

THE THIRD DEGREE

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TIME AND PLACE

Late summer, 2020. Evening. Empty Greater Municipal International Airport.

SCENE 1 CHARACTERS

RON, black male in his 30s.

SKYE, white male in his 30s.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

... // in the dialogue indicates interrupting (but **not** overlapping) text.

Does he love you? Do you love him?

We suffer.

~ Howard Barker, "Downchild," 1977.

SCENE 1

SKYE has just parked a shiny '57 Chevy across from the entrance of the GREATER MUNICIPAL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, a few spaces down from RON's worn pickup truck. RON is sitting on a bench alone outside the airport. Except for the two of them, the airport is empty. SKYE gets out of the car, walks up to RON, and sits down. RON nods.

A period of silence.

Are you happy? **RON**

I always envied '57 Chevy owners.
And now I am one. **SKYE**

Where'd you get it? **RON**

Classic Cars dot com. **SKYE**

Must have cost a bundle. **RON**

A bundle. Like a lot of things.... **SKYE**

What, for example? **RON**

Like, I'm sorry, Ron. **SKYE**

About what? About things you can't buy? **RON**

Like, I'm sorry.
For what I did. **SKYE**
Aside from this Chevy life doesn't feel much like I'm in the driver's seat right now.
Like it's moving on without me, and doesn't care.

RON

Like what happened to me after Paul.

SKYE

Paul?

RON

Paul, who you were screwing while you were my lover? Remember him?

SKYE

Oh.

RON

Seen him lately, Skye?

SKYE

No.

RON

I wouldn't think so.... Know why?

SKYE

Why?

RON

I'll tell you why.

I tracked him down. At a gym.

Showed him enough to get him interested.

To get him home with me.

Caught him off guard, and beat the living shit outta the drastic son-of-a-bitch.

Told him if he ever saw you again, he'd be dog food.

SKYE

You fucking didn't.

RON

[*pause*] No. I didn't

But I sure thought about it.

Actually, I did run into him.

He was leaving town anyway, and I gave him a bit of advice.

I guess he took it, Baby.

SKYE

Why are you telling me this?

RON

Because, if you're thinking of seducing me again.
If that's what this is about.
I'd think twice, if I were you, if you plan to ever start cheating on me again.
Understand?

SKYE

It's not like I go around thinking about him or anything. It's not like that at all.

RON

Why then? Why'd you do it?

SKYE

I don't know why. I just do.
It's the burn I feel. Not the actual doing it itself.
The excitement of seeing something new.
And knowing I can touch it, if I reach just right. And have it.
Close enough I can taste it. Taste a piece of it.
Don't you ever crave new things like that?

RON

As a point of fact ... no, I don't.

SKYE

Understood.

RON

And do you understand why I won't put up with shit like that anymore?

SKYE

Yes.

RON

And what might happen if you start two-timing me again?

SKYE

Yes.

RON

I doubt it.

SKYE

You don't want to get back together?

RON

I've said it before, and I'll spell it out for you again, Skye:
Lovers should be lovers because they love each other.
Women should be lovers because they love each other.
Not in retaliation against men they hate, or what men do.
And men should be lovers because they love each other.
Not fucking to forget what they didn't get.
Get it?...

I was hurt and lonely when we found each other. Disappointed and hungry.
And you nourished my soul when I needed it most. You're real good at that.
You made spontaneous and impulsive seem like action verbs for me.
And I loved it.
And I believed I was doing the same for you, and that we really loved each other.
My mistake.
I trusted you. And you burned me.
And that was the worst hunger of all. Loving someone who cheats on you.
Sex exists to help share the tenderness and tensions of life.
The softness and comfort of just lying and breathing in the same air afterwards.
Talking with the same breath. Just being together.
Sharing the company of somebody you love to relax with, and who loves you.
Not to play adolescent games and pollute the atmosphere with infidelities.

SKYE

I'm not arguing; but do you know why there's sex on Earth at all?

RON

I'll bite. Why?

SKYE

Because the animals in the beginning that had sex survived.
And the ones that didn't died out.

RON

And that applies to us? Somehow?

SKYE

Yes.

