

## **Length of Stay**

by Don Cohen

(excerpted scenes, 18 pages)

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## Length of Stay

### A Play in Two Acts

#### CAST

##### The patients

Kara, girl, 15  
Tracy, girl, 16  
Nicole, girl, 15

##### The staff

Dr. Waldstein, man 40s  
Dr. Robbins, woman, late 30s  
Dolores, woman, late 50s  
Dave, man, early 20s

##### Kara's Parents

Judith, woman, late 30s  
Hal, man, about 40

#### SETTING

In and near a psychiatric hospital in the northeast.

#### TIME

Last spring.

## Length of Stay

### Act One

*The set is flexible, with a minimum of desks, chairs, beds, etc., possibly moved in and out to suggest a room in the hospital, a therapist's office, a meeting room, etc., as well as some indeterminate spaces as scenes overlap and flow into one another. But the consistent overall effect should be of enclosure, of institutional colors and shapes, possibly with a hint of nature (sky or trees) high up or at a distance. In any case, out of reach.*

*Light comes up on WALDSTEIN and KARA in two chairs facing each other. He is probably in his mid-40s and wears a grudging approximation of professional clothing: crumpled slacks, socks and sandals, a white shirt open at the collar and a loosely tied somewhat garish tie. It may or may not be apparent that he is wearing one black shoe and one brown one. She is 15, huddled in a chair, wearing a cap that hides most of her face, ripped jeans, a soiled raincoat too large for her. It is hard to see what she looks like.)*

WALDSTEIN

When you took the aspirin, did you know fifty wouldn't kill you?

*(No response.)*

I'm asking.

*(Silence.)*

You've been feeling bad for how long?

*(No response.)*

I'm guessing a long time. Maybe as long as you remember. Secretly. Not so secretly. Ever tried to kill yourself before? Thought about suicide?

*(No response.)*

Problems with a boyfriend? You have a boyfriend? Parents fighting a lot?

*(He waits for her to answer each of these questions, but she doesn't respond at all, not even with a movement that indicates she's heard him.)*

The intake nurse at ... hold on.

*(He rummages through an overstuffed briefcase and eventually finds a piece of paper with the information.)*

My filing system. One of these days.... The nurse at Walden, Janet Kelly, it looks like. No, I'm wrong. Janice. Janice ... Keily? She says you've been cutting for a year. Is that right? That would mean you started in eighth grade? You're in ninth now? First year at the high school?

*(Silence.)*

Why should you talk to me? Fair question. Gives me a better chance of helping you. I think. Can't prove it. I'm guessing silence has been your friend. Like the clothes: a place to hide. Was it the right choice at the time? The silence? Maybe yes. I'm not criticizing. Maybe it protected you. I'm saying silence is not your friend now.

*(A silence.)*

You may not think anyone *can* help.

*(He studies her as if to discover what she believes by looking.)*

I'm guessing fifty aspirins means you have hope. So that gives us a place to start.

*(Pause.)*

An lot of girls who cut ... It's almost always girls. Once in a while a boy; you find the exception that disproves the rule. A lot of girls see someone else cut first. A friend at school. People find each other. The rest figure it out for themselves. They think they're the only one. When they get to the hospital, they see it's not unusual.

*(No response from her.)*

Girls tell me it gives them relief. For a while. Some discomfort gets relieved. Pressure. Numbness. Some girls cut to relieve their lack of feeling. I respect that. I don't recommend cutting, I'm not a fan, but I admire people that want to feel. Can I see your arms? The cuts are all on your arms?

*(Pause.)*

It would be helpful. I won't touch you.

*(He waits patiently, giving the impression that he is in no hurry at all; he'll wait all day for her to decide. After a long while, she slowly pulls her arms out of her raincoat, but stays tense and alert, like a frightened animal, ready to put it back on in an instant. She is wearing an unbuttoned flannel shirt, which she also takes off. Underneath she wears a worn black T-*

*shirt. Her upper arms are crisscrossed with reddish cuts, some fairly fresh, others healed to scars. He looks at her arms, careful not to touch her or get too close.)*

Thank you. That's fine. Good.

