

Her Wifely Duty – a Short play by
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The time is the present. The setting is a den in the home of Charles Richardson. A party is in progress in the garden. The characters are Charles Richardson, a wealthy, older man, Jennifer, his attractive young wife, and Robert Egan, his young, handsome lawyer.

At curtain, the den is empty. After a moment, the door opens and Charles enters. He picks up the telephone and dials.

Chas. "Hello, this is Mr. Richardson. Is Doctor Connelly in? Oh, then could I speak to him? No, I don't mind waiting. No, that's fine, I'll hold... (during this pause, Mr. Richardson might take a pill, or light a cigarette. He is nervous, and drums his fingers on the desk as he waits) Oh, Doctor Connelly! I'm so glad I was able to reach you! Well, as you can imagine, I'm a bit nervous about my test results. I... yes, yes I would like to hear the results now! I don't think I could stand waiting until my appointment tomorrow! Yes, yes I would appreciate that. Yes, I'm at home, and actually there's a little party going on... well, it's to celebrate my wife's birthday... No, there's no one here, with me, at the moment! Well I don't see why I should call her... No! No! there's no need for that, I am quite able to hear the results, whatever they are,... only I wish you would just tell... What? ... What did you say? ... Well, is there a chance that there's some mistake?... Perhaps there are some other tests that you could run!... Yes, I understand! Well, how much time have I got? My God! ... No, I'm all right. I'll be fine!... I would appreciate your not telling anyone about our conversation, Doctor. No... no... especially not my wife! There's no need to upset her. Yes, thank you. Good bye. No, I don't think I'll be in for my appointment tomorrow. No. Good bye!

(He sits in a wingback chair, which hides him from anyone coming into the room. After a long pause, he goes to the desk and retrieves a revolver from the drawer. He sits back down and studies the weapon. The door opens, we hear the sounds of a party in the distance. Jennifer enters, and stands next to the door she has just closed. After a moment, the door opens, and Robert enters. Charles tries to hide the revolver when Robert speaks)

Rob. "I haven't seen Charles for several minutes. Maybe he's gone upstairs... to sleep off those scotches!"

Jen. "Oh, you are terrible. You shouldn't mock the hand that feeds you! (she giggles) Besides, he really doesn't drink all that much. I, on the other hand..." (she holds up her empty glass, and waves it under Robert's nose)

Rob. "But you, my sweet, have so much reason to drink. How do you manage to go to bed with that ... garrulous old windbag, night after night?" (During this exchange, Charles has been about to rise and reveal himself until he hears the thrust of the conversation)

Jen. "There's no need to be so catty! No... no ... men aren't catty! Women are catty! Then what are men? I know... you're doggy! (Giggles almost hysterically) I'm sorry!

You are not a doggy, are you? You are the sweetest thing. And I just love the way you follow me around. Yes, I do! I love it best when Charles is there, and you follow me with your eyes. Or when you walk by me and touch my shoulder or the small of my back with your finger as you pass. It always makes me shudder! I always think he's going to see, but that makes it even more delicious! (She is standing very close to Robert and puts her arms around him. They kiss.)

Rob. "If you would just listen to me, we wouldn't have to be so secretive. I told you to leave him! You know I'm crazy about you! I can't stand the thought of him touching you, kissing you... I just don't know how much longer I can take it!"

Jen. "Oh Robbie... (kissing him passionately) you will not understand, will you? I get such a rush when your foot touches my ankle at dinner, with Charles rambling on about God knows what! I wish I could explain it more clearly for you! I love the thought that you are so jealous. Just knowing that you want me and can't have me on so many of those nights, makes the other nights, that much more special. (She sees Robert's disconcerted look) And they are special, Robbie darling, more special than you'll ever know. They keep me sane. They make it possible for me to smile, instead of screaming, when Charles explains how Wall Street works for the umpteenth time! But,... darling... sweetheart... understand one thing. Charles is so good at whatever he does down at Wall Street that he is worth many millions of dollars. And if I leave him for you... well let's just say that ... (Charles has overheard enough. He speaks before rising.)