RON

How?

SKYE

Because when sex begins to die out, we, ourselves, start to die.

RON

Bullshit! Don't give me that! I always gave you plenty of sex.

SKYE

Remember how we met in the beginning?

RON

Yesss....

SKYE

We got together because your friend Steve picked me up ... //

RON

You picked him up.

SKYE

Whatever. He was cheating behind your back with me.
And you found out, and dumped him.

RON

That's right. Like I dumped you, when I found out about Paul.
So? What's your point?

SKYE

Well, if it weren't for sex,
and for infidelity, for that matter,
we wouldn't have got to meet each other in the first place.

RON

Christ! We became lovers because my former lover cheated on me with you?
What's that supposed to prove?

SKYE

We became lovers because he could only give center kisses,
and I discovered how you give full-moon kisses.
Like nothing I've ever encountered.

RON

I don't give a shit what kind of kisses I give.
I mean more than how I can kiss. I mean, I *want to mean* more than how I kiss.
[beat] It's becoming abundantly clear to me how shallow you are.

SKYE

And it's becoming abundantly clear to me how miserable I am without you, Ron.

RON

Is that why we're here?
Because we're both miserable?

SKYE

I had no idea how much you actually meant to me.
Over and above sex.
Beyond Black Lives Matter.

RON

That is why we're here.
Because we're miserable.

SKYE

Strange, isn't it?

RON

What?

SKYE

How quiet it is.
I drove my Chevy here. My old one. The Camaro. A couple of months ago.
That I traded in so I could but this baby.
And the airport was empty then, too.
Not a plane in the air. Not a passenger on the ground.
The sky had died.

RON

Me, too.

SKYE

It's never going to be the same again, is it?

RON

Don't know. Probably not.
Not unless they get a vaccine that really works. For all lives that matter.

SKYE

I guess we had our chance.
Dancing to the old music.
The way we did. The way we used to, touching and everything.
Happy for the while.
Not knowing how homesick it was all going to end.

RON

How can it ever be the same?
When someone lets you down like that?

SKYE

When someone you trust, you mean.
Like trusting policemen.
Because it makes me sick just thinking about what I saw.
It turned my beliefs about things upside down.
Is that what you mean?

RON

Yes.

SKYE

I cried. Not right off, mind you. But I couldn't help it.
Did you?

RON

I couldn't help it either. But for different reasons. Different tears. Anger's tears.

SKYE

That's not how I made you feel, is it? Like that?

RON

Course not.

SKYE

You're lying aren't you?
Good Lord! I didn't kill anybody.

RON

Of course you didn't.

SKYE

No. I mean it.
They say you can't be white and know how it is, being black.
But I know how it is being scared about being black.
Being scared something was going to happen to *you*.
Like that. Like, Jesus Christ!

RON

You're right. You can't understand. You never will. But I'll give you that.

SKYE

There's a place in my brain. Somewhere.
Like an attic I don't get up to all the time.
Filled with the things I haven't done.
And the things I've lost, and places I miss.
And people who don't understand me.
And it bugs me.
How nobody I talk to seems to understand how I feel about blacks.
Like you could. Inside.
And what I haven't done in my life to help you.
And what I'm missing not being loved by you.

RON

You bring it on yourself.
Your own selfishness self.
And you can't even see it.
You're not even sure what you want.
Just lonely, for a while. Or high.
Is that it? Are you high?

SKYE

High as a sky filled with storm clouds and sadness.
I had no idea how much I depended on you.
How much your black life mattered to my white life.
How much I needed someone to talk to like you.
People just don't get it. How I feel.
Those good ole boys, drinking whisky and rye, thinking I'm just a player.

RON

It's coming, isn't it?

SKYE

It's never been done, for some.

RON

Lincoln.

SKYE

Lincoln. And he took it in his dreams.

RON

King.

SKYE

King. And *he* took it in *his* dreams.

RON

Kennedy.

SKYE

Kennedy. And *they* took it in *their* dreams.

RON

George Floyd.

SKYE

It's criminal.

RON

Damn straight, it's criminal.
And what you did was criminal, too

SKYE

Criminal?

