



STAND. BY. ME.

A Play in Two Acts

by

Walt Kelly

walterkellyhome@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

To view a copy of this license,

visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA..

Cast of Characters

Moses: homeless man, older but ageless, the narrator; when he speaks the others ignore him.

Jeremiah: twenty something, blunt, plain-speaking

Stewart: thirty something, scared, nervous, sarcastic

Sara: early twenties or younger, full of life, uses third person pronoun

Sophia: forty something professor, lives on the edge of despair, uses plural first person pronouns

SCENE

The entire play takes place in the central room of an old fallout shelter. Off stage is a bathroom.

TIME

The present.

ACT I

Possible slide show to lead in: a montage of images of disasters, wars, pestilence, famine, etc. that accelerates until the screen becomes intense white light, then...last slide on screen is of a large sign saying: **WARNING!** *This door is hermetically sealed and once opened will no longer function to prohibit contaminants.*

SETTING: An old sixties/fifties era fall out shelter. Laying around the floor in various stages of repose are Sara, Jeremiah, Stewart and Sophia. Moses stands before the audience, addressing them backlit by the dim light of the slide behind him.

MOSES

Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice. From what I've tasted of desire, I hold with those who favor fire. But if it had to perish twice I think I know enough of hate to say that for destruction ice is also great and would suffice. A poem by a man named Robert Frost.

(Low light.)

The paths of five strangers converged here, in this old fall out shelter beneath the school. It's a remnant from the Cold War, when surviving a nuclear war seemed a possibility.

(Lights on reveal the shelter. Four people lay and sit in various stages of repose in their separate spaces. All are unmoving, frozen. Moses wanders around the stage.)

(Turns the air purifier crank.)

We got food, water (indicates the crank) - clean air. We could live down here for months. Did I say live? No. Survive. Make note of that. The difference between the two is...of the essence.

(The lights go out. Darkness. After a few moments the lights flicker back on. All are sitting as before. They are relieved when the lights come back up. Moses is now camped at his own personal space.)

(Sara stands and wanders over to center stage, looking at an imaginary door there. It is the large shelter door featured in the initial slide.)

STEWART

(Stands next to Sara, points at the imaginary door.)

You keep staring at the door. I'll read it again for you, "This door is hermetically sealed and once opened will no longer function to prohibit airborne contaminants."

SARA

(Stares at the invisible door, right at the audience.)
We don't know what's happening out there.

STEWART

That's the point, isn't it? We don't know. So we stay in here until things...settle...'out there.'

JEREMIAH

What's to know? The world is fucked up. What else is new?

SARA

But we don't even know. What really happened.

STEWART

(Holds up his cellphone.)
You got the same cellphone alert we all did: 'seek shelter'. What happened out there? Take your pick! A raging pandemic! Nuclear war! Smart bombs! Dirty bombs! Foreign terrorists! Domestic terrorists! Nerve agents! A meteor the size of a baseball stadium! Oh hell, the angel, the archangel, the guy with the horn!

MOSES

(Reading from the book of quotations he carries around.)
Gabriel. "And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit." Revelations nine.

JEREMIAH

You ever heard of the Doomsday Clock? Did you know it's closer to midnight now than even back when they built this bomb shelter?

STEWART

Yeah. No, thank you. We've got everything we need to live.

SARA

Hm. When the night has come, and the land is dark...

(Sophia appears from stage L/R, adjusting her clothes.)

STEWART

You get lost in the can again, your ladyship? 'Cause it's your turn to crank the air.

SOPHIA

(Single spot on her while turning the hand crank.)

We tried to keep calm, deal with things, but 'trying' implies failure, doesn't it? We've tried so many things, haven't we?

(She pulls a small pistol from her backpack.)

We tried. Then the phones began wailing. Gabriel's trumpet, digitized. Do we welcome the end, embrace resolution? No, we follow Moses like a frightened lost child, down into the bowels of the building, into this...crypt.

(Stage lights back up. Sophia replaces the pistol into her pack and she finishes cranking.)

SARA

Are you alright, Sophia?

SOPHIA

We're...fine. Thank you, Sara. What were you all talking about?

(Sara makes a gesture toward the door, the usual subject. Sophia acknowledges with a nod, looks at Stewart.)

MOSES

Fear. "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering." Yoda.

STEWART

Don't look at me. I didn't start the war. Or whatever calamity it is out there.

SARA

Do you think anybody is, maybe, looking for us?

STEWART

Nobody banging on the door, haven't heard 'olly olly oxen free'.

SOPHIA

He has a point, Sara. If things are okay. We suppose that somebody would have come down here to tell us. Don't you think?

SARA

Think? I think I stopped thinking when that door slammed shut. My brain is, like, on autoplay.

STEWART

What's to think about? We're the survivors. World War Three, or the Zombie Apocalypse or whatever. The Invasion of the Body Snatchers, or Snotty Bastards. We're the lucky ones.

JEREMIAH

Really? This is luck?

SARA

(Looking at the door.)

Surely it wasn't meant to end this way.

JEREMIAH

Was it always coming to this?

SOPHIA

We had a civil society. We just needed more respect and tolerance.

STEWART

Well, look where your civil society got us.

(He points at the imaginary door, the audience.)

JEREMIAH

(Monologue. Spotlit.)