Chas. "Let's just say that you love my money even more than you love Robert's 'special' nighttime forays with you! You, my adoring wife! You, who always laughs at my stories about my work. (He has risen, and the gun is in his hand)

Jen. "Charles! I didn't see you there!

(these lines may overlap)

Rob. "My God Charles! Where did you come from?"

Chas. "Of course you didn't see me Jennifer! I doubt you would have said the things you did!"

Jen. "Now, Charles, I'm sorry if you have misunderstood what Robert and I..."

Chas. "Robbie! Why not continue calling him Robbie? It has a nice ring to it! I believe I shall call you Robbie from now on ... Robbie!"

Rob. "Charles, is that a gun in your hand? What the hell do you think you are doing with a gun?"

Chas. "I'd almost forgotten this! (he levels it at them. Until now it had been held casually in his hand, pointing down at the floor) I should be careful. It has a hair trigger. (Robert takes a partial step forward) Oh my! Please don't move Robert... Robbie! This could go off. Especially in the hands of a garrulous old windbag like me! (Robert moves back)

Rob. "For Christ's sake, Charles! Give me the gun! Please don't do anything foolish! The conversation you overheard..."

Jen. "Spied on, you mean! I can't believe that you were spying on us, Charles! You have no right! And this gun... Please put it down! I love you Charles! No matter what you think you heard!"

Chas. "I assure you Jennifer, I was not spying on you. I would never have done such a thing. I had no reason to! I trusted you... and Robbie, here... completely. I guess that qualifies me to be a foolish, garrulous old windbag, doesn't it? Well, enough of that, we have a situation here. I guess that's what you would call it! Yes, a situation. And now we have to decide what to do about it. Any suggestions?"

Rob. "Charles, please put the gun down. That will do for starters. You can fire me, and throw Jennifer out if you like, but I assure you that I have always acted in your best interests. (Charles raises the gun and points it at Robert) No! No! Put it down, Please! Charles! For the love of God!" (Jennifer puts her hands out in self-defense)

Chas. "All right, I'll lower the gun, but no more ridiculous statements like that one! All right, go on, I'm listening."

Jen. "Charles, you wouldn't throw me out... would you?"

Chas. "Jennifer, I'm trying to listen to Robert just now, so please, stay out of this for the time being. Now Robert, you were saying..."

Rob. "What I was trying to say was that I have... in a business... situation, you understand, have... have acted with your best interests, I swear! And as for Jennifer, well, she is very lovely..."

Chas. "You needn't state the obvious!"

Rob. "Yes, well, you see... and maybe she didn't mean to... but she was always very seductive toward me... when you weren't around..."

Jen. "You bastard! Charles, you aren't going to believe... (Charles has swung the gun so that it is pointed at Jennifer) Oh God, Charles... You must believe me... I never... I mean he... he... (Charles raises the gun to point at her head) Charles, I love you! (she begins sobbing and sinks slowly to the floor. She is on her hands and knees. Quietly she continues) Please... please... don't kill me, Charles. I'll go away. I don't want anything from you... please!"

Chas. "I really shouldn't frighten you like that, Jennifer. I don't think I could kill you, even now. But you, Robbie! You I am not so sure about! Tell me why I shouldn't kill

you! You should be able to plead your case. After all, you are a lawyer, and a highly paid one, at that! So, let's hear it!"

Rob. "First of all, you would never get away with it! And you have no idea how tough prison can be, Charles. Even for a man of your means. And, secondly, you're not a vindictive man, Charles. You are too civilized! So, I guess you won't shoot either of us..."

Chas. "Vindictive! Interesting, you don't think of me as vindictive. I guess I should be flattered! Thank you, Robbie, for that vote of confidence! But, you have to take into consideration all the emotional baggage that goes into a relationship between a young and desirable woman and an old, garrulous..."

Jen. "I never thought of you in that way, Charles! Please believe me! (She begins to get up from the floor) He called you garrulous...he called you a windbag...not me!"

