

The Velvet Hour  
A Play in One-Act  
By  
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"There are times when it will go so wrong that you will barely be alive, and times when you realize that being barely alive, on your own terms, is better than living a bloated half-life on someone else's terms." - Jeanette Winterson

### Characters:

Wil: around 18. A high school senior trying to come to terms with the new reality of her sexual identity and life without her mother, whom she had been close to; average height, dark hair recently cropped; a bit coarse-seeming and guarded due to some trauma in her not-so-distant past, having previously been a receptive, spunky child growing up.

Shay: a destitute 16 year-old who, prior to the start of the play, read in the local library every day in lieu of a formal education; a petite and eccentric strawberry blonde. She speaks rather poetically at times, as if narrating her life. Despite having an unconventional upbringing, or perhaps because of it, she is very conscious of the world and of herself.

Jessica: a longtime classmate of Wil's. She was once on good terms with Wil, but rejected her after her official coming out.

Jack: Jessica's asshole boyfriend; homophobic

Wil's Mother & Father: consumed by their dysfunctional marriage and therefore somewhat neglectful of Wil. The father is slowly succumbing to alcoholism, the mother familial obligations back home; have actors playing Jack and Jessica double these roles; pantomime to monologue, no dialogue

### Setting:

Leavenworth, Crawford County, Indiana, near the Ohio River; late fall. Primary locations: a high school, a local library, and a clearing in the forest between the two.

(LIGHTS UP. A schoolyard flanked by forest. A pack of kids stand to one side. Enter WIL, book bag slung casually over one shoulder. Noticing the clique, she quickens her pace, deliberately eying the ground. The group cuts her off.)

JESSICA

Nice haircut, *Wil*. Got the "lipstick lessie" look in spades now. Because lesbihonest here, you weren't fooling anyone before.

WIL

You ought to know - you've been pulling off the "dipshit Jessie" for years now, and believe me, that jackass boyfriend of yours Jack isn't helping. It's in his name though, so not like he can help it. Maybe he's more like me than you think.

JESSICA

I oughta wipe that smirk off your face, lipstick and all!  
(Grabbing Wil's face, her own contorted) Who're you trying to impress anyway - mommy dearest? Oh wait, I forgot, she's not around anymore, is she?

WIL

(Throwing off Jessica's grip) You shut the hell up! You know nothing about it. (Beat as she reins herself in) 'Course you've been around this long and don't know much about anything really, so maybe I shouldn't be so -

(JESSICA cuts WIL off with a slap to the face. Beat. Enter JACK, smoking a joint.)

JACK

What's going on? You okay, baby? I thought I heard a scream -

JESSICA

(Wailing hysterically, clapping a hand to her cheek) Oh Jack, she hit me!

(JACK shoves his way to the front of the group, looking WIL up and down.)

JACK

This butch bitch here? Don't worry, baby, I'll take care of it. (Chuckling the joint) Maybe if I hit her hard enough, I can do this town a favor and smack her back straight.

(WIL tries to run, but Jessica's posse corners her. She twists away, just as JACK aims a punch at her stomach. She doubles over, but JACK wrenches her up by the shirtfront.)

JACK

You know, for a dyke you're pretty, uh, pretty. Maybe I don't need to beat the gay outta you, maybe I can just -

(He mashes his lips to hers, holding her so she can't pull away.)

JESSICA

Jack, what are you *doing*?

(She yanks him back with a noise of outrage.)

I hate when you get high without me. You always do the stupidest shit. I mean, seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?

WIL

(Wiping her mouth in disgust) He's just operating on dick default, Jessie. Told you he was an ass. Now would be a good time to tell him to go screw himself, except it looks like he's already got that covered. Guess you two won't be getting messy with either stick tonight, huh?

(JACK lunges at WIL with a snarl, but she dodges him and escapes into the audience, JACK on her tail; a somewhat protracted scuffle ensues as the stage dims for the scene change. At last, WIL manages to shake JACK off, disappearing into the "woods" off stage.)

JACK

Get her!

(He leads the rest of the group backstage in pursuit, the sounds of the chase ongoing.)

JACK (V.O.)

