Two Rooms

By Lee Blessing
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CHARACTERS
MICHAEL WELLS......................................... 30s, educator
LAINIE WELLS.......................................... 30s, educator, married to Michael
WALKER HARRIS....................................... 30s, reporter

(Lights rise to reveal a dull-colored emptiness. A narrow mat lies on the floor. The sense of an entry upstage, but no more than that. Michael lies on the mat. He has an unkempt beard, wears a t-shirt and pajamas. He also wears handcuffs. He is blindfolded.

MICHAEL. Mathison had a gun. Under his jacket. A little automatic pistol or something – I’d never seen it before. Silver. I remember it gleamed in the sunlight when he pulled it out. It was just as they were forcing us both into the car – just as he put one hand on the roof of the car. He was right in front of me, there was nowhere I could go. And suddenly this shining little fantasy pistol appeared. Can you imagine? I taught for two years with the guy and never knew he carried it. As though that was supposed to save us. As though that pitiful gun – that absurd, miniscule tribute to one man’s utter lack of realism . . . I mean, he had to know what the world can do – if it just feels like it – to a man. To any man. And to carry a gun? The size of a cigarette case? In Beirut? (He starts to laugh, stops because it hurts.) He didn’t even know what to do once he pulled it out. I think he really believed all those kidnappers would take one look at this mighty weapon of the West, drop their AK-47s and flee. “Run! It’s a trap! He’s got a tiny gun!” (Starts to laugh again, stops.) God, Lainie, I love you. I wish this was a real letter. (A beat.) What Mathison forgot was these people have been taking hostages for thousands of years. They know how to do it. He yelled, “I’m armed!” I remember, and that same instant one of them shot it out of his hand, along with some of his fingers, and they slammed us into the car, wrapped Mathison’s hand with his own shirt, blindfolded us and drove us ... wherever this is. No one spoke. The only sound was Mathison weeping. I wasn’t paying that much attention. I was busy counting my own fingers. And toes. (A beat.) I wear a blindfold. I can take it off, but if I do they beat me. Or if they come in and it looks re-tied, they beat me. Sometimes it doesn’t look like I’ve taken it off, but since I’m an American they’re sure I must have, and they beat me anyway. Their voices are so young. I’m sure it’s a delusion, but sometimes I think I’ve had one or two of them in my class. (A beat.) Now I’m in theirs.

(The lights fade quickly to black. When they rise again, Lainie is alone in the room. She stands staring at the empty mat. The room is much brighter – light from an unseen window surrounds her. When she speaks, she addresses the mat at first, then moves around the room. She does not address the audience.)

LAINIE. I’m talking to myself. All last night, taking the furniture out of this room, I was talking to myself. It’s not the worst habit. Besides, for the last year, what else
have I been doing? (She regards the mat critically, slides it toward one corner of the room.) Talking to everyone in power – which is, of course, the definition of talking to yourself. I don’t know about it here. It’d probably be in a corner, but this one? Which one? (Sliding it to another corner of the room.) It’s hard to know which was worse: talking to Moslems or talking to Christians. Talking to Lebanese or talking to Syrians. Going across the Green Line to beg, or to Damascus – or Washington. (Suddenly nods her head decisively.) Washington. Definitely Washington. The Arabs wouldn’t help me, but at least they’d respect the pain. In Washington, I was the pain. (Of the position of the mat.) This is absolutely wrong. (She moves it to another corner, stares at it.) The head of the University said they’d do everything humanly possible to get you back. So did the head of Amal. So did the Lebanese President. So did the Syrian Foreign Minister, our embassy in Beirut, our embassy in Damascus, the Undersecretary of State, the President, and everyone running for President. This doesn’t work at all. (She moves the mat to the center of the room again.) This is just going to have to stand for all the corners of the room. Why not? It’s ... not an exact science. (She stares at the mat.) You’ll be here. (She moves towards the source of light from outside, mimes pulling down a shade and lights dim. She goes to the mat, sits on one side of it, then lies on it, allowing space as though another person were lying on it with her. Tentatively, she reaches out as though stroking the cheek of her ‘companion.’) From now on, I’m only talking to you. (Lights fade to black. When they rise again, Lainie sits on the floor a few feet from the mat, staring at it. Walker stands staring at her.)

WALKER. How long has this room been like this? (A beat.) Rest of the house looks real nice. Very normal. (A beat.) This room, though. This room you seem to have done something to. (A beat.) Lainie? Can I call you Lainie? (A beat.) I want to thank you for letting me come. I know a lot of other reporters would like to be here. I’m glad you chose to talk to me. (A beat.) Lainie? (A beat.) So – what is it you’d say you’ve done in this room?

LAINIE. I cleansed it.

WALKER. Cleansed it? (Attempting to break the mood.) Is that a new thing? In décor? Cleansing? (A beat.) Lainie? (A beat.) It’s hard to ask the right questions if you won’t --

LAINIE. I scrubbed and painted all the walls. I took all his things out.

WALKER. Was this his room? I mean – is it?

LAINIE. His office. His things were here.

WALKER. Where are they now?

