

The Carson McCullers
Literary Awards
2022
Anthology



COLUMBUS STATE
UNIVERSITY

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The Teenage Fallacy

By Sujana Vangala

Children brush the jagged edge of youth,
Suck copper from stained fingers,
Devour golden ichor from chalices,
Drown in their euphoric ecstasy,
As Dionysus lights a fire beneath their feet.

Scarred hands extend to your person,
Do you drink from the goblet,
Do you trade your youth for shadows,
Bargain epiphanies for innocence?
The gods come alive in your veins.

Love swallows you entirely,
Amplified by the crowd around you,
Love sedates you and you relish it,
You feed her until she pulls you apart,
Love's poison paints you blue.

Time's clay swirls together,
A canyon between one moment and the next,
Blur where memories should be,
Concavity in abundance's place,
The mirror casts a stranger in your role.

A skeleton traces your silhouette,
Bruises where kisses once danced,
Forgotten nights landmarked in black ink,
In raised, ribbed scars, in the hollows of your cheeks,
Evidence of a madness beyond the camera's reach.

Dionysus's fire calcines your feet of their eagerness,
His chalices of your rage, of shame,
He carries your tears in an amphora,
Tears at the flesh of your adolescence,
And sucks the fat from his fingers.

For a while, you fear the future,
Claw at the silk of your juvenescence,
Desperate for years of your prime,
Believing Aphrodite measures love in teaspoons,
And you have wasted yours on lapsed time.

Years later, you will realize Dionysus is not a man,
But a boy feigning god in a paper crown,
That his revels birthed impending realizations,
Stretched children's bones, so when adulthood came,
They would not keel over from the pain.

You will enter a grocery store,
In search of a jug of blue-capped milk,
And you will see one of Dionysus's youth,
Perhaps leaning against a brick wall,
Or shrieking from the window of a car.

The memories will embrace you for a moment,
But growth will usher them along,
And they will cling to a callow boy as he chatters his lighter,
Clutches a cigarette between his teeth,
And you'll catch silent ghosts dancing in pale smoke.

Pretty People

By Kadyn Moore

Pretty good, pretty nice, pretty smart
There's art in the way I say everything they want to hear
But feel nothing for myself
But it's pretty nice being pretty cool
Walking the halls of all the people telling me I'm pretty
Pretty privilege of the pretty people, pretty much making our worths unworthy

“Pretty princess!” They call,
“Come down from your pretty prison!”
Wait for a pretty prince to come properly prick you from the dragon who was always your friend
“Don’t waste your voice on us, Pretty Princess,” they say,
When you were only trying to comfort your pretty protector,
Impaled by the pretty prince’s pretty weapon. The pretty
princess was not saved that day.

A pretty performer walks across the stage,
Auctioned off to less pretty men with pretty big wallets All she
is is a pretty big price tag and pretty small clothes Not the pretty
prestigious Princeton degree she’s paying for!
Not the pretty perfect ACT score she made!
Only a pretty pink corpse in the hands of a pretty broken society.

Pretty Paris Hiltons prance down private runways,
Properly fed on tears and broken scales
Pounds and ounces, pumps and blouses,
Pictured less pretty if they have a pretty mind, pretty diet
All the pretty models pay the price, not the producers

“I have pretty good grades!” a pretty girl argues, But
where are your pretty blue eyes?
Where is your pretty blonde hair?
Pretty high scores mean nothing if you aren’t pretty, silly girl!
The pretty girl breaks her pretty mirror with the pretty pencil she finished her homework with.

“Please look at me,” they all cried!
Put a price on my pretty body, pretty hair!
Put a pretty knife through my pretty stomach if not! Because
what am I if not pretty?

ebony sun

By Kyra Richardson

before he kissed me
he asked if he could
and my body hollowed itself out
to make room for the love
i knew i'd grow to have for him

and when our lips
finally touched,
the universe parted clouds,
instructing the sun to highlight
our brown skins of
burned caramel
and hazelnut

My Soundtrack

By Madison Hoar

My death will be by gunshot, I learn as I bleed out on the floor.

The man standing above me can't be that old. I estimated seventeen or eighteen years of age, sort of on the short side. His hair is dusty and a mess, maybe from sleeplessness, maybe naturally. His eyes are darker than the room. I suspect those freckles on his cheeks are made of my blood, but I can't tell anymore. My vision has gone too fuzzy.

"What...?" I utter, holding onto my rope of consciousness with an iron grip. The anchor on the other side of the rope is his voice.

"Hey, sorry about that, old timer," the kid says casually, as if he'd bumped shoulders with a friend. He blows out the tip of his pistol, even though it isn't smoking (I think), and pockets it. He wipes his cheeks with the sleeve of his shirt. I'm right about the 'freckles'.

"I'm... going to die," I whisper stupidly, voice still, like the air before a storm.

"Yeah, probably. I'd be impressed if you didn't." He's rooting through the vanity across from the couch. I realize then what he's after, as soon as he pulls a slip of paper from the bottom of a small bag meant to house jewelry. I make a noise of distress, entirely expecting to choke on my own fluids, and he glances back at me.

"Oh, that's right. You did do me a favor, I suppose. I'll repay ya." Dropping the paper on the counter, he sidles over and hauls my limp body onto the couch behind me, which I slipped off of when he shot me. Behind him, a football game is lighting his silhouette, white noise in the otherwise silent room.

"What team do you root for?" my murderer asks, sitting down beside me and leaning forward on his knees.

"My b-blood," I note shakily, staring at the stain blooming on my shirt.

"Wow, never heard of them." He laughed. "You seem like a Cowboys kind of guy. Who's that they're playing? The Dolphins? I hate them. Or, my dad hated them. I think he still does. Something I probably picked up from him."

"You're a bastard," I spit in vain. The life is draining from me. It's the least I could do to insult him.

He cracks a smile, the edges sharp. "Heh, yeah, I've been told." Pushing back his hair, he gets up and snatches the paper once more, then acknowledges each of my walls individually. "Do me a solid and I'll call an ambulance for you before I leave, alright? Which one's got the goods in it?" He points at what I assume is the coffee table in the far corner. "Maybe that gray box under there?" "No," I rasped.

"Ah, that's the ticket." He practically skips over, whistling what sounds like *These Boots Are Made For Walking*. "Let's see... 6, 9, 3, 3, 4..."

"Please...!"

"Aaand, 12." A hollow clicking sound echoes out.

I have to wonder how he knows about that. I wonder who he works for. Something tells me he'll take more than his cut.

"So!" He drops the contents of the safe into a raggedy backpack and then kneels in front of my deathcouch.

"Anything I can get you before you gruesomely surrender to the sweet release of death?"

I grimace, pain racking my entire body like I couldn't imagine. The best I can do is, "My daughter."

"Oh, you got a daughter? Want me to call her?"

"Please."

"Alrighty. What's her number?"

I almost tell him, but it strikes me that, if he learns her phone number, the things he might do with it could jeopardize her life. He could sell it to someone unsavory, or contact her and use me as false ransom. If the last thing I ever do is put my daughter in danger, I'll never forgive myself.

"...Nevermind."

"Probably a smart move, honestly. Is your daughter pretty?"

I sigh. "Yes."

"In, like, an *I'm her father and see here* way, or for real?"

"Pretty."

He nods. "She's not around anymore, huh?"

"No... adult."

"Ha. Yeah. I get it. One moment you've got someone, the next, you're alone." He punches my arm gently. "At least I stuck around to see you off, huh?"

I want to tell him to screw himself, but the muscles in my mouth aren't responding anymore. The fear has set in completely. Seconds are slipping by.

"Hey, old dude. Are you dead?"

I scowl.

"Oh, good. I wanna tell you something." He looks around, as if to gauge if anyone's listening, and then leans forward. "I think I saw a picture of your daughter on the way in here. She's the one with the dyed hair, right?"

The corners of my lips tugged in some kind of gesture he understood.

"Yeah, thought so. You're right, she's lovely. Listen, this is actually good for her. Sure, she'll be sad, but your life insurance could support her for years."

Rage broils inside of me, but anger speeds up the rush of blood. I don't have that luxury.

"Welp. The cops will show up soon. There's an alarm on your door, I noticed. It's disabled now, but I did you the courtesy of letting it alert the authorities first."

Then what was the point of disabling it?

"So if you hang on a little longer, they might could save you. Um, might be able to save you. My mom keeps telling me to stop talking like that. I grew up in the south, though, before we left Dad. It's kind of cool—I can do a New Jersey and Texas accent back to back."

There's no air left in the room. He's taking it all. I cannot breathe.

Then again, in some strange way, I like having this soundtrack to my death. All he's doing is rambling, but there's something comforting about that. Like he cares to tell me his story. Probably because it will die with me, I know. But it's better than nothing

"Anyway. All of that's besides the point."

He spots the remote on the floor; blood drips off of it as he holds it up to turn off the TV.

"About five minutes 'til the cops arrive. I should go, but I don't wanna just leave you to die alone. That's cruel."

Of all places to draw the line.

"You don't seem to be moving anymore. I'd say you've got thirty seconds to a minute left. Any last words?"

Yes indeed.

“Y...”

“What’s that?”

Come on, muscles.

“You... are... an odd... kid.”

He nods, like it’s a fact.

“And you remind me of him.”

The Unexplored 95%

By Izzy Cox

There's an old Norwegian *spøkelseshistorie* about the crows nest every Arctic sailor knows, and — as Cohen falls out of it to the frothing waves below — it's all he can think about. That, and the giant wall of water that had pushed him out of the ship in the first place, breaking against the hull of the bow and attempting to tip the ship on her side. It wouldn't be too terribly hard, for how long the ship is and how high her masts stretch up into the sky. Then they'd all be sunk. Every man is on deck — even the Captain — holding on to the rigging to stay on their feet as the wave swamps the boards under a layer of foamy water, and no one spares a glance for Cohen as he goes streaking past. There are no shouts of man overboard, just the cries of terror as the water threatens to pull experienced sailors' feet out from under them. No one notices. And by the time the weather calms and a head count goes by, it will be too late. Claimed by the waves or cold, whichever. In a storm like this, drowning looks all the more likely.

The ship is called the *Silver Serpent*, the *Sølvorm*, with a wooden carving of a sea serpent left unpainted as the masthead, coming off more like a dragon than anything else. It's based on some old Norwegian folktale from the Captain's homeland, far North where the ice pack starts and the fishing is good and the pickled herring is plentiful. Some fairytale supposed to be good luck to waves and wind and boats, but not necessarily the men on them, because sailors are collections of superstitions and stories, patchworks of beliefs. So long as the fish are caught, so long as the coal is delivered, so long as the gold is earned. It matters little what happens to the men on the way to the next port in Longyearbyen on the Svalbard archipelago to pick up a load of Longyearbyen coal.

The story is about falling but no impact, but it has little to do with ghosts really. It was more a story told in the dark and cold of Oslo to scare little boys back home for dinner. The only reason Cohen is still thinking about it in his last few seconds instead of his wife or his son, is for almost the same reason he was even falling in the first place. That, and the twin waterspouts that had sprung up in seconds on the starboard side.

Cohen had seen *it*. The huge shadow in the shape of a hand, clawed around the Barents Sea. The *skyggedyr*.

In the *spøkelseshistorie*, an unnamed sailor is manning the crows nest one late afternoon, just as the sun slips under the ledge of the horizon — when the light off the water gets concave and strange, throws shadows and shapes where there shouldn't be any — when he sees something. Not land, as the navigator had been tentatively suggesting was near for the past week. In the middle of trying to explain whatever it is to the closest crewmate — with big eyes and pale skin and big gestures — yelling against the breeze, the sailor fell from his perch. Everyone on deck remembers the snap of wind through his loose shirt as he went, but he never hit the water. There was no splash, no scream, no body. He was falling and then he was gone, midair. It was like everyone on board had blinked together at just the right moment. And when they sent the next deckhand up to get a better vantage point to find the body — born on a wave — whatever he sees up there, he can't ever talk about again.

This is all to say, as Cohen plunges to likely death — likely caused by the *skyggedyr* in the sky and under the ocean — all he can hope is that he makes it to the water. He doesn't want to go wherever the unaccounted bodies go — consumed by sea creatures and algae, bones left behind to serve as homes for fish and coral.

Cohen rotates enough on his back to see the sky as he falls, weightless. The sky is an angry, brooding bruise, bad weather for sailing as any sailor would tell you, but above the horizon and clouds, the new moon hanging like an empty space between stars — something is changing. The Dark Spot — with its cratered surface of tunnels and caves and mountains and wheat tan color — is moving, seeming to pulse in the air. There is suddenly a great vacuum of wind as if sucked from a void, and the last thing Cohen sees before he is flipped sideways in the air from the force is the Dark Spot, limned in light.

Cohen sees the object coming from the sky at an unbelievable rate as he slips past the rail — sees the ship tilt just that last degree, irretrievable. The men on deck bracing, fates gambled away the second they stepped off the wharf and aboard. The toes of Cohen's left foot have just breached the icy surface as the metal of a large pair of tweezers snatches him from midair. He skyrockets upward out of the surf. The tweezers reach out to lift the mast back straight right before it touches the waterline with the flat of one metal clamp. The ends, still around Cohen's waist, dip into the water to compensate, dunking his head under. He comes up sputtering and soaking wet, the clamps too tight to draw in air anyway — the strands of his beard freeze instantly, water droplets perfectly round like strands of pearls against his mouth. The *Sølvorm* stabilized, the tweezers pull Cohen out of the water, dropping him too many feet above the deck. He hits with a muted cracking noise on his side and shoulder — and suddenly it's even harder to breathe. Definitely a rib — or two. He's still flat on the deck, gasping, crew running around him in panic, while the tweezers pull back to the west at a startling fast rate. Not that the whole thing isn't startling and strange.

Cohen glances up just in time to see the giant hand attached to the sky tweezers as they pull back out of the hole left behind by the Dark Spot. The Dark Spot — it's gone. Now, in its place, a giant eye, blue and bloodshot. Everything else about the giant is obscured — as if through a thick lens — but still visible in the sky. A silhouette that's always been there, shadowy and large, hunched over the ocean, blocking out the light. As soon as they'd set sail from the frozen harbor of Vardø it had been there, stretching out from the horizon, moving eerily like a human form. Even the eye, human, from the pupil size and shape to the white sclera showing around the iris. If Cohen has ever believed in anything, it is that this creature must be the skyggedyr, cradling the world.

The ocean starts to shake. Not the ship on the waves, or even an underwater earthquake, although massive walls of water are stirred up, no, the whole ocean sloshes to the left and then back, the whole world tilting on its axis. There are screams on deck and more than one man leaning over the railing, sick from the change in equilibrium. But it keeps going, like the world is rolling over itself, *around and around and around*, like suddenly the rotation of the Earth can be felt and it is a terrifyingly fast, dizzying thing. There is nowhere stationary, nowhere still — not uncommon for the middle of the ocean and experienced sailors, but most men are flat on their backs, unable to even open their eyes. Cohen is pressed with force against the deck, what is left of his ribs groaning against the G-Forces — he couldn't even get up if he tried.

And then, suddenly the spinning stops and all that is left is the terrifying feeling of free drop, the swoop in the stomach, and instead of being pressed down, Cohen is now scrambling for something to grab to even stay on the ship. Many men are quite literally floating in the air, a few feet above the deck, the ocean rising to meet the sky in embrace. They fall for a horrifically long time.

Next, the impact. The world cracks open with a shattering noise, like broken glass — like a broken egg, into millions of fine pieces — nothing like Pangaea with its puzzle pieces; you

couldn't put the Earth back together if you tried. There's no fixing this. The ocean empties out, like someone has removed the drain to a bath. Like someone has removed the cork of a bottle of wine... or a bottle with a ship inside. The *Sølvorm* cracks in two against the ocean floor.

But as Cohen sits up to observe the wreckage of the world, he doesn't see what he expects. The ocean floor looks like white carpet, soft and sewn together with cream colored stitches — the sky has become an eggshell, popcorned with texture and encased with a crown molding, and the horizon has become a light sage green spreading up a wall.

And sitting next to the remains of the world is the skyggedyr, the giant in the form of a little girl, thousands of times larger than Cohen is. She's sobbing, her cries booming in the still air, with bloody fingers and knees from kneeling in the glass of the shattered bottle. Despite her size, she can't be very old, her limbs still caring themselves with baby fat and incoordination. No one comes to check on her, and her cries eventually taper off, even if the blood doesn't, glass bleeding out and staining the carpeted ground. She reaches for the ship, hull split down the middle, masts cracked all in half, men scattered about — some still moving, groaning or crying out in fear, some long gone, stuck like pigs by the same glass that kept their world intact. Cohen is still flat on his back — a broken rib surely having punctured a lung or some other vital organ sometime in the spinning and smashing because there is blood welling up from his throat and pooling in his mouth — when the skyggedyr's hand closes around him, grip much too tight, shattering whatever is left undisturbed in his chest.

Cohen is suddenly flying out of the ruin of the world, the ruin in his chest splitting itself open with each rattling breath, lifted to a great red-rimmed, ocean blue eye. The skyggedyr is even more terrifying up close, freezing Cohen's body naturally stiff in fear. Or maybe that's not it. As the giant starts to shake Cohen around, his body only seems to grow stiffer, until his limbs have stopped flopping, stopped moving at all. There is a terrifying weight on his chest but it no longer hurts, everything has gone numb — not even the squeezing clawed hand around his middle is hurting. The blood has stopped overflowing his lungs and his breathing is not rattling; it's then that Cohen realizes he has stopped breathing altogether. He doesn't even need to. The girl shakes him again and he recognizes the way she is moving him — it's as if he were a toy for her to play with.

The last thing Cohen has enough control over his mind and body to see is a bloodshot eye, blue as the ocean Cohen grew up on. His body is born on a wave to sink below to house fish and coral in his broken, plastic ribs.

Everything else is lost.

The Words of the Devil

By Lucien Jervis

The words were spoken by The Devil, and the Devil alone.

“You,” said the Devil, leaning forward in its chair, “Have had quite the nasty exploits, haven’t you?”

I bristled. In my opinion, I hadn’t done much of anything— it was quite depressing, really— I hadn’t said much of value, hadn’t done anything worthwhile. There were still so many things left to be said.

“Do you want to go over some of my favorites?”

Such asinine talk. The Devil was sitting across from me, and couldn’t muster up more than meaningless muttering. I leaned forward in my seat, looking around the room.

The room was bland, made of hospital green and sterile white, with mold and grime in every corner. The lights flickered every few moments, as if displeased— every time they flashed, I could have sworn that someone was, very faintly, crying out in pain.

“That’s a rhetorical question. I’m making you do this,” the Devil told me.

I wondered, idly, if the Devil could say *anything* worthwhile. Unlike mortals, the being surely had used up everything it could have said that held value— repeated every message until none of it meant anything anymore. Us humans need to savor our words, choose wisely what messages we choose to portray to the world. We need to be careful what messages we send, whereas the Devil says, in most crude terms, what it wants, when it wants to. The Devil couldn’t produce anything of value, merely an incarnate of sin who whispers sweet nothings and empty promises, bringing inevitable destruction along its path.

“Fascinating.” The Devil leaned back in its seat, eyeing me cautiously. “You really have *no idea* what you’re doing right now.”

Pointless words.

The Devil laughed.

“You’re aware that you’re here because of the number of pointless, undeserved murders you’ve committed, yes?”

Over the course of my life, I’d done many stupid things, but all for a greater purpose. Those which needed to be silenced would be silenced, and those who should speak would keep their voice. It’s imperative that the messages that are put out into the world are nothing but important, thoughtful, and impactful. Their murders were *more* than deserved.

“Ever the pretentious bastard,” said the Devil in its monotone, “You’re too much of a coward to speak.”

I, personally, didn’t find it cowardly not to speak in this situation. I just didn’t find the Devil worth the words— after all, everything they’d said so far was such utterly useless junk that I couldn’t see half a point in. My own processes are worth more of my time than this. I would have rather moved on from that dead space, to whatever afterlife awaited me, than consult this imbecile any longer. It was *boring*.

