Hold your horses.

 *(Gwendolyn opens the door; Fairmont and Lily follow*

 *behind her.)*

Yes?

 **LUCRETIA**

Come out here. I want to show you something.

*(Gwendolyn, Fairmont and Lily follow Lucretia into*

*the vacant lot.)*

 **FAIRMONT**

Look, honey. She brought sunshine.

 **LAUREL**

What happened to eight years of rain?

 **FAIRMONT**

I guess Stalin never had to visit that village.

 **GWENDOLYN**

 *(To Lucretia)*

Well?

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia displays a court order.)*

Do you know what this is?

 **FAIRMONT**

A letter from Nigeria?

 **LUCRETIA**

A court order. Signed by a state judge—And do you know what it says?

 **FAIRMONT**

That you’re entitled to all of the looted treasures of the Belgian Congo?

 **LILY**

That they can’t give you a heart, but they can give you a testimonial?

 **LUCRETIA**

That this property is mine to build a quarry on. Not the dim-witted Indian’s. Not the Bolshevik tree’s. Mine!

 **GWENDOLYN**

Let me see that.

*(Gwendolyn grabs the document from Lucretia and*

 *reads it to herself.)*

I’m afraid it says what she says it says.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia takes back the document.)*

Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a tree to chop down.

 *(Lucretia approaches Laurel, Jimmy and the Poplar Tree.)*

You. Indian. I have something for you.

**FAIRMONT & GWENDOLYN & LILY**

*(Simultaneously)*

—Native American!—

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(To Fairmont.)*

One more word and you’ll enjoy your own personal monsoon season.

 **JIMMY**

Get off my property, lady. Before I call the cops.

 **LUCRETIA**

I’m afraid it’s my property now.

 *(Lucretia hands him a copy of the document.)*

A copy for you. Read it and weep.

 **LAUREL**

What’s wrong, Jimmy?

 **JIMMY**

It says she owns the lot. Free and clear. It seems that, according to the state constitution and the principles of Anglo-American jurisprudence dating back to the Magna Carta, rich people have more rights than trees or Native Americans. I guess that means we have to leave.

 **LUCRETIA**

No, please don’t go so soon. Stay a while. Make yourself at home. But clear away from that tree….I have something I’d like you to watch.

 **LAUREL**

Oh my God! What are you going to do?

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia retrieves the axe from the garden shop.)*

Something I should have done fifty-two years ago—Chopped down that damn Commie tree….Communism is a lot like long-horned beetles. If you have one of them in your forest, they poison everything around them….

 *(Takes out another copy of the court order)*

I guess there’s no point in pinning this court order to the tree if I’m going to chop it down anyway.

 **JIMMY**

Please, Mrs. Vandervelt. Let’s discuss this like reasonable people.

 **LUCRETIA**Since when am I a reasonable person? Now where do you keep that axe?

 **JIMMY**It’s my axe. If you want to chop down trees, buy your own axe.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia retrieves the axe from in front of Jimmy’s shop.)*

I think this will suit just perfectly.

 **JIMMY**That’s my axe, lady. Put it down.

 **LUCRETIA**

So sue me….Now step back.

 *(Lucretia raises the axe.)*

 **LAUREL**

Somebody do something! I can’t look.

 **JIMMY**

Wait. What would you say to a better offer?

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Lucretia pauses with the axe elevated.)*

Are you trying to bargain with me, young man?

 **JIMMY**

Yes, I am. I’m trying to offer you a profit—a return on your investment.

**LUCRETIA**

What sort of profit?

 **JIMMY**

How about this: If you don’t chop down the poplar tree, I’ll give you my shop. Outright. The stock, the equipment, even the accounts receivable. You can sell all the merchandise and then tear down the building to build your quarry.

**LUCRETIA**

So basically I’m trading one piece of property for another. Some profit. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, this is personal. Maybe I’m going soft, but I’d actually risk losing money, at this point, to get rid of that damn overgrown Bolshevik.

 **JIMMY**

Please, lady. You can keep this property too. You’ll be able to build a quarry twice the size—and all you have to do is leave the tree alone.

 **LUCRETIA**

Let me get this straight. You’re offering me your entire shop and the land it stands on—and all I have to do in return is agree not to put the tree on the chopping block.

 **FAIRMONT**

It’s sounds like a good deal, Dame Lucretia. In a financial sense.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(To Fairmont)*

What on earth do you know about financial sense? You don’t have the sense to come in out of the rain….You’re fired!

