

The Opposite of Flight

A Play in One Act

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CHARACTERS

CASSIE A cerebral middle-aged woman who has grown eccentric by being the only audience to her thoughts for too long; she is pretty, although she does not inhabit her body with pride.

LEO The elderly father of CASSIE, still strong and intimidating.

SETTING

CASSIE'S small home, which is comfortable and decorated with unusual art and personal relics. It is clean but not tidy and located in a space that feels in between the mountains and the desert.

TIME

The present.

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AT RISE

CASSIE is putting away groceries in the kitchen, stops abruptly, and moves toward LEO in the living room. LEO pauses his reading of the weekend newspaper on the couch in the adjoined living room. They both look up at the (fourth) wall toward the audience, toward the source of an unknown disturbance.

CASSIE

(a little loudly so LEO can hear)

I can see what you mean, Dad. I didn't quite realize how active he was in the afternoon. Little workaholic.

LEO

See what I mean?

CASSIE

I do.

LEO

I told you Thursday to call someone.

CASSIE

You did.

(returns to the groceries in the kitchen; quietly, but not exactly to herself)

Maybe he just needs to carve out some personal space before settling down.

LEO

I can't hear you.

CASSIE

(returning to volume)

I was just thinking that he could very well settle down soon and we could all live together, relatively peacefully. It's not an unlikelihood.

LEO

Relative to what? Living in an ice machine?

CASSIE

Very funny.

LEO

I'm not being funny. You're not here when the thing really gets going around late morning. Like driving nails through each thought I think. And my hearing has not been great lately, so that's saying something.

CASSIE

(moves out of the kitchen again)

Okay, well, we can do something about that. We can certainly do something about that.

LEO

That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you since I got here.

CASSIE

I meant your hearing, Dad. We can do something about your hearing.

LEO

Oh.

(beat)

Or how 'bout we send that cat of yours on a mission? He'll be our Ambassador of Relative Peace.

CASSIE

I don't have a cat anymore.

LEO

Too bad. Capable creatures.

(LEO resumes reading the newspaper and CASSIE returns to the kitchen. After a short period of silence, the subject of their discussion is revealed in a rapid, loud knocking. It is the sound of a woodpecker building a hole for a nest on the outside wall of CASSIE's house.)

(LEO fiddles with the newspaper and sighs loudly.)

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(CASSIE returns again from the kitchen
to sit next to LEO.)

CASSIE

Driving home from work the other day, on the radio they reported on a man who ran from the police after robbing a liquor store. The police chased him down the interstate and into Munds Park and he hid out in someone's shed for a while until he was caught. When they arrested him, he was charged with "unlawful flight."

(Laughs - CASSIE is tickled by this
phrase.)

I wonder if our feathered friend here has ever been charged with such a crime. Or imagine: If he keeps going and ends up pecking a hole through this wall, he could be guilty of breaking and entering. *But*, if he injures that beak of his, we could be liable for his personal injuries. Then we might have to *unlawfully fly* to someone's shed in Munds Park!

LEO

Why not robbery or larceny?

CASSIE

What?

LEO

If a man robbed a liquor store, why wasn't he charged with robbery or larceny?

CASSIE

Oh, well, I imagine -

LEO

You live in a strange town.

CASSIE

I'm sure he was, Dad. I just didn't find that as funny as "unlawful flight."

(beat)

I'm sure he was.

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LEO

You still live in a strange town.

CASSIE

So do you now.

LEO

Listen to this:

(reading a headline from the newspaper)

"Freak Bolt of Lightning Hits Roof and Two Trees Causing Damage to West Parkline Property." Freak is right.

(pointing to the wall with the bird)

Anything around here not cause damage to personal property?

CASSIE

(lower volume so LEO can't hear,
and getting up to return to
the kitchen)

I guess not. I've settled in a menacing nest of lightning storms - a land of wicked birds with no respect for private property. When you stop to think about it, making it through the day around here is the real act of God.

LEO

I can't hear you.

CASSIE

(retuning to volume)

Nothing, Dad.

(The bird picks up the pace. LEO returns to the newspaper briefly, then folds it and puts it on a nearby surface.)

LEO

Before your mother died we had some contractors come out and give estimates for building a deck out back, you know. Nothing major. A place to sit.

CASSIE

I didn't know. Sounds lovely.

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LEO

Yeah, maybe. Even with a project of that modest size you need a permit. You need a damn permit for everything. I'll likely need a permit before I get fed up and throw rocks at our new friend here.