“Listen to me,” said the Devil, and I was hardly even present, “you may think that you’re above all this— that I am a boring old hag which can’t produce anything other than thoughtless drivel— but I promise you, your own thoughts and feelings mean nothing to the world. You may have ‘silenced’ a few innocent, unimportant souls, but you mean *nothing*.”

The Devil stood, looming over me. For the first time, I looked it in the eye.

Its gaze pierced straight through me, and I found myself quickly averting my gaze. It was ghost-like, and undefinable—a true terror. Its presence, once that of a plain office worker, now seemed imposing, fearsome. The room seemed smaller, now, than it did before.

Still, what did the Devil know? It was all talk, and I knew, ultimately, that I had made the correct decisions in life. My ideas are not to be mocked. I would *not* be mocked.

“And yet,” said the Devil, and an inexplicable pit began to form in my stomach, “You mock every word I have to say, or will ever say, without listening?”

Surely, the Devil wasn’t capable of reading my thoughts.

“You are so close-minded and *stupid* that you will put down anything that you dislike as folly. You disregard that which you, in your very limited knowledge, deem unimportant.”

I stood from my chair, no longer wishing to be in the room with this beast, who seemed increasingly inhuman as the seconds passed.

Grabbing my arm, the Devil followed, almost falling out and over its desk in an effort to keep me still. “You will go nowhere,” hissed the Devil, “until I am done with you. I try to be at least *amiable* to those who will dwell within my domain, but you are a new breed of prideful. Your sins are insurmountable, and you are a fool who has learned too much from his own teachings. You are nothing, and you are not special—you are not wiser than I, who has been alive eons, and your words hold no importance. You are worthless, and you are not any smarter than me, much less anybody else who has ever lived. You are a liar, to yourself and to the world. You are no better than anyone else just because you *think* that you have good ideas. Your words are too many in your mind to have anything of value floating amongst the chatter. You judge others in order to make yourself seem more wise, and that is the most foolish thing of all.”

The words were spoken by The Devil, and The Devil alone.

Truer words could not have been spoken.

Satsuma

By Joseph Barns

Whether it be bouts of the seasonal flu suffered by distant, aging uncles traveling for the holidays or bored groans from younger cousins lounging about the house after Christmas Dinner, the magical fruit's sweet citrus seemed to cure any affliction. I recall the first time I indulged in the nurturing nectar as if it were a natural recording, stored and kept in the most wholesome depths of my being.

Golden rays of sunshine seeped through the clouded, December sky and lent a warm glow to my grandfather's garden. The presence of life was ubiquitous in that Sanctuary. Early birds played amongst themselves and darted through the deep green leaves of towering trees, enjoying their weightless freedom. Flowers of all kinds—ranging from pink lilies with flamboyant blooms to the spreading honeysuckle that crept along the back fence—sprouted across his land, flooding the senses with their sweet, intoxicating perfumes. And, then, there was me, a gap-toothed, snotty-nosed kid who stood under the proud figure of my grandfather.

That space was an Eden in my eyes, though, not because of the setting. In my young, ignorant age where the occurrence of daily life held no significance—save for the enjoyment of instances when playing was involved—the bounties of nature and the beauty of an early morning eluded me. I cherished the garden solely for the fruits it produced: ripe cantaloupes begging to be devoured, tangy grapefruits prompting a welcome puckering of the face, and even tender figs, almost berry-like in their sweetness. So, as we began our trek, my grandfather guiding me with his wide palm laying flat on my even wider head, I helped myself to any low-hanging treats.

“Imma show you something new this year!” he said in an excited tone, steering me along rows of leafy collards. An ear-to-ear smile was plastered across his face as we traversed his pride and joy, the very personification of his spirit; that garden was an extension of himself and all the effort he put into maintaining its ethereal, natural beauty.

We stopped before a rough-looking tree, its branches weighed down with countless rounded orange fruits.

“Somethin’ special I been workin’ on! Best tasting Satsumas in all of Mobile, I can tell you that!”

My bubbling greed did not allow me to question his use of that foreign word. Just as I had done with the other dangling fruits, I snatched it up, ripping stem from branch with the ferocity of a ravenous lion pouncing on unsuspecting prey. Though, partaking in the “satsuma” was a much more delicate ordeal.

Its leathery skin dimpled at my touch and rose again as I dragged my fingers along the length, searching for the perfect spot to tear into flesh. The exterior peeled like a soft dough of some uncooked, rich pastry—a knowingly strange analogy, but that comparison was the best my young mind could conjure up with its limited scope. I stared at the bare fruit, thick, stringy pulp clinging to its bright slices, and decided to forgo nature's natural presentation. I bit straight into my grandfather's creation and faced the repercussions of a flavorful explosion, the likes of which I had never experienced. An almost stinging sweetness burst on my tongue and rushed down my throat before my mouth even closed; I gagged from the severity of the taste but went right back for more after I recovered. Such sharp succulence was not suited for the faint of heart, though, I was the furthest from it when it came to food. The clouds parted, and a sonorous golden trumpet

blared as the Sun's light flooded onto the holy scene of my enlightenment. Oh, what a glorious day!

But, the Satsumas did not grow this Winter. Christmas came, and the family gathered together at my grandfather's bayside home. We talked and laughed over dinner, everyone reminiscing over past memories in routine fashion. It was not until I broached the subject of the Satsumas that the mood shifted.

"Coldest frost the devil could whip up." Grandfather grumbled, his usual smile slowly fading.

So, just as we had all those years ago, we walked through the garden, past wilted buds, along the sad collards lying limp on the icy ground that crunched beneath our feet and eventually returning to the rough tree. But, not one satsuma, not one even one white petalled bloom hung from its barren branches.

The absence of the object of such fond memories, while upsetting, was merely a disappointment; tasting the tangy sweetness of the fruit had become a wholesome tradition. Though, I quickly realized that, in my grandfather's eyes, it was a devastation. That once proud man who repeatedly guided me through his Kingdom now stood helpless, staring at the plain branches of his failure jut out against the gray sky.

There was a clear dichotomy of values presented to me at this moment. After all these years, I failed to notice how much the garden truly meant to him. The garden's success was his success. The garden's shortcomings were his own. I had lived so alienated in my own thoughts, that I never took the time to contemplate the other perspective. Where I saw trees crowded with tasty, ripe fruit, he saw the fruition of his passion. When I felt the soft petals or smelled the scent of his assorted flowers sweetly wafting through the air, he smelled his garden giving back what he had put into its growth.

In an admittedly uncharacteristic fashion, I hugged my grandfather, sensing the loss leaking from the depths of his soul. And, in that moment, I felt it with him

Memory Bread

By Sarah Phillis

Bring out the ingredients you know you will need. First, pour the milk and water into the pot. Watch as it heats up, remember the painstaking time it will take. Remember just like this mixture, you too are worth the work. Add the bubbles when bubbles begin to form and remove it from heat.

Pour hot water into the cup with sugar. Add the yeast and thank it for its life. Watch as the yeast comes to life and the water begins to froth. Give it a gentle stir to cover all the yeast. Be thankful for the purpose of the yeast. Remember you too have a purpose.

Put flour, salt, and sugar into a bowl. Watch as they mix together seamlessly. Remember no matter how different they may seem, they fit together. Remember you too will find your place and the others you will blend with.

Pour the milk into the flour mixture and begin to stir. Stop the stirring to scrape the sides, making sure to bring the mixture all together. Remember your ancestors who had to do this by hand. Remember to have your patience. Wait until it is cooler- not cold- to add in the yeast.

Continue to mix, but not too long.

Soon, move the dough onto a floured surface. Knead the dough and feel your soul falling back into your body. Feel the push and pull of the ingredients and feel as they all fall together. Remember you are whole, no matter how shattered you feel.

Pull out the bowl and lard. Coat the sides of the bowl and shape the dough into a ball. Place the dough into the bowl and cover with a towel. Remember the best things you must wait for.

When the dough has risen, pull back the towel and clench your fist. Remember those who have scorned you. Remember those who said you couldn't. Punch the dough and remember.

Separate the dough and place into their pans. Cover them once more and wait.

Heat the oven just right. Feel the heat fall off it in waves that seep into your fingers. Let the warmth leech the icy feeling from your bones and fireplace it with warmth. When the dough has risen once more, place it in the oven. Feel the heat almost overwhelm you. All too much, but still not enough to warm you. Lower the temperature ever so slightly.

When the bread sounds like hollow wood, pull it out of the oven. Let the fresh bread sit to cool. Remember that no matter how tempting it is, life will be easier if you let it cool for a few moments. Remember the trials and tribulations your ancestors endured. Feel their hands guiding yours when you grab the bread knife that makes slicing bread easy. Feel their pride at how far you've come.

Grab the tub of butter that you're sure how long it has been there. Grab the slice of bread you have spent hours, days it feels like, and spread the butter on it. Coat the sides just right. And when you bring it to your mouth; remember you are whole. Every bite into that bread is your own. You are alive. You are you. All you must do, is keep going.

Mitosis

By Izzy Cox

My grandmother watches out the window with the peeling white-painted sill and cornflower blue curtains as my grandfather kneels down in the dirt to find his reading glasses. The day is hot enough the concrete road seems to be melting, rubber tires melting to fill in the stretch fissures. My grandfather laid the concrete slabs himself, when he was younger and his back was strong and he needed the ten dollars in his pocket (not that he doesn't always need the 10 dollars in his pocket. He will for the rest of his life). By this time the road is crumbling at the edges, and by the time I am even thought of, it will be nothing more than a cow path. The honeysuckle and blackberry bushes and sycamore trees will leave it too grown up on either side to get two lanes of traffic through.

My grandfather is leaned up against the tailgate of his old red Ford pickup truck, pencil in hand, scribbling in a journal to keep up with sales for the day, a bed full of watermelons and corn behind him. When he goes to stop writing and slide his reading glasses back in his shirt pocket, they fall to the ground in a moment of slight miscalculation. It's nothing serious at the time, the shakiness of his hands, the resistance in his limbs, the little moments misplaced in his mind. He's getting older, after all. They both are. And he's been making himself do the work of a twenty-year-old for twenty too many years. There is no cause for concern, yet. No one knows about the genetic disease lurking in the tissue of his brain, waiting — or the slow wasting that will come to pass. The shrinking and the degeneration — the brain — a desiccated shell left behind in the desert of a life lived too fast and hard.

He had risen just that morning to load up the truck in the backfield, some five miles through the woods, and then back to park at the side of the Snead intersection, with its gas station, Mexican restaurant, and church, where the house sits back far enough away from the road my father had to wait for the bus at the end of the driveway. My grandfather has been outside for five hours already, humidity making the air stick to his throat on the way down, in 94-degree heat. He is soaked in sweat, covered in a long-sleeve T-shirt and jeans to keep the sun off his skin. It leaves his neck exposed, long since become one of the rednecks of old, the ones that worked a field instead of a trailer park. My grandmother watches him out the window, unwilling to join him and unwilling to bring him a cup of water. She's the type that doesn't mean it vindictively, although she has the capacity for it — and in their last years of marriage, it becomes something twisted enough to be similar. Just sometimes things don't work out, and people stop being enough.

My grandfather is alone at the intersection, with the random passerby stopping to buy a watermelon or two or a bushel of corn — the soybeans have already been sold to the co-op in the next town, the field left barren until they can get the autumnal collard greens in the ground. My father has just left for college two weeks ago, only three hours away, but after 18 years, it might as well be across the country. My grandfather has never been alone like this. Since the time my father was old enough to walk, old enough to turn the unpowered steering tractor wheel, they'd been everywhere together. My father had made the first three, lonely years of my grandfather's marriage worth it. My grandmother has been unwilling to leave the house for many years already, unwilling to cook or get a job, unwilling to be much of a person at all. It isn't her fault; she was passed down a weak, entitled spine from her mother — stubborn as she was incapable of

being a functioning woman. Genes are a funny thing, and when the time comes, she does her best in the womb to pass the same on to my father.

The only difference between them is ambition. As intrinsic to a person as the ridges and valleys to their face.

My father talks about this sometimes, this scene and the setup, what makes him his parents' child, and what doesn't. What he still doesn't know, what no one will ever know, now that the disease has progressed and my grandfather doesn't remember who anyone is and has no hatred for anyone in his heart — tabula rasa. He lives his own life now, wherever he is, because even if he remembers very little, he knows enough about hospitals. My father talks about this, in passing, with higher frequency every year. About the misplaced moments he observed in his own father as he entered high school, the vacancy, the number of pet names in place of forgotten real names. He talks about the future like a looming curtain, waiting for a gust of wind to snatch it away and expose what was always festering behind. He talks about it with something like disgust, hardly concealing his fear of his own aging hands and synapses. He talks about going to the doctor for tests and taking vitamins with jellyfish and how it gets harder to concentrate at work. He and my mother don't hide their age from each other, but this fear of his own mind turning against him, forgetting his own daughter and wife, is something they still can't properly touch.

My father talks most about his mother now, because she still calls once a week, talks about what he wanted for her, and the guilt he has for leaving at the exact wrong moment, even though he knows everything that happened was necessary. He had to leave for college, had to get out of the house, had to stop working for his father before he was stuck, and had to make the most of his mind and while he still had it.

My grandfather was passed down a genetic disease and a spine of steel from his mother and wandering eyes. His father spent most of his life cheating on my great-grandmother who refused to divorce him and refused to let him live in her house if he was going to cheat. There's a picture of Edison, his father, above my grandfather's kitchen table in the RV he lived in when I last saw him. Edison is handsome with thick white hair even into his old age, but his face is not kind. Facial expressions and mannerisms are always the first things to be passed down. Repetition and learning. My grandfather keeps this image because he didn't know his father much when he was growing up, Edison came and went — once or twice with money for my great-grandmother, although more often to beg her for some of her own — sometimes my grandfather and great-aunt wouldn't see him for years, sometimes for weeks. The time they did spend together was enough.

Maybe it was simply the abandonment. Maybe it wasn't anything in his nature that made him act in any particular way, but all nurture, learned behavior from the only steady parent in his life. His mother's stubbornness and pride, her unbending spine and darting eyes, always looking for a way out, and always refusing solutions she was smart enough to see. It is not courage that makes her stay or lack of courage that keeps her, and it certainly has nothing to do with hope. Abandonment is a finicky thing, some people can brush it off and some can't, can find someone or something new to love or they get stuck. My great-grandmother did not still love Edison, but she refused to get remarried, refused to move out of their once shared house, refused to abandon her children, and when they left her instead, she finished her life alone. My great-grandmother was stuck with all the ability to see every way out. And cursed with the inability to do anything about it. And when her children are abandoned by their father, this learned behavior is passed down.

So when the woman stops on the side of the road, hair blonde and short, makeup understated except for her pink lipstick, and offers to go with my grandfather everywhere, like his son used to, there isn't much other choice he sees. He must abandon first before another person leaves him. Loneliness has bent him into another shape. He gives her the watermelon, free of charge, and glances back at the house, old and creaky, with the aging, creaky woman inside. The curtain has fallen back in place.

He thinks about the woman inside that he loved, once. Imagines her when they just met, young and vibrant, opportunity spread out before them like the rolling hills of his inherited farmland. Imagines how she helped him grow it and cultivate it and when it became time for her to stay inside to grow their family instead. Genetics are finicky but sometimes it isn't passed down sometimes genes are designed to fail from the beginning, anaphase pulled incorrectly apart in creation, one mistake in 3 million, a building set aflame. The first baby's body remains standing for 8 days before the structure gives way, the fire damage weakening cells and spreading. He thinks about that first baby and how it left behind a burnt out shell of a building, twisted the woman he loved into something unrecognizable, something he didn't marry, something he promised to care for until death, but something he can't find himself loving anymore. He thinks of the second child, and how he is finally gone, the inevitable coming to pass.

He thinks about how he is mourning, and she seems unchanged this time, role reversal. It is his turn to lose a child. He thinks about what she would do if she lost another person, and he thinks about how he would survive if he had to go back inside that house.

There is really only one choice.

My grandfather hops in the woman's car.

Thoughts on Healthcare

By Izzy Cox

In June 1987 a woman fell from her three-story balcony. It is important to note that this woman lived in New York City, and that when she fell, about thirty people were walking on the sidewalk below her. Something important to note about humankind in general: seven 911 calls were made, no less than five seconds apart, but no one approached her body, sprawled out like it was, and no one saw her falling until she'd already hit the ground.

The ambulance took her to Lenox Hill Hospital where she was left in the overfilled emergency room, slumped sideways in a chair in the corner, her left leg bent at a 90-degree angle from the shin and the hair at the back of her head sticky with blood. She had no identification, which meant she had no money or insurance on her. She would not gain consciousness for 18 days.

The ER nurses tried their best not to get the woman in a bed, because as soon as they did, they'd be stuck with her, or they'd have to do the paperwork for a transfer (most likely to the closest sanatorium). Nurses are, by definition, overworked and underpaid, which leads to carelessness and work avoidance. There are a lot of corners they learn how to cut. And the doctors are no better.

Eventually, at 3:27 am, a bed opened up and the woman was carted up 6 floors by an attendant and left in a wheelchair next to it until a nurse could hook her up to an IV or send for an X-ray of her leg. The X-Ray discovered something rather strange. The woman definitely had a clean break through the tibia and a skull fracture. But it also picked up on trace swelling all throughout her body, which was not uncommon for the blunt force trauma of the fall — but the really odd thing was how it seemed centered on the brain, not the skull injury at all. You see, at this time, patients were X-rayed over the whole body with no lead protection vests. The doctor ordered an MRI and sent her back to her room with a nurse who finally inserted an IV line and cleaned and sutured the wound on the back of her head. She started up an EEG machine to measure brain waves, something typical for coma patients so they could tell when to pull the plug. She was definitely active, not yet a vegetable, but the brain waves were unlike anything the nurse had ever seen before. Somewhere in delta sleep, deep and dreamless, but with scary spikes of awareness into Gamma. She wasn't awake, but her brain was reacting as if it were doing a puzzle.

The MRI was performed and when the doctor on call saw the results, he instantly sent for a neurologist. You see, the average adult brain weighs about 3 pounds. On average a female brain weighs 7% less than a male one. An Alzheimer's brain weighs around 2.6 pounds. The MRI showed extensive damage to the cerebellum — in fact, it was completely gone, just a shriveled leftover husk. This explained the fall from the balcony, at least, because without her cerebellum, the woman would have had no control over balance or coordination. It would be a miracle if she could move at all after she woke up. And without the cerebellum, her brain weighed about 1.5 pounds.

But even more important than this discovery, was the presence of *tunnels* in the cerebellum tissue. Like bites had been taken out of whatever was left. The neurologist ordered a brain biopsy.

The doctor's name was Samuel Johnson, and he remembered the pictures his professors showed the class in medical school. They were from the '50s, long before MRI machines so they

were actual dissected brains, when the first prion disease was discovered in New Guinea. The cannibalism disease.

Dr. Johnson had discovered the first case of Kuru in the United States.

My mother doesn't like to talk about this anymore. Not the job, not the hospital, not the weekend, and certainly not the couple. In fact, I've never heard the story from her, only from my father, whispered in the evening after my mother had already gone to bed, exhausted from her day. We often stay up watching late night news to recap the day, and my father will try to explain the woman that gave birth to me. My father — he's easy to understand, always an open, if grumpy, book. But my mother is something different, something alien to me, even after 17 years. So he tells me stories, shares things she would tell her husband but never her child. It might be because she's ashamed of the weakness this story exposes, or because the grief is still too encompassing to put into words.

My mother has been a nurse for nearly 30 years now, almost exclusively in the operating room (OR). She is a certified operating room nurse (CNOR) with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) from the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH). And after college, she immediately went to work at Huntsville Hospital in the second biggest OR in the state. She saw more people cut open on a table than I've ever met.

