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THE BEST WOMAN

By Gary Earl Ross

Characters

DR. NEA GILCHRIST, Republican Vice President of the United States, black, late 50s.

AMANDA DEAN STYLES, Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, white, late 50s.

TONI BURNETT, aide to Styles, former student of Gilchrist, black or white, about 35.

DR. VERNON LARK, advisor to Vice President Gilchrist, white, early 60s.

MALCOLM MICHEAUX, CNN News anchor, debate panelist, black, about 50.

RACHEL PERLMAN, *New York Times* reporter, panelist, white, about 50.

DR. ZORA QUICK, director of the American Council of Intercultural Concerns, debate moderator, black, mid-50s.

*REV. ROB PATTERSON (voice only), of TV's Resurrection Club, Southern, 70.

*DR. JENNIFER STYLES (voice only), daughter of Amanda Styles, a surgical resident.

Act One

Scene 1

(Brief sound of snare drums. Lights rise on a stage that has been set up for a political debate. Upstage center is a table with three chairs. On either side of the table, at a forty-five degree angle, is a lectern with American flag bunting. The Stars and Stripes also festoon the wall behind the table. The stage right lectern bears a sign that reads, "Vice President Gilchrist." The stage left lectern reads, "Senator Styles." Downstage right, as close as possible to the edge of the stage and in darkness during the debate hall scenes, is a small make-up table and chair, with a lighted frame representing a mirror. The mirror is positioned so the actor looking into it is gazing out at the audience. A matching table and chair are downstage left. TONI BURNETT, in dark pantsuit, enters from stage left, crosses to center stage, and turns, taking in the whole. Presently, VERNON LARK, heavysset and dressed in a suit, enters from stage right and watches TONI sigh with nervous excitement.)

LARK

Another case of history—

TONI

(Starting and turning.)

Oh, I—

LARK

—stitching itself into the fabric of democracy.

TONI

I didn't see you there.

LARK

Or is that democracy stenciling itself onto the pages of history?
(Crossing to shake her hand.)

We haven't exactly met yet. I'm Vernon Lark.

TONI

Everyone knows you, Dr. Lark. Your charm precedes you.

LARK

Nobody knows me, Miss Burnett. Courtesy of the turkey vultures we call the press, they just think they do.

TONI

Everybody gets unflattering publicity.

LARK

Darth Vernon? Come to the Lark side?

TONI

I guess that's about as unflattering it gets.

LARK

You know . . . Do you have children, Miss Burnett?

TONI

No, sir. I've never been married.

LARK

Kids worship you when they're little. Then they mutate into sarcastic masses of hormones convinced you know nothing. Finally, as adults, they collect every editorial cartoon and internet joke you inspire and make a framed collage for Father's Day.

TONI

Ouch.

LARK

The longer you work for the Senator, the more sympathy you'll have for an old dinosaur like me. The press'll see to that every time they label you, libel you, or pick through your trash.

TONI

I must remember to be careful.

LARK

Always take the time to get to know your . . . opponents, in the press or across the aisle. That's the kind of political survival strategy I bet you won't find in the curriculum at Northwestern.

TONI

Sound advice. Oddly paternal coming from a man who has no children.

LARK

So you knew all along I was shining you on about the fecklessness of youth.

TONI

Just as you already knew my marital status and my alma mater.

LARK

I never actually said I had children.

TONI

No, you wanted me to draw a conclusion that disarmed me. Next you'll say your wife can't have children—true, but your purpose will be to weaken me with my own maternal longings.

LARK

(Chuckling.)

You're *good*, little lady. What would it take to bring you over to our camp?

TONI

Come to the Lark side?

LARK

The Vice President could use a mind like yours.

TONI

She had her chance when I was her student at Northwestern. Gave me my only C after fourth grade, but I'm sure you know that already. My thinking was too liberal. I'm afraid it still is.

LARK

And Senator Styles is your friend. Has been since you went to Washington as an aide for her husband. There's even talk she's grooming you for a congressional run.

TONI

Your information gathering is impressive.

LARK

So is your loyalty.

TONI

Mine pales compared to yours for Sam Houston Bullard. A conservative do-nothing governor of modest intellect, and you took him to the White House twice. Now you're hoping for a hat trick with his Vice President.

LARK

May the best woman win.

TONI

If we're lucky.

LARK

Luck's got nothing to do with it. It's all in the strategic planning.

TONI

Your strategies are infamous. Governor Locksley—

LARK

—is a fine Republican. Whatever misunderstanding the press highlighted eight years ago has long since been settled.

TONI

Misunderstanding? Pollsters called registered Republicans all over the South to ask how they would feel if Locksley had a biracial gay son.

LARK

Independent pollsters ask the damndest questions, don't they?

TONI

It wasn't a question. It was vicious innuendo that ended Locksley's shot at the White House.

LARK

As far as I know, no one actually *said* the governor had a gay mulatto son.

TONI

The child they adopted was only eleven.

LARK

Once again, *independent* pollsters ask the damndest questions. Too bad they're *independent* and can't be controlled by either party. As for Governor Locksley, he had lunch with the President just last week, and there wasn't a whisper of discord between them.

TONI

And I suppose you had nothing to do with Veterans Against Senator Charles, either.

LARK

VASCO was independent too, men who challenged the basis for the senator's medals.

TONI

Senator Charles has a Medal of Honor. Half the idiots in VASCO never went to Vietnam.

LARK

One needn't have seen combat to be a patriot.

TONI

Something Sam Bullard can vouch for, having vanished during his National Guard duty.

LARK

Now we all know he was working on a family friend's gubernatorial campaign. In any case, *President* Bullard won re-election and *Senator* Charles still serves the people of New York. After November Massachusetts will still have Senator Styles . . . until maybe you replace her.

TONI

We're ready for you, Dr. Lark. Dirty tricks, whisper campaigns, borderline slander. It won't work with Senator Styles.

LARK

You're a pistol, all right.

(Smiling and shaking his head as TONI moves away.)

This is gonna be an exciting campaign. And starting tonight, you, young lady, are about to get a real education.

(Back to him, TONI looks up to think about his

promise.

ZORA QUICK, dignified in speech and bearing and

clad

In muted colors, enters and crosses to shake

hands.)

ZORA

Dr. Lark, good to see you again.

LARK

Dr. Quick. And this is Miss Burnett, the Senator's aide.

TONI

Dr. Quick, I'm a great admirer of yours, of all your work—

ZORA

Why, thank you. On behalf of the League of Women Voters and the ACIC, welcome to Atlanta and to the third annual ACIC Convention.

TONI

Thank *you*. Senator Styles is happy to be here.

LARK

And Vice President Gilchrist is delighted to be back in her home state.

ZORA

I can't tell you how thrilled we all are to host the first debate in the most exciting election in U.S. history. Polls change by the hour. The pundits are talking in circles.

LARK

All bets are off. This may be the purest presidential election ever.

TONI

(Looking at LARK.)

Democracy stenciling itself onto the pages of history.

ZORA

And there's been a last minute journalistic substitution. The *Wall Street Journal* traded its place to the *New York Times*.

(This last line catches their attention.)

TONI

Rachel Perlman?

ZORA

When she was released this week, everyone seemed to think assigning her to the debate was good for media morale.

LARK

The other reporter still Malcolm Micheaux of CNN?

ZORA

Yes.

LARK

Then I'm afraid I'll have to lodge a complaint. Both are known for their liberal bias.

TONI

I would have thought terms like liberal and conservative meant nothing in the purest election ever.

LARK

(Fixing her with his gaze.)

Not everyone has a good time with Malcolm Micheaux.

(TONI flashes a look of annoyance.)

LARK

My last interview with that son of a—

ZORA

Dr. Lark.

(After a pause.)

There's nothing you can do about the panel now. It's not a liberal or conservative issue.

Micheaux and Perlman are both respected members of the fourth estate.

(LARK sighs, visibly distressed at being cut off.)

TONI

How will the endorsement decision be reached?

ZORA

Of course, the League is neutral. The ACIC executive committee will make a recommendation to the general membership, which will debate it. Then there'll be a vote. They can endorse either candidate.

LARK

Or even Oscar Meade.

ZORA

True, Dr. Lark, but unlikely. In the last two elections Mr. Meade got less than one percent of the popular vote. ACIC does not view his candidacy as viable.

LARK

Less than one percent? Funny, but I thought Meade's run helped elect Bullard the first time.

TONI

(Ignoring LARK.)

When will the endorsement be made public?

ZORA

Immediately. It would be impossible to keep a secret *that* big. So, is everything to the candidates' liking? The placement of the podiums and the press table? The dressing rooms?

TONI

Fine. Everything's fine.

(LARK nods.)

ZORA

Good. If it's convenient, I'd like to come backstage to welcome each candidate personally. First, the Vice President, then the Senator. Dr. Lark, if you have no objection. . .

LARK

Of course.

(LARK leads ZORA off stage right. TONI exits left.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on the left “dressing room.” AMANDA STYLES, in stylish suit, sits at the table with a stack of files and an open take-out salad box. She turns as TONI appears behind her.)

AMANDA

Is everything ready on the stage?

TONI

Yes, Senator.

(AMANDA studies TONI a moment.)

AMANDA

What’s the matter, Toni?

TONI

I just met Vernon Lark.

AMANDA

(Smiling.)

Oh. Hobnobbing with the prince of darkness, eh? That explains the smell of sulfur in the air.

(Turns back to the mirror and fiddles with her hair. as she glances down at the file open before her.)

TONI

He’s got something he’s going to spring. I can feel it.

AMANDA

Not that godless lesbian shit again. How many times do I have to answer that one?

(Turning; as if answering interview questions.)

Yes, Camille Bernosky and I spent many nights together. She was my roommate at Wellesley. No, I didn’t know she was a lesbian. In fact, at that point *she* didn’t know she was a lesbian. At least that’s what she says in her book. While I’m flattered she says I’m the one that got away, even she admits there was never anything romantic between us. All we shared were dreams. Now she writes bestsellers and I’m running for the House. We’ve both outdone ourselves.