LAINIE. In the basement.

WALKER. What if he comes back? Soon, I mean.

LAINIE. I painted everything. Walls, ceiling.

WALKER. A lot of consistency. What’s the mat for?

LAINIE. I look at it.
WALKER. Why? (A beat.) Do you mind if I open the shade? (A beat.) Lainie? (Without attempting to open the shade.) What is it you’re staring at?

LAINIE. His hands.

WALKER. His hands?

LAINIE. Walker, goodbye.

WALKER. Goodbye? What do you mean?

LAINIE. Goodbye.

WALKER. We’ve just gotten started.

LAINIE. Goodbye. (A beat.)

WALKER. When can I come back? (A beat.) You know, I’ve got better things to do than chase down stories of uncooperative people. (A beat. He starts to go, stops.) Do you want me to leave? I’ll do what you want me to do. (A beat.) Lainie? What is it you want me to do?

LAINIE. Bring back my husband.

(He stares at her, then leaves. Lights quickly fade to black. When they rise again, Michael is alone onstage, as he was as the beginning.)

MICHAEL. I have new guards now. It’s been more than a year, hasn’t it? They don’t tell me exactly. I’ve discovered some things here. For example, your hands can become friends if they’re in handcuffs long enough. (A beat.) I once saw a hand just lying in a street. You remember that day I came home, after walking past a car bombing? I didn’t tell you at the time, but I saw it. Just a hand, lying there, unclaimed. It wasn’t even horrible so much as … terrifyingly lonely. (A beat.) I ask myself all the time, “Why did we stay here? Why did we stay here? Why?” (A beat.) I look back now and can’t believe we stayed. Can’t believe we actually sat there at the University and said, “One last term. Then we’ll leave.” One last term. I wonder if we would’ve left even then. I wonder if someone, some part of us even liked the danger. Or was in awe of what we were witnessing. I mean, why does anyone stay? This city’s in the hands of boys. Teenagers roam the streets carrying AK-47s and somebody stays? I don’t know if there’s ever been a city that has for this long been such a horror. That’s taken itself apart brick by brick, life by life. And so many of us stayed. We walked down the street, through the rubble, past the checkpoints, past the bombings – we had days full of ordinary moments. Amid – what? – devils from Hell. Boys who might shoot you the next moment. Cars that might drive up, park and explode. (With a growing tension that finally breaks through.) And none of us seemed ready to say, “Leave it. Let us out of here! Please, God anything but this! Stop it!!!” (A beat. He recovers himself.) And none of us was ever quite ready to leave. (He moves towards a wall. Lainie enters and sits next to the mat, reaching out as though stroking Michael’s hair. Michael is oblivious to her.)
LAINIE. Michael? This bothers me. Here on this side, just below your mouth. It’s a line here. A little tuck, almost. A wrinkle. It’s not on the other side. I don’t mind you growing older, but you should do it all over your face, evenly. Don’t you think? (A beat.) This, though. Here at your temple. I like this. The way the hairs glide along the side, over your ear, into the tangle in back. Just these hairs on the side, running straight back, like they’re in a hurry. (With a slight laugh.) But all this ear-hair. This has got to go. (Quieter.) A beard. I can’t imagine it. (A beat.) I suppose you don’t get enough sleep. Or maybe you do. Maybe all you do is sleep. I hope so. I wish you could sleep from first to last. That you’d never open your eyes again, till I was in front of you. Your eyes are so … Why do women love eyes so much? They say it’s men that are visual. (A beat.) Michael? (Lights fade quickly to black.)

Scene 2

(A slide appears on the upstage wall. It’s a picture of a heavily-damaged building in Beirut. We see Lainie and Walker silhouetted on the floor, looking up at it.)

LAINIE. This is a hotel in Beirut near where we lived. It was destroyed in some shelling a couple of months before … before he was taken. (We hear the sound of a slide projector. The picture changes: the site of a car-bomb explosion.) A car bombing. Michael used to take pictures as he walked along. He wasn’t looking for these kinds of things. You just couldn’t avoid them. People at the University told him it was dangerous. It made people notice him. Even more, I mean. And he did stop a few weeks before … (Another slide: a Lebanese youth, perhaps 15, with an automatic weapon.) This guy commanded a whole block. He liked Michael. He wanted to pose. (Another slide: the coast. A few indistinct figures at the shore.) Michael heard that people had started fishing with grenades. They’d just toss a grenade in the water and … fish that way. (Another slide: a Lebanese woman, weeping bitterly.) Michael said he could’ve taken this picture a hundred times. I’m not sure what it was about her. He didn’t know her. He saw something different as he passed. Maybe the sun’s shining on her in a different way. Maybe it’s something about the way she’s standing, or – whatever it is, all the values just seem to … hold you. (Suddenly the projector shuts off. The image disappears. Blackness.)

WALKER. What’s wrong?

LAINIE. I want to stop now.

WALKER. We just started.

LAINIE. I’m sorry.

WALKER. I’ll get the lights.

LAINIE. Don’t.
WALKER. You want to sit in the dark?

LAINIE. Do you think they still blindfold him?