*(She puts the shirt and raincoat back on.)*

I've seen worse. Mainly the upper arms. I don't get excited about cutting. It's a habit. Tough to break. Maybe you promised yourself you wouldn't cut any more, but it's hard to stop. Once you start. Like smoking. You smoke?

*(She nods fractionally.)*

Uh-huh.

*(On another part of the stage, lights come up on a room with three beds in it. One is empty. TRACY is sitting on one, NICOLE lying on the other. Neither of them is older than sixteen. TRACY is wears jeans with some small rips in them and a sweatshirt, NICOLE a skirt and blouse.)*

WALDSTEIN

Anything you want to ask me?

*(Pause.)*

I've put you on Elavil. An antidepressant. Takes two to three weeks to have an effect. When it works. I've had some success with it.

*(Pause)*

OK. That's a start. Good work. I'll get someone to take you back.

*(He picks up the phone.)*

Dolores? Could you ask Dave to take Kara to her unit? Thanks.

*(He hangs up.)*

We'll talk tomorrow.

*(Light goes down on them.)*

NICOLE

*(following her own train of thought)*

If a murderer kidnapped your parents and he said he was going to kill one of them and he made you decide, which would you pick?

TRACY

My father. Where do I find this guy?

*(They laugh.)*

I'd kill myself. NICOLE

Then he'd kill both of them. TRACY

But I'd be dead. NICOLE

( TRACY looks at her watch.)

I can't believe you don't smoke. TRACY

I made a sacred vow because of Adriana: no cigarettes, no weed, no alcohol. NICOLE

Smoking is my god. TRACY

Wait till you have a baby. NICOLE

(TRACY laughs.)

No, really. You'd be such a great mother. NICOLE

Cigarette, cigarette, cigarette, cigarette, cigarette, cigarette. TRACY  
(looking at her watch again, chanting.)

They're bringing her soon. She promised. The last time she was here? NICOLE

(There is a knock on the door. TRACY responds with a mocking, "hostessy" sweetness.)

Come in!

(DAVE brings KARA in.)

How's it going, ladies? DAVE

We're in here shooting up. Want some? TRACY

That's inappropriate, Tracy. DAVE

TRACY

It's good stuff.

*(He looks at her: a friendly warning.)*

TRACY  
*(mockingly)*

"Inappropriate."

NICOLE

My aunt is bringing Adriana. I think today.

DAVE

That's would be good, Nicole, but it may not happen today.

NICOLE

Or in a few days from now. A while ago she said soon.

DAVE

Maybe you should call to make sure.

NICOLE

She said.

DAVE  
*(to KARA)*

You've got good roommates.

*(KARA goes to the empty bed, lies down and curls up.)*

TRACY

Take me out for a butt, Dave.

DAVE

When it's time.

TRACY

Seven minutes!

DAVE

You're a slave to your habit.

TRACY

It takes five minutes to get them out of sharps.

*(He's at the door, about to leave.)*

I hate to tell you this, but cigarettes are not sharp.

DAVE

Thanks, Tracy. I didn't know that.

TRACY  
Now you do. How's your girlfriend, Dave?

DAVE  
What girlfriend would that be?

TRACY  
The one you go to bed with.

NICOLE  
Inappropriate.

DAVE  
Thank you, Nicole.

TRACY  
Do you have one? You can tell us. Please? A boyfriend?

DAVE  
See ya.

TRACY  
It's time!

DAVE  
Not yet.

*(He goes out, closing the door.)*

TRACY  
He is so hot.

NICOLE  
Do you think he is?

TRACY  
He's the number one studly man.

NICOLE  
He's good looking.

TRACY  
Are you blind, girl? He's amazing.

NICOLE  
Did you ever notice the good-looking ones are always Dave? Or Mike. There was this gorgeous guy Mike at CSM when I was there. You know who I think is cute? That guy who came in the other day?

TRACY

With the muscles and the buzz cut? He has some hotness potential.

NICOLE

I think the other one who came in before. Pretty tall? Hair kind of ...

*(She gestures to describe long hair combed to one side.)*

...brown hair.

TRACY

Who is this?

NICOLE

You know: tall. He had, I think it's a college thing on.

TRACY

That guy? With the UCLA sweatshirt?

*(She pronounces it "Uklah.")*

NICOLE

I guess.

TRACY

You're kidding.

