

Shelter

A short play

By Ben Luckinbill

Contact:

Ben Luckinbill  
ben.luckinbill@gmail.com

*Black. A thunderclap.  
The sound of heavy rain  
beating the hell out of  
corrugated steel. Faintly,  
fading in and out are the  
sounds of a drum circle in the  
distance.*

*Dim lights rise on a shitty  
Florida Keys motel room.*

*A man, ED, followed by a woman,  
CECILIA, enter loudly, wet from  
the rain. They are an energetic  
and elegant pair. She is in her  
sixties. He, his seventies.  
They are dressed in expensive  
looking vacation gear and laden  
down with luggage.*

*They stop to catch their breath.*

ED

Not another second out there.

CECILIA

I'm glad you pulled over, I was... I thought we  
were going to die.

*(Ed turns on a lamp  
bringing a warm glow to the  
area around the two twin  
beds in the dimly lit  
room.)*

ED

Your leg kept going like you had a brake pedal  
on your side.

CECILIA

You hate that, I know.

ED

It only...

CECILIA

Makes you more nervous, I know. That truck, that accident. That was almost us.

(Ed looks down and shakes his head slowly, recalling the grisly scene. A quiet moment passes.)

ED

Do you hear drumming?

(Cecilia listens for a moment then shakes her head, unsure.)

ED

I hear drumming.

CECILIA

Please don't finally crack up on me now, Ed.

ED

Shh.

(He moves close to her. She listens.)

CECILIA

Maybe?

ED

The natives could be restless. Could be headhunters.

CECILIA

Or cannibals. Old Jewish cannibals with dentures.

(Ed smiles awkwardly, deeply in love, as he stands near Cecilia. She begins to brush water from her clothes, stops, there's no point. They both look around the room.)

ED

What a...

CECILIA

Dump?

ED

Shit-hole.

CECILIA

Better. Shit-hole. Yes. But it's a roof and four walls.

(Ed moves to place a suitcase on one of the beds.)

CECILIA

(sharply)

Wait! Sorry, just let me...

(He watches her, slightly annoyed with her snappiness.)

Cecelia scrunches her nose as she removes the garishly patterned bed covers and tosses them in a corner.)

CECILIA

Disgusting. They never wash these things. Not...

ED

Not even at The Ritz. Thanks.

(Cecilia holds her hands away from her body as if they are filthy.)

Ed checks the little brown fridge. It's empty. He looks annoyed.)

CECILIA

What?

ED

It's empty.

CECILIA

You thirsty? I'm sure there's a soda machine...

ED

I don't want a soda.

CECILIA

A drink? Babe, you've been so good.

ED

No I don't. I don't. Really. It would just be nice to know it was there. In case of...

(Ed scrutinizes a framed art print on the wall above the fridge.)

ED

Apocalypse. A couple tiny bottles of just-in-case. Not in this shit-hole.

(he turns to her)

If it's a hurricane we could be here for days.

CECILIA

It's not a hurricane. I checked. It's just a little sun shower like you said in the car. The kind we love. It'll clear up and there'll be a rainbow.

(Cecilia reaches into her purse and finds a bottle of antibacterial goo which she rubs into her hands. She puts the gel away and takes out a compact. She looks into the mirror, presses her hands to her cheeks, stretches the skin back, lets it go, sighs. She snaps the compact closed, puts it away and sets her purse aside.)

Ed places another suitcase on the bed, opens it. Cecilia watches as he unbuttons his wet shirt, throws it on the bed, and pulls a dry one from his suitcase.)

CECILIA

You look great, babe.

ED

Yeah? Well. Better.

CECILIA

You look great.

ED

Yeah?

(Ed flexes and poses like a bodybuilder. Cecilia giggles. Her eyes move to the wet shirt on the bed.

Cecilia's face turns serious again as she chooses a shirt from her own suitcase. She moves and sits on the far corner of the bed, her back to him, and removes her blouse.

Ed picks up his wet shirt and hangs it to dry on the back of a chair. He puts the dry one on. He watches Cecilia change.

Cecilia, suddenly self-conscious, quickly pulls on her top. She tries to smooth out the wrinkles in the shirt with the palm of her hand. Gives up. She stares at nothing, lost in thought.

Ed, concerned, begins to move toward her, then stops and looks at his hands.

Cecilia turns to face him.)

CECILIA

Are we old?

(Ed moves toward her again,  
his hands out. But her face  
says she doesn't need  
comfort, she needs an answer.  
He stops.)

