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WAITING FOR THE FLOOD

A play in one act by Carey Perloff

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CHARACTERS

- Natasha** American, mid-30's. A geneticist. Pregnant and panicked.
- Shirley** From New Orleans, 15, restless and rebellious.
- Rose** Shirley's mother. 45. Utterly pragmatic, very southern. Filled with longing.
- Susi** Italian, originally Viennese. 35. Vain, charming, brilliant.
- Lili** Viennese, now in Long Island. Mid-sixties. Irreverent, self-confident, a survivor in pearls
- Ilse** Viennese, early 40's, a shell-shocked refugee in a very small hat.
- Marcia** Natasha's mother. Sixties, savvy, a biographer, seemingly American

TIME: All the characters in the play except Natasha and Marcia exist in the early 1940's at the time of the play. Their ages can be relatively fluid since she remembers them as if in a dream. Natasha lives in the present, and Marcia most likely appears at the age she was when she (recently) died, that is, in her sixties or seventies.

PLACE: Somewhere near San Jose, California. A car sits center stage, a sixties convertible maybe, with plenty of room to sit on the hood. It is parked on the ground floor of a large, empty public garage. Perhaps the kind with slightly sloping concrete floors, white lines painted across to mark the parking spaces. Intense morning sunlight slants across the stage.

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THE LIGHTS COME UP ON A BARE STAGE, WITH AN EMPTY CAR PARKED BETWEEN THE WHITE LINES. IN THE DISTANCE, WE HEAR THE HUM OF TRAFFIC. IT IS EARLY MORNING. BEAT. A DOOR OPENS (FROM AN ELEVATOR, PERHAPS) AND NATASHA APPEARS, IN SWEAT PANTS AND FLIP FLOPS. SHE RUNS ACROSS THE STAGE, OPENS THE CAR DOOR AND JUMPS INTO THE CAR. SITS PANTING FOR A MOMENT. LOOKS AROUND, PANICKED. GRABS HER CELL PHONE. DIALS. LISTENS

NATASHA

(SPEAKING INTO PHONE, LEAVING A VOICE MAIL MESSAGE) It's Natasha. I won't be in today. (BEAT) I can't. (BEAT) I have to go home. (CORRECTING HERSELF) *Stay* home. (PAUSE) I'll work from home. How about that? If you need me I'll be there. (CORRECTING HERSELF) Here. In my car. Don't ask. You all know what to do. I'll come in tonight and check the results, okay? (SHE HANGS UP. PAUSE. CONTINUING TO PANIC. RIFLES IN HER BAG, PULLS OUT A SODA. OPENS IT, STARTS TO DRINK). Positive. I'm positive. Be positive. A positive. O positive. What's a little purple stick? Just a little purple stick. (HER PHONE RINGS. SHE LOOKS) Bill! (STARES AT PHONE) Wow. What timing. (PHONE RINGS. SHE DOESN'T ANSWER IT) Hey sweetheart. (PHONE RINGS) I can't talk right now. (PAUSE) What do you know! The dam has broken. The dial has shifted. The shit has hit the fan. (THE PHONE KEEPS RINGING. SHE TALKS TO THE RINGING PHONE) Can you come home? Come back? Turn around? Are you sitting down? No of course you're not, you never sit down! You're running to catch a plane—you're in the Cloud—you're-- (THE PHONE STOPS RINGING. SILENCE. SHE STARES AT THE PHONE, DELFATED). You gave up. Oh god I knew you'd give up. Don't give up on me, Bill! You're my guy—you my best—you my best best--!

A TEEN-AGED GIRL RIDES BY ON A BICYCLE. SHE WEARS CLOTHES FROM 1942.

SHIRLEY

YOU SONOFABITCH, you get my shoe down off the roof *now*. You hear me? You climb on up there and get me my shoe! (SHE DISAPPEARS, THEN CYCLES PAST AGAIN.) I'm warning you—I'm gonna climb up there myself and stuff it down your throat!(SHE PEERS INTO THE CAR AND SEES NATASHA) Hey! I didn't see you in there! What're you doin'?

NATASHA

Nothing—I'm just—(SHE STOPS, EMBARRASSED)

SHIRLEY

(OPENING THE CAR DOOR AND POKING HER HEAD IN) Can I ride with you?

NATASHA

(SURPRISED BY THE QUESTION) No! I'm not going anywhere--

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SHIRLEY

That's okay... I'll just hide out. My brother threw my shoe on the roof so I broke one of his inventions and now he wants to kill me. (SHE CLIMBS IN THE CAR) You got a brother--?

NATASHA

No.

SHIRLEY

You lucky thing—what I wouldn't give to be *alone* in this world! (SHE SURVEYS THE CAR) Nice car! Your daddy buy it for you?

NATASHA

It's my boyfriend's. I usually ride a bike. Like you.

SHIRLEY

(IMPRESSED) Must be some boyfriend! He know you're sittin' out here all by your lonesome?

NATASHA

He will—when he calls back—he's going to call back—in a second—and I'll have to tell him--

SHIRLEY

You don't have to tell anyone anything! I never do. My mama thinks I'm locked in my room. She won't figure out I'm gone till at least tomorrow. Maybe she won't even care! (SHE SMILES) You look awful.

NATASHA

I haven't had a shower this morning. (PAUSE. CONFIDENTIALLY) Do I smell?

SHIRLEY

Not too bad. You sick?

NATASHA

No. (BEAT) Worse than sick.

SHIRLEY

You better get out of your pajamas before folks think you're crazy.

NATASHA

These aren't pajamas...

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SHIRLEY

Happens to me all the time. I lock myself in my room to create things of great beauty, but everyone thinks I'm just havin' a bad day.