TONI

You mean you’re running for the presidency.

AMANDA

What did I say? The Senate?

(TONI shakes her head.)

AMANDA

I said the House? The goddamned *House*?

(TONI nods.)

AMANDA

That's how long I've been facing this nonsense, since my first House campaign fifteen years ago. When my opponent tried to make an issue of it, I said anyone who hadn't spent a night discussing dreams with a friend didn't have enough imagination to represent *any* part of Massachusetts.

TONI

And the voters agreed with you.

AMANDA

Every time I run, Cammy sells more books. I ought to charge her a publicity fee.

TONI

Maybe being single makes Nea less likely to bring up Camille. I think Lark has something else in the back of his boxers. And given his usual pandering to the Bible Belt—

AMANDA

If not gay sex, straight sex. Lie about a blow job, you get impeached. Lie to start a war, you get re-elected. Candidate fitness always comes down to sex, doesn't it?

TONI

I'm afraid so. If you're not married you can't appear to . . . do it.

AMANDA

Like Nea, ever the chaste minister's daughter.

TONI

The only men she's seen alone with are White House staffers and the President himself.

AMANDA

It's been nine years since Brendan's plane crashed. I can't play the grieving widow forever.

TONI

The public prefers you that way. All political widows. That's why Coretta Scott King never remarried, why Jackie Kennedy was pilloried when she did.

AMANDA

I don't plan to remarry . . . but a woman does have her needs.

(Turning away from the mirror to face TONI.)

Toni, sometimes I worry about *your* dating habits. No one ever seems to last very long and—

TONI

Senator, I would never do anything to embarrass you.

AMANDA

(Waving dismissively.)

Never crossed my mind. But you're young—kind of a second daughter to me, if you'll permit me a moment of mothering. And, yes, I've said these same things to Jen.

(Pausing to gather her words.)

You're a strong woman, Toni, and ambitious. That's good. You remind me of myself when I was your age. But even if you do run for the House, eventually you may want more than the 24/7 D.C. grind. You may want a family, a separate kind of peace. I did. I understand.

(Looks back into the mirror.)

You may not be satisfied with state dinners and Kennedy Center galas—with men who have tinted limo windows and private entrances to their homes. Men who never kiss and tell because they have as much to lose as you do.

TONI

Tonight isn't about me, Senator. It's about you, about how the American public sees you.

(Moving behind her.)

Just promise me you'll be careful.

(Embracing her.)

Please.

AMANDA

What did old Darth Vernon say to you?

TONI

(Stepping back.)

He said tonight I was going to get a real education.

(They freeze.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise in the opposite dressing room. NEA GILCHRIST, in suit and fashionable knee-length boots, sits looking up at ZORA. NEA's table too is laden with files. LARK stands to one side.)

LARK

Madame Vice President, I think what the good doctor is saying is that the ACIC is most concerned about family values.

ZORA

(To LARK.)

Not just sex and violence on television, Dr. Lark, or the rising number of single mothers.

(To NEA.)

Family values must include things like health insurance for the fifty million who don't have it and jobs that pay livable wages so families can thrive. And—

LARK

Republicans agree, which is why the platform continues the President's policy of Sustainable Sympathy. Money for social programs—

NEA

(Gently.)

Vernon, I'm sure Dr. Quick would prefer that we hear what *she* has to say.

LARK

Of course.

(Smiling at ZORA.)

Forgive me but sometimes my zeal gets the better of me.

(LARK and ZORA lock eyes for an instant. Then he breaks eye contact and sits in the nearest chair. He crosses his arms.)

NEA

You were speaking of helping families thrive.

ZORA

(Turning back to NEA.)

Yes. We recognize also that families take many forms, not just the traditional nuclear option.

NEA

If memory serves, that part of your mission was controversial among some of your members.

ZORA

Controversial, yes, but eventually accepted for the greater good.

NEA

No doubt your energetic leadership had something to do with that.

ZORA

(With practiced ease.)

Leadership is everything. Good or bad, CEO or head of state, the leader always sets the tone.

NEA

Indeed.

(Standing, extending her hand.)

Well, I know you still have to see the Senator, Dr. Quick. As always, it's been a pleasure.

ZORA

(Taking her hand.)

The pleasure was mine, Madame Vice President. Dr. Lark.

(Smiling, LARK nods, and ZORA exits. His smile disappears when she is gone. He rises, begins to pace.)

LARK

I don't trust that woman.

NEA

(Opening a folder and scanning.)

You don't trust anybody.

LARK

(Stopping, facing NEA.)

This business with Micheaux and Perlman really burns my ass. It's meant to embarrass you.

NEA

(Not looking at him as she leafs through a file.)

The media are independent, Vernon. We agreed to the ground rules weeks ago.

LARK

Much as I dislike him, it's not even Micheaux that galls me here. It's Perlman. Six months in stir and she comes out a rock star. She's liable to get more attention than either one of you.

NEA

I'll be sure to praise freedom of the press and smile.

LARK

I think Quick is setting you up.

NEA

A doctor *and* a lawyer, founder of the most influential grass roots organization in a generation, and you think she's setting me up. Either party chairman would gift wrap a lung for her.

(Holds out a paper to him.)

Look, these are the latest achievement results for elementary students. Fourth grade test scores are on the rise, but sixth graders have leveled off and eighth graders have fallen behind.

LARK

If it comes up, scores are on the rise, period. The fact-checkers won't say otherwise until tomorrow morning, on public television and NPR, when no one is paying attention. Look, Quick used to be a Democrat.

NEA

I used to be a Democrat—until that bungling peanut farmer abandoned our embassy hostages.

LARK

But nobody ever compared *you* to Barbara Jordan. When you left, you became a Republican. Quick disappeared into private practice and came back later as Jesse Jackson with breasts.

NEA

That's not how she dances on the national stage.

LARK

I know. But behind all that neutrality bullshit she's a liberal and she's dangerous.

NEA

(Holding up another piece of paper.)

No more dangerous than these trade deficit statistics. Don't we make *anything* anymore?

LARK

With all due respect, the stakes here are higher than the downside of free trade agreements.

NEA

Enough about Quick, Vernon. I know *exactly* what's at stake. And I know, too, that if Morris Kindle hadn't resigned after his heart attack, I wouldn't be here.

LARK

Now that's not true, Nea. It was your time. As Secretary of State you were a good bet for the big desk, even if the VP hadn't quit. He was on record anyway as not wanting to run.

NEA

If fewer dark faces had been on TV after the hurricanes, that idiot Cliff Crocker would be vice president and I'd still be posing for pictures with thugs who call themselves heads of state. The party wasn't quite ready for a black female. It took a serious arm-twisting from the

ZORA (continuing)

President to get me nominated on the third ballot, and I still had to accept Crocker as my running mate.

LARK

It took the Democrats three ballots to nominate Styles.

NEA

Which means neither party was as ready as they thought to nominate a woman.

(After a pause, sighs.)

Oscar Meade may well have the best ever showing of a third party candidate.

LARK

Not if tonight you kick your opponent's ass all the way back to Boston.

NEA

I know I have to win.

LARK

Not win, *triumph*. The people want a president who's tough and decisive, merciless when need be. That's why they elected Bullard. They knew he wasn't afraid to throw a punch.

NEA

Maybe I should just cross the stage and clock Styles in the jaw.

LARK

Yes . . . metaphorically. You have to look tough enough to play with the big boys. You've already faced world leaders without the safety of a senate committee. Styles has to prove herself tonight to have half a chance.

NEA

That's not what the polls say.

LARK

(Beginning to exit.)

Remind me to tell you sometime how useful polls can be when they're analyzed properly.

NEA

Merciless, huh?

LARK

(Stopping and turning back to her.)

The moment will come, Nea. You'll know it when it does. Just don't hesitate to strike.

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(Lights rise in the opposite dressing room.
AMANDA and ZORA sit facing each other.)

ZORA

Well, the people I see in my medical and legal clinics are poorly served by traditional liberalism. It's not just a matter of creating programs and throwing money at problems. Hands-on involvement goes a lot farther than bread crumbs shot out of a cannon.

AMANDA

You mean something other than lugging brooms and paint cans into the ghetto, '60s style.

ZORA

And going home afterward. Yes. Disenfranchised people don't need someone to clean up their neighborhoods. They need to feel connected enough to the surrounding community to clean up their own neighborhoods.

AMANDA

Connected how?

ZORA

Take job training programs. They're useless if no public transportation goes where the jobs are. The jobs *themselves* are useless if the pay is so poor workers still qualify for public assistance.

AMANDA

Exactly. That's why we need to raise the minimum wage and cut small business taxes. We need universal health care and increased mass transit funding. After the Bullard administration's fiscal irresponsibility and cronyism—

ZORA

I'm sorry, Senator. I'm sorry. I just wanted to explain a few ACIC positions. You don't need to make your case to me.

AMANDA

Of course.

ZORA

(Standing and extending her hand, which AMANDA takes.)

Thank you, Senator Styles, for your time. I'll see you shortly.

AMANDA

Thank *you*, Dr. Quick.

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

(Lights rise on the debate area. In a suit, MALCOLM MICHEAUX enters from stage right, crossing upstage center to the panel table. He carries a file full of papers, which he flips through. TONI enters from stage left. MALCOLM faces her. For a moment, neither speaks. As the next conversation unfolds, they move toward each other and away, then toward each other again.)

I was hoping I'd see you tonight.	MALCOLM
How have you been, Malcolm?	TONI
Fine but busy.	MALCOLM
I imagine you must be. Congratulations on being named anchor.	TONI
That's old news now, but thank you.	MALCOLM
I would've called but—	TONI
But you didn't. You never returned any of my calls.	MALCOLM
Malcolm . . .	TONI
It's okay, Toni. I understand. It was never supposed to be more than it was, and I guess I started getting too . . .	MALCOLM
Attached?	TONI
Sure. Let's call it that.	MALCOLM

TONI

It's just that now is not a good time for me to get serious with anyone. The election and all.

MALCOLM

I said I understood. It was a fling. A hook-up between the Senator's aide and a reporter covering the primaries.

