

## **CORNERED**

A drama by Rosemary FrisinoToohey

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### **CHARACTERS**

LAURA...female, late 30s-early 40s. Wife, mother, PhD candidate.

Her range of motion gradually diminishes over the course of the play,  
although her fencing moves are executed without restriction.

STEPHEN...male, late 30s-early 40s. Laura's husband, a successful lawyer.

### **SETTING:**

Laura and Stephen's living room and later, the suggestion of a nursing home cubicle

### **TIME**

The present. The action occurs across a number of years.

Lights up on LAURA, executing fencing moves. A moment, then, lights up on STEPHEN. She fences as he speaks & stops when she speaks.

STEPHEN

In the beginning, of course, we didn't know what the problem was. When Laura started stumbling, seeing double, having difficulties with bladder control, the doctors were baffled. And she's not exactly what you would call an "easy" patient. She's always been very determined. Along with being practically brilliant. She tolerates fools not at all.

LAURA

I loved fencing. The ritual, the magnificence of it. It was the Italians who first brought speed to it. They developed the use of the rapier, focused on the point rather than the side of the blade. In the early seventeenth-century, fencing was a two-handed affair: a rapier in one hand, cloak and dagger in the other.

STEPHEN

The most maddening thing about it was that Laura's symptoms came and went. We thought it was gone, then it would start up again. And her pregnancies made everything worse. It was the extra weight, of course, but we didn't know that back then. After Jen was born, the problems subsided for a time, so we assumed everything was okay. But then Brian came along and there was something of a sea change.

LAURA

It was the French who took fencing to the next level. That's why most fencing techniques have French names. A change in fashion in the court of Louis the Fourteenth brought the lighter, shorter, court sword into vogue.

STEPHEN

I remember that horrible day when she dropped him. He was only about three months old. I had gone back to work. All of a sudden, she said, her arms just...gave out. She got down on the floor, thankful that he was screaming his lungs out. She was afraid to pick him up for fear she might drop him again, so she pulled his blanket across the floor and crawled over to the phone. I can't imagine what it was like for her.

LAURA

Dueling became the acceptable way for gentlemen to settle their disagreements. A good bit of blood was shed during all of this and most of it was blue. They say forty thousand

LAURA (cont'd.)

aristocrats died in duels in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

STEPHEN

When we got the diagnosis, when the doctors finally recognized that it was multiple sclerosis, it was a relief. I think it's always better to know the full dimensions of a problem, have all the information, see every possibility, however grim it might be. Just knowing what we were facing was easier. For me, anyway.

LAURA

I discovered fencing freshman year of college. Just out of curiosity, I stopped in at a practice. I had never given a thought to sports, but fencing didn't look like a sport. It looked like...like art. A beautiful, dangerous art.

STEPHEN

We made accommodations to the house. I put in an elevator, wheelchair ramps, took out the steps going from the kitchen to the living room. And I felt that we were in charge, that in some measure, we had won. Ludicrous, I guess, looking back on it.

LAURA

Stephen said it was the control, the competitiveness in fencing that appealed to me. Not to mention the possibility that one might just draw blood. He was probably right.

STEPHEN

And then...the next phase. I thought it was a phase. I hoped it was a phase. It was very hard. I kept telling her I wasn't going to give up. I kept saying it. But she was so sure, so positive that we were doomed, that our relationship was over. It was like trying to win an argument with a rock. And despite everything I did, the rock kept growing.

Lights down on STEPHEN. LAURA makes the ritual salute of foil to forehead, puts the foil aside & sits in her wheelchair, becoming what she is, a woman increasingly paralyzed by multiple sclerosis.

LAURA

I didn't really have a plan in the beginning. Back then, I think it was just about winning. I wanted to win, I needed to win...something. And Stephen was my only opponent. Our afternoons became filled with little rituals. Him coming in from work, a kiss, the mail...

LAURA (cont'd.)

the opening salvos, and then the battle of wills. Our field of play was the living room rug.

*Match 1*

STEPHEN  
(offstage)

Hi, hon. You in there?

LAURA  
Ah-huh. ((Now where else would I be?))

STEPHEN  
How you doing?

LAURA  
((He doesn't really want an answer to that, does he?)) Fine. How'd it go today?

STEPHEN  
Fair to middling. Preliminaries on the Donohue case have got to be nailed by Thursday.

LAURA  
Can you get it done?

STEPHEN  
I have to get it done. I'm tackling it right after supper.

LAURA  
((Note to Laura: I'm throwing myself into my work tonight. No time for any annoying arguments.))

STEPHEN  
The kids home?

LAURA

Not yet. Brian won't be in till almost six. The first grade went to the pumpkin patch, remember?

STEPHEN

Oh, yeah. And Jen?

LAURA

She's at Stephanie's. Making Halloween costumes. Ann said she'd bring her home right after dinner.

STEPHEN

Anything good come in the mail?

LAURA

Not much. Gately's statement. And the bill for when they sprayed the trees.