The incident happened in her 6th year there. I was not born yet so my mother often worked the 12-hour weekend shifts because the nurses were paid better overtime (when it happened) than they would be during the regular week and she did just about everything to avoid working the night shift. She and my father spent their weeks in Auburn where he was running the beef testing unit, running experiments on cows for graduate students so they could get their PhD, and their weekends in Huntsville where she would work in one of the biggest hospitals in the state. All the work paid off when — 2 months before this — she had been promoted to the weekend Nurse Head of Surgery (NHS).

On Friday, March 18, 2002, at 8:06 in the morning Jane and David Smith were hit by an 18-wheeler in morning traffic on 231. They were in his blind spot. By the time the ambulance arrived, picked through the wreckage for the bodies, and drove through the traffic to the hospital, Jane was nearly dead. When they came into the emergency room (ER) and were immediately re-routed to the OR three stories above, my mother had been at work for four hours. They pulled her out of a routine angioplasty — blood still on her scrubs — and asked her to make the most difficult decision of her career.

There was only one operating room open. One doctor on call. Jane had been without a pulse for 18 minutes and 23 seconds, the EMTs had sewn her up as best as possible and started CPR. The truth was Jane was hemorrhaging, her chest cavity filling with blood as her heart failed, and she had been dead for nearing 20 minutes. The truth was — Jane was dead on arrival. But the most important thing was that David — he wasn't. David had internal bleeding from a piece of shrapnel, currently sticking out of his abdomen, which had punctured his bowel.

His body was septic and going into shock. But he was conscious.

He had been driven in the ambulance behind his wife, but they had ridden up in the elevator together, the EMT performing CPR on his wife the whole way up. He was clear enough to realize what was happening, and in love enough to deny it. He saw my mother standing there in her bloodstained scrubs, her sickle and hood, and immediately recognized her for what she

was. An angel of death, his sentencer and salvation. Recognized the expression on her face when she saw his wife on the gurney beside his own.

My mother is a quick-moving, quick-talking woman. React first, ask questions later. Or never at all. Stop the bleeding, stop the crying, fix. I come from a long line of problem-solving people, which is great until you hit the teenage years and all you want to do is lie down and pitch a fit. At a certain point, problem-solving slips the grasp of helpfulness and free falls into condescension. And at a certain point, I started to recognize the rush of air in my ears for what it was.

But some things even the most sure-footed of us can not survive. When David opened his mouth, teeth varnished with his own rising blood-tide, and begged my mother to save Jane's life, begged her to kill them both, begged her to put the dead woman in the only room and condemn him to death — my mother stumbled for the first time in her life. She's been on the way to the ground ever since.

The next weekend, a father and daughter came in from the ER, trauma one. Children are always finicky and the doctor had little experience, but my mother insisted. They both died, open on the table. And when the mother got there — well, if there are no words for *widower* then there are certainly no words for *she didn't make it*.

My mother went home. The apartment ten minutes down 231, and waited for my father to get back from the grocery store. Waited until they could go back to Auburn and forget the career she tried to make for herself. She sat in the dark and stared at nothing much. And when the door opened, she found that all of her quickest words had abandoned her together. He started cooking and years went by.

The biopsy came back negative. Negative for Kuru, negative for Creutzfeldt-Jakob, negative for any prion disease known of. But the degenerative pattern ... it could be nothing else. They cut open her head again.

The woman, it turned out, had a husband, who had been frantically searching for her through the police department. Her name was Marie, and for the last few months, she had been often and easily confused. When they had gone to their family physician, he had diagnosed her with early-onset dementia and sent her home with some pills made of jellyfish enzymes that were proven to slow the steady decline in mental function. But after six months, it was clear there would be no slowing this.

The husband had not been home when his wife fell from their apartment balcony, but he had heard about it from neighbors. He had been searching hospitals for unnamed patients, sanatoriums for suicide risks, alleyways in case the hospital had released her and she'd been too confused to find her way home. New York was a large and scary place. There was nothing for over two weeks.

An hour after the second biopsy, Marie's brain waves changed from delta sleep to nearly awake alpha waves and the spikes calmed. She could wake up any minute. It would take her another day, another day for her husband to finally find her and be there when she woke up, but she would wake.

She didn't know anyone. Didn't know her husband or her name and she was unable to balance, so she was unable to walk. She could hardly talk, the words escaping through the holes

in her brain tissue. Liquid started seeping from her nose and ears and eyes, yellow-ish. Her cerebrospinal fluid was leaking. Her brain was melting.

Dr. Johnson couldn't find the cause. The prions present in her blood should have been attacking the whole brain, not this steady destruction of the meninges. There was no reason she should still be alive or able to function at all anymore. She was negative for any known illness, and yet, her brain was dying. And yet *she wasn't* dying.

About a month after Marie had been admitted to the hospital, she slipped into another coma. She would wake for varying amounts of time throughout the rest of her life, sometimes weeks and sometimes minutes. There was no discernible pattern, and her brain waves continued to spike and lull. When she finally died, her ex-husband had her body donated. When they measured her brain, it weighed 0.8 pounds.

Seven years later, when my mother was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy of the face, the doctor discovered it through the EEG. My mother had the exact brain wave activity when sleeping as a woman with a prion disease 1000 miles away in a semi-permanent coma. The Bell's Palsy infection lasted three months and then was gone. Just like that, my mother was cured.

She lived.

The Crucible: How Fear Perpetuates Suffering in a Community

By Emma Rose

“A fire, a fire is burning! I hear the boot of Lucifer, I see his filthy face! And it is my face, and it is yours, Danforth! For them that quail to bring men out of ignorance, as I have quailed, and as you quail now when you know in all your black hearts that this be fraud -- God damns our kind especially, and we will burn, we will burn together!” John Proctor

History continually demonstrates the calamity unchecked fear bred by superstition and perpetuated by authority brings a society. Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, inspired by the striking parallels he noticed in the McCarthyism of his day and the Salem witch trials, tells of near-poetic tragedy and injustice. The play demonstrates how unchecked fear allows the ruthless to exploit the fear-riddled system by playing into its narrative, debases people’s sense of comradery and trust by polarizing them, and incentivizes authorities to abandon principle for security.

In the bizarre scene that incites Salem’s hanging-spree, as Reverend Hale solicits Tituba for a confession, Abigail sees her chance to cover her tracks, make a power-grab, get revenge on her enemies and obtain the man she desires. “You have confessed yourself to witchcraft, and that speaks a wish to come to Heaven’s side. And we will bless you, Tituba...” Hale says, lifting her up as “God’s instrument put in our hands to discover the Devil’s agents...chosen to help us cleanse our village” (43-44). Abigail promptly takes him up on that offer -- “I want to open myself...I want the light of God...the sweet love of Jesus!” (45). To be the hand of God, for the Salemites, is to be revered, near unquestionable. Instead of dismissing the talk of witchery, she appropriates it; Abigail plays into the hysteria-fueled narrative and thereby manipulates even the very face and hand of Salem law: Judge Danforth. Abigail’s manipulation of her fellow Salemites’ suspicion is exemplary of Miller’s sentiments concerning the vulnerability of a fear-riddled society to those ambitious members cunning enough to use that fear to their advantage. As the hunt closes in on Proctor and Mary Warren, Mary’s fear of punishment manifests in the decisive betrayal that constitutes *The Crucible*’s climax. In this moment, Proctor’s strength of integrity, as he dons the thorny crown of condemnation and bears the weight of the town’s guilt and paranoia -- a burden he neither asked for nor deserved -- is tested. Under the same duress, Mary, in her weakness of character, takes the path of least resistance, incriminating Proctor, his family, and many good people with him. Reverend Parris makes the more appealing option abundantly clear: “Cast the Devil out! Look him in the face! Trample him! We’ll save you, Mary, only stand fast against him...” (109). Mary succumbs, joins the deluded flock for its safety, “I’ll not hang with you!” she tells Proctor. “I love God, I love God...” (110). The juxtaposition of the two responses illustrates the polarization perpetuated by a fear-frenzied population. This polarization leads its victims to an impossible choice -- a scapegoat’s death or a coward’s existence. Judge Danforth sees himself as presiding not over a series of court cases, but over the legal battlefield between good and evil, God and Satan; martyred innocents, their

orphans and widows, collateral in his noble crusade. Danforth proclaims, "A person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there is no road in between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time -- we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world. Now, by God's grace, the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it" (87). His statement speaks to this black-and-white mindset that trickles down and saturates Salem. All this to say: *The Crucible* portrays polarization as a mass perceptual weapon whereby, in retaliation to a pseudo-enemy, corrupt officials can sanction acts of mass purgation under the guise of holy conquest.

After twelve are hanged and more (of good-repute) stand accused, the facade crumbles. Abigail has robbed her uncle and fled town -- "...I think they be aboard a ship...tonight I discover my--my strongbox is broke into" (117) and Parris has come under public suspicion. "Tonight," he divulges, "when I open my door to leave my house -- a dagger clattered to the ground" (119). Why does Danforth refuse to even postpone the morning's hangings upon receiving such damning evidence against Abigail's testimony, the basis of the entire witch hunt? But his resolution is this: "I will not receive a single plea for pardon or postponement. Them that will not confess will hang... Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part; reprieve or pardon must cast doubt upon the guilt of them that died till now..." (119). His primary concern is the deflection of guilt, motivated by his fear of losing his unblemished repute and influential position. If integrity and alleviating human suffering were his foremost motivations, he would have called it off immediately at any personal cost. Instead, he and Parris concoct a solution: "Now that Mr. Hale's returned, there is hope, I think -- for if he bring even one of those to God, that confession surely damns the others in the public eye, and none may doubt more that they are all linked to Hell" (118). Danforth's fear that the town will place blame for the death and imprisonment of dozens of innocent Salemites on his shoulders, pushing him to sacrifice the lives of many good people.

Each of these occurrences speaks to Miller's overarching theme in *The Crucible* of how fear, despite its functionality as an upholder of order and stifler of crime, eventually consumes a society, like an organism which, in liaison with humanity, can produce copious amounts of suffering, especially in repressed societies like Salem. The resulting pitfalls are exemplified in Abigail's rise to power, Mary's betrayal, and Danforth's complicitness. Overgrown fear devoured

Salem by exploiting its vague yet abiding superstition, putting weapons of polarization in its people's hands, propping up the Machiavellian, manipulating the simple, and defaming the virtuous.

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Gone but NEVER forgotten

By Samuel Mansi

So at first, I didn't plan to write something that might be a little bit of a tear jerker, yet here I am. Flash, our dog, will be turning 12 this February. Well, that's what I would like to say. The thing is, Flash *was* our dog. As much as we would love to spend his birthday with him this year, fate had other plans. We had to put Flash to sleep near the end of summer last year, and even now there's a part of us that I don't think we'll ever get back. The funny thing is, I couldn't stand that mutt when we first got him. But to explain why, I have to share a few stories. Yeah... This is going to be a long one...

I have Autism Spectrum Disorder. The 'spectrum' is a way of measuring the impact one's autism has on their way of functioning in life. I'm considered "high functioning." What that essentially means is that, compared to those that are 'normal,' I have a harder time reading, hearing, responding to, and understanding social cues. Anyways...

One day while I was in therapy, my mother was waiting for me in the lobby when she overheard something about a service dog program/company called "Paws With a Cause". Apparently they were trying a pilot program for Autism Service Dogs, so she signed up and tried to get us accepted.

Boy, we got lucky. Since it was a pilot program, they were only accepting a few families, and we just happened to be one of the 10 they selected!!

One long car trip to Michigan and a few training/test runs later, we got paired up with a Golden Retriever named Nugget. She was amazing, except for one tiny problem. She was allergic to the trees. She was allergic to the grass. She was allergic to your farts. She was allergic to basically *everything* in Georgia. We only had her for a few weeks (it hadn't even gotten to my birthday yet), and we quickly grew attached, but we had to send her back so she could hopefully be given to a family that could give her a home where she could live out a long, healthy life. I don't exactly remember how long the wait was, possibly a few days, but some time later, "Paws" had sent us a new dog.

Nugget was calm, cool, dainty, and well-behaved. But this new dog? Out comes barreling this doofy, white blur that made you pet him if your hand was close enough. That was how we got Flash, and you can kind of see why I didn't like him at first!

He was the complete opposite of Nugget. His breath was smelly, he was full of energy, his tail was like a baseball bat when he entered a room, he would eat whatever wasn't bolted to the ground (RIP, Red Power Ranger. To be fair, Flash got better about that though as time went on), AND I *STILL* DON'T FORGIVE HIM FOR SNATCHING THAT CHOCOLATE COVERED BANANA OUT OF MY HAND WHEN WE WERE DOWN AT MYRTLE BEACH!!!!!!!

Still... I guess he had some redeeming qualities. He was one of those dogs that, no matter how hard you tried, it was just impossible to not love him. He hardly barked (he did whine a lot, though), he would NEVER hurt someone on purpose, and he would always want to be in the room with someone.

Suffice it to say, he grew on all of us over time. While he was technically 'my' dog, it's more accurate to say he was our dog, he was a part of the family. And I can't help but notice that I took him for granted.

In recent years, though, his hips and legs started to give him trouble. It reached the tipping point this summer, and we had to put him to sleep. It hurt him to just try and move, and at that point, the only thing the medicine would do was just pain management. We couldn't bear to see him like that, and we knew that it hurt him more to not be himself. I know there were clues of what was going on before everything happened, but it still feels like everything changed in a matter of days...

One of my favorite memories of Flash was when I had come home from a 2 day overnight Summer Camp. Something must have been in those cabins, because what I thought was just morning sinuses ended up being something that caused me to hurt just when breathing! If I'm being honest, that was probably the worst I ever felt in my entire life. I went to the living room to try and sleep on the couch (which, if you know me, is something I hardly ever do, since usually the only reason I EVER sit on the couch is either to watch TV or play a video game), and in that little area where the rug made a corner with the couch, Flash sat right there next to me. I think he knew I was feeling awful.

During the weeks leading up to the date of the vet coming (we were lucky enough to be able to have him put to sleep at home), I just knew I had to return the favor — No... It wasn't a favor, now that I think about it. He was there for me when I felt my worst, and I knew I would be there for him. So, on one of the last nights we had with him, I slept there in the living room with him. I slept on the same couch, in the same area I was when I had felt sick. Even if I couldn't pet him in my sleep, it felt better knowing that I was in the room with him.

Morning came, and we had only a little time left with him. You better believe we pampered him like crazy. We moved him to the porch (carried him in a sort of makeshift hammock) and fed him popsicles and loved on him like crazy. And yes... We even gave him a chocolate covered banana, which was poetic in a sense. One of my first (and worst) memories of him involved a chocolate banana, but now what would be one of my last (and now possibly one of my favorite) memories would allow things to end how they began.

It was hard... saying goodbye. We grew up together, and by we, I don't just mean Flash and me. I mean 'we' as in my family. I think it hit dad harder than he thought it would. I think it hit all of us harder than we thought it would.

It's funny. I never really thought about him that much when he was alive, because I saw him as just another part of the day. I didn't realize what I had, until he was gone.

I miss my buddy, and though I guess I could say I've 'gotten used' to him not being around, it still feels weird.

I miss his tip-tapping through the hall.

I miss the 'thunk-thunk-thunk-ing' of his tail (it knocked over a lot of stuff!).

I miss him coming into my room at night, waiting for my parents to open the door to their room.

We all miss him.

I don't know who exactly said the quote, but I think it said, "For us, a dog is only part of our life. But for them, *you are their entire life.*" Recently, we bought some bracelets and necklaces to remember him, and in them are infinity signs. When we were getting them, my mother asked me, "why an infinity symbol?" Well, the answer's simple: "Because he will now, and forever will be, my dog."

While I don't doubt some new dog may come into my life at some point, there is one thing that I know for a fact. I was spoiled beyond belief, and though they may be my dog, there is only one dog, only one Yellow Labrador, now and forever, that will be *my* dog.

I still miss you, ya' smelly mutt. You were a good boi...

Emily

By Dylan Black

EXT. INTERSECTION - MORNING OF THE ACCIDENT

Open on a pedestrian crossing signal. The signal is the red hand. After a few moments, the signal will change to the walker.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

There is a bell above the door. As the door opens, the bell rings. A man walks out of frame through the door. The man walks up to the coffee shop counter. Only his hands are visible as he sets them on the counter. Behind the counter is the barista. The barista turns to the man, but it is inaudible. We watch in silence as the barista takes the man's order, then turns to make it.

EXT. INTERSECTION - MORNING

A crosswalk at the intersection. The pedestrian crossing signal is out of focus on the other side of the crosswalk. The man walks into frame in focus from the right. This is TRISTAN ALLEN. Only his shoulders down are visible. He is holding the coffee cup in his left hand and a binder with papers sticking out in his right. He is dressed for fall, wearing a sweater and a pair of slacks, while rocking some busted up converse. The focus shifts to the pedestrian crossing signal across the street. It switches from the red hand to the walker. Tristan begins to walk toward the other side of the road. As he walks, the focus shifts back to him. A man is looking at his phone. He is driving towards the crosswalk, which is through the windshield out of focus. The focus then shifts through the windshield to Tristan walking across the crosswalk. He turns to see the car speeding towards him. He freezes, and drops his coffee. We cut away before we see the car hit him.

DR. WEST (V.O.) What's on your mind?

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - EVENING

THIS TAKES PLACE AFTER THE ACCIDENT

Tristan is sitting in a therapist's office. The office is a cramped space with very uniform decoration. Tristan sits on an uncomfortable-looking couch on the left side of the room. To his right an end table with a lamp. Across from Tristan is DR. WEST. He is sitting in a luxurious armchair and is looking much more comfortable. He is matching the therapist stereotype, with his notebook and glasses. To his right is an identical end table and lamp, and a cup of coffee. A cup of coffee identical to the one Tristan ordered months before. On the back wall is a bookshelf holding several books and distinguished-looking awards. Tristan is sitting very uncomfortably, studying his folded hands in his lap. He continues to stay silent.

DR. WEST (O.S.)

Are you thinking about the accident? Tristan continues to stay silent.

DR. WEST

(sighs)

We're not gonna get anywhere if you don't speak to me Tristan.

(fading out) Tristan continues to stare off, not speaking.

EXT. INTERSECTION - MORNING

Tristan's coffee cup is laying on the ground. It is laying sideways with coffee spilling out. We begin to zoom out to reveal more of the intersection. Papers from the binder are blowing all over the street. As we continue to zoom out, Tristan's body comes into frame. He is laying unconscious in the street. It is clear he has been in a very serious accident, with clear broken bones and blood on the street. As we continue to zoom, we see two police cars and an ambulance pull into the intersection. Paramedics quickly run out of the ambulance and rush towards Tristan.

INT. AMBULANCE - MORNING

Tristan is laying unconscious in the back of the ambulance.

The paramedic is setting up the medical equipment and tending to Tristan.

His eyes are moving as if he was dreaming. All of a sudden, HIS EYES SNAP OPEN.

He grabs the paramedic in his confusion. The paramedic panics and tries to get away from him, but Tristan won't budge.

TRISTAN

(panicked) Where is she? Where is Emily?

INT. HOSPITAL - HALLWAY - DAY

Looking through the door window, we see Tristan laying in a hospital bed. He is unconscious with several bandages and casts. There is an IV hooked up to him.

INT. HOSPITAL - ROOM - DAY

Looking at the door from Tristan's bed, we see it open. A nurse walks in, and holds the door open for Dr. West, who enters slowly after her, holding flowers in his hand. He slowly walks into the room, taking in everything around him. As he enters the room completely, the nurse begins to exit.

DR. WEST

(to nurse) Thank you.

The nurse exits the room. Dr. West slowly walks toward Tristan's bed.

He passes a table for gifts. The only thing on the table is a "GET BETTER SOON" card that has been knocked over. Dr. Owen looks at the card for a moment, then lays the flowers down on the table. He slowly walks toward a chair next to Tristan's bed, then sits down. He pulls a small notebook and a pen from his pocket. He opens the notebook, and examines it for a long time.

