

ON THE BEACH

By Steve Waters.
Adapted by C.Aguado

“The World is turnin’
Hope it don’t turn away.”

“On the Beach”, Neil Young

Characters

WILL., a glaciologist, thirty-seven

SARIKA, a senior Civil Servant, thirty-three

ROBIN, an ex-glaciologist, sixty-seven

JENNY, his wife, sixty

Setting

ACT ONE

Above a salt marsh, on Robin and Jenny's land in north-west Norfolk; April, Saturday

ACT TWO

The same; September, Saturday 8p.m

Time

The near future

ACT ONE

Scene One

Near ROBIN and JENNY's house looking out to sea. Mid-morning

ROBIN's looking through a telescope on a tripod

In shabby cut-off jeans; a plaid shirt, ripped; glasses on a chain around his neck; battered trainers. Wiry, weather-beaten, moves fast. Inaudibly Neil Young's "On the Beach".

JENNY appears, breathless. Face devoid of make-up but a little eyeliner; snowy long hair, dishevelled, piled up on top and held with a bandanna.

JENNY silences the stereo. Battling gulls.

ROBIN. Look, look. Governor's Point

JENNY reluctantly looks through the eyepiece of the telescope.

You see it now?

JENNY. No. Nothing

ROBIN. See it now?

JENNY. No

ROBIN. Here then.

He adjusts the focus

You see Governor's Point, okay?

JENNY. I notice as usual that Governor's Point is a great big lump of sand in the North Sea.

ROBIN. Little egret.

They sense the warming. We know that.

But also they come inland as the seas get more turbulent.

JENNY. I don't have time for ornithology, Rob.

WILL left a garbled message, he "might" be here mid-morning.

ROBIN. So he's finally here.

JENNY. Oh, Robin, Will's simply coming home for a refuel, I doubt he'll stay longer than Monday.

ROBIN. Jenny, there's an event coming; it's building in the Atlantic; probably be with us by the small hours.

JENNY. The forecast's a cloudless day.

ROBIN. That bird knows it. Blown several latitudes north looking for landfall.

When it leaves again, it'll be time.

JENNY. Robin, any storm and a little egret are entirely unrelated.

I'd better get off.

JENNY's car starts off; ROBIN heads into the house.

From the other side of the stage, WILL enters with SARIKA; SARIKA's in a suit; WILL in informal gear, wet shoulder bag, rucksack. MUD

SARIKA. Everything's banks and capitalisation and social policy and that's nastier than I thought. Climate change is clearly sorted.

The infamous Stability Hypothesis says, in effect, no rise in global temperature within any conceivable range can melt the largest mass of ice in the world.

WILL. Basically it claims the West Antarctic is impregnable.

SARIKA. But now you've proved the exact opposite - that in fact the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet is on the verge of collapse; that in fact sea-level rises of minimum 5 metres are imminent; and that in fact we are on the brink of a catastrophic event.

WILL. I don't think I ever suggested I was Nostradamus. I'm here to talk about my work, yes, on Monday. But I can't offer certainty.

Into her bag, rifles through to find an envelope.

SARIKA. Crap, this is wet too.

Your father, Robin, and Jenks prove the Stability Hypothesis, but for some reason your dad doesn't publish, doesn't sign the paper, your father then exits altogether from science, steps out of- well, out of life.

But I don't like mysteries, you know.

And here's a mystery. Look.

He opens the envelope.

SARIKA. It's the only record of a meeting between a polar scientist and the then Minister for Science & Education, one Margaret Thatcher, Subject: "The Contingency Plan". When exactly did your father come back from Antarctica?

WILL. 1974

SARIKA. You're sure about that?

She kisses him, gathers her shoes, and wanders off.

Stereo, listens to the music.

ROBIN enters from the house.

WILL. What's this?
Let's see. '75?

ROBIN. '74.

WILL.'74. What is it about you and 1974?

Neil Young!

ROBIN. "On the Beach"

WILL switches it off.

ROBIN. Jen was picking you up.

WILL. Well, we got a cab.

They embrace, belatedly.

ROBIN. And did you get taller? Is that possible?

WILL. You're just shorter. Shrinkage.

ROBIN. You lose your hair, your height, your libido, your pension's value, your standing in life. Not good being old.

Sorry. And how's the Brunt doing?

WILL. The Brunt is thinning.

ROBIN. The Brunt has always been particularly vulnerable.

WILL. You found that, did you?

ROBIN. And, yes, you'll get thinning.

But thinning is perfectly compatible with stability.

WILL. Right.

You still stand by the Hypothesis?

You never claimed it, never published on it.

All I know is that bastard is melting. Well, Jenks ever said and pretty soon we're going to feel the effects right here

ROBIN. But that's just not good enough, is it, Will?