NICOLE

I think he is.

TRACY

No, Nicole. Sorry. No. Nope.

NICOLE

You know the one I mean?

TRACY

You think he's cute?

NICOLE

I thought he was.

TRACY

The guy with the thorazine shuffle?

NICOLE

He wasn't that bad.

TRACY

You've been here way too long.

NICOLE

He reminded me of, you know, the actor, in that movie.

TRACY

Who?

NICOLE

You know: Keanu Reeves.

TRACY

Keanu Reeves and UCLA?

NICOLE

I thought his eyes were nice.

TRACY

This is sad, Nicole.

NICOLE

He wasn't that bad.

*(TRACY points her index finger at her mouth—the universal sign for vomiting.)*

Maybe we're not talking about the same one.

TRACY

The tall guy with the UCLA sweatshirt, who walked into the wall?

NICOLE

That was an accident.

TRACY

Did you talk to him?

NICOLE

We did the eye thing. I thought he was ... mysterious.

*(pause)*

We had a different impression.

TRACY

That's true.

NICOLE

That thing with the wall, I thought that was cute—the way he looked shy and like he wanted to apologize.

TRACY

I'm not the best judge of guys, Nicole, but there's a minimum requirement, like knowing the difference between a door and a wall.

*(pause)*

NICOLE

I thought he was OK.

*(A silence. They turn their attention to KARA but don't want to intrude on her privacy.)*

TRACY

*(gently)*

If you're thinking it sucks here, you're right. But the first twenty-four hours suck the worst.

*(no response)*

NICOLE

It's better when you get your levels.

TRACY

So I'm Tracy. This is Nicole.

*(pause)*

KARA

*(almost inaudible)*

Kara.

TRACY

Hi.

NICOLE

Hi.

TRACY

You saw Dave. He's the best. Eric is creepy. Not Eric Dr. Bonner. Eric Eric. Dr. Eric Bonner is bad in his own way. He's on vacation. Dolores is ...

NICOLE

No, I like her.

TRACY

Dolores is fine if you're straight with her. Do you smoke?

*( KARA nods.)*

They have to give you Nicorette until you get level two. Then you can go out for butt breaks. Eight-thirty, twelve-thirty, four-thirty, eight-thirty. The first time I was here they had a smoking room. Which was amazing.

NICOLE

I quit because of my baby. Your whole life completely changes.

Did you see your shrink yet?  
(KARA *nods.*)  
Man or woman?  
I have Dr. Robbins.  
(KARA *shakes her head.*)  
Man, kind of messy looking?  
(KARA *nods.*)  
Waldstein. Waldstein is ...  
... weird.  
Extremely weird.  
but ...  
... yeah, in a good way.  
(*a knock on the door.*)  
Come in, Dave. Butt time!  
DAVE  
(*to KARA*)  
How are you doing, Kara?  
(*She doesn't respond. TRACY shows DAVE her watch, and mimes smoking.*)  
I know, Tracy.  
TRACY  
If we're late, you owe me an extra butt.  
(*He gives her a look: nice try. They go out. A silence.*)  
NICOLE  
Tracy is so great. She's like not only the smartest. The best person.

*(A pause.)*

NICOLE

It's not too bad here. Compared to other places I've been. What meds are you on? I'm on Paxil, Trilafon, Cogentin, Ativan, as a PRN. I used to take Wellbutrin and Depakote, but they stopped that because I got seizures. I told you about me having a daughter? A little girl. Adriana. My baby girl. My aunt takes care of her. You can meet her when she comes. Maybe today. You want to see her pictures?

*(As she goes to the table near her bed and rummages through the drawer, light comes up on WALDSTEIN's office. He is there with HAL and JUDY, Kara's parents.)*

HAL

Adolescence, we thought. The clothes, the moods, barricading herself in her room. Her friends dress the same. The hair.

WALDSTEIN

Barricading?

HAL

No, but her door shut, music blasting. Maybe ...

*(He stops. WALDSTEIN waits.)*

Maybe it is. Adolescence. Aren't all teenagers a bit ...?

*(pause)*

How long will she be here?

WALDSTEIN

I don't know. Ten days? Not as long as I'd like.

*( JUDY makes an inarticulate sound of pain.)*

WALDSTEIN

Mrs. Freeland ?

