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VENTILATOR BLUES

[EXCERPT]

by

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## CHARACTERS

ALICE	60s
GRACE	Alice's daughter, late 30s or early 40s
VOICE	Computer generated, but sounds male
OTHER MALE VOICES	Various voices heard over speakers or live from offstage (may be played by the same actor)
FEMALE VOICES	Prerecorded voices heard over speakers

## SETTING

Two detention cells. The walls are whitewashed cinderblock. There is one door upstage and another, smaller door to the side. There is a chair in the center of each room, a bucket in the corner, a drain in the floor, and a speaker on the wall.

## TIME

A little ahead of and maybe to one side of the present.

Sudden, brief blackouts between scenes. Intermission may be taken after Scene 16.

NOTE ON OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE: A double slash (“//”) indicates the point at which the following line starts overlapping.

## SCENE 1

(Lights up bright in both cells. In one cell, ALICE sits on the chair. She is dressed in a gray jumpsuit. A thick stack of papers rests on her lap. It appears that she has been sitting there a long time. Shielding her eyes against the light, she looks around the space above her.)

(The other cell is unoccupied. A thick document rests on the chair.)

(ALICE begins to idly browse through the document on her lap. Over the speaker in ALICE's cell, a two-note WHISTLE is heard, as though someone is trying to get her attention. ALICE stops browsing through the document, squares the corners and rests her hands on top of it. She stares straight ahead.)

(A moment.)

(From offstage, footsteps are heard. ALICE turns her head at the sound. The WHISTLE. [It sounds identical to the previous one—a prerecorded sound.] ALICE assumes her previous posture, staring into space. Footsteps fade.)

(A moment.)

(The door to the unoccupied cell opens, revealing GRACE in a small vestibule. She wears a gray jumpsuit. She enters the space uncertainly. The door closes. GRACE stands near the chair. She looks around the room, first at the walls, then the floor, and then up toward the ceiling.)

(Meanwhile, ALICE's head has drooped forward. The document falls from her lap onto the floor. The WHISTLE. ALICE starts awake. She takes a moment to orient herself. The WHISTLE again. Realizing where she is, ALICE jumps out of the chair and gathers the papers from the floor. The WHISTLE again. She sits back in the chair and desperately tries to put the pages back in order.)

(A CHIME sounds: a gentle sound, like a quiet doorbell. GRACE reacts; ALICE, still ordering pages, does not hear it. GRACE looks up, shielding her eyes, trying to locate the source of the sound.)

(Over a speaker, a male VOICE, pleasant but firm, perhaps electronically generated but not overtly robotic. Only GRACE hears and reacts to it.)

VOICE

Grace Underwood.

GRACE

I want a lawyer.

VOICE

Have a seat.

GRACE

Let me have a lawyer.

VOICE

Please. Have a seat.

GRACE

I said I want a lawyer.

VOICE

Have a seat. Please. Then we'll begin.

GRACE

Not until you give me a goddamn lawyer.

VOICE

(brief pause)

If you need one, one will be provided.

GRACE

You're saying I don't need one?

Hello? Are you there?

If I don't need a lawyer, then let me go.

VOICE

(brief pause)

Grace Underwood.

GRACE

Let me call a lawyer or let me go.

VOICE

Please. Have a seat.

(Beat.)

GRACE

There's something on the chair.

VOICE

Have a seat. Then we'll begin.

GRACE

Begin what?

VOICE

(brief pause)

Have a seat. Please.

(Shielding her eyes, GRACE peers up at the ceiling.)

VOICE

(evenly, at a steady, unhurried pace)

Please. Have a seat. Have a seat. Please. Then we'll begin. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be done.

GRACE

And then I can go?

VOICE

The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be done.

(brief pause)

Have a seat. Please. Then we'll begin. Please. Have a seat. Then we'll begin. Please. Have a seat. Then we'll begin.

(GRACE sits on the floor. Brief pause.)

VOICE

On the chair.

GRACE

No.

VOICE

Please. On the chair.

GRACE

I'm comfortable here.

VOICE

Have a seat. On the chair. Then we'll begin.

GRACE

I am not moving until you let me call a lawyer.

VOICE

Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please.

(A moment. The chime sounds. ALICE does not react. A moment. The CHIME sounds, over and over, in an unhurried but steady and inexorable rhythm. Finally:)

GRACE

Stop it. Stop it! STOP IT! God! ENOUGH WITH THE GODDAMN RINGING!

(The CHIME continues. GRACE pounds on the door.)

HEY! LET ME OUT! LET ME GO, OR LET ME CALL A LAWYER! HEY! HEY! HEY! HEY!

(The CHIME continues. GRACE tips the chair forward, dumping the document onto the floor, and sits in the chair. The chime ceases. A prolonged silence.)

VOICE

Pick it up.

GRACE

Pick what up?

VOICE

(brief pause)

The document.

GRACE

Why?

VOICE

(brief pause)

Pick up the document. Then we'll begin. Please. Pick up the document. Then we'll begin. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be done. Please. Pick up the document. Please. Please. Please. Please. Please.

(A moment. The CHIME, over and over. GRACE relents, gathers the pages haphazardly together and sits in the chair.)

GRACE  
You happy?

VOICE  
(brief pause)  
Put the pages in order.

GRACE  
You're kidding me.

VOICE  
Please. Put the pages in order. Then we'll begin. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be done.

(A moment. The CHIME sounds. It sounds again. Again.)

GRACE  
For Christ's sake.

(GRACE begins ordering the pages. The chime ceases.)

(ALICE has finished ordering her pages. She stares straight ahead. Her head droops forward. The WHISTLE sounds. She starts awake.)

(Something on one of GRACE's pages has caught her attention. She reads more closely. Her mood shifts. She reads more pages. The CHIME sounds repeatedly through the following.)

GRACE  
What is this? How did you get this? Tell me! Where did this come from? I want a lawyer. Let me call a lawyer! You're going to let me have a lawyer and you're going to tell me where this came from. If you don't, I'm not giving you a goddamn thing!

(Chiming ceases. A moment.)  
Hello? Hello?

VOICE  
(brief pause)  
Have a seat. Please. In the chair. Put the pages in order. Then we'll begin. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll be done.

(GRACE stands, showing no signs of moving. Pause. Blackout.)

## SCENE 2

(GRACE stands, as at the end of the previous scene. She continues standing in this position through the end of this scene.)

(ALICE, on her back, in her cell, with one arm over her face, covering her eyes. She is asleep. In her cell, her document rests on the chair. A moment.)

## VOICE

Alice Underwood.

(ALICE stirs but does not wake.)

## VOICE

Alice Underwood.

(Beat.)

Alice Underwood.

(Pause. The WHISTLE. ALICE bolts awake, orients herself.)

## VOICE

Alice Underwood.

## ALICE

Yes?

## VOICE

Have a seat.

(ALICE hurries to the chair and sits, the document in her lap. She awaits instructions.)

## VOICE

Alice Underwood. Page eighteen, line seven. Please begin.

(ALICE finds the place in the document.)

(NOTE: Whenever GRACE or ALICE reads from a document, she is not attempting to “perform” or “re-enact” the text. The general idea is that she is reading it into the record in a courtroom, although her current circumstances, state of mind, etc., may color her reading.)

ALICE

(reading from the document)

“should be in bed. You have school tomorrow.

“Shane Samuelson: I couldn’t sleep.

“Alice Underwood: That’s why we made that rule, no screens after ten o’clock.

“Shane Samuelson: I wasn’t... I had a nightmare, too.

“Alice Underwood: Oh.

“Grace Underwood: About when they took you in?

“Shane Samuelson: No, about when the raccoon got in the basement.

“Grace Underwood: That happened months ago.

“Alice Underwood: That raccoon’s long gone, Shane. Grace took care of it. It’s not coming back.

“Shane Samuelson: I // know, but”—

VOICE

Thank you.

(brief pause)

Please explain.

