

EXCERPT ONLY

HOUSE | DIVIDED

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House | Divided

A play in two acts with five scenes.

Four Actors Required: Two women, two men.

*

Setting:

The basement of an aging, cramped, middle-class home.

Time:

The Present.

Running Time:

Approximately two hours.

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CAST LIST:

(in order of appearance)

DOUG RYAN	Male, fifty-plus. A general contractor recovering from severe amnesia.
ROSS HALL	Male, no older than Doug. Owner of a bowling alley, and Doug's best friend.
NANCY RYAN	Female, fifty. An aspiring state senator and Doug's wife.
JULIE RYAN	Female, mid-twenties. Currently a resident of Ecuador. Doug and Nancy's only child.

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ACT ONE:

INTROIT:

A timeless moment in the recent past. Over darkness, or perhaps a gentle, shifting visual effect, we hear the gliding cello of Camille Saint-Saens' "Le Cygne" ("The Swan")—and then, over that, four voices. The speakers are the play's four characters: DOUG RYAN, NANCY RYAN, JULIE RYAN and ROSS HALL, all unseen. Their words, in a dreamlike largo, twine together to form a peaceful invocation.

DOUG

For food and fellowship—

NANCY

—For food and fellowship—

DOUG and NANCY

—we humbly give thanks.

ROSS

Give us this day...

JULIE

Give us this day our daily bread...

DOUG

Give us...

JULIE

Give us laughter.

NANCY

Children at play.

ROSS and DOUG

Running.

NANCY

The neighbor's kids running, rushing around.

JULIE

Barefoot children, laughing and rushing every which way.

DOUG

Like magic.

NANCY

Give us this day...

ROSS

Fall air. Sweatshirts and sweaters.

NANCY

A field of flowers—

JULIE

—a field of sunflowers raising up their heads—

DOUG

—all at once.

ROSS

All those smilin' sunflowers—

NANCY

—raising up their heads to greet the dawn.

JULIE

Give us this day—

NANCY

—turkey with stuffing.

DOUG

Turkey with gravy—

JULIE & DOUG

—and warm pumpkin pie.

ROSS

The home team winning—

JULIE and ROSS

—at the last possible second.

DOUG

Autumn leaves.

ROSS

People holdin' hands.

NANCY

A baby smiling. Julie smiling, when she was a baby.

ROSS

A good dog.

JULIE

Vacations at the lake. Years ago.

DOUG and NANCY

Music.

JULIE

Mom playing the piano.

NANCY

Dear Lord, give us this day—

ROSS

—Give us Little League, with burgers and a shake right after.

DOUG

Give us this day—

JULIE

—the touch of warm skin.

DOUG

The courage to reach out, to really make some kind of contact.

NANCY

Home.

ROSS

A Hail Mary touchdown!

DOUG

Home.

JULIE

Curled up in bed—

NANCY and JULIE

—with a really good book.

ROSS

Home.

JULIE

Silence.

NANCY

Home.

DOUG, NANCY and ROSS

Harvest home.

JULIE

The evening sunlight, touching the tops of the Andes,
turning the glaciers rose-red and lavender.

An awkward pause. "Le Cygne" fades, leaving only the voices.

NANCY

Oh, Julie...

ROSS

My best friend, married to a woman I just can't...

JULIE

That first glimpse of the Amazon—not the river itself, the river's not the point, I mean the forest, the totality of it all, so enormous...

DOUG

A good job well done.

NANCY

Tradition.

JULIE

Making a difference.

ROSS

My best friend...

NANCY

My heart, filled with God's love.

DOUG

A good job. Well done.

A cellular telephone rings. We hear traffic sounds. The phone rings again.

DOUG (cont'd)

Goddamn it.

Muffled groping sounds as the phone continues to ring, mixed with a sudden screech of brakes. The horrific crash that follows is the lethal kind: metal smashing against cement and rebar, a car wreck to jolt listeners out of their seats. Then silence: almost. A piano fills the void, playing the hymn "Jerusalem" so gently, it's as if the tune has been blown from the grave.

SCENE ONE:

The present, late summer. The setting is a basement "rec" room, or, more properly, the room where the male of the house goes to relax, kick back, and drink. Nothing in the room is new, especially the third-hand recliner. Other essential set pieces: a "bar" and a cube 'fridge.

The décor relies heavily on wood paneling, accented with beer and sports paraphernalia. There's not a book in sight. The tile floor has been torn up, and boxes of new tiles are piled around, waiting to be affixed to the sub-floor. A staircase leads up to the first floor. The only other exit leads through a hollow-core door, into the laundry room.

Stretched across the width of the room is a home made banner reading: Welcome Home Doug!!!