STEPHEN

What did that come to?

LAURA

Four something.

STEPHEN

We were supposed to get a discount for calling early.

LAURA

Were we?

STEPHEN

It was supposed to be ten percent off if you get on their sheet before March.

(He unfolds the bill & studies it.)

Jeez. Five cherry trees. Four hundred-thirty-five dollars. But I guess you can't ignore tent caterpillars.

He crosses, & quickly, unobtrusively,  
touches the back of the TV set.

LAURA

((Did you catch that? That little move?))

STEPHEN

Of course, we could just get rid of the trees. But I hate to do that. You always said you liked the way they look in the spring.

LAURA

Thank you, Stephen.

STEPHEN

What?

LAURA

For that vote of confidence. Thanks.

STEPHEN

What do you mean---

LAURA

Feeling the back of the set to see if it was warm. You could have asked me, you know. All you had to say was, "Did you watch TV today, Laura?"

STEPHEN

And you would have said...?

LAURA

Too late, counselor. The evidence has been examined and a verdict has been reached.

STEPHEN

Honey...

LAURA

Don't say "honey" when you're calling me a liar.

No one's calling you a liar.

STEPHEN

Why didn't you just ask me?

LAURA

Maybe because, I didn't think I'd get a straight answer.

STEPHEN

That's my boy. Home from the office, hard on the trail of the straight answer.

LAURA

Are we playing games again?

STEPHEN

I like games.

LAURA

Only the ones where you win.

STEPHEN

Well, naturally.

LAURA

I thought we had an agreement, Laura. I thought the agreement was...

STEPHEN

...if I needed to relax, I could turn it on.

LAURA

So did you do everything else?

STEPHEN

LAURA

I folded the towels, I loaded the dishwasher. Except for Brian's thermos. It was---

STEPHEN

Did he leave it at the back of the counter again? I told him.

LAURA

He's only six.

STEPHEN

Six is old enough to understand. I've explained it to him. What time did Evira come?

LAURA

Eleven. She changed the sheets, did your shirts. I made sure she got the collars right this time.

STEPHEN

Did you call Marcia?

LAURA

Oh, and we looked all over Jen's room. No sign of her ballet slippers.

STEPHEN

And what about your sister?

LAURA

Evira even moved the bed. They're just not there.

STEPHEN

Did you call Joan?

LAURA

You know, it's not as if I've had a dynamite day at the office to talk about.



STEPHEN

It's keeping in touch, Laura, staying involved. They care about you, honey.

LAURA

((Painful, that little jab. But I press on.)) Look, the hours just went. Okay? There wasn't enough time to....

STEPHEN

But there was time to watch "All My Children"?

LAURA

((And with his first lunge, he scores.))

STEPHEN

You promised, Laura. You made me a promise. Are you listening?

LAURA

Of course, I'm listening. I haven't run out of the room, have I? I haven't even rolled out of the room. Get the joke?

STEPHEN

Honey, I know you're frustrated. I'm just trying to help you...go on being you. We're in this together, remember?

LAURA

Point of information, counselor. I am in this and you are clearly standing over there. Ipso facto, you are not in this.

STEPHEN

Watching soap operas, it's not...you're an intelligent person. For crying out loud, you're a dissertation away from getting a Ph.D.

LAURA

Oh, thanks for reminding me. And what would I do with it if I got it? Lecture Evira on the rise of Racine as a master of French tragedy?

STEPHEN

We've been all over this. You could---

LAURA

Explain to the mailman why Descartes and Pascal were revered for their prose as well as their philosophical concepts?

STEPHEN

You could write. You wanted to write. Remember? You could dictate---

LAURA

Of course! How French literature survived the upheavals of the Middle Ages. We were going to visit Mont-Saint-Michel. When do you think we can pull that off?

STEPHEN

Well, we'd have to make some accommodations, but---

LAURA

I know! You could fit this thing with off-the-road tires. Like the ones they put on RVs? That'll do it! Then we could climb those winding streets to the top of the mount, take in the views of the bay, the Romanesque nave in the abbey, the refectory, the sculptures? Mont-Saint-Michel is one of the most impressive sights in all of France. What do you think, Stephen, next vacation maybe?

STEPHEN

Look, Laura, I...

LAURA

Or shall we just do what we did last year? And you play with the kids on the beach while I watch *The Young And The Restless* in a motel?

Pause.

STEPHEN

I better start supper.

STEPHEN exits.

LAURA

Of course, even when I wasn't being a bitch on wheels, the world had a way of putting me in my place. Good people, well-meaning people, had a real knack for it. They say no one can bring you down without your cooperation, so I guess to some degree, it was my fault. Maybe if I'd have been better at interpersonal relations or some damn thing, I might have side-stepped some of the grief. Case in point, Brian's eighth birthday party. An epic event.

*Match 2*

STEPHEN enters.

STEPHEN

Hey, hon. So how did it go?