*(She can't say anything.)*

HAL

So you think it's not just ...

*( WALDSTEIN lets him hang.)*

... adolescence.

*(NICOLE shows the pictures to KARA one at a time but doesn't let go of them.)*

NICOLE

This is her at her six month birthday party. That's her favorite thing she's playing with. She's always happy. That's me and her when she was a few weeks old. That's her with her peeboo again. That's what we started calling it because of playing peek-a-boo, hiding behind it, so we started calling it "peeboo." If you say, "Where's your peeboo, Adriana?" she knows what it is; she holds it up. I didn't name her after anybody. I like Adriana because it sounds mythical: Adriana. Having a baby is so ... now that I have a baby, I would never kill myself. I would never do that to her. No matter how much I wanted to.

*(Lights down on the girls' room.)*

WALDSTEIN

Any unusual tension between the two of you?

HAL

Kara and ...?

WALDSTEIN

You and your wife.

HAL

*(with a laugh)*

Just the usual.

WALDSTEIN

How much is that?

HAL

Not much. In my opinion.

*(He turns to his wife.)*

Maybe you don't agree.

*(She doesn't speak.)*

WALDSTEIN

Mrs. Freelander?

*(It takes an effort for her to break out of her silence.)*

JUDY

If we ...

*(She can't find the word, gives up.)*

HAL

She thinks it's our fault.

JUDY  
Of course!

WALDSTEIN  
Because?

JUDY  
I'm her mother!

WALDSTEIN  
(to HAL)  
Your opinion?

HAL  
I don't think we're worse parents than the ones whose kids don't ...  
(Again, he stops.)

WALDSTEIN  
Don't?

HAL  
Are not in the hospital.

JUDY  
She's ...  
(She breaks off.)

WALDSTEIN  
Yes?  
(HAL is about to speak. WALDSTEIN holds up a hand to stop him.)

JUDY  
I brought ...  
(She stops, then takes photographs out of an envelope one at a time and shows them to WALDSTEIN.)

JUDY  
(as she passes a picture to him)  
This is Halloween: she was Robin Hood. She always wants to rescue ...

HAL  
... the underdog.

JUDY  
... everyone! everyone else.

HAL

She was always bringing home wounded birds, starving cats, dead mice. We've got a whole animal graveyard out back.

*(JUDY gives him another picture.)*

WALDSTEIN

Why are you showing me these?

JUDY

She was happy.

WALDSTEIN

Did you know she was cutting?

HAL

No idea.

JUDY

A year, they said!

HAL

The way she dresses ...

JUDY

I saw scratches. She blamed the cat.

HAL

You're supposed to respect their privacy ...

JUDY

Why?

WALDSTEIN

Anger? Self-punishment? That's not where the money is, in my opinion. People need to tell their stories. Maybe if the story is about suffering, the need is greater. Some cutters are ashamed to tell theirs with words. Or forbidden. So they write the story of their suffering on their bodies, with a knife, a razor blade.

*( JUDY lets out a brief cry of pain.)*

HAL

Forbidden?

WALDSTEIN

When the abuser threatens to hurt them if they tell. Or someone they love, kill a pet. Plus they usually think it's their fault. It's less frightening to believe you deserve the bad things that happen to you.

*(A silence.)*

JUDY

What ...?

*(She stops.)*

WALDSTEIN

A lot of cutters have been abused. Physically. Sexually. Most often a man in the family.

*(He lets that hang in the air, looks at HAL.)*

HAL

Are you accusing me?

WALDSTEIN

I'm asking.

HAL

*(with a bitter little laugh)*

The answer is no.

WALDSTEIN

We don't have much time.

HAL

No.

*( WALDSTEIN looks at JUDY.)*

JUDY

He would never ...

WALDSTEIN

Uh-huh.

JUDY

He wouldn't.

WALDSTEIN

I've met women—mothers—who would do anything to protect their marriage.

JUDY

No.

HAL

*(laughs again)*

I have my faults. Not that one.

WALDSTEIN

You're laughing because ...?

HAL

Better than killing you.

*(A silence.)*

WALDSTEIN

When did she stop being happy?

*(a silence)*

JUDY

You think someone did something to her?