TONI

You're not just any reporter. You're Malcolm Micheaux, a legend with a long history of—

MALCOLM

Stop. You're making me feel old.

TONI

Your age was never a problem for me.

MALCOLM

I've got grown children from both marriages. Sticking with me, you could be a grandmother before you're a mother.

(TONI laughs, and MALCOLM follows suit.)

MALCOLM

So, how is the Senator?

TONI

Getting ready to undo eight years of Sam Bullard, though it may take longer than two terms.

MALCOLM

Bullard didn't do it alone. He had help—from all the President's monkeys and the Democrats who never even tried to put them on a leash.

TONI

Isn't that the tone you usually reserve for Republicans?

MALCOLM

Invading Qaraq for the October 10th attacks was like invading Costa Rica for Pearl Harbor. But a whole lot of Democrats went along for the ride.

TONI

(Momentarily looking away.)

Like a lot of Americans, Senator Styles was concerned a dictator like Hamdi Siddiq could have weapons of mass destruction. She changed her position when the lie became apparent.

MALCOLM

She listened to a self-cured boozer on a mission from God. The lie should have been apparent when he moved his lips.

TONI

Sometimes the President gets the benefit of the doubt just because he's the President.

MALCOLM

Even a spoiled frat brat with a record of ruining every business he ever touched?
(Moving upstage a bit to half sit on the table edge.)
Democrats have wimped out for years. Now they act like nominating Styles proves they've grown enough spine to sit up in the wheelchair. They'll need more than that to walk again.

TONI

What choice is there? Gilchrist? She listens to the same nutjobs as Bullard, like Reverend Rob Patterson. Black or not, she owes her fame and fortune to the neocons. She'll just continue their agenda. How long did it take them to bounce back from failed hurricane relief and make gay marriage the number one issue again?

MALCOLM

Yes, they're hypocritical thugs and I despise them, but your guys' hands must be numb from being sat on for so long. No, they're not as bad as the Republicans—

(A cell phone chirps. TONI produces one, opens it.)

MALCOLM

—but *you* have to know that being the lesser of two evils is just not enough.

TONI

(Holding up a finger to MALCOLM.)

Toni Burnett. Yes. Oh really? When? All right. I'll be there in a minute.

(She clicks off and puts her phone away.)

Mal, I know experience has made you cynical about politicians, but whatever you think of the Democrats, at least Amanda's a chance for a new beginning.

MALCOLM

I hope so, Toni. I really do. And I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go on like that. Sometimes I . . .

TONI

I admire the passion. It's just that I talk politics around the clock. One of the things I liked about being with you was that we didn't talk politics.

MALCOLM

As I recall, we didn't talk much about anything . . . once the door was closed.

TONI

No, but you did bring that same passion into bed. And the shower. And my office.

(Moves to him, fingers the lapel on his jacket.)

Look, I didn't call you because I was afraid you were getting in too deep, that you'd want something I couldn't give you.

(LARK enters, stops to look at them.)

TONI

When the election is over, if you feel like giving me a call, if we can keep things breezy . . .

(Moves to kiss MALCOLM but she notices LARK. She stops.)

I've got to pick something up out front. It was . . . it was nice to see you again.

MALCOLM

Very nice, Toni.

(TONI exits right. MALCOLM turns to see LARK.)

LARK

Charming girl. A good person but a bit naïve, don't you think?

(MALCOLM glares at him.)

LARK

That's the trouble with ambitious young girls. They're so easily drawn to older men they see as heroes. They never see the flaws until it's too late.

MALCOLM

(Moving to the panel table and opening his folder.)

You're a real piece of shit, Lark.

LARK

(Smiling as MALCOLM leafs through pages.)

I know.

(LARK goes downstage. As he speaks his next line, RACHEL PERLMAN, in a colorful but modest suit, enters from stage right and passes behind LARK.)

MALCOLM greets her with a hug and pulls out her chair. She sits.)

LARK

Crowd's gathering outside the door, Micheaux. It'll soon be show time.

(Turns around.)

And the lovely Rachel Perlman is right on cue.

RACHEL

Flattery, Vernon, from you?

MALCOLM

No doubt there's an angle.

LARK

I'm glad to see you looking so well, Miss Perlman, so radiant . . . after your ordeal.

RACHEL

No worse for the wear.

LARK

A radiance no doubt born of standing on principle.

MALCOLM

An idea foreign to some of us.

LARK

(Moving back upstage and stopping in the center.)

On the contrary, my liberal friend. Principle drives me. Everything I do is rooted in principle.

MALCOLM

What principle? Power for the sake of power? When you controlled all three branches you squandered your power by preaching fear and practicing scandal. It cost you Congress.

LARK

We'll get the Congress back this November. We want to put America back on the right track.

MALCOLM

As far right as possible. You couldn't spell compromise with a dictionary and a magnifying glass.

LARK

Compromise is overrated, especially where the well-being of the nation is concerned.

MALCOLM

You think the nation's well-being is served by Bullard's assault on the middle class?

RACHEL

Boys . . .

LARK

The economy's been healthy under Bullard, with thousands of new jobs created every month.

RACHEL

Boys . . .

MALCOLM

Right. All those displaced factory workers just love it under the Golden Arches.

RACHEL

Quiet, both of you!

(For a heartbeat LARK and MALCOLM face each other, speechless. Then both look at RACHEL.)

RACHEL

In case you haven't noticed, neither of you is running. The next president will be a woman, thank God, not some schmuck who'll start a war because he's scared his twinky looks too small in the international locker room.

LARK

Miss Perlman, such crudity.

RACHEL

Don't go dragging out your offended Christian values, Vernon. We both know their limits.

(LARK turns away and moves downstage a bit as MALCOLM takes a step toward RACHEL.)

MALCOLM

Rachel, I've got to take care of something before airtime. I'll be back.

(Exits stage right.)

(LARK moves back upstage toward RACHEL.)

LARK

If it matters, I was . . . concerned . . . the whole time you were away.

RACHEL

You didn't think I could handle advances in the shower?

LARK

I was worried about you, Rachel.

RACHEL

I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, but you weren't worried enough to release me from my pledge of confidentiality.

LARK

My position was precarious.

RACHEL

I'll say. Because of you the VP's chief of staff resigned and got a plea deal for Club Fed—lucky bastard. Of course, the big question is, was Vice President Kindle himself involved? That heart attack was certainly convenient.

LARK

You could've traded me for freedom any time instead of waiting for the grand jury to expire.

RACHEL

Trust me, I thought about it every time somebody blew me a kiss. What about you though? You brought down the VP. What principle made you betray one of your own?

LARK

Off the record?

RACHEL

Kindle's old news. This is curiosity.

LARK

He was a major liability to the party, especially after the mid-term election losses.

(Moving away as he explains.)

They had this subtle good cop, bad cop routine. Bullard was the good old boy who'd give you his last beer. Kindle was the cold CEO who'd set you adrift on an ice floe. That shtick works only when the good cop undercuts the fear inspired by the bad cop.

RACHEL

(Putting the puzzle together.)

The party desperately wanted to keep the White House, and they needed a fall guy for the war.

(LARK begins to nod.)

RACHEL

Who better than the party's scariest face. Ease him out under a cloud of suspicion and let innuendo run its course.

LARK

His chief of staff did tamper with intelligence data.

RACHEL

And who better to replace him than a classy Secretary of State.

(LARK smiles and spreads his arms, palms up.)

RACHEL

And you used me to do it.

LARK

You'll probably win a Pulitzer.

RACHEL

If I do, I'll give it back.

LARK

You can't without explaining, and all this is off the record.

RACHEL

Do you believe in anything, Vernon, or is everything just part of a God-sized chess game?

(LARK says nothing and turns away from her.)

RACHEL

When I met you, you were a brilliant professor, the voice of modern conservatism. You were controversial but charming. Before I knew it—

LARK

It was a youthful indiscretion.

RACHEL

A youthful indiscretion? You were forty-two, Vernon. The first time we did it was on your desk, with your Bible in one corner and your wife's picture in the other. You were forty-two.

LARK

It was wrong, Rachel, a mistake.

RACHEL

Then why keep calling to tip me off to good stories all these years?

LARK

(Turning to face her.)

Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.

RACHEL

(Laughing and shaking her head as she sits.)

You never leave home without your bumper stickers, do you? Same old Vernon. You've always loved screwing the media, and nobody does it better.

(Blackout.)

Scene 6

(Lights rise on the debate area. RACHEL is still seated, looking at note cards. MALCOLM enters from stage left, crosses to the table and slips a paper into his folder.)

MALCOLM

Sound check in a couple minutes. It's just about time to get this freak show started, though how we pick our presidents may give freak shows a bad name.

(When she says nothing he studies her a moment.)

You're kind of quiet.

RACHEL

Just thinking. Wondering if I wasted the past six months.

MALCOLM

(Sitting beside her.)

Maximum security *was* overkill. That judge—

RACHEL

That's not it. I mean, prison was hard, and I'm learning to enjoy the little things again, like a cup of tea whenever I want. But that's not what's got me thinking . . . Maybe it's the job itself. I've been doing it for so long, maybe it's time I got out.

MALCOLM

Take a leave and jump on one of those book offers. And there's always television. It beats waiting in line for tables.

RACHEL

I'm not sure I'd want any of that. I'm kind of an old-fashioned newshound.

MALCOLM

A dying breed.

RACHEL

Yeah, because people don't want to be informed anymore, except about movie stars and American idols.

MALCOLM

They don't, but even if nobody's listening, *somebody* has to say the Emperor is running around buck naked and paying for a war on MasterCard.

(Places his hand over hers.)

And somebody needed to show how easy it was to hijack intelligence to start that war.

You're a hero, Rachel, not just for doing time and protecting your source, but for exposing those bastards. And I'd rather be here with you than Peter Corey from the *Journal*. He's so gung-ho about the war I think he sleeps with Bullard's pom-poms.

RACHEL

(Laughing and placing her hand over his.)

Thank you.

MALCOLM

(After a moment, releasing her hands.)