After he gathers his thoughts, he clicks his pen.

INT. OFFICE - TRISTAN'S DESK - DAY

THIS TAKES PLACE BEFORE THE ACCIDENT

As the pen clicks, we cut to a shot of Tristan at work. He is at his desk between two dividers. One thing notable about his work space is that there is nothing notable. It's empty. He has no pictures, no awards, just an empty desk with a laptop, his coffee, his binder, and a few work essentials. He leans back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. In the desk next to his, someone is continuously clicking a pen.

He sighs, then checks his phone. No new notifications. He sighs again, then tosses his phone back on his desk. The clicking persists. He scoots up to his laptop, and checks his email. No new messages. He sighs once again, then rolls back in his chair. The clicking continues.

Getting annoyed, he looks over the divider to the desk next to him. It is a man looking at his computer. His work space is much different from Tristan's. It is full of pictures of family and friends, as well as awards and quirky decorations all around. As the man stares at his computer, he continues to click his pen. Tristan stares at him annoyed for a few moments, debating whether or not he should say something. He decides not to confront the man and sits back at his desk defeated.

EXT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT- EVENING

A car pulls up in front of Tristan's apartment. Dr. West has drove Tristan back home after his time in the hospital.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT- FRONT DOOR - EVENING

The front door opens, and Tristan walks through. He is still banged up, armed with a sling and crutches, but it is clear he has recovered for the most part. He makes his way through the door and into the house. Dr. West follows behind him carrying bags of food and supplies. He closes the door behind him.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT- KITCHEN - EVENING

Tristan makes his way into the kitchen, then collapses into a chair at the table. Dr. West sets the bags down, then takes a seat across from Tristan. Tristan is staring at the table, studying the design. Dr. West sits across from him silent, thinking of what to say. After a long moment of silence, he finally speaks.

DR. WEST

Who is Emily?

Tristan looks up at him.

TRISTAN

What?

DR. WEST

In the ambulance, you yelled for a woman named Emily. Who is she?

Tristan looks back down, then shrugs.

TRISTAN

It's complicated.

DR. WEST

How so? Is she an ex-girlfriend, a friend?

TRISTAN

No, nothing like that.

DR. WEST

Then who is she?

Tristan groans, then puts his head in his hands.

DR. WEST

Tristan, what really happened that day?

Tristan looks up at him, clearly upset.

TRISTAN

You wouldn't understand.

DR. WEST

Tristan, it's my job to understand.

TRISTAN

Then I can't explain it.

DR. WEST

Tristan. I can't help you if you don't talk about it.

TRISTAN

(becoming angry) Well maybe I don't want your help!

DR. WEST

Tristan, please stay calm. You've been through a very traumatic incident.

In his anger, Tristan abruptly stands from his chair. He winces from the pain, then yells at Dr.

West.

TRISTAN

Get out!

Dr. West then stands up to try and reason with him.

DR. WEST

Tristan, just wait--

TRISTAN

No! Get out right now!

DR. WEST

Tristan...

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - EVENING

Back to Tristan and Dr. West in the therapist office. You can hear Tristan's voice from the flashback fading out. Tristan is still staring at his hands, not speaking.

TRISTAN (V.O.)

(fading) Get out of my house!

Dr. West is looking at Tristan, just as concerned as he was that day months ago in Tristan's house. The coffee cup sits next to him.

DR. WEST

You clearly want to work through it. Why else would you come here?

Tristan looks up at Dr. West, but remains silent. Noticing he's gotten his attention, Dr. West continues.

DR. WEST (CONT.)

You haven't spoke a word to me since you got here. It's been months. I've tried to get you to let me help you since that day you got home from the hospital. No matter how much persisted, you've always refused. So when I received your call, I thought, why now? Why, after all this time, would he want to talk about it now? Then I realized. I've been looking at your treatment all wrong. I've spent so long coming to you that I never even considered you coming to me. And yet here you are. So I think I know what this means. It means you want help. You've always needed it, but know you actually want it. And I think you know that too. So I don't have to do anything. I just have to wait for you. So that is what I will do.

Tristan is taken aback by this. He continues to sit silent for a long while, thinking about everything Dr. West said. After he gathers his thoughts, he looks up at Dr. West, and finally speaks.

TRISTAN

I was thinking about the accident.

INT. AMBULANCE - MORNING

Back in the ambulance, the chaos continues. Tristan is grabbing the paramedic by the shirt, screaming at him, demanding to know where Emily is.

TRISTAN

Where is she?! Where is she?!

In his panic, the paramedic begins reaching around for anything he can use to escape Tristan's grip. As he searches, he tries to reason with Tristan.

PARAMEDIC

Wh-who is Emily?

TRISTAN

The woman, from, uh, from...

A look of worry and confusion washes over Tristan's face as he slowly starts to realize where he is and what's happening. As he takes it all in, he loosens his grip on the paramedic. Noticing the sudden change in behavior, the paramedic slowly starts to regain his balance and calm down.

Tristan is staring off, thinking. Suddenly, he looks up at the paramedic.

TRISTAN

Was none of it real?

Taken aback by this statement, the paramedic remains silent.

At this point Tristan has released him and is sitting dazed on the gurney. Noting the lack of response, Tristan continues.

TRISTAN

The pats on the back. The football games. The car rides. The sunsets. Emily. None of it was real. Tristan is staring off, clearly hurt and confused. He looks as if his whole world has just come crashing down, because it kind of has.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - EVENING

Cut to same shot of Tristan's face, but in his apartment.

This is after he kicked Dr. West out of his apartment.

He collapses back into his chair at the kitchen table and sighs. He picks up his cell phone, notices the lack of notifications, and tosses it back on the table.

He groans, then struggles his way back out of the chair. He grabs his crutches, then walks off to the right.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM DOOR - EVENING

You can hear the shower running on the other side of the bathroom door. Elton John can be heard over the sound of the water.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Tristan is sitting on his bed in his underwear, taking the plastic wraps off his casts after his shower. You can see several gashes and bandages along his back from the accident. His room is very lackluster, with just a single bed with a nightstand. The walls are empty, lacking any kind of picture or art.

After he takes off the plastic, he sighs, then grabs his phone from his nightstand. He looks down and once again notices the lack of notifications. He then groans, drops his phone on the bed, and puts his head in his hands.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Tristan walks into the living room and collapses on the recliner, setting his phone on the table next to him. He grabs the TV remote, and switches on the TV. He begins surfing through channels, trying to find something to watch. As he does, he quickly glances at his phone several times.

You can tell he's resisting the urge to check it. After several painful moments of this, he finally gives in. He sets the remote, and slowly reaches for his phone. As he grabs it, he slowly flips it over, as if he's afraid to look. He finally thinks "screw it" and flips it all the way over. No new notifications. Tristan sits silent for a long time, staring at his phone. He finally lets a long sigh.

He then yells and raises his phone up as if he's going to throw it. However, we cut before he does.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tristan is sitting at his spot at the kitchen table. He looks extremely rough. Sporting a robe and messy hair, he sits eating his cereal. You can tell at his point he's stopped caring for himself. There are beer bottles and newspapers scattered across the table. His phone is sitting next to him, screen cracked. All of a sudden, it rings. Tristan freezes. Staring at it, he drops his spoon in his bowl. Cautiously, he reaches for the phone. He flips it over to look at the screen, then stares at it.

UNKNOWN CALLER.

He debates answering it or not. After much hesitation, he answers the call.

INT. THERAPIST
OFFICE - EVENING

We are back in the therapist office with Tristan and Dr. West. Tristan looks conflicted, but Dr. West remains calm.

DR. WEST
So was it real?
Tristan doesn't look up.

TRISTAN
I still don't know.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MORNING

it's Saturday morning. Tristan is laying in bed. His room is a mess. The sheets are thrown everywhere and his bed is filled with various McDonalds wrappers and beer bottles. Knock.

Knock. Knock.

Tristan groans. He turns over in bed.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Tristan groans, then sits up. He looks towards his bedroom door for a moment, clearly pissed. He picks up the digital clock on his sidetable and looks at it. 8:03 A.M.

He lets out an obnoxiously loud groan, and drops the clock on the table.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - FRONT DOOR - MORNING

Knock. Knock. Knock.

TRISTAN
(yelling) I'm coming!

Sporting a robe, Tristan aggressively yanks open the front door. Dr. West is standing on the other side. He gives Tristan a big, friendly smile.

DR. WEST
Good morning, Tristan!

Tristan slams the door in his face. Clearly annoyed, he turns around and starts to walk the other way. Knock. Knock. Knock.

Tristan's head falls back, and he lets out yet another groan. Still turned away from the door, he yells to Dr. West.

TRISTAN
Go away!

DR. WEST (O.S.)
I thought you wanted to see me. You said so yourself.

TRISTAN
(under his breath)
What the--
(yelling) No I didn't!

DR. WEST (O.S.)
Tristan, you called me last night.
Tristan turns around. He is shocked. He has no recollection and said phone call. He ponders on DR. West's words for a moment, then walks back towards the door. He opens the door back up, and Dr. West is once again on the other side with that smile.

DR. WEST
Good to see you, Tristan.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - MORNING

Tristan is frantically clearing off the kitchen table, throwing it all in a trash bag. Dr. West is sitting in his same spot, watching Tristan. When Tristan has cleared off a majority of the table, he sits down across from Dr. West. They both sit in silence for a long time. Tristan not wanting to start the conversation, and Dr. West waiting for Tristan to start the conversation. Finally, Tristan caves.

TRISTAN
I don't remember calling you.
Dr. West taps a left beer bottle laying on the table.

DR. WEST
I'm aware. But you did.
Tristan sighs and runs his hands through his hair. He studies the kitchen table. Without looking up, he speaks to Dr. West.

TRISTAN
What did I say?

DR. WEST
Nothing specific.
Worry crosses Tristan's face. He looks as if he's about to cry.

TRISTAN
(voice breaking) What did I say?
Dr. West takes his time to respond. He sits looking at Tristan. Tristan sits staring at his hands, tears in his eyes. Finally, Dr. West speaks.

DR. WEST

You said you got a phone call.

Tristan sighs. He doesn't respond. He just continues to stare down.

DR. WEST

Tristan, I suggest you come and visit my office.

Tristan cuts him off.

TRISTAN

So it was real?

DR. WEST

Was what real?

Tristan looks up.

TRISTAN

The phone call.

Dr. West looks confused.

DR. WEST

Why would it not be real?

Tristan realizes his mistake, and goes back to his signature head down position.

TRISTAN

(mumbles) I don't know.

Dr. West is becoming slightly agitated.

DR. WEST

Tristan, what are you not telling me?

Tristan stays silent.

DR. WEST

Tristan.

Still no response.

DR. WEST

Who is Emily?

This catches Tristan's attention. His eyes light up.

Something has clicked inside of him.

TRISTAN

(under his breath) Emily.

Tristan's head snaps up to look at Dr. West.

TRISTAN

I'd like you to leave.

DR. WEST

Tristan, you can't keep doing this.

I--

TRISTAN

Now.

Dr. West is beginning to lose his patience.

DR. WEST

Damn it, Tristan! I'm trying to help you!

Something has changed inside of Tristan. For the first time in weeks he looks... hopeful. His eyes are bright and determined. It is clear something Dr. West has said sparked something inside of him. He responds with a newfound confidence.

TRISTAN

Listen, doctor. I appreciate and understand your concern.

(MORE)

TRISTAN (CONT'D)

I had a little too much to drink last night, and in my drunk stupidity called you. That's all. I assure you...

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - EVENING

Back to Tristan and Dr. West. They are speaking about this interaction. Dr. West quotes Tristan, finishing the previous line.

DR. WEST

(quoting Tristan)

"...I am fine."

Tristan looks very upset. He clearly doesn't want to be revisiting this conversation.

DR. WEST

Now tell me, Tristan. Were you really fine?

Tristan remains silent. After a few moments, he slowly shakes his head.

Both men sit not speaking for a while. The coffee cup still sits next to Dr. West, undrunk. After he's had time to think, Dr. West speaks again.

DR. WEST

So was it real?

Tristan doesn't answer for a long time. He remains head down, looking very upset. He stays very still, as if he was dead. After a few long, silent moments, Tristan finally answers.

TRISTAN

(quietly) I don't know.

Dr. West sighs, not knowing where to go from here. Noting the lack of response, Tristan chimes in again.

TRISTAN

I don't know what's real anymore.

EXT. INTERSECTION - MORNING

Tristan is looking a lot better. He has cleaned up quite a bit. It's been about two months since the accident. He is now ready to return to work. Rather than the messy hair and clothes he's usually rocking, he has nice clothing and combed hair. He has his routine coffee in his left hand and a backpack for his binder and laptop. With a newly-found confidence, Tristan approaches the crosswalk. The crossing signal is the red hand. Tristan waits at the crosswalk, patiently awaiting the change in signal. The signal changes. The people around Tristan begin to walk across. Tristan just stands there.

INT. BUS - MORNING

Tristan is sitting on the bus seat, staring off. He has lost that confident, good-feeling look he had at the intersection. The bus stops, and he continues to look down. A woman with red hair walks past, which catches his attention. He looks up and watches her walk off. After a moment, he realizes something. He stands up quickly, spilling his coffee on his pants.

TRISTAN

Oh, sh-

He quickly grabs his bag, and rushes down the aisle.

Stepping on several feet and almost tripping several times, he reaches the bus door... which closes in his face. Tristan turns to the bus driver, becoming progressively more and more upset.

BUS DRIVER

My bad.

The bus door opens back up, and Tristan rushes off.

EXT. BUS STOP - MORNING

Scanning the crowd, he searches for the woman from the bus.

As he does, the bus doors close and the bus drives off.

Tristan searches the crowd, then gives up. He turns around to get back on the bus, only to find it wasn't there. He sighs, then walks towards a bench to wait for the next bus.

INT. OFFICE - TRISTAN'S DESK - DAY

Tristan is sitting at his desk. It's a similar scene from earlier. His office is very lackluster, with only Tristan, his laptop, his binder, and a cracked phone sitting next to him.

He is working intently, staring at his computer. His focus is broken when a familiar sound of a clicking pen starts in the desk over. Tristan sighs and runs his hands through his hair. He debates standing up and attempting to confront the man once again. It doesn't take long for him to settle on a decision.

Tristan stands up and looks over the divider. It's the same guy with his same pen in his same office. Tristan peers over the divider, working up the confidence to confront him. Only now, he's able to find it.

TRISTAN

Excuse me?

The man turns to face Tristan, continuing to click the pen.

PAUL

Can I help you?

However, as he looks at him, something changes in Tristan. He looks as if he's seen a ghost. He freezes, not knowing what to say or believe. The man, becoming impatient, stops clicking his pen and speaks again.

PAUL

Hey, you need something?

Tristan, in utter shock, finally speaks.

TRISTAN

Paul?

PAUL

Yeah?

Tristan is blown away. He can't believe what he's seeing. Paul, confused what's happening, speaks again.

PAUL

Do I know you?

Suddenly, a huge smile comes across Tristan's face.

TRISTAN

Paul, it's me!

Paul looks confused, so Tristan continues.

TRISTAN

(points to himself) Tristan.

Paul looks very confused. He stares at Tristan's face, trying to place it. Tristan continues to stare at him with that hopeful, optimistic look.

After a while, Paul gives up and decides to entertain Tristan.

PAUL

Oh yeah, uh, Tristan. How you been, buddy?

Tristan is beyond excited. His eyes light up and his mouth forms into a big smile. He speaks quickly and excitedly.

TRISTAN

Oh my gosh. I didn't think it was real. They told me it wasn't real.
Tristan is talking when he realizes something. The excited look drops from his face.

TRISTAN

Wait. Is this real?

Paul stares blankly at Tristan. He has no clue what's happening. He has gone from impatient to worried to genuinely scared.

PAUL

Listen, bud. I have no clue who you are or what the hell you're talking.
Tristan isn't listening. His world is falling apart for the second time. His speech and movement are spastic as he runs his hands through his hair on the verge of tears.

TRISTAN

No no no no no! If this is real, then that wasn't real! But if that was real, then this isn't real!
What's real? He stops. He realizes something. He drops his hands to his side.

TRISTAN

Emily.

He turns to Paul.

TRISTAN

Emily's real.

At this point, Paul has scooted all the way back to the other divider. He looks genuinely afraid.
He stares right at Tristan, wondering what is wrong with him.

PAUL

Who the hell is Emily?

Tristan looks right at Paul. His mood has changed from excitement to passion.

TRISTAN

She's everything to me.

INT. TRISTAN'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NOON

Tristan is sitting at the kitchen table on his laptop. He is doing something on it, unseen to us. His kitchen table is surprisingly... clean. Tristan looks good. He's been taking better care of himself. Hanging on the wall behind him are printouts of jobs. It's made clear he has lost his job. There is also a drawing on the wall, looking very out of place among the several job articles. The drawing is of a woman. There is no color in the drawing, except in her hair. Her very bright red hair. All of a sudden, his phone rings. He picks it up almost immediately. He's talking to a potential employer.

TRISTAN

(speaking to employer) Yes, this is he.

INT. BUS - AFTERNOON

Tristan climbs on the bus, dressed sharply and carrying his briefcase, ready for an interview. He walks down the aisle and makes his way to a seat. He sits down and looks forward.

The bus starts moving. As he sits, Tristan glances over quickly. Then he takes a double take.

Then he stares. There is a woman with bright red hair sitting across the aisle next to him.

Tristan is petrified. He doesn't believe what he's seeing.

He continues to stare at her.

The woman notices him staring, but tries to ignore him. However, Tristan continues to stare for what seems like year. Several uncomfortable years. Becoming upset, she turns to Tristan.

WOMAN

I'm sorry, can I help you?

Her voice. Tristan can't believe it. He attempts to speak, but can't. Tears come to his eyes. After another eternity, he finally speaks to her.

TRISTAN

Emily?

The woman is clearly confused and uncomfortable.

WOMAN

No, I'm sorry.

She turns away from Tristan to face forward again, but Tristan continues to stare.

TRISTAN

Emily, it's me. It's Tristan.

She turns back to Tristan. She is becoming impatient.

WOMAN

Listen, I'm sorry. I don't know you. Could you please leave me alone?

Tristan either doesn't believe her or doesn't want to. He continues to stare, scooting closer to the aisle. Closer to her.

TRISTAN

Emily, listen to me.

She is becoming upset.

WOMAN

(tearing up) Please...

TRISTAN

You are everything to me. I don't know what's real anymore.

(MORE)

TRISTAN (CONT'D)

But the one thing that has always been with me is you.

WOMAN

Please, I don't know even you.

TRISTAN

You're the only thing that's real.
Nothing else matters. It's just you. It's always been you.

WOMAN

(crying) What are you talking about?
Tristan stands up and walks right up to her. He sticks his hand out.

TRISTAN

I love you Emily.
Tristan looks right at her. He sees her face. She looks terrified. Tears are running down her face.
He takes a step back. He is broken. He stares right into her scared, emotional eyes.

TRISTAN

Emily?
He stares at her, not sure what to do. A single tear runs down his face.

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - EVENING

Back to Tristan and Dr. West one more time. Tristan is staring at the ground, a single tear making its way down his face. Dr. West stares at him for a long while, letting him think.

DR. WEST

This is real, Tristan.
Tristan looks up at Dr. West. He looks at him for a long time. Tears are gradually running down his face.

TRISTAN

(voice breaking) She didn't even know me.

DR. WEST

She never did.
Tristan breaks. The tears start flowing down. He rests his head in his hands as he sobs.

TRISTAN

But I love her.

DR. WEST

You didn't, Tristan.
Dr. West patiently waits for Tristan to compose himself.
Tristan finally snuffles and looks back up at Dr. West, waiting for him to continue.

DR. WEST

That love you felt. That wasn't real. None of it. The only thing real right now is you and me.
When you leave this room, that'll be real. When you go home, that'll be real. Everything will be

real. Everything except her. Dr. West finishes his sentence, then closes his notebook. He finally takes a sip of the coffee, then drops it in a small garbage can next to him. He's done.