WILL glares at ROBIN; then through the telescope.

WILL. Yeah, thought I saw an egret in the marsh.

Is it me or is the sea closer?

ROBIN. Another storm due tonight.

WILL. Something nasty in the Atlantic maybe. Should be fine here.

ROBIN. Oh, it'll come here too.

Over the marsh.

SARIKA comes back on, her feet wet, her trousers rolled up.

ROBIN. Who's this? Hey, what are you-

You don't have a permit to-

SARIKA. I'm sorry, has Will not yet- ?

ROBIN. You know her?

JENNY comes in from the house.

JENNY. There's no bloody petrol in the Volvo.

WILL. Mum. Hey. Sorry, I didn't - you got something for a weaver-fish sting?

JENNY. Sorry, you -what's this-?

SARIKA. Ow ow - sorry, my foot's gone numb!

WILL. Have we got some ice?

SARIKA. Are you Jenny? Hello, Jenny.

I hurt my foot on the beach.

Sorry. I've heard a lot about you. And you, of course, Robin.

He kisses JENNY, takes SARIKA into the house..

JENNY. Will!

ROBIN. He saw it. Will .He saw the egret.

Blackout.

Scene Two

Later.

Dusk above the marsh. It's calm.

A long trestle table, a hurricane lamp on it.

JENNY is laying a large white cloth, cutlery and glasses.

JENNY. We stopped buying processed food - altogether. No tins, no packaging, no precooked stuff.

WILL. So, no Ambrosia Creamed Rice?

JENNY. Everything you will eat tonight I have sourced locally or grown myself.

WILL. Sadly the wine's from Chile.

JENNY. Couldn't you have got something more local?

WILL. It was local. In Chile.

JENNY. We don't wait for the politicians or the-because,like Gandhi said. "Be the change you want to see." Or was that Martin Luther King?

WILL. And who's this "we" exactly?

JENNY. Okay.

North Norfolk Area Climate Change Action.

Now we're going into schools, the church, they screened the Al Gore three times.

SARIKA comes in from the house.

SARIKA. Do they have wireless here?

JENNY. Wireless? Yes, yes, we do.

JENNY. Could you take these in to Rob?

To be cooked in the wine.

SARIKA. Lovely.

She takes in a bowl of clams.

JENNY. That girl's far too pretty to be a scientist.

WILL. Are scientists by definition ugly?

JENNY. Why would she be in Antarctica if she's not a scientist?

SARIKA re-enters.

SARIKA. There was nothing on the radio about any incipient storms.

SARIKA. Jenny, do you get cable?

JENNY. Cable?

Have my mobile. I never use it.
Don't let Rob know.
I got it in case he - you know.

WILL. This is such progress, Mum.

SARIKA. Ten minutes -

She kisses WIL; JENNY watches them. SARIKA goes.

JENNY. Presumably she didn't arrive in the Antarctic by accident.

WILL. Oh. The inquisition continues. No.
Fact-finding visit.

JENNY. Fact-finding for who?

WILL. For the Government. She's a Civil Servant. She works for the Department of
Climate Change & Energy.

Pause.

JENNY. Have you told Robin?

WILL. Not yet.

JENNY. Don't.

WILL. Mum, he was the best glaciologist of his day. The absolute works.
Comes home from Antarctica. Never goes back.

JENNY. It was nothing to do with science and everything to do with human frailty.

WILL. It must have been something to do with science.

JENNY. Will, you have to understand that he cannot, he must not go back there, to that time.

ROBIN enters with a tray of plates.

ROBIN. What are you talking about, Jen?

JENNY. Nothing.

SARIKA enters.

WILL. And what about Chris?

SAKIRA. Not to be disturbed.

JENNY picks up the wine, pours it out.

ROBIN. Chris? Who's Chris?

SARIKA. Oh. Christopher Casson.
Minister for Climate Change. And Energy.

ROBIN. We can all relax and go home now.

SARIKA. Yes, I've heard that's how we're viewed round here.

WILL. Politics in itself shouldn't be a dirty word.

SARIKA. Robin, do you know what I do?

WILL. Sarika's a Civil Servant.

ROBIN. Civil Servant?
You're kidding me. Far too pretty.

SARIKA. I am actually- A biochemist.
Well. Okay. There is a ministry dedicated to climate change.

ROBIN. Dedicated - what, to implementing climate change?

WILL. Government has to have some role in mitigating or adapting-

ROBIN. What do governments know? They don't have the knowledge.

WILL. They work with experts -

ROBIN. I know every inch of this land. Am I an expert? I can't even say for sure what'll happen tonight.

SARIKA. You are precisely the sort of person we should be working with.
I work with an old colleague of yours, Colin Jenks.
He's Chief Government Scientific Advisor.