LAURA

(flatly)

He got three, no, four Lego kits. A couple of space shuttles, a racing car and a helicopter, plus a pump gun that shoots water jets, a science kit, and an ant farm, that should be fun. He went off to Evan's house to play with the pump gun. They'll bring him back later.

STEPHEN

Great.

Pause.

What is it?

LAURA

Tell me something, Stephen, how old am I?

STEPHEN

What?

LAURA

Do I look like a child?

STEPHEN

Of course, you don't look like a...what happened?

LAURA

It was all...everything seemed fine...at first. The Kelly boy came and then the Mahoney twins and then Jason and Drew, Evan, David and finally Jack. He was late, dentist appointment or something. But...

Pause.

the mothers, Stephen. The mothers all stayed. It started with Crissy Mahoney. When she brought the boys, she just hung around. And then she said to Jason's mom, under her breath, of course, "We can't just leave them here."

STEPHEN

Meaning...?

LAURA

Meaning clearly, that I was incapable of taking care of them. Maybe I'd have a fit. Roll over one of them in my chair. Fall asleep, have an accident, impact their little lives somehow.

STEPHEN

Did you say anything?

LAURA

Of course, I did. I said there was no need, that Brian and I could take care of things. And Evira was here. I pointed out to them she was right there in the kitchen. But apparently that wasn't enough. "Oh, no, Laura, you relax, take it easy." I started to say something else but Brian looked at me and... he plays with these kids. He'll probably go to middle school with them, high school, even. If I'd have said what I wanted to, they'd think I was touchy, difficult, crazy, maybe. They might not let him near their little darlings again. So I shut up. And they just took charge. There was this phalanx of smiling, oh god, how they smiled, moms. They put the popcorn out, they cut the pizza. "Do you want to open your gifts now, Brian? Is it time to have the cake, honey?" And they talked around me and over me and above me like I was one of the eight-year-olds.

STEPHEN

I'm sorry, honey, I should have been here. We should have done it on a Saturday and I

STEPHEN (cont'd.)

should have---

LAURA

Why are you blaming yourself?

STEPHEN

Because I should have seen it coming. I should have known.

LAURA

Well, I didn't know.

STEPHEN

I guess they figured if something happened...

LAURA

Who the hell knows what they figured? It's an imperfect world, that's all. And I'm the most imperfect thing in it.

STEPHEN

Don't talk that way! It's not you.

LAURA

Well, then it's just the way things are. We can't give everybody lessons in dealing with the disabled.

STEPHEN

I suppose it's natural for parents to be protective, but---

LAURA

What? I'm not protective?

STEPHEN

I didn't say that. I'm just trying to explain---

LAURA

What do you have to explain? Are you saying there's something I don't get that you and every other parent does?

STEPHEN

Don't align me with them. I'm not like them.

LAURA

Christ, now I'm not even a mom anymore.

STEPHEN

Laura, come on. Listen to me.

She turns away. Lights down on  
LAURA. Pause.

Parallel tracks in an alternate universe. That's how it was sometimes. I thought a lot about what it would have been like if she hadn't contracted MS. We were better off than a lot of other couples going into marriage. We weren't kids. And when I said better or worse, sickness and health, I meant it. I really meant it. I fully expected to be with Laura, to grow old with her, to go on loving her, for the rest of my life. But this thing, it was growing. Little by little, the rock became a boulder. And I couldn't stop it.

Pause.

Of course, there were still some good times. Times when we were just...us.

He picks up a DVD. Holding it behind  
his back, he turns to her. Lights up full.

I've got it.

LAURA

Let me see, let me...

STEPHEN

We had a bargain, remember? Did you keep your end of it?

LAURA

I did all twelve exercises, mister. With repetitions, for your information.

STEPHEN

I knew you could do it. Here it is. MY LEFT FOOT. Daniel Day-Lewis.

He hands her the DVD.

You know, I was thinking, honey, you could write a book. A study of movies where the character's in a wheelchair.

LAURA

Well, let me think. I don't know if anybody's ever done that. I mean, there's this one, of course, and...AFFAIR TO REMEMBER...REAR WINDOW...COMING HOME. Oh, and for sheer horror value there's KISS OF DEATH. Richard Widmark in his first screen appearance.

STEPHEN

Richard Widmark's in a wheelchair?

LAURA

No. He's a psychotic killer and he pushes a woman in a wheelchair down the stairs.

STEPHEN

Nice. So what would you call your book?

LAURA

I don't know. How about... Wheels on Film, maybe?

STEPHEN

That's great!

LAURA

The cover could be... a wheelchair with film canisters for wheels.

STEPHEN

Very good! So do we let the kids watch this one?

LAURA

Jen, maybe. Not Brian. It's a little heavy. Grim surroundings, everybody trying to drink their troubles away.

STEPHEN

I can hardly wait. Let me get dinner going.

He starts to exit.

Is it time for a pill?

LAURA

Not yet. I get the blue one at five-thirty.

STEPHEN

And the green one?

LAURA

After dinner.

STEPHEN

The blue is the diuretic?

LAURA

Yes.