DOUG RYAN enters via the door at the top of the stairs. As he does so, the piano sounds diminish and disappear. Doug is just past fifty, and he walks as if the room is made of thinnest glass. Perhaps it is, since the room is composed of everything the man Doug Ryan used to be.

With him comes ROSS HALL, a big bear of a man more or less Doug's age. Ross watches Doug with great curiosity.

DOUG

All this?

ROSS

Yours.

DOUG

This chair?

ROSS

Your favorite.

Doug opens the refrigerator.

DOUG

That's a lot of beer. Do I like beer?

ROSS

Like a fish loves water.

DOUG

I spent a lot of time down here.

ROSS

You did, yes.

DOUG

Every day.

ROSS

And then some.

DOUG

Who picked out these colors?

ROSS

Back at the dawn of time, they prob'ly picked themselves.
How's your head? Are you doin' alright?

DOUG

I'm fine. Should I drink a beer?

ROSS

Do you want to drink a beer?

DOUG

Not really.

ROSS

How 'bout we both drink a beer? Get you as comfortable as
we can.

DOUG

Comfortable, yeah, that'd be good.

ROSS

Hit me again, barkeep. And one for my friend, here.

DOUG

I am your friend, right?

ROSS

Yep.

DOUG

And I've been your friend.

ROSS

Long as we've been out of diapers.

DOUG

Why?

ROSS

Why what?

DOUG

Why are we friends?

Ross hands Doug an open bottle.

ROSS

Here's to you, Doug. Welcome home.

DOUG

I like this?

ROSS

Try another swallow.

DOUG

Sour.

ROSS

But good sour. And cold.

DOUG

What's through there?

ROSS

The laundry room. A crawl space. The rest of the dungeon.

DOUG

How about that. I have a laundry room.

ROSS

And at the top of the house, you've got an attic.

DOUG

Do I like this house?

ROSS

Not really, no.

DOUG

Ross. Why am I living in a house I don't like?

ROSS

Because you don't make a whole lot of money.

DOUG

I think I want to make more money.

ROSS

Then you're going to have to be a better businessman.

DOUG

How do I do that?

ROSS

You could start by firing half the guys on your crew.

DOUG

Fire them? Why?

ROSS

They're lazy, shiftless bastards and they've been screwing you for twenty years.

DOUG

Twenty years?

ROSS

Ellis and Dan, they take three-hour lunches, and Cody—Cody can't even drive a nail straight. Jesus, Doug, every job you get takes twice as long as it's supposed to. It doesn't matter how good a builder you are. You have to be a good foreman, too. If it was just you and the wood, you and the blueprints, Jesus, you'd be a millionaire. But you let people get away with murder.

DOUG

Did you just say Jesus?

ROSS

I don't know. Did I?

DOUG

Isn't it supposed to be a sort of sin, taking the Lord's name in vain?

ROSS

Well, sure. But you say it, too.

DOUG

I do?

ROSS

All the time.

DOUG

How do I say it?

ROSS

You know. "Jesus, that was the worst tackle I've ever seen!" Or "Jesus, I need a drink!"

DOUG

How about, "Jesus, I feel full."

ROSS

Beer is filling.

DOUG

So we put Jesus in front of half the things we say because Jesus is really important. Right?

ROSS

Are you gonna pull one of those Cliff Robertson stunts?

DOUG

Cliff Robertson...?

ROSS

You know. Charly. It's only one of your all-time favorites. Cliff Robertson plays this guy who's not too quick and then one day he wakes up real smart. I think he won the Oscar for it.

DOUG

The Oscar.

ROSS

What's four thousand thirty-seven divided by sixteen?

DOUG

How should I know?

ROSS

Hey, bud, I'm kidding. Relax. Everything's alright.

DOUG

I think maybe it is. Thanks to you.

ROSS

Whadda you mean, thanks to me?

DOUG

A surprise party, down here...it would have been too much. I mean, this place sets off bells in my head. With Nancy and all her friends—the noise, all that jabber—and Julie coming home on top of it all...

ROSS

These people comin' over, they're your friends, too.

DOUG

Right. Obviously. But I don't remember any of them.

ROSS

You remembered me.

DOUG

My point is, it wouldn't have been a good way to come home.

ROSS

Point taken. You want another beer?

DOUG

(Examining his 3/4 full bottle) No.

ROSS

I'll have one. I'm going to need it, once Nancy finds out I let you down here.

DOUG

She'll be angry?

ROSS

Hopping mad.

DOUG
But this is what I want. What I need. Why should she be angry?

ROSS
Did you ever plan a surprise party for someone and then someone snitches and ruins the surprise?

DOUG
I don't know. Did I?