You're not getting away! When I'm through with you, no amount of makeup in the world is gonna hide how fucked up you're gonna be!

JESSICA (V.O.)

Come on, girls, let's split up! We'll find her faster that way. Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have worn these heels!

(The sound of frantic footsteps fades slowly.)

WIL (V.O.)

(Catching her breath) I think - I think I lost them, thank god. Thought they were going to kill me for sure! (Pause.) Wait, crap...where is this?

(LIGHTS UP. A great beech tree in a small clearing. A girl in a pink patterned sweater and faded blue skirt sits among the lower boughs in the vague U of a large, overhanging branch, watching the sunset. She holds her arms out wide as if to embrace the world, or challenge it. WIL approaches.)

WIL

Um, hello. (Waits for a response that doesn't come) ...What are you doing?

SHAY

(Indicates her arms) Flying.

WIL

Okay, sure...What are you really doing?

SHAY

Dying. Same as you. We're dying all the time, after all.  
(Lowering her arms) I was feeling the fear under the thrill, you could say.

WIL

You don't really seem like the morbid type.

SHAY

Whoever said death was morbid? If you stop trying so hard to avoid it, it doesn't seem so bad. When you're dead you forget fear, you become it, and so ends the paradox. I'm just balancing on the edge, watching the world do the same as heaven and earth collide. You'd think people would be afraid of sunsets too, and yet the compounded might of the two elements essential and transcendent to humanity only brings us peace, a velvet hour bordered blue.

(SHAY smiles sadly and sighs.)

...It's such a lonely little creature, death. Somehow I feel like I can relate.

(Submerged in the weight of this peculiar girl's words, WIL nods. There is a pregnant, private sort of pause as SHAY climbs down from her perch.)

WIL

It's funny. I thought I was gonna die before. These kids from school were...well, it doesn't matter now I guess. I'm not sure I understand it yet, but looking at it your way, it seems silly to have been scared.

SHAY

(With a shrug) Not really. Just 'cause you know what's in your heart doesn't mean you can't be afraid of it. In the quiet, like now, you can really hear how it beats, and it's *loud*, loud with so many things, fear among them. And loud things can be scary.

(In the distance, a sound like a gunshot. WIL tenses, crouching suddenly.)

SHAY

What are you doing?

WIL

(Hugging herself; in a small voice) ...Flying.

(SHAY kneels beside WIL, pulling her hands away from her shoulders and taking them in her own.)

SHAY

Let's fly together then. What does your tomorrow look like?

WIL

"My tomorrow," (chuckles) you make it sound so promising. Same as today, most likely. Survive afternoon classes, then try my best not to get my ass kicked on the way to violin practice.

SHAY

Oh, what a lovely instrument. You play?

WIL

Sort of, yeah. It's kind of a spiritual thing for me, music. Doesn't judge, keeps me sane. Grabs hold of my heart so I can let go for a little while.

SHAY

And be unafraid.

WIL

For once, yes.

SHAY

So can you come tomorrow? You can practice here. I'd love to hear you play.

WIL

Well...I guess so, yeah, thanks.

SHAY

(Standing) Then it's settled. We'll meet here at...do you know what time it is? I don't own a watch.

(WIL tugs up her sleeve,  
looking at a non-existent  
watch.)

WIL

Sorry, I must've lost mine when I was running - in the woods  
before.

SHAY

It's fine, don't worry. (She glances towards the dimming  
horizon.) We'll meet here, before sundown.

WIL

See if we can beat the cosmos to it. You be heaven, I'll be  
earth, yeah?

SHAY

Our own little velvet hour.

(She pulls WIL to her feet.  
They begin to move away from  
the tree, crossing to other  
side of the stage.)

WIL

(Rubbing her wrist) Man, I can't believe I lost my watch. I  
should probably try to find it...it was a birthday present from  
my dad. I kind of feel naked without it, you know.

SHAY

How about I help you look for it tomorrow? It's getting dark;  
we'll have better luck then. In the meantime...

(She stops, and removes the  
ribbon in her hair to tie it  
around WIL'S wrist.)

For security. And so I know you'll come back.

WIL

A little piece of your heaven tethered to my earth, eh? Maybe  
tomorrow won't be so bad. Thanks for the flying lesson. I'll see  
you tomorrow, um...