ED

Hell no. Old? Hell no! Relative to what, anyway? To  
who? Remember our parents at our ages? The ones  
that even made it that far. No way.

CECILIA

Then why are we in Florida looking at real estate?

ED

We like... It's warm, it's a short flight, a good  
investment. We like Florida.

CECILIA

Yeah. Those people on our flight though...

ED

The blue-hairs.

CECILIA

I don't want that to be us.

(He sits down next to her.)

ED

It won't be. Never happen.

CECILIA

Kill me first.

ED

Stop.



CECILIA

Smother me with a pillow, unplug me, just don't ever let me... God. Like your mother at the end.

(Ed wraps his arms around her. Cecilia buries herself in his embrace. She is suddenly very emotional.)

ED

Woah. Hey. I promise.

(He rocks her gently and she quickly calms down. She turns over, her head in his lap now, and smiles up at him. He smiles back and gently wipes away a tear or two.)

ED

And me?

CECILIA

Never stop trying to resuscitate. Have them plug you into more machines, if at all possible.

ED

And?

CECILIA

Make sure you have morphine in the IV and crap on the TV.

ED

That's my girl.

(A moment passes. She becomes serious again.)

CECILIA

I'm not scared of it, you know.

ED

I know. I am.

CECILIA

I know. You shouldn't be. All this leading up to it, the anxiety, the pain, the disease, that's all something to be... the thing itself really isn't anything at all. It'll be nice, a relief, I think, after all this worry.

ED

I... I don't worry about the other stuff. I don't even think about it. It's the thing itself. I just wish I knew what to expect... after.

CECILIA

But that's the whole point, you can't... Aw hell, what a pair we make, huh?

ED

Perfect for each other.

(They kiss, gently.)

CECILIA

We've talked about dying plenty.

ED

But maybe not enough about death.

CECILIA

We haven't made love in forever.

ED

We haven't fucked either.

(She gives him a playful  
slap on the chest.)

CECILIA

I wish I could go to the gym with you.

ED

Well, you can't yet.

CECILIA

The operation was almost a year ago.

ED

The 'Procedure.' It's been barely seven  
months. You still need time to heal.

CECILIA

I thought you lost interest.

ED

Never. I didn't feel good about myself. But now...

(Smiling he begins to climb  
over her. Cecilia scoots back  
along the bed on her elbows  
stretching out beneath him.  
She touches his torso.)

CECILIA

You've lost what? 25 pounds?

ED

Thirty. Well, twenty-eight.

(Cecilia reaches up, slowly working at the buttons of Ed's shirt.)

CECILIA

Thirty pounds? Wow. You look great.

(He runs his hand up her thigh then under her shirt. They move slowly to kiss.)

CECILIA

Ooh, you bad boy. Are we gonna make it in this... this...

ED

(kissing her)

Shit. Hole.

CECILIA

Yeah, this is... Babe, my back. Ow ow ow. Are you putting your weight on me?

ED

No. No. Shit. Are you okay?

CECILIA

I think so. God! I'm sorry...

ED

Stop. Turn over and I'll work on it for you.

CECILIA

Really? Oh. My angel. I don't deserve you.

ED

Yeah yeah.

(He begins to rub her lower back, gently at first. As she relaxes he really gets in there.)

Cecilia breathes into it, moaning.

Suddenly the door bursts open. A young man, CLAYTON, and a younger woman, EMILY - their very casual clothing soaked through - enter.

Clayton carries all their luggage. He drops it just before he sees - and hears - the older couple, who don't react much.

CLAYTON

(turning away)

Oh my God I'm so sorry! We... Uh...

EMILY

Just stopped to get off the...

(Clayton still has his back turned. He holds up the room key.)

CLAYTON

The man at the desk, he gave us the key...

ED

Us too.

CECILIA

(gives Ed a little shove so  
she can sit up)

I'm not surprised, really. You can turn around.  
We're fully dressed, you know.

(Ed seems to be relishing the  
moment. Clayton turns to face  
the older couple. He looks to  
Emily for help.)

EMILY

Yeah, this motel is, pretty much a total, um...

ED

Shit-hole?

ALL

(but not in unison)

Shit-hole.

CLAYTON

Well if it's okay, I'll just run back and...

CECILIA

Of course. You don't both have to go.

CLAYTON

Right. Honey, would you like to? While I?

EMILY

It's fine?

ED

It's great.

(Clayton stops, starts, then  
rushes back out into the  
rain.)

