

Sunset Artists Of The American West

By

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## Sunset Artists of the American West

### Characters:

Anna Torrance - 84, a touch of ambiguous ethnicity about her in a way that's hard to pin down.

Becky Shore - 25, Anna's grand-daughter

Leah Connors - 32, Becky's older sister

Aaron Connors - 34, Leah's husband

Fulwarkin Freml - male, a Native American cloud Kachina

Zaffring Till - female, an assistant Native American cloud Kachina

Tanjer Dreslin - male, cloud Kachina, former pupil of Fulwarkin's, played by the actor playing Aaron

Sorrel Nunez - female, 26, high-school friend of Becky's, played by the actor playing Zaffring

Young Anna - in her late teens, played by the actor playing Leah

Time: The present

Setting: A house in Tucson, Arizona; a sidewalk cafe; a small apartment in Los Angeles; the sky

A note on gondolas and sudden oceans:

For the record, the fantastical imagery in this script, such as the flying gondolas or the floating in Anna's room-turned-sea are meant to be suggestions, not hard and fast rules. The gondolas could easily become a window washer's platform. Ladders on wheels. Stationary scaffolding. Something to suggest the kachina are on another plane and move through time and space differently. Anna's floating could be just a matter of light, sound and movement and I'd be perfectly happy. If your theater happens to have a fly space and a budget, please, go all out. But there's also something to be said for simple tricks executed imaginatively.

## Act One

## SCENE ONE

A huge expanse of desert sky in high sunset mode. Stage Right, some patio furniture in the Southwest style along with a few potted cacti. Stage Center, more furniture denotes a pleasant living room. LEAH, early 30s, sits out on the patio at an easel, painting the sunset.

LEAH

(to the sky)

It's a good one today. Really good. (looks down at her palette) Should've mixed more red.

Offstage Left, a woman's voice moans. Leah freezes, listening intently, body tense, ready to jump up at any moment. No more sounds from offstage. Leah slowly relaxes, then carefully digs into one of the cactus pots, and brings out a pack of cigarettes. She draws one from the pack, lights it, inhales deeply.

BECKY, mid 20s, dressed in a way that manages to seem hip and conservative at the same time, enters drying her hair with a towel.

Unseen by Leah, Becky watches her smoke for a moment.

BECKY

So you're still sneaking cigarettes.

LEAH

Are you going to rat me out again?

BECKY

I didn't rat - I was eleven years old and terrified for your soul! It took Dad a half an hour to convince me you weren't damned for all eternity.

LEAH

(mimicking "Dad")

"Smoking cigarettes probably won't send you to hell" -

BECKY AND LEAH

- "It'll just make you smell like you've been there."

They share a laugh at the memory. Leah takes a long drag, breathes out, considers her cigarette.

LEAH

I think they taste better when you have to sneak them.

BECKY

From Aaron?

LEAH

(nods)

I mean, who knows when you're going to get the next one, so you make sure to pay attention.

BECKY

Yeah. You guys are better at that here.

LEAH

At what?

BECKY

Paying attention. Might be what I miss most about Tucson. (gestures to the sky) I mean, look at this. It's so beautiful, and the people in Kansas City just pass it by, like they have it DVRed or something and can watch it whenever they want. Here, it's an event. Everybody coming out into their yards at sunset, just to watch. Granted, Missouri sunsets aren't quite as, you know, ... "wow". Yeah, God really does paint 'em up special out here.

LEAH

Seriously?

BECKY

What?

LEAH

You and Aaron, with all your - Molecules and air particles scatter the blue and violet light from the sun's rays when it's lower on the horizon. That's what colors the sunset. It's old science that everybody knows, and you're still talking like God's up there with a paint brush, playing Jackson Pollack.

BECKY

(giggly with the thought)

Can you imagine what the sky would look like if God actually was Jackson Pollack!

LEAH

(ignoring her)

I expect it from Aaron now. You know where he is, right this minute? Out looking for the dogs again. They got out of the yard three days ago. I've spent the last two plastering the neighborhood with Missing signs. He worked all day, has the Home Group planning session tonight, and in between? He feels "led by the spirit" to go find them. The Spirit leads him all over the place. But I thought you were smarter than that.

BECKY

I am. It's just - isn't it kind of cool to think that even in something perfectly scientific like a sunset, there's some intelligence that's artistically involved just because it wants to be?

LEAH

No. It's not cool. It's naive and lazy.

BECKY

Oh come on!

LEAH

If you had to listen to half the insanity I hear from his parishioners on a daily basis -

BECKY

I'm in ministry, Leah. I get it.

LEAH

- this whole mode of thinking where the Lord is personally responsible for every little thing that happens to you.

BECKY

Or the devil, yes.

LEAH

Exactly. And that's where the "God paints the sunset" train ends up. With you rebuking Satan for hiding your car keys while trusting in Jesus to get you better gas mileage even though you bought an SUV.

BECKY

I know the type, and I'm very glad to be here right now not listening to them.

