

# **High, Thin cirrus**

By

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THE SETTING: a place for old people. It is not a nursing home or is it a hospital. It is not, essentially, a place that is real. In fact, the play takes place in the mind, in the memory, of Genevieve. The barest of scenic elements are all that need be provided: chairs, preferably wooden, (Adirondack chairs will do nicely), an occasional light and some indication of the grounds outside the home should be provided. Think of a long lawn running down to a beach and the ocean. The presence of the ocean nearby must be clear: the sound of gulls, waves, a fog horn, the bell from a buoy. The scene with the father can be set with nothing more than a bench or chairs. The scenes can be best played on varying levels, perhaps platforms of slightly different elevations offset from each other so as not to be symmetrical. Only the platform(s) in use in a particular scene will be lit. At the open all of the characters should be dimly seen in tableaux. They will remain so throughout except, of course, in their scenes.

At rise: ocean sounds are heard. An old Victrola plays Glen Gray and the Casa Loma orchestra's version of "Just a Fair Weather Friend" or something similar. We hear Genevieve speak as the music goes under and out.

(GENEVIEVE sits looking out to the sea)

GENEVIEVE (V.O.)

We are, all of us here, old, most people would say. We no longer lead useful lives as the expression goes. What they mean, I think, is that society has determined our lives no longer suit its needs. Or, more likely, society doesn't really know what to do with us. But, we still live and we must be...someplace...and this is where we find ourselves. This is where...we are. A state in which we find ourselves. Some of us, many of us, don't really believe we're old, we don't feel we're old. We look in the mirror and still see that girl we were. So young, so hopeful. It's true. No gray hair; no wrinkles. So much promise. Choices were made...have been made...for us though--for reasons not always clear...to us...we could not make these choices for ourselves. Our opinions, our needs, our real needs, are rarely considered. We come to places like this resentful--yet resigned. What we were...then...what we are. The resentment mostly passes with time. The resignation becomes acceptance. We measure time by the distance between visits from these strangers we once called our children. Or, between episodes of All My Children.

(Beat. The sound of a small airplane is heard rising then falling as it passes overhead and out of sight)

GENEVIEVE (Continued)

Oh, yes. I nearly forgot. There was someone who came to

see me. No. To be precise, he did not come to see me...

(GENEVIEVE is now standing on the "grounds" looking out to the sea. Two of the wooden chairs are nearby. Drew appears and stands watching her)

GENEVIEVE (Continued)

(Startled)

Oh.

DREW

I'm sorry.

GENEVIEVE

No, please. I just didn't...see you coming.

DREW

(Looks to the sky)

Cooling off some.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, yes. Yes it is, isn't it.

DREW

Taking the air?

GENEVIEVE

Yes.

(Gesturing)

The flowers. Aren't they lovely? I'm especially fond of the marigolds.

DREW

Those over there.

GENEVIEVE

(Laughing)

Oh my no. Those are zinnias. Scarlet zinnias.

DREW

I never did well with flowers.

GENEVIEVE

I had a lovely garden once. Goatsbeard, so good-

looking...even gone to seed...and globethistle and heliopsis  
and...sweetwilliams and columbines. And always, along the  
edge, sweet alyssum and lines and lines of marigolds.

DREW

Would you like to sit?

GENEVIEVE

Oh, I don't think so. I really should be getting in. The breeze  
seems to be stirring. I don't take the cold so easily these  
days.

DREW

Well, here now. Let's do something about that.  
(He removes his cardigan and offers it)

GENEVIEVE

Really. I don't--

DREW

I insist. Let me help you.

GENEVIEVE

Well, aren't you the gentleman.  
(She puts on the cardigan)

DREW

There.  
(Indicates the chairs)  
Now. Which side would you like?

GENEVIEVE

Well, which side would you like?

DREW

I'll take this one. Otherwise you'll be on my bad ear.

GENEVIEVE

My mother used to say stay out of the wind with your ear--  
whenever I had a bad ear, that is.

DREW

I'm deaf in that ear.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, dear. I am sorry.

DREW

Look at that sky. It'll rain tomorrow.

GENEVIEVE

My. I never would have guessed. It's such a love--

DREW

(Overlapping)

Mare's tails. You see them up there? High, thin cirrus. And the breeze picking up? Mackerel skies and mare's tails make tall ships carry low sails.

GENEVIEVE

Oh.