 **FAIRMONT**

But Dame Lucretia—

 **LUCRETIA**

One more word and you’re fired.

 **FAIRMONT**

But you already fired me.

 **LUCRETIA**

That’s it. You’re fired again. Do you want to try a third time?

 **LILY**

 *(To Fairmont)*

So much for loyalty.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(To Jimmy)*

Now where were we? Oh, yes. As I was saying: It sounds like a good deal. In a financial sense.

 **JIMMY**

I don’t know much about finance, lady. It’s all I have to offer.

 **LUCRETIA**

So what’s the catch?

 **JIMMY**No catch.

 **LUCRETIA**

There’s always a catch. Otherwise there’d never be any incentive to exchange anything. How exactly do you plan on taking advantage of me?

 **JIMMY**

Look, lady. I couldn’t take advantage of you if I wanted to. I’m not nearly that clever.

 **LUCRETIA**

You are rather dim-witted, aren’t you?

 **JIMMY**I love Laurel and Laurel loves the tree. That’s what this is about.

 **LUCRETIA**So you’re desperate. I could raise the price.

 **JIMMY**You could. But I don’t have anything else to offer.

 **LUCRETIA**

It would be nice to have a larger quarry….

 **JIMMY**

You could dig all around the tree if you wanted to….We won’t take up much space.

 **LUCRETIA**That’s an awful lot of bedrock we’re talking about….I think I’ll do it. Mr. Fythe, prepare the documents.

 **FAIRMONT**

But I thought I was fired.

 **LUCRETIA**

Very well. You’re rehired. But at the entry level. You’ll have to work your way up.

 **FAIRMONT**

Yes, Dame Lucretia. Thank you, Dame Lucretia.

 **JIMMY**

So everything’s settled.

 **LUCRETIA**

 *(Tentatively)*

I suppose it is.

 *(Jimmy and Lucretia shake hands.)*

A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Duckfoot.

 **POPLAR TREE**

STOP!

 **LAUREL**

She spoke!

 **POPLAR TREE**

Listen up, everybody.

 **LAUREL**

What is it, baby? You name it and it’s yours.

 **POPLAR TREE**

All I want is a moment of everybody’s time….I’m not in the habit of giving long speeches, but you all need to hear what I have to say.

 **LAUREL**

Of course we do.

 **POPLAR TREE.**

Especially you, Laurel.

 **LAUREL**

 *(Giddy.)*

I think she likes me.

 **POPLAR TREE**

I do like you, Laurel….But I don’t love you. I’m far too independent to fall in love with anyone, particularly a human being. I’m self-pollinating, if you know what I mean.

 **LAUREL**

It’s all right, baby. You take your time…..

 **POPLAR TREE**

It’s not a matter of time. It’s a matter of inclination….I just don’t love you, Laurel. But that man does….Enough to give up his livelihood to save the tree you love, even though he despises me with a passion. Isn’t that right, Mr. Duckfoot?

 **JIMMY**

Despises is such a dirty word….How about “loathes”?

 **POPLAR TREE**

You’d be a fool to give up a man like that for a tree like me.

 **LAUREL**

But I love *you*. Not him.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Do you really?

 **LAUREL**

 *(Less certain)*

I think so.

 **POPLAR TREE**

I don’t. I think you’re just stubborn like your mother.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Thank you.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Maybe you had a crush on me at the beginning, but now it’s Jimmy you come out here to see every morning, not me.

 **JIMMY**

You think so?

 **POPLAR TREE**

I know so.

 **LAUREL**

I’m so confused.

 **POPLAR TREE**

It’s okay to be confused. But be confused with Mr. Duckfoot….Human relationships are complicated enough—no reason to bring tree hormones into the mix. Trust me: When my xanthophyll starts flowing, you’ll wish you’d chopped me up for firewood.

 **LAUREL**

I guess I could try loving Jimmy—If *you* wanted me to.

 **JIMMY**

That’s all I ask for….Just try a little bit.

 **POPLAR TREE**

In any case, I’m tired of being loved. Do you really think you’re the only girl ever to pine away under my branches? Every summer it’s the same weeping, the same pleading, the same ribbons. Well, I’ve had enough….Mr. Duckfoot, could I ask you a small favor?

 **JIMMY**

After what you’ve just done, you can ask for anything you want? All of my plant food, my fertilizer, my marble bird baths—it’s all yours. I don’t know how to thank you.