Anyway, tonight you've come to the right circus. The first presidential debate between women, and you're a part of it.

RACHEL

Nobody ever remembers who asked the questions at these things.

MALCOLM

They will tonight.

(Pause as RACHEL looks at him.)

I mean, this has to be the first debate with an ex-con on the panel.

RACHEL

Ex-con, ex-wife, ex-Washington bureau chief. I guess the only way I *can* go is up.

(MALCOLM laughs.)

RACHEL

Go ahead and laugh, but you're the one sandwiched between an ex-con and a civilian.

MALCOLM

A civilian with enough juice to get her convention chosen as a debate site.

RACHEL

I hear she paid the application fee out of her own pocket, all \$7,500.

MALCOLM

Wouldn't surprise me. I like Zora, and so do the Republicans. They've been courting her like a hall monitor with a hard-on. They don't understand the prom queen they've given that sad little flower is out of their league.

RACHEL

And the slackers on the other side are so late to the party they can't imagine she might go home with someone else.

(Pause.)

My editor once said the last real visionary the Democrats had was Brendan Styles.

MALCOLM

Ever meet him?

RACHEL

(Looking wistful.)

Once at a party. Smart, engaging, tall—and that smile. My God, what a good-looking man! I'm sorry I never got to . . . interview him.

MALCOLM

I did, several times. He wasn't afraid to take chances and there was something reassuring about his fearlessness.

RACHEL

Bullard is fearless.

(Pauses as MALCOLM reacts.)

He won't admit to making mistakes.

MALCOLM

That's not fearless. That's stupid. Styles was nothing like Bullard. He wasn't afraid to say he was wrong.

(Shaking his head sadly.)

If he hadn't cashed in his chips like that . . .

RACHEL

She would never have gone to the Senate. What do you think of her?

MALCOLM

She's not her husband. I don't think she has his gift for compromise. And just between us, neither does Nea Gilchrist. Any child of the Deep South who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement should be outraged at some of the crap her party shovels.

RACHEL

Are you saying she's not black enough?

MALCOLM

No. Her parents sheltered her from the ugliness as much as they could. I'm saying their good intentions deprived her of a deeper social conscience.

RACHEL

So whichever way we go, the country is screwed.

MALCOLM

(Shrugging.)

In the absence of hope, make history.

RACHEL

Who said that? John Wilkes Booth?

(ZORA enters, wearing an earpiece.)

ZORA

I just want to say how honored I am to be on this panel with you both. I'll do my best not to embarrass you.

(Touches her earpiece.)

I haven't been this nervous since my first day of med school.

RACHEL

Zora, both these women desperately want to be president. Believe me, your toughest job will be getting them to shut up when you call time.

ZORA

Yes, and I have to remember not to make faces when the people in the booth tell me something in this earpiece.

MALCOLM

(Gesturing her toward her seat.)

I'm sure you'll be fine.

(She sits.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 7

(Lights rise on NEA's dressing room. NEA is seated, reading. LARK enters and hands NEA a cell phone. She looks at the caller ID and winces.)

NEA

(Cradling her head.)

Reverend Patterson, sorry if I kept you waiting.

PATTERSON (voice over)

Now, that's all right, Madame Vice President. Running the country is busy work. I can't expect you to drop everything to take a call from a poor country preacher. Sometimes the President takes two or three days to get back to me.

NEA

(With forced cheerfulness.)

Today I was expecting you, sir. Vernon said you might call before airtime.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

I just wanted to wish you good luck and God's blessing on tonight's debate. We here at *The Resurrection Club* will be watching and praying for you.

NEA

That's very kind of you, sir. I appreciate your support.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

We give it freely, in our determination to keep the country on the moral path carved out by President Bullard. The Court is on the verge of burying abortion in a grave so deep it can never climb out again, and more school districts are rejecting Darwin for Intelligent Design.

(NEA sighs visibly but not audibly.)

PATTERSON (v.o.)

More states are blocking sodomite marriages even before sick new laws can be proposed. My congratulations to your running mate for getting the Log Cabin Republicans thrown out of the party.

NEA

I'll pass that on to Senator Crocker when I speak with him later tonight.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

If they want to be gay, they should just be Democrats.

(Hesitating, clearing his throat.)

Not that God doesn't love them, too—or Democrats. Hate the sin, not the sinner, I always say.

NEA

A private sin is not so prejudicial as a public indecency.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

I beg your pardon.

NEA

Something my father used to say—from *Don Quixote*.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

Can't say I've read it, but I know you were named for somebody in that book.

NEA

Yes, Dulcinea. The imagined lady of—

PATTERSON (v.o.)

And I hear tell you carry your father's Bible with you everywhere you go.

NEA

Yes, sir. It's all I have left of him. It keeps me centered.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

From what I've read of him, he was a good man, your father. I would have liked to meet him.

NEA

I'm sure he would have enjoyed knowing *you*, Reverend Patterson.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

Yes . . . well . . . In any case, we've made great strides on the home front under President Bullard. We've even spread the message of Christian-style freedom overseas to Qaraq and its neighbors without having to bomb Mecca. Christians have a lot of faith in you, Nea, as our last best hope to keep America on the path God wants.

NEA

The . . . Christian community can rest assured that I will do my very best.

PATTERSON (v.o.)

Will you pray with me, Madame Vice President?

NEA

Yes, sir.

(Grimacing, NEA lowers her head, freezes. Brief

blackout. Then NEA closes her phone, and LARK enters.)

LARK

And how is Reverend Rob tonight?

NEA

Give me a minute.

LARK

Did he renew his call to bomb Mecca? Or did God channel him for some other purpose?

NEA

The man's crazy, Vernon. Cancer is the French president's divine punishment for not supporting our war. Terror attacks mean God hates feminists. People like him used to be presidential assassins, not presidential advisors.

LARK

Sure he's crazy, but you can't afford to ignore him in a tight race. He can deliver votes. Do you know how many people watch *The Resurrection Club*?

NEA

I don't care. It's a wonder Sam could stand him all these years.

LARK

The President is a practical man.

NEA

Patterson is odious, and frankly, I'm offended by what he says. I was raised by Christian parents who'd find it blasphemous the way he trivializes God as the ultimate micromanager.

LARK

We've had this discussion before.

NEA

My father used to say, "Nea, you don't have to be like everybody else. In fact, you don't have to be like *anybody* else."

LARK

And you're not.

NEA

When I was a Democrat I was expected to be like every other black professional. "Tell me, Nea, what does black America want?" It was the same on campus. "Nea, will you run the black film festival?" "Nea, the Black Student Union needs a faculty advisor." I became a Republican so I could be seen for myself, not another slave on the Democrat plantation.

LARK

Nea—

NEA

But people like Reverend Rob make me wonder whether I've traded my place in the field for an unheated shack in the Republican gulag.

LARK

You need him.

NEA

Conservatives have a message but how can smarter voters hear it when headline whores like Patterson keep jumping in front of the message with proclamations from God?

LARK

Forget about smarter voters. They're in the minority. You don't want people to *think* about what you say. You want a majority to vote for you so you can *do* what you say.

NEA

So that's what our democracy has become, a line dance with morons.

LARK

No, Nea, a line dance *for* morons. The average voter doesn't understand a tenth of what the President and Congress face every day and wouldn't care if he did. He wants his street paved and crime-free. He wants his trash picked up, his house heated, and a guarantee that his big-screen TV will be delivered in time for the Super Bowl. His idea of a practical foreign policy is a full gas tank and no attacks on U.S. soil. The freedom he cherishes most is the freedom not to read, not to think, not to worry about the rest of the world.

NEA

I knew you were a cynic, Vernon, but I never imagined you held the American people in such contempt.

LARK

It's not contempt. It's reality.

NEA

(Takes one last look in the mirror and stands.)

What reality?

LARK

The American people have surrendered themselves to our custody. They want to be led, and for the good of all, someone has to step up and lead.

(NEA picks up an old Bible from the make-up table and briefly looks at it before kissing it and setting it down.)

(Blackout.)

Scene 8

(Lights rise in AMANDA's dressing room. AMANDA is seated, holding her phone. She punches buttons.)

AMANDA

Hello. I'd like to speak with Dr. Jennifer Styles, if she's available. This is her mother calling.

(She waits a moment.)

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Mom?

AMANDA

Hi, sweetheart. Hope I haven't caught you at a bad time.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

I'm glad you called. I planned to call to wish you luck but I just got out of surgery and thought I'd be cutting it close.

AMANDA

Cutting it close. Is that doctor humor?

JENNIFER (v.o.)

No. Doctor humor is the joke I tell the nervous patient to make him ignore the two Secret Service agents in the room.

AMANDA

Jen, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you through all this.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

That's okay. I wish I were there with you.

AMANDA

I wish you were too, but you know we agreed it was better this way. The Vice President has no living family, so the American people will see only their candidates.

(Pause.)

And you fought too hard for this surgical residency to take a leave.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Dad would be so proud of you, Mom.

AMANDA

He was the one who wanted to be President. What am I doing here?

(Laughs. Then her voice catches.)

You know, I still miss him.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

I know, Mom. Me too.

AMANDA

(After a pause.)

Listen . . . honey . . . Have reporters been bothering you lately?

JENNIFER (v.o.)

No more than usual. Less, in fact. I'm old news in the hospital and the Denver papers.

AMANDA

That's good.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Why do you ask?

AMANDA

I think Vernon Lark's people have been digging through the trash again.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Oh, Christ. Yours or mine?

AMANDA

Probably both, and some of our friends as well.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Christ! Mom, are you all right? Is Toni there with you?

AMANDA

I'm fine, and she'll be right back . . . Look, this probably has nothing to do with you. I just thought I'd check. It's not as if we have any deep dark family secrets.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

What about my insane uncle chained in the attic?

AMANDA

Open cell, sweetie, and not everyone has your sense of humor?

JENNIFER (v.o.)

If you're listening, Vernon Lark, you better pray you never end up in my OR.

(AMANDA laughs.)

JENNIFER (v.o.)

How was that?

AMANDA

Just what I needed, to hear your voice before I went into the coliseum. I love you, Jen.