WILL. He ripped off Dad's ideas.

ROBIN. I told him he was wrong. I said we have to start doing without it all -
governments, Civil Servants, politicians, democracy, all of it.

SARIKA. We can hardly do without democracy.

ROBIN. Voting'll stop the great die-out, a wave in its tracks?
Quiet!

JENNY. What is it?

ROBIN. Listen.

The sound of a bird - perhaps an egret.

He rushes to get his binoculars.

SARIKA. Yes, I see something. Little egret. I've seen them. In Nigeria. Fabulous.

JENNY clears the plates.

*JENNY goes into the house; SARIKA wanders after. WILL drinks more, as does
ROBIN; WILL stands.*

ROBIN. Sea's closer in. They're going to let it go.

WILL. No. I'm ready, Dad. Tell me about the sea.

JENNY enters with the pudding, bowls of gooseberry.

JENNY. What's going on?

ROBIN. Skip pudding.

ROBIN goes.

WILL goes in.

SARIKA re-enters.

JENNY. What are you doing here?

SARIKA. Will wanted me to meet you -

JENNY. I always wanted a daughter.

I have felt, with Will, over the years, I have felt him slipping away from me.
Blaming me for things.

SARIKA. Oh, he loves you very much.

JENNY. Everything had to be set aside for the work-

ROBIN and WILL come on carrying something.

ROBIN. It's a disgrace, the illiteracy.

WILL. Here. On the table.

Box covered in a kind of protective fleece. ROBIN is manipulating a pencil torch. He pulls back the fleece to reveal a relief map of the reserve within a tank with markings on the side. He has a measuring vessel.

ROBIN. Effectively our land in cross-section.

He pours some water from the jug into the vessel.

SARIKA. What does it represent?

ROBIN. Just for reference, what you have there is the amount of water that we might see tonight during a fierce storm.

Let's imagine we got the Stability Hypothesis wrong. Imagine we lose most of Greenland, imagine the Antarctic Sheet itself breaks apart. Take it up to this level. Right up, right up.

She pours the water.

ROBIN. Particularly strong spring tide and, look, pour a little more, we have major inundation. If you resist the sea, you enrage it. The only solution is to allow it to find its course. The real answer is more marsh, mass retreat inland, a whole

new idea of living. The only viable plan is no plan at all. Return the land to the sea.

SARIKA's Blackberry pings.

SARIKA. I better just go

She goes in.

WILL. How can we abandon the coast? The whole economy is maritime.

JENNY. Will, that's enough.

WILL. Why, why did you come home early? In 1973?
What did you find out, Dad? That made you so sick?

ROBIN. I'll talk alone or not at all.

JENNY goes. Pause. WILL + ROBIN keep talking.

JENNY reapproaches.

ROBIN. I couldn't stop thinking about that warming, this much heat generated this much ocean warming, more ice loss, more warming.

JENNY. Stop, stop, you made yourself ill then you're -

WILL. Knew the ice sheet was melting and you suppressed it!
What I was supposed to be, supposed to do the job you failed to do, right, all these years, you knew what was coming, but you, what, you sat on your hands?

ROBIN sits heavily and buries his face in his hands.

SARIKA comes on.

SARIKA. Will! Please. It's urgent. Something's happened.

She takes him in, then goes back inside.

WILL. It was you, wasn't it?

ROBIN. What?

WILL. What was your plan?

ROBIN. What?

WILL. What was your plan?

ROBIN. What plan?

WILL. This.

He pulls out the photocopied document.

ROBIN. They weren't ready to hear about it. Coastal retreat, coastal retreat? The exit from the oil economy? Oh dear. Colin rightly, rightly putting me right on whatever occasion he could, why would he not, got to distance yourself from lunacy like that, right, right –

SARIKA comes on. Bag + coat

SARIKA. I have to get London - there's been some flooding in the west -

WILL. A flood? Tidal?

SARIKA. Probably, far larger than anyone presumed. Happened very fast, hit the outskirts of Bristol, devastating effect. We've all been recalled, and I think this is the time. So, look, I took the liberty of calling a cab, it should get us to the King's Cross train, but if not, we're authorised to take it all the way.

JENNY. What are we doing?

WILL. I am going into Government. I am going into Government. I'm going to smash the Stability Hypothesis.

ROBIN. Broke off your research for that?

WILL. I asked for a sabbatical. They said was I experiencing psychological problems, I said in a way, they said like your father.

SARIKA goes

ROBIN. How could you give up for your work for her?

WILL. And I am taking my work, taking it to the highest level.

ROBIN. You think that'll change things.

WILL. If your work had emerged in 1974 -

ROBIN. My work did emerge, boy. And they spat in my face. I made the mistake of thinking the truth was its own ambassador. And if you do this, now, you will make

the exact same mistake again. These people, they use you, this girl will use you too.

