

THE ARTICLE IN QUESTION

a play in two acts

by Tom Rowan

[OPENING SCENE ONLY]

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CHARACTERS:

LEONARD LOBEL: A renowned oceanographer, geologist and geochemist who pioneered the study of climate change. Early 80s.

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

JORDAN WHITAKER: Lobel's research and teaching assistant, a graduate student 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. 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 spring day in 1988. 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, blonde undergraduate dressed in shorts, sandals, and a T-shirt.)

LOBEL

Dawn, it's been a pleasure. You ask very provocative questions.

DAWN

Well what you said in the panel discussion totally inspired me! And your *book*...! I've read it twice already. *(Hinting)* Which is why I've been trying so hard to get into your Marine Policy class. The summer term.

LOBEL

(Shaking his head) I know, but it's already full. There's always a long waiting list, and priority goes to graduate students.

DAWN

My name's on the list already. Do you think you could pull any strings?

LOBEL

(Beat) I'll tell you what; I'll check with the Dean.

DAWN

Ohmygosh, I would appreciate that so much.

LOBEL

I'm afraid I can't guarantee anything. But I do hate to say no, and when a person's as excited about ecology as you certainly seem to be--

DAWN

It's who I am. Totally.

LOBEL

Then I believe in encouraging that. *(Notices JORDAN)* Good afternoon, Jordan.

JORDAN

(Looking up) Hey, Leonard.

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 bunch 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 seems 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 totally amazing.

JORDAN

It should be. I teach it.

DAWN

(Confused) You? What are--?

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 anybody thought. So to speak.

DAWN

D'you know what though? I read a sort of interesting article last week that said it might not actually be that bad.

JORDAN

What might not?

DAWN

Some scientists 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! It just seems like a complicated issue, compared to what I'm used to anyway.

JORDAN

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

(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 they're 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.

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

(A friendly challenge) 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 few--and he was Science Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior under JFK. He's got a direct line to top level government in Washington. 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 Leonard because he's brilliant. That's what excites me more than anything: 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 tell as many people as you can get to listen.

DAWN

Like today! *(Looking around)* Doesn't it seem kind of quiet though? 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

I know, right? But 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?! Those guys 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... (*She makes a face.*)

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

JORDAN

Don't worry; we've got sunscreen.

DAWN

Sure you don't mind?

JORDAN

Slather it on.

DAWN

(*Squeezing some sunscreen out of his 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... well, since high school, actually. Evolutionary Thermodynamics.

DAWN

Sounds complicated.

JORDAN

Simplest thing there is, really. It's a way of looking at human society as an organism, a living entity. 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 atoms of 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 grows; it wants to grow; it fights you when you try to put it out, doesn't it? *(Beat)* It's called oxidation: rust grows the same way, actually. And so do organisms.

DAWN

What does that have to do with evolution? (*She takes a couple more chips.*)

JORDAN

Everything! Animals are the result--excuse me, *we* are a result--of little cells that oxidize carbohydrates--

DAWN

(*Chewing*) Like potato chips!

JORDAN

Exactly. Our bodies burn them to stay alive. So then we form communities, and in the same way towns, and *cities*, burn oil and coal to stay alive--and to grow. Each level leads to the next layer of emergence, and I believe they all function according to exactly the same fundamental laws. It may even begin at the subatomic level--and the thing is: *it doesn't end with the social level.* (*Mysteriously*) The planet will find ways to sustain itself.

DAWN

(*Not sure she knows what he means*) Whether we like it or not?

JORDAN

Exactly! (*Beat*) 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. When you said that.

JORDAN

It can take a while to get your head around it. But once you do, everything starts to make sense. The evidence is plain as day.

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 didn't want me around. "An untenable situation"--that was what they called it. 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

Actually I got rejected.

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 my way cross country.

DAWN

Oh my gosh! From...

JORDAN

From *Vermont*. All the way to California, with the wind in my face most days. 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, numbskull--why are we sitting here?

JORDAN

It ended an hour ago.

DAWN

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

JORDAN

You didn't ask.

DAWN

Jordan.

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

(Shrugs) Energy is drawn to energy. *(They look at each other as the lights fade.)*

INTERLUDE

(We hear the sound of applause in a large lecture hall. Lights come up on a podium, above which hangs a banner carrying the words "AAAS New Orleans 1990." LEONARD LOBEL is standing at the podium, with some notes in front of him, to which he refers occasionally. He smiles at the audience.)

LOBEL

Thank you, Henry, for that... extremely generous introduction. *(He looks at his notes and clears his throat.)* There is a good though not certain chance that the Earth's average climate will, over the course of the next hundred years, become substantially warmer. *(Slight pause, as he looks out at the audience's faces.)* This would be due to the rapidly increasing concentrations of what are now popularly referred to as "greenhouse gases" in the earth's atmosphere. Research and data collection between now and the end of the millennium should help us to determine more accurately the magnitude of atmospheric warming that we can expect during the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, it would behoove us to explore ways to *mitigate* and *delay* this potential change, and its conceivably substantial effects, both on our environment and on our society. And that's what we're here to talk about today. *(He turns a page of his notes as the light on him fades out)*

END OF EXCERPT