STEPHEN

Then I better empty your bag.

LAURA

Right. We don't want that to happen again.

STEPHEN

If it does, it does. No big deal.



LAURA

Not since you put down the tile.

STEPHEN

Tile just makes more sense anyway in the kitchen.

LAURA

I wonder why the Tuttles put carpet there in the first place.

STEPHEN

No idea. Think of all the spills one might have. Pickle juice, onion gravy...urine...

LAURA

One more word from you, mister, and it'll be your blood on the floor.

STEPHEN

Ready for you anytime, wheelchair lady.

Lights down on LAURA. Pause.

But the good times became fewer as it went on. And god, how it did go on. The years run together in my mind, with only certain points sticking out. Just the sharpest ones.

He exits. Lights up on LAURA.  
She's out of the chair, fencing.

LAURA

Timing is very important in fencing. There is always a precise window of time in which to seize the advantage, draw one's opponent into a position of vulnerability. The basic idea is to touch your foe before he touches you. Ironic, isn't it? In fencing, one scores with a "touch."

She returns to the chair. Her range of movement is clearly diminished.

More and more I was up for a fight. Cornered animals usually are. In some crazy way, I think I felt as if Stephen had contracted MS, too. And I wanted to punish him for it.

STEPHEN enters.

*Match 3*

STEPHEN

The lawn's looking pretty ragged. Brian ought to mow it tomorrow.

LAURA

He's got swim practice.

STEPHEN

He ought to have time if he gets a ride home right away. Doesn't Jeremy's Dad bring him home on Thursday?

LAURA

Is he the one with the Mercedes?

STEPHEN

No. That's the Richardson's.

LAURA

Then it's the Richardson's on Thursdays.

STEPHEN

Well, it needs to be done. Soon as he gets here.

LAURA

I'll tell him.

STEPHEN

Did the therapist come?

LAURA

She came.

STEPHEN

How'd it go? Did she work with you?

LAURA

Actually, there was some confusion on that point. She seemed to think it was her job to stand there, barking like a drill sergeant, while I did the work.

STEPHEN

The agency said she's very good at helping people who have difficulty.

LAURA

She's dynamite at counting. I'll give her that. You should have heard her. "One, two and up, two, two and up, three, two and up...."

STEPHEN

She's trying to help, Laura. I know you don't want to hear that.

LAURA

Then if you know I don't want to hear it, why the hell do you say it?

STEPHEN

Because it happens to be the truth.

LAURA

If I have to meet one more person who's "trying to help," I'm going to spit in his or her eye, one of the few physical acts, may I remind you, that I'm still capable of pulling off.

STEPHEN

Well, maybe next time you and she will---

LAURA

There's not going to be a next time.

STEPHEN

She's not coming back?

LAURA

I doubt it. She seemed to take offense after I pointed out, correctly, I might add, that she was too dumb to pour piss from a boot with the directions on the heel.

Pause.

STEPHEN

So we'll get somebody else.

LAURA

I don't want somebody else. I don't want anybody.

STEPHEN

Well, we can't just give up.

LAURA

We? Let's be clear. You can do...whatever. And I can do anything I goddamn please. It's my body.

STEPHEN

And what happens when you can't move your body?

LAURA

I'm in a good place about it, Stephen. Isn't that what people say nowadays?

STEPHEN

When your legs won't budge an inch, will you be in a good place then?

LAURA

Hey! I'm trying for lighthearted here and you're---

STEPHEN

Don't give me that. This is serious business.

LAURA

Very serious. Very, very, very serious.

STEPHEN

Why won't you fight this thing?

LAURA

Because it's hard! Did you know that? It's goddamn hard.

STEPHEN

I realize that, but if you don't keep those muscles working, they'll---

LAURA

Hey! I've got a new joke.

STEPHEN

This is not the time for---

LAURA

I think it's exactly the time. I'd like to bring a bit of levity to the proceedings. Inject a little humor here. How do you make a cripple fly?

STEPHEN

Laura, please.

LAURA

Come on. How do you make a cripple fly?

STEPHEN

I do not want to hear this.

LAURA

Give up? Push his wheelchair off a cliff.

Pause.

Come on. That was pretty good, wasn't it?

STEPHEN

Can we give it a rest? Can we just stop this nonsense?

LAURA

Got another one. What did one cripple say to the other cripple?

STEPHEN

Stop it. Stop---

LAURA

The least you could do is play along. Come on.

Pause.

STEPHEN

I don't know. What did one cripple say to the other cripple?

LAURA

Who gives a crap? Nobody listens to cripples anyway.

Pause.

Now, that's funny, isn't it?

Pause.

I think it's funny.

STEPHEN

Are you finished?

LAURA

I'm just trying to get you to lighten up.

STEPHEN

Because if you're finished maybe we can get back to something important. Like the life we're living here. Yours, mine and our kids. All I'm trying to do is keep our life---

LAURA

Get off my---

STEPHEN

I'm just trying to keep us going. That's all. That's why---

LAURA

Get the hell off my back! It's bad enough being in this thing without you---

STEPHEN

But if you'd only try. Dr. Frank says---

LAURA

Dr. Frank can stand up on her fucking legs.

