

Mourning Woods Merengue

A Play

by Kim E. Ruyle

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Mourning Woods Merengue

Cast of Characters

- LOREN HOLMES Male. 60s. Reserved, dispirited. Divorced. Forced into early retirement. Eternal pessimist.
- SHAR SHIMMELS Female. 60s. Bubbly, energetic. Widowed. Retired. Eternal optimist.
- JOE HOLMES Male. 40s. Loren's troubled, disappointment of a son. Single. Mechanic. Sometimes stutters on initial, back-of-throat consonants, e.g., words beginning with c, g, and k. Stuttering is more pronounced when he's stressed. Most stuttering is not explicitly identified in dialogue and is at the director's/actor's discretion.
- HELEN SHIMMELS-COX Female. 40s. Shar's interfering, uptight daughter. Divorced. Assistant district attorney.
- PALOMA GUTTIEREZ Female. 20s. Aspiring choreographer. Has the moves. A bundle of Latin energy.
- Note: Ethnic diversity encouraged and at the director's discretion.
- TIME: About now.
- SETTING: Mourning Woods Village, an upscale gated condo complex of mostly older but active adults in Port Washington, Wisconsin.
- SPLIT SET:
1. A clubhouse lounge. Signage – *Mourning Woods Village*. Comfortable seating. One exterior door and one interior door to an office identified as *Activities Coordinator*. A window. A coffee station. A panel of mailboxes. A prominent poster announcing a dance contest and depicting a dancer that resembles Paloma.
 2. Loren's living room. Functional, high quality, furnishings. Modestly stylish but unpretentious.
- SYNOPSIS: After being forced out of his job, Loren, a resident of Mourning Woods Village, is deeply depressed. Shar, his next-door neighbor, is determined to reanimate and romance Loren. She invites him to partner in a dance contest with the support of Paloma, the earthy, vivacious activities coordinator who ludicrously supports the matchmaking. Adult children jump in and complicate things with their own problems and interference. In the end, will anyone find romance? Will anyone even dance?

RUNNING TIME: ~90 Minutes without intermission.

PRODUCTION NOTES

- Crossfading is used for seamless scene transition.
- Two recorded soundtracks are provided with royalty-free merengue dance music, one has a vocal track.
- Dialogue written in all caps is intense, forceful, impulsive.
- Dialogue written in italics is given accentuation, emphasis.
- A forward slash (/) indicates where the next line of interrupting and overlapping dialog begins.
- Ellipses (. . .) indicate an unfinished thought, dialogue that trails off.
- A dash (–) indicates dialogue cut off, abruptly interrupted.
- Brackets [] indicate sentiment expressed by unspoken words.
- Permission is granted by the playwright to change the names of specific cities and towns cited (e.g., Port Washington, Oconomowoc, Milwaukee) to refer to cities and towns in the region of a production.
- Permission is granted by the playwright to change the terminology from OWI (operating while intoxicated) to that which reflects local legal terminology referring to driving under the influence of alcohol.
- This play requires dance choreography and actors capable of physically handling merengue dance moves. While Loren and Shar will only be making basic dance moves (including simple turns), Paloma and Joe will be dancing somewhat more advanced moves including the pretzel, the cuddle, and the sombrero.
- An intermission, if desired, may best fit between scenes six and seven.

“If nothing saves us from death, at least love should save us from life.” ~Pablo Neruda

“Who loses courage loses all.” ~Miguel de Cervantes

“You dance love, and you dance joy, and you dance dreams.” ~Gene Kelly

SCENE ONE

Saturday, midmorning in the Mourning Woods Village clubhouse. Latin music comes from the open office, and Paloma dances provocatively near a poster announcing the Mourning Woods Village Dance Contest. Shar, dressed for tennis, fills cups and sits with coffee and a book of crossword puzzles. As the music dies, Paloma joins Shar.

SHAR

It's like watching a terrible accident. You know? How when something's horrific, but you can't turn away? You're cringing, but still, you just keep watching.

PALOMA

Pero, why do they schedule it on Saturdays? Saturdays are date nights.

SHAR

It humanizes the addicts. The dealers. The families. And the cops. It feels like reality TV, but it's all dramatized, Dearie. You know? They have a script, and the star –

PALOMA

No Saturday TV for me since they canceled *Sábado Gigante*. About the time I lost my virginity.

SHAR

Do you think Loren would like a show like that?

PALOMA

¿Sábado Gigante? Does he speak Spanish?

SHAR

No, no. Not –

PALOMA

¡Ay dios mío! I just realized! All that time, it was Univision keeping me from the boys, Sábado Gigante protecting my virtue. Bueno, at least until I was fourteen. Pero, ahora, los sábados no son para Don Francisco. ¡Solo para los muchachos!

SHAR

[What the hell are you talking about?] Okay, but do you think Loren –

PALOMA

Forget about your TV program.

Standing, dancing her way to the poster.

It's just one week. You should be practicing!

SHAR

He'll be here any minute now. He's so predictable. But we have to ease him into it. You know, give him time to get comfortable. Nothing too obvious. We don't want to scare/ him off.

PALOMA

/Me? You think I'm *obvious?* *Scary?* I'm not going to scare him off.

SHAR

Well, maybe you should, you know, wait in [your office].

Gesturing toward the office.

Maybe give us five minutes, Dearie, so it's not too –

PALOMA

Obvious. I know. Quizás you need obvious. Get his attention, chica. Un rocotazo. Hit him right in the head.

Beat. A smile.

I am *not* scary.

Starting for the office and glancing out the window.

Here comes Señor Sexy Pants now. ¡Vamos embullate, Shar! You got this!

Paloma exits to the office. Loren enters. He's neatly dressed in slacks and a crisply ironed shirt.

SHAR

Good morning, Loren. What a nice surprise.

Loren politely nods, pours coffee, and retrieves newspaper from a mailbox. Shar pats the seat next to her, but he sits a bit removed and opens the paper. Shar hesitates, then refers to the crossword.

SHAR

Pleasing curve.

Waits but no response.

Seven letters.

Still waiting. Still no response.

Begins “r-o” and ends in an “e.”