ROSS
No, but Nancy did. Your twenty-year anniversary.

DOUG
Who snitched? (*Off Ross's sudden discomfort*) Oh.

ROSS
I didn't mean to.

DOUG
So it's okay. It was an accident.

ROSS
Except that me and her, now we've got a history, see. I've done this kinda thing before, so your wife, well—Nancy's gonna cut me a new one.

DOUG
A new what?

ROSS
Just don't point her in my direction, alright?

DOUG
I'll tell her it was me. I made you bring me down here. I forced you to tell me about the party.

ROSS
That would sure make my life a lot easier—hey!

This last as Doug envelops Ross in a bear-hug.

ROSS (cont'd)
Hold on, man. We could settle for a handshake.

DOUG
I shouldn't hug you?

ROSS

No, not really.

DOUG

I'm confused. I was trying to say thank-you.

ROSS

Look, it's not personal, it's just that with an accident like you had, blows to the head and all, a lot of things can change.

From upstairs, we hear a door slam and footsteps creaking over the floorboards and joists.

DOUG

Is that them?

ROSS

Either that or my dogs all came over at once. Joke.

DOUG

You don't have dogs?

ROSS

Not have dogs...? Man, you really did get clocked.

DOUG

I did, yeah. Get "clocked." Should I go up?

ROSS

Do you want to go up?

DOUG

Maybe I should be in my chair.

ROSS

Hey, the chair. Sounds good. D'you want me to go up, let them know we're here—and this was your idea?

DOUG

Would you?

ROSS

Anything—as long as you don't thank me any more. You sit. I'll be back in a jiffy.

Ross exits up the staircase.

Doug sits in the reclining chair. He pulls the lever on the side and the chair rockets back so violently that he loses his grip on his beer; it goes flying backward, over the chair and onto the floor. Doug leaps up, picks up the bottle, puts it in the sink at the bar, then searches for something to clean up the spill. He can't find anything, so he strips off his shirt and uses it to soak up the liquid. Then, as the footsteps above draw closer to the basement door, he rushes back to the chair, sits and tries to be the perfect— shirtless—picture of relaxation.

Down the stairs come NANCY RYAN and JULIE RYAN, with Ross trailing behind. Nancy is Doug's age, a no-nonsense conservative currently all a-flutter despite herself.

Nancy carries a cardboard box, open at the top and full of red, white and blue metal buttons.

Daughter Julie (mid-twenties) is the sort of hard-nosed left-wing romantic who blends studied disaffection with boundless, sunny optimism.

NANCY

Doug! I am going to kill Ross, do you understand me? I am going to kill him! Do you have any idea how much planning we've done?

DOUG

A lot?

NANCY

(To Ross) You are a dead man.

ROSS

Usually am.

NANCY

All you had to do was guard him, keep him amused upstairs until I got back again. Was that so hard?

DOUG

(Rising) No, it was my idea. I told him, bring me down here. And tell me if there's going to be a party. And he told me because I made him tell me.

NANCY

I don't believe you—but it doesn't matter. So it won't be a surprise, so what? Everyone will be here. Everyone. Seven o'clock.

JULIE

So is this gonna be like business as usual, or do you think you'll remember to put a shirt on?

NANCY

Julie!

JULIE

I'm sorry. Dad. It's great to see you.

She gives Doug a solid hug. Doug looks at Ross instead of returning the hug.

DOUG

Is this okay?

ROSS

She's your kid. Go to town.

JULIE

And it has been a while.

DOUG

It has?

NANCY

Too long.

DOUG

Then I should definitely put a shirt on. Right?

NANCY

For this, you can dress any way you want. Because it's your party, because it's—Doug, it is so good to have you home!

She also embraces Doug.

ROSS

No, don't ask me, just go ahead.

NANCY

Oh, did you see? Look what we picked up!

Nancy reaches into the box and withdraws an oversize campaign button. For anyone close enough to see, it reads: RYAN FOR SENATE. Nancy pins one on Doug's belt loop.

DOUG

"Ryan for Senate." Am I running for the Senate?

NANCY

Doug!

DOUG

What?

NANCY

I told you this yesterday, at the hospital. And the day before. I am running for Senate.

DOUG

Wow. The Senate.

NANCY

Here, Ross. One for you. One for me, and—

JULIE

—Don't even think about it.

Nancy lets Julie's button plop back in the box.

DOUG

Are we going to have to move?

NANCY

Move? Why?

DOUG

If you win. I mean, I'm not real clear on this, but isn't the Senate someplace kinda far away?

JULIE

Mr. Smith went all the way to Washington.

NANCY

Honey, this is the State Senate. I am running for state, not national, office.