RON

Infidelity's criminal. In my book.
My mama taught me who's criminal and who's not.
And yesterday's criminals are tomorrow's big shots.

SKYE

Meaning what? I'm a big shot? Far from it....
[beat] You still have faith in God above?
It doesn't sound like it.

RON

My faith's in music, thank you....
[beat] Think of me?

SKYE

Often.
Think of me?
Often and more often?

RON

Now and then.

SKYE

I'm too much in my own.

RON

In your own? You mean *on your own*.

SKYE

In my own company.

RON

Oh....

When I'm in my own company, Man, I dig those rhythm and blues.

SKYE

You know what they say:

When things make no sense, music makes sense of things....

Ever been to Minneapolis?

RON

Never.

SKYE

Or Portland?

RON

Never.

SKYE

Me neither.

I don't know how it would feel, risking walking the walk.

Mixing it with the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers....

[beat] I feel myself in you sometimes, when I wake up.

RON

Never.

SKYE

No, I mean it. Not in a sexual way.

Thinking about the places we went together.

And what we saw.

And imagining what you must have been thinking.

Wanting to have happy thoughts, and feel safe.

And dream of helping people we'd see, on the streets, needing help.

RON

The fucking endless war against the poverty and injustice of the street,
against the eyes that never cease not caring, and watching us in judgment.

SKYE

You don't have to say it.
What do those two see in each other? they're thinking.

RON

Moss grows fat on a rollin' stone.

SKYE

Stones are fickle, like the sand and dust.
Like love and Bob Dylan.
And Mick Jagger and sex.
And crime and punishment.
And Presidents and social conscience.
Or the organized religion I know and social conscience.

RON

Choose life. I say. Wear a mask....
Not here with you, of course.

SKYE

Revealing

RON

What?

SKYE

What an awful decision I made.
For ever cheating on you.
For what? For fucking what, for Christ's sake?

RON

You were always free, you know.
We both were.
Except, not to lie and sneak around about it. Exposing us.

SKYE

What irony!
A land of the free and the brave, to go wherever free spirits are free to go.
But not when they're in love.

RON

Mustn't be.
Never be.
A philistine.

SKYE

Aren't you tired?

RON

I *am* tired. Tired of having to be angry all the time.

SKYE

It must be work, thinking about the things you carry around inside you.

RON

Pity the work.

SKYE

I used to love the work. *Now*, I pity it.

RON

Whose?

SKYE

Don McLean's.

RON

I was thinking on Beyoncé.

SKYE

Her sinking police car. Saw it.

RON

Right.

SKYE

But when I watched him on the stage,
my hands got clenched in fists of rage.
No angel born in Hell could break that Satan's spell.

RON

While in the streets the mothers screamed.
Children died, and streamers streamed.

SKYE

And the Chinese flu, we denied the most, the Sichuan pork and the Peking roast,
caught the last planes for the coast.

RON

The day, that George Floyd, died. Singin' "Bye, bye the American dream."

SKYE

We have so few beautiful moments in life.
Brainless, or gutless, to waste them. *Gutless*, it must be.

RON

Covid.
Sometimes I wonder: Could I have picked a better time to live?

SKYE

Every time is tree-climbing time.
Greatness is the guts to make the climb up, isn't it? And down again.
To make a difference even when you feel like shit.

RON

And act like shit.... I hear you.

SKYE

Black lives really matter.

RON

I thought I was hearin' you say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.

SKYE

I'm sayin' solitude gives a heart time to think things out.

RON

I've missed you, too. But, I suspect, to a different degree.

SKYE

What we're living in is the Third Degree.

RON

What's the Third Degree?

SKYE

Slavery was the first. KKK and Jim Crow were the second.
Now this, the third. And I *hate* it! And all the phony, politically correct racism.

RON

I knew that I was out of luck, with *my complexion* and a pickup truck.

SKYE

What *are* the right words to the dirge, anyway?

Are they: "Come home with me?"

Is that what they are?

Because that's what I'd like to say.

That it's time to go home together. And live together.

RON

And what would thy neighbors think?

Me and my pickup truck in your driveway?

SKYE

My neighbors? It's high time my neighbors did begin to think, too.