Studies the newspaper hiding Loren's face.

Can't help me out, smarty pants?

Sotto voce.

I've got some pleasing curves. Case you haven't noticed.

LOREN

Two-fisted today, are you?

Off Shar's puzzled look.

Drinker. Two-fisted coffee drinker. You've got two cups.

SHAR

Oh. No. I was just visiting with Paloma.

LOREN

So *not* waiting for me...

SHAR

Oh. Well... Would you like to join me, help with the crossword?

Loren just nods at his newspaper. The office door opens, and we briefly hear Latin music. Paloma provocatively dances out with pickleball paddles, closes the office door, and throws kisses.

PALOMA

¡Buenos días, guapo y la mujer más bella del mundo! ¡Mmwah! ¡Mmwah!

SHAR

Buenos días, Paloma. Looks like you're ready for –

PALOMA

¡Vamanos! Los Wilsons are looking for double partners.

SHAR

Oh, that sounds like fun. Loren? Pickleball?

Loren gives the slightest wag of his head.

SHAR (CONT.)

I keep telling him. He needs to have some fun.

PALOMA

¡Dale! Exercise! It's good for you! And pickleball is sexy time, too!

Seductively approaching and teasing Loren.

¡Vamos! You can see the pretty chicas in their little shorts.

SHAR

Well, I don't know about –

PALOMA

Oh, I do know! I know what Dr. Holmes needs. More energy for the sexy time. He never exercises.

LOREN

Folding newspaper, giving a wan smile.

It's. *Loren.*

SHAR

He doesn't like to be called *doctor*. The/ formality.

PALOMA

Sashaying to Loren, extending both hands.

/Okay, okay. *Loren*.

LOREN

What are you doing?

PALOMA

Vamos, *Loren*. Pickleball es para machos. So, bring your pickle and your balls and come play with Shar.

SHAR

Paloma!

Loren, mildly annoyed, pauses, then turns to Shar.

LOREN

Rondure.

SHAR

What?

PALOMA

¿Que?

LOREN

A pleasing curve. Rondure.

PALOMA

Laughing, tilts and strokes a hip.

Oh, you like my curves, *Loren*?

SHAR

Rondure! Oh, you think you're so damn smart, don't you? That's o-n-d-u-r-e, right?

PALOMA

¡Ay dios! You two are such a cute couple.

LOREN

We're not a couple.

SHAR

You think so?

PALOMA

Yes! I think you are both –

LOREN

Neighbors. Just neighbors. And I do, too, exercise. Six a.m. every morning. I walk.

SHAR

Yes, he does. So early. A speed walker, too. Sometimes he even lets me join him.

LOREN

One time. One time you tried to keep/ up.

PALOMA

/Really? I did not know. Walking is good, pero even better if you jog. Or pickleball! I mean, gets your heart pumping. Your blood pumping. Your chest pumping. I mean *everything*. Pumping, pumping, pumping! Don't you just love pumping?

SHAR

Paloma!

Turning to Loren.

And I did, too, keep up.

PALOMA

Loren?

Off Loren's blank look.

Bueno. Okay. So, no pickleball today. Shar, you want to find another partner?

SHAR

Maybe I can convince Mister Stick-in-the-Mud to play tomorrow.

PALOMA

Hmmph. I still say, you are a cute couple. And you know, the dance contest is coming –

SHAR

Not now, Paloma! Loren has his paper. And I've got this... Really knotty crossword puzzle.

PALOMA

Naughty? A *naughty* crossword puzzle? You hear that, *Loren?! Shar's/ got a –*

SHAR

/Not *naughty!* It's difficult. It's a hard puzzle.

PALOMA

Loren. Did you know Shar likes *hard* puzzles? Okay. *Nos vemos, mis bellos amantes.*

Paloma giggles and dances her way to exit. Then...

LOREN

That woman scares me.

SHAR

I thought it might be romance.

SHAR (CONT.)

Off Loren's confused look.

Seven letters. Begins "r-o" and ends in an "e."

LOREN

But then the clue wouldn't be *pleasing* curve, would it?

SHAR

Well, maybe not a curve, but something pleasing. Something sweet.

LOREN

Oh, romance definitely throws a curve, but it's not necessarily sweet. Maybe, I don't know, uh... A syrupy downward spiral into [some kind of hell].

SHAR

Into *what?! A pit? An abyss? Into hell? Are you really so, so [jaded]?*

LOREN

Annoyed? Disgusted by the –

SHAR

Disgusted?! By romance?!

LOREN

By the transparency. We're not in junior high. And Paloma is so damn... *Obvious.*

SHAR

Paloma's got nothing to do with it. I just thought... I don't know what I thought.

LOREN

You thought I'd work the crossword puzzle with you. Right? Play some pickleball. And then you hoped – don't deny it – hoped you might convince me to enter the dance contest with you.

SHAR

Carnac the Magnificent! And what sweet hell that would be! Dancing with your neighbor.

Shar keeps a stiff upper lip as she starts to leave.

LOREN

Wait! Wait. Uh, look. I don't dance. And pickleball is lame. They play like sissies afraid to hit the ball just... *Just playing for fun.*

SHAR

Why else would you play?

LOREN

Why would you play anything if not to win?

SHAR

Can't help being amused.

Good question.

LOREN

I do like a knotty – a *hard* crossword puzzle. But the rest of it... Sorry. I'm just being honest.

Shar relents, takes seat next to Loren, not too close.

SHAR

Okay. Pickleball, I understand. But what do you mean, you don't dance?

LOREN

Paloma ambushes me every time I'm in here. Tries to recruit me to be your dance partner.

SHAR

She does? I didn't –

LOREN

You can do better.

SHAR

The contest, it's just a silly –

LOREN

Contests are fine. Not talking about the contest... Talking about me... I make a shitty partner.

SHAR

Dancing. It's just for fun.

LOREN

I don't have time for dancing or...

SHAR

What do you mean? What do you have that's so pressing?

LOREN

Or a relationship.

SHAR

God, you're so serious. Who said anything about –

LOREN

Holding up his Wall Street Journal.