EXT. INTERSECTION - NIGHT

The pedestrian crossing signal. It has the walker symbol.

After a few moments, it changes to the red hand.

Tristan walks toward the intersection. He is devastated. His entire world has been ripped apart.

He approaches the crosswalk. There is no one else around. No people rushing around to get to work. No cars stopping and going. It's just Tristan.

He stands at the start of the crosswalk, the same place he stood three months before. The signal is still the red hand. Tristan sighs, then walks forward.

He walks to the middle of the crosswalk, then falls to his knees. He stares at the ground, his face emotionless. He sits there for a while. Suddenly, a light shines on him. It becomes brighter and brighter. Headlights. A car rushes towards, but we never see it. We stay focused on Tristan. The lights become brighter. The car becomes louder. Right before the car inevitably hits him, Tristan speaks.

TRISTAN
This is real.

CUT TO: BLACK

Seen

By Elizabeth Webb

INT. BROOKE'S BEDROOM

BROOKE is sitting at her computer looking at information for bisexuality. Her alarm goes off and she starts getting ready for the day. Just before leaving she stops in front of a necklace with the bi flag on it she reaches out towards it before retracting her hand. She gives a sad look before continuing out the door leaving the necklace behind.

CUT TO:

INT. A CAR

Brooke and her MOM are in the car driving to school. Brooke still looks slightly upset.

MOM

Are you okay sweetie? You've seen a little down lately.

BROOKE

I'm fine mom.

MOM

Well if you say so. You know you can talk to me about anything right?

They pass by a house with a pride flag hanging outside.

Brooke's mom scoffs

MOM

Now, what is the point of all that?

You know I'm all in support of the gays but sometimes the stuff they do... It just seems counterintuitive to me. I mean they complain about never being treated properly for being a queer but then they go and flaunt it for the world to see. Just causing trouble if you ask me. Brooke stays silent and just listens to her mom talk while looking out the window wishing she could block everything out.

FADE TO:

INT. SCHOOL

Brooke walks up to her friends, TRINITY, COURTNEY, and EVELYN, who seem to be deep in a conversation.

BROOKE

Hey Trinity! Hey Courtney! Hey Evelyn!
What's going on?

TRINITY

You haven't heard?

EVELYN

Apparently, Oscar came out as gay yesterday.

BROOKE
Oh really?

COURTNEY
I know right I would have never pegged him as the type

BROOKE
That's not really what I...

TRINITY
He certainly doesn't look gay

EVELYN
I bet he's lying and only doing it for attention.

COURTNEY
I think he was just faking his
"masculinity" to get closer to cute guys.

EVELYN
You're probably right!

TRINITY
What do you think of all this Brooke?

COURTNEY
And that's why you're the smart one. I guess time will tell which one of us is right.

BROOKE
I'm not sure. I don't really have any opinion on this.

COURTNEY
And that's why you're the smart one. I guess time will tell which one of us is right.

FADE TO:
INT. CLASSROOM

Brooke is tapping her finger at her desk in her first class of the day waiting for the teacher to start. Some guys around her seem to be talking about a video game.

GUY ONE
Yeah, the graphics on that one were so whack dude.

GUY TWO
I know the first one was so much better.

GUY ONE

At least it was better than the third one

GUY TWO

Honestly, the third one might be my favorite, no joke

GUY ONE

Dude, are you kidding me? That's so gay.

GUY TWO

What!?! No, it's not! I just think that the storyline was done really well

GUY ONE

Yeah sure, maybe if you're gay

GUY TWO

You're being ridiculous

GUY ONE

Oh, am I? I don't know you seem to be getting pretty defensive.

The two guys continue to joke around while Brooke rests her head in her arms and continues to sit silently.

FADE TO:

INT. LUNCHROOM

Brooke is waiting in the lunch line when she overhears two people talking about a new movie that came out recently.

PERSON ONE

I just didn't really get the point of it.

PERSON TWO

Right like it's not like it added anything to the plot there was no point in making him being gay like a thing

PERSON ONE

It was probably just a last-minute cash grab in order to pander to those kinds of people.

PERSON TWO

They didn't even try to portray him as gay.

PERSON ONE

Wasn't he even dating a girl in the first movie? I honestly don't know who the directors thought they were fooling.

PERSON TWO

Oh my gosh, I didn't even think about that. I don't know what they were thinking.

PERSON ONE

They obviously weren't.

The two people keep talking while Brooke gets her lunch and leaves in a rush to get away from them.

FADE TO:

INT. BAND ROOM

Brooke approaches her section in band noticing one of the upperclassman girls, AMBER, was wearing multiple rainbow bracelets and a couple with shades of orange, pink, and white. As she goes to set up her instrument, she can hear them talking.

BAND MEMBER ONE

Wow, Amber nice bracelets what are you gay?

AMBER

Yeah, that's kinda the whole point of them.

BAND MEMBER TWO

Ha, imagine being gay. Couldn't be me.

AMBER Sure...

BAND MEMBER TWO

What? I'm not!

AMBER

You know we'll support you no matter what.

BAND MEMBER TWO

Oh, shut up!

Amber and Band Member One both laugh while Band Member Two looks embarrassed. Brooke accidentally drops her instrument intrigued by the conversation. Amber notices her and walks over.

AMBER

Hey Brooke, What's up?

BROOKE

Not much. I really like your bracelets.
Amber looks at her curiously but slowly starts to smile.

AMBER

Thanks! I have tons of them if you ever want to borrow some...

BROOKE

That sounds nice maybe some other time.

AMBER

Yeah for sure! Just tell me whenever you're ready.

BROOKE

Thanks! Well, I should probably go get my instrument. See you later.
Soon enough band starts, and Brooke sets up with a slight pep to her.

FADE TO:

INT. BROOKE'S BEDROOM

Brooke's alarm goes off and she starts to get ready for school similar to how she did at the beginning. Except this time when she walks past the necklace she stops and puts it on before continuing out of her room.

Look Away

By Khayla Truitt

ACT I- SCENE ONE _____

INT. ALIYAH'S BEDROOM - DAY _____

ALIYAH sits on the bed, scrolling through Instagram and drinking her coffee before logging into class.

The phone screen shows an explore page full of activism posts and reels. She closes the app and continues to log onto her zoom meeting.

ALIYAH

(on Facetime with SHAI)

I was hoping tomorrow we'd go to the library and catch up on the work from last period. Our substitute didn't explain the second page-

SHAI

(interrupting ALIYAH)

Did you see what happened last night? I'm looking at the comments on twitter right now.

ALIYAH

You know I don't really like to talk about that. I'm not even gonna go there with all that complaining.

SHAI

(in a hostile and confused tone)

What do you mean "complaining"? Speaking on injustice is complaining? I didn't know you were even like that...

ALIYAH

(uncomfortably)

What do you mean "like that"? So, because I don't feel like wasting my energy it's a problem?

SHAI

(STARES IN SHOCK) You know what... I gotta go. I'll hit you up later.
(The facetime call ends.)

SCENE ENDS (FADE TO BLACK)

SCENE TWO _____

INT. ALIYAH'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT _____

ALIYAH is sitting on the couch at home. She turns the TV down as she hears her mothers phone ring. She gets up and goes to answer it. She answers the phone and the sound is muffled but you hear a DOCTOR speaking.

DOCTOR

(speaking through the phone) Miss Foster? May I speak with a Mrs. Whitney Foster?

ALIYAH

(stammering) Uh- this is her daughter, who's speaking?

DOCTOR

This is Doctor Feira Allen at the Corpland Medical Center and I'm calling to inform Mrs. Foster about her son, Jayden. Is she there?

ALIYAH

(confused) I'll... relay the message what's going on?

DOCTOR

Her son Jayden has been involved in a shooting incident with the Corpland Police Department in a traffic stop and he has multiple wounds. He's not stable but we're doing everything we can. I'm sorry but the odds aren't looking too well you may want to get down here fast Mrs. Foster-
The sound fades and

ALIYAH

hangs the phone up.

She stares blankly and then drops the phone.

SCENE ENDS

SCENE THREE _____

INT. ALIYAH'S BEDROOM _____

The screen shows a fading time-lapse of ALIYAH dealing with the passing of her brother. Scenes such as balled up tissues, lying in bed, messy hair/clothes, etc. The days of the week as well as timestamps flash across the screen to indicate the time passing. A muffled and fuzzy audio of the phone call reporting her brothers incident replays over the scene. The screen then shows a "3 Months Later" slide.

ALIYAH is shown creating posters and signs (indicating that she is headed to a protest).
She gets an incoming call from SHAI.

SHAI

Hey, are you sure you're up for this Liyah?... No Justice?
ALIYAH takes in a deep breath while she nods her head in reassurance.

ALIYAH

No peace.

SCENE ENDS - FADE TO BLACK _____

A Play in Progress

By Jocelyn Peebles

2 CHARACTERS:

WRITER

ACTOR 1

ACTOR 2

ACTOR 3

ACTOR 4

ACTOR 5

LIGHTS

SOUND

BRAGSTONE

TRIPPIE McGEE

BETTY

MARC

TOE SOCK GUY

PHONE GUY

USHER

MEANIE BUTT

SETTING

In an auditorium, on a stage.

TIME

Present day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The actors playing WRITER, LIGHTS, SOUND, and ACTORS 1-5 will choose their own name. (The casted actors will decide a name after the read through.) Whenever a name is said in the characters' dialogue, substitute with the new selected name.

This show requires audience participation. Audience members can pay an additional fee to guarantee them being called on. (Along with them being able to pay more to not be called on.) Be sure to give them something that separates them from the rest of the audience.

(EX. Neon colored paper or a paper hat) This will be explained by USHER.

Gender does not matter when casting, feel free to change pronouns. Anywhere the name "Jocelyn" is mentioned, feel free to substitute for the name of the person directing the show.

The actors playing TOE SOCK GUY, PHONE GUY, MEANIE BUTT, and USHER are the ensemble. They are only given a few lines. Please have them sit in the audience and improvise more lines or write some more throughout the rehearsal process. These characters can be double casted with BRAGSTONE, TRIPPIE, and BETTY.

This play was written with the hopes of donating funds towards ThesCon grants. You can alter lines to fit the charity of your choice.

Mad Lib for Audience members (to be passed out during the Avenue 2.0 Scene)

Please fill out the following. (The wellness of our show depends on you. There are no right answers. Please think out of the box. The weirder, the better.)

Write a phrase describing your dream vacation. (EX. sandy, humid, full of sharks)

List three must-haves when picking out a house (EX. working toilet, lousy neighbors, and a kitchen)

Pick one:

YEE-YEE YEE-HAW

List as many jobs (as you can think of) that are required to keep a prison running (EX. guard, cook, criminal)

List three health code requirements for a restaurant (EX. gloves, hair nets, and rat traps)

Which one of the actors should play the animal in the scene? (If you don't remember names, use clothing to describe the person.)

Which one of the actors should be the villain in the scene? (If you don't remember names, use clothing to describe the person.)

Make a list of funny words that happen to rhyme

ACT I

SCENE 1- Opening

(Curtains are closed and house lights are on. USHER walks onstage.)

USHER:

Good evening everyone. Before we get started, I need to inform you that this show requires audience participation. I know, I know. But do not fret! If you don't want to be called upon, I can help you out! For a small fee of three dollars, I'll give you a "Don't even think about calling on me, I have a chronic case of stage fright" pass. And for those wanting to be a part of this production, I'll give you a "Pick Me!" crown guaranteeing your participation in tonight's show. Of course, for a fee of three dollars. All proceeds are for ThesCon scholarships granted to HCHS thespians. Helpers! *(The usher summons ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 2)* If you don't want to be called on, raise your hand and ACTOR 1 will give you a pass and collect your money. If you definitely want to be a part of the show, stand up and ACTOR 2 will give you a crown and collect your three dollars. Please remain standing.

Can I get a round of applause for these brave souls? Yes, yes. Thank you. Oh, and just because you didn't get a crown, doesn't mean you won't be called on. So good luck. *(starts to walk off, but WRITER runs on and whispers something in their ear)* Oh! I forgot to ask for suggestions.

*(All ACTORS run onstage with labeled suggestion buckets. *Note: You can choose how you want to collect suggestions...Have USHER stand at mic like an auctioneer, charge audience members to write suggestions, hand everyone an index card as they walk in and assign them questions by row, etc* Throughout the script, you will see what suggestions are needed.)*
(USHER exits through the audience and we hear a commotion behind the curtain. The actors just found out WRITER won't be paying them as much as he originally said he would. Actors are being loud and rambunctious. The following lines are said from behind the closed curtain.)

WRITER:

Guys! Guys, calm down. You'll get your money. Just not tonight. Look, to be honest, I never had any money to give in the first place. I really just needed some help. And who better to ask than my favorite improv troupe?! So just give it your all and let's hope the audience brought some spare change.

(Actors were not motivated by the pep talk. The next 5 lines are said quickly after one another.)

ACTOR 1:

They better have!

ACTOR 2:
I can't afford to lose my Disney Plus subscription!

ACTOR 1:
Only punks use Disney Plus.

ACTOR 2:
Yeah?! Then maybe I'm a punk then! Punk!

ACTOR 3:
I thought we were donating all the money to charity. I really need the community service hours.

WRITER:
Why do you need the hours again?

ACTOR 3, quietly:
It was court ordered.
(silence, maybe cricket sound)

WRITER:
Uhh...

ACTOR 3:
So are we donating the money or not?!

WRITER:
We are, the leftoversACTOR 3: Good enough. *(shrugs)*

ACTOR 4:
(to writer) I just wanted to tell you I'm so thankful for this opportunity. You know when I first met you, I didn't take you as the creative type, but with you writing this play.

ACTOR 1:
I'm still worried about the money situation!

WRITER:
Guys! Geez! Let's just go over the game plan one more time and then we can give the curtain speech and get it all over with. Don't worry about the money! You'll get your money!

ACTOR 3:
What about-
WRITER:

And yes! I'll sign off on your community service hours. Wait, where is ACTOR 5? I told them to be here at five-thirty.

*(Focus shift to SOUND entering from stage left. They walk down stage and into the audience. They make their way to the audience member in the first seat, second row. *unless they have the "don't pick me pass", then they will find the next closest person. * They hand the audience member their backpack.)*

SOUND:

Would you watch this for me? Yeah, just put it under your chair. Like that. Thanks.
(LIGHTS enters from the outside door on stage right and makes their way onstage.)

LIGHTS:

Do you have the key to the light booth? I was told it was under the brick outside the door, but I just looked and there was no key!

SOUND:

Check my bag. I might have a spare. It's under the first seat in the second row.
(LIGHTS goes over the audience member.)

LIGHTS:

Would you mind standing up for me? You see, I was tasked with a very important job and the wellness of the show depends on me. Thanks.
(LIGHTS sits in the chair and proceeds to dig through the book bag. They pull out a blanket, lightsaber, pillow, and an assortment of other random things. LIGHTS uses the pillow to get comfortable and forgets about finding the key. Audience member is still standing.)

LIGHTS:

Man, us crew members just don't get enough recognition. I wish I could be in the show. I was in a play once. Second grade, *Annie*. I was the understudy for the dog.
(SOUND is rolling a speaker from front of house, to back of house and almost runs over the standing audience member. SOUND gives them a "what the heck" look and shakes their head.)

SOUND:

At least, we wouldn't have to deal with all these people.

LIGHTS:

No, I'm pretty sure this is an interactive show. Actually, I think I heard one of the actors saying something about knife throwing. I'm not really sure. *(sees audience's reactions)* Oh, well don't worry.

SOUND:

Yeah, ACTOR 2's "course completion" certificate myself! Or...maybe that was there clown school diploma. Hmm, I'm not sure now.

(SOUND starts to open the curtain. We hear grunts, and then SOUND peeks their head out. The audience can see some of the ACTORS behind the curtain. They are warming up. We hear "Checkolsylvokia" being ominously chanted in the background.)

SOUND:

(to LIGHTS) Pst, hey! Give me a hand.

LIGHTS:

(to standing audience member) Save my seat.

(LIGHTS disappears backstage with SOUND. Focus shifts to WRITER who doesn't realize the curtains are opening.)

WRITER:

I asked *(director's name)* one last time for a bigger budget, but they said no again.

Also, has anybody heard from ACTOR 5? We really need them here...

(Curtain begins to open rapidly.)

WRITER:

What are you doing?! I didn't give you the signal. Close the curtain!

(Curtain is now being closed.)

SOUND: LIGHTS!

Can't you ever do anything right?! Did you even find the key?

LIGHTS:

Oh, yeah. It was in my pocket the entire time. I'm going up to the booth to get the lights working.

(LIGHTS runs up to the booth using the blanket as a cape. SOUND goes backstage.)

WRITER:

And hey, ACTOR 3... No Darth Vader impressions. Ok? It just... last time got a little weird...

(ACTORS grimace and nod their heads in remembrance. All of a sudden curtains open ¼ of the way and there is a flashback to when ACTOR 3 did his Darth Vader impression. SOUND is seen panicking because they don't know how/why the curtain "magically" opened. There is a spotlight and ACTORS wave a cape behind ACTOR 3 for dramatic effect as he breathes heavily. After about 10 seconds of this, all the ACTORS snap back and curtains slam shut.

We hear SOUND go "phew".)

WRITER:

We on the same page?

(SOUND slips offstage and drags the standing audience member up onstage.)

SOUND: Can I borrow you for a second? I'm really struggling with the curtain. It seems to have a mind of its own.

(SOUND takes audience member backstage and the curtain begins to open... again.)

WRITER:

Ok, good. And finally, ohhh- *(turns around to face the audience)* Haha. Didn't know you were- uh... didn't know the curtain was open. *(to audience member)* Who are you? Go sit down. Why do you people keep opening the curtain?!

SOUND:

(pointing at audience member) It wasn't me this time!
(House lights dim and brighten multiple times.)

WRITER:

Hey LIGHTS! Stop messing around! It's showtime! This is for real! *(now addressing the audience)* Sorry for that folks, this is LIGHTS first time doing lights.

LIGHTS:

Waaaaaaait!

(LIGHTS is heard running down the stairs and through the house. The curtain is closing.)

WRITER:

What now?

LIGHTS:

Well, if it isn't too late... I was wondering if I could be in the show?

WRITER:

Well who is gonna do lights?

LIGHTS:

Oh, I set them on a timer.

WRITER:

You can do that?

LIGHTS:

(shuffling feet) I'm pretty sure.
(Lights start dimming slowly)

WRITER:

Um.. Go fix them and maybe you can be in the second act. Sorry guys. Hurry up.
(LIGHTS runs to the booth and WRITER goes behind the curtain.)

WRITER: Y'all understand the plan?
(We hear grunts of comprehension)

WRITER:

Ok, I'm about to give the curtain speech. Be sure to stay quiet. Ok, I'm ready for the curtain!
(No response) Can someone please open the curtain? *(WRITER proceeds to find the split between the curtains and slide out. They fail and end up slithering under. Once they get out, they take a moment to regain their composure.)* Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for attending tonight's show. About 6 months ago I was honored with quite the task, if I do say so myself. Last September I was assigned... a senior project. I know, I know. I was just as shocked and honored... and I let it get to my head. Long story short, I spent all my time thinking of how to get out of doing the project, rather than working on it...and it's due tomorrow. *(Sighs loudly.)* So "what was the project?", you might ask. I said I was going to write a play. I don't know why I didn't pick something easy like baking or I don't know- petting dogs, but that doesn't matter now. What matters is that we get a show written by tomorrow morning, 8:05 a.m. Lucky for me, my handy dandy improv troupe agreed to help out and run through some of my unfinished ideas. But, this is not your traditional improv show! In fact, most of what you will see tonight was written by me... this afternoon. So it's actually not improv at all.
(Actor 4 peeks their head out.)

ACTOR 4:

Yeah, some of it may seem like really, really bad improv, but it is just poor planning on

WRITER's part. *(shrugs)*
(Writer hisses and immediately realizes how weird it was.)

