

THIS IS AN ONLINE SAMPLE
OF THE FIRST TEN PAGES OF

SAFEWORD
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To touch my person to some one else's
is about as much as I can stand.

—*Walt Whitman*

SETTING

Washington DC.

September 10, 2004 to September 12, 2005.

CHARACTERS

FRED NELSON

White, late 40s. A successful, aggressive corporate lawyer in Washington DC. He is largely unaware of the fact that he is a bit of a dick, but he has moments of realization and this causes him great remorse. He seeks absolution from visiting dominatrixes. He is Brenda's second husband. They met at work. She was his secretary.

BRENDA NELSON

White, 40. A legal secretary and devout Catholic. Her first husband, Jim, drowned. Her secret is that it was suicide and he was gay. She has lived a largely unexamined life, but is beginning to explore therapy because she is worried about her son, Joe.

JOE

White, 16. Brenda's youngest son from her first marriage. Joe is, in many ways a typical suburban teen living a privileged life. After his father's death, he was separated from his older brother and enrolled in private Catholic school. Basically a good kid who just happens to make and deal crystal meth.

AREZOU

Non-white, early 30s. A professional sex worker /dominatrix. Reads a lot of feminist theory.

WILLIAM

Black, mid-30s. A bartender and Arezou's best friend. He is gay but in no way queeny. The love of his life was Brenda's first husband, Jim.

ANNE SHORENSTEIN

Any race, 40s. Anne is a fairly competent therapist. She is recently divorced.

RUBY

Any race, 17. Joe's girlfriend, Anne's daughter. Ruby is smart, angry, and bored. At the start of the play, she has begun hooking, and by the end of the play, she has left home, dropped out of school, and begun a career as a professional dominatrix.

ACT I

**Friday, September 10, 2004.
Washington DC.**

Scene 1: 12:50pm. Arezou's apartment, Anne's office, Ruby's bedroom.

Scene 2: 5:00pm. Arezou's apartment and Fred's car.

Scene 3: 7:00pm. Brenda's dining room, Anne's living room.

Scene 4: 11:50pm. Joe's bedroom.

ACTt II

Friday, March 11, 2005.

Scene 1: 12:50pm. Anne's office and Arezou's studio.

Scene 2: 7:00pm. The bar where William works, and Brenda's living room.

Scene 3: 1:00am. Anne's living room, Joe's bedroom, and William's living room.

ACT III

Sunday and Monday, September 11-12, 2005.

Scene 1: 11:30pm. Brenda's bedroom.

Scene 2: 11:45pm. Arezou's apartment.

Scene 3: 12:50pm the next day. Anne's office and Ruby's office.

Scene 4: 6:00pm. Brenda's living room.

SAFWORD

ACT I

Friday, September 10, 2004

Scene 1: 12:50pm

AREZOU is lighting candles in her apartment. It's dark in her apartment not because it's night but because it's raining. She checks her hair and makeup in a mirror, readying herself and her apartment as if for a date. Mood music like Dead Can Dance or Morcheeba is playing softly. Doorbell. AREZOU opens the door. FRED is standing there, holding a bouquet of flowers and a wet umbrella.

AREZOU

Hello.

FRED

Hello. I'm—

AREZOU

Leave that in the hall. (*He leaves the umbrella outside.*) Wait there. (*AREZOU leaves FRED standing at the door as she goes off to her bedroom for a few seconds. She returns.*) Fred, right? You can bring the flowers in.

FRED

Sorry. I'm a little early. I can come back later.

AREZOU

No. You may as well come in now since you're here. Wipe your shoes there.

FRED

Thank you. Your place is very—

AREZOU

Did you complete the application?

FRED

Yes. Here. Your place is very nice.

AREZOU

Don't sound so surprised. What'dja expect, a dungeon? Don't sit there. Don't sit just yet.

FRED

Of course. I wasn't going to. I wouldn't presume to— (*Trails off. Silence.*) I can come back later.

AREZOU

No. (*Reads the application.*) "Feet. High heels. Toes. Cigarettes. Ponytails. Schoolgirls." Capitol Hill, right?

FRED

How did you—

AREZOU

"Safeword: ocean." Water?

FRED

I can pick another safeword.

AREZOU

No. Do you want some water?

FRED

Oh, yes, please. With Scotch, if you have it. (*She is not amused.*) Please. (*Silence.*) I thought you meant, earlier—

AREZOU

How many have you had already?

FRED

Just one. (*Pause.*) Three.

AREZOU

No alcohol. (*Both are silent as she pours him a water and herself a Snapple. More silence. AREZOU takes her Snapple and sits down. She does not bring FRED the water. FRED remains standing, unsure what to do, then goes over to pick up the water.*)

FRED

Thank you. Why no alco—

AREZOU

Safety and I don't drink.

FRED

Of course.

AREZOU

Why "of course"? You think I'm Muslim. I'm Filipino, asshat.

FRED

Of course. I'm sorry. I—

AREZOU

Typical.

FRED

I'm sorry.

AREZOU

Whatev, Trev. I don't have all day.

FRED

Yes. How do we—

AREZOU

Stop with the questions already. I'm conducting this interview. Now, the million-dollar question is: Punishment or Service?

FRED

Is this like Truth or Dare?

AREZOU

(AREZOU looks at him for a long time.) I'm getting bored. *(FRED looks at her with irritation for the first time.)* Oh, is that it? Do you bore your wife, too?