Have you seen this? The acquisition. Months in the works. And I'm supposed to be glad I got a severance package. Sons of bitches.

SHAR

Loren, I don't know –

LOREN

If they'd listened to me, we'd have a product on the market by now. I could still be working.

SHAR

Still working? Wait. You're how old?

Pauses but no response.

What happened?

LOREN

Ah. You couldn't possibly [understand]. You. You wouldn't [understand].

SHAR

Two months you've been next door and hardly said a word to me. I'd like for us to be more than neighbors. Friends, I mean. We could be more. More than [neighbors].

LOREN

I don't need a friend. I need my job.

SHAR

Maybe what you need –

LOREN

Have you ever seen how a pride of lions brings down a zebra?

SHAR

Zebra? What are you –

LOREN

A female lion's got the zebra by the throat. It's down. Kicking. Has a crazed, wild look in its eyes as a pack of lions rips into its guts. What's going through that zebra's mind? At that minute? Guts being torn out. Pathetic thing's still alive. What's it thinking? Its final thought?

Beat.

I know exactly what it's thinking! *I was so close! I almost made it! Poor goddamn zebra can't believe it's over. Why? Why did it have to end like this? I wasn't ready! Not for this!*

SHAR

Okay. That's a bit overly dramatic, don't you think?

LOREN

It's real! The difference is, it's all over in minutes for the damn zebra. Probably seems like an eternity, but it's really just minutes, nothing like the months I've been [suffering]. And just like that goddamn zebra, I was so damn close! So. God. Damn. Close.

SHAR

I'm sorry. Close? Close to what? What are you talking about?

LOREN

They killed my project, the clinical trials for a biologic to treat alopecia. Bastards. Cutting costs in anticipation of a merger. After thirty years, they clamped down on my throat. Instead of a Tranvita research scientist, I became a goddamned zebra on the Serengeti plains getting my guts torn out by a pack of lions. And now, I'm... *I'm irrelevant.*

SHAR

Confused. A thoughtful pause.

Alopecia?

LOREN

I wasn't ready.

Beat. Acknowledging Shar's confusion.

Alopecia. Yes. Alopecia. Hair loss. In rabbits.

Pause. Off Shar's continued confusion.

Told you, you wouldn't understand.

SHAR

Sotto voce, mild sarcasm.

And you're not being dramatic?

Genuinely now.

Sorry. I can see this is important to you. But give me some credit.

LOREN

Unsure. Hesitates before continuing.

Rabbits aren't always gentle creatures. Dominant rabbits sometimes bite and chew the fur off another rabbit. Mother rabbits sometimes eat their babies. And –

SHAR

Please! Bunnies aren't monsters. Bunnies are cute. Bunnies are –

LOREN

Animals. Just animals. Like you and me. And sometimes they lose their fur due to a skin condition. But I – my team and I – we were creating a new drug. And we were so close!

SHAR

You're talking... Hair loss. In rabbits... A drug. For hair loss. In rabbits.

LOREN

Right. Who gives a shit about rabbits? But I'll tell you, that project made me relevant. Gave me a reason to [live].

SHAR

I get it. My husband was –

LOREN

Oh, Christ! Your husband was, what? Bald?

SHAR

Always chasing something.

LOREN

I'm not your husband.

SHAR

Distracted. No! The opposite of distracted. Focused. He was. Totally focused on his job. Nothing else was even visible [to him]. He couldn't see what he had. Nothing else had meaning. Your life shouldn't end when you stop working. But for him... When he stopped working, he just/ (*Cont.*)

LOREN

Overlapping.

/I'm not/ (*Cont.*)

SHAR

Overlapping.

/Died.

LOREN

Overlapping.

/Dying. Might feel like it. But not literally. Not really [dying].

SHAR

But are you living?

LOREN

Oh, God. Don't –

SHAR

What about your son?

LOREN

The dropout? The genetic aberration? What about him? Have you even seen my son?

SHAR

In the parking lot once. I think it was him. On a motorcycle.

LOREN

He and that damn motorcycle.

SHAR

Your son is more important than bunny fur! There's your purpose. A son needs his father.

LOREN

My money, you mean. He needs my money.

SHAR

It can be difficult with our kids. I know.

Taking hold of Loren's hand.

But your son –

Shar gasps, startled by Helen who enters carrying a plastic bag. Helen pulls up short and looks on with a stony expression at Shar who holds Loren's hand.

HELEN

Mom? What's going on?

LOREN

I was just leaving.

SHAR

Loren, you don't have to go... Okay... We'll continue our...

Shar's watches Loren leave. Helen stands there, hands on her hips, an expression of reproach.

HELEN

You'll continue your/ what?

SHAR

/Lighten up, Sugar Bug. Damage is done. Might as well have a seat and –

HELEN

Don't call me that! You know I hate –

SHAR

Sugar Bug? Whatever. But I've got to say, *Honey Buns. Sweet Cheeks. Baby Cakes.* You've got good timing. Great goddamn timing.

(SLOWLY CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE)

SCENE TWO

Loren enters his condo, tosses his paper on a table, and turns to close the door. Joe appears wearing jeans, boots, and a tank top. His left arm has a large, raw scab from an abrasion. Joe's demeanor is low key, pensive. Rarely, if ever, does he sound upbeat or get highly animated. He's heartbroken and searching for a connection. Joe's stuttering isn't explicitly indicated in the script and shouldn't be so much that it slows down the scene. There should be at least a couple of instances in the scene, however, in which he stutters very noticeably.

JOE

Hey, Pops.

LOREN

Speak of the devil.

JOE

[*What?*] Uh, I guess. Yeah. In the flesh.

Pauses waiting on Loren.

Ain't gonna invite me in?

Loren waves him in, grabs his newspaper, and takes a seat. Joe, limping slightly, enters, shuts door, and waits awkwardly for acknowledgement. Joe gives a sigh, sits, and gently chides Loren.

JOE (CONT.)

Sure. Take a seat. Good to see ya. Getcha anything?

LOREN

How much this time?

JOE

Aah, shit. Just assume.

Beat. Trying to adopt a cheerful tone.