JENNIFER (v.o.)

Love you too, Mom. Now tell Toni I said hi and go knock Gilchrist out of her Ferragamos.

(Smiling, TONI appears behind AMANDA, who looks at her. TONI holds a large blue envelope.)

AMANDA

Are those canary feathers caught in your teeth?

TONI

No matter what Vernon Lark tries to pull, you've got Nea cold. If they try to smear you, or Jen for that unreported marijuana thing, if they try to expose any intimacies or link you to the radical left or organized crime or even a Star Trek Fan Club, you have all you will ever need to shut them up.

AMANDA

What on earth are you talking about?

TONI

(Briefly holds up the envelope.)

This came a little while ago. Remember Nea's convention speech, all that talk about a family-based culture of life?

AMANDA

Of course.

TONI

The lady who sent this doesn't appreciate Nea's hypocrisy. She worked as a nurse in the office of her late husband, the lone black doctor in Nea's hometown. Nea herself worked there as a receptionist the summer after she finished high school.

(Withdraws papers and hands them to AMANDA.)

Five years before Roe, Dulcinea Gilchrist came home from her first semester of college so the man who'd got her pregnant could give her an abortion.

(Pauses so AMANDA can react.)

The procedure left her sterile.

AMANDA

(After a moment of silence.)

The woman sat on it all this time? Why? Nea hasn't exactly been in hiding.
(Flips through a few pages.)
Does this guardian angel-slash-scorned wife have a name?

TONI

Mabel Lee Gaston, and she's as feisty as they come. I just got off the phone with her. She may hate Republicans more than Malcolm Micheaux does.

AMANDA

(Pauses long enough to consider, then shakes her head.)

I don't know, Toni. Even if this is true . . .

TONI

(Positioning herself behind AMANDA, who looks into the mirror. TONI bends at the waist so her head is just above AMANDA's shoulder.)

No matter what, we're in the clear. You can't say anything during the debate, of course, but you *can* hand her a copy, and then she'll know we know. She could choose to release it and beg forgiveness. Or we could sneak it to the press. Either way, her holier-than-thou culture of life rant will crash and burn, and we won't be anywhere near the debris field.

(Straightening to her full height.)

Who's going to learn a lesson now, Vermin Lark?

(Blackout.)

End of Act One

Act Two

Scene 1

(The stage is the same as in Act One, though now the dressing room areas are gone. Lights rise. RACHEL, ZORA, and MALCOLM are seated at the press table, gazing straight ahead as if into TV cameras.)

ZORA

Good evening. On behalf of the League of Women Voters, let me welcome everyone to the first of three presidential debates between Vice President Nea Gilchrist and Senator Amanda Dean Styles. I'm Zora Quick, director of the American Council of Intercultural Concerns, which is pleased its annual convention was chosen as a backdrop for tonight's historic event. I'll be your moderator. Joining me on the panel are two distinguished journalists, reporter Rachel Perlman of the *New York Times* . . .

(RACHEL, seated on ZORA's right, smiles and lifts a hand. The audience applauds.)

ZORA

. . . and CNN anchor Malcolm Micheaux.

(MALCOLM, seated on ZORA's left, nods slightly. The audience applauds.)

ZORA

We're broadcasting from the Pollard Auditorium, where we've gathered an audience of one hundred ACIC convention delegates, chosen by lottery. Remaining delegates are next door in the Bronson Park general assembly hall, watching on the JumboTron. Ms. Perlman and Mr. Micheaux will pose most of tonight's questions, but they've been gracious enough to select additional questions from the more than two hundred submitted by the audience. The honor of asking those will be mine. I will explain the rules of the debate once the candidates have joined us onstage. First, let us welcome the Republican candidate, Nea Gilchrist, Vice President of the United States.

(NEA enters from stage right, waving amid applause, carrying a folder. She stands behind her lectern.)

ZORA

Next let us welcome the Democratic nominee, Amanda Dean Styles, United States Senator from Massachusetts.

(Smiling, AMANDA enters from stage left, carrying a folder, and takes her place behind her lectern.)

ZORA

Because this first debate is intended to give voters an overview of the *women* running for president—I'm *truly* pleased to be able to say that—there will be no restriction on the topics. The second debate will focus on international affairs and the third domestic concerns. Tonight answers are limited to sixty seconds, rebuttals to thirty. Ms. Perlman and Mr. Micheaux will take turns asking one question of each candidate. Each answer will be followed by a rebuttal. After four questions have been asked and answered, I will ask both candidates an audience question. Each will have one minute to answer. Finally, I ask that the audience refrain from applause until the end of the entire debate.

(Looks at each candidate and each reporter.)

Mr. Micheaux won the coin toss and will begin.

MALCOLM

Thank you. Madame Vice President, we've been in Qaraq for more than six years now. Nearly five thousand Americans have died, not to mention tens upon tens of thousands of Qaraqis. President Bullard has said repeatedly, we will not leave until we have achieved a victory. What constitutes victory?

(AMANDA scribbles notes, as NEA will later.)

NEA

The war in Qaraq is only one front in the global war on terror. Victory will take different shapes on different fronts. Victory in Qaraq will occur when Qaraq forces are strong enough to take over the security of the nation and protect the people from the insurgency. We mustn't forget that we've had significant troop reductions since the start of this war. That is progress. Hamdi Siddiq, I am happy to say, is no longer a threat to the world. That's progress too. This is not a struggle where a definitive battle, like Gettysburg, will turn the tide. But if we can slow down the growth of terrorist networks, eventually we will prevail. More than anything, the October 10th terrorist attacks taught us this fight requires both sacrifice and vigilance.

ZORA

Senator?

AMANDA

Another lesson 10-10 taught us is that we can be trained to respond to a number the same way Pavlov's dogs responded to a bell. Every time the administration is challenged about the legitimacy of invading Qaraq, someone brings up 10-10. Let me say it here and now, again: Qaraq had nothing to do with 10-10 or Nazim bin Hasan and the Red Scimitar. It had no weapons of mass destruction, no capability of threatening anyone but its nearest neighbors—

ZORA

Time.

MALCOLM

Senator Styles, at first you supported the invasion. Some say your opposition began when it seemed you might be the Democratic nominee. If elected, how will you get us out?

AMANDA

First let me say my initial support was based on the administration's claims that Hamdi Siddiq posed a threat. Like Humphrey Bogart, who came to Casablanca for the waters, I was misinformed. We all were. Look, we've made a mess of Qaraq, let in far too many terrorists, and alienated so many of our friends it'll take years to rebuild alliances. Can the Qaraq people secure their country without our presence? They can and they must. I will establish a timetable for withdrawal that gives them fair warning of when they must be self-sufficient.

NEA

The Senator is forgetting that the insurgency is still very much alive, and very deadly. If we leave before it's defeated, the country could sink into a civil war that destabilized the region.

AMANDA

It's already sunk into civil war.

NEA

It's an insurgency, certainly not full scale civil war.

AMANDA

What, I wonder, inspired your earlier mention of Gettysburg?

ZORA

Madame Vice President, Senator. It's Ms. Perlman's turn to ask the Senator a question.

RACHEL

Since this war is being attributed, at least in part, to faulty intelligence, what would you do to correct the deficiencies in the country's intelligence-gathering apparatus?

AMANDA

Insurgency, civil war—the people bombing shrines and killing civilians couldn't care less what we call the conflict. That we didn't see it coming is our intelligence failure. If the White House had bothered to study the region's history, it would have known that the Shiite-Sunni split dates back to the death of the Prophet more than eleven centuries *before* the Declaration of Independence. Maybe then it could have imagined

that sectarian violence might follow the fall of Hamdi Siddiq. My administration will treat intelligence like science, with diligence, patience, and expert analysis—without a political agenda. Flaws or not, President Bullard wanted to invade Qaraq and interpreted the data to justify his decision. We won't do that.

NEA

It's a sad day for our country when a U.S. senator openly calls the President of the United States a liar. The *office* we seek demands more respect, if not the person who holds it.

AMANDA

It will be an even sadder day when a U.S. senator shirks her constitutional responsibility to act as a balance against unchecked presidential power.

NEA

Why is it so hard to believe the President acted in good faith on credible information that wasn't entirely off the mark? Hamdi Siddiq *did* attempt to build weapons of mass destruction and for years hid his programs from UN inspectors. What our intelligence failed to reveal was how much those efforts had imploded, thanks to UN economic sanctions. I'm sure the Senator would have acted in the same good faith if she'd seen the same reports. Regardless of what she says, Siddiq was a threat, and everyone is better off without him.

AMANDA

Even if the Middle East is now more dangerous than ever? The war was a mistake. Did this administration miss school the day the kindergarten teacher covered facing up to mistakes?

ZORA

Senator . . .

NEA

At the time, most people thought the American Civil War was a mistake too. The average Northerner was only too happy to continue buying cheap cotton produced by slave labor.

ZORA

Madame Vice President . . .

AMANDA

At least it was our war, not the result of a foreign invasion.

NEA

Fortunately, history relies on more than the price of cotton to make its judgments.

ZORA

Ladies, please!

(Looks from one to the other as they remain silent.)

We all appreciate your . . . enthusiasm. But if we're going to get through the evening and cover what you agreed upon, we will have to stick to the ground rules.

NEA

Understood, Dr. Quick. The Senator and I are both passionate about our positions.

AMANDA

Fiercely so. The voters deserve nothing less.

ZORA

Of course. Ms. Perlman.

RACHEL

Madame Vice President, what would you do to improve intelligence-gathering?

NEA

Improvements are already under way. The recent appointment of a new intelligence czar has led to a review not only of all intelligence protocols but of all intelligence programs. An intel board with representatives from each agency now advises the czar, who meets regularly with the national security advisor but reports directly to the President. As we refine this process, analysis of sensitive information will greatly improve.

ZORA

Senator.

AMANDA

One has to wonder why this administration's answer to every crisis is the creation of another layer of government. Terrorist attack? A new national security hierarchy. Inept response to a natural disaster? Try another level of emergency management. Going to war over faulty—or false—intelligence? How about a new intelligence czar to oversee everything. Since when are the problems *of* bureaucracy corrected by adding more levels *to* bureaucracy? With that kind of track record you can't call Democrats the party of big government.