SHAY

Shay, call me Shay. ...What? Why are you smiling?



WIL

No reason, it just suits you, that's all. I'm Wil by the way.

SHAY

(Nods) You wear it well. Your hair, too. It looks so...free.

WIL

(Beaming) Glad you think so. It's a new look for me, so I'm still getting used to it. (Beat.) It was really great meeting you, Shay. See you tomorrow.

SHAY

Tomorrow.

(WIL smiles again and waves, exiting the stage. LIGHTS OUT. END OF SCENE.)

SCENE II

(Soft violin music wafts through the space. LIGHTS UP on the left half of the stage. WIL sits in a pool of dappled light under the old beech, playing and smiling absently. SHAY appears behind her in the same clothes as the day before. She tiptoes up and taps on her shoulder. WIL starts, nearly dropping the violin.)

SHAY

(With an apologetic laugh) I'm so sorry! I didn't think that would scare you.

WIL

It's all right, no harm done. Looks like I win this time. (Playfully nudging SHAY) Touchdown: Earth.

SHAY

(Giggles a bit, nodding at the violin) You're very good. What was that song you were just playing? It sounded really pretty. I could hear it from the other side of the woods.

WIL

Chopin's "Tristesse." Sounds better with a full orchestra or at least a piano, but I figured the trees wouldn't mind much. (Pause.) "Other side of the woods?" What were you doing over there?

SHAY

Oh, I was just at the library.

(She takes a moment to sit down, looking up at the canopy of tree leaves.)

They're quite like forests, aren't they? If the pen is mightier than the sword, books are the splinters of trees into which we carve our namesake with the greatest weapons of all.

WIL

You talk like you practically live there! Haven't been in ages, so that's the most poetry I've heard in a while! I'm guessing you were there for school?

SHAY

No, I just like reading. I'm not in school.

WIL

(Sets down the violin) Did you drop out?

SHAY

Oh no, nothing like that. ...I've never been actually.

WIL

Never? Not even grade school? Isn't that illegal or something?

SHAY

Well, I was sick a lot as a kid so my mother decided to homeschool me. But I always liked reading.

WIL

And now? Does she still homeschool you?

(SHAY shakes her head.)

SHAY

No. She...she got sick too. Lessons started ending earlier and earlier, and then one day they stopped. Everything stopped.

(She fidgets with the hem of her skirt, drawing up her knees to her chest.)

SHAY (cont'd.)

(Quietly) I told you heartbeats were scary.

WIL

...When my mom left it felt the same way, for a while. But then it was like the world restarted in double-time and I couldn't keep up. ...How long has it been for you? Being without her, I mean.

SHAY

A full year as of yesterday. (Beat.) I read once in a book on Mediterranean folklore that forest clearings were considered sacred because people could see the sky among the children of the earth, and better know their gods. But I've found that people are also children of the earth, thin-skinned, with rings to mark our years, under our eyes, on our fingers, around our collars, in our baths, in the smoke and song we breathe out to fill the world with tiny stories in our search for belonging. I have always put my faith in books, so I thought coming to the forest would feel a bit like coming home.

WIL

Going back to your roots, I can relate. That's the reason my mom left. Her family back in Kentucky needed her, apparently more than I did. So, six months later, it's just me and my dad, who barely tolerates me now that he knows who, or as he would say, "what" I really am. If I'm being honest though, "what" might be a better word. Feels like he never really knew me at all now. ...Weapons, indeed.

SHAY

(Beat.) Yesterday, there was that loud bang...

(Cue the gunshot noise. WIL flinches.)

You seemed scared. I wanted to help but I didn't know what to say.

WIL

(Trying for some bravado) You didn't know what to say? I didn't think that was possible!

SHAY

My mom used to joke that if I wasn't careful, I'd talk myself to death. But...do you want to talk? About what happened, I mean.

WIL

Not really. But you're probably the only person in this town who'd listen if I tried, so I might as well.

(She takes a breath to compose herself.)

There was a time when I contemplated suicide.