How ya been, Pops?

LOREN

Got all dressed up to visit, I see. No sleeves, but at least you've got your naval covered.

JOE

Jesus, Pops. Ya know I had to rideshare to get here? All the way from Oconomowoc.

LOREN

Must want me to cough up a really big wad of dough this time.

JOE

This time... Jesus.

LOREN

What's with your arm? What the hell happened?

JOE

An accident... And now my bike needs some repairs.

LOREN

Well, fix it, for God's sake. Still a mechanic, aren't you? Tell me you didn't lose your job.

JOE

God, no. But lucky dint break my neck. Goddamn rabbit.

LOREN

Rabbit? What do you mean?

JOE

Just north a Hartland. Sundown, and my eyes peeled for deer. Dint speck no goddamn rabbit.

LOREN

You hit a rabbit?!

JOE

Rabbit dint do no damage, but threw me off balance. Went off the road, hit a big rock, and –

LOREN

But you hit the rabbit?!

JOE

What's with you and [rabbits]. No. I dint hit the fuckin' rabbit. Do you even hear what I'm –

LOREN

You checked to see –

JOE

The rabbit? Checked on the rabbit? Hell no. I was checkin' myself. Feelin' my arms and legs, make sure I was still alive.

LOREN

Well, you are... Alive, I mean.

JOE

Hurting.

Oh, my God. Good to see you're so relieved.

LOREN

No. I am... I, uh... I am glad... That... That you're not dead.

JOE

Thanks, Pops. I'm glad you're not dead, too... But listen...

LOREN

And here it comes.

JOE

Goddamnit.

Joe rises, wincing, and pulls a wad of bills from a pocket. He slaps the bills down on the coffee table.

JOE (CONT.)

Only two hundred. But I'll have the rest –

LOREN

Wait! *You're. Paying me?*

JOE

Woulda had the whole five hundred I borrowed but – this is what I wanted to tell you – I gotta buy a new front wheel for my bike. Cost more than six hunnerd bucks! Believe that? Anyways, I *had* the five hunnerd I owe you. I did. But now I gotta use some to buy the damn wheel. Anyways, wanted to see, okay I get ya the rest end of the month?

LOREN

Well, uh... You're really paying me back?

JOE

Could I ask one more favor?

LOREN

Grabbing and holding out the wad of bills.

What are you giving me this if you –

JOE

Not money. Keep the money. But... Can I borrow your car?

LOREN

Oh... I don't –

JOE

I need to drive to Milwaukee and pick up the wheel for my bike. Two, three hours, and I'll have your car back. My truck's in the shop next coupla days, and I need to get my bike runnin'.

LOREN

Well, uh...

JOE

What the hell, Pops? Your car. Just a coupla hours. I'll bring it back with a full tank.

LOREN

No. That's fine. I guess. And you don't have to put gas in it.

JOE

Thanks... Also... I was hopin' to...

LOREN

What? That it? You want to borrow the car or not?

JOE

Pause. Disappointed. Resigned.

Uh, yeah. No. Uh, yeah. I guess that's it. If I can get the key, I'll get outta your hair.

Loren tosses set of keys to Joe, but his aim's poor. Joe takes a quick step to catch keys and noticeably favors a leg when he does so. Then he turns to exit.

LOREN

Wait. You hurt your leg, too?

JOE

Yeah. Well. Not bad, but yeah.

LOREN

Joe. Wait. Wait a minute. You don't have to [go]. You can, uh... Stay a while.

Joe looks skeptical, but Loren nods. Joe slowly sits.

LOREN (CONT.)

You go to the hospital?

JOE

No insurance. I'll be fine.

LOREN

Ah.

JOE

What about you? How you doing? Can't believe you moved out here after 30 years in Madison.

LOREN

The new business owners are building a state-of-the-art lab just over on Maritime/ Drive.

JOE

/God's sake, Pops. The ship's sailed. They ain't gonna take ya back. Ya got your severance.

LOREN

I wasn't ready. I wasn't finished! So don't start! You have no idea!

JOE

Yeah. I guess.

A sigh. A pause. Looking around.

Anyways. How ya likin' the place?

LOREN

No maintenance. I like that.

JOE

Makin' any friends?

LOREN

I've met some people.

JOE

Any ladies? Gettin' any action?

LOREN

Everybody plays pickleball. What the hell is it with pickleball?

JOE

Might be a way to make some friends. Guy's gotta get his priorities in order.

LOREN

Right. Like you. Get a friend who might give me a ride or loan me a car so I wouldn't have to –

JOE

Pops, I got lotsa friends.

LOREN

That's why you need to borrow *my* car.

JOE

No. I didn't *need* to [borrow it]. I just...

JOE (CONT.)

Sighs. Pulls out cell phone to view messages.

Look here. Four, five messages from lady friends. Just tuther day, wishin' me a happy birthday.

LOREN

Oh, shit!

Like a punch, the realization hits him hard.

Your birthday. I forgot.

JOE

Aah, that's okay. But just look at these texts. Here's one from Earlene. Another from Melva. She's a pistol. Sherry. Rhonda. Nuther from LuAnn. Givin' me buncha hearts and/ kissy faces.

LOREN

Ignores phone. On rising and exiting to kitchen...

/I never. Before. I never forgot.

JOE

Projecting.

Any a these ladies would a loaned me their car.

LOREN (OFF)

I'm sorry about missing your/ birthday.

JOE

/Forget the birthday. What you're missin' is my point. I got friends who would've –

LOREN

On reentering. Despondent.

I believe you. I guess. But I want you to know –

JOE

Pops. I dint *need* to come. Bunch a guys would a loaned me a car. It was just an excuse –

LOREN

You could have transferred money to me electronically, the way I've been –

JOE

No.

Pause.

Goddamnit.

Earnestly.

What I'm sayin'. I wanted to see you. To tell you...

Pause.

LOREN

Tell me what?

(CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE)

SCENE THREE

Continuing in the clubhouse.

SHAR

Great goddamn timing.

Beat, then indicating the package Helen carries.

Pickleball paddles?

HELEN

Carelessly tossing the bag aside.