WALKER. They might. Who can know?

LAINIE. Do they chain him?

WALKER. They might. (Walker flicks on the lights. He stands at the upstage wall. Lainie still sits on the floor.) Those are good pictures. He’s a good photographer.

LAINIE. He’s a good teacher, too. I’m sorry. These pictures were harder than I thought. I shouldn’t have agreed to show them to you.

WALKER. It’s a shame. They’d go awfully well with an interview. If you’d ever give me an interview.

LAINIE. I can’t decide.

WALKER. It’s been two months. (A beat.)

LAINIE. Why haven’t you written anything up to now? You have more than enough without me talking.

WALKER. I guess I’d like to have your permission. (With a self-deprecating laugh.) My editors think I’m crazy, of course. But that’s why. (A beat.) I won’t write anything if you don’t want me to. That’s a promise.

LAINIE. What’s a promise?

WALKER. You were teaching, weren’t you? After you got back here? (Lainie nods.) But recently you took a leave of absence?

LAINIE. You’ve been asking about me?

WALKER. Why’d you leave?

LAINIE. It’s hard to teach natural sciences when . . . (She trails off.)

WALKER. When what?

LAINIE. When nothing’s natural. (A beat.)

WALKER. So. You sit here all day. Not much of a life.

LAINIE. Michael’s here. I can’t explain it, but for me he is. In this room. The moment I come in, I feel . . . the warmth of his body. The rest of the house – everywhere else – is cold.

WALKER. You need to talk to people. How about the other hostage families?

LAINIE. It’s like looking in a mirror.

WALKER. Then talk to the public. That really hasn’t been tried enough. We could start with an interview. In depth, about --
LAINIE. My pain.

WALKER. Among other things. We could run it in the paper. Two, three installments. Maybe more.

LAINIE. We could run my pain in installments.

WALKER. It’s better than hiding in this room. (A beat.)

LAINIE. The State Department says that won’t help anyone but the kidnappers.

WALKER. No one knows what will help. That’s the first thing. No one knows. All we know is what we’ve done, and what hasn’t worked. Keeping silent hasn’t worked.

LAINIE. Why do you care about this? You don’t have anyone over there.

WALKER. I care about people who are going through what you’re going through.

LAINIE. But why? Why our pain? There’s so much to pick from. The world is full of terrible ... outcomes. Why did you choose this? Is it because you can win an award?

WALKER. An award? What are you talking about?


WALKER. Is that what you think I’m here for? I’ve been waiting for months. You think that’s how I’d go after a Pulitzer prize? You think I’d wait for you to ask me here? I’d be on your doorstep every day.

LAINIE. I’m sorry.

WALKER. I’ve stared into too many faces – yours included – of people who’ve been told, “Your husband’s gone. He may be dead. There’s nothing you can do.” (A beat.) The reason I’m here is because more than anyone this has happened to – any family, I mean – you understand what’s really going on.

LAINIE. What’s really going on?

WALKER. What’s really going on is that they’ll let him die. They’ve already made the value judgment on him and the others. To this administration, it’s more effective to use his captivity – and even his death – to push a bunch of policy points, than it is to use every means to get him back.

LAINIE. You really think that?

WALKER. I know it. So do you. The day he’s reported dead, do you think they’ll take any responsibility? They’ll be all over TV, pointing the finger at every terrorist in the Middle East and saying, “These are barbarians. Don’t try to understand them, just let us do what we must do.” And we’ll let them.

LAINIE. What do you think I should do?

WALKER. I’ve said. Speak out. Do interviews. Go on TV if you have to. (She considers this.)
LAINIE. No.

WALKER. Why not?

LAINIE. *(Shakes her head.)* It's too public for me. It's too ... public.

WALKER. Well. Fear of speaking. Right up there with -- what? Fear of falling, fear of loud noises --

LAINIE. That's not fair.

WALKER. Oh, I'm not being fair? Sorry. You're right. Loud noises can be pretty rough. *(He suddenly claps his hand loudly behind her ear. She pulls away from it, holding her ear in pain.)*

LAINIE. Stop that!

WALKER. That's probably going to be the last thing Michael ever hears. Only it won't be two hands clapping, it'll be a gun.

LAINIE. Get out of here!

WALKER. Care about your husband.

LAINIE. I do!

WALKER. Do something!

LAINIE. I am!

WALKER. Do more!

LAINIE. No!! *(A beat.)* You know what will get him back? Nothing we can understand. Whatever took Michael, whatever will bring him back is a power so incomprehensible we'll never understand it. And all the running around screaming about injustice won't change a thing. All we can do -- all anyone can do -- is take pictures of mourning widows. Write stories about mourning widows. Become fascinated with widows of men who aren't even dead yet. But nothing -- *nothing* -- will make a difference.