RON

Are they what's really behind all this?

SKYE

Behind what? What are you saying?

RON

Behind my contemplating murder, pissed at you the way I was.

SKYE

How could my neighbors have anything to do with that?

RON

Because subconsciously you looked for a way out. From their spurning you.
And you went a-whoring.

SKYE

That's not how I think.

RON

It might be.

Even though you don't think so.

SKYE

I don't go beneath the surface of how I feel. I simply do how I feel.

I mean, it isn't lovin' feelings that make me want sex.

Do you get what I'm trying to say?

RON

You don't care how you feel about the person you're having sex with?

SKYE

Exactly. Like playing tennis. Feelings don't have a thing to do with it.

RON

Sex is like playing tennis to you?

SKYE

You could say.

RON

Then why are you here?

SKYE

I'm not here for sex.

That's what I'm trying to tell you.

I'm here because I miss you.

I'm here because of the laughter you brought me.

I'm here because of the way you looked for me with your passion on the world.

You made my moments with you seem valuable.

You made my just living seem valuable.

RON

Then how could you burn all that to ashes?

SKYE

Because I didn't.

You did.

RON

Me?

SKYE

By thinking my playing a few games of tennis had anything to do with you.

Or with any of those things about you that matter to me.

RON

Infidelity always does.

SKYE

Only in your mind. In *your* mind.

RON

You can be infuriating.

SKYE

How?

RON

You want it all.

And all I wanted was to squeeze you.

Squeeze the breath out of you, without pity.

Leave you gasping on the ground for air.

Naked.

For the mess you spread all over, of what was the feast of our love.

That's how.

For letting others eat what should have been mine alone to taste.

SKYE

Pretty intense.

RON

Faithless love gets as pretty intense as it gets.

SKYE

For how long?

RON

I don't know. Is there a time limit?

How long for what?

SKYE

How long does it take you to bleach out the stains of infidelity?

RON

[*beat*] I had a dream the other night about you, Skye.

Your face came up to me, out of the shadows. Only your face.

And asked me just about that same question.

Telling me you felt my humiliation.

What bullshit! You don't feel a thing.

And you don't have the least interest in looking behind that disguise of yours.

SKYE

You hate me.

RON

What's the point in that? There's no recovery in hatred.

But, still....

Where's your mind? Where's your brain?

Why are we here, if we have to let our urges drag us through the gutter?

SKYE

Is there anything I can do?

RON

I'd have to be crazy, thinking I could ever do this again.

SKYE

Anything?

RON

We'll talk about it.

SKYE

What do you want? Me on my knees?

RON

I don't think I can do friendship with you right now.

SKYE

Why not?

RON

I have my dignity, for Christ's sake!

Your passion for me dropped like spoiled garbage when Paul came along.

You didn't touch me for days.

SKYE

It wasn't Paul.

RON

Then, who in the shit was it, you were fucking?

SKYE

It wasn't Paul.

RON

You better remember who. And tell me damn quick,
if you want this conversation to continue into the next minute.

SKYE

I don't kiss and tell.

RON

Tell me who you were fucking, or get your ass in that Chevy and leave.

SKYE

Why? So you can go and beat up somebody else?

RON

I could find out.

SKYE

I don't think so.

RON

I could break your arm.

SKYE

Why does it matter? It's past history.

RON

If it doesn't matter, then tell me.

SKYE

I can't.

I swore I never would.

RON

That vaccine's not been tested safe yet.

SKYE

Can't we just let bygones be bygones?

I swear to you, I'll never cheat on you again.

Isn't that enough?

RON

Not if I can't trust you.

Which I obviously can't, if you can't tell me who you screwed.

Everyone of them.

SKYE

Every one? In history?

RON

Everyone while you were sleeping with me.

SKYE

That's crazy.

RON

My God! Why am I even in this conversation?

SKYE

She doesn't even live around here anymore.

RON

She??! It was a she??!

SKYE

Why are you giving me the Third Degree?

RON

Women bleed differently, you obviously know.
That's why they're called "women."
Because they bleed differently than men.
And that's what you want?

SKYE

You have no idea what you're talking about.