WRITER:

Sorry. Did I tell you that I got a callback for the off-off-off Broadway version of *Cats*? Yeah, I was never the same... It's brutal up there. *(Takes a minute to remember, then continues)* There are a few places where I will need your help to come up with some finishing touches. That's what the suggestion buckets were for. I hope you all came up with some good ones because tomorrow I present my senior project to the counselor board. *(dramatic sound effects, preferably the "dun, dun, dun" sound track)* Tonight is the only time we have to set the plots straight and get any hiccups worked out.
(PHONE GUY'S phone rings)

WRITER:

Oh, that reminds me, please turn off all cell phones and any photography is strictly prohibited. Without further ado, let's get this show started!

SCENE 2- The Ghost of Dad's Garage

(House lights dim, spotlight on WRITER)

WRITER:

My first play idea was inspired by a musical that you all are probably familiar with. Maybe you grew up hearing about a certain phantom that haunts an opera house? But, have you heard of "The Ghost of Dad's Garage"?!
*(WRITER sets the needed suggestion buckets up for the other actors. Curtain opens and WRITER goes to his "Director" chair. *stage right on the circular platform* A keyboard, tool box, and music stand is brought out by the actors in this scene. ACTORS 2-4 are wearing 80's punk gear. ACTOR 1 has not entered yet.)*

ACTOR 2:

No fair! How come ACTOR 3 always gets to sing melody? I'm sick of singing alto! My voice was meant to be heard. *(proceeds to start jamming/humming)*

ACTOR 3: Probably 'cause you sound like *(pulls suggestion out of "sounds that make people angry" bucket)*

ACTOR 2:

My voice is *(pulls suggestion out of "adjective" bucket)* And besides, that's our job! To rile up the crowd, get them angry! You all know how important this is! We're auditioning for the *(pulls suggestion out of "rock band" bucket)* impersonation concert! We have to get this right!

ACTOR 4:

We know! Let's just work on that number one more time. A-one, a-two, a-one, two, three-
(A screeching sound is heard, like a garage door falling off its hinges.)

ACTOR 3:

Daaaaad! We're practicing! Leave the garage door closed! We're not ready to go public! It's only our second rehearsal!
(Screeching continues)

ACTOR 3:

Sorry, he must be coming home from work. He knows we practice on Tuesdays. He's supposed to park the car in the driveway. Let me go tell him.
(ACTOR 3 exits)

ACTOR 2:

Let's fix these lyrics before ACTOR 3 comes back. I just don't like the part that goes "didley doo, I ain't gonna say I love you". Like what the actual heck? "Didley doo"?

ACTOR 4:

I don't even try to give them suggestions any more. Last time, they threatened to smash my uke. Oooh, let's try the words "I'll tell you the truth, it ain't so easy to say I love you". You know, rather than that other verse.

ACTOR 2:

Wow! You should really stick to ukulele!

(We hear a multitude of riffs and electric guitar out of nowhere. There is a muffled scream and a "thwap" as ACTOR 3 is knocked unconscious and falls onstage.)

ACTOR 4:

Are you ok?! What was that? Hey! Wake up! ACTOR 3, buddy, uh, get up? ACTOR 3?

ACTOR 2:

Get help!

I can't, the door is locked!

(ACTOR 1 enters with a too-small bed sheet over them. They are the ghost.)

Ghost: I am the ghost of your dad's garage! I am here to terrorize-

(WRITER hops off of his chair and runs onstage.)

WRITER:

No! No! No! We discussed this! You're supposed to have an accent!

GHOST:

Oh sorry... what accent?

WRITER:

I don't care! Just pull one from a suggestion bucket!

GHOST:

We didn't ask for accents before the show.

WRITER:

You didn't? Very well. *(to audience)* Can someone yell out a western european country?

WRITER:

There you go. Use that accent.

GHOST:

But I don't know how-

(WRITER goes to sit back down, leaving the actors to continue. Throughout the rest of this scene, GHOST will try out different accents, failing miserably.)

GHOST:

Like I was saying, I am the-

ACTOR 2:
We know, the ghost of his dad's garage.

GHOST:
Would you let me finish?

ACTOR 2:
Oop, sorry.

GHOST:
Thank you. I am here- *(changes accent)* I am here to punish you all!
(ACTOR 2 produces a shrill scream)

GHOST:
What was that for?

ACTOR 2:
I was just adding a scare factor.

GHOST:
Oh, thanks. *(breaks character)* You know I can't imagine a ghost with an accent being too scary. I honestly find this whole plot a little silly.
(WRITER clears throat and motions to "keep going". ACTOR 3 is heard waking up and is making sounds of pain.)

ACTOR 4:
Guys! ACTOR 3 is waking up!

GHOST:
Oh man! Not yet! Ugh, I can't do anything right. *(starts to sob hysterically)* ACTOR 2: Get it together! What did you do to

ACTOR 3?
He can't talk!

GHOST:
I was trying to steal ACTOR 3's voice! You see, my family is known for our spectacular voices, but I was not bequeathed-
(ACTOR 3 sits up and laughs.)

ACTOR 3:

Haha, “bequeathed”. *(lays back down and presumes being dead)*

GHOST:

I was not bequeathed... with such a gift. My da-

ACTOR 4:

Prove it.

GHOST:

Prove what?

ACTOR 4:

Prove that you can't sing.

GHOST:

What? Why- *(Tries to sing something)* As I was saying, my dad sent me away to find a better voice.

ACTOR 2:

But why ACTOR 3's voice? How come you didn't steal mine or ACTOR 4's?

GHOST:

Well, ACTOR 4's talent lies in writing lyrics and you sound like *(pulls suggestion out of “sounds that make people angry bucket”)*

ACTOR 4:

So you were just gonna steal their voice and lock us in here so we couldn't scream for help?

GHOST:

Yeah, that was the plan.

ACTOR 2:

(Thinks for a moment.) You can still do that. I'm not gonna stop you. I want to be the lead singer anyway.

GHOST:

You mean you're really gonna let me slip through the walls with your buddy's voice?
ACTOR 4: Yeah man, *(breaks character and mutters)* it's not like this play really has a plot anyway.

(WRITER jumps out of chair and walks onstage.)

WRITER:

What did I say about your sarcasm? That's strike three! You're out! (*points offstage*) Out!
Get out! I'll finish this scene for you! Go take a break and think about what you've done.
(*WRITER presumes ACTOR 4's role.*)

GHOST:
(*to WRITER*)
Where do you want me to go from?

WRITER:
Your last line.

GHOST:
You mean you're really gonna let me slip through the walls with your buddy's voice?

WRITER:
(*Really milking their line*)
As long as you don't hurt us!

GHOST:
You're sure, you're sure? Okay, if you insist.
(*GHOST exits and blackout.*)

SCENE 3- Avenue Two Point O
(*Lights rise and WRITER stands center stage.*)

WRITER:
Ok, so how was it? Give me your thoughts.
(*WRITER picks on MEANIE BUTT to give their opinions.*)

MEANIE BUTT:
I actually think it needs a lot of work. I thought this was a real show. Not some dumb little
performace by some "wanna be writer". What a waste of seven bucks!
(*MEANIE BUTT storms out of auditorium*)

WRITER:
Wow. Ouch. What a meanie butt. Was it really that bad?
(*cricket sound*)

WRITER:
Umm... My next idea is actually a puppet show. I know what you all must be thinking.
Puppet show? Ugh. Puppet shows are for little baaaabies. Well let me inform you *Avenue Q*
was a successful puppet show and the last thing on earth you would want to show a little
baby. Before we get started, could I borrow someone's sock? It's quite embarrassing, but

(director's name) only gave us a forty dollar budget 'cause of the whole "last minute" thing and we blew half of it on pre-show snacks.

TOE SOCK GUY:

Here ya go! I want it back though!

WRITER:

Toe sock? Seriously? And lastly, I need to borrow five bodies. Oh, gosh... that sounded morbid. Um, I need five people to come onstage to be the ensemble members in this scene. I promise you won't have to touch the sock. *(crickets)* I just need the stage to look full. So who wants to come up?

(If no one volunteers, use planted audience members. Or bribe audience members with one dollar bills.)

WRITER:

SOUND is taping out your places, be sure to listen to him for further instructions.

SOUND:

Trust me, you'll want to stand on the x's. You'll be in the least amount of danger of falling things. Also, some housekeeping tips, leave your shoes on and whenever LIGHTS holds up a sign- Yup wave at LIGHTS. Be sure to read it and do what it says.

WRITER:

And now, please welcome the cast of "Avenue Two Point O".

(Black out. Cast enters and brings on a table with a long table cloth to hide the actors. Lights up and TEACHER gives the five audience members crayons and the madlib to fill out.)

ACTOR 1 is TEACHER

ACTOR 2 is BILLY and SHIRLEY (uses puppets)

ACTOR 3 is BOB and TEMPLE (uses puppets)

ACTOR 4 is ALLY, TALLY, SALLY, and JOHN (uses puppets)

TEACHER:

Good morning class! I hope you all did your homework assignment on "What to do with a BA in English".

(LIGHTS holds up a sign that says "Proceed to whine. If any of you were ever a child at some point in your life, you should know how to do this perfectly" Class is heard grumbling.)

BILLY and BOB start making out.)

TEACHER:

Billy! Bob! None of that! We haven't even been in here for five minutes and y'all are already tongue tied! Do I need to call your parents?

BILLY:
No ma'am.

BOB:
They already know.

TEACHER:
Know what?

BILLY:
That we are lovers.

BOB:
Yeah, they sang us a song and everything. It was called "If You Were Gay".

TEACHER:
How... delightful. Today we are going to talk about what the internet is for. It's part of our BYOT standards. Everyone partner up. I want you and your partner to come up with some ideas of why you would use the internet at school. You have five minutes. When time is up, you are going to present your ideas to the class.

(LIGHTS holds up a sign that says "Pretend like you are working. We all know you know how to do that. Anyone with a job should know how to look busy")

SHIRLEY:
Hiiii Temple, wanna be my paaaartner?

TEMPLE, with lisp:
Sure thing Shirley! So what do you think the internet is for?

SHIRLEY:
I know what I use the internet for. *(Actor raises head above table to "wink wink")*

TEMPLE: What's that?

SHIRLEY:
Getting my answers for my homework! *(Actor raises head above table to "wink wink")*

TEMPLE:
Wow! I never thought of that! That's super smart!
(ACTOR 4 slithers on stomach to separate part of stage, no longer hiding behind table.)

ALLY:
Hey, Tally! Come here loser! You're gonna be my partner and you're gonna do all the work!

TALLY:

Not again! I'm gonna work with Sally. She's super smart and nice and smart and smells nice and smart and has a twitchy eye and-

ALLY:

Ahhh! You can't do that! Teacher! Teacher! I don't have a partner!

TEACHER:

Well neither does John.

ALLY:

John?

ACTOR 4:

John?

TEACHER: *(to actor, not puppets)*

Yeah, ACTOR 5 never showed up, so you gotta be their characters too.

(TEACHER hands ACTOR 4 the toe sock to use as JOHN. ACTOR 4 lies on their back like a dead cockroach to utilize both their hands and feet.)

ACTOR 4:

Toe sock? Seriously? Which one of you weirdos-
(WRITER comes out and places sunglasses on JOHN)

WRITER:

I just had the idea to make John blind. It adds a little more depth to the scene. Continue.
(WRITER goes back to chair.)

TEACHER:

Four minutes, you have four minutes.
(ACTORS freeze, lights onstage dim and houselights rise.)

WRITER:

Okay, I am going to be honest. This is all I wrote for this idea. I need some help. But first, I want to get to know you all a little bit better.

(The following questions are directed towards audience members. Move on to a new person after each question.)

WRITER:

What is your favorite kitchen appliance?

(WRITER writes answer on an index card and puts it in pocket. They move on to a new person.)

WRITER:

What year was your favorite child born?

(WRITER writes answer on different index card and puts it in pocket. Moves on to new person.)

WRITER:

What is a word that rhymes with snot?

(WRITER writes answer on an index card and puts it in pocket. Moves on to new person.)

WRITER:

What is your favorite type of flooring... tile, laminate, carpet?

(WRITER writes answer on an index card and puts it in pocket.)

WRITER:

I think I have enough to work with. This next little part is going to be improvised by the actors using your answers as inspiration. Wish them luck. Oh, but we have to give them a time limit. If we don't cut them off, we could be stuck here for days. Can I borrow your phone? *(Goes to PHONE GUY)* Agh! It's not powered off! What a lack of theatre etiquette.

Help me get a timer pulled up. Thanks a bunch.

(Each group will pull an index card at random from WRITER. They will then take turns and improv a thirty second scene explaining why they use the internet at school using the suggestions as inspiration. ACTOR 4 will begin their thirty seconds, but then get fed up using four puppets.)

ACTOR 4:

Ugh! I can't do this anymore! Hey, phone guy! Come up and help me, will ya? You just gotta improv with me for thirty seconds, and then I'll give you your phone back. Deal?

(ACTOR 4 and PHONE GUY improvise.)

TEACHER:

Okay! That's enough for right now... or ever. Nap time kiddies! I need a break. *(to onstage audience members)* Be sure to hand me your papers before you leave. You can go back to your seats now.

(ACTORS will remain onstage while taking off their costumes from the scene and puppets. SOUND will be the runner and gather all of it. We can hear them grumbling about how "this is not what I signed up for" or "I better get paid extra for this." WRITER ran backstage with the madlibs from the audience members.

SCENE 4- Standy Stand

(ACTORS are standing in a line while the curtain closes. SOUND brings on a mic.) ACTOR 1: This next bit will be introduced by us.

ACTOR 2:

Yeah, you know those papers we just had those random people fill out?

ACTOR 3:

They are the inspiration for the next, next scene.

ACTOR 4:

So not this one, but the one after.

ACTOR 1:

Until the writer writes a scene using your suggestions.

ACTOR 3: *(to ACTOR 1)*

Wait, where was the line about “stalling”?

ACTOR 1:

I don’t know, I just know my lines.

ACTOR 2:

I think ACTOR 5 was supposed to say it...

ACTOR 4:

Where is ACTOR 5? Maybe we should call them.

ACTOR 2:

I’ll call them. I have their number. *(ACTOR 2 backs out of line and proceeds to call ACTOR 5.)*

ACTOR 3:

I’ll just say the line. Let’s start over.

(ACTORS reset to their line from the clump they formed. There is a space where ACTOR 2 should be because they are on the phone behind everyone.)

ACTOR 1:

This next scene will be introduced by us.

(Long pause because ACTOR 2 is distracted on the phone. ACTOR 3 steps over to deliver line.)

ACTOR 3:

Yeah, you know those papers we just had those random people fill out?

ACTOR 3:

They are the inspiration for the next, next scene.

ACTOR 4:
Not this one, but the one after.

ACTOR 3:
It is, and I quote “our job to stall”.

ACTOR 1:
Until the writer writes a scene using your suggestions.
(Long pause.)

ACTOR 1: Pssst, ACTOR 2
*(ACTOR 2 is leaving a voicemail and is shooing them off. He realizes and covers the bottom of the phone with his hand to say line, then goes back to leaving voicemail. *Note: Other actors do not know it’s just a voicemail, they think he is actually conversing with ACTOR 5*)*

ACTOR 2:
Oh! So we are going to do a little standy stand.

ACTOR 3:
He means stand up comedy.

ACTOR 4: SOUND can we get a mic up here?
(SOUND looks at ACTOR 4 then at the mic on the stage. SOUND then moves it in front of ACTOR 4 and is gestured to move it in front of ACTOR 1. SOUND squats at the base of the mic this whole scene, moving it as jokes are told.)

ACTOR 1:
I don’t want to brag or anything, but I was voted class clown in ‘19. So prepare yourself.
This joke got me through the finals of last year’s talent show. Ok. Y’all ready?
What do you call a pony horsing around- Oh no! I just said the punch line. Let me start over.
Why did the pony get sent to timeout? He was horsing around. See? Funny, right?

TOE SOCK GUY: *(laughs uncontrollably)*
Did you hear that? A pony horsing around. *(continues to laugh)*

ACTOR 3:
Ooh! My turn! Why did the picture go to jail? Because he was framed! Get it?

TOE SOCK GUY: *(laughs uncontrollably)*
Picture frames. Ahaha, that’s so funny.

ACTOR 3:
 Framed, like me! *(cricket sound)* I'm just messing. I've never been to jail. Haha. That was the second part of the joke...

ACTOR 4:
 Let me help you out. What's brown and sticky? A stick.
(Crickets)

TOE SOCK GUY:
 Nope, that one's not funny. Not even remotely. A stick? Seriously?
 What's wrong with this guy?

ACTOR 4: Hey, ACTOR 2, are you still on the phone with ACTOR 5?

ACTOR 2:
 Give me a minute... *(hangs up call)* Man, I hate leaving voicemails.

ACTOR 3:
 That was- that was a voicemail?

ACTOR 2:
 Yeah, is it my turn now?

ACTOR 3:
 Yes.

ACTOR 2:
 What do you call a cross between a *(pulls suggestion out of "mythical creature" bucket)* and a playwright? A-
(phone rings and ACTOR 2 answers it. It is ACTOR 5. ACTOR 2 puts them on speaker)

ACTOR 5:
 I got your voicemail and no, I don't want to go to the cast party! Am I on speaker?

ACTOR 2: No...
 But you are now.

ACTOR 5:
 Gosh, don't put me on speaker...

ACTOR 2:
 Oops, too late.

ACTOR 5:
Hi guys... On my way right now. What scene are y'all on?

ACTOR 1:
The stand up one.

ACTOR 5:
Like stand up comedy?

ACTOR 2:
Yeah, tell a joke. The mic is hot.
(WRITER enters and listens to call)

ACTOR 5:
Uhhh.. Well, I wasn't really prepared... But uh... What do you call a cross between a *(same "mythical creature" used earlier)* and a playwright? *(insert WRITER's name)*.

TOE SOCK GUY: *(laughs uncontrollably)*

ACTOR 2, proudly:
Oh, that's my joke!

WRITER:
What?! I do not look like a *("mythical creature" suggestion)*

ACTOR 5:
Oop, gotta go! Be there in 10!

WRITER:
Was that ACTOR 5? I finished writing the next scene.

ACTOR 1:
Oh, good.
(WRITER hands out scripts to actors and they go backstage.)

WRITER:
Despite being written three minutes ago, this next scene is one I hold so dearly to my heart. It shares its name with one of the most popular and influential musicals on Broadway.

ACTOR 2: *(peeks head onstage)*
He's not very creative when it comes to names. *(shrugs)*

WRITER:

Without further ado, I present “Hamilton: Our Hometown”.

SCENE 5- Hamilton: Our Hometown

(For this scene, the ACTORS will be reading from a script handed to them by WRITER. The WRITER filled out the blanks in the script with the suggestions given in the papers handed to audience members (during Avenue 2.0) while the ACTORS were doing the last scene. Their roles may change in each performance depending on how the audience members fill out the Mad Lib. Fill in the parenthesis with the answers provided by audience members.)

(The character MAN is the villain. The character HORSE is the animal. The remaining actors not assigned a role by the audience in the mad lib will play “rock, paper, scissors” onstage in front of everyone to determine which character they play. ACTOR 5 will read lines titled ACTOR 5.)

(Both “remaining actors” will begin to read GLORIA’s first line at the same time. They don’t know who is which character. They will argue who gets to be GLORIA, so they end up playing “rock, paper, scissors”. Who ever wins, will restart line and the loser will read for NATHANIEL)

GLORIA, *with a bad country accent:*

‘Tis but another day working on thy farm. My bones hurteth as though they are crumbling into dust from all this hard labor...eth.

NATHANIAL, *also with bad country accent:*

We shall try to runneth away! I hear just a few miles up thee road lies a town so spectacular...eth and modern.

GLORIA:

Oh how I yearn for *(one healthcode requirement)* and *(another healthcode requirement)*.