For your birthday tomorrow. Sorry I didn't have time to get them wrapped.

SHAR

That's/ okay.

HELEN

/I was thinking I'd take you out to brunch, but now... Well, I don't know what to think. Is he –

SHAR

No! He's just... Just a friend.

HELEN

He was holding your hand.

SHAR

I was holding *his* hand.

HELEN

Mom, what are you –

SHAR

Not like that! Not sexually.

HELEN

Sexually?! Is that guy taking advantage of you?

SHAR

Sotto voce.

God, I wish.

Beat.

Loren. His name is Loren.

HELEN

Don't tell me. He's a wounded bird. What is it with you and your need to nurture?

SHAR

Bite me. I love you, Sugar Bug. I do. But still. Bite me.

HELEN

Bite me?! Really?

Studies dance contest poster a moment before turning.

I know you, Mom. Your life's not complete unless you're taking care of someone. Why do you think you and I are so... Why our relationship is so [fucked up]?

SHAR

Affectionate? So warm? So loving? You're too kind, Sugar Bug, to give me all the credit for our... Our *incomparable* mother-daughter relationship.

HELEN

I'm not needy! And *that's* the/ problem.

SHAR

/Oh, you're needy all right. But can't allow yourself to be/ vulnerable.

HELEN

/You're only happy when there's some co-dependency going on. So, tell me, what's got you holding hands with this guy? He's needy, right?

SHAR

God, no. Anything but. Independent as hell. Educated. A professional. *Doctor* Loren Holmes. He's a research scientist at Tranvita. Was. A pharmacologist.

HELEN

Oh, great. So, he's into drugs.

SHAR

Cracking up.

Only from the mind of an assistant DA. Oh, yeah, Ms. Prosecutor. He knows all about drugs.

Shar stands, quashes her giggles, gets in Helen's face, and does her best to adopt a gangbanger persona. It's a valiant effort, but more comical than authentically badass. Helen is aghast.

SHAR (CONT.)

Whatchu thank, Sistah? My homey – that mofo – he be my dealer! Aight? A real mad hatter, yo. Aight? Y'all come bouncin' in here all hard. Getting' up in my face right when my homey be palming a snowball, yo! That sweet, sweet dragon. Aight? Gots ta get me my cotton candy. Ride the magic carpet. Y'all best be watchin' yer yams, ya don't get kissed by my homey, yo.

HELEN

What the hell was that?

SHAR

Sitting and taking great pleasure in Helen's shock.

Pretty good, huh?

HELEN

Sitting, leaning in, concerned.

Who *are* you? I don't even –

SHAR

Take it easy. Just having some fun. If you'd let your guard down sometimes, maybe we could have some fun. Together, I mean.

Pauses, still amused, then continues teasing.

That bit there, my riffing... Inspired by... Have you seen the *Testiclops* series on Saturday nights? On HBO? About the drug dealer who got shot and now has just one testicle? It's –

HELEN

Mom!

SHAR

I mean, it's scripted but the authenticity of the language is –

HELEN

Mom!

SHAR

Losing a testicle to a gunshot. Got to hurt, right? That's how he became a dealer.

HELEN

You make light of everything, but –

SHAR

At the time he got shot, he was a cop. *Then* he got hooked on pain killers. Are you following this? It's important. Such irony! *He was busting a drug dealer when he got his ball shot off.*

HELEN

That?! That is what's important?

SHAR

Well, maybe not to you, but think about it from the guy's perspective. Yeah, it's important because after a scrotum injury, guy couldn't be a cop anymore. Guess it must be hard to sit in a patrol car all day with one only one ball. Maybe it throws a guy off balance.

HELEN

Goddamnit, Mom, will you listen to me? The world's a dangerous place.

SHAR

What I'm saying. Guy goes to work one day, a happy fellow with two balls, and next thing you know, he's turned into Testiclops by a bullet to the nut sack. *It is* a dangerous world.

HELEN

Oh, my God.

Deep breath, recovering composure.

Is it wrong I worry about you? Are you sure this *pharmacologist* isn't a scammer? Or worse?

SHAR

Make up your mind. Con artist? Drug dealer? Sexual deviant? Maybe you think he's all three.

HELEN

Remember Niko Watanabe, from high school?

SHAR

Real cute. Short girl, right? A cheerleader.

HELEN

Smart, too. Degree from Stanford. Inherited a small fortune from her parents. And you want to talk irony? Niko worked at a bank where they're supposed to be experts on financial scams.

SHAR

Well, if she got scammed, maybe she wasn't all that smart.

HELEN

No, see, that's the problem. These scammers are sophisticated. They know how to bypass your logic, your ability to reason. They prey on your emotions. Let's face it, Mom, you aren't always the most [rational].

SHAR

Most what? Quick-witted? Bright? Perceptive? You think I'm irrational? Dimwit? Senile?

HELEN

No. That's not what –

SHAR

I'm caring. Maybe I am a hopeless romantic. Doesn't make me gullible.

HELEN

I'm not... I didn't say... Mom. You know I care.

SHAR

You care. Do you hear yourself? Now *you're* the caregiver? The kettle calling the pot...

HELEN

Just want to protect you! That's all. I'm trying to protect you because there are monsters out there. Right now, I'm dealing with a monster who scammed and hurt women just like you.

The pain is palpable.

It's too terrible to even talk about.

SHAR

I'm sorry Sugar Bug, but Loren's not a scammer. Maybe I'm the one manipulating him.

Paloma enters, unnoticed, and hangs back listening.

HELEN

Okay. There's no winning with you.

SHAR

Winning! Yes! Like someone else I know. It's all about winning with you, isn't it? Your case. Get the verdict. Maximum sentence. Why you can never let your guard down. Why you're so hard. Battle-hardened from being constantly in a fight. But I'll tell you, Sugar Bug, life isn't about winning. It's about living.

HELEN

Oh, my God. *Life's. About. Living.* So profound.

SHAR

Yes. Living!

HELEN

Life is a bitch, and I'm just trying to –

SHAR

I know. Life *can* be a bitch, but it *is* about living. Putting yourself out there. Taking risks. Meeting new people. Learning.