STEPHEN

Laura, you said you would try. I have a right to know when you're going to try to---

LAURA

So this is about your rights?

STEPHEN

She said the muscles could respond. They might---

LAURA

Great word choices there, "might," "could." And by the way, what do you think of them?

STEPHEN

What do I think of what?

LAURA

Dr Frank's legs. And don't tell me you didn't notice. Her trim ankles, her finely turned calves, her tight little ass.

STEPHEN

Stop it. If the kids were here---

LAURA

The kids aren't here. So what do you think of her fucking little---

STEPHEN

Can we please not use that language in this house?

LAURA

Put me out in the yard then. What frigging difference does it make? Fucking, fucking, fucking---

STEPHEN

You're an intelligent woman. Why do you want to talk like that?

LAURA

Because I just do. I can say what I want. Watch me. Ass, ass, fuck, fuck, shi---

STEPHEN

I will not stand here and listen to---

LAURA

Then sit down. You can, you know.

STEPHEN

For god sakes, you have a Master's degree.

LAURA

Well, shit, damn, screw, bitch, cock and prick.

STEPHEN

Why you want to say those things, use that gutter-level vocabulary---



LAURA

Who knows? Maybe men from Mars have taken over my head! Maybe aliens are trying to communicate through the ramblings of a comatose woman in a wheelchair.

STEPHEN

You are not comatose.

LAURA

We should consider all the possibilities. What if there's some obfuscated, fucked-up message I'm supposed to deliver to the world?

STEPHEN

There is absolutely no reason for someone with your intellect to talk like that.

LAURA

Maybe it's another "complication." Maybe I've contracted Tourette's syndrome along with multiple sclerosis. I could be making medical history here. You could at least admit the possibility that---

STEPHEN

I will admit that you have a serious illness. That's all.

LAURA

But what if the MS has gone to my brain? What if random words begin to reel out of me at all hours of the day and night? "Wombat," "vestibule," "globular," "anachronism," with just the occasional "fuck" thrown in for good measure. Would that be acceptable, Stephen? Could you live with a mummified woman if she only occasionally said "fuck"?

STEPHEN

You are not mummified!

LAURA

Want to bet?

Pause.

STEPHEN

I promised myself I wasn't going to yell today. I promised.

LAURA

You shouldn't make promises like that. I don't. Then I never have to worry about breaking them

Lights down on LAURA.

STEPHEN

I read somewhere that in a relationship, the one who loves the least is in charge. The one who can picture him or herself without the other, holds the reins. Maybe that's what was wrong. I couldn't get hold of the reins and the two of us were slipping apart. No, I was the one who was slipping. She was a block of granite. And I was sliding down some deep, dark hole I couldn't find the bottom of.

Lights crossfade to LAURA.

LAURA

We had a picture done that year. Stephen got some photographer to come to the house. Had a hairdresser come beforehand for me, made sure the kids wore their best clothes. Maybe he thought at least we would "look" as if we were a "normal" family. Strange, all of us sitting there with these smiles on our faces set in stone.

Pause. Lights up on both.

*Match 4*

STEPHEN

Did the mail bring anything interesting?

LAURA

Looks like Jen's SAT scores came.

STEPHEN

She hasn't seen them yet?

LAURA

She's baby-sitting until seven. Oh, and there's a flyer about the re-paving of the street.

STEPHEN  
That 'll be a nice mess.

LAURA  
You've always said we need the street wider.

STEPHEN  
Yeah. Well, I better go start...

STEPHEN starts to exit.

LAURA  
Stephen?

STEPHEN  
Yeah?

LAURA  
What is it?

STEPHEN  
Marty got the Brewer case.

LAURA  
Marty? After you did all that work? How could they---

STEPHEN  
They did. They just did, that's all.

LAURA  
But that's not fair.

STEPHEN  
Fair? Is anything fair? Is there anything anywhere right now that's "fair"?

LAURA

Oh, hon. Come here. Please.

He goes to her.

Take my hand, and...and...

He does but it lays lifeless in his.  
Pause.

STEPHEN

It's okay, honey. It's okay.

He exits. Pause. LAURA  
steps out of the chair, fencing.

LAURA

A critical necessity in fencing is the mask. Without it, one is courting an injury. Of course, the mask also serves to hide one's face. One might be terrified of an opponent, appalled by the odds, but the mask conceals the fear. It also obscures the intentions. Behind it, one might have any motive, hatch any plan.

Pause.

It was clearly time to ratchet things up. There's a move in fencing called a feint thrust. All I needed was the opportune moment.

She returns to her chair. Her range  
of movement is further diminished.

*Match 5*

STEPHEN enters.

LAURA

So what was the decision on the Johnson case?

STEPHEN

The judge threw everything out. Insufficient evidence. He bought the whole package.

