

THE ARTICLE IN QUESTION

a play in two acts
by Tom Rowan

-OPENING SCENE ONLY-

Draft Three: August, 2013

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CHARACTERS:

LEONARD LOBEL: A highly-respected oceanographer and atmospheric physicist who pioneered the study of climate change. Early 80s.

J. CURTIS REINING: A former physicist and college professor, now a renowned skeptic on the science of global warming. Mid 60s.

JORDAN WHITAKER: Lobel's research and teaching assistant, a postdoctoral scholar working on a theory of evolutionary thermodynamics. Early 30s.

DAWN WARREN: Jordan's girlfriend, later his wife; a graduate student. 20s.

MARTHA BURDEN: Professor Lobel's longtime secretary and assistant. Mid 50s.

DOUGLAS CAVENAUGH: A colleague of Lobel's in the Department of Oceanography. Late 50s.

ANDREA BYERS: a lawyer representing Professor Reiner. Early 40s.

SETTING: Various locations in and around a university campus in Southern California

TIME: 1988-1993

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

(The quad at the University of California; a sunny summer day in the late 1980s. JORDAN is comfortably camped out on a beach towel with a stack of books, a bag of chips, a bottle of coke, and a hand-painted sign, mounted on a stick and reading "Save the Ozone." His boom box is cranking the song "Everybody Wants to Rule the World," by Tears for Fears.

After a moment, LEONARD LOBEL enters. A tall and distinguished scientist, he is dressed in a suit and tie despite the hot weather, and is smoking a cigarette. He is in conversation with DAWN, an attractive undergraduate dressed in shorts, sandals, and a T-shirt.)

LOBEL

Miss Warren, it's been a pleasure. I think your ideas about shoreline habitat conservation are quite intriguing. And original.

DAWN

Well what you said in the panel discussion totally inspired me! And your book...! I've read it twice already. That's why I'm trying so hard to get into your Marine Policy class.

LOBEL

(Shaking his head) It's already at capacity. There's usually a long waiting list, and priority goes to graduate students.

DAWN

Do you think you could pull any strings?

LOBEL

It's too late for this semester, I'm afraid. And you haven't yet taken Environmental Policy. Which is a prerequisite.

DAWN

Is there a waiting list for that too?

LOBEL

Probably, but that one's usually shorter, given that there are two sections. (Beat) I'll tell you what; I'll speak to the Dean.

DAWN

Ohmygosh, I would appreciate that so much.

LOBEL

I'm afraid I can't guarantee anything at this late date. But I do hate to say no to anyone, especially someone as excited about ecology as you seem to be--

DAWN

It's who I am.

LOBEL

And I believe in encouraging that. (Notices JORDAN) Good afternoon, Mr. Whitaker.

JORDAN

(Looking up) Hey, Professor Lobel.

LOBEL

What are we protesting today? Or is this just an excuse for getting some sun?

JORDAN

Chlorofluorocarbons. Senator Wilson is on campus for a televised speech, so a group of us set up a rally to demand ratification of the Montreal Protocol.

LOBEL

Sounds commendable. And I trust you're not neglecting your paper on the coral reefs.

JORDAN

Got it right here. It'll be in your box Monday.

LOBEL

Jordan, this is Dawn Warren. Dawn, my graduate assistant, Jordan Whitaker. This is fortuitous; I've been meaning to introduce the two of you.

DAWN

Nice to meet you, Jordan.

JORDAN

Same. (To LOBEL, interested) You thought of introducing us why? Not that it doesn't seem like an excellent idea...

LOBEL

Dawn shares your interest in environmental causes. (To DAWN) So all I'll say is that although the student body here has never been particularly noted for a commitment to activism--especially in comparison with certain other campuses in the University of California system--Jordan here has taken it upon himself to close the gap. The two of you should talk.

JORDAN

I'd like that.