CLAYTON

O... Okay.

(A moment passes. The rain  
bangs away. Subtly,  
almost imperceptible, so  
do the distant drums.  
Emily and Cecilia both  
begin to speak at once.)

EMILY

I am sooo sorry.

CECILIA

Well -- No, it's not your fault. You're shivering.

(A moment passes. Emily seems  
about to speak.)

EMILY

(blurting)

I think it's fantastic to see a couple your age  
with so much passion.

CECILIA

Really?

EMILY

Not that you're old. Did I say something  
horrible? I do that. I'm sorry. I just say  
whatever pops into my head sometimes. It's  
very endearing, once you get to know me. I'm  
told.

ED

I'm sure it is.

CECILIA

It was a fine thing to say.

(she shoots a look at Ed,  
but softens)

We... We haven't felt very passionate of late.

It's nice to hear.

EMILY

My husband's heart stopped three months ago.

CECILIA

God.

EMILY

He was dead for fourteen minutes. But he's okay now.

CECILIA

He's so young. It's shocking.

EMILY

Since it happened, I guess you could say, uh, it hasn't been as intense as, well, it used to be... we're having... intimacy issues.

CECILIA

You're not making love?

(Emily fumbles for an appropriate response.)

ED

You're not fucking.



(Emily laughs suddenly and loudly, covering her mouth with her hand and then smiling at the release of tension. She begins to shiver more noticeably.)

CECILIA

My husband has a way with words. Endearing, sort of. As you get to know him it grows on you. Like a fungus. Please, go change. You're freezing.

EMILY

It's not that. Really, I'm fine. I think it's adrenaline or, I don't know. We were just in...

(Emily gazes toward the door as her voice trails off.)

Clayton lets himself back in. He stands next to her. Not wanting to interrupt takes her hand and holds it gently.)

ED

What did they say at the front desk?

CLAYTON

All the rooms are booked. We're sorry to have... We'll just find someplace down the --

CECILIA

Oh no. You can't go back out on the highway in this mess. We pulled over for ten minutes. I was sure we would crash. And we passed that accident, did you pass it too?

EMILY

We were in it. Mile marker 33.

CECILIA

Not the car that flipped?

CLAYTON

No. We, our car, we're fine. Some kids bumped us changing lanes. I swerved, hit the brakes. There was a pickup behind us. It lost control, hit the divider, and just... launched.

EMILY

The man driving lost control trying not to hit us. I saw it all in the mirror. His face.

ED

No wonder you're shaking.

CECILIA

Is he... the driver?

EMILY

He was still alive when the ambulance took him.

(Cecilia closes her eyes for a few moments, a silent prayer. She opens them, resolved.)

CECILIA

You'll wait here with us.

EMILY

We couldn't.

CECILIA

You must.

CLAYTON

That's not --

ED

Why wife has now gotten an idea into her head. She will insist. And - if you are normal human beings as you appear to be - you are powerless to resist. So do not argue. These storms usually pass quickly. We'll wait it out together. It'll be nice to have company.

(then quietly, toward Cecilia)

And if those cannibals show up we'll stand a better chance together.

(Cecilia hits Ed, playfully.)

CLAYTON

What?

EMILY

Was there supposed to be a hurricane or something?

CECILIA

No. I checked.

CLAYTON

Yes. No. So did I.

EMILY

Well. Good. Okay. We'll stay. Thank you.

(to Clayton)

You feeling okay?

CLAYTON

(pauses before releasing  
Emily's hand)

Yeah. Yes. I'm fine.

(Emily smiles then crosses to enter the bathroom. She closes the door behind her.

For a couple moments no one speaks. Clayton is at a loss. He wants to ask about the cannibals but decides it's better not to. He shrugs and almost smiles.)

ED

So. You were dead for fourteen minutes.

CECILIA

Ed!

CLAYTON

So I was told, yes.

CECILIA

I'm sorry. You don't have to indulge my husband. He's just being rude for rudeness' sake.

ED

No. I'm not. I want to know. About the experience.

(Clayton takes a deep breath, he has told this story a few times.)

CLAYTON

It was a Sunday. We were home with our dogs.

CECILIA

Children?

CLAYTON

None.

ED

Good. Continue.

CLAYTON

I, well... I was in good shape, I ate well, but I smoked. Cigarettes. For, you know, since I was a kid. And a total stress case... I was on the computer working, and I felt a tingling in my shoulder and neck, like someone was pushing down on my chest. I couldn't breathe. And I felt kind of déjà vu, but like something terrible was going to happen. So I do a search for heart attack symptoms and there they all were. I yelled for help and then I blacked out.