LAURA

That's wonderful.

STEPHEN

Yeah, a lot of work but it all panned out.

LAURA

That's great, hon. Jacob must have been happy.

STEPHEN

He was. He invited everybody into the inner sanctum. Broke out a bottle of 25-year old Macallan.

LAURA

No joke! Who was there?

STEPHEN

All of us. Sean, David, Rivetsky, Hank, Felicia, Elliott. The whole gang.

LAURA

Well, I hope he appreciates the fact that you led the charge.

STEPHEN

He seemed to.

LAURA

That's terrific. Felicia who?

STEPHEN

Ahh, Neale, I think her name is. Say, weren't we supposed to get the rebate back on the Volvo by now?

LAURA

Two more weeks, I think. So who is she?

STEPHEN

She just came over from Hartley, Branch. You know I planned to use the rebate to pay

STEPHEN (cont'd.)

the homeowner's insurance.

LAURA

They said it'll take six to eight weeks.

STEPHEN

That's ridiculous. If they wanted to, they could turn a rebate around in three days.

LAURA

It's just the way it is, Stephen. What division is she in?

STEPHEN

She's working with Hank over in corporate. I swear, somebody ought to file an action. Rebates are just one more way to fleece the consumer.

LAURA

And is Felicia pretty?

STEPHEN

Why can't they simply adjust the sales price? No one objects to an honest profit margin, but this nonsense....

LAURA

I see. Very pretty.

STEPHEN

Laura.

LAURA

Young too, I bet.

Pause.

STEPHEN

No. I'm not going to play.

He starts to exit.

LAURA

Oh, I almost forgot. My mother called. She says she can stay over Saturday night.

STEPHEN

Okay.

LAURA

Does that give you enough time?

STEPHEN

Time?

LAURA

To make plans, arrangements.

STEPHEN

Despite what you seemed determined to think, when I go out for the evening, I don't escape to a world of parties and dancing.

LAURA

Why not? I would if I were you.

STEPHEN

All I did last time was wander around that new bookstore. Drank some coffee, had a donut. It's just a little time. That's all.

LAURA

My mother thinks you ought to be kicking your heels up.

STEPHEN

What did she say?

LAURA

I'm paralyzed, Stephen, not deaf. I heard her last week. Why, she thinks you're practically a saint. Taking care of the kids all these years, keeping the house going, cooking every night, holding down a demanding job.

STEPHEN

You can't hold me responsible for what other people say.

LAURA

Of course, that's nothing to what your parents are saying, I'm sure. Poor Stephen! Saddled with that bitch who's riddled with disease.

STEPHEN

They've never said that, Laura.

LAURA

Puts in those long hours at the office, and comes home to what?

STEPHEN

No one is saying that. No one is thinking that.

LAURA

Imagine the gross things he has to do! Him with a law degree, laboring like a hospital orderly!

STEPHEN

What fiendish glee do you get out of this? Torturing me, torturing us both?

LAURA

It's perfectly all right, you know. Absolutely, perfectly---

STEPHEN

I swear to god I'm not seeing anybody. And I'm not having an affair! Why can't you believe that?



LAURA

Incredible! What ails you, man?

STEPHEN

That's it. I'm not listening.

STEPHEN exits.

LAURA

Stephen! STEPHEN!

Sound of a door banging shut. Pause.

Not long after that I almost pulled a Richard Widmark. I was just out of the hospital after one of my endless urinary tract infections. The cleaning lady had to leave early and Stephen wouldn't be home for hours. I got myself to the top of the basement stairs and I sat, looking down into the darkness, thinking about it.

Pause.

Could I do it? What would it be like? And most important, how could I guarantee success? What if some well-meaning shock-trauma team thwarted my plan? But... in the end...it was the sun coming through the kitchen window that stopped me. The light fell exactly on the ceramic mugs the kids had made so long ago in grade school. Jen's, the more accomplished work of a fourth-grader, the brilliant blue of the word "mom" standing out against an apple-red background. Brian's lumpier first-grade effort, was a prize as well, its bright orange "m" so cockeyed...so perfect.

Pause. Lights crossfade to STEPHEN.

STEPHEN

Can you stay with somebody when they don't want you to? Is that a kind of abuse? It finally dawned on me at the caregivers' session. I was walking around in a daze and then it came to me and I felt really stupid. I suppose you could call it a kind of hubris, pride on my part. I thought we were going to go on forever...Laura and me. Maybe I thought I was such a prize that once she fell in love with me, the feeling would never stop. Maybe it was the illness, maybe it was time, maybe...who knows? I began to see that I was wrong. It was gone. Long gone. I didn't know how to bring it back and she didn't care. No, that's not right. That last year, after Brian started college and Jen moved to Austin, she was...actively pushing me away. It was quite a revelation. But what kind of a bastard walks out on a woman in a wheelchair?

Lights crossfade to LAURA.