LOBEL

And in case your efforts today prove unsuccessful, I'm headed inside to my office. (He stubs out his cigarette.) I'm afraid I subject myself to enough carcinogens without courting melanoma as well.

JORDAN

You should quit those things.

LOBEL

We all have lists of things we should have done and would have were we wiser and stronger. (Smiles) Have a chat. Enjoy the sun. Get some work done.

(He goes.)

DAWN

I like him.

JORDAN

Merely a genius. He's the reason I'm here.

DAWN

Really? So you're in Oceanography?

JORDAN

Finishing up my master's. Then straight into the PhD program.

DAWN

I'm Biological Sciences--but I'm focusing on endangered species, so I want to learn as much as I can about environmental policy before I graduate. I adore his book. And everybody says his class is one of the best in the catalog.

JORDAN

It should be. I teach it.

DAWN

(Confused) You? But how...?

JORDAN

I'm his head TA. I lead one of the discussion sections and occasionally he'll let me take a lecture. More often this year than last; he's been out a few times dealing with health issues.

DAWN

Oh no. Is he--?

JORDAN

Nothing too serious. He trusts me, though. Would you like to sit?

DAWN

Sure, I guess. (He makes room on his beach towel and she joins him.) I like your sign. Did you paint it yourself?

JORDAN

No; my girlfriend.

DAWN

(Trying not to sound disappointed) Oh.

JORDAN

Again, nothing serious. (Beat) The relationship I mean. The issue is.

DAWN

I've had nightmares about it.

JORDAN

It is a nightmare. But the good thing is we're getting attention this time. People are finally starting to acknowledge that the garbage we're pumping into the atmosphere can fuck it up faster than we thought. So to speak.

DAWN

You know what though? I read a sort of interesting article last week that said it might not actually be as bad as they've been saying.

JORDAN

What might not?

DAWN

Some people think there really isn't a hole in the ozone layer at all. That natural circulation of air currents into the stratosphere like moves the ozone around or whatever, so even if there is depletion over Antarctica, it could be just temporary. Or something.

JORDAN

And you believed this?

DAWN

I don't know! It was in the Wall Street Journal...

JORDAN

Oh, well in that case...!

DAWN

Don't laugh at me.

JORDAN

Don't believe everything you read. There are NASA satellites collecting stratospheric data all over the world. If the ozone from over Antarctica was just moving around, they would have measured increases someplace else.

DAWN

That makes sense, I guess. (Beat) I don't know; it just seems like a complicated issue, compared to what I'm used to anyway.

JORDAN

Oh yeah? What are you used to?

DAWN

I don't know...

JORDAN

Come on. What was the last protest you went to?

DAWN

The spotted owl!

JORDAN

What?? That one got very complicated!

DAWN

Not to me.

JORDAN

(Beat. He nods approvingly.) A woman with convictions! But like I was saying: there could be an upside to this ozone thing.

DAWN

Seriously?

JORDAN

Sure. Congress has already banned CFCs. And now that people are recognizing how quickly this kind of damage can happen, I think there's a good chance the government might finally start paying more attention to greenhouse warming--which is going to be an even bigger problem, believe me.

DAWN

Bigger than the depletion of the ozone?

JORDAN

Bigger than anything we've ever dealt with. (Beat) Do you have any idea how much water would be released into the oceans if the polar ice caps melted? A coastal community like San Diego could be under water in less than a hundred years.

DAWN

So what are we going to do about that?

JORDAN

“We” meaning you and me?

DAWN

I was thinking more the human race?

JORDAN

Well to start, we’ve got to slow down the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

DAWN

(Nods) Which means--

JORDAN

Drastically reducing the use of fossil fuels.

DAWN

Which would put a lot of people out of work.

JORDAN

Out of work is one thing. Not having a habitable planet to live on...

DAWN

You sound like you know a lot about this.

JORDAN

I’m learning more all the time, from Leonard. Professor Lobel.

DAWN

You call him by his first name?