WALKER. Lainie, I'm only --

LAINIE. Get out! *(A beat.)*

*(Walker hesitates, then exits. Lights fade to black. When they rise again, Michael sits alone on the mat. He is blindfolded.)*

MICHAEL. *(A beat.)* War isn't a tear in the fabric of things, it is the fabric. If earth is our mother, our father is war. The chief priority we have on earth is to vie with each other for a place to stand. Does any of this make sense, Lainie? I'm trying to explain why this has happened to us. Americans fight all the time -- lots of wars. But always far away. We haven't had to fight for the soil we stand on in a century. We've forgotten that level of sacrifice. These people haven't. Everyone in this country -- Christian, Sunni Moslem, Shi'ite, Palestinian, Israeli -- everyone is
fighting for the ground. The ground itself. They stand here or nowhere. So it’s easy for them to give up their lives. Small sacrifice. It’s easy for them to kill, too. Small sacrifice. You know how being here, being swallowed up by it, makes me feel? Like I’m finally part of the real world. For the first time. Lainie, something in me never felt … affected … until this happened. You know what it makes me think of? Shiloh. Vicksburg. The Wilderness. What those places must have been like: suffocating, endless, bleeding disaster. Stacking of bodies ten deep for a few feet of our ground. Don’t you see? We’re not different from these people, we’ve just forgotten. We think this urge doesn’t exist anymore. We abstract everything, we objectify. We talk about global politics, how all this affects the balance of power. Do you know what a twenty-year-old Shi’ite thinks of the balance of power? (Lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

(Lights fade up to reveal Lainie and Walker. The chair is gone.)

WALKER. I want to be able to give you my side of things. (A beat.) I want to show you that what I did --

LAINIE. You promised me. (A beat)

WALKER. That what I did --

LAINIE. You promised me.

WALKER. Lainie --

LAINIE. This room. You put this room in a newspaper.

WALKER. It’s in a newspaper every day. It’s Michael’s room. It’s the room they’re all in. Hell, everyone’s in it. We can’t get out.

LAINIE. People call me. They’ve been calling all week. They want to know if this room really exists. They want to know if they can come over.

WALKER. I’m sorry.

LAINIE. You’re sorry?! My life hasn’t been that different, you know. I’ve had friends take advantage of me before. I’ve had them hurt me, betray me. I know what it’s like. But I never thought someone would come into my life now – as it is now – and do this.

WALKER. Lainie --

LAINIE. Why?!

WALKER. ’Cause you were smothering, that’s why. You were sitting in here and pumping the air out, and for all Washington cared you could do it forever. Your husband, the men in Lebanon, the people in this country need you. They need you to say “I hurt” – in public. They need you to say, “I don’t believe my government,” and “We
have to try new ways.” They need to hear you say it over and over.

LAINIE. That's for me to decide! That's my choice! You took my choice! (A silence.) You think that just because you've been in this room, you understand it? It's the only place I can go and find Michael. Where I can feel – however imperfectly – what he’s experiencing. No barrier between us. No one coming between. No one. I don't have to hear about him from a government spokesperson, or a reporter or concerned friends – I have him here. He's mine.

WALKER. (Quietly.) It’s an illusion.

LAINIE. What isn’t?! How do you want me to experience Michael? On the news? In the faces of all the sick human beings I've had to beg for freedom? Holding hands with how many other helpless relatives? You’re a great one to talk about illusions – that’s you’re whole business. If I can have Michael – no matter how I do it – I’m going to have him. Do you understand?

WALKER. Lainie --

LAINIE. Do you understand?! (A beat. Walker nods, turns to leave.) People are calling me. Reporters – other reporters – want to do articles about me and this room. What are we going to do about that?

WALKER. I don't know. I'm sorry. (A beat. He starts out again.)

LAINIE. I'm going to give you an exclusive interview.

WALKER. Why?

LAINIE. Because now that you've written what you've written, talking to someone is inevitable. Unless I want to be thought of as ... odd, I'll have to speak out. A lot of reporters would work, I suppose. But with you there’s a special advantage. I know how far I can trust you. (Walker exits. Lights fade quickly to black and quickly rise again. Lainie is with Michael, who is blindfolded.)

MICHAEL. Some days I go around a room at home. Any room. Doesn't matter, they're all wonderlands compared to where I'm kept. Today it's my office. I try to remember everything about every piece of furniture. Where I bought it, what it was like that day, the smells in the air. It's really very sobering, how much the mind recalls when it's forced to. I remember my chair, my filing cabinet – and not just the filing cabinet, but the exact order of files: household, course-plans, medical, automobile, retirement – all of it. As if I took a picture. I remember the smell of my desk. And each day. I think I remember each day in my office – all of them. Cold days, wet days, days of incredible light. (A beat.) Did I tell you I was making a new country? On the wall. I feel the tiny bumps. They're mountains, of course. And the cracks are the rivers. I work on it all day, sometimes. Every mountain has a name. There’s Mount Freedom – of course. There’s Mount Hope and Mount Sense of Humor. And Mount Forgiveness. There’s Mount Forgiveness. Most days, though, I fill up with the people we know. You, mostly. (Lainie carefully removes Michael’s blindfold. He smiles at her.) You know that child we thought about having? We had him. He's um ... almost six months now. I'm aging him faster than normal so
we can talk together sooner. His name is Andrew. Because I like it. He has your hair and eyes, and … I can’t tell about his nose yet. We may have a daughter later, I’m not ruling it out. (A beat. They stare at each other.) Who can predict the future? (Lights fade quickly to black.)