ED

Then what?

CLAYTON

Well, I wasn't really... Emily, my wife, she called 911 and started CPR. I was awake for a little while in the helicopter... She saved my life. They said so.

CECILIA

Helicopter?

CLAYTON

We live in the middle of nowhere. Or, used to.

CECILIA

And you're fine now?

CLAYTON

Pretty good. My energy isn't... the same. I quit smoking.

CECILIA

That's good.

(Ed has been looking away,  
listening thoughtfully.  
He turns to Clayton,  
dissatisfied.)

ED

You were dead, right?

CLAYTON

My heart stopped and I wasn't breathing, yes.

ED

What was that like?

CECILIA

Forgive him, my husband is the kind of person who  
will read the last page of a novel first.

ED

I've saved myself a lot of time and disappointment  
that way.

CLAYTON

Well, I certainly have a lot of family that were  
disappointed by my answer to that question.

ED

No 'white light'.

CLAYTON

I didn't see Grandma or the pearly gates, no.

ED

What did you... experience? Anything?

CLAYTON

It was... Hard to describe. I'm sorry I just realized we haven't even been introduced.

ED

After! Please.

CLAYTON

(finding the words)

It was Emily. I could feel her there. There were moments when I could hear her voice or feel her hands, her body, holding me. Yes. But it was... I could feel her all around me when there was nothing else. Her presence. Sounds ridiculous now, but -- I knew. She was there with me. Wherever "there" was. I knew that I could let go, but she wanted me to fight. So that's what I did.

(Cecilia covers her mouth drawing a sharp breath, her eyes wet.)

CLAYTON

I can't tell you much more than that. I didn't see God, or Heaven, but I didn't see Hell either I'm happy to report. I do have the sense now that, this may be it, so make it count. I sold my business. Always came to The Keys when I was a kid for vacations. It's paradise enough for me. We'll buy a little house and I'll spend every single moment I have left with Emily.

CECILIA

Well that's...

ED

Lovely. A beautiful story. Thank you.

(Ed goes over to Clayton and  
takes his hand as Emily  
exits the bathroom.)

ED

Welcome back, Emily. I'm Ed. My wife, Cecilia.

CLAYTON

Clayton.

EMILY

Emily. You knew that.

CECILIA

Yes. You look refreshed, dear.

EMILY

Thank you both so much for this --

ED

Shh! There it is again! Am I losing my mind  
or is that drumming?

(They all listen.)

EMILY

I hear it! Sounds kinda... I want to say,  
"groovy".

ED

(to Clayton)

Do you hear it?

CLAYTON

I don't know. Maybe?



EMILY

I bet they're drumming on the beach!

CECILIA

In this rain?

ED

Why not? Probably a bunch of good old-fashioned free spirits.

CECILIA

I remember those.

EMILY

Let's go find them!

CLAYTON

(unsure, he looks  
to Ed and Cecilia,  
all the luggage)

I mean...

CECILIA

Ponchos!

CLAYTON

What?

CECILIA

I forgot I packed ponchos! They fold up into little tiny...

(Cecilia digs around her things and produces two pouches containing brightly colored packable plastic ponchos.)

Emily and Clayton shake them out, put them on, and present their new look.)

ED

Well there ya go. Ponchos.

EMILY

Wait, what about you guys?

ED

We'll listen from here.

EMILY

(with a conspiratorial look to Ed)

Mmm-hmm.

CECILIA

Go. Have fun. We'll be here when you get back.

CLAYTON

We'll knock this time.

(Clayton smiles. Emily grabs his hand. They dash out into the rain together.)

A moment of stillness in the room is underscored by the rain's percussive cacophony and the rise of the distant drumming. Cecilia closes her eyes. A smile spreads across her face. She hears it now.

Ed is seated on the bed, listening.

Cecilia opens her eyes and smiles at her man. She sits down next to him. He puts his arm around her. She rests her head on his shoulder. A moment passes.

Ed and Cecilia begin to kiss, slowly lowering themselves onto the bed.)

*The rain decreases in tempo, softens, and becomes but an occasional plink on the corrugated roof. Those sounds punctuate - then gradually become lost in - the sound of the drums.*

*The drumming grows louder and louder as the lights grow brighter and brighter.*

*Bumpata, bumpata, bump, bump, BUMP.*

*BLACK*