ROSS

Get used to it, buddy. She's gonna win.

NANCY

Durham's only got a four-point lead, so. The tide is turning.

DOUG

The tide.

JULIE

Mom sees barbarians at the gate. It's time to drive them out.

NANCY

We are not going to have this conversation.

JULIE

In a nice town like this, you don't want barbarians. Does a number on the property values.

NANCY

You're the one who chose the word "barbarians."

JULIE

No, you chose it, just before my prom, remember? Me and my friends: barbarians.

NANCY

What you were doing, at that place—

JULIE

—What we were doing was escorting terrified girls to see a doctor at a legal clinic.

NANCY

Legal, maybe, yes, but if you want to give the word "clinic" a bad name, well, on that score, Planned Parenthood is doing a great job.

JULIE

(To Doug) Mom had the biggest sign and the loudest voice.

NANCY

I didn't know you were going to be there!

ROSS

Well. Looks like you all are back in the swing of things.
Time for me to hit the road.

DOUG

You could stay.

ROSS

I'll be back tonight. Your personal chaperone.

NANCY

He doesn't need a chaperone.

ROSS

I won't get in the way. But I'll be here. Later, folks.

Ross exits.

JULIE

I could be your chaperone.

NANCY

That's the spirit. You know, at the airport, she said very
clearly, "Thank you for picking me up."

JULIE

Like thirty minutes late.

NANCY

The buttons weren't ready, so...

JULIE

I love airports.

NANCY

I got there as fast as I could!

JULIE

I love standing around in airports, watching the luggage...

DOUG

Julie. It was only a half hour, right?

JULIE

Yeah. It wasn't a problem.

NANCY

I have to go up, I have a million things to get ready.

DOUG

Can I help?

NANCY

No, we're bringing in pizza, we've already got beer—and this is your party. Just sit back, relax...Julie, try and help Dad remember: I am in the middle of a senate run, seven weeks to go. This could mean everything for us.

Nancy exits.

JULIE

Hey. Want to know a secret?

DOUG

I guess, sure.

JULIE

Mom never comes down here.

DOUG

Never?

JULIE

But for you, today. She'd go anywhere.

DOUG

Then I guess I really should get dressed, huh?

Doug locates his shirt, but it's wet and chilly.

JULIE

Dad, whoa, stop. Let me get you a dry shirt.

Julie opens the laundry room and roots through a basket of folded clothes until she finds a clean shirt. She tosses it to Doug. It looks pretty much like his first shirt.

DOUG

This is what I wear, huh?

JULIE

Whenever you can get away with it.

DOUG

You think I ought to be wearing something else?

JULIE

Maybe for the big bash, but you've got a couple hours. You know Mom's pretty excited.

DOUG

About this party.

JULIE

To have you home. Do we have any more beer?

DOUG

Tons. *(As Julie gets one)* Do you like beer?

JULIE

What's my middle name?

DOUG

What?

JULIE

I'm serious. What's my middle name?

DOUG

I don't think I know my own middle name. Do I have a middle name?

JULIE

Washington. Your name is Douglas Washington Ryan.

DOUG

How about that.

JULIE

Gran and Gramps named you after George Washington.

DOUG

And he was...?

JULIE

The founder of our country, our first President. I cannot tell a lie, yes, I'm the one who chopped down the cherry tree...no? This must be scary.

DOUG

It's...I can't even say...I look at that mirror there...I can read the letters, I know the words, but I don't know, what's Samuel Adams? He's a person, there he is, but it's a beer, right? It has to be, the guy in the picture's holding a mug so it's some kind of advertising and Ross says I drink beer like a fish, so that's a beer mirror and Samuel Adams is a person and a beer. Right?

JULIE

Mom says you remember the accident.

DOUG

I'm not supposed to, but I do. I can see my hands on the wheel, it was Schrock Road, where it goes under the highway—and then I get a call, and I pick up the cell but I drop it and I'm reaching around in the foot-well, trying to find it, and then—I look up, and I'm under the bridge, and here come the supports, right smack against my headlights. And I guess before that, I had a middle name. You know what's weird? I can't remember if I was in a hurry. If there was some reason why I had to answer that call. I'm not in a hurry now.

JULIE

You aren't unless you want to be.

DOUG

But I do feel, I don't know. Behind.

JULIE

I want to help.

DOUG

How?

JULIE

Let's nail down some basics. Do you think Mom's a Republican or a Democrat?

DOUG

Those are...clubs, right? Political clubs.

JULIE

Pretty much. Which one are you?

DOUG

Can I choose?

END EXCERPT

FOR A COMPLETE COPY OF THIS SCRIPT, CONTACT MARK RIGNEY

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