(LIGHTS UP on the second half of the stage. The actors playing JACK and JESSICA now play her parents. They sit at a small table set for three, a birthday cake at one end. Extending behind them is a fireplace and rug to indicate a living room. They pantomime to WIL's narration. As she speaks, she twists and untwists her hands to keep from shaking, staring hard at the ground.)

Last summer, I'd finally worked up the courage to come out to my family. It was my birthday. My parents hadn't been getting along very well, but they'd tried to be civil at least for my eighteenth. I thought maybe if I came clean, it would bring us closer together. But it didn't go well. My dad had been drinking to "celebrate," and he got into a huge fight with my mom. Sexuality was never really brought up in my house, so I never knew how he felt about it. He threatened to disown me. My mom tried to defend me, but he turned around and threatened her with divorce. She revealed that she'd been planning to leave anyway. Her father had had a stroke, and she needed to go home to help her mother adjust. It got violent. Long story short, she slapped him; he pulled out a gun. Told me if I didn't get out, he'd shoot. She told me to run, but I couldn't. He ended up shooting the wall. Two days later, my mom packed for Kentucky, said she

WIL (cont'd.)

was going to try and make arrangements for me to come live with her there. But she never came back.

(The lights fade on the other side of the stage.)

SHAY

(A pause.) So I'm guessing you don't want to look for your watch?

(WIL glances down at her wrist, thinking. The ribbon is still tied as SHAY left it.)

WIL

Nah, it's time I got a new one anyway. Besides, I think I heard it break when I - when I fell yesterday. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have lost it in the first place. So, yeah, thanks, but it's okay. What should we do instead?

SHAY

I have an idea.

(She scoots closer to WIL, carefully handing her the violin.)

You promised you'd play something for me, remember?

WIL

But you said you already heard me. Isn't that enough?

SHAY

That doesn't count. You didn't know I was listening.

WIL

(Rhetorically) If a girl plays a violin in a forest and no one's there to hear it, does she make a sound? It counts, Shay.

SHAY

Please? It doesn't matter to me if you play the same song over again or make something up off the top of your head. I don't know much about music except that it can mean a great many things all at once, but it's one thing people seem to have

SHAY (cont'd.)

trouble putting into words. So even if you mess up, who can say anything against you?

(WIL can't help smiling. She readies her bow, looking at SHAY expectantly.)

SHAY

(Jumping to her feet) Make it something I can dance to.

(She leans down and pulls the ribbon free, letting it sail behind her as she skips off. As she sweeps across the stage, the light follows until the space is fully illuminated again. WIL begins to play at an allegro tempo, the notes coming easily though she does not think much about which will come next. SHAY twirls around to the rhythm, hair and skirt flaring.)

WIL

(With a burst of laughter as she cuts off) God, you're horrible!

(SHAY comes to a wobbly halt, arms akimbo as she pouts.)

SHAY

Who says? Maybe you're horrible!

WIL

(Half-laughing) Not ten minutes ago you told me I was "very good," but it only took you about ten seconds to lose the beat!

SHAY

It's not my fault I never learned to dance! I just did whatever felt good. That's all that matters, right? It's not like there's anyone else here to see me anyway. The only one who's embarrassed here is you.

WIL

I'm just looking out for you. You're pretty for a bookworm; what are you going to do if someone thinks that's sexy and asks you to dance? You know what, I think I can finally put those damn cotillion classes my dad made me take to use after all these years. C'mere.

(They meet each other center stage.)

WIL

I'm going to teach you the two-step. (Demonstrating) Okay, so it goes: one two three, one two three, quick, quick slow, quick, quick slow. Simple enough, right?

SHAY

I guess so. Show me again and I'll copy you.

(WIL repeats the steps, SHAY imitating her.)

WIL

Good, that's it! Now let's try it for real.

(She positions SHAY and then assumes the corresponding stance. They begin to dance. SHAY falters, teetering as she tries to avoid stepping on WIL's feet.)

SHAY

Oh, who cares about fancy footwork? It's so stiff and stifling! It's a lot more fun to do *this!*

(She breaks posture, grabs WIL's hands and spins her in a circle. WIL laughs and switches direction, leading with her hip and pivoting towards SHAY, who mimics her. They proceed to invent their own rhapsody of a dance, whirling and hopping about until they fall to the ground breathless. They lay side by

side. The sky sobers them,  
and their laughter subsides.)