(On screen, a deluge of images and headlines from media: Biden, Obama, Trump, DeSantis, Ukraine, Jan. 6, masks, protests, mushroom clouds, factory waste, refugees, Iron Man, Captain America, Kardashians, Kanye, minutia, trivia, etc., etc.)

(He gestures toward the screen.)

JEREMIAH

You get tired of it. The constant, relentless, non-stop flood, of, of, of bad news.

(Turning the air purifier crank.)

You're fried. Okay, okay you get it. Reality sucks. Or virtuality does, anyway. I mean what? Is the internet run by Chicken Little? Yeah, you're just a little overcooked these days.

(Stage lights come back on.)

MOSES

Getting information off the internet is like taking a drink from a fire hydrant. Mitch Kapor.

SARA

(Looking at her dead cellphone.)

Does anybody know what time of day, or night, it is? Or day of the week?

(Addressing the audience.)

Does anybody know, really, why were here? Or what's for dinner?

MOSES

Spam.

STEWART

Spam.

SOPHIA

Spam.

JEREMIAH

Spam.

SARA

Hm...yeah.

(Lights go out.)

JEREMIAH

Oh great. There go the lights again. What do you say we all just take a break from this 'the world is fucked' thing for awhile.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

(Darkness)

MOSES

America, America,

God mend thine every flaw,

Confirm thy soul in self-control,

Thy liberty in law. Katherine Lee Bates.

(Low lights on. Moses is cranking the air purifier slowly.

All else are frozen, except ~~SARA~~ Sara, who is dancing around the stage.)
 If the sky that we look upon...but no. It's a funny world she lives in. At once both beautiful and hideous, peaceful and not. She gets moments of truth and is blind-sided by deception. She's confused then enlightened, then dazed again. Rending sadness and unspeakable joy. She is darkness, then light. She glories in life and then...

(She stops at Sophia's place, sees something in her backpack, reaches down and extracts the pistol.)

Mmmm. Cold, hard, silent steel, your kiss beckons, the promise of peace. Release. The soul freed of this, this, entanglement.

(Looking at the audience.)

Would that there were a sign, a voice, something, that life is...yet possible.

(She perks up as though she heard something.)

(To the audience.)

What? What's that? What did she hear? The cosmos speaks? Hm? Did it just say: 'yes'?

(Wait for the audience to say 'yes'.)

And, and, was that: 'believe'?

(Wait for response.)

What else? What else, Cos'? What makes this life's tumult worth passage? Why choose to live? Tell her. Say, say, say.

(Wait for audience call outs: i.e. "Chocolate!" "Skinny dipping!" "Friends!")

Okay. Just as long as you stand, stand by me.

(Sara looks down at the gun, then BLACK OUT.)

MOSES

Whenever you're in trouble won't you stand, by me.

Ben E. King

(Lights up. Sara returns the pistol to Sophia's backpack, unseen by the others. She moves to center stage, looks at the door. Stewart sees her.)

STEWART

Want me to read the door for you again?

(She just looks at him, smiles. Sophia appears from stage right/left. Jeremiah is cranking the air purifier.)

STEWART

Her highness, appearing from stage right.

JEREMIAH

Is this thing doing anything really?

SOPHIA

We...we forgot...something.

(She roots around in her pack desperately searching for something. She finds it, the pistol, which she secretly grabs, exits off stage. Sara has watched her. She follows, knocks on bathroom door.)

SARA

Sophia? Are you okay?

SOPHIA

(Off stage.)

We're...fine.

SARA

Nobody says they're fine if they're really okay. Come on out.
Let's talk.

SOPHIA

(Off stage.)

We just need to be alone.

SARA

Yeah, I get that. But come out and talk to me first. Just for a minute.

(A few seconds later Sophia emerges, gun in hand. Alarm, panic.)

STEWART

Oh shit. Oh shit.

JEREMIAH

(To the audience)

Does it always have to come to this?

MOSES

(To Jeremiah.)

He who learns must suffer. Aeschylus.

SOPHIA

(Waving the gun around absent-mindedly.)

Are we already dead?

SARA

Sophia? Sophie'?

SOPHIA

Living like this is...pointless.

SARA

Come here. Come with me. Come.

(She leads Sophia to center front stage. One dim spot.)

SARA

Shh. Stand here. Listen.

(Quiet.)

SOPHIA

What?

SARA

Shh. Listen. It sounds like this: bum-bum-bum, bum; bum-bum-bum, bum...

(She continues this line until the audience picks it up.)

SARA

(Speaking in time to the rhythm.)

When the night, has come

And the land is dark

And the moon is the only light we'll see

No I won't be afraid,

Oh, I won't be afraid,

Just as long, as you stand, stand by me

(At some point Sophia begins weeping, drops the gun.

Jeremiah and Stewart wander to center stage too, doing the bum-bum-bum, bum. If necessary, encouraging the audience to sing along.)

Oh, darlin', darlin', stand by me, oh stand by me,

Whoa stand now, stand, stand by me.

(Singing.)

If the sky that we look upon,

Should tumble and fall,
And the mountains should crumble, to the sea
I won't cry, I won't cry, no I won't, shed a tear
Just as long as you stand, stand by me.

(Cast sings chorus together with the audience. Encourage audience to stand.)

Oh, darlin', darlin', stand by me, oh stand by me,
Whoa stand now, won't you stand now, stand by me.

(As the song ends, Moses steps forward, mimes turning the door's rotary handle and opens it, the casts steps out and bows.)

(CURTAIN)