RON

Deny it, if you can: The stain of a woman's blood is like a wine stain.
The stain of a man's blood is more like coffee.

SKYE

You really don't know what you're talking about.

RON

Want to try me?

SKYE

Do you hate me *that much*?

RON

How can I crack this out of you?
Better yet, how can I crack this out of *myself*?
If I can't get even a sliver of truth out of you.

SKYE

Why can't you just leave it alone, and trust me?

RON

Why can't you trust *me*?

SKYE

Because I know now what you're capable of.
Like you just told me.

RON

You're killing me.
Like George Floyd. One breath at a time.

SKYE

You're talking crazy. I'm no Derek Chauvin, no matter what you think.

RON

Chauvin wasn't doing what he was doing to just one black man alone.
He was doing it to all black faces across the country.

SKYE

That's not me. I wasn't cheating across the country.

RON

Maybe not. But anyone fucking you was raping me.

SKYE

This keep getting crazier and crazier.

Pause.

SKYE

You're exaggerating, aren't you? Just to weird me out.
Like they wanted us to believe that Paul went literally blind at his epiphany.
Or like Jonas thought so hard, he went into the belly of a whale for three days.
Or Jacob worried so much at night about what his cheated brother would do to
him, he told other people he felt like he was wrestling with an angel from heaven.
Like that, right?

RON

I'm pissed. Mostly at you, you unfaithful slut.
But also at myself, for even being in this conversation.
And your Bible talk isn't helping one bit.

SKYE

I think you're blowing this way out of proportion.
Sure I screwed up. I admit it. I *have* admitted it. And I won't do it again.

RON

So?

SKYE

What do you want from me? Tears? On my knees?

RON

If you really cared about me, you'd let me go, and not put me through this again.

SKYE

But I miss you too much.

RON

It's like you get some pleasure out of seeing my pain.
Like you're some kind of executioner.

SKYE

You're losing it.
Let me cut to the chase here:
I love you, and I miss you.
I want to be with you.
I want you with me.
Living with me.
But nut, look, this might be a mistake.
All I wanted was a chance to say I'm sorry, and ask for a second chance.

RON

You have no limits, do you?

SKYE

Because I was able to get the dream car of my life?
Or because I miss you like Hell and want us back together?

RON

There was no "us" in "us." Unless "us" included all the others.
That you refuse to tell me their names.

SKYE

This is so awkward.

RON

You made it that way.

SKYE

I guess I did. But how do you mean?

RON

I thought you were better than that.

Did you simply not know better?

Or think because you saw other people do it, it was okay for you, too?

It was *your life*. So what the Hell with the feelings of your lover. Right?

I thought you were better than that.

I thought you were more than just about sex.

SKYE

Sex is sex; and love is love; and life is life.

RON

Meaningless sex is meaningless sex is meaningless sex.

What's the point of it?

SKYE

That's the point. It isn't anything; and it shouldn't break up relationships.

Or marriages.

RON

Meaningless sex is the ruin of love-making.

You wouldn't play tennis with someone when it didn't matter, would you?

Some poor player who would screw up your game?

SKYE

How would you know?

RON

Well, I wouldn't. And won't, because meaningless sex is a one-sided coin.

SKYE

Like everything else you've been saying, that makes absolutely no sense.

RON

That's my point. Sex without its flipside makes absolutely no sense.

SKYE

Yeah? So, what's the flipside of sex?

RON

What you *don't get*, from someone you pick up cruising.

SKYE

I know what I *do* get.
What don't I get?

RON

The other side of the coin.

SKYE

Which is?

RON

Depth.

SKYE

How do you know I don't?

RON

I can see it. In your eyes. Whenever you think about it.

SKYE

Well, do you know what I see in your eyes, Ron?

RON

What?

SKYE

[*beat*] That you're right.
Casual sex is shallow.

RON

Thin.

SKYE

Surface.

RON

Pointless.

SKYE

I don't know if I'd go that far.

RON

Well, cruel then.

SKYE

Cruel?... I have a sister had a dog once, she loved.
As, perhaps, were you like my sister, so would you.

RON

What's its history?