(She looks at the sky for an answer)

DREW

Those clouds. Look like horses's tails. Cirrus clouds. Now that wouldn't mean a thing but some nice weather coming along...that's what you were thinking...except for the breeze. Noticed how it's turned around? This morning from the west. This afternoon--where's it coming from now?

GENEVIEVE

Why, I just don't know. I was never very good with directions.

DREW

East. Turned around out of the east. Those mare's tails aren't such a good thing after all, pretty as you think they are. It will rain tomorrow by this time. I promise you.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, my.

DREW

You just can't say high thin cirrus--good weather. You always have to watch which way the wind's blowing. Put the two together. Then you know. West wind--good. East wind--not so good.

(Beat. he looks to the sky)

Where are you from?

GENEVIEVE

Albany...New York.

(Beat. She stares at him)

Have you forgotten me?

DREW

I'm far from home. Where home was.

(Pause. He looks at her as though recalling--  
what?)

A long time ago...

GENEVIEVE

And where was home for you?

DREW

Everywhere. Just about everywhere you might say. Army  
Air Corps.

(DREW riffs on an old WWII tune)

Nothing can stop the Army Air Corps.

(Beat)

In the old days. Air Force now.

GENEVIEVE

I've never been in an airplane. I somehow couldn't bring  
myself to do it. I could never understand what kept them up.

DREW

Not much to it really. It's the wind, the air. Just like water  
really. You just can't see what holds you up. That's all.  
Keep up your airspeed, we used to say and you'll come out  
of just about any kind of trouble at all.

GENEVIEVE

My husband. He was an insurance man, he's gone now. He  
flew. And my daughter. Quite a bit, you know. They did try  
to get me to go. They would always say I missed so much  
because I wouldn't fly.

(Beat. She looks to the sky)

I suppose I wondered if it would keep me up.

Oh, I do remember; I know a weather sign. My father taught  
me. Would you like to know?

(She's like a young girl now)

Can you guess? Please? Now, just look. You'll see it.

(They both look toward her father as light comes up where he's riding in a train coach. The sound of a train clacking along rises and falls on the segue. GENEVIEVE speaks to her father as though she's a girl again. This scene should have a dreamlike aura)

The leaves, father. Look at the leaves. See. See what they're doing.

FATHER

(He looks out)

Yes, I do. I see, Genevieve. It'll be raining by the time we get to Hartford.

GENEVIEVE

But the sun is shining.

FATHER

Not for long I'm afraid. Not for long. It will rain when the leaves turn their backs...

(Pause. The clack of the train rises, falls)

There'll be young men in Hartford. At your age--

GENEVIEVE

Oh, father. Don't be silly. I'll be perfectly fine. You're not to worry. And besides--those insurance men are perfectly innocent. Why, didn't I grow up with one...

FATHER

Just the same, the single ones sometimes chase after the young--

GENEVIEVE

(Overlapping)

Oh, Father. No one has endurance like the man who sells insurance! Isn't that what I hear you say. They mean no harm, father. It's just their nature.

(Her father stares out the railcar window as the light fades and the clack of the rails rises, falls)

GENEVIEVE (Continued)

(Back with Drew. No longer the child)

Can you guess? Now just look. You'll see it.

DREW

(Looking hard)

Well, let's see. No. I think you got me.

GENEVIEVE

The leaves! Look at the leaves. See? What they're doing?

DREW

No.

GENEVIEVE

Look there. They're blowing backwards. You can see their bottoms. See how much lighter they are. How white.

DREW

I do. Now. Yes, I do.

GENEVIEVE

My father said when they went bottoms up like that it was a sign of rain.

DREW

I'll be damned. Sorry. That's one I never heard of before

(He has really. Beat)

Here. Let me show you another one.

(Drew stands with his arms extended sideways  
shoulder-high)

I learned this one from an old Indian in New Mexico. He told me his people would put their backs to the wind and wherever their left arm pointed, that's where the storm would come from. So, when they camped they'd protect themselves from that direction.

GENEVIEVE

My word.

(Beat)

What where you doing with an old Indian in New Mexico?

DREW

That's a long story. You don't want to hear it.

(Pause)

I like that name. Genevieve.



GENEVIEVE

But I would. I truly would--and, oh my, I'm going on so asking you about your life history and I don't even know your name.

DREW

Drew. Drew Tippit.

GENEVIEVE

Well now. I must say that's a perfect name for an Army Air Force man.

DREW

Corps. Army Air Corps.