FRED

I don't think I want to—

AREZOU

Sit down! *(FRED sits immediately.)* I know your type. Which clubs do you go to? *(FRED looks at her.)* Camelot. Good Guys.

FRED

Both.

AREZOU

Doesn't even make you hard anymore. That's why you're here. You're boring. Impotent and boring.

FRED

Look, I don't think I—

AREZOU

Punishment. Or. Service.

FRED

Service.

AREZOU

Pussy. I can do it so the marks won't show.

FRED

Service, please.

AREZOU

Are you sure? (*FRED nods.*) What?

FRED

Yes. Ma'am. Mistress. Mistress Miranda.

AREZOU

All the first-timers want service. Pain is the only thing that'll help you. You'd enjoy it. Might even get you hard.

FRED

Really?

AREZOU

Yes. Really.

FRED

(*Considers this.*) Service. Please.

AREZOU

First we have to settle up. Where's the tribute?

FRED

Oh, of course. It's two-hundred, right? (*Pulls out crisp bills and starts counting.*)

AREZOU

Two-seventy-five. My rates went up.

FRED

When?

AREZOU

Just now because you're boring me. (*FRED starts to hand her the money.*) Don't hand it to me. Just put it on the table there. I told you to bring an envelope. Next time use an envelope.

You don't take direction well, do you? You sure you don't want punishment? (*He shakes his head no.*) Take off your jacket and roll up your sleeves.

FRED

Why?

AREZOU

Christ—

FRED

Sorry. (*FRED removes his jacket.*)

(Lights down, then up on ANNE and BRENDA. BRENDA holds several crumpled tissues and sits across from ANNE, a licensed clinical social worker.)

ANNE

All right, Brenda, since we've only got a few minutes left, let's recap what the plan of action is until our next session.

BRENDA

Um, okay, I'm going to ask Joey open-ended questions, so that he has to elaborate and he can't just say yes or no. Or grunt.

ANNE

And that includes questions like, "How was your day?" because it's too easy to brush that off with a "Fine." Try "Tell me about your day" and see if that opens things up.

BRENDA

Right. "Tell me about your day, Joey." That's good. I like that.

ANNE

What else?

BRENDA

Um, I'm going to listen more, and let there be silence sometimes, so that Joey might open up more.

ANNE

Right. Sometimes when we're hurting, we depend on our children for our emotional needs. Children adapt their behavior to meet their parents' expectations. Even grown children. Do you think Joey might join us down the road once we've got a few sessions under our belt?

BRENDA

Um, I don't know, I mean, I can't even get him to look at me. Like I said, it's like I lost my son. He just grunts and mopes around in the basement.

ANNE

You said his behavior changed drastically about a year ago?

BRENDA

Yes.

ANNE

Was that around the same time you and Fred stopped sleeping in the same bed?

BRENDA

Yes. Did I tell you that? I don't see how they'd be connected, but yes.

ANNE

Did Joey take any trips or did any new friends come into his life around that time? Is there anything that happened around that time that might have triggered this change in Joey?

BRENDA

No.

ANNE

How's his social life? Does he have friends? A girlfriend?

BRENDA

He has a new girlfriend. She's a senior. He spends all his time at her house. Her mother works long hours. I keep trying to get him to invite her over but—

ANNE

What's she like?

BRENDA

Well, I've only met her once, but she seemed kind of hostile.

ANNE

How are his grades?

BRENDA

Um, well, he used to be an A student but now he doesn't care about anything. He had to take Chemistry in summer school this year.

ANNE

Could he be using drugs?

BRENDA

No. He'd never. *(Pause.)*

ANNE

Do you think he's sexually active?

BRENDA

No. He'd tell me. *(Pause.)*

ANNE

Well, I don't have to tell you that adolescence is a minefield, especially for boys these days. He's trying to define himself as a man yet he's still a child, dealing with so many pressures. He may feel like he's abandoning you, Brenda, by growing up and leaving you with a workaholic husband who's largely absent. How do he and Fred get along?

BRENDA

Um, okay, I guess. They basically stay out of each other's way, except when the cell phone bill comes in. We had almost three-hundred dollars in text messages last month.

ANNE

Mm-hm. Tell me again, Brenda, your first husband died when Joey was how old?

BRENDA

Jim died when Joey was eight.

ANNE

And Joey's 16 now?

BRENDA

Yes.

ANNE

And your other son?

BRENDA

Aaron's 23. Lives in Colorado with my sister. He was 15 when Jim died and my sister took him in.

ANNE

So Joey's behavior changed around age 15, the same age Aaron was when Jim drowned?

BRENDA

I never thought of it like that, but yes.

ANNE

Does Joey talk about his father? Ask about him?

BRENDA

Never.

ANNE

Do *you* talk to anyone about him?

BRENDA

No. Fred says what's done is done. The past is the past.

ANNE

Do your sons know why their father killed himself?

BRENDA

No. They think it was an accident. Sometimes *I* think it was an accident. I *want* it to be an accident. Too many sins.

ANNE

What are you doing there?

BRENDA

What?

ANNE

You're picking at your hands.

BRENDA

Am I?

ANNE

Do you do that a lot?

BRENDA

I don't know.

ANNE

It's a fairly common habit for some people when they're under stress. It's actually self-mutilation, an expression of self-loathing, wanting to pick at yourself until you disappear. Try to bring your awareness to it over the next week. Try replacing the action with something loving like rubbing lotion on your hands.

BRENDA

Okay.