WIL

You're right. That's much more fun. Actually, that's the most fun I've had in, well, six months.

SHAY

It's strange too. With that haircut of yours, you look like someone who knows how to have fun. My idea of fun consists of a stack of good books I can escape into. That's how I feel free.

(WIL rolls onto her side to  
look at SHAY, propping  
herself up on her elbow.)

WIL

I used to be more like you. A free spirit my mom always said. But I guess since she left, I forgot what that meant, or maybe I didn't want to remember. I still have my music, but that's about it. Me and this girl Jessica used to get up to all sorts of antics as kids. Then she turned out phony and I turned out gay, so things are different now. Yesterday she said my new hair completed my "lipstick lesbian" look. I know I shouldn't care, but it hurt, especially coming from her.

SHAY

You cut your hair to free yourself from the weight of everything it represented to you, right? To me, all it says is that the outside matches the inside, that you've found your equilibrium. That Jessica's the one who's off balance.

WIL

It's just hard to let go of the past, you know? I mean, we put so much stock in our histories, as a nation, as a culture, as individuals. People are only who they are because of their experiences. If I forget my past, then what do I become?

(SHAY sits up, smiling  
at WIL.)

SHAY

Free, Wil. Living in the present, it's a lot like dancing. The "Now" comes along without your notice, and then it hits you and suddenly you're dancing even if a moment before you didn't think you could, even if you're only dancing on the inside. The way the light dances when the sun hits the horizon. That's why



SHAY (cont'd.)

people like laughter, and kissing, and sleep - they all happen in the "Now." They feel like freedom, like music, like dancing. It's a safe surrender. It's not like flying. You don't need to be brave. You don't need to try so hard. You just feel it and sometimes another person feels it with you. You surrender your mind to your body and your body to that other person and it all just happens on its own and even if it's awkward it's still beautiful.

WIL

I feel you...These past six months, all I wanted was to *feel* something again. It was like I was waiting to wake up, wanting to let go but hold on. I needed a homecoming. And I've finally found it, here, in the velvet hour, with you. ...Can I - would you mind if I tried something?

(SHAY nods. Tentatively, WIL hugs her. SHAY seems frozen in shock for a moment, but then slowly returns the embrace. Her eyes close, and a pained smile flits across her face. She is crying quietly. WIL pulls her closer, soothing her almost like a child.)

SHAY

I - I'm sorry. I don't - I don't know why I'm crying, I -

WIL

Shh, shh, it's okay. You don't need to say anything. It's okay.

SHAY

I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. I've been so alone for so long, I just -

WIL

I know. And you've been so brave. But you don't have to be alone anymore, you don't have to try so hard. You've got "Free Wil" on your side. You can let it all go.

SHAY

I don't want to let go, not yet. Not yet.

(She holds WIL tighter, burying her face in her

shoulder, sobbing openly. WIL rocks her gently, stroking her hair. LIGHTS FADE. END OF SCENE II.)

SCENE III

(Derisive laughter. LIGHTS UP. WIL and SHAY have sprung to their feet, looking around wildly for the source of the noise. WIL is shaking slightly, seeming to recognize the voice. SHAY takes her hand, wiping her tears with her free sleeve. JACK enters, brandishing a pistol.)

JACK

Well, well, what have we here? Two backward birds caught in the act. Knew I'd catch up to you eventually, Wil.

SHAY

(Pulling WIL along as she backs away) S-Stay away from us! I don't know what you have against Wil, but she hasn't done anything to you.

JACK

It's more the fact that she exists, if you know what I mean.

(WIL and SHAY press their backs to the tree as he feigns a lunge at them, cackling at their terror.)

WIL

(Gathering her courage, clutching tightly to SHAY's hand as she speaks) How - how did you manage to find us all the way out in the woods like this? I came straight here; no one even saw me leave. I made sure of it!

JACK

Well, if you came "straight" here, there's your problem. It's not really your area, remember? Or maybe you liked our little kiss more than you let on? If you straighten out again, Jessica might even take you back.

WIL

Does she even know you're here?