LAURA

We heard about a nursing home with a visitation arrangement and that became my endgame. I pushed. I pushed for it hard. In the beginning I would go and stay a couple of days, a week maybe, and then come home. I can't imagine he wanted to have me back, but like clowns in some lousy circus, we were playing out our sick little roles.

*Match 6*

Lights up full as STEPHEN  
pushes her chair.

STEPHEN

So what do you think? Are you surprised? I was afraid they wouldn't get it done in time. The painters had some kind of issue with a job that didn't get finished the week before. But they worked straight through the weekend. I think it looks pretty good. Goes real nice with the paper in the hall don't you think?

LAURA

You're talking about the color? The living room used to be green and now it's blue, is that it?

STEPHEN

I just thought...you're in here so much, the least we could do is paint the walls your favorite color. It's been ages since we had it done and it seemed to me---

LAURA

My favorite color?

STEPHEN

Yeah. Blue was always---

LAURA

Was, Stephen. Past tense. It's not my favorite color. Hasn't been my favorite color in a long time.

STEPHEN

Well, when did you...?

LAURA

You didn't ask me. You never ask me. You just go ahead and do stuff like I'm not here.

STEPHEN

That's not true, Laura. You know, I...everything in this house revolves around you, what you want, what you need. I thought---

LAURA

Correction. Everything in this house revolves around what *you think* I want, what *you think* I need.

She turns away. Pause.

STEPHEN

Was she right? Was I deluding myself into thinking I was arranging everything for her, and it was all about me? Father knows best. With a sick twist.

Pause.

By then I had stopped going to the caregivers' sessions. I was finding comfort elsewhere.

He takes a drink.

So we settled in. No breakup, no goals and dreams. Just mindless, monotonous monogamy.

*Match 7*

He picks up a crossword puzzle.

Let's see. A seven-letter word for... no, that doesn't fit. There's an E and then...

LAURA

Stephen, have you ever thought that maybe you're gay?

He erupts in laughter.

STEPHEN

Wow, what an opening!

LAURA

You know it would be perfectly all right with me if the other woman were a man. After all, what if your impulse was the wrong impulse in the first place?

STEPHEN

You are too much, you know that? Aiming this pop psychology crap in my direction. Like...who was that Roman goddess with snakes for hair?

LAURA

I'm just saying. If you'd be happier in an alternate lifestyle you should give it a go. Everybody's "out" now. Why not you? What are you waiting for?

STEPHEN

Is this how you spend the commercial breaks in the soap operas? Making this stuff up? I got to hand it to you, hon, you're nothing if not creative.

LAURA

Perhaps, in a moment of weakness you caved to the idyll of marital bliss. The happy pyramid of earthly delights sprinkled with the old pixie dust of perfection. A wife, a home, children, and then---

STEPHEN

My soul, how you do go on.

LAURA

Clouds move into the happy valley. The picture starts to hang crooked. The angelic partner, the lovely paragon of homemaker, mother, sex queen, is replaced by a harpy glued to a wheelchair.

STEPHEN

Do you want something from the kitchen, honey?

LAURA

Well, what about it? What if I'm right? What if you're gay?

STEPHEN

I've got a better one. What if we've been replaced by coneheads? Aliens from space, stumbling around, locked forever in a split-level rancher with zoysia grass out front and solar panels on the roof.

LAURA

You know, it's no fun if you won't take me seriously.

STEPHEN

Honey, I've been taking you seriously for years. Can we change the channel? Do we have to keep doing Macbeth? I vote for The Simsons.

LAURA

You know what's wrong with you?

STEPHEN

Yeah, I do. Nothing's wrong with me.

LAURA

So, is there some sort of climax you're waiting for here?

STEPHEN

Not particularly.

LAURA

Then, why---

STEPHEN

Because this is what is, darlin'.

LAURA

What, what is?

STEPHEN

The is-ness of life. My life, your life. You and me, me and you. Us.

LAURA

You say that as if there still were an us.

STEPHEN

Of course, there's still an us.

Pause.

LAURA

Will you have enough time to get back tomorrow after you take me to the nursing home?  
When is the electrician coming?

STEPHEN

Eleven or so.

LAURA

Because if we need to leave earlier, we could.

STEPHEN

Don't worry about it, it's fine.

He pours himself a drink.

You know what I thought of today?

LAURA

No, I don't know what you thought of.

STEPHEN

Granada.

LAURA

Granada? What made you think of that?

STEPHEN

Jack's daughter is going to Spain to get her Master's. He and Janet are all excited, naturally. They're going to visit her in the spring. It just got me to thinking about...when we were over there.

LAURA

It's so long ago.

(laughing)

STEPHEN

What?

LAURA

Just...you know. How young we were. How dumb we were.

STEPHEN

Going to Granada on a holiday weekend with no reservations. Where was my brain?

LAURA

Where was mine? And that room we finally found...

STEPHEN

Oh my god. You came running out of that little pensione, all excited, and you said to me "We've got a room. And it costs less than a euro!" And I thought...not that I wanted to rain on your parade or anything...but that was like not even two bucks. And I'm thinking...what the hell kind of a room are we going to get for less than two bucks?