WILL hits ROBIN in the face.

WILL. Shit. Dad. I didn't -

JENNY. Rob - he's very - frail -I told you - I told you that - why did you hit him?

Car horn off.

WILL. You were wrong back then, and now, again.

ROBIN. Go and tell that to Colin.

WILL. I really am sorry. But I have to do this, Mum.

WILL tries to hold her; she flinches away.

ROBIN sits down and fiddles with his model.

The car drives off. ROBIN and JENNY stand.

ROBIN. We didn't eat the fruit, did we?

JENNY. No. We didn't eat the fruit.

Blackout.

ACT TWO.

Scene One

A table with tablecloth for two; hurricane lamp. Quickening of the wind, sea is louder. ROBIN with binoculars. Cry of an egret.

ROBIN. Where are you now?

JENNY walks on with dinner.

She sits. They start to eat.

ROBIN. It's fabulous. It's fabulous.

JENNY. Mmm.

The telephone rings in the house.

JENNY stops.

JENNY. I suppose we should at least update him.

I saw him on the news. He was the only one who seemed to know what they were talking about. Wearing a suit too. He hadn't properly brushed his hair.

ROBIN. Comical hair. Mad scientists.

He should be doing science, not speaking for "science". You never see politicians these days. Only scientists speaking for them, cleaning up after them.

JENNY. There was a lot of confusion about tonight. About how bad tonight could be.

ROBIN. They have not the faintest idea what will happen tonight.

Ah. You know what. I forgot to open this.

He pulls a bottle of wine from a bucket.. She drinks, coughs, spits it out.

JENNY. It's gone off. Pour it away. Robin. You idiot. Could be toxic.

They laugh.

Suddenly a siren calls, off.

JENNY. Will said there would be, there would be evacuations.

The siren again.

He said rising sea levels would make it more lethal.
Scared the birds too, look.

The sound of hundreds of drumming wing-beats as flock of geese alights and circles; it's incredibly loud.

ROBIN. Must be at least two hundred! The noise!

JENNY. Must be five-hundred-odd birds!

Pause. The sound fades away.

ROBIN is tearful; he returns to his meal. Eats on.

She toys with the food.

ROBIN. I blocked the road. The approach road.

JENNY. You blocked the approach road?

ROBIN. We've nowhere worth going. Shifting us somewhere that means nothing to us.

JENNY. The defences will protect us.

ROBIN. I breached them.

JENNY. What are we doing?

ROBIN. You know what we're doing.

ROBIN. Finishing our supper. Drinking a bottle of wine. Just go over the plan.

JENNY. Okay. Turned off the gas, electricity. Got the insurance documents on me.
Packed our bags with a change of clothes -

ROBIN. Put plugs in the sinks -

JENNY. Disconnected the washing machine.

ROBIN. Bottles of fresh water, torch, first-aid kit, tinned food - yes. Yes?

JENNY. Yes.

The phone rings in the house.

ROBIN. We should disconnect that bloody -

ROBIN's gone in. JENNY, alone, pulls out her mobile. She can't get through.

ROBIN re-enters.

ROBIN. How did you come by that phone?

JENNY. I could just inform him.

ROBIN. You don't need that.

She takes it back and he snatches it back.

ROBIN. You don't need it.

ROBIN starts to dismantle it.

He places the disassembled phone on the table.

JENNY. I'll call from the house then, fine.

He shows her the cord from the telephone.

ROBIN. What we need to remember is we did this alone. That we are entirely alone.
Being alone is actually our strength. We will be stronger.

JENNY. Could we not at least let him know what we're doing?

ROBIN. You're frightened, Jenny.

JENNY. Yes, Rob, yes I am.

ROBIN. Why?

JENNY. It's the sea, Rob. I just don't recognise it. Human beings can move. We are not trees.

ROBIN. Listen to that quiet. This is our habitat, Jen. How could we live outside our element, tell me that?

She approaches him.

JENNY. Robin, it's no defeat to admit the past's mistakes, to give way to love, that's being human, isn't it, doing that?

ROBIN. No, I'm good here, snug here. The Hypothesis confirmed. Okay. No more predictions. The sea rises, the land goes, the cities go, the people are gone. You can't fight that.

JENNY. I think science is a sort of madness.

ROBIN. It's just a storm. We'll probably lose the ground floor. We'll lose the fresh water.

JENNY. It's just weather.

ROBIN. An extreme weather event.

ROBIN. It was sea before and land before that. You think in continental time. Geological time. That's the way I'm starting to think we should think.

"On the Beach" starts to play.

JENNY. Okay, Rob, okay.

ROBIN gets up and holds her; she stays standing, limp.

Blackout.