(NEA visibly struggles not to respond.)

ZORA

(Holding up a note card.)

Now it's time for the first audience question of the evening, from Len Shelley of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. It's been seven years since terrorists attacked New York and Los Angeles and we sent troops into the mountains of Kafiristan to find

Nazim bin Hasan. What will you do differently to continue the search? Madame Vice President, then Senator Styles.

NEA

Bin Hasan is still one of the most dangerous men alive, even if we haven't heard from him in nearly two years. We can ill afford to abandon the search. President Shariff of Kafiristan has been a valuable ally in the hunt, despite being targeted for death on a Red Scimitar website. As President, I will commit more resources to the search and more aid to Kafiristan. Sooner or later, Nazim bin Hasan will be brought to justice.

AMANDA

When Red Scimitar attacked, it had fewer than two thousand members worldwide. Now new cells are springing up in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and even Europe. They weren't there before we invaded Qaraq. If we'd focused our efforts on finding Nazim bin Hasan six years ago, we might have prevented the spread of his deadly ideology. It's past time to redirect resources to Kafiristan, to capture and try this evil man once and for all.

ZORA

Mr. Micheaux.

MALCOLM

Madame Vice President, President Bullard has said his domestic surveillance program has prevented further attacks on this country, and so far it has withstood every court challenge. Will you continue it?

NEA

First, let me correct your terminology. It isn't domestic surveillance in the sense that the government is watching Americans . . .

AMANDA

Isn't it?

NEA

(Ignoring AMANDA.)

It is surveillance not of *citizens* but of *communications* between citizens and members of terrorist organizations abroad. The program is limited in scope—I want to be very clear about that. We're not looking over your shoulder at what you read or monitoring your movements. The NSA is studying selected communications. The average American is so far removed from terrorism suspects that this program doesn't affect him or her at all, but it has provided us with vital information in the struggle against our enemies. To the extent that it works to fulfill its intended purpose, I will continue it, but I will never broaden its focus.

AMANDA

If the program has provided us with such vital information and we've stopped so many terror plots, how come we haven't heard about them, or about all the arrests? And wasn't renewal of the True American Act enough? This domestic spying program—let's call it what it really is—is just a fishing expedition that violates the privacy of American citizens. As for the court challenges, there have been only two, and those were tried before courts dominated by the President's appointees to the federal bench. One of the first things I will do after taking the oath of office —

ZORA

Time.

AMANDA

—is put an immediate end to government spying on citizens.

MALCOLM

Senator, homeland security remains an issue, not just for terrorist attack but for response to natural disasters. What would you do to strengthen our domestic defenses and improve our disaster response?

AMANDA

If the Gulf disaster taught us anything, it's that we must do a better job of anticipating what will be a problem and of preparing contingency plans when we are given information. We know enough about how earthquakes and storms and floods behave. Sometimes, as was the

AMANDA (continuing)

case with the Gulf hurricanes, we have several days' notice. If elected, I will separate disaster preparedness from national security, then hire in both areas well qualified individuals capable of assessing threats and responding effectively.

NEA

Finally, an area where the Senator and I agree. I too would make disaster prep and homeland security parallel entities, each with its own equally important charge.

ZORA

Ms. Perlman.

RACHEL

Vice President Gilchrist, the current administration is seen as anti-science for disregarding or rewriting opinion from government scientists. How would your White House handle the public face of government science?

NEA

Openly. Honestly. The current administration is not anti-science. It's very much pro-science, but it would prefer to err on the side of caution. When a government scientist makes a dire prediction about something like, say, the environment, the Executive

branch is obligated to make sure the language used and the factual basis for the prediction meet the most rigorous standards. What I'm saying is, when reporting on science the media frequently label as confirmed something that is still speculation. Misinformation and rushed judgments hurt the public as much as ignorance. My administration will release all information, not just science, only after it is thoroughly validated.

AMANDA

In other words, White House lawyers will continue to rewrite scientific reports to satisfy a political agenda. This administration has banned certain over-the-counter contraceptives, despite the advice of its own Food and Drug Administration. It has stated that abortion leads to breast cancer, an idea refuted by health researchers. It has rewritten or trashed the work of its own environmental scientists. Look, I'm a lawyer, and I know lawyers have no business meddling in scientific papers.

RACHEL

President Bullard's Every Child Moving Forward initiative was controversial when it was passed into law seven years ago. Senator, from your perspective, how has the program fared? What educational initiative would you propose?

AMANDA

Every Child Moving Forward has been an abject failure.

(NEA shakes her head, again struggling to keep silent.)

AMANDA

They claim test scores are on the rise, but so is the dropout rate. As weaker students leave school, average test scores rise a little, creating the illusion schools are improving when all the while there is a growing underclass of the uneducated. With four times our population, China graduates ten times as many engineers. Does that have something to do with administration opposition to science? Children in Belgium learn French, Flemish, German, and English, while our students struggle with one language. Is that one outcome of the English Only movement? Oh, we teach our kids to take tests, all right. But that's not education. True education is integrated into a person's life, not forgotten when a test is collected. As President, I will propose a family education initiative that assists whole families with learning, computer purchases, gallery memberships, travel to historical sites, anything that could spark the curiosity children need to succeed.

NEA

Tax credits for visits to the library. Before—

AMANDA

At least as important as tax credits to companies that lower wages and cut pensions to raise profits.

NEA

Before we go off the deep end and buy computers for every child and subsidize Washington, D.C. trips for every family, we might ask ourselves how we'll pay for it.

AMANDA

Perhaps the same way we paid for the war.

ZORA

Senator, the Vice President has the floor.

NEA

Yes, education begins in the family—and I know that because my family valued learning—but in a free society we cannot impose the burden of teaching on those ill-equipped to do it. The states must continue to determine curriculum and how to measure their success. Until we have better tools, we will have to rely on tests, as do Belgium and all industrialized nations. Our schools are the backbone of the American Dream and give *all* children the opportunity to become whatever they are capable of being. And once again, we are not anti-science.

AMANDA

How can you say that when the arctic shelf's melting like an ice sculpture at a July wedding—

ZORA

Senator . . .

AMANDA

—and you still deny the existence of global warming?

ZORA

(Looking from one candidate to the other.)

If we're ready for the second audience question . . . from Ann Proctor of Flagstaff, Arizona. We used to be Republicans and Democrats. Now we're conservatives and liberals. How do you view the label applied to your opponent? Senator Styles, then Vice President Gilchrist.

AMANDA

I don't much care for labels, and I believe most Americans are open to compromise for the common good. That said, the Vice President belongs to an uncompromising administration that labels itself conservative. What is it they're trying to conserve? The good old *Leave It to Beaver* days, when alcoholism, wife-beating, and incest were kept hidden? The days of unspoken quotas—three Jews, no blacks except janitors, no women except unmarried secretaries? The Founding Fathers preached freedom while holding slaves and extended the vote only to white male property holders. It wasn't until 1828 that other white males got the vote. Women got it in 1920, but not all African-Americans until 1964. If America had not deviated from the

Founders' original intent, the Vice President and I would not be here tonight. Over two and a half centuries our nation has evolved, and evolution doesn't care whether we believe in it. It just happens.

NEA

Winston Churchill once said, "Show me a young conservative and I'll show you someone with no heart. Show me an old liberal and I'll show you someone with no brains." In the '50s and '60s liberals were necessary to challenge the country for its failure to live up to its creed. The great accomplishment of that era was the end of all forms of legal discrimination. But the liberal mindset could not let go of the idea that people are victims, that government should intervene to correct all inequalities. Over two generations we have gone from repairing flaws in our system to creating them with good intentions. The proposal for national health insurance is another example of the liberal idea that government money is limitless. Frankly, we can't afford liberalism.

(All debate participants freeze. Light dims on debate.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise on each area which held a make-up table in Act One. The debate participants are still on stage, frozen or, at the director's discretion, pantomiming as the debate continues in dim light. LARK and TONI enter from opposite sides and step into the lighted areas, each where his or her candidate was earlier. Each has a cell phone pressed to an ear. Their conversations with other parties overlap for the audience.)

Jen? Aren't you watching?

TONI

I take it you recognize my voice.

LARK

Don't worry. Your mom's ready for anything.

TONI

I trust I have every reason to believe that your end of our contract has been fulfilled.

LARK

And we have a trick or two up our sleeve too.

TONI

Good. Very good.

LARK

She doesn't look too pale, does she? That make-up guy was a little heavy-handed.

TONI

And the item was delivered per my request?

LARK

Her suit looks all right? The color and style?

TONI

I see.

LARK

No, of course men don't have to worry about that. Blue suit and tie, bingo. But a woman . . .

LARK

Just as long as none of this is ever connected to me.

TONI

The hospital lounge, huh? Who else is watching?

LARK

Then the second half of your money will be wired as soon as the story breaks.

TONI

Ignore him. Creeps come in all walks of life.

LARK

Tonight or tomorrow morning.

TONI

When this is over, that idiot will be buying *you* a drink. And he'll be voting for your mother.

LARK

Of course it's a calculated risk. What's the fun in a sure thing?

TONI

Call back the minute it's over, and I'll give her the phone before she talks to the press.

LARK

No, No, the pleasure was mine.

(Both close their cell phones and exit where they entered. Lights fade on where they stood.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise on the debate.)

ZORA

For the next round, I believe Mr. Micheaux will switch the batting order.

MALCOLM

Yes, thank you. Senator, what about the Democratic proposal to nationalize health care? Is it workable or will it be, as conservative talk radio host Crash Lambert said this afternoon, and I quote, a white elephant surfing on a hypodermic in a public toilet?

AMANDA

Did he really say that?

MALCOLM

Yes, ma'am, he did.

AMANDA

And we wonder why Americans are turned off by political discourse.

(Gathers herself for her response.)