NATHANIAL:

Then let’s depart. We must head to Hamilton!

(Note: Whenever the word “Hamilton” is said, have the other actors say “Yee-haw!”)
(HORSE and MAN enter)

HORSE:

Neigh! I am the horse!

MAN, *holding a “horse taxi” sign:*

Whoa there horse! I see two travelers looking for a ride! Y’all looking for a ride?

GLORIA:

Yes, to Hamilton.
(Yee-haw!)

MAN:

Ahhhh, Hamilton. (*Yee-haw!*) I've heard it's (*one dream vacation phrase*).

NATHANIAL:

Really? I've heard it's (*different dream vacation place*)

GLORIA:

No, no. You've got it all wrong. Hamilton (*Yee-haw!*) is (*different dream vacation place*)
(*Long silence*)

MAN:

Pssst, it's your line.

HORSE:

No it's not.

MAN:

Yes it is! Just say your line!

HORSE:

Fine! Neigh! I'm the horse!

MAN:

Well anyways, get in my buggy! Off to Hamilton! (*Yee-haw!*)
(*They proceed to gallop from one side of the stage to the other with WRITER using coconuts as "hoof" sound effects. Maybe there can be "Wild West" music in the background.*)

MAN:

Whoa horsey! Whoa! I said whoooooa!

HORSE:

I'm whoaing!

MAN:

Well, here we are. Hamilton. (*Yee-haw!*)

GLORIA:

It's a lot smaller than I imagined.

NATHANIAL, *looking at the audience*:

Yeah, and everyone looks weird. Where's the (*one must have in a house*) I heard all about?

GLORIA:

Or the *(different must have in a house)* and *(different must have in a house)* ?

MAN:

Well, they're over in the square next to the *(different must have in a house)* and *(different must have in a house)*

NATHANIAL:

Would you mind taking us up to the square? We need to find a place to stay.

MAN:

Sure! Giddyup horsey! Giddyup! I said giddyup!

HORSE:

I'm giddyenuppien! Man, of all the characters, of course I'm cast as the horse. *(sighs and neighs)*
(ACTOR 5 bursts through the door closest to the bus ramp)

ACTOR 5:

Waaaait! Don't start the next scene! I got stuck behind a tractor going fifteen in a fifty-five. That's Hamilton *(Yee-haw!, ACTOR 5 looks around to find the source of the Yee-haw!.)* for ya!

WRITER:

We're in the middle of a scene! Here, jump in. You're playing the hero.

ACTOR 5:

Oh yay! Where are we? Oh! *(reads from script)* Go no further you evil horse taxi driver!
 ACTOR 5 walks downstage left to meet and confront the man.

WRITER:

Wait! Wrong part! You skipped like half of it!

ACTOR 5, *ignoring WRITER:*

I have seen you before. And it wasn't at a rodeo. It was in the clink! For kidnapping!

NATHANIAL/GLORIA:

Gasp!

ACTOR 5:

Do you remember me? I was the *(one job required to keep a prison running)*

NATHANIAL/GLORIA:

Gasp!

ACTOR 5:

Point accusingly at the man. Walk centerstage.

MAN:

I don't know what you're talking about!

WRITER:

Go back! Go back! Page 3!

MAN:

I'm not kidnapping them! They are customers! Paying customers!

GLORIA:

Actually, we were hoping this would be F.O.C. Free of charge.

NATHANIAL:

You know, from the kindness of your F.O.C.I.N.G. heart. (*elaborates*) From the kindness of your free of charge heart.

MAN:

What?!

ACTOR 5:

Walk upstage left to confront the man one last time.

WRITER:

Stop reading the stage directions!

ACTOR 5:

What?

WRITER:

The words in italics are not meant to be read! And go back to the right spot! You skipped the part where the tap dancing tigers enter and the police being called over the dueling landlords! The audience hasn't even had the time to figure out the hitchhikers are actually millionaires!

ACTOR 5:

I mean, everybody already knows what happens now... So we might as well carry on.

WRITER:

Fine!

ACTOR 5:

Walk in a circle around the horse taxi and proceed to challenge the man to a duel. I challenge you to a duel!

MAN:
Okay! I accept!

ACTOR 5:
Whoever wins this gets to decide the fate of the two poor travelers! Pick a random person from the audience. Preferably one that looks like they know the difference between their left and their right... (*ACTOR 5 picks someone, but then shakes their head and picks a different person*) Have that person call out the words (*word that rhymes #1*) and (*word that rhymes #2*). Whenever that person says (*word that rhymes #2*) mimic spraying the MAN with a water gun and say *Yee-Haw!* (*Says next part to audience member*) You got that? So basically, it's a duel. Say (*word that rhymes #1*) until you're ready for us to yell *Yee-Haw!* Whoever says it first, wins the duel. You sure you understand? I mean my life is on the line. Ok... Now get in positions for the duel.

MAN:
I am in position for the duel!

ACTOR 5:
Oh, no. That was just the stage directions. I wasn't talking to you.

MAN:
You're really throwing me off with all the stage directions.

ACTOR 5: (*to audience member*)
Ok, we're ready when you are.
(*They duel. ACTOR 5 wins.*)

MAN:
No! I am down! I am down! Goodbye world! Goodbye!

ACTOR 5:
I am victorious! Walk downstage to MAN and check his pulse. Declare his death. He is dead folks! He is dead! Do not fear NATHANIEL and GLORIA.
(*MAN proceeds to drag himself offstage.*)

GLORIA:
We are saved!

NATHANIAL:
Thank goodness!

HORSE:

Neigh!

(There is a roar from offstage and SOUND runs on)

SOUND:

I've got the tap-dancing tigers! When do I let them on?

WRITER:

No! No! I sent you a text! Cancel the tiger rental! Check your phone!

SOUND:

Oh, well I already paid... So maybe we can use them later in the show?

WRITER:

I don't think so...

LIGHTS:

Watch out!

(A bed sheet unfurls from the grid and falls right in front of the actors. ACTORS scream.)

LIGHTS:

Close one! I was trying to do a black out, 'cause it got real awkward when SOUND came on, but my finger... slipped and I accidentally hit the big, red button under the sign that says "do not touch".

(The ACTORS are still behind the sheet and we can see their shadows moving around)

ACTOR 5, still reading from script:

Now, GLORIA and NATHANIEL, where are you headed? Walk to the remaining actors and proceed to pet the horse's mane.

HORSE, *as actor*:

You better not touch me- don't you do it! No

ACTOR 5, *whispering*:

It's for the show man. Just go with the flow...

(ACTOR 5 awkwardly pets the HORSE)

GLORIA:

We are headed to Hamilton. *(Yee-haw!)*

NATHANIEL:

But, the horse already told us, I mean nipped at me whenever I asked it to take us the rest of the way. It's a very stubborn horse.

HORSE:

I am sick and tired of always playing the animals! I'm done! Done, I say! *(We see the actor take off the horse head and put it under his arm. He then walks off stage.)*

ACTOR 5:

Do not fear! I'll have my tap-dancing tigers take you the rest of the way!

SOUND:

No, no! Don't you dare touch that cage! Ehh! I'm warning you!
*(We hear a roar and then behind the curtain, tigers run across the stage. *Note: You could either use a projection on the sheet or have actors run behind it on all fours... *)*

WRITER, to the audience:

One moment please.

(WRITER slips behind sheet and hisses multiple times, which calms down the roaring tigers.)

WRITER:

Get in the cage! In the cage!

(WRITER hisses again and then steps out from behind the sheet.)

WRITER:

Thank goodness I attended that *Cats* workshop, I now speak fluent tiger. Well, what did you think? Maybe I should just stick to the show I had already written. We can blame that little safety hazard on the people who filled out those questionnaires. Just... don't sue about the tigers. We don't have room in the budget for it... Moving on!

SOUND: You forgot to tell me what set pieces you needed for the next scene! It's not in the script.

WRITER:

For this next scene? Oh, we just need a plane.

SOUND:

Now? A plane?

WRITER:

Yeah.

SOUND, to audience:

Do you hear this guy? "Just get a plane, it can't be that hard".

WRITER:

You have five minutes.

(SOUND squeals and runs offstage.)

WRITER:

We'll get back to that scene in a minute... *(Yells to ACTORS backstage)* We're skipping the plane scene for now! We'll do that one after the "Lagtime" one! *(to audience)* Our next play kind of pokes fun at slow internet connection- something we all have to deal with every now and then. I present to you, Lagtime.

SCENE 6- Lagtime

(ACTOR 1 says all the lines for NEWS ANCHOR. ACTOR 5 will be onstage mouthing the lines for NEWS ANCHOR. ACTORS 3 is Farmer Freddy. ACTOR 4 is NEWS CREW and holding a camera, boom, ect. ACTOR 2 is RANDOM GUY.)
(A desk is rolled out and a sketchy-looking sign that says WBRL NEWS CHANNEL 77 comes on. During this scene, the ANCHOR's lips aren't going to match up with his voice.)

NEWS ANCHOR:

Good morning. I'm Fonda Fatlips and you are watching *(looks at sign)* WBRL NEWS CHANNEL 77.

RANDOM GUY:

Get a load of this! This guy's mouth never matches his voice. Watch.

NEWS ANCHOR:

Today's story has to do with politics... haha! Just kidding! We actually have a special guest on with us today, Farmer Freddy.

FARMER FREDDY:

Yup.

NEWS ANCHOR:

Tell us why you're here with us.

FARMER FREDDY:

Ima growin' the biggest tomater yuse ever did see.

NEWS ANCHOR:

Ok, that's enough. *(Chuckles)* Hopefully he'll share with us! Up next is a personal favorite segment of mine: Cute puppies.

SOUND:

I've got the plane sir! *(runs onstage with a toy plane)*

NEWS ANCHOR:

Hey! We're live here!

SOUND:

I know, I know. But it was the best I could do...

NEWS ANCHOR:

Commercial break! Commercial break!

WRITER:

Cut! Just stop! We won't do Lagtime anymore. I didn't really like where the scene was heading anyways.

SOUND:

No one would let me rent their plane. So I picked this up at the Dollar General.

WRITER:

No, no. That won't do. Actors!

(WRITER claps twice and the lights turn off.)

WRITER:

Hey, LIGHTS! What's going on? Turn the lights on!

(WRITER sighs loudly. The lights finally come on and when they do, the ACTORS are all huddled around WRITER.)

WRITER:

Ah! Wow, you scared me. This next scene only needs two actors: the pilot and the angel. The extra people are going to be the plane.

(WRITER positions the extra ACTORS in the shape of a plane. WRITER accidentally uses 4 out of the 5 ACTORS, so there is no pilot.)

WRITER, to audience:

I present to you: Don't Look Down.

SCENE 7- Don't Look Down
(ACTOR 1 is the ANGEL)
(Lights dim, then spotlight on ANGEL)

ANGEL, with ghost voice:
 You have escaped me long enough! I will take no more of this!

WRITER:
 No! You are an angel, not a ghost.

ANGEL:
 You don't know what angels sound like.

WRITER:
 No, but I know what I want you to sound like.
 ANGEL: Fine. *(In a high pitched voice)* I am here to end you!
(Plane actors make sputtering sound)

ACTOR 2:
 Wait, who is driving the plane?

ACTOR 3:
 Where is the pilot?

ACTOR 4:
 Mayday! Mayday! We are falling!

ACTOR 5:
 Get someone from the audience to drive!

ACTOR 2:
 Hey you! *(points to an audience member)* Get up here!

ACTOR 3:
 Hurry! We only have forty thousand feet left!

ACTOR 4:
 I've seen a snail move faster!

ACTOR 5:
 Hey buddy! Just because your life isn't on the line, doesn't mean you can walk slower than a-

ACTOR 2:

About time. Ok, grab our thumbs to steer.

ACTOR 3:
Yup, just keep us level.

ACTOR 4:
Close one.

ANGEL:
As I was saying, I was sent by a certain someone (*points upward*) to set you straight. What do you have to say for yourself?

ACTOR 5:
Well, say something!

ANGEL:
How about this? I'll give you three riddles and if you can get all of them correct, I'll spare you the punishment and tell the Big Guy we had a little chat about your tax evasion issue. Tax evasion, big deal. I know. We're not too happy about it. But I'm giving you a chance to wipe your slate clean. So, what do you say about the riddles? If you get one wrong, I'm going to have to confiscate everything. Even the very plane you're flying in now.

ACTOR 2:
Why the plane? Did he not pay taxes on it either?

ACTOR 3: Shame, shame.

ANGEL:
So, what do ya' say?

ACTOR 4:
Pst. Say yes. Say yes.

ACTOR 5:
I really don't want to know what happens when he confiscates planes.
(If an audience member says "yes", then continue with the scene as normal. If they say "no", use the italicized script.)

ANGEL:
Oop, wrong answer! That was your first riddle! Don't worry, I'll give you another chance. (Clears throat) So... Do you want to play the game or not? (If they say "yes", continue with riddles. If they say "no", continue with italicized script.)

ANGEL:

I tried to warn you! Confiscation time!

(Black out. When lights come back on, only the audience member is onstage.)

WRITER: *Well that's embarrassing... Why don't we have ACTOR 1 walk you back to your seat?*

(ACTOR 1 still has angel costume on. They smile evenly when they see the audience member. When the audience member is seated and ACTOR 1 is back onstage, move on to SCENE 7.)

ANGEL:

Good choice. Safe choice. By the way, you just passed your first riddle. Okay, riddle number two... It's a toughy. What is black, white, and read all over?

(If they say "newspaper", continue the scene as normal. If they get it wrong, use the following italicized script.)

(ANGEL makes buzzer sound.)

ANGEL:

Bummer dude... that's like the easiest riddle ever. Oh well. Confiscation time!

(Black out. When lights come back on, only the audience member is onstage.)

WRITER:

Well that's embarrassing... Why don't we have ACTOR 1 walk you back to your seat?

(ACTOR 1 still has angel costume on. They smile evenly when they see the audience member. When audience member is seated and ACTOR 1 is back onstage, move on to SCENE 8.)

ANGEL:

Correct! Riddle number three... If you were paying attention earlier, you should get this one right... It's less of a riddle and more of a joke. Anyways, what do you get when you cross a ("mythical creature" suggestion from earlier) and a playwright?

ACTOR 2, proudly:

Hey! That's my joke from earlier!

(If audience member answers correctly, continue scene as normal. If they get it wrong, continue using italicized script.)

ANGEL:

Bummer dude... We literally said that joke earlier... Oh well. Confiscation time!

(Black out. When lights come back on, only the audience member is onstage.)

WRITER:

Well that's embarrassing... Why don't we have ACTOR 1 walk you back to your seat?

(ACTOR 1 still has angel costume on. They smile evenly when they see the audience member. When audience member is seated and ACTOR 1 is back onstage, move on to SCENE 8.)

ANGEL:

Correctumondo! Wow! Impressive! I've never had anyone answer all the riddles correctly before! Why don't we do a little "double jeopardy"? I have one last riddle and if you can get this correct, I'll never mess with you again. But, if you get it wrong... you still lose your plane... So here we go... A bowling ball is falling from a cliff and is heading towards a school bus filled with different breeds of poodle mixes. The dog bus driver is named Chester. What is his best friend's maiden name? *(At this point, the audience member is going to get it wrong.)*

ANGEL:

Incorrect! Oh well. Confiscation time!
(Black out. When lights come back on, only the audience member is onstage.)

WRITER:

Well that's embarrassing... Why don't we have ACTOR 1 walk you back to your seat? *(ACTOR 1 still has angel costume on. They smile evilly when they see the audience member. When audience member is seated and ACTOR 1 is back onstage, move on to SCENE 8.)*

SCENE 8- Le Joy

(Lights dim slowly and dramatically. There is a prolonged blackout. We hear LIGHTS stumbling/running through the audience.)

LIGHTS:

Sir? Sir?

WRITER:

Turn on the lights! You have one job!

LIGHTS: I was wondering if I could be in the show now? My faaavorite scene is coming up and ACTOR 5 still isn't here!

ACTOR 5:

What?! Yes I am!

LIGHTS:

Well, it's my favorite scene!

WRITER:

Who is going to run lights?

LIGHTS:

Oh, well I've installed the clapper. Look. *(claps two times)*
(Lights come on)

WRITER:

Is that why the lights went out earlier?

LIGHTS:

Which time?

WRITER:

Never mind. You can be the bread maker.

LIGHTS:

Really?! Oh, thanks!

WRITER, *to the audience*:

Since we are a small bunch, we don't have enough people to be the "townsfolk" for this next scene. We need some of you to be our ensemble. (*Picks 5 people*) Here are your costumes. Just stand on the taped out Xs. Oh! And whenever you hear the word "happy", I need you to (*pulls suggestion out of "reaction to wife being pregnant" bucket*). This includes any form of "happy": happiness, happy, etc. Okay, places please! A few years ago I stumbled across a show called *Les Miserables*. I was sad for the following fifty days. Well, I thought if I could create a show called "Les Joy", then I can have the same effect on other people! Well, not sadness, but happiness...you get the point. I now present to you, Le Joy!

(*WRITER scurries to seat. ACTOR 2 enters looking very sad.*)

(*ACTOR 1 is KING LUCKY. ACTOR 2 is JAVIER. ACTOR 3 is OTHER PEASANT. ACTOR 4 is KING'S MAN. ACTOR 5 is MESSENGER*)

WRITER:

Hey! You're supposed to be happy!

JAVIER:

Oh shoot right! My name is Javier. I am a French peasant. And I am terribly poor! Like terribly poor!

OTHER PEASANT:

The wealthy elite of France tax us to no end and treat us terribly! They enforce harsh rules and rip us off. We get nothing... and we're okay with that!

LIGHTS:

I am the bread maker and you will abide by my rules!

WRITER:

No! You're not supposed to say anything. You don't actually have any lines. I made up your character just now. Where did you get those bagets from?

LIGHTS:
Found 'em backstage.

WRITER:
Wha- Ok, that's fine. Continue.

KING LUCKY:
I'm sorry what?! You're what?

JAVIER:
Fine with getting ripped off!

KING'S MAN:
You're what?!

OTHER PEASANT:
Fine with getting exploited by individuals who are only different from me by my socio-economic status.

LIGHTS, *trying to steal the show*:
I am the bread maker and you will abide by my rules! (*ignored by other actors*)

KING LUCKY, *visibly confused*:
I... You do know how bad I'm exploiting you right?
(*MESSENGER runs onstage.*)

MESSENGER:
King Lucky- (*Sees peasants and gasps*) What are you doing out here with these filthy peasants?! You should be partying with us in Paris!

KING'S MAN:
I second that! You should be using the idiot's money, not chatting about it with him!

MESSENGER:
Come on! We've got more money to steal... I mean collect from the peasants who loyally give it to us.

KING LUCKY: (*Looks from JAVIER to OTHER PEASANT*)
You're fine with that?

JAVIER:
Why wouldn't I be?

MESSENGER:
Is this guy okay?

OTHER PEASANT:
We're quite happy.

LIGHTS:
I am the freakin' bread maker and you will abide by my gosh darn rules you peasants!
(ignored again)

JAVIER:
Would you like to stay for dinner?

KING'S MAN:
What are you having?

OTHER PEASANT:
Dirt, sticks, shrubs. It's Tuesday night after all! Oh! I just love my life!

KING LUCKY:
What is going on?!

MESSENGER:
Is this some kind of joke?

JAVIER:
No, no joke. I'm just happy! And so is everybody else!

OTHER PEASANT:
And you should be too!
(At this point, JAVIER begins leading the audience into singing "If You're Happy and You Know It." Whenever the clapping part happens, the lights turn off and on... due to the clapper. Whenever the word "happy" is sung, the 5 audience members have to react. This should be pure chaos.)

LIGHTS:
Abide by my rules! Abide by my rules!

MESSENGER:
Oh, no. I can't do this! WRITER! WRITER!

WRITER:
What are you doing?