JACK

No, and she never will. High-maintenance cunts like her don't pay attention to much if they can't fit between their ears or their legs. Besides, you're certainly not going to tell her.

(He aims the gun.)

WIL

Shay, run!

(The girls break away from one another. SHAY darts into the shadows behind the tree as WIL dives out of the way. Before she has time to pick herself up, JACK is standing over her. He digs his foot into her side to prevent her from rising. He smacks her across the temple with the gun.)

JACK

Told you I'd fuck you up. See that? (He gestures with the gun at the fading sunset.) It's almost dark now. Looks like it's lights out for you too.

(He points the pistol directly at her head.)

SHAY

NO!

(WIL and JACK look up; SHAY is balancing on the big branch jutting into the clearing, her arms outstretched.)

WIL

(In horror) Shay, what are you doing?

SHAY

(With a hard smile) Flying.

(She jumps, throwing herself on top of JACK. The two collapse to the ground. They wrestle for the gun. As SHAY scrabbles for it, JACK pulls her into a chokehold.)

WIL

Stop it, stop it, *please!* STOP, YOU'RE GOING TO -

(BANG; the gun goes off. Silence.)

JACK

Oh, God. No, this isn't what I - this wasn't supposed to happen.

(SHAY lies motionless beside him; he scrambles backward at the blood. WIL stares, frozen in shock.)

No, I - I never meant - I only thought - I didn't know it was loaded. I was just messing with you, I swear.

(His words fall on deaf ears as WIL stares transfixed at SHAY's body.)

WIL

Shay...S-Shay? SHAY?

(She drops to her knees beside SHAY, pulling her onto her back. A great shuddering gasp escapes her. Trembling, she looks up at JACK. She screams at him, her face as full of fury and anguish as her voice, slowly throwing back her head, as if to yell at the whole world too. JACK cries out as he clammers to his feet and flees, utterly terrified. The stage is silent. WIL pulls SHAY into

her lap, brushing the hair  
from her face.)

WIL

Shay? (Shaking her gently) Can you hear me?

SHAY

(Hazily) Did you see me, Wil? I flew.

WIL

Yeah, you were amazing. You were always amazing. From the moment  
we met, I knew you were.

SHAY

You're amazing too. I know sometimes it's hard to remember, but  
you've got to know that you are. No matter how much they beat  
you up, inside or out, you've got to remember. So long as you  
say so, your bruises are beautiful, and your hair is too. They  
might throw words or worse at you, but you have your own and you  
know how to use them. And that makes you stronger than them. You  
let them hear how loud your heart can beat, and they won't be  
able to break you down. Because heartbeats are like music and  
dancing and they don't ask you to be brave. They ask it of  
everyone else. ...Will you be brave for me and listen to mine?

WIL

I can be brave for you. For you, I could be anything, do  
anything, say anything.

SHAY

How about a plane or a rocket ship? I need you to help me fly.

(She holds up her hand.  
Tenderly, WIL clasps it in  
her own.)

WIL

I think I'll be better as a backward bird. I don't have to play  
by anyone's rules but my own. Never liked physics much anyway.

SHAY

Sounds...heavenly.

WIL

I don't think I can fly that high yet...The moon's out now. I  
may not have a spaceship, but can take you that far at least. We  
can dance all we want, put on a show for the aliens and

WIL (cont'd.)

astronauts and amateur astronomers. Balance on the edge to watch heaven and earth collide into our tomorrow and all the tomorrows after. Time won't matter there; we can stay in the velvet hour forever. I'd like that, wouldn't you, Shay? Shay?

(WIL looks down. A small smile parts SHAY's lips. She is still like the trees, like the sky.)

(Murmuring) Touchdown: Heaven.

(She releases her grip. Very gently, she places SHAY on the grass before her. She retrieves the half-forgotten ribbon and ties it around SHAY's wrist in the same fashion as she did for WIL. She holds her hand again for a moment, and brings it to her lips very softly. She turns to look up at the beech tree. She gets up and moves to stand beside it. She looks back at SHAY once more, then turns and begins to climb. She makes it to the drooping branch. She edges out towards the middle, and stops. Slowly, she raises her arms until they are wide like wings.)

WIL

Time to fly.

(BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY.)