PALOMA

And dancing! And singing! *¡La vida! ¡Bailando! ¡Cantando!*

Startled, Shar and Helen stare wide-eyed as Paloma dances up and takes a seat to join them.

PALOMA (CONT.)

¡Mujeres! ¿Qué pasa?

(CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE)

SCENE FOUR

Continuing in Loren's condo.

LOREN

Tell me what?

JOE

Look. Bunch a guys. *My friends*. My birthday. Havin' a good time at Topsy McDougal's and –

LOREN

Totally slipped my/ mind.

JOE

/We're just havin' our first round. Guys treatin' me. But then my buddy, Boyd – you don't know him. But he gets this text, and next thing I'm followin' him to the hospital cause his ol' man's circlin' the drain.

Standing. Getting emotional.

And I watched Boyd, big ol' son of a bitch biker dude. Real tough guy. Arm rasslin' champ. This big ol' guy just comes apart there while his ol' man's takin' his last breath. Boyd. Just a bawlin' like a baby. And I just kinda. Well, I felt...

LOREN

No. I get it. It's sad.

JOE

Jealous. I felt jealous.

LOREN

Jealous? Jealous of a guy who's losing his father.

This second punch hits him even harder.

Oh, God. *What are you saying?*

JOE

Jealous a what they had. Boyd and his ol' man. Yeah. I was sad, too. Watchin' Boyd and Maynard, his ol' man. Guy used to come watch our softball games. But now, I dint even recognize him. All shriveled up, like there was nothin' left of him. Boyd kinda shrunk up, too.

Beat. Barely keeping it together.

Boyd. Bawlin' his eyes out while his ol' man's slippin' away. And I got to thinkin'... Well, I jumped back on my bike, and I just had a ride. Clear my head.

LOREN

Choking a bit.

Jealous? That's what you [felt]? You. Were jealous.

JOE

Anyways, I don't gotta tell ya all this, but... Uh...

LOREN

What?

JOE

After. It kinda got to me. Then. After. I'm on my bike headin' home, and that goddamn rabbit. And tell the truth, when I went off the road and hit that big ol' rock, and I'm flyin' ass over tea kettle, I figgered. This is it. *I'm gonna be the one layin' tits up on a slab. Not you.*

LOREN

Not... *What? Not me? What the hell's that mean?*

JOE

Well, that's what I was thinkin'. Watchin' Boyd's ol' man. Maynard. Slippin' away. Thinkin', what if it was *you* layin' there takin' your last breath? But then. Instead. *I* went ass over tea kettle, and it was *me* layin' on *my* back, side a the road. And I couldn't move. Not at first anyways. And I'm wonderin' if someone's gonna find me off the side a the road 'fore I croak.

LOREN

But somebody did. Find you.

JOE

Guy in a Ford truck, yeah. Found me. But before that. I was. I was wonderin' what you'd... If I... It was me? Tits up on a slab. How would you [react]? What would you [think]?

LOREN

You're my son.

JOE

Yeah. Good answer. I know I'm a disappointment for ya.

LOREN

What I mean –

JOE

I never! Never! I never *wanted* to die. My, my whole life, never much/ thought on it.

LOREN

/What do you mean, wanted to die?

JOE

Sprawled out there on side a the road, I kept thinkin' on it. How I *dint* wanna die and how I gotta see my Pops again. I dint go to the hospital, but Rhonda came over. Put me in a bath. Bandaged me up. Had some powerful fuckin' pain pills. Kinda knocked me out for a while.

JOE (CONT.)

When I woke up, my thinkin' had flipped thinkin' 'bout wantin' to live. Musta been the pills got me thinkin': *What the hell am I doin'?* And would anyone really – I mean really – would anyone give more 'n two shits about it? If I was dead?

LOREN

Of course, they would!

JOE

Yeah. Kinda figgered that out, but not 'fore them pills fucked me up. Comin' down off them pills, I was layin' there thinkin'. Fuck. This. What's the point? Point a livin'?

LOREN

Oh, my God. *Joe!*

JOE

Sitting again, leaning in.

Let me ask ya. What is it keeps a guy wantin' t' live? Is it the chasin'? Or the gittin'?

LOREN

I don't [understand]. You're talking nonsense.

JOE

Ya never even been to see me, Pops. To my place. Not once.

LOREN

Groaning with the painful truth.

It's just that... I don't... I know. I don't really/ have an excuse.

JOE

/Just a shitty doublewide. But I got a 16-point buck mounted on a wall. On tuther, I got a 55-inch muskie. Twenty-five years I chased 'em. And holy shit. Last year, I got 'em both. For a guy like me, I figger it don't get no better. I done the chasin', and the chasin' made life intrestin'. But I tell ya, now that I done the gittin', life ain't so intrestin'. Not no more. Comin' down off them pain pills. I thought. Ain't much point to livin'.

LOREN

Oh, Son. Life's about more than chasing deer and fish.

JOE

Yeah. And more than chasin' rabbit pelts.

LOREN

You think that's [what I'm doing]? No! That's not what I'm doing. I'm searching for a cure –

JOE

Yeah, yeah. A drug. Whatever.

Beat.

You and I are so goddamn [different]. I'm not sure we're really even related. But I –

LOREN

What's that supposed to mean?!

JOE

Don't sweat it, Pops. Them pills didn't mess me up forever. I admit. I had a spell thinkin' to put a gun in my mouth but –

LOREN

Oh, my God!

JOE

Take it easy, Pops. Ain't gonna do it cause I got thinkin' 'bout my friends. Like I tol' ya, I do got friends. Guy friends. Lady friends. Ain't like they gonna name a bridge for me when I do go tits up. But my buddies, they'll ride their Harleys to my funeral. Raise their glass to me in the bar. Tell stories 'bout me ever once in a while. And maybe that's not such a bad life to have. After them pills worked their way outta my system, I thought. I'm gonna live. Hell yes. Life ain't never perfect, but with friends, ain't so bad neither.

LOREN

Of course not.

JOE

I don't really feel a connection with ya, Pops. Not like Boyd and Maynard. So maybe I got no right to say it.