End of Act One

ACT TWO

(When lights rise, Lainie and Michael sit on the mat in the same position as the end of Act One.)

LAINIE. Do they move you often?

MICHAEL. Now and then.

LAINIE. Are the rooms ever different?

MICHAEL. It’s always the same room. Whatever it looks like.

LAINIE. Why do they move you?

MICHAEL. They’re nervous. I’m a prize, remember? The Army could steal me away, another faction could steal me. Sort of like sea gulls fighting over an orange rind on the beach.

LAINIE. What do you do all day?

MICHAEL. Write letters to you. What do you do?

LAINIE. Well, I … I do a lot of things. I do my work.

MICHAEL. And how’s that?

LAINIE. Oh, you know … never-ending.

MICHAEL. (With a smile.) That’s the trouble with nature. What else do you do?

LAINIE. Nothing.

MICHAEL. Still?

LAINIE. I’m still getting used to it.

MICHAEL. It’s been a --

LAINIE. I know how long it’s been – it’s been longer than my life, all right?

MICHAEL. I know.

LAINIE. I wish they kidnapped women.

MICHAEL. They do. Sometimes.
LAINIE. They let them go. *(A beat.)*

MICHAEL. Does anything make you happy?

LAINIE. Sometimes Walker does.

MICHAEL. What’s he like?

LAINIE. He’s like you. He likes to be where he’s told he shouldn’t be. *(A beat.)* I gave him an interview.

MICHAEL. You did?

LAINIE. I talked about you. I talked about how little anyone’s doing. All the standard things. I feel like such a fool when it’s all over and nothing’s happened. We all of us seem that way to me sometimes – all the ones who speak out. Going around the country, grabbing the whole nation by the elbow, saying, “Please? Can’t you do something?” *(A beat.)* Do you ever hear gunfire where you are? Or shelling?

MICHAEL. Yes.

LAINIE. Close?

MICHAEL. Close enough. I fantasize sometimes that the place gets hit. A hole opens up, and I run out of it. Like someone escaping from a crashed plane. About the same odds, I suppose. I like the room this way. Thanks.

LAINIE. Walker always wants me to open the window.

MICHAEL. Maybe you should.

LAINIE. You think so?

MICHAEL. You know what I’d give for a window?

LAINIE. Yes. *(He rises, moves towards the window. He makes a gesture as though opening a curtain. Light pours into the room. He looks out, smiles. Lainie rises and joins him at the window. After a moment, Michael exits upstage, leaving Lainie staring out. Walker enters with a photograph in his hand.)*

WALKER. *(Calling out loudly.)* Lainie! This is great! This is fantastic! Thank you!

LAINIE. It’s just a picture.

WALKER. Are you kidding? Michael and Jim Mathison together at the University of Beirut? You never told me you had this.

LAINIE. I didn’t see any reason to --

WALKER. Look at it. They’ve got their arms around each other, they look warm, human, vulnerable – it’s perfect.

LAINIE. Walker --
WALKER. We've got to bring this along. They'll want to use it on the show, I know it.

LAINIE. You think so?

WALKER. They'd kill for it. It's got everything you want: simple, affecting – this'll communicate.

LAINIE. I don't want to bring it.

WALKER. You don't?

LAINIE. I look at that picture. I don't want it flashed all over the country.

WALKER. Why not? That's exactly what you want to do. It's the perfect one. It affects you. It'll affect other people. (She takes it from him.)

LAINIE. I'll find another one.

WALKER. No.

LAINIE. No?

WALKER. Either you're going to do this or you're not. You have a chance to make a statement here. But it's only going to be heard if you make it as strong as possible. “Quietest Hostage Wife Speaks Out” is a headline. “Quietest Hostage Wife Sort Of Speaks Out” isn’t.

LAINIE. But this is a picture.

WALKER. Doesn't matter. It's all imagery. The pictures we choose, the copy we write, the interviews you give – it's all a matter of giving the proper image. That's how people think. Images – not ideas. Images.

LAINIE. (Of the pictures.) If I give this up, I give it up. I won't be able to look at it. (A beat. She gives it to him.)

WALKER. Good. Thanks. They'll pick this up everywhere, believe me. They'll run it all over – all the networks. This is the perfect time. Couldn't be more perfect. I was afraid this would all be over now, I really was.

LAINIE. Have they let anyone go? Women, children?

WALKER. Nobody. Not a one.

LAINIE. What if they decide to ... to -- ?

WALKER. Kill more of them? It's possible. But it's not all that likely. They've already made their point with the soldier. We know they're serious.

LAINIE. They could get nervous. Someone could make a mistake.

WALKER. No one's going to make a mistake. These things are rituals. Everyone knows the role they're playing. Our role is to get Michael into the deal. We can, too. We're going to help him – starting with this ... (Indicates the picture.) and one very intense interview. Come on – let's get you down to the studio. (He moves to leave,
LAINIE. What happens after the interview?