Fewer employers are buying into the health insurance system, which means fewer workers and their families are offered even basic coverage. Thus the emergency room becomes the primary care physician for a growing segment of the population. In the form of higher insurance rates and taxes, we pay for everybody, not just the Saturday night gunshot victim but also the elderly woman who breaks her hip on Tuesday and the baby with an ear infection and fever on Wednesday. Group policies cost less. We envision a private-public partnership that creates larger groups and limits coverage to the essentials. Congress would have to authorize a sliding scale payroll deduction for voluntary participants, but in the long run the plan will save money.

NEA

Socialized medicine will not save money and has the potential to destroy the economy. It will be a monopoly and government monopolies usually fail. Without the current business model, the medical and pharmaceutical industries will have no motivation to conduct the research necessary for improvements in health care for all. Once deductions fail to cover the cost, we'll have to start looking elsewhere for the money to pay for everything, and we'll need a whole new bureaucracy to address insurance fraud. This is a naïve, pie-in-the-sky proposal.

MALCOLM

Madame Vice President, more states are limiting gay adoption and domestic partnerships. Recently, your running mate, Senator Crocker, had the Log Cabin Republicans ejected from the party. The Reverend Rob Patterson once said that

serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's being gay was all anyone needed to know about homosexuality. How far will a Gilchrist administration roll back gay rights?

NEA

Senator Crocker has challenged many groups within the Republican party. Some have chosen to leave, which is part of the democratic process. Reverend Patterson is a private citizen who often exercises his constitutional right to free speech. My administration will safeguard the rights of all Americans. Likewise, we'll support the right of individual states to define standards and pass their own laws about adoption and domestic partnership. Senator Styles hails from the first state to sanction gay marriage but it's clear the majority of the people do not approve such an agenda. Unless I misread the polls, there is considerable support across the country for an amendment defining marriage as the union of a man and woman.

AMANDA

Speaking of serial killers, Ted Bundy was a Republican, but it would be absurd to say that tells us everything we need to know about *his* party. I'll yield the remainder of my time to the

Vice President so she can explain once and for all how the gay couple across the street is a threat to the fifty or sixty straight marriages on the block.

NEA

It would take too long.

(A beat.)

ZORA

All right. Ms. Perlman.

RACHEL

Madame Vice President, recently Republican leaders have supported the efforts of a Virginia couple to have their daughter removed from life support so her husband can face a murder charge and possible execution. Meanwhile, a Florida woman remains on Death Row for killing her abusive husband, and the Republican governor has refused to commute her sentence to life. Are these positions inconsistent with the party platform?

NEA

Not at all. End of life decisions should be made by the next of kin. Any husband who beats his wife into a coma forfeits next of kin status, and the Virginia courts should award guardianship to the victim's parents. In the Florida case, the governor simply made a decision to uphold the sentence of the court. Governors make such decisions all the time.

AMANDA

Forgive me for thinking this is all just a bit hypocritical. How many Qaraqı civilians have died in this misguided war? We may never know. Or don't non-American lives have a place in the culture of life?

(Looks from NEA to the audience.)

Not too long ago a woman named Sherry Teal spent a decade in a persistent vegetative state, with no chance of recovery. Republicans passed resolutions and held all-night prayer vigils to keep her husband from ending life support. Now they'll let one woman die so her husband can be executed—

NEA

That's a false comparison. The cases are completely different.

ZORA

Madame Vice President . . .

AMANDA

And they'll let another woman die because she defended herself. We failed—

ZORA

Time.

AMANDA

(With terse sweetness, to ZORA.)

I was interrupted.

(To the audience.)

We failed two victims of abuse, and in her own way each has paid with her life.

RACHEL

(After a pause.)

Recently, Missouri legislators barred state-funded clinics not only from performing abortions but also from dispensing any kind of birth control. One of the bill's sponsors said, quote, "A lot of folks don't want their tax dollars used to promote immorality." Senator, this points to the ever deepening cultural divisions between Americans. How will you reverse this trend? How will you unite our citizens for a common purpose?

AMANDA

I see your reputation for tough questions is well deserved.

RACHEL

Just trying to get back up on my bicycle, Senator.

AMANDA

Anyone who's ever been part of a family knows how difficult it is to keep the peace among parents and children, siblings and cousins. As more families are blended and extended, the task gets harder. But we do it because we must. The strongest families

find a happy medium, a common ground acceptable to most if not all. In America we are an enormous extended family. We'll never make every single member happy all the time, but compromise and a renewed sense of common purpose can help us understand each other. The person who objects to funding birth control on moral grounds should be able to understand the person who objects to funding war on moral grounds. If we can talk, we can grow past this divisive administration into something that works for the common good.

NEA

There is no common purpose more important than the defense of the American people. For those who take issue with President Bullard or consider him a divider, let me say this: I am not President Bullard. While my policies, like his, will put national security front and center, my approach will be my own. As Secretary of State I worked hard to strengthen ties with our allies, and I earned the friendship of leaders all over the world. As President, I will continue to foster those friendships for the good of all. Nothing unifies us like peace.

ZORA

Our next audience question comes from Audrey McGinley of Vermillion, South Dakota. Will we ever find a way to compromise on abortion? First the Vice President, then the Senator.

NEA

Our party platform is clear. We must reverse the slaughter of the innocents, the millions of unborn children who die horribly each year because they are an inconvenience or unwanted. Too many abortions are performed and too few alternatives, like adoption, are explored. The Republican party proposes a new era of personal responsibility, where children are accepted, placed with loving families, and given a chance at life. Abortion must be undone, either by overturning Roe or amending the Constitution. There is no middle ground.

AMANDA

Ms. McGinley, most Americans believe abortion should be safe, legal, and rare. I think we can indeed find middle ground—if we cut through the hypocrisy. You see, even those who oppose abortion sometimes find themselves in a position where they have to decide whether to have one.

(Briefly looks at NEA.)

It's now public knowledge that some years before he helped impeach a president for a sexual indiscretion, a pro-life congressman paid for his secretary's abortion. I'm not suggesting the married congressman fathered a child; he may simply have been helping his secretary through a tough time. The father's identity is not the issue here. The mother's choice is. How dare we judge a woman for what may have been the most difficult decision of her life.

(Looks right into NEA's eyes.)

How *dare* we.

ZORA

Mr. Micheaux, you're up.

MALCOLM

Senator, for years you were one half of a truly glamorous power couple, the only marriage anchored in both Houses of Congress.

AMANDA

(Chuckling.)

Please understand, Mr. Micheaux, that terms like *glamorous* and *power couple* originated with the press and not our offices.

MALCOLM

Certainly. After your husband's untimely death, no one was surprised when Governor McCallum named you to replace him in the Senate. Still, the personal loss must have been incalculable.

AMANDA

(Tightly.)

Yes, it was.

MALCOLM

My question now is about the six months immediately following your husband's death . . .

AMANDA

(Wary.)

Yes . . .

MALCOLM

You were under the care of Dr. Richard Vickery, a Boston psychiatrist.

(AMANDA is clearly stunned by this.)

MALCOLM

Dr. Vickery was treating you for depression—

AMANDA

My husband had just died.

MALCOLM

—and made extensive notes detailing your inability to function . . . and thoughts of suicide.

AMANDA

How . . . how did you get this information?

MALCOLM

Senator, tragedy visits all of us, but presidents must handle loss differently. Affairs of state will not stop percolating for First Family misfortune. What guarantee can you give the American people that another personal tragedy won't render you unable to perform the duties of the presidency?

(ZORA, RACHEL and NEA gaze at MALCOLM with discomfort, or distaste, then at AMANDA with pity.)

AMANDA

(Hesitating, looking at her notes, then the audience.)

As you know, Mr. Micheaux, nothing is guaranteed. But if you've taken the time to dig up and read confidential medical records—as it appears you have—then I'm sure you must be

AMANDA (continuing)

familiar with a very public document called the Constitution. The 25th Amendment addresses the . . . the scenario you propose. As for me, it was medical treatment, no more, no less.

NEA

(Looking at AMANDA, then glaring at MALCOLM.)

Senator, let me say that I knew and liked your husband and still consider his passing a major loss to the nation. We all grieved but we all understand that your grief far surpassed our own.

AMANDA

Thank you.

NEA

(Still glaring at MALCOLM.)

You're most welcome.

MALCOLM

Madame Vice President . . .

NEA

(Coldly.)

Mr. Micheaux.

MALCOLM

(Shifting uncomfortably and clearing his throat.)

Madame Vice President, my next question is about a recent comment you made about the Senator's running mate, Oregon governor Thatcher King.

NEA

(Relaxing a bit and shaking her head.)

With what they did to me on *Saturday Night Live*, I'm surprised it took you this long to ask.

(As NEA speaks, MALCOLM touches his earpiece, as do RACHEL and ZORA. All look at each other.)

NEA

Look, a joke made at a cocktail party is hardly worth all this attention from the press—

ZORA

Madame Vice President . . . I . . . I need to interrupt you for a moment.

(Looks at MALCOLM as NEA and AMANDA look at her.)

Mr. Micheaux, perhaps you'd like to . . .

MALCOLM

Of course.

(Shifting into anchorman mode.)

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid a breaking news story of national importance compels us to end this debate early. In a moment, whatever network you're watching will begin individual coverage of this story as it unfolds.

(AMANDA and NEA look at each other and then MALCOLM.)

MALCOLM

The details are still unclear, but reports out of Washington at this hour indicate that President Sam Houston Bullard has been taken by helicopter to Walter Reed Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. Initial speculation is that the President has had a stroke.

(All react. NEA puts a hand to her mouth.)

MALCOLM

(Touching his earpiece.)

We're going now to individual network coverage of the White House briefing room, where Press Secretary Bruce Tolliver is preparing to make a statement. Please stand by . . .

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(Lights rise. The lecterns are empty. MALCOLM and RACHEL are standing at the table, gathering papers.)

RACHEL

Maybe he'll die.

MALCOLM

God, I hope not. When presidents die in office, we tiptoe around their shortcomings. I want history to remember Bullard as the knuckle-dragging buffoon that he really was.