LEAH

Because there's no reasoning with those people. And it takes a toll on you after a while.

BECKY

Especially when you're on a church staff with them. It can be ... intense.

LEAH

Is that at all what's been keeping you up nights? Staff problems back in Kansas City, or -

BECKY

What? No. It's just - I flew overnight to get here and, you know, wanted to spend time with Gran while she's still ... She pretty much just sleeps during the day at this point, so I started sleeping next to her. Guess it just threw my schedule off.

LEAH

I was worried you weren't going to make it in time. The doctors said "a few days left" a week and a half ago, so -

BECKY

She's a fighter.

LEAH

How much time did you manage to get off?

BECKY

As much as I need 'til ...

LEAH

We hadn't seen you the last couple holidays, I figured they were working you to death out there.

BECKY

I had the time coming to me. And ... (a strange laugh) things just sort of opened up.

LEAH

Well, I'm glad you're here.

BECKY

Me too.

Beat.

BECKY

I'm glad you're painting again.

LEAH

(a sad chuckle)

Only out of desperation, trust me. Gran and I were never really close, but watching her ... slip away like this has been - I needed something else to focus on, so -

BECKY

I know it's been hard carrying -

LEAH

No, you don't.

Beat.

LEAH

I appreciate what you're trying to say, Becky, but you've been halfway across the country. You don't *know* how hard it's been. You don't.

BECKY

You're right. I'm don't.

Something in Leah's painting catches Becky's eye.

BECKY

But I can just make out little bits of it. (points to the canvas) In there.

Leah looks at her quizzically.

BECKY

It's how you paint the light. Not out front like we might expect. It's pushing through the field of grey, but not quite out of it. Fighting just to be seen at all, but still there, in spite of everything.

Leah looks up at Becky, not knowing what to say. When she finally does, warm laughter comes with it.

LEAH

You still sound just like them.

BECKY

Like what?

LEAH

Those books that Mom left to you. Uh, Great Artists of the -

BECKY

Lives of the Great Artists, Volumes 1 thru 5, and the Classic Composers Biographical Dictionary.

LEAH

You got so obsessed with those after she -

BECKY

I was obsessed with them before she died. That was just it. I made her read them to me so many times as a kid that when she was gone, I could open them up and still hear her voice in my head. I wanted to write stuff just like that. And then I did, and no one would touch it with a ten foot pole.

LEAH

It might have helped if you'd picked someone more interesting than the "Dogs Playing Poker" guy.

BECKY

C.M. Coolidge led a fascinating life! It's a classic American success story ... in a really, really weird sort of way.

Leah starts to put away her painting supplies.

LEAH

Well, you're probably better off. You've got a solid career going that's right down in the trenches, getting involved in these kids' lives. You're really doing something, not just writing about it.

BECKY

Yeah ... yeah, I guess it all worked out.

LEAH

(indicating the sky)

This is what kills me. Just when I'm finishing up, it all shifts into something even more brilliant that I wish I'd been painting from the get-go.

BECKY

Huh. I wonder if there was a moment where you could have caught it. Where you could have changed course when it did, and painted this instead of that.

LEAH

Maybe, but then I'd be late getting started on dinner. The world doesn't stop, you know? There's always something.

BECKY

There's always something ...

Leah exits through the house. Becky gets up to go after her, but stops and watches the sunset for one more moment.

BECKY

Yeah. It never looks like it's changing at all until it has.

She exits after Leah. A moment of stillness. Then, two white gondolas float through the sky, each piloted by a Hopi Kachina spirit, both a riot of color and ornament barely contained under white painters' overalls.

ZAFFRING TILL, female, wields a paint roller on a long stick, making large swaths of orange through the grey as the sun sets.

FULWARKIN FREML, male, older, handles the details with a fine brush.

FULWARKIN

(to Zaffring)

Some more orange past that cloud, but lay it light.  
I want a gasping ember's glow. Yes. Good.

He sails over to where Zaffring has left a trail of orange light, and goes over it with light touches of red as he speaks.

FULWARKIN

The surge of the electric open sign  
In Tom Wincott's bookshop on Ina Road  
Before he flips the switch one final time,  
And leaves his old dream stranded in the dark.  
The smoke in Gabriel Mendoza's eyes  
When daughter Esmerelda disappears  
Behind the airport metal detectors  
Back to a life without him somewhere else.  
The warmth Kate Pine feels in her lover's kiss  
As she decides that it will be their last.  
That final pulse of fire before the ash.

They'll look up in the sky, and see themselves  
 Commemorated in horizon lines. (to Zaffring)  
 Now watch it - not so thick! You'll spoil the mood.

ZAFFRING

You know I love your requiems. I do!  
 But don't you think some counterpoint might bring  
 To life the composition as a whole?

Fulwarkin looks at her but doesn't say  
 anything. Zaffring decides to press the  
 point.