Chas. "That's true, Jennifer. That's true. But let us get back to the case Robbie is pleading. He said I was not vindictive. I was trying to make the point that an older man is always a little frightened that his young wife will be attracted by the good looking types who are always around her. That she will be bored by his feeble attempts at lovemaking! That she is only hanging around for his money! These fears are always there, Robbie! When you make a killing in the market, when you're at the theatre, at parties, in bed, in the dark with your beautiful wife sleeping beside you, the fear is there! And no matter how hard you try, you can't push the fear away! And that can make you jealous, and bitter and vindictive. But you had another argument. You said that I couldn't stand going to prison. And there you have me, Robbie! I will not go to prison, for anyone, or anything! So, you can relax, Robbie. And so can you Jennifer! I'm not going to kill you. (He turns the gun around and hands it toward Robert. Robert takes the gun by the handle. He is visibly relieved. Charles pulls the revolver toward himself and it goes off. Charles lets go of the gun and falls back. He grips the chair and doesn't fall.)

Jen. "Oh God! Charles! Robbie! You've shot him!" (overlap these lines)

Rob. "What the... I didn't do that! Charles, are you...Charles, I didn't mean..."

Chas. (He is mortally wounded) "I warned you that it had a hair trigger... but don't worry Robert... I'm sure that Jennifer will testify that it was an accident. That you were trying to get the gun away from me... You'll have to explain why I had the gun on you... but you'll think of something... Of course, Jennifer, this is your chance to get it all. If I'm murdered, there is a double indemnity clause in my insurance... worth millions extra for you... but you'll have to say I tried to get the gun away from him... you decide, Jennifer. (he slumps to the floor)

Jen. "Oh, Charles! Please don't die darling! (She is kneeling beside him, holding him)

Rob. "You can stop that! I don't think he can hear you! Oh, and don't believe that story about double indemnity. That's a lot of hogwash! If he had such a clause, I'd know about

it! So, you know what you have to say! You can just tell the truth! He handed me the gun and it went off! It was an accident! All right?"

Jen. "The truth... the truth... what is the truth? Seriously, Robbie, I don't think I know what the truth is anymore. You heard him, didn't you? Why did he have a gun in the first place? Why was he pointing it at you? Why did you have to take it away from him? Well, what are you going to say?"

Rob. "Jennifer, what the hell are you doing? Just tell the truth! He was handing me the gun and it went off! It had a hair trigger... he said so! Wait a minute... you're not really thinking about pinning this on me? For the extra insurance money? You must be crazy! No one will believe that! Why would I want to kill him? It doesn't make sense!"

Jen. "You're a real bastard, you know that Robbie? He has a gun on us and you try to tell him that I was always 'seductive' towards you when he wasn't around! He could have killed me, and you were thinking of your own skin. And now you want me to save your skin again, and maybe throw away millions to do it! Well, Robbie! I've got to think about this really carefully!"

Rob. "I'm a bastard? I'm a bastard? How can you even think about saying that I killed him? You'd destroy me for money? You're due to inherit millions anyway! What do you care about a few extra million?"

Jen. "It sounds so easy when you say it, Robbie! 'A few extra million'. Just throw it away, Jennifer! What do you care about more... a few extra million dollars, or a bastard who would throw you to the wolves if it would save his ass?"

Rob. "You're forgetting one thing, Jennifer, I've got the gun! And it has his prints all over it! So if he shoots you, and I try to get the gun away from him and it goes off, killing him, then I'm in the clear! (He shoots her. She collapses. He opens the door and calls out) Help! Help! Oh my God! Charles is shot! And Jennifer is... she's shot... please somebody, help!"

Chas. "Are you sure she's dead? (he has sat up on the floor)"

Rob. "Oh God! Charles, are you... you're not... you're O.K. you're not shot... but how?"

Chas. "Give me the gun, Robert! I can help you! They're coming, we haven't any time! Give me the gun! (Robert hands him the gun. Charles opens his vest and unbuttons his shirt as he speaks) I've been wearing one of these for longer than I care to remember. Bullet proof vest seems to go with the territory. If you remember, you said I'd never kill you because I didn't want to go to jail. And you were right! And you're a good lawyer, so you would probably get off with a light sentence... for killing Jennifer, my beautiful, foolish wife. I did love her, you know. (He shoots Robert. Robert slumps to the floor) I was talking to my Doctor just before you came in here with Jennifer. I've only got six months to live. So I don't care. Well, I guess I'd better see where everyone is. This should really liven up the party! (He exits)"