NATASHA

I *am*. Having a bad day. A really bad day.

SHIRLEY

All the more reason to get out of your pj's before anyone finds out! Otherwise they'll *never* let you go! I'm runnin' off like Margaret Mead to study the Samoans.

NATASHA

The what?

SHIRLEY

I'm an anthropologist. And a painter. You?

NATASHA

Genetics.

SHIRLEY

Say what?

NATASHA

I study genes. (PAUSE) The genome. (SHIRLEY LOOKS BLANK) You know, *DNA*?

SHIRLEY

DeeAnn who?

NATASHA

You honestly don't--? (SHE STOPS. TAKES IN SHIRLEY. THEN, SUDDENLY ANIMATED, LIKE EXPLAINING A FAVORITE THING TO A CHILD) It's how we're put together. Like a code, right? There are only four letters, but they make infinite patterns. Or rather, proteins. The letters make *proteins* that tell the body what to do.

SHIRLEY

Why would you want to tell the body what to do?

NATASHA

Why am I talking to you?(BEAT. PATIENTLY) It's your *past*.

SHIRLEY

(WHISPERING) I know a secret about my past. I think my real daddy is Morris Cohen. I think my mama has had a thing for Morris from the very beginning and that's why she goes up to the Cane River all the time and floats around on that old row boat. I think that's why I have blue eyes and everyone else in the family has green.

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NATASHA

Recessive. It just means blue eyes are *recessive* in your family.

SHIRLEY

Nothin' is recessive in my family! They're the loudest people on the planet!
(REASSURING) But that doesn't mean you have to be! You're gonna be just fine.

NATASHA

You think so?

SHIRLEY

I know so. Sometimes I don't come out of my room for days at a time and everyone thinks I'm goin' to kill myself.

NATASHA

Are you? Going to kill yourself?

SHIRLEY

I've thought about it. Haven't you?

NATASHA

Now and then. In the last ten minutes, for instance.

SHIRLEY

You pregnant?

NATASHA

(VOCIFEROUSLY) No!

SHIRLEY

Don't worry—I can keep a secret. My doctor says I'm over-sexed. I tell him I'm waiting for some soldier to come back from the war and sweep me off my feet! You tell your boyfriend you're pregnant?

NATASHA

(QUIETLY) No.

SHIRLEY

He know you're out here in your pj's?

NATASHA

He's on the road.

SHIRLEY

What road?

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NATASHA

Selling computing systems to unwitting corporations...

SHIRLEY

(THRILLED) He's a traveling salesman? Like Morris Cohen?

NATASHA

He's in the Cloud, actually. He takes massive data systems and converts them to cloud computing. Don't ask.

SHIRLEY

(DAZZLED) I'd love to be in a cloud! (GRINNING) He know you got a tiny drop of water inside you right now?

NATASHA

(NOT AMUSED) No!

SHIRLEY

What're you waitin' for?! You scared he'll be mad?

NATASHA

Glad. I'm scared he'll be glad.

SHIRLEY

You're crazy.

NATASHA

I don't want it.

SHIRLEY

The baby? You don't want the baby? What's the matter with it?

NATASHA

Nothing. (PAUSE) Well, anything. Everything. (PAUSE) This wasn't supposed to happen. Ever.

SHIRLEY

How do you know?

NATASHA

He told me he couldn't. I was so relieved!

SHIRLEY

Just 'cause he said he *couldn't* doesn't mean he'd say he *wouldn't*. Nothin' like a little peanut to stitch two people together. (EXPLAINING) I come from hurricane country, that's why I know these things. It's like a big storm—you always think you're invincible

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and then along comes a big one and rips the roof right offa your house. (SHE SMILES, FANS HERSELF)

NATASHA

Look, I don't mean to be rude, but—

SHIRLEY

But what?

NATHASHA

I wish you'd go away. I need to think.

SHIRLEY

So think. (BEAT) What's wrong with bein' pregnant?

NATASHA

I'm finishing a huge study—I've just gotten more funding—they need me in the lab!

SHIRLEY

The graveyards of Europe are filled with indispensable people, that's what my daddy always says. What are you studyin' so hard?

NATASHA

Right now, yeast.

SHIRLEY

Yeast?

NATASHA

Which believe it or not might some day yield secrets about bipolar disorder—in mice—

SHIRLEY

Mice have bipolar disorder?

NATASHA

My mice will.

SHIRLEY

Why do scientists always study mice? Plenty of crazy *people* wandering around—why not study them?

NATASHA

Mice are easier. (BEAT) And they don't look like anyone you know.

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SHIRLEY

Some mice do! (SHE GRINS) So how 'bout that man of yours? You like his folks?

NATASHA

What folks? We don't know each other's folks! We only have each other.

SHIRLEY

Lucky you. Every day when I get up, I make up a new past. I recommend you do the same.

NATASHA

Oh yeah? How do I do that?

SHIRLEY

Use your imagination.

NATASHA

I have no imagination. That's what my mother always said. I have nothing but bad dreams. (BEAT) It's so weird. I keep expecting to dream about *her*. But nothing happens. Even after dozens of pills and weeks without sleep... it's been total silence since we buried her--

SHIRLEY

Hold your horses! I just came on ahead.

NATASHA

Ahead of what?

SHIRLEY

I got so tired of listenin' to them argue, I decided to come first. I'm Shirley—don't you remember?

NATASHA

Shirley who?

SHIRLEY

(DISAPPOINTED) You don't recognize me? *Honestly?*

NATASHA

I'm sorry—I'm not good with faces—

SHIRLEY

I was *memorable*-- everyone said so! I represent the Southern contingent!