CASSIE

You wouldn't.

LEO

I would if this were my house. Day before yesterday I would have. But it's not my house.

CASSIE

You are nothing if not consistent. And while I forbid you to go outside and throw rocks at this bird, you should know that just because this is my house, doesn't mean it's "my house my rules."

LEO

That's exactly what it means.

CASSIE

But that's not how I want things to be.

LEO

And I will listen to your wants because it is your house.

CASSIE

But -

LEO

You're in a corner, Dear. And I don't want to rock the boat, but you've always had a bit of trouble with the concept.

CASSIE

No. No, my house will not be a place that is governed. Not even by me.

LEO

Doesn't work that way. You can't curse the ground you stand on. Well, you can, I guess. But to go on and act like just because you cursed it that you're somehow walking around without it is nonsense to the idiot degree. But there's plenty of company for you to join if that's your position.

(LEO gestures to the newspaper)

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CASSIE

Jesus. I just want you to feel at home. I just want you to feel at home without throwing rocks at birds.

LEO

I'm not home. So I don't feel at home. And I probably never will.

(beat)

And you don't need to call me Jesus. I've always been fine with "Dad" or "Father."

CASSIE

(sighs)

Yeah, I remember.

LEO

I noticed you threw a bottle of ketchup in the trash that still had some in it.

CASSIE

What?

LEO

You threw a perfectly good bottle of ketchup away.

CASSIE

I did not. I wouldn't do that.

LEO

I wouldn't make it up.

CASSIE

It was empty, Dad. I know you like ketchup. The bottle was empty so I threw it away. And look: I got a new one at the store today.

(CASSIE raises in the air the
New bottle of ketchup.)

LEO

It wasn't empty. I saw ketchup in it.

CASSIE

Christ!

LEO

What is with all the cursing?

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CASSIE

How are we going to do this, Dad?

LEO

Do what?

CASSIE

(rummaging through trash)

I just - I just don't know how we're going to do this. When did I throw that away? I remember that I - here! Here, I found it.

(holding up the old bottle
of ketchup)

It's empty. It just looks like there's some left. There's some ketchup coating the side right here so it appears one way; it appears like there's ketchup left. But it's empty. Christ, it's empty.

LEO

That's fine. I'm fine with that. It's only a bottle of ketchup.

CASSIE

That's exactly what it is. It's only a bottle of ketchup.

LEO

So we agree then.

CASSIE

I have no idea.

LEO

Of course we do. We agree that it's only a bottle of ketchup. We disagree about throwing rocks at home invaders, but we agree that it is the owner of the home's decision whether or not to do so. We agree sixty-six percent of the time with a little left over. Something to grow on.

CASSIE

What if I disagree with that? The sixty-six percent?

LEO

Sixty-six percent with a little left over.

CASSIE

In my house, percentages are not allowed, especially those with leftovers. It's not an effective way to communicate.

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LEO

And dictates are?

CASSIE

I learned from the best.

LEO

Oh, I see. I also taught you how to be reasonable, though you wouldn't know it by listening to you now.

CASSIE

You're the one who had me digging through the trash. Not exactly a marker of reasonable behavior.

LEO

You did that on your own.

CASSIE

Because you needed proof! An honest answer from someone who has absolutely no reason to lie about ketchup isn't good enough. Why is that?

LEO

Reasonable people prefer evidence.

CASSIE

I thought it was just ketchup?

LEO

And I thought you wanted me to feel at home here?

(The bird really *really* picks up the pace. CASSIE sits down in the kitchen. CASSIE and LEO sit and listen to the noise.)

LEO

Before your mother died -

CASSIE

I know she's dead, Dad.

LEO

What does that mean?

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CASSIE

It means that if you tell a story about Mom, I know it happened before she died. It's not something I've forgotten.

LEO

Nor I.

(LEO supports himself up off
the couch.)

But you can forget I said anything.

(LEO exits.)

CASSIE

(CASSIE leaves the kitchen and
goes over to where LEO was sitting
on the couch. She leans over the
newspaper, picks it up, and peruses
the headlines.)

(reading from the newspaper)

"Plans for New Arts Center Still a Work in Progress. Ranch Road
Exit Reopened to One Lane after Semi Rollover. Elite Volleyball
Team Looking for Fourth National Title. The Week's Most
Adoptable Animals."

(CASSIE sighs, folds the newspaper,
and sets it aside.)