LAURA

I was too tired to do the math. When the guy said he had a room, I signed the book.

STEPHEN

Yeah, quite a bargain. Right next to the john, with an airshaft for a window and the walls made of paper.

LAURA

What a night! And then the next day that drive to the Alhambra.

STEPHEN

That was not our fault. The map was lousy.

LAURA

I was behind the wheel and you had your head buried in the map and you said “Turn right.”

(laughing)

And there was nothing on the right but a flight of stairs!

STEPHEN

The map showed a street going up to the Alhambra, I swear to god. Stupid damn thing.

LAURA

But when we finally got there...oh, my, remember how beautiful it was?

STEPHEN

Yeah. Incredible. It's a shame we never got to...

LAURA

What?

STEPHEN

Nothing.

LAURA

What?

Pause.

STEPHEN

Barcelona. We were going to go to Barcelona.

LAURA

Yes. After Jen was born.



Pause.

STEPHEN  
You sure you don't want a drink?

LAURA  
Stephen.

STEPHEN  
I could fix you a nice---

LAURA  
Stephen, my love. It's time.

STEPHEN  
Not tonight, Laura. Please, not---

LAURA  
Yes. Tonight. You know, you know---

STEPHEN  
Honey---

LAURA  
No. NO. I mean it. This is it, this time...

STEPHEN  
Laura, please, please, no.

LAURA  
I am not coming back. Do you hear me? Do you understand? This time, I am not coming---

STEPHEN  
I don't want this, Laura. I swear to god I never wanted---

LAURA

And what about what I want?

STEPHEN

You're so sure you're right. You're so goddamn sure---

LAURA

If it were you, I would do it. I would let you go. I would have let you go long ago. I would have done it.

STEPHEN

You don't know that.

LAURA

Yes, I know that. Then we could both of us---

STEPHEN

So there still is an us. You just said so.

Pause.

LAURA

Let me go. Just let me go and be done with it.

STEPHEN

I'll never be done with it. I'll never be done with you.

LAURA

I cannot be responsible for your inability to----

STEPHEN

I will never be done with you.

Long pause. Then STEPHEN picks up a suitcase & pushes the wheelchair a short distance.

STEPHEN

I hope we brought everything.

LAURA

Don't worry. Some cheery little volunteer will come in soon with a cart offering me anything my heart desires.

STEPHEN

Want me to open the blind or...

LAURA

Just turn on the tube.

He clicks the remote. The TV is heard.

And give me the remote, if you please.

He puts the remote in her lap.

STEPHEN

You sure you've got---

LAURA

My show's coming on. Time for you to go.

STEPHEN

Okay, okay.

Pause. He bends down & gives her a kiss.

LAURA

My magic wand if you please.

He puts the plastic wand in her mouth positioning the end of it on the remote.

STEPHEN

Anything else?

LAURA shakes her head “no.”

STEPHEN

Well...all right then. All right, hon.

STEPHEN exits. TV sound fades.  
The wand falls to her lap.

LAURA

I almost called him back. Almost. But I had my strategy, I had my plan. I think of him, of course, I think of him often. And I wonder about him. Is he all right?

Lights up on STEPHEN.

STEPHEN

I guess we're where she wanted us to be. I don't know. I make sure the kids go see her, of course, when they come to town, even if they don't always take the time to see me.

LAURA

Brian and Jen were pretty bitter about it all. They've never been able to see it from my point of view, from this chair. But then, who could?

STEPHEN

Jen hasn't forgiven me for being complicit in the act. I don't know if she ever will. For a long time I didn't know if I could forgive myself. And what came next...I didn't set out to have it happen. I guess that sounds pretty lame.

LAURA

I know Stephen was seeing a psychologist for a while. I figured if he could just learn to live with himself, maybe he could think about living with somebody else again.

STEPHEN

It's not that Meg is gorgeous, she's not some over-sexed twenty-two-year old. She's just...she's a really good listener. And there's none of the baggage that was there between Laura and me.

LAURA

I knew he was walking around with a big chunk hacked out of his heart, but I figured at the end of the day if he could go home to someone, some woman who could put her arms

LAURA (cont'd.)

around him, if he could just do that...he'd be all right.

STEPHEN

I guess as long as Laura's okay, if she can tolerate being there, tomorrow and the next day and the day after that...maybe if I could have been stronger, if I could have gone on with the battles...

LAURA

Fighting him was so exhausting. Even for me. And I love a fight.

STEPHEN

They say, in marriage, the one who loves the least, calls the shots.

LAURA

The one who loves the least holds the reins. That's what they say. But I never believed it.

LAURA escapes her chair, takes up the foil & executes a few moves. Then, she lets the point drop to the floor.

And you, fair lady, you take him. Treat him well and kindly. He is full and fairly yours. Use my affection for him, make it your foil. The well of my love is dark, but very, very deep.

She makes the ritual salute of foil to forehead. Lights slowly down.

END OF PLAY