SKYE

It was a small dog.
And she'd beat it. Down in the basement.
With its leash, until it would cower away from her.
Then she'd sweep it up in her arms, and kiss it, and love it.
And tell it how sorry she felt for hurting it.
It always came back to her.

RON

That's unthinkable cruel.

SKYE

Is that how you think of me?

RON

If I let you keep on doing what you did, yes.
But I won't.
I'm no sister's little dog.

SKYE

Never thought you were.

RON

How many sisters do you have?

SKYE

One.

RON

And two brothers?

SKYE

That's right.

RON

Well, then, our parents obviously had a bit of sex.
Do you think they thought it was so casual?

SKYE

Did Thomas Jefferson? Or Martin Luther King?

RON

You say stuff like that, and I'll tell you how it makes me feel...

SKYE

[beat] How?

RON

Like there must be phantom cockroaches, running like ghosts through your body,
your brain, and your nervous system. Making you want to spit shit like that out.
So what do you do? What does any sex addict do?
They run to more meaningless sex, like an alcoholic runs to a fresh bottle.

SKYE

Like you run to Othello.

RON

This is starting to get ugly, isn't it?

SKYE

Give me a theme. Anything.

RON

Salt. In a wound.

SKYE

Okay. Salt. Lot's wife looked back, and whatever Lot actually did to her,
he reported to children's services that she turned into a pillar of salt.
Right in front of him. Lick. Lick.
Which they never could find, so they let him and his teenage daughters go.
Into the mountains. Unchaperoned. Sick. Sick.
Because, other than for ocean waves,
it's not so friendly being salty in people's company. Like pissy and angry salty....
Give me another.

RON

Heaven.

SKYE

Heaven. Cute. Have you ever thought what heaven's all about?
Well, someone told me, but from what source I have no idea,
that when you go to heaven they ask you:
Who were the ten most important people in your life, excluding your family.
What for? you ask.
Because, he said, they keep lists, and give scores,
and there's some kind of promotion or award for the souls who get the most likes.

SKYE bites a lip.

SKYE

I'm sorry I never told you, but you're at the top of my top ten list.

Pause.

Did you hear me, Ron? You're number one on my top ten list.

RON

I heard you the first time, even though I wasn't listening.

SKYE

I feel so small and angry. And I can't tell you how sorry I am.
Or how very much I'm missing you.

RON

I miss you, too, or else I wouldn't be here.
But it doesn't make my world any better to know you cheated on me.

SKYE

Why? Why, if we're not supposed to,
does our curiosity always lead us where we're not supposed to go?

RON

If I'd written it down, the story of my life, which I haven't,
the answer to that question would be my last sentence.
And I'd write it a thousand times. And I'd erase it a thousand times.
Because there *is* no answer. Not even for a cat.
Because sometimes we're our own worst enemies, and nobody really knows why.
It's where we live.
It's the music we start dancing to.

SKYE

But what I did is no music to your ears, is it?

RON

More like static than music.
A noise like that kills good thinking, good feelings, good loving, and good music.

SKYE

What can I do about it? Other than give you my word I won't do it again?

RON

Doing nothing is worse than doing nothing.
Your promises are like the wind. Gone with the wind.

SKYE

What are you saying?

RON

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear it blowing,
but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes.

SKYE

You're saying you can never trust me?

RON

The Skye I've known, constantly thinking about getting laid,
has eyes bigger than a brain.
First you see something.
Then you do it.
And only then you think about what you've done. And all the people you've hurt.

SKYE

I feel like I'm on a journey to International Stupidity Day.

SKYE stands, spits, and grinds it into the ground with a foot. RON stands.

SKYE

Here's spitting on stupidity.

SKYE offers RON an elbow bump.

RON

Oh! the Hell with it.
Takes SKYE into a full embrace.
We'll talk about it.

SKYE

Sure. Okay.
I understand.

**SKYE turns, walks back to the Chevy,
and gets in.**

End of Scene 1

SCENE 2

**Scene 2 repeats Scene 1, word for word, action for action, except with
the following change of character(s) –**

**RON, same black male, or another black male actor in his 30s.
SKYE, white female in her 30s.**

END