(speaking to the bird wall)

The week Mom died I still went in to work. Partly because I
didn't know how to communicate my projects to a coworker, and
partly because I didn't want to be here alone. Mostly, I didn't
want to hear my dad describe what happened, like an engineer
analyzing a failed bridge.

(light bird knocking)

The walk to my office is lovely. There's a big courtyard with
old pine trees, and most mornings the ravens are hopping around
on the grass looking for goodies. They're huge. Much bigger than
you. They look fat almost and so greasy in the sunlight.

(light bird knocking)

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Yes, I do like ravens. They're fat and greasy but very smart. I almost get the feeling they remember me - not fondly or anything. But that they're keeping track, very closely, on who goes where around the courtyard.

(beat)

Anyway. I walk on the perimeter of the courtyard, on a paved path to my building, and I watch the ravens too, so they don't think they're the only ones keeping track of things. And when I reach my building, as I'm about to pull open one of the heavy double doors, I look up. I don't know why. I don't think I usually do. But this day I did.

(light bird knocking)

When I look up, I see a raven on the roof, on the very edge of the roof looking down at me. The building is only three stories, so I can see him clearly, but he's still very much up there. And I hesitate for a moment, but not for too long, and when I do finally reach for the handle of one of the heavy double doors, the raven lets loose a collection of dried leaves he was holding in his beak.

(light bird knocking)

The leaves fall on me as I enter the building. If the goal was getting leaves in my hair and on my shoulders, the timing was perfect.

(light bird knocking)

Like that. Exactly.

(LEO enters slowly and stops halfway.)

LEO

Are you talking to yourself? Who are you talking to?

CASSIE

Yes. I don't know. There's no one here if that's what you're asking.

LEO

Do you do that often?

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CASSIE

I'm not sure. There usually isn't anyone around to remark on it. Probably not often.

LEO

Probably occasionally?

CASSIE

Probably.

LEO

That's good.

CASSIE

You don't mean that.

LEO

I do in that occasionally is better than often.

CASSIE

What if I do it a lot?

LEO

(enters completely and sits
next to CASSIE on the couch.)

Well, then I probably wouldn't say "that's good."

CASSIE

How are we going to do this?

LEO

Do what?

CASSIE

The two of us. Here.

LEO

Probably differently from when it's just you. I'm sorry for that.

CASSIE

It's not your fault.

(moderate bird knocking)

LEO

That's not the impression I received earlier.

(light bird knocking)

CASSIE

Tell me what you were going to tell me. "Before Mom died..."

LEO

It's nothing.

CASSIE

Tell me anyway.

LEO

(beat)

Before your mother died, when I was trying to find someone to build a deck without a damn permit, she was obsessed with getting the rabbits out of her garden. I helped her install chicken wire underground, which was not easy. We walked Miguel around the garden at least once a day, although those rabbits must have smelled that he was toothless. What a guard dog.

(light bird knocking)

Anyway, chicken wire, Miguel, these pellet things that are supposed to smell like a rabbit's natural predators. None of it worked. I told your mother that we were out of options and that she might as well open the whole thing up as a bunny buffet.

(light bird knocking)

Well I came home one day, and she was strutting around like she was the first to split the atom. Pleased as punch that for the past three nights there was no sign of rabbits in the garden. I asked her what had happened, and she didn't say anything. She took my hand and led me outside to the big oak tree where this god awful electronic owl hung from a branch, presiding over the garden.

(light bird knocking)

It looked like it was part kite and part Halloween decoration. Ugly as hell. But it worked. Your mother was so proud. Just delighted by this damn thing.

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CASSIE

That is a good story.

LEO

Well, it's true. She was so satisfied. Anyway, I was thinking that when we decide to finally clean out the garage, we should keep an eye out for it, as much as I'd love to never have to see it again. Maybe it'll scare away Woody Woodpecker.

(light bird knocking)

CASSIE

Oh.

LEO

Scare him away without hurting him.

CASSIE

Oh.

LEO

Isn't that what you want?

CASSIE

A raven showered me with dried leaves when Mom died.

LEO

What?

CASSIE

A raven was on the roof. And he dropped dried leaves on me the day after Mom died.

LEO

Where?

CASSIE

Walking into work.

LEO

Is that what you were talking to no one about?

CASSIE

Yes.

LEO

You should have told me instead.

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CASSIE

I'll try to remember next time.

(moderate bird knocking)

(Pause)

LEO

You know we can't live like this.

CASSIE

I know.

LEO

We can make it better, but I need your help.

CASSIE

Okay.

(light bird knocking)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT)