

BOMB

An Excerpt from the Play "Requiem"

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FROM THE PLAY

REQUIEM

KATHY ACKER

ACT 1: DADDY MISSING

SCENE 1. This could be a room in any corporate office. Dark red couches, strewn here and there like the small rugs below them, light up the grey of the walls. It is a waiting-room in an expensive New York City hospital.

A door that leads not to an exit but rather further into the hospital interior opens up and **Claire** emerges. In her late forties, she looks thirty and is very beautiful. Would look thirty if it weren't for her clothes. Though we are in the early 1970's, past those hippie years, she's dressed like a wealthy '50's dowager: tight orange cashmere sweater matching a narrow orange and brown checkered skirt that ends just below her knees, a set of pearls, stockings (only Jackie Onassis dared to go without stockings away from the beach), high black heels, one of her small Gucci purses, of course bright red lipstick. Pausing in front of the doorway, she opens up her purse, withdraws a mirror and a lipstick the exact color of what she's wearing so she can check her mouth. Only after she's done this will she allow herself to see if anyone's around.

She hasn't as yet, as is her wont, noticed her daughter, **Electra**.

Electra is lurking. One of her more charming characteristics. She's part sitting, part slouching over, part disappearing into an armchair whose colors are more grey than not. Both the chair and she are almost in a corner; corners are her favorite spot because they remind her of prison though she's never been in prison. **Electra** doesn't want to be visible and at the same time, she looks exactly like **Claire**. Except for her coloring. **Claire's** eyes are green and her hair is jet-black; **Electra**, brown everywhere, has none of the pallor of her mother's perfect skin, and wears no lipstick. In fact, it's hard to notice what

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Electra is wearing.

As usual, the latter is picking her lips.

The door, the one that leads to the outside, opens and **Betsy** walks in. A woman ten years older than **Claire**. **Claire's** best girlfriend. It's obvious that **Betsy** is rich, richer even than **Claire**, because she's wearing a thrift-store dress, the same sort of colorless stockings **Claire** wears, and low, black heels. This constitutes the uniform of 'the girls'; women who wear designer clothing and let their wealth appear publicly are deemed 'nouveau riche'.

Betsy, rushing in Betsy-style or walking at an almost standard pace: I know I'm late... How is he?

Claire, still doing her lipstick: As well as can be expected.

It's obvious that **Electra** has left her private space to listen to all this closely because she's now slouching further into the chair, trying to be as invisible as she can.

Two nurses, chattering to each other, enter. They're young.

Nurse 1, motioning toward **Electra** as if she's dead: That's the daughter there...

Pimplly Nurse, staring because she can't see properly being near-sighted: She looks exactly like the mother though she isn't beautiful the way Mrs. Alexander is.

Betsy, her voice loud enough to be heard in the inner room: **Claire**, whatever you think, you have to admit that he's been a good husband to you.

Claire, still putting on lipstick: I guess so.

Electra is so fascinated by what's happening that she forgets she's supposed to not be visible.

Betsy: A lot of husbands could have been worse.

Claire: I guess so.

Betsy: He took care of you and the kids...

Claire: I guess so. (Putting away her lipstick, perks up.) Let's go to La Rotonde for lunch.

Betsy: Oh good. The new chef there does the most marvelous creme brulee. I'll even go off my diet. (They exit.)

Pimplly Nurse, pointing to **Betsy** as she leaves: And

that's the one whose husband owns Wall Street. Would you believe it?

Nurse 1, chewing gum: She's a walking garbage can...

All the adults disappear. **Electra** is left alone. Her eyes grow larger and larger as she looks at her father's hospital room's door...

SCENE 2. Same room, a bit later.

There's nothing here that indicates change of weather or the passage of time. Here, at the threshold of all which lies below.

Since no one is now in this room except for **Electra**, still sprawled out all over the armchair, she reads aloud from Kallimachos' *Hymn to Apollo*: "He who sees the god is great; he who does not see him is small."

Peter, a sexy but fattish rocker-type, enters from the exit door.

Peter: So is he here?

Electra: Shhh. (Points to where her father is. So they begin to whisper.) This is his third heart attack.

Peter, earnestly: Actually you're the one I'm looking for.

Electra: I like it here.

Peter: There's no one here but us.

Electra, realizing she has to shut her book: What's going on, Peter?

Peter: Maybe now's the wrong time. (Changes his mind cause he can't help himself.) Look.

Electra: Don't start that.

Peter: You said to wait 'til I got money and now I do.

Electra, disbelieving: How d'you get money?

Peter: I sold my book on John Lennon.

Electra: I don't care about money.

Peter: We can get married.

Electra: I don't want to ever marry anyone. Especially someone with whom I'm having sex.

Peter: That's a sick way to feel. You gotta let someone in.

Electra: And there's daddy.

Peter: What d'ya mean?

Electra: Just look at him.

Peter: Electra, your father has your mother to take care of him.

Electra: That's what I told him that night...

Peter: What night?

Electra: Forget it. My father knows that he's all alone.

Peter: Electra, your mother's a good woman and she loves your father very much. When they have quarrels... that's what people do when they live together. You're just feeling things too strongly at the moment cause you don't want your father to be in here.

Electra: Why don't you ever listen to me? I don't want a husband. I want a brother. That's what I want. That's what you were to me before we had sex; if we were brother and sister, we would tell each other everything and nobody would or could ever come between us.

Peter: One day you'll grow up, Electra, and then you'll know what I'm feeling now. I'm gonna wait for you.

Electra: I don't feel anything. All I know is I don't want to get married. I'm never gonna let anyone near me or let myself get close to anyone.

Peter looks at her. **Electra** is looking off into space. She does this in order to make sure that no one can trespass into her private realm. She does this most of the time. As soon as **Electra's** sure that this territory or herself is impenetrable, she speaks.

Electra: You know what I want? (If **Peter** really loved her, he'd give her everything she wanted. As it is, she doesn't wait for his reply.) I want my mother to have a lover.

Peter: Maybe you shouldn't talk so loud.

Electra, not lowering her voice because **Peter** doesn't exist except as a figment of her imagination: Cause if she understood what sex is, what actual sexual desire is, she wouldn't torment me any longer and she'd understand me. (**Peter** starts tiptoeing toward the door to the inner room so that he can close it.) He's got to be like one of those older European guys, in the movies, I can't remember any of their names, gorgeous but slightly sleazy so that he can be sinister. He won't let her get away with anything; when she begins to act up, like she always does, he'll slap the shit out of her. That's the only thing that's gonna make her behave properly. Cause she's so desperate for sex and she never gets any.

Peter, accepting **Electra's** reality: How do you know?

Electra: I was sound asleep and this huge scream woke me up, this was about four months ago, so my sister and I, now semi-awake, ran into my parents' bedroom and we saw Tinkerbell...

Peter: Tinkerbell?

Electra: ...my mother's ex-poodle hanging by my father's nipple. I think he was trying to bite through it. Tinkerbell was a he. Half the nipple was hanging off.

Peter: What did your father do?

Electra: He watched.

Peter: I mean, what had he done to make a poodle...?

Electra, understanding: Tinkerbell was pro-

tecting my mother cause my father had tried to kiss her.

Peter: What did your mother do?

Electra: Nothing.

Peter: From this you concluded that your mother needs to be fucked...

Electra: By an older guy.

Peter: ...by an older guy?

Electra: I totally know what it's like to be regularly fucked by a guy who knows how to control you. My mother's either going to get hot sex, not just a one-night-stand but a relationship, or she's going to die. Don't you see that she's doing everything she can — making my father's life living hell, tormenting me — so she can get it? She's just a bitch in heat.

Peter: Your mother is a very proper lady. There's no way she's going to meet a lover. Lovers don't exist in her world.

Electra: Yes, they do.

Peter: And even if they do, your mother's not going to take one.

Electra: We've got to make a plan. (*She starts picking her lip.*)

Peter: Why?

Electra: It's not going to happen otherwise. You already said that.

The Pimplly Nurse walks from the exit to the inner room and enters it.

Peter, trying to think: She could meet him at a dinner party.

Electra: Mommy doesn't go to dinner parties. I mean the kind where people meet each other. Those are for the people who spend their money on clothing. My mother's friends all know each other; they don't want to know anyone but themselves.

Peter: Your mother knows a lot of people and everyone loves her.

Electra: You've got to understand the difference between "nouveau riche" and mom's friends. Take Hope Legrand...

Peter: She went to that private school with you...

Electra: Mommy just told me that Hope married this old guy — the kind of marriage my family wants me to make cause the guy'll die when I'm young enough to enjoy his money. When Hope married, her grandfather gave the couple a bank as a wedding present and then Hope had a baby who was... (*scratches her head*)... mom said it served her right... well Hope's mother, this is who I really want to tell you about, she belonged to the same beach club as us, she had dyed blonde hair and wore a bikini even though she was my mother's age. All that's 'nouveau riche'.

The Pimplly Nurse exits from the interior room, carrying a bed pan.

Peter, scratching his head: What's 'nouveau riche'?

Electra: Having money and showing your money off publicly is 'nouveau riche'. It means you're insecure cause you didn't inherit the money from someone who inherited money.

Peter: I don't see what this has to do with your mother's lover.

Electra: I know how my mother's going to find

a man. (*Pause.*) It'll be a dark night. The way the pavement looks wet in the city when all the lights are shining in it. Mommy will be so maddened by horniness, though of course she won't know what this is, that she'll tiptoe, with her high heeled black shoes in her hand, past my father, fast-sleeping, into the dark hall, slowly open the door, the elevator man won't comment to her how late it is, down down into the night, where her lover will be waiting.

Peter: Where?

Electra: Where a single car zooms around a corner... the sound of high heels tapping on the concrete... in the distance, a cop car siren... my mother is walking down that street...

Peter: ... and goes into a bar.

Electra: No. Mom would never go into a bar by herself. (*Recognizing that her ability to deal with reality is now being tested. Passing that test.*) It doesn't matter how they meet because their meeting is pre-ordained. So they could meet... at the Jewish Guild for the Blind. What matters is that the moment they meet, they just know. Simultaneously mom doesn't know because she's been so sexually fucked up. Now he... starts kissing her... there's no restraint...

Peter: What if your father's there?

Electra: Where?

Peter: Where they are.

Electra: They no longer know if there's anyone else around them because there's no one left in the world. Just them. The scenario I'm describing is only a metaphor for the following reality: he sweeps her off her feet and, by doing so, shows her who she is. So it doesn't matter how they meet.

Peter: What happens after they fuck?

Electra: It doesn't matter.

Peter: What does he look like?

Electra, ignoring **Peter** out of necessity: As soon as they've met, my mother begins to drink.

Peter: Your mother hates alcohol.

Electra: The truth is that the moment she drinks, she becomes a sex-maniac. When she had a drink at the beach party a month ago, she instantaneously got down on her hands and knees and crawled over to one of her friend's husbands and licked his leg. When she's not drunk, she's always telling my father that he's an alcoholic; he replies, "Claire, I've only taken one drink; I've worked all day." She tells him that he's worthless, he has a job only because he married into the family, all the wealth is on her side of the family. He tells her that he bought her her first mink coat. They go through this every single day. (*Pauses.*) **Peter** doesn't say anything. Leaving wherever they are, my mother and her lover go away to a room and fuck all night. He does things to her like spank her and call her his "petite chienne".

Peter: I guess it's a good thing to be drunk.

Scene 3. An apartment located in the richest section of New York City's upper East Side. A small apartment — its interior reveals that its inhabitants aren't all that wealthy.

A narrow, dark green hall leads, on one side, to a

large sunken living room, the largest room in the apartment.

All the sofas and chairs in this room, of which there are many, have silk exteriors; the clear plastic that **Claire** explains are needed to protect the pale silks from stains are never taken off except when there are guests. There are a number of antiques including a captain's desk in which there are hiding places, a table whose inlaid pads are the color of ivy. A cabinet replete with china dogs supervises the large writing desk, of the same wood, beneath it. No one ever uses this desk. Tinkerbelle is dead. Pepper, the living dog, is standing below. He is so fat, he can hardly stand, but that doesn't matter to anyone because Pepper is vicious. He loves only one living being, **Claire**. Anything else that moves is regarded as meat. Pepper will eat anything, however his favorite food is the gold foil from chocolates that can sometimes be found in the toilet bowl. He is pedigree like everything else in this house.

The dog's life is eating, sleeping, and biting.

Claire and **Nana** are standing next to a white armchair and looking down at the clothes spread out on the pink sofa that runs against the half-cross-shaped windowseat. Since **Nana** is family, the plastic is still on the silk. **Claire's** mother is eighty years old, more than of sound mind and body. She's as sharp as they come. A stroke has paralyzed one side of her face.

tell them that you're sorry, you're returning them.

Claire: I don't want to return them.

Nana: Pick out something nice for yourself.

Claire, grinding out her half-smoked cigarette and lighting up another: I'll go on Thursday. OK?

Nana: It's not as if I didn't bring you up to know how to dress yourself decently.

Claire: I said I'm going to return them Thursday. I have a lunch date with Betsy.

Nana: She knows how to dress herself. She got that magnificent silver fox at Roland's. I bet she paid next-to-nothing for it.

Claire: That's a thrift store.

Nana: Betsy knows how to buy clothes.

Electra, staying away from Pepper, seats herself in a corner.

Claire: So what am I going to do about the dinner party this weekend? If Bud comes home... Can I have a dinner party with a man in the house who's just had three heart attacks? What if he dies?

Nana: He's not going to die.

Claire: What if he isn't home by then?

(There's a pause.) Can I have a dinner party if he's not here?

Nana: You can't hold a dinner party while your husband's away.

Scene 4. Hospital. The same room. Nothing ever changes because this territory is located between time and eternity. As is true of most of the locations in this play.

Electra is sitting in the same armchair in which she last sat. This time since she's not trying to be invisible, she appears in her normal pose: legs spread all over the chair's arms and back, one of her hands, without her being aware of its existence, on her crotch then in a nostril. Because she was kicked out of music class in third grade, she sings:

It's important to be a little girl
And to lie in your bed,
And all the men lie around you,
And all the men are dead.

Billy enters through the outside door. **Billy** looks exactly like the person she dreams is her ideal brother of all time and is her real brother. He resembles Jimmy Dean. Some of his red hair falls over one eye and he's fat. Not exactly Jimmy Dean if reality has to matter. It doesn't. Since Jimmy Dean was gay, she can't have sex with her brother.

Electra: Hi ya, Billy. (Seeing that **Claire** is right behind him, she shuts up. Takes her legs and feet over the chair and places them on the ground where they belong.)

Claire's reasoning is that since poor people eat

She is still rather beautiful in an antiquated Grand-dame style: the white hair, with lilac tinge, piled on top of her head is perfectly coiffed. So are her nails. The old lady's dress isn't as dingy as **Betsy's**, though it's the same style, for disdaining stores because other humans shop in them, **Nana** has her own dressmaker.

Nana: Claire, you should be ashamed of yourself.

Claire: What'd I do now? (Flicking her cigarette.)

Nana: Pfew! (to the cigarette smoke) You're going to kill yourself with those cigarettes, Claire. (Pauses.) I told you to buy yourself something decent, didn't I?

Claire: Yes, mother.

Nana: What do you call this? (They both look down at the clothes on the couch. The white shopping bag that's sitting on the glass table in front of the couch says 'Sak's Fifth Avenue'.)

Claire: What's the matter with them?

Nana: What's the matter with them? Claire. (Walking over to the pink sofa and picking up a dress.) How could you even think of wearing something like this? Look where the hem is. Who do you think you are?

Claire: I don't know.

Electra sneaks down into the living room. Sneaks, because she's not allowed in there, over to a corner in front of the black banister that separates the hall from this room, but they're not noticing her which she knows. She knows that, except when she's in danger, she doesn't exist.

Nana: Go back to the department store and

Claire: But what am I going to do about the caterer? (Electra starts picking her nose. Pepper doesn't know whether or not he smells food.) You know how hard it is to get this caterer... it takes weeks to reserve him. He's the talk of the town. Plus Alice Harte's husband, you know Robert, can only come...

Nana: You should have consulted me before you planned all this, Claire. I'm going to go home now.

Claire: Mother... Just stay for another half hour and the traffic'll have died down. You don't want to go cross-town in this traffic.

Nana, not yet making a decision: So what are you going to do about Bud?

Claire: I don't see what there is to do about him. It's not as if he's dead or anything.

Pepper growls at **Electra**. She tries to move further back into the corner.

Nana: He was a good husband to you, Claire. He took care of you and the kids.

Claire: I know. (Folding up the clothes, placing them in the white bag.) I don't love him.

Nana: That's not what matters.

Electra crawls out of the living room. She thinks about hiding under the dining room table and decides not to.

Claire: Do you think I should get Liliane's to do those fabulous pastries they did for Beatrice's party? (looking through her purse,) Oh damn. I've run out of diet pills again.

Claire, in a black turtleneck and plaid kilt that stops an inch above her knees, is now stylish. She looks younger than she first looked.

Claire: We've been looking all over for you.

Electra, having learned from **Claire** that a lie's use-value in no way depends on whether it's convincing or not: I just got here.

Claire, recognizing her own tactic: You're here so much these days that they might start asking you to pay rent.

Electra: I just like this room.

Claire: What's there to like about a... hospital? (Now that the mother and daughter are close together, it becomes very obvious that they are physically alike. Rather than mother and daughter, they appear to be sisters. Except that **Claire's** lips are thinner and more elegant.)

Electra, looking closely at her mother: You look good.

Claire: Oh, let's get out of here. I don't like hospitals. (She's returned to flirting, which is one of her three major modes of dealing or being.) They're so... depressing.

Electra, shutting her book which she never goes anywhere without — it doesn't matter which one: Where can we go?

Claire, flirting and now noticing the unsuitability of her daughter's attire, for instance how **Electra's** ponytail falls over her face and even into her mouth where it's chewed: Let's go to that deli around the corner from Bloomies. I'll treat Billy and you to lunch. Electra, can't you wear something... more like what the other girls wear?

Electra: It wasn't as if I was going anywhere. I didn't think I had to get dressed up. I was only going to a hospital.

Claire: Well, someone might see you in a hospital. You have to learn to take more care of yourself. Look at Penelope Wormwood.

Electra: Penelope is the class creep. *(Closing her satchel.)*

Claire: At least tonight, try to wear something decent.

Electra: Why tonight? *(Claire has already exited because it doesn't matter what her messy daughter says. Billy is still occupied by boy stuff, peeking around the partly opened inner door, to the room that can't be seen. He wants to see what's inside and he doesn't want to be seen doing this. Turning to Billy.)* Why tonight?

Billy: Our uncle's coming to dinner.

Electra: We don't have an uncle.

Billy: We do now.

Electra: We don't have anyone. Just mommy and Nana.

Billy: We do have an uncle. I don't know who he is.

Electra: So why does he have to come to dinner?

Billy: He's Nana's sister's child.

Electra: So what. I still don't see why he has

Electra: Is she coming to dinner too?

Billy: Those two never talk to each other.

They live on separate floors in this mansion in a rich section of Cambridge where there's never any light and lots of old American paintings which are hideous.

Electra: And then there are brats?

Billy: Three. Were. One... or two... died. One suicided. One has elephantiasis. He might not have died. They're the males.

Electra: There's a girl?

Billy: Alive. She's an artist.

Electra: Then she won't be asked to dinner. How does mommy know all this and, what matters more, why is she having this uncle to dinner? She doesn't give a damn about family plus we don't have any.

Billy: He might stay with us a week or two til daddy comes home.

Claire's Voice: Where are you two? I can't wait all day.

Scene 5. The Alexander apartment. Dinner. The dining room, or what passes for it, is at the end of the entrance hall, opposite the front door. Found between the sunken living room and the parents' bedroom. The walls here are green. Above the dining room table

up in the suburbs or somewhere where it's nice. If we had brought you up in Mamaranek or Westchester where there are nice girls...

Electra: I was brought up fine.

Billy: Can I be excused from the dinner table?

Claire: No. Eat the rest of your steak. *(To Ford, flirting.)* I don't know what I'm supposed to do with these children. They have no respect for me; they love me, but they have no respect for me.

Ford, *one of his hands patting one of hers:* You've done a fine job!

Claire: I've done my best. That's all I can say. *(Electra's looking down at her dinner plate.)*

Electra, *defiantly:* Look, I'm getting married this summer. You don't have to have anything to do with it.

Claire: Who're you marrying?

Electra: Peter Wolf.

Claire: Who's that?

Electra: He's a boy. *(Silence.)* He came to the hospital.

Claire: You're too young to get married.

Electra: I have to do something.

Claire, *exasperated and forgetting Ford's presence:* I don't understand what you're talking about.

vegetables, if you eat vegetables you're poor.

to interfere.

Billy: Mommy said he's a famous geologist and even worked on the hydrogen bomb.

Electra: That's all the more reason to have nothing to do with him. What else did she say?

Billy: She's waiting for us... she's going to be angry.

Electra: Just tell me quickly everything she said.

Billy: She said that she needs a man around cause... cause something-or-other...

Electra: What does that have to do with our uncle? Daddy's going to be well soon.

Billy: ...cause she doesn't know anything about business. And neither does Nana. *(Now totally speaking in Claire's voice, which he does sometimes.)* She doesn't know why everyone expects her to do everything by herself all the time.

Electra, *giving up cause she can never successfully fight her mother for even one moment:* So who's this man?

Billy: We gotta go.

Electra: First, tell me what you know.

Billy, *real quickly cause they gotta go:* Mommy was telling Nana that he married a Swiss girl who was insane. Or she went insane. Then he married again. This wife hung herself in a closet.

Electra: Yuck. Did he find her?

Billy: The son opened the closet and saw.

Electra: The son?

Billy: So he remarried the Swiss girl who was crazy.

hangs an expensive chandelier. The dog is below.

Billy, Claire, Electra and Ford sit around the table. **Ford** is in the father's seat. They're eating steak, for they only eat steak in this house. There aren't many vegetables. *Claire's reasoning is that since poor people eat vegetables, if you eat vegetables you're poor. Especially eggplant and collard greens. If you're poor, says Claire, you'll never have any friends and friends are the basis of life.*

There's no wine at this table.

Ford is a reasonably tall, fairly heavy-set, middle-aged man. Good-looking according to those in his kind of social set. He's wearing glasses.

The meal has been going on for several minutes, desultory conversation.

Electra: I'm going to get married.

Claire: Is there a problem?

Electra: What do you mean, 'a problem'? I'm going to get married.

Claire: You know what I mean, Electra.

Electra: *(Pauses.)* Oh. No, there isn't a problem. I just want to get married.

Billy: Who are you going to marry? *(Mumbles cause his mouth is stuffed full of very rare steak.)*

Claire: Listen to me, Electra. This isn't the first time something like this has happened. We'll just take care of things. It's nothing these days; you just disappear for two or three days; nobody'll notice a thing. *(Thinking.)* It can be done cheaply. I know for a fact that Beatrice's niece...

Electra: I want to get married.

Claire: The problem is that you didn't grow

Billy: I do.

Electra: Look. *(Shows her wrists which are heavily scarred.)* I tried to suicide when I was in college this year.

Claire: You know better than to talk about nasty things at the dinner table. And in front of strangers.

Billy examines one of the wrists.

Ford: I have three children. Children just don't do what they're supposed to do despite all that we put into them.

Claire: Well, I've done my best whatever anyone says.

Ford: And having a husband in the hospital. It must be hard.

Claire: I just don't know how to be when I'm alone.

Ford: Well, we can do something about that.

Billy: What about daddy?

They all look at him.

Song

It's important to be a little girl
And to lie in your bed,
And all the men lie around you,
And all the men are dead.

Pirates sailed shark-wondrous seas
And never did go home;
One day I will come home again,
One day I'll have a home. ☺