JORDAN

Stick with me and you’ll meet plenty of important people. Leonard’s served on a bunch of government advisory panels--even chaired a couple. He’s got a direct line to top level government in Washington. Want some chips?

DAWN

Sure. (She takes a handful from the bag.) So is that why you chose the program here? Access to the political world?

JORDAN

No. I knew I had to study with Professor Lobel because he’s brilliant. That’s what excites me more than anything else: interfacing with people who are smarter than I am.

DAWN

I’m guessing you haven’t had the chance to do that too often?

JORDAN

Not till I got here.

DAWN

(Almost laughs) Apparently you don't believe in false modesty.

JORDAN

I don't believe in false anything. There's always too much noise out there trying to distract us and obscure the truth. The scientist's job is to find a way to get past that, listen through it and hear what's really going on underneath. And then when you find something that feels true, you test it, you find out if you're right. And if you are, you tell as many people as you can get to listen. Like today.

DAWN

(Nods) It's up to us to fight the good fight.

JORDAN

Exactly.

DAWN

(Looking around) Although... I don't know, doesn't it seem kind of quiet? I've only seen a couple other people with signs; where is everybody?

JORDAN

Aw, it's like Leonard says: this campus is a disappointment! Too mellow for its own good.

DAWN

But don't you think most of the country is? Anymore anyway. The eighties feel so complacent! Reagan sucked the life out of this country and I think Bush is going to be almost as bad.

JORDAN

What?! They inspired me!--to get angry. You should have seen me in undergrad; I was a diehard nuclear freeze activist.

DAWN

Me too! (They high five.) But compared to my mom and dad... They did the whole Power to the People thing in the sixties! The peace marches, the civil rights rallies...

JORDAN

Drugs, free sex...

DAWN

We missed out on something! Don't you think?

JORDAN

(Smiles) So you wish you'd been born in time to be a flower child?

DAWN

(Thinks) Well, maybe not. Because then I'd be in my forties now and that's... too awful to even think about.

JORDAN

I don't know. You have an excellent bone structure. I think you'll be just as attractive at forty as you are today.

DAWN

Was that a compliment?

JORDAN

Just a hypothesis. Possibly worth testing.

DAWN

So what do you think Professor Lobel was thinking?

JORDAN

About what?

DAWN

Was this a set-up or something? I mean didn't he say he'd been wanting to introduce us...?

JORDAN

Oh, I think Leonard Lobel has more pressing things on his mind than playing matchmaker for a couple of grad students.

DAWN

Um: I'm still an undergrad. Junior, actually.

JORDAN

Hmm. And trying to weasel your way into advanced seminars! I like that in a girl. (Beat) I'm thinking Leonard saw two passionate activists and thought we'd have something to talk about. He's counting on people like us to have an impact.

DAWN

So when is this thing starting? I shouldn't sit out in the sun too long; I tend to burn.

JORDAN

Don't worry; I've got sunscreen.

DAWN

Sure you don't mind?

JORDAN

Slather it on.

DAWN

(Squeezing some sunscreen out of the bottle) We don't have to talk if you need to work on your paper.

JORDAN

I'm always working on my paper.

DAWN

Coral reefs?

JORDAN

I can crank that one out over the weekend. This one's my baby.

DAWN

Your what?

JORDAN

It's an idea I've been developing since high school. Evolutionary Thermodynamics.

DAWN

That sounds complicated.

JORDAN

Simplest thing there is, really. It's a way of looking at human society as a living entity, an organism. We're all component parts of it, the same way every one of your organs is a component part of you.

DAWN

Should you be talking about my organs? We don't know each other very well yet...

JORDAN

(Trying not to smile) Do you want to hear about this or not?

DAWN

Sure I do. I was just--

JORDAN

It's what I want to do my thesis on, if they'll let me. It's about taking Darwin down to the simplest elemental level. What if evolution is just carbon and hydrogen wanting to combine with oxygen? That's how you get fire. That's where life begins.