WALKER. Another interview. Maybe a lot of them.

LAINIE. And after that?

WALKER. Everybody. Everybody who asks. 7 o’clock, 11 o’clock, late night news shows. You name it.

LAINIE. And after that?

WALKER. I don’t know. Threatening phone calls from the State Department – or the White House, if we’re lucky.

LAINIE. And from the families of the new hostages. They’re going to hate me – you know that, don’t you? If I try to complicate this negotiation by insisting that Michael –

WALKER. Bullshit.

LAINIE. It’s not bullshit. They will.

WALKER. Do you care?

LAINIE. Of course I care. I know what they’re going through –

WALKER. How long have they been going through it? (A beat.) You’ve been in line. It’s your turn, too – not just theirs. (Michael enters, handcuffed but not blindfolded. Walker is oblivious to him, but Lainie sees him. Michael smiles at her, goes and lies down on the mat, closing his eyes.)

LAINIE. All right.

WALKER. (Taking her by the hand, exiting.) Come on. Believe me, you’ll get used to it. (They exit. Michael suddenly bolts straight up, screaming.)

MICHAEL. LAINIE!! LAINIE!! (A beat. He looks around fearfully, as though expecting someone to enter. When no one does, he relaxes slightly.) They moved me again. That’s why I dreamed. They have a box that they put me in when they move me. It’s the shape of a coffin. And it’s soundproof. The first time they tried it, they put the box in the back of a van with a bad exhaust system. I was unconscious when they took me out. I know this is an illusion, but sometimes – usually right in the middle of the night – it occurs to me that I don’t know, I don’t absolutely know, whether I’m alive or dead. (A beat.) They brought Mathison here – you know that? No, of course you don’t. I never actually saw him. They moved him into a room just down the hall. I could hear him go by once a day when they took him to the bathroom. He said something in the hall the first time he passed it. “Mathison!” Once, real loud. It got very silent in the hall. Then the sound of them shoving him out,
and then my door opened. Two guards came into my room and beat me. They never would admit he'd been there. But I knew. I heard him. He heard me. (Lights fade out on Michael.)

Scene Two

(Lights up on the empty room. Walker enters, carrying a glass of champagne. He calls out.)

WALKER. Hey, Lainie! Come in here! What are you doing?

LAINIE. (Off.) I’m getting some coffee.

WALKER. Coffee?

LAINIE. (Off.) We need to sober up.

WALKER. Why!? We did it! We got the message out! We put those bastards on the spot. They’re going to have to ask for everybody – I know it!

LAINIE. (Entering with a cup of coffee.) I can’t remember the last time I had alcohol.

WALKER. (Holding his glass towards her.) Have some more. I’m sure it’s a very good month.

LAINIE. No, thanks. This’ll be fine. (Gradually a silence surrounds them. They look at each other, can’t help a smile and a slight laugh.)

WALKER. You were fantastic. Fantastic. Everybody in America felt for you. And that picture. Was I right or what? The cameramen were tearing up.

LAINIE. They were not.

WALKER. They were. I saw tears. Sixty-year-old union guys. Men who’ve seen every disgusting, pitiful atrocity that ever happened. I bet they haven’t cried since the doctor hit’em. But they cried tonight. For Michael. For you.

LAINIE. No one has to cry for me.

WALKER. They do. That’s the point. That’s the power. You have whatever it takes. You have authority. People feel what you say. You can’t help it. They look at you, and they trust what you say.

LAINIE. What if what I say isn’t for the best?

WALKER. They'll believe it anyway. Right now – not a week ago, not a week from now – but now, this instant, people believe what you say. They're moved by it. They may even act on it. How do you think things happen in the world? They happen because every once in awhile enormous numbers of people become ready to hear something. And if you've got what they're ready to hear, then you're a very powerful person.

LAINIE. Walker --
WALKER. Use it. You have to use it. You have to push at the ones who are pushing you.

LAINIE. No one’s pushing me.

WALKER. Nothing in this world happens because it ought to. You have to push people into it. Right now, you have a quality that lets you push. You have a thing to say, and the means to say it. If you’re lucky, when you look back on it, it’ll have been moral. If not, too bad – you made your best guess.

LAINIE. When did you first decide I had this … quality?

WALKER. First time we talked.

LAINIE. And that’s why you’ve kept at this? With me?

WALKER. Lainie --

LAINIE. I mean it. Is that all this has been? You’ve just been waiting for me to … blossom into some kind of spokesperson for you?

WALKER. Not for me, for yourself. For Michael. How do you think you’re going to get him back? ESP? You going to pray he’ll show up? He won’t. You’ll get him back when you make this government uncomfortable enough to make some other government uncomfortable enough to lean on somebody – that’s it. (She stares at her coffee.)

LAINIE. You’ll write a lot of articles now, won’t you? No matter how it comes out.

WALKER. Yes, I will. That’s my job. That’s how I push. (A beat.) So look – in my business, when you make the government uncomfortable you drink champagne, not coffee. What do you say? (He offers her his glass. She doesn’t take it.)

LAINIE. Go home.