## SCENE 3

(GRACE stands, as at the end of the previous scene. She appears to have been standing like this for a long time.)

(ALICE is doing yoga.)

(Long pause. ALICE gets into a different yoga pose.)

(GRACE's strength starts to flag; she starts to sink to the floor. The CHIME sounds. She stands back up.)

(Pause. ALICE gets into a different pose.)

(GRACE starts to sink to the floor. The CHIME sounds. She sits. The CHIME continues to sound, over and over. With great effort, GRACE rises. The CHIME ceases. GRACE tries to stand, wobbles. She stands behind the chair, holding onto its back for support.)

(The CHIME sounds. It sounds again. And again.)

(GRACE backs away from the chair; the chime ceases. GRACE tries to stand, wobbles. She approaches the chair, ready for the chime, which does not sound. She picks up the document and sits in the chair.)

## VOICE

(brief pause)

Thank you. Let's begin.

(Blackout.)

## SCENE 4

(ALICE is wiping the floor and walls of her cell with a rag. GRACE sits upright, the document on her lap.)

GRACE

(reading from the document)

“—that the gas riots had come to New Jericho. I was down at the Gas-N-Go on County 12. Cars lined up for five miles, their tanks all empty. I was inside, buying yarn.

“Grace Underwood: At the Gas-N-Go?

“Alice Underwood: It made sense at the time. The National Guard was there to enforce the ration. There was a shout, an explosion, and then gunfire. I started to run, and then everything sort of skipped ahead, and I was watching everything from above. The mob surged forward, like a wave breaking over the soldiers. Then I woke up.

“[six-second silence.]

“Grace Underwood: I can tell you one thing. Diet Coke isn’t going to help you get back to sleep.

“Alice Underwood: What // was that”—

VOICE

Thank you.

(brief pause)

Please explain.

GRACE

Isn’t it obvious?

VOICE

Please explain.

GRACE

I mean, you must know, somehow you have a record of that conversation. I don’t know why you have to ask.

VOICE

(brief pause)

Please explain.

GRACE

Are you an idiot?

VOICE

Please explain.

GRACE

Are you a person or a computer?

VOICE

(brief pause)

Please explain.

(brief pause)

Please explain.

(brief pause)

Please explain.

(brief pause)

Please // explain.

GRACE

All right, Jesus. It was the middle of the night, I'd just come home from work, and I found my mom sitting at the kitchen table drinking Diet Coke. I asked why she was still up, and she told me about a nightmare she'd just had.

VOICE

(brief pause)

Please elaborate.

GRACE

That's pretty much it.

VOICE

(brief pause)

Please elaborate.

GRACE

On what?

VOICE

(brief pause)

Please elaborate.

GRACE

She'd had a nightmare that the gas riots had started happening here—well, not here, I guess, I have no idea where this is—but back home. And she was disturbed, I suppose, because it does seem like it's just a matter of time before they do start everywhere.

(a moment)

Are you happy?

VOICE

(brief pause)

Thank you.

GRACE

Are we done?

(A moment. GRACE starts to set the document on the floor. The CHIME sounds. She sits back in the chair, the document on her lap.)

VOICE

Page forty-seven, line one.

(GRACE sighs and finds the place in the document.  
Blackout.)

## SCENE 5

(GRACE and ALICE in their respective spaces.)

(GRACE sits on the floor in the middle of her cell. Before her is a tray with a plate, a jug, and a cup. She is eating the last bites of a meal.)

(The door to ALICE's cell opens, revealing a tray on the floor. On the tray is a plate with a sandwich, some overcooked vegetables, a pitcher, and a cup. ALICE takes the tray from the vestibule into the center of the room and sits on the floor. The door closes. ALICE pours water from the pitcher into the cup and drinks it. After a moment she pours another cup and drinks it. She picks up the sandwich, pries the pieces of bread apart and sniffs at what is inside. She presses the pieces of bread back together, takes a bite, chews, and swallows. She takes another bite, chews, swallows. She picks up a vegetable with her fingers, puts it in her mouth, chews, and makes herself swallow. She continues eating.)