ZAFFRING

Down there, at Oro Valley's public pool,  
 Alonso Cruz, age 6, is drying off  
 From his first ever swim, all pruneey skinned  
 And triumphant, from vanquishing water,  
 Eye-stinging chemicals and his own fear.  
 I put his jog in this bright streak right here.

Fulwarkin examines it carefully.

FULWARKIN

A first time, not a last one. Doesn't fit.  
 Perhaps the sunrise crew has use for it.

ZAFFRING

But it's a first that will not come again!  
 The last time that sensation will be new.

FULWARKIN

I see your point. But new things all contain  
 A little too much yellow for tonight.  
 See? Right there at the edges, glowing gold.  
 Just tone it down a bit with that cloud there.  
 That's better. But it still needs something else -  
 An end? An exit. From suburbia?

His look encompasses a vast distance,  
 but he eventually finds what he's  
 looking for.

FULWARKIN

Yes, 1422 Oracle Road. (peers out over the gondola a bit)

ZAFFRING

That address ... is that where I'm s'posed to -

She brings a small day planner out of  
 her pocket, flips through it.

ZAFFRING

Oh.

FULWARKIN

What is it?

ZAFFRING

Just bus'ness that can wait.  
The address of the house reminded me  
Of an appointment scheduled for tonight.

FULWARKIN

And what appointment's that?

ZAFFRING

(sighs)

You'll just get mad,  
And turn the sky all bitter at the end  
Of what has been a lovely eulogy.

FULWARKIN

Oh god, don't tell me - the biographer!  
That damn book series, "Sunset Artists Of  
The American West", what volume?

ZAFFRING

Five.

They fin'lly found a candidate that meets  
All the criteria. It's quite a coup.  
Her name is Becky Shore, age 25.  
This house is where I'm s'posed to pick her up.  
The usual procedure, wait for sleep,  
Then steal into her dreams and bring her here.  
She interviews you, sums up your career.

FULWARKIN

And who are they to say that my career  
Is ready to be summed up here and now?

ZAFFRING

You have been painting a few billion years.

FULWARKIN

Exactly! Right in my artistic prime.  
I'm still on my first planet, for gods' sake!

ZAFFRING

It's just that you've done such important work.  
Your influence goes whisp'ring through the world.

Zaffring sees Leah's easel, points it  
out.

ZAFFRING

I see some of it there, in the back yard.  
A new interpretation of your work.

Fulwarkin sees Leah's painting on the  
easel.

FULWARKIN

That there? Hmm. Not too bad. She gets the shapes.  
Too many artists chase my color schemes,  
While she lays out the forms. Unique approach.

But far too stingy with her use of red.  
 Still find it curious how humans try  
 To imitate my work in detail, yet  
 They make it all mean something different  
 Than what I said with the original.

ZAFFRING

And speaking of, if you have more to say  
 With this one, we had better hurry up.  
 We're running out of light to work with here.

FULWARKIN

Just one more thing to check on, then we're done.

He looks stage left, where ANNA  
 TORRANCE has appeared. She lies in bed,  
 surrounded by various medical  
 paraphernalia that signals a very rough  
 patch or a coming end.

FULWARKIN

There. Anna Torrance, 84 years old.  
 For weeks now, she's been reaching up t'wards death.  
 Could grasp it any minute now, looks like.

He shouts down to Anna's bed.

FULWARKIN

Ahoy there! Anna! My associate  
 And I are Ka-

ANNA

I know what you are. But which ones? What do you do?

FULWARKIN

The sunsets. Requiems and eulogies.

ANNA

What is it that you want?

FULWARKIN

To mark your passing, write it in the sky.  
 To build you a memorial of light.  
 Should we do it tonight, or will you stay  
 With us another night, another day?

ANNA

I'm still here, for now. And for a little longer, I think.

FULWARKIN

Just let us know when you decide to go.  
 No end should go unnoticed in this world.  
 (to Zaffring)  
 All right, let's start to pull the colors down.

They steer their gondolas toward  
 offstage, making small touch-ups as  
 they go.

## ANNA

It is a choice now, isn't it? I could just make up my mind, and go. Life's grown soft, thin. A summer bedsheet I can push off, and let billow away. But death. Death is ... too vast, too deep. I don't know the way through it yet. No up, down, or sideways there. A whole new set of directions I'm still learning. I used to run into things so quickly. Sever ties like that. I could go out that way. A certain poetic justice in it. But my grand-daughters. I'd be leaving them without a compass. It never bothered me before. Let them make themselves without the baggage of history. But now ... knowing where you came from starts to feel important. I should tell them something. If I still can.

Anna watches Fulwarkin and Zaffring go about their work, now at the other edge of the stage.

## ZAFFRING

(to Fulwarkin)

These fuschia trails you're leaving in - that's new.

## FULWARKIN

Yes. Slashing color with a double edge.  
This stubborn brightness in the gath'ring grey -  
Both burning need to go, and wish to stay.

They fade the sunset out, and the light with it.