WALKER. Go home?

LAINIE. I don’t feel like celebrating.

WALKER. Why not?

LAINIE. Because for all I know, I haven’t done anything more than risk the lives of innocent people tonight. That’s no reason to celebrate.

WALKER. That’s not what you were saying earlier.

LAINIE. Earlier I didn’t think I was with someone who – (She stops herself.)

WALKER. Someone who what? Who what, Lainie?

LAINIE. Who makes friends just so he can … push.

WALKER. I have to be able to do my job. It’s a world of work, Lainie.

LAINIE. It’s a world of crime. We call it work so we can keep doing it. (A beat.)
WALKER. I’m sorry you feel this way. I think I’ve been pretty damn patient, all things considered. I’ve waited a year for a story that …


WALKER. I know! That’s why I’m writing about the stupid shit!! (A long beat.) Lainie? (A beat. He takes a hesitant step towards her, pulls back.) I’ll call you in the morning. (He exits quickly upstage with the champagne, his glass and her cup. Lainie sits on the mat thoughtfully for a moment, then lies back on it, and closes her eyes. Lights change, isolating her on the mat.)

LAINIE. Michael? The first time I saw you, time turned a corner. I’d always thought of it as gray, impassive. But it wasn’t. When I married you, I felt as though time were our child. That somehow we could … (She stops, sits up.) We could shape it to our lives. (Lights fade. In the darkness we hear Walker’s voice. When lights rise, Lainie is sitting in a corner on the floor.)

WALKER. (Off.) Lainie? It’s me, Walker. Can I come in? (Off.) Lainie? (Off.) Your car’s in the garage; I know you’re here. (Off.) Lainie? (After a moment, Walker enters. He looks at Lainie with concern but not surprise.) It’s not a defeat. It’s a step closer. (No response. He moves to her.) They released Mathison. Plus everybody from the charter terminal. That’s a step. They recognized a linkage. They bargained. We can take credit for that. You’re as responsible as anyone that Jim Mathison’s free now.

LAINIE. Why him?

WALKER. No one knows. (A beat.) You haven’t been answering your phone.

LAINIE. Reporters call. (Of the mat.) I can’t see him anymore. All morning I haven’t been able to feel him. I can’t remember what he looks like.

WALKER. He’ll come back. I know he will. (She moves to the mat on all fours, places a hand at its center.)

LAINIE. He may as well have disappeared into the earth. Right here. On this spot. I would feel more hope.

WALKER. Lainie, he’s … For God’s sake, we got Mathison back.

LAINIE. Did you see the President? On the news? “We have them back now, after eight harrowing days of captivity.”

WALKER. Plus Mathison.

LAINIE. Is that what they tell mothers of dead soldiers? “Your boy’s dead, but don’t worry – the one right next to him was just fine.”

WALKER. I’m just saying that Mathison --

LAINIE. I didn’t do this for Mathison! HE’S NOT MINE! (A beat. She collapses on the mat, crying. Walker hesitates, moves to the door, stops, moves to her. He strokes her shoulder and arm awkwardly, tenderly. She is on her side, facing away from him. He stares up and away while she cries. As her crying abates, his stroking moves to
her hair. After a moment, she moves closer to him, so that her head rests on his lap. She slowly grows silent as he continues to stroke her hair. Lights fade to black. Lights back up on Michael sitting alone on the mat.)

MICHAEL. Sometimes I wake up with the most intense desire to know what day it is. Sunday? Thursday? I feel like I’m going to die the next minute if I don’t find out. Other times I’ll wake up and suddenly realize that months have gone by – must have gone by – since I last had a conscious thought about time. It makes me feel like the astronaut who travels forty years at the speed of light and then returns, no older. “What’s happened to everyone?” he must think. “Time must be for them, not me.” I never thought of time as a coat you could take off and put on again. Too cold to live without it – so we all keep it on. We hug it to ourselves, because if we can’t … (A beat.) Time is change. That’s all it is. When there’s no change. When there’s no change … Yesterday one of my guards told me I’d been here three years. (A beat.) I didn’t know what he meant. (Lights fade to black. They come back quickly again on Lainie and Walker. Lainie is very agitated.)

WALKER. I don’t think it means anything.

LAINIE. What do you mean, it doesn’t mean anything? They said they were going to kill him!

WALKER. It’s a radio report. They’ve been wrong dozens of times. They’re almost never right.

LAINIE. What if they’re right this time?

WALKER. It’s a tactic. That’s all it is. We hit them, they threaten the hostages. Nothing happens. It’s just a pressure game.

LAINIE. This isn’t a threat. They said they were going to kill him.

WALKER. That announcement didn’t even come from his captors. It came from an entirely different faction. They wouldn’t even know where he is, let alone how he is.

LAINIE. Oh, God – I can’t stand this. I can’t. Not knowing – this is …. Oh, GOD!!

WALKER. Lainie – (She moves away from him, pacing the room with increasing agitation.)

LAINIE. There is a circle of hell for these people. There is a circle of hell so deep --

WALKER. Lainie, calm down --

LAINIE. NO!!