DAWN

Fire isn't alive.

JORDAN

Isn't it? Fire wants to grow; it does grow. It fights you when you try to put it out, doesn't it? It's called oxidation: rust grows the same way. So do organisms. So do cities.

DAWN

What does that have to do with evolution?

JORDAN

Everything! Animals burn energy to live; they're a result--excuse me, we are a result of oxidation of carbohydrates. Each level leads to the next emergence, and they all function according to the same fundamental laws. It may even begin at the subatomic level--and it doesn't end with the social level. Life will find new ways to sustain itself, whether we like it or not. Energy is drawn to energy.

DAWN

(Looking into his eyes) I can feel that. (Looks away; slightly embarrassed) I mean I can see that, what you... what you were talking about.

JORDAN

It can take a while to get your head around it. But once you do, everything starts making sense for the first time. The evidence is plain as day--at every level.

DAWN

You sound like a lawyer.

JORDAN

That's 'cause I am one.

DAWN

You're what? Wait a minute, I thought you said you were a grad student in Oceanography.

JORDAN

I am now. I got a law degree when I was twenty-three and practiced for a year. Couldn't stand it.

DAWN

Twenty-three?! How did you get through law school that young?

JORDAN

Disrespect for authority, mainly.

DAWN

(Confused) Okay...

JORDAN

Well it helped that I skipped second grade. And then in eighth grade, I was challenging the teachers so often I got kicked out of school.

DAWN

Challenging them about what?

JORDAN

Not knowing what the fuck they were talking about! That school was a joke.

DAWN

(Grins) So they expelled you??

JORDAN

Well they couldn't do that exactly, because I had a straight A average. But I was embarrassing them so often they couldn't keep me around. So they kicked me up to the high school just to get me out of their hair. And then at fifteen I graduated.

DAWN

Wow. But you didn't like being a lawyer?

JORDAN

I was wasting my time arguing about things that didn't matter.

DAWN

So you applied here and got accepted?

JORDAN

Got rejected you mean.

DAWN

(Beat) How come every single thing you say confuses me?

JORDAN

I've always had trouble taking No for an answer. So five years ago this June I got on my bike--with the rejection letter in my backpack--and pedaled cross country from Vermont.

DAWN

Oh my gosh! All the way...

JORDAN

All the way to California, with the wind in my face most of the time--greatest experience I've ever had by the way, next to skiing, or sex; I highly recommend it. Anyway, I ended up crashing for a few weeks on my cousin David's couch in Santa Barbara. He introduced me to Leonard and the rest--

DAWN

“Skiing or sex”??

JORDAN

Say what?

DAWN

You said the greatest experience next to skiing or sex. You must... really love to ski?

JORDAN

Used to. Haven't in years. Came close to making the Olympic team when I was in college...

DAWN

Jeez! So what else are you brilliant at?

JORDAN

(Smiles) Picking restaurants. And I know a thing or two about wine. What would you say to an early dinner? We could get changed and--

DAWN

What about the rally?

JORDAN

What rally?

DAWN

(Tapping his sign) The Save the Ozone rally, numbskill--why are we sitting here?

JORDAN

It ended an hour ago.

DAWN

What?? Why didn't you tell me that?

JORDAN

You didn't ask.

DAWN

Um, okay. So what are you still doing here?

JORDAN

Just using an excuse to soak up some rays while there's still enough ozone left to keep me from frying.

DAWN

That's what Professor Lobel said.

JORDAN

Leonard tends to be right.

DAWN

(Pretending to be more irritated than she really is) But why did you tell me that--

JORDAN

I said I was here for the rally! I didn't say I was still waiting for it to start; you inferred that. With the result that you sat down to spend some highly enjoyable time with me.

DAWN

You really are a lawyer, aren't you?

JORDAN

Like I said: energy is drawn to energy.

**-CONTINUED-
END OF SAMPLE SCENE**