 **POPLAR TREE**

I’ll tell you how….Bring over that axe.

 **JIMMY**

Sure thing.

 *(Jimmy retrieves the axe.)*

**POPLAR TREE**

What I want you to do is to chop me down. Right there at the base.

 **JIMMY**

You serious?

 **POPLAR TREE**

Have you ever known a poplar tree to tell a joke?

**LAUREL**

Please, baby. You can’t.

 **POPLAR TREE**

No, but Mr. Duckfoot can….I’m tired of being loved. I’m tired of being doted on and fawned over by a horde of pathetic teenyboppers. They’re a dime a dozen—self-absorbed sniveling brats, every one of them—and I’ll be glad to be out of my misery.

 **JIMMY**Watch it! That’s my girl you’re talking about!

 **LAUREL**

I want to die. Chop me in a half too.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Don’t be stupid. You have everything to live for. You’ve got a man who’ll love your doting and fawning and sniveling. What more could a girl want? Now if you’ll get to work, Mr. Duckfoot.

 **LILY**

Don’t listen to her, Jimmy. This is crazy talk.

**LAUREL**

She really doesn’t love me.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Nothing crazy about it. Who are you to decide what’s crazy and what’s not?

 **LILY**

I’m a psychiatrist, dammit.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Okay. What’s the first principle of psychiatry?

 **LILY**

Do no harm?

 **GWENDOLYN**Sanity is culturally specific.

 **POPLAR TREE**

Precisely. Sanity is culturally specific. So to a human being, this may not make sense….But to a tree, what I’m doing is perfectly sane. You can replant some of my branches if you want to.

 **LILY**

She’s gone mad. She needs therapy.

**POPLAR TREE**

I don’t have all day, Mr. Duckfoot. It shouldn’t be too hard. You humans idolize that monster Washington for his incident with the cherry tree. And that genocidal maniac, Paul Bunyan. Raise your axe and do your worst.

 **LAUREL**

I didn’t know she could be so cruel.

 **POPLAR TREE**

I can be a lot crueler. I’m going to keeper saying increasingly nastier things until your new boyfriend gets to work….you spoiled bitch.

 **JIMMY**

 *(Jimmy lifts the axe and chops the poplar tree in two. She*

 *falls to the ground.)*

I warned her not to talk that way about my girl.

 **GWENDOLYN**

Maybe we can replant some of the branches.

 **FAIRMONT**After the wedding. I have a friend who’s a justice of the peace. I’ll tell him to come over immediately, before anything else goes wrong.

 *(Fairmont and Jimmy carry the poplar tree toward the*

 *edge of the stage. Lily, Laurel and Gwendolyn follow.)*

 **LUCRETIA**

Wait a second!

 **JIMMY**

What?

 **LUCRETIA**

We haven’t signed a contact yet….That was still my tree you chopped down.  **JIMMY**

Still your tree? That means I still own my stop.

 **LUCRETIA**

You tricked me, confound it….But you had no legal right to cut down that tree….I’ll take you to court.

 **JIMMY**

I’ll counter-sue for my pruning fee. I usually charge good money for removing unwanted trees—I have a whole lot full of witnesses who heard you ask me specifically to chop the tree down.

 **LUCRETIA**

But I wanted to chop it down myself. Mr. Fythe will testify to that.

 **LAUREL**

C’mon, Fairmont. Now’s your chance.

 **FAIRMONT**

I will not testify to that—Mrs. Vandervelt….

 **LUCRETIA**My heavens!

 **FAIRMONT**

If you want to chop down the tree, bring on the rains and re-grow it….You’ll have another chance in…I don’t know—maybe fifty-two years.

 *(Fairmont, Lily, Jimmy, and Laurel exit.)*

 **LUCRETIA**

I suppose I’d best be going too….No use standing around here when there’s money to be made elsewhere….A young couple’s bond can be strong—but it pales compared to an old woman’s love for an almighty dollar….Stone Age, here we come!

 *(Lucretia exits.)*

 **GWENDOLYN**

 *(Gwendolyn, to the audience.)*

So there you have it.

Two young couples in love with each other. An old woman in love with her pocketbook. What could possible be stronger? How about a middle-aged divorcee’s love for her grandchildren. I can already envision dozens of them—Loyal democrats, every last one.

As I said, love is out of control these days. But that’s not such a bad thing, now is it?

*(Lights out.)*

**END OF ACT TWO**