Joe stands as Loren, distraught, sinks to a seat.

JOE (CONT.)

But, Pops, ya ain't got no trophies on your walls. No rabbit pelt. Or whatever it is ya been chasin'. And, Pops. For you. Huntin' season's over.

Loren, unnerved, unable to find words to respond.

JOE (CONT.)

I'm sayin', it's good to be chasin' somethin'. But if ya can't be chasin' somethin', least ya got to get some friends.

LOREN

It's not about chasing. It's about having a purpose. Goals. You wouldn't understand.

JOE

What's difference 'tween chasin' and goals? Twenty-five years a my chasing trophies don't mean nuthin' to you. But thing is, I got friends *and* I got goals. Leastwise, I had 'em.

LOREN

Okay, but it's not – they're not the same thing.

JOE

I'm alive cuz I got friends. Best a guy has goals *and* friends. But leastwise, a guy's got to have one or tuther. I mean, it's best a guy's got both a his balls. But if a guy's only got one a his balls, he's still a guy. Right? But I ain't sure a guy with no balls is still a guy.

LOREN

You're saying, [what]?

JOE

Sayin' a guy chasin' somethin' and who's got friends – real friends – is whole. Might be a guy can get by with less, but Pops, ya ain't got neither far as I can tell. So, if ya can't keep chasin' somethin', I hope you find a friend 'fore ya find yourself tits up on a slab.

The third punch hits Loren between the eyes. He tries but fails to say something as lights fade and we...

(SLOWLY CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE)

SCENE FIVE

In the clubhouse, the tension is thick as Shar and Helen stare at each other. Paloma, the third wheel, fails to read the room, as is her custom.

SHAR

So, I guess we're *not* going to brunch.

PALOMA

Yes! Let's do brunch! What about Daily Baking?

SHAR

Their fig walnut bread is to/ die for.

PALOMA

¡Ay, de higo con nueces! ¡Delicioso! ¡Mmwah! ¡Fantástico!

HELEN

We were having a conversation/ here.

PALOMA

/But we have to order in. Make it a delivery order.

HELEN

We? What are you [doing]?! We are *not* having food delivered!

PALOMA

Bueno, pero I don't have much time for a lunch break. And Saturday morning, hay mucha congestión. It will be crowded.

HELEN

Oh, my God. Who do you think [you are]? *Who are you?* And *really?* You're supposed to be working? Right now? *This* is your work? Butting in on a private/ conversation?

SHAR

/Be nice. Paloma is our activities coordinator. She does/ a good job.

PALOMA

/It's okay. She must have got her father's personality. I am happy/ to call in our order.

HELEN

Oh, my God! Don't you dare talk about my father! I loved my father! Who's your manager? Your boss?

SHAR

You don't have to. She's just leaving. Aren't you, Paloma?

PALOMA

Ay, no! I'm sorry! I didn't mean. I just meant. You don't seem anything like. Uh, I mean, related to. Your mother, I mean. You're just. I mean, you're different than. *¡Ay Dios!*

HELEN

Standing to leave.

Well, you're right about that. I'm nothing like my mother.

PALOMA

I am trying to be more... More sensitive. Really. I am. I, I just thought the brunch would be nice.

SHAR

Show her your report, Dearie. And your certificate.

Paloma dashes to her office.

SHAR (CONT.)

I know she can be abrupt.

HELEN

Abrupt?! More than abrupt. She's meddlesome. And presumptuous. And intrusive. And –

SHAR

She means well.

Paloma returns with a report and framed certificate.
She hands the certificate to Helen.

HELEN

What's this?

PALOMA

Well, the thing is that I got fired from my last three jobs.

HELEN

Oh, really? Imagine that. But what's/ this?

PALOMA

/I am a dancer.

SHAR

Listen to her, Sugar Bug.

PALOMA

Ay, por favor. Do not tell my boss. She will, fire my ass. Ay, Dios. One more incident, she said...

HELEN

Referring to framed certificate, finds it amusing.

What? She doesn't know you're a... An intermediate level dance instructor?

SHAR

Don't be condescending! You were raised better!

PALOMA

I am going to be a choreographer.

Paloma does an elaborate, over-the-top dance move. Helen gives a wag of the head, a dismissive grin, and tries to return the framed certificate to Paloma who ignores her. Shar takes it. Helen starts to leave but is stopped by Paloma's insistence.

PALOMA (CONT.)

Por favor! My last gig did not go so well, and the theatre brought in some kind of psychologist to, well, you know... And they didn't want to fire me right away because I'm, well, I mean. *Look at me...* So, I –

HELEN

What do you mean your gig didn't go so well?

SHAR

It's okay, Dearie. You can tell her.

PALOMA

One of the other dancers tried. To kill me.

HELEN

Kill you?!

SHAR

But more than one. It was *several* others.

PALOMA

Yes, but only one of them. Darla, the bitch. The puta. She wrapped a leotard around my neck to strangle me. The others just –

HELEN

Mother of God!

SHAR

They ganged up! The other dancers ganged up and attacked her/ after –

PALOMA

After rehearsal when they didn't like my... My, uh...

SHAR

Commentary.

HELEN

Commentary. Uh huh. On what did you comment?

PALOMA

Oh. Well. I told one of the other dancers that when she danced The Snap... I told her when she danced The Snap, she looked like a... A *babuino*. A baboon.

HELEN

Oh, oh, no.

PALOMA

Fucking a banana tree. Looked like a baboon fucking a banana tree.

Now, Helen really cracks up.

SHAR

She took offense.

HELEN

Did she? Can't imagine.

PALOMA

But now I know. Some people just can not handle honest feedback.

SHAR

And Paloma was justified when she... Well, she defended herself.

PALOMA

I know it was insensitive, but you don't strangle someone just because of some honest feedback.

HELEN

Defended herself?

PALOMA

I broke the perra's nose! I mean, what would you do some *puta* [chokes you]?

Paloma dramatically mimes being strangled.

SHAR

It was totally justified.

HELEN

Oh, no doubt. And did she press charges?