GENEVIEVE

Well, yes. Yes, of course it is.  
(Pause)

DREW

I went out there after the war. I took to all that...open...land. Some people think it's all desert and sand and snakes, you know. Not so. There are mountains. It's cool there...rising high...Sangre de Cristo up north. San Andres down south. And sky. Especially the sky. The air's so clear you can see a hundred miles. God, you could see the clouds, huge white cumulus, everywhere. Fair weather cu we called them when I was a flyer.

(Beat)

It's not like that here.

(Beat)

I bought an old place. Sort of a combination hotel, gas station, grocery store, saloon. Put everything I had into it. Turned it into a pretty decent place. Then I met the Indian. Came by looking for work one day. I took him on. He'd cut wood and truck it up to Albuquerque and he'd helped out around the place. He was a lot like me. Liked the wildness out there.

(Beat)

I called it Tippit's Guest Ranch.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, Drew. It sounds just lovely.

DREW

I didn't know what else to call it.

(Beat)

My wife hated it. She didn't like the people, she didn't like the mountains, she didn't like the sky--always said the clouds would bring rain--she didn't like the Indian. She called him my wooden Indian because he wooden speak to her. She thought that was funny. She didn't like anything. So, she left. She just walked out one day. After that, it just didn't work out for me. I suppose the business was never really that good anyway. I packed it in. Sold out to the Indian and moved east. I thought maybe if I came back where she was we'd get together again. She was all I had left. Don't get me wrong. She wasn't as bad as I made her sound, I guess. She just wasn't right for that part of the country. Sometimes she said it was just like another army post.

(Beat)

She was really all I had in the end.

GENEVIEVE

And did you? Get together again?

DREW

No. Oh, I found her alright. She'd married a man with a motel up on Cape Cod. I asked her why and she said it was the difference between east and west. I left. I haven't seen her since.

GENEVIEVE

I'm sorry.

DREW

No need to be

(Pause)

I suppose I'll go in now.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, please. I love having company. I really feel alone--here--I like your company, Drew.

(DREW stays)

When I rode the train with my father, I knew what kept them up. Yes. When I was young--won't you come sit by me--my father would take me with him--did I tell you this--my dear father would take me with him on his business trips

occasionally. We'd get on the Troy, Ballston and Saratoga Railway and ride all the way down from Albany to Hartford. What a glorious time it was. You'd have loved those mountains, Drew. The Berkshires. So lovely in the fall. And sometimes we'd get off at Northampton and my father would take me to a wonderful inn there. Oh my, I wish I could recall the name...and we would dine and visit our cousins...don't you think families are so important. Then we'd board the next train and go down into Hartford. That's the insurance capitol of the world, you know. He was in the insurance business.

(Beat)

I would never want those trips to end. I remember that.

DREW

We did that, too, you know.

GENEVIEVE

Now isn't that something of a coincidence.

DREW

Oh, no. Not the train to Hartford. My father would take me to the lake when I was a boy. And...there were loons that flew low across the water at sunset and they'd make that crazy wail that loons make.

(Drew does a bad imitation of the call of the loon. Genevieve laughs and applauds)

I liked to watch them fly. When the sun went down we'd stand under the stars at the edge of the lake and he'd point out all the constellations. Perseus, Orion, that's the bull, you know, Gemini. I still remember. Isn't that something after all these years? I don't think he really knew which was which. But, he knew all the names. And then, later, when it was dark, we'd lie on our backs on the warm sand, not making a sound, I can remember his breathing, and we'd watch the shooting stars. He called them the Perseus meteor showers, I think. And sometimes we'd see the Aurora Borealis, that's the Northern Lights, you know.

(Beat)

I hated to go home, too.

GENEVIEVE

(She sings)

"I will gather stars out of the blue, for you, for you."

DREW

(Drew looks at her, then up at the sky. He wets his forefinger with his tongue and holds it up to the breeze)

The wind's picking up. High, thin cirrus. East wind. Storm coming. We'd better go in before you catch cold.

(Genevieve rises. They start to leave. DREW sings. Badly)

Oh Genevieve, sweet Genevieve, the days may come, the days may go.sa

GENEVIEVE

(She joins him in singing for a moment. The light begins to fade)

How my father loved that song. Did I tell you that's how I got my name?

(The sound of a small airplane is heard rising then falling as it passes overhead and out of sight. DREW and GENEVIEVE look skyward as it passes)

## Characters:

Genevieve – an elderly woman, stoic, sentimental.

Drew – an elderly man. Proud but defeat shows in the seams.

Father – Forties. An insurance executive.