(GRACE has finished eating. She looks up and around, waiting to see what will happen next. The door opens. GRACE rises and approaches it, cautiously, expecting a reprimand. Nothing happens. She pokes her head into the vestibule and looks around. She looks back into the room, thinks for a moment. She steps into the vestibule. A long moment. The CHIME sounds. It sounds again. It sounds repeatedly, but GRACE remains in the vestibule. The CHIME ceases. Beat. The door closes, shutting GRACE in the vestibule.)

(ALICE has eaten all the food. She licks her plate clean. She places the plate upside down on the tray. She pours the rest of the water from the pitcher into the cup, drinks it, and sets the cup and pitcher upside-down on the tray. She sits back, her hands on her lap, and looks up toward the ceiling. The door opens. ALICE puts the tray in the vestibule. She crosses to the bucket and picks it up. From the way she carries it, it is apparent that it is about half full, and from the way she averts her head, it is

apparent that its contents are foul-smelling. She places the bucket in the vestibule, steps back, and waits. The door closes. ALICE stands there for a moment. She finds a place on the floor and settles down to sleep.)

(GRACE's cell is still empty. Long pause. Knocking on the door. Pause. Knocking again. Pause. Pounding on the door.)

GRACE

(behind door, as she continues pounding)

You can let me out now. You've made your point!

(A moment. The door to GRACE's cell opens. GRACE enters. The door closes. She goes back to her tray, inspects it to see if she missed any food. GRACE looks around for something, in vain.)

GRACE

(to ceiling)

I um... I have to go to the bathroom.

(goes to the door)

Hello? Guard? Anybody?

(Pause.)

Am I supposed to shit on the floor?

(A moment. GRACE goes to the corner and, conscious of the cameras she is sure are there, prepares to unzip her jumpsuit.)

(The door opens. In the vestibule is a plastic bucket.)

GRACE

You're kidding, right?

(Pause. GRACE gives in, retrieves the bucket. The door closes. GRACE takes the bucket into a corner. She tries various ways of squatting over the bucket. Once she has determined which position will reveal the least to the cameras above, she prepares to unzip her jumpsuit.)

SCENE 6

(ALICE and GRACE, each upright in her chair. GRACE waits. Images are projected on the wall of ALICE's cell.)

(Image: An avocado.)

ALICE

Like.

(Image: An apple.)

Like.

(Image: An orange.)

Like.

(Image: A rotten tomato.)

Dislike.

(Image: A dragon fruit. ALICE is puzzled.)

VOICE

Alice Underwood.

ALICE

I don't know what that is.

VOICE

Like or dislike.

ALICE

Dislike.

(Image: A bunch of grapes.)

Like.

(Image: A lime.)

Dislike.

(Image: A peach.)

Like.

VOICE

(brief pause)

One moment, please.

(ALICE waits. Images projected on the wall of GRACE's cell.)

(Image: A noble-looking horse.)

GRACE

Like.

GRACE (*continued*)

(Image: A filthy but cute pig.)

Dislike.

(Image: A rooster.)

Ummm... Dislike.

(Image: A bull mounting a cow.)

Eew. Do you really have to?

VOICE

Like or dislike.

GRACE

Like, I guess.

(Image: A baby chick.)

Dislike.

(Image: A shorn sheep.)

Ugh. Like.

(Image: A pig wearing sunglasses.)

Love the animal, hate the eyewear.

VOICE

Like or dislike.

GRACE

I just told you.

VOICE

Like or dislike.

GRACE

Fine. Like the pig. Dislike the sunglasses.

(Beat. Image does not change.)

VOICE

Like or dislike.

GRACE

Just one for the whole picture? They sort of cancel each other out, so...  
Indifferent?

(Beat. Image does not change.)

VOICE

Like or dislike.

GRACE

Like, I guess.

(Image: A parakeet wearing a top hat.)

Boo! No good! GRACE

Like or // dislike. VOICE

Dislike! GRACE

One moment, please. VOICE  
(brief pause)