PALOMA

Well, Darla... An ambulance took her to the hospital. And everyone's like all, *Ooooh, the pooooor, poor girl*. She didn't get in any trouble for trying to kill me. None of the girls got in trouble. Do you believe it? But they got some *comemierda* to make a psych evaluation.

Now reading from the report.

Dance ability is not an issue. Paloma has mad dance skills.

Looking up from the report.

But I'm not just legs! I've got lungs, too! Can blow off the backdoor from your front yard. But the *pendejo* says nothing about my singing.

Momentarily bursting into boisterous song and dance.

Y arriba y arriba

Arriba y arriba, y arriba iré

Por ti seré, por ti seré

Bamba, bamba, bamba, bamba

Bamba, bamba, bam-bam

Abruptly stops, bows, continues.

You see?

Back to the report.

Dance ability is not an issue. Paloma has mad dance skills. The issue is her lack of personal sensitivity and empathy. Unless Paloma modifies her behavior to improve her emotional intelligence –

Looking back to Helen.

¿Ya vez? This is the part that is so... AAAARGH!

SHAR

She wants to choreograph, and that means working with other people.

PALOMA

Exactly! But...

Returning to the report.

Unless Paloma significantly modifies her behavior to improve her emotional intelligence, *she will only be effective in solo dance work.*

Looking to Helen.

You know what solo dance work means? *It means dancing with a pole!* Or not dancing at all.

SHAR

She's working hard for this, Sugar Bug. Give her a break.

PALOMA

Aside.

Coño emotional intelligence.

HELEN.

Sounds like you could have been charged with a crime. Probably should have been. You weren't, were you?

SHAR

God! Why does your mind go there? What's important is she wasn't hurt!

HELEN

Right. That, too. Congratulations on surviving a leotard lynching and still being able to dance.

SHAR

Oh, that move just now, that was nothing. You should see her bust a move when –

PALOMA

Y tu mama can dance, too! I'm coaching her for the contest.

SHAR

She's a great teacher!

PALOMA

Oh! We should find you a partner! You can compete with Mamacita and Dr. Holmes!

HELEN

The pharmacologist?

SHAR

Well, that's not really/ decided.

PALOMA

Niña, son un sexy couple. Cute!

HELEN

Really? A sexy couple. Uh huh.

SHAR

Oh, she doesn't mean –

PALOMA

¡Oh, por supuesto! ¡El doctor guapo y la mamacita bella! ¡Tan sexy!

HELEN

Well. Okay, then. That's what I [thought].

HELEN (CONT.)

Gives a wag of the head, a sad sigh, and stands.

What I thought. And now I need to get going. Bye, Mother. Enjoy your brunch.

Helen exits. Awkward pause. Shar sighs.

PALOMA

Oh no. Did I [say something wrong]?

SHAR

Don't worry about it. You were right, you know, about her getting her father's personality.

PALOMA

Una nerviosa. Your daughter. I mean, your daughter is, eh, how do you say it? Strung up.

SHAR

High strung?

PALOMA

No se, pero sí, es obvio.

SHAR

Her father was uptight, too. Could never let himself relax, and Helen's got that –

PALOMA

Como una puta en la iglesia.

SHAR

No. Not really. Not like a whore in church. More like. Maybe more like a nun in a strip club.

Paloma studies the paddles that Helen had brought.

PALOMA

Your new paddle? You bought two.

SHAR

In case Loren ever wants to play. Helen bought them for my birthday. I suggested – no – I *told her* to buy them for my birthday.

PALOMA

¡Excelente! ¡Feliz cumpleaños mi amiga! How do you feel about... You still want brunch?

SHAR

That's okay. I think I'll head home. Have a bagel.

Joe enters, a slight limp, his scabbed arm oozing. He's annoyed by Helen who follows trying to support him. Paloma and Shar leap to their feet.

JOE

I'm okay. I'm okay.

HELEN

But your arm! And you're limping!

SHAR

Oh, my God! What happened?

Paloma grabs paper towels from coffee station for Joe's arm.

PALOMA

¡Ay chico! ¿Qué te pasó?!

JOE

No. This was from before. Just broke open the scab. Fuckin' rabbit.

HELEN

What?

JOE

Pops is gonna be pissed.

HELEN

I didn't see you. I'm so sorry.

SHAR

Helen?

JOE

He loves that car. It's vintage.

HELEN

I didn't see/ him.

JOE

/Rabbit GTI model. Built in Pennsylvania in 1984. He loves that damn Rabbit.

SHAR

A car accident?

JOE

Goddamn collector's item. It's 'bout old as me.

PALOMA

Looking out the window.

¡Ay dios!

JOE

You see it? This thing he's got for rabbits. Even his car.

HELEN

We should get you to the hospital. You may need stitches.

JOE

Naw. It's nuthin'. Jes a little blood. 'Sides, ya can't stitch up a scrape.

Looking at bloody paper towel stuck to his arm.

See? Bleedin's already stoppin'.

SHAR

How'd this happen?

HELEN

I was backing out and didn't see him.

SHAR

You're him! You're Loren's son!

HELEN

The pharmacologist?

JOE

You know Pops?

PALOMA

Señor Sexy Pants!

Uncomfortable pause. Helen glares.

JOE

Well, look. I-I'd better go tell Pops. Driver's side's all caved in.

HELEN

Pulling cellphone from a pocket.

Please sit down. Let's make sure you're okay before I call my insurance.

PALOMA

And I will get a bandage for that arm.

JOE

I'm fine, but Pops is gonna be –

HELEN

Please.

Helen sits, then Shar and Paloma also take a seat.
Joe regards them for a moment then reluctantly sits.

JOE

Least your car's still drivable. But I've got to –

HELEN

I've got insurance, so don't worry about [it]. It was my fault.

JOE

Yeah. No. But I gotta talk to Pops, then call for a rideshare.

HELEN

Oh, I can give you a ride.

JOE

No. I gotta get to Milwaukee 'fore noon.

HELEN

No problem. I'm glad to give you a ride. Just let me make a call first.

SHAR

And maybe I can break the news. Tell Loren...

(SLOW CROSSFADE TO NEXT SCENE)