WALKER. You know, there might even be an advantage in this.

LAINIE. Advantage!!

WALKER. Listen to me! A false story’s been broadcast. Michael’s kidnappers may have to show pictures of him alive now. There could be a video tape, or --

LAINIE. And if there’s nothing?
WALKER. That doesn’t mean anything, either. They can play this a lot of different ways. The point is, they've kept him for three years. And now they're just going to kill him? When they've got nothing to gain? It’s not rational.

LAINIE. What’s rational about killing? (A beat.) I want to go on TV. I want to talk to somebody. To everybody. I want to --

WALKER. You shouldn’t do that.

LAINIE. Why not?!

WALKER. Nothing’s known yet. We have to wait and find out the status of things.

LAINIE. Status?!

WALKER. We killed one of their people. I don’t think Michael’s captors want to hear from any American right now – even you.

LAINIE. I didn’t kill anyone.

WALKER. We did. The country did. We have to wait for some time to pass.

LAINIE. How am I supposed to sleep? Till we hear. How am I supposed to live? Not knowing.

WALKER. I don’t know. But that’s the situation we’re in. They can say he’s alive, they can say he’s dead --

LAINIE. They can say anything! They can do anything ... to him. (A beat.) We should obliterate the city.

WALKER. Lainie --

LAINIE. Why not?!?! Don’t you want to?!?! Lebanon, the Middle East – let’s get rid of it! (Walker grabs Lainie and hugs her to him tight.) I want to kill them.

WALKER. It’s all right.

LAINIE. I want to kill them.

WALKER. I know. It’s all right.

LAINIE. I want to kill a million people. (He continues to hold her. Reluctantly, her arms finally go around him. They freeze in this position. Michael enters – handcuffs, no blindfold. He circles them as he speaks, but doesn’t look at them. He finishes his speech staring out the window.)

MICHAEL. One night someone came to move me. It was no one I knew – none of my guards. I was blindfolded, but I could tell by his voice. He spoke English better than any of them. He said I had to be moved at once – that the Syrian Army might have learned where I was. He was nervous, but there was a softness in his voice, too. I think he was young. (A beat.) Some clothes were thrown on me and I was hustled into the back seat of a car by three men. All the voices were new – not one of them was familiar. It was actually a cool night. The feeling of being outside was incredible. I listened for anything – any sound, any voice – over the noise of the
car. Not because I was planning to escape. Just for the sheer, sensual pleasure of it. A sound, at random. A voice. Anything that was completely disconnected from my being a hostage. That just ... existed in the world. And I thought for some reason about all the things that always exist in the world simultaneously – with or without us. Innumerable parts of a system designed to not even recognize itself as a system. Dogs barking in the streets, wind in the shop awnings, people talking on corners, flowers letting go of their fragrance, people riding bicycles, pigeons mourning nobody we know, people driving in cars, people buying oranges, distant explosions, people carrying guns, people dying of poison gas, oceans rocking on their stems, people making love for the first time in their lives, people designing clothes-hangers, people designing the end of the world, people in movie theaters, people singing in languages we don’t understand, insects filling the world – filling the world – people in restaurants ordering the best meal of their lives, people using the phone, petting their cats, holding each other in each other's arms. (A beat.) All of it, at once. (A beat.) They drove me to a quiet neighborhood and shoved me into a building. I was taken down, still blindfolded, to a small, cramped room that smelled like ... clay, and I was shot to death. (Michael exits, but now upstage. He passes through the “wall” of the room. Lights fade to black.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise. Lainie is staring out the window. Walker enters with a letter.)

WALKER. The President sent a letter.

LAINIE. Burn it.

WALKER. Michael’s casket will arrive at Andrews Air Force base tomorrow morning. They are planning a short ceremony --

LAINIE. No.

WALKER. Lainie -

LAINIE. Just go.

WALKER. I don’t think you should be alone.

LAINIE. I’m not. (A beat.)

WALKER. What about tomorrow? I’ll drive you to the Air Force base.

LAINIE. Thank you. You should go now.

WALKER. Are you sure? (She nods, stares at the mat. He looks around the room.) I’ll call you later. All right? Lainie? (A beat.) Lainie? (She moves to the mat, kneels down beside it, stares at it. Walker studies her for a moment, then leaves. Lainie’s hand strokes through the air, as though caressing Michael’s face. At this point, Michael enters upstage, silently. He moves to the mat and reclines on it, so that her hand
now strokes his hair.)

LAINIE. I think my favorite is the African hornbill.

MICHAEL. Of all birds. Why?

LAINIE. After they mate, the male walls the female up, in the hollow of a tree. He literally imprisons her. And all through the weeks of incubating the eggs, he flies off and finds food, and brings it back and feeds her – through a little hole in the wall he’s built. After the eggs are hatched, he breaks down the wall again, and the whole family is united for the first time. You see? It hasn't been a prison at all. It’s been … a fortress.

MICHAEL. Their devotion, you mean?

LAINIE. Their devotion. (He smiles, closes his eyes. She continues to stroke his hair. Lights fade to black.)

The End