RACHEL

It's no secret how you feel about the President. That's why I'm having trouble understanding what you did to the Senator. You sandbagged her pretty good.

(MALCOLM looks at her.)

RACHEL

A classic CNN strategy. I believe it's called the Dukakis Maneuver.

MALCOLM

Rachel, I'm just a journalist asking questions, doing my job.

RACHEL

Oh, you did a job, all right.

MALCOLM

The people need to know if their leaders—or potential leaders—are unbalanced.

RACHEL

The people need to know their leaders are human. Grief for a dead husband isn't unbalanced. It's normal. Aren't you the one who said Bullard is stupid for refusing to admit his mistakes? Isn't admitting you need help a sign of strength?

MALCOLM

(Moving from behind the press table to exit right.)

Look, I came into possession of some information I had a duty to report. That's all.

RACHEL

(Moving from behind the other side to cut him off.)

That's no excuse for acting like a putz!

(TONI has entered from the left and come up behind him.)

TONI

You son of a bitch!

(MALCOLM turns around and TONI slaps him.)

MALCOLM
(Rubbing his jaw.)

Toni, you don't understand.

TONI
I understand just fine. All you can see is the first black woman president. It doesn't matter who she's fronting or what she'll do to the country.

RACHEL
In the absence of hope . . . make history.

TONI
Don't make history. Be history. Lose my number.

(MALCOLM moves toward the stage right exit, pauses, looks at TONI, and exits. TONI looks at RACHEL.)

TONI
I can't believe I trusted him. Backstabbing bastard!

RACHEL
(As if about to step toward her.)
Oh, honey . . .

TONI
I don't need comforting! I'm not broken. I'm pissed.

(Stopped by TONI's tone, RACHEL stares at her.)

TONI
You don't think he got that stuff from me, do you?

RACHEL
No, I don't.

TONI
I don't know anything about the Senator's psych records. I didn't even work for her then. I was fresh out of law school, working for her husband. All I remember is that she comforted me and all his staffers more than we ever comforted her.

(Suddenly wary.)
Listen, this is off the record. I'm not making *any* statements to the press.

RACHEL

That's fine. I'm not taking notes.

TONI

Unless, of course, you mention the source was *not* the Senator's staff . . .

RACHEL

Malcolm won't give up his informant, but I think I recognize a distinct smell.

TONI

Public speculation about this could hurt our campaign. Even if the Senator doesn't end up looking crazy, voters may think she can't hire trustworthy staff.

RACHEL

Where is the Senator?

TONI

In her dressing room, talking to her daughter.

(LARK enters from stage right, a cell phone to his ear.)

RACHEL

Will she be all right?

(Seeing the women, LARK stops and closes his cell.)

TONI

(After a pause, with determination.)

Absolutely. She's Amanda Dean Styles, damn it—and she's going to be president.

LARK

(Stepping into their line of sight.)

I wouldn't count on that just yet, little girl. I'd say my gal wiped up the stage with yours.

TONI

Then we weren't watching the same debate.

RACHEL

How's the President, Vernon?

LARK

(With subdued glee.)

The Senator came off as a sarcastic, shrieking harpy. She complained about everything and campaigned against the President instead of the Vice President. Meanwhile, Nea Gilchrist was in control and looked truly presidential.

RACHEL

How's the President? Did he really have a stroke or is this Plan B, like Kindle's heart attack?

LARK

Conspiracy theories from *you*, Miss Perlman?

RACHEL

I wouldn't put anything past you, or the people who—

LARK

An act of God is beyond even us. As for the President, he's undergoing tests. What I'm about to say is off the record until the White House issues another statement. His speech is slurred, and the left side of his body is paralyzed. The VP has called an emergency Cabinet meeting, to invoke the 25th Amendment.

(Looks at his watch.)

We'll be airborne within half an hour. I just came to say goodbye, to both of you.

TONI

It was you, wasn't it?

LARK

Miss Burnett, it's not often a presidential candidate steps out of a debate and into an Acting Presidency. I'd say that gives us the advantage of incumbency. Wouldn't you?

(Entering from the left, NEA stops well behind

LARK.)

TONI

It was you who gave Malcolm the Senator's medical records, probably through a third party. I bet he doesn't even know it was you.

LARK

Maybe you did learn something tonight. If not, here's a tip to help you grow up: campaign financing buys a helluva lot more than TV time . . . little girl.

TONI

Fuck you!

LARK

An ugly tone but a pretty thought. If you don't mind, I'll take a raincheck. We can conduct *that* part of your education when I have more time.

TONI

(Glancing at his midsection.)

When you have more dick.

(TONI tries to pass. LARK blocks her, jabbing a finger.)

LARK

It'll take more than dick jokes to keep a Chihuahua like you from being a chew toy for the big dogs. When the time comes, a big dog'll take your hand clean off and think nothing of it. You'd do well to remember that.

(NEA clears her throat.)

LARK

(Turning and seeing NEA. He hesitates.)

Madame Vice President . . . are we ready to go?

(NEA says nothing, staring at him as she moves closer. He takes a step back)

NEA

Toni, would you please ask the Senator to come out here? I'd like to see her before I leave.

TONI

All right, Dr. Gil—Madame Vice President.

(Exits stage left.)

(RACHEL eases out her notebook and flips it open.)

LARK

Madame Vice President, we really should get a move on.

NEA

Not yet.

LARK

Look, we can discuss this on the plane.

NEA

No, Vernon. We won't be discussing anything on the plane. You're fired.

(RACHEL scribbles a note.)

LARK

Excuse me.

NEA

You're fired. You'll have to make your own way back to Washington.

(RACHEL scribbles again, closes her notebook,
and exits, opening her cell phone.)

LARK

Because I got mad at that . . .that *child*?

NEA

It's so much more than that.

LARK

You believe that crap about the Senator's psych records? You can't believe what they say.

You can't believe what the girl says. *She* was the one sleeping with Micheaux, not me.

NEA

It was you, Vernon. I knew it the moment Micheaux dropped his bomb. It was you, and I'll thank you not to insult my intelligence by denying it.

LARK

You were supposed to pounce, Nea. That was your moment. You were supposed to pounce —

NEA

Really?

LARK

—and talk about the importance of mental stability in a Commander-in-Chief. So what did you do? You said you understood her loss and gave her a way out. It was so . . .
so liberal.

(Calming down.)

But no harm done. Fate, God, Sam—whatever—has given you all the edge you need. In the morning you'll see how you've been blessed by all this. How we've been blessed.

NEA

Sam is my friend. I will never consider his stroke a blessing.

LARK

That's not what I meant. Come on, Nea . . .

NEA

I meant what I said. You're not coming back to Washington with us.

LARK

(Suddenly very angry.)

You can't fire me, Miss Missy! Do you know who I am? *Do you know who I am!*

NEA

(Calmly.)

No, I only know *what* you are, Vernon—a dinosaur that should have gone belly up in a tar pit a long time ago.

LARK

(Looking at where RACHEL exited.)

This'll be all over the front page of the *Times* tomorrow. Why are you shooting yourself in the foot like this?

NEA

Because some things are more important than winning. Because I can only close my eyes to so much before I hear my daddy rattling in his casket. Now if you don't get your things and go, I'll have the Secret Service take you into custody.

LARK

(Taking a step toward her.)

Nea, I know this game better than anybody. You need me.

(AMANDA and TONI enter stage left. AMANDA has the envelope.)

NEA

(Moving toward LARK, making him retreat.)

First, I'm tired of games. Second, I've never needed Affirmative Action to take me anywhere and I damn sure don't need an Affirmative Asshole to take me nowhere. Now go.

(LARK pulls away and exits stage right. NEA moves down right, gazes out at the audience to collect herself, then turns and sees AMANDA and TONI.)

NEA

Toni, if you don't mind I'd like a moment to speak to the Senator alone.

TONI
Senator?

AMANDA
It's all right, Toni.

(TONI exits as ZORA enters. AMANDA crosses to NEA. ZORA crosses and stands between them.)

NEA
Dr. Quick. Let me apologize to you and the Senator for tonight's breach of decorum. Vernon Lark was the source of the personal information about the Senator. I hope CNN management will reprimand Mr. Micheaux for his lapse of integrity. Dr. Lark has already been discharged. Tomorrow my campaign will issue a public apology.
(Turning to AMANDA.)

Amanda, I'm deeply sorry.

AMANDA
Thank you, Nea.

ZORA
Long ago I gave up on this political system as corrupt, self-serving, and hopelessly testicular. That's why I got out. But now, for the first time, women are facing off for the White House, and I can't help feeling hopeful politics will finally serve the greater good.

(Taking hold of each candidate's hand.)

Win or lose, each of you can make a difference. Use your womanhood to elevate the process. The question for both of you is do you have the ovaries to change your parties for the better? Despite what I've seen tonight, I think you do—and I pray you will.

(Sighs, hesitates.)

I guess that's it. I've said all I have to say. May the best woman win.

(Releases their hands. Exits stage right.)

AMANDA
(Looking at where ZORA exited.)
How can she?

NEA
How can she what?

AMANDA
How can the best woman win? She's not even running.

(NEA looks where ZORA exited, then turns back.)

I have something for you.

AMANDA
(Hands envelope to NEA.)

What's this?

NEA

Dr. Gaston.

AMANDA

Oh.

NEA
(NEA closes the envelope without looking inside.)

My campaign won't have anything to do with releasing those documents.

AMANDA

Thank you.

NEA

Still, I can't vouch for the woman who sent them to us.

AMANDA

Who would that be?

NEA

The doctor's widow.

AMANDA

Mabel Lee Gaston? Are you sure?

NEA
(After a beat.)

Yes. Toni spoke to her.

AMANDA
(Slowly, after a moment of apparent disbelief
NEA begins to laugh. AMANDA's confusion is
apparent.)

Mabel Lee Gaston is dead.

NEA

(AMANDA reacts.)

NEA

She died in 1992.

AMANDA

(Shaking her head as she realizes the truth. She begins to laugh.)

Watch your back.

NEA

(Shaking AMANDA's outstretched hand.)

You too.

(Blackout.)

The End

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