MESSENGER:

I can't do this. It makes no sense. These people are starving and they're fine with that?!!
(Singing still going on in background. KING LUCKY has joined them.)

WRITER:

Okay, you don't see the artistic vision here. This show is about joy and happiness.

MESSENGER:

Joy? Joy?! Starving! He is starving!

OTHER PEASANT, *sing-songy*:
 And I'm haaaaapy!

WRITER:

Ok, if you don't like the play, the exits are that way *(points offstage right)* and that way.
(points offstage left)
(LIGHTS runs to booth)

MESSENGER:

Fine! Enjoy your bad show!

WRITER:

Hey! Everyone! *(Can't be heard over singing)* Stop! We're done! *(claps 6-7 times, lights go in a frenzy. Everyone stops and looks at WRITER.)* Everyone take a break. I need to re-
 invigorate my mind. Go sit down.
(ACTORS exit. A desk is rolled out and lights are dimmed. WRITER is centerstage and there is a spotlight a little off centered of him. He sits down and notices the light.)

WRITER:

Hey, LIGHTS? Hey! Are you back in the booth yet? I see your feet up on the light board!
 Could you?... *(gestures to the spot light)* Could you just center the spot on me? It really
 helps. Tha- *(spotlight is moved)* Thanks.
(WRITER starts looking through a mess of papers on his desk.)

WRITER:

Hmm, what about this one? No. Too basic. Or what about this one? Nah, has the exact plot as
Romeo and Juliet. How about this one?! Yes! This might work. Now, I didn't go over this
 one with the actors, but they can just wing it. After all, I wasn't told to have a finished
 product, just a finished script. And this will do just the trick! I forgot I had written this. It
 really just needs a few touches here and there. *(looks up at audience)* I think this might be the
 script that earns me an A!
(WRITER runs offstage. Black out. Curtains close.)
(End of ACT 1.)

(*Note: I have a list of things to be accomplished during intermission. Pick and choose as you wish, but the things in bold must be done.)
 -Intermission Song: funny song sung by LIGHTS and SOUND
 -ACTORS mingling with audience members
 -ACTORS having a quarrel about props. (can be improvised)
 -Have one ACTOR put a “container of crickets” under selected chair -Make stage “messy”

ACT 2

SCENE 1- The Board Members are Coming! (*The ACTORS are milling around onstage. WRITER runs frantically onstage.*)

WRITER:

The board members are coming! The board members are coming!
 (*All the ACTORS stop what they are doing.*)

ACTOR 1:

What?!

ACTOR 2:

I thought you were supposed to pitch the play tomorrow?!

ACTOR 3:

Yeah, and only for Marc! Not the counselors!

ACTOR 4:

Who’s Marc?

WRITER, *ignoring ACTOR 4:*

Me too! But apparently we have a snitch in this very room! (*to audience*) Which one of you is the mole?

ACTOR 5:

What are you talking about?

ACTOR 4:

Who is Marc?

WRITER:

Turns out, Mrs. Bragstone... the head honcho lady of the senior project board has Snapchat. (*to audience*) And one of you posted on your story about tonight’s show. Thankfully you did not disclose any more information except that I was debuting my “newly written” play. Bragstone doesn’t know I haven’t written the show yet. And now she thinks I’m doing a test

run with an audience before I show her. And she doesn't like to be left out and now she is coming!

ACTOR 1:
Wait, so who told her?

WRITER:
I don't know. But as soon as SOUND finds the post, he is going to print it out and pass it around. Someone will recognize the username.

ACTOR 4:
Who is Marc?!

WRITER:
What? Oh, Marc is the new teaching assistant for the AP Lit class. He was supposed to be my "mentor", but I never scheduled any meetings. He also warned me that the senior project counselors were heading this way about... 2 minutes ago.

ACTOR 2:
Well, don't you have a show to present?

ACTOR 3:
I thought you had one picked out for tomorrow.

WRITER:
I do. But y'all don't know the lines or the plot. I was just going to have you read out of the script in front of this audience first.

ACTOR 4:
Is Marc hot?

WRITER:
Now is not the time! And yes, Marc is very attractive.

ACTOR 5:
Well, just give us a quick run through. We do improv. We can make up blocking and as long as we can look at the script before the scene, we should be able to memorize most of our lines.

WRITER:
You only have like ten minutes. Maybe even less than that.

ACTOR 1:

Then quit whining and give us the scripts!

ACTOR 2:

Yeah, we got this. What kind of play is it?

WRITER:

It's a mystery. Murder mystery.

ACTOR 4:

Is Marc going to be here?

WRITER:

Maybe, are y'all serious? You would do that for me?

ACTOR 3:

As long as you sign off on my hours.

ACTOR 5:

And as long as I get paid.

ACTOR 4:

Besides, you're our improv buddy. I mean, you're the best we've got. You never let us down. We won't let you down. Especially if Marc is coming.

WRITER:

Okay. Let me give you the synopsis.

LIGHTS, SOUND! Stall!

SCENE 2- Clean Up Crew

(LIGHTS runs down from the booth)

LIGHTS:

I thought I could be a part of the show in the second act! Man, WRITER never gives me a chance.

SOUND:

He doesn't appreciate people like us. Crew.

WRITER, *from offstage*:

Close the curtain, would ya?! *(peeks head out)* And if the board members arrive, use your manners! *(To audience)* You all are still in trouble for snitching!

SOUND:

See? “Close the curtain! Get a plane! Rent some tigers! Oh! Don’t let the tigers out!”

LIGHTS:

Yeah it’s all “Stop turning off the lights, we need to see!” and no “Good job LIGHTS, you actually showed up this time.”

SOUND:

I don’t think I’ve heard one kind word come out of his mouth. He is just picky and ungrateful.

LIGHTS:

Yeah! Totally!... Well, what are we going to do about it? About being mistreated?

SOUND:

He told us to stall.

LIGHTS:

Well he also told us to “clean up the stage and set up for act two”. Well, I ain’t gonna do it!

SOUND:

No. You rebel.

LIGHTS:

That’s right. You heard me. I’m not gonna stall. Or clean up.

SOUND:

I have an even better idea. Why don’t we get some people from the audience to do it for us?

LIGHTS:

WRITER would hate that! Ohhh, great idea. *(to audience member)* Hey, you! Come up here! Help us clean up the stage. *(SOUND dumps out a bucket of suggestions.)*

SOUND:

Can someone get up here and clean up this mess? I aint waiting all day! Come here! Clean this up!

LIGHTS:

Hey you! Yes, you! What’s something you’d hate to hear from a drill sergeant?
(LIGHTS goes on and says that to someone who is cleaning.)

LIGHTS:

I need someone to hold this chair up for me! Yeah, like that.

SOUND:

Can you come sweep up under here? One sec, let me get you a broom.

LIGHTS:

Whenever you finish your job, go back to your seat.

SOUND:

Here ya go! (*hands audience member a broom*)

LIGHTS:

WRITER isn't ever going to mess with us again! We're invincible!

SOUND: Yeah!

(*Door in back of house opens and BRAGSTONE enters.*)

SOUND:

Hey! You late person! Don't think we don't see you sneaking in.

LIGHTS:

I bet she didn't even pay for her ticket!

SOUND:

You know what happens to people who don't pay for their tickets!?

LIGHTS:

You know I do! Wait, what happens?

SOUND:

I don't know. I was asking you.

LIGHTS:

Oh, well...We could send her up to the grid!

SOUND:

Oooh, let's make her carry the eight-foot long benches up the spiral staircase.

LIGHTS:

By herself!

SOUND:

Yeah! That'll teach her!

BRAGSTONE:

Excuse me? What is going on? Who are you? You aren't WRITER.

LIGHTS:

You bet your big bum we're not!

BRAGSTONE:

Excuse me? Well, where is he?

SOUND:

We've gone rogue. We don't know anything anymore!

BRAGSTONE:

Well if you can remember, please tell WRITER Mrs. Bragstone is here and she is not okay with the lack of civility happening.

LIGHTS:

Wait. You're Mrs. Bragstone?

BRAGSTONE:

You bet your big bum I am.

SOUND:

Uhh, one moment please. I am going to fetch WRITER.

LIGHTS:

So uh... you like jazz?

BRAGSTONE:

Frankly, no. But I do like professionalism and promptness. What is taking so long?

LIGHTS:

Where are the rest of the board members?

BRAGSTONE:

They are waiting in the car. I am supposed to let them know when to come in. Where is WRITER?

LIGHTS:

If I were you, I'd tell them to lock their doors and drive far, far away.

BRAGSTONE:

Who are you again?

WRITER:

Mrs. Bragstone! What a pleasant surprise!
(WRITER runs onstage and trips over broom.)

WRITER: *(hisses)*

Pick this up! *(clears throat)* I didn't know you were here yet, or I would have sent out snacks. So sorry for the wait. The actors are just warming up. They'll be out shortly.

BRAGSTONE:

Should I tell the board members to come in now?

WRITER:

Sure, why not? Here, take a seat. I saved you a spot.
(LIGHTS and SOUND are seen hauling on a couch up the stairs to be placed next to the WRITER's chair.)

BRAGSTONE:

You've got quite an audience. We're not late, are we?

WRITER:

No, no. I told everyone to get here fifteen minutes early. We're just trying to raise money for charity.

BRAGSTONE:

Lovely, for what cause?

WRITER:

You know... that one.

BRAGSTONE:

Hmm?

WRITER:

Uh... for.... ThesCon scholarships.

BRAGSTONE:

That's wonderful! Sending adolescents to ThesCon! Theatre really prepares you for everything whether or not you pursue it as a career. Anyways, I'll forget the rude greeting I got from those two hillbillies since you really are taking the initiative to help the thespian society grow. Who were those weirdos anyways? Are they a charity case also? They were making audience members clean up.

WRITER:

What?! Oh, um... They are my light and sound crew. They were just practicing a bit. You know? An idea for a possible scene and they needed more bodies to act it out. Don't worry about it.

(The other board members enter through the back door.)

WRITER:

Welcome! Welcome! Come on in! Find a seat. Anywhere is fine.

TRIPPIE:

Well thank you kindly.

BETTY:

I am so looking forward to seeing your play!

BRAGSTONE:

This is Trippie Mickey and Betty Whittaker.

BETTY:

Marc has told me all about you and how clever you are.

WRITER:

Really? Where is Marc?

TRIPPIE:

He got a bad case of the shingles.

BETTY:

And lice. Poor guy.

ACTOR 4: *(runs onstage)*

Marc! No!

(SOUND drags ACTOR 4 off.)

WRITER:

Sorry, just practicing another bit... What happened to Marc?

TRIPPIE:

Oh, you know... he was dumpster diving again. You know how neurotic he gets when people don't recycle.

WRITER:

Yeah, I do...

(Flashback to Marc jumping in trashcan. Spotlight on him... similar to Darth Vader bit.)

MARC:

Ma, I told you to recycle your chilli bean cans! This is the last time I warn ya!
(Spotlight off)

BRAGSTONE:

Anyways, are your actors ready now?

WRITER:

Let me check. Um.. and let me warn you... Don't be expecting spectacular acting or anything. They just got the script.

BETTY:

Just got the script?

WRITER:

Yeah, yes. Like a month or two ago.

BRAGSTONE:

Well which was it?

WRITER:

Hmm?

BRAGSTONE:

Was it one month ago or two months ago? A month can make a big difference.

WRITER:

Actually it was 3 weeks ago.

TRIPPIE:

That's plenty of time. Can't wait to see it!

WRITER:

Let me go check on the actors... one second.
(WRITER goes backstage.)

SCENE 3- Disclaimer

LIGHTS:

Man, I've never seen WRITER that mad before.

SOUND:

He was real peeved about us getting the audience to clean up for us.

LIGHTS:

Yeah, let's not do that again. I didn't know WRITER hacks up hairballs when angry.

SOUND:

Yelling will do it to ya. Eesh, come on. Help me close the curtain.
(They close the curtain and try to sneak offstage past the board members.)

BETTY:

Are those the two nimrods that tried to force you up on the grid?

BRAGSTONE:

Yes, yes there are.

TRIPPIE:

Why don't we teach them a lesson?

(Cricket sound)

T

RIPPIE:

Did you hear that?

BRAGSTONE:

Hear what?

TRIPPIE:

Oh nothing. Never mind.

WRITER:

Can I have a word with Mrs. Bragstone please? Okay, like I was trying to say before... Don't focus too much on the acting... or the writing. Just don't think too much about the show at all. You know what? Just sleep through it.

(WRITER claps twice and the lights turn off. When they come back on, the board members have a blanket laid across them.)

WRITER:

I mean it is a student written play... So I guess what I am trying to say is... What I am about to present to you is far from a real-world product... and if you don't like it, I have some back up ideas.

BRAGSTONE, laughing uncontrollably:

You are hilarious. And convincing. For a minute there, I really thought you weren't ready. Wow, you deserve a Tony for that. Why aren't you acting in your show?

WRITER:

I just want to provide as many opportunities as possible. Okay, I guess we are ready.

BRAGSTONE:

Splendid.

WRITER:

Places! Places please!

(Lights in house brighten and dim. WRITER goes backstage and talks to actors)

WRITER: There's not much to say except "my diploma's on the line". You guys got this! If you pull this off, I owe you big time.

ACTOR 1:

Don't you worry one little bit.

ACTOR 2:

Yeah, we got this.

WRITER:

I sure hope so.

SCENE 4- Murder Mystery

(Lights dim, curtain opens. ACTOR 1 is HARRY. ACTOR 2 is LARRY. ACTOR 3 is MIKE. ACTOR 4 is COP. ACTOR 5 is BUTLER.)

BUTLER:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I am the most delighted that you are here with me tonight. You couldn't have picked a better time to be a living witness to what is about to occur.

TRIPPIE:

Oooh, I wonder what is about to occur.

BRAGSTONE:

Shh.

(A door bell rings three times.)

BUTLER:

Come in, come in, come in.

(HARRY, LARRY, and MIKE enter)

BUTLER:

Welcome. I've been expecting you.

HARRY:
Oooh, that's creepy.

LARRY:
I should hope so, you invited us.

MIKE, *reading lines off his arm*:
Something, something... do you own a toilet?

BETTY:
Hmph?

HARRY:
That's not your line. *(Clears throat)* What Mike meant to say was, do you mind if he uses the restroom? It's been a long drive.

MIKE, *whispers*:
Sorry, I forgot my line.

BUTLER:
It's all good, the bathroom is down the hall to the left. Third door. Use it while you can.
(MIKE walks offstage and sits next to an audience member. The next two lines are said under MIKE's line.)

BUTLER:
So you all rode together?

HARRY:
Well, me and Mike did. Saves on gas money.

MIKE, *to audience member*:
If you don't mind, I am going to sit right here. I don't know any of my lines and I figured I could hide out here until WRITER notices I'm missing. Do you think he'll still sign off on my community service?

BUTLER:
Please make yourself comfortable... while you can.

TRIPPIE:
Have you noticed he keeps making subtle threats?

BETTY:

Yeah, I don't know. I kind of find it... fascinating.

TRIPPIE:

Speaking of fascinating, how's your dog/horse hybrid doing?

BRAGSTONE:

Shhh.

LARRY:

What's with all this "while you can" business? I'm scared.

BUTLER:

Typical of you.

LARRY:

What did you say? I'm not kidding. Did you hear that? You know what's typical? That you have to out me and make a lil' joke to everyone in the room that I'm a 'fraidy cat. Well look at me now!

HARRY:

Wait. You two know each other?

BUTLER:

Yes.

BETTY:

Ooooh! Plot twist!

TRIPPIE:

And so early in the show! Can't wait to see what happens next!

HARRY:

How do you know each other?
(*BUTLER tackles HARRY and pins him down.*)

HARRY:

What are you doing? Who are you? Are we about to kiss? How do you know each other?

LARRY:

We were inmates. Back in '04. I got caught putting up "birds aren't real" stickers on the windshields of students' cars while they were in class.

BUTLER:

And I got caught dropping a bowling ball from the top level of a parking garage... You know the one downtown? Man, it was awesome!

TRIPPIE:

Oh, I've done that.

BETTY:

Really? From the one downtown?

TRIPPIE:

No, the Atlanta airport one.

BETTY:

And you didn't get caught?

TRIPPIE:

Nope.

HARRY:

Get to the point.

LARRY:

Well, as I bawled my eyes out in fear of facing my mother, he formulated a plan to get us out of the clink.

(This next part is a flashback of LARRY and BUTLER in jail.)

LARRY:

I can't do this anymore! My momma is gonna kill me! And I don't mean the kick me out of the house kill me, I mean take me deep into the woods and-

BUTLER:

Pull yourself together! I can talk us out of this.

LARRY, *sobbing*:

I didn't even do nothin'. I was just giving away free stickers. Where's the crime in that?!

BUTLER:

Oh, shhh. Look. Here comes the copper.

COP:

Stop your crying or I'm gonna put you in a different cell.

LARRY:
Yes-s-s-s sir.

BUTLER:
You gotta another bathroom? I'm not too comfortable dropping another bowling ball in front of this guy. Might freak him out even more.

COP:
He'll live.

BUTLER:
He might die of fumes, if not fear. C'mon, when's the last time you had Taco Bell? The Chalupa Supreme is a killer.

COP:
Fine, but you have to leave the door open.
(Flashback ends.)

LARRY:
It was at this time that I pretended to have a seizure. The cop got distracted and left the cell door open.

BUTLER:
I made a run for it but only made it so far before I got tasered.

LARRY:
You'll never believe what happened next...

BUTLER:
As soon as I got shocked, my saliva glands went into overdrive and spit started pouring out of my mouth.

LARRY:
While he was unconscious.

BUTLER:
The cop that had tasered me, ran to check if I was immobile, slipped on my large puddle of spit, fell, hit his head, and was out cold.

LARRY:
I quickly came out of my fake seizure and checked to see if the other guard was on duty. Due to the smallness of our little town, only two cops manned the station. The other guy was dead asleep in the conference room, so I borrowed his set of keys and we made our way out.

BUTLER:
And that's how we escaped.

LARRY:
The first time.

BUTLER:
About fifteen minutes later, we were back in the clink.

LARRY:
'Cause apparently, there's no "get out of jail free if you can outsmart your prison guards"
pass.

BUTLER:
That's right. Just like there is no pass for you either.

HARRY:
Wait, who caught you the second time?

LARRY:
This lady I dogsat for caught us trying to hijack the police car and threatened us with her
pepper spray. She always carries it. I should've known.

BUTLER:
So we ended up back in jail, but in different cells this time and we had a couple more
offenses and fines...

LARRY:
But we still had each other.

BUTLER:
That's right.

LARRY:
Even though steel bars separated us, we really bonded. Especially since he decided to use the
bathroom in front of me anyways. From then on, we swore to stick together.

BUTLER:
Through the thick and the thin. After we did our time, we taught piano lessons and when the
guy who hired us figured out we didn't know how to play, we sought to become better liars.
He only made us better bad guys.

LARRY:

Yeah, we evolved from ball droppers and petty vandalizers to full-blown con men.

BUTLER:

Look at us now! We were able to convince the president's son... wherever he is to come to a "time share consultation" for a "space condo on Mars". Is he still in the bathroom?

HARRY:
I think so.

BUTLER:

Anyways, we have both the president's son and his body guard as hostages.

HARRY:

If you can hear me Mike, stay in the bathroom! Do not come out here! Better yet, try to escape out the window!

MIKE, *wakes up*:

Sorry, I'm awake now. What's all this yelling? (*looks at audience members*) Were they talking to me? No? (*falls back asleep*)

BUTLER:

Larry, go take care of him.

LARRY: (*pops neck*)
Will do. (*walks into audience*)

HARRY:
Mike, run!

BUTLER:

And now I need you to hold this up (*hands him a newspaper*) and smile.

HARRY:

The date is November twenty-ninth. It's not even from this year.

BUTLER:

I never buy newspapers except on Black Friday.
(*BUTLER takes picture with his phone.*)

BUTLER:

Oop, bad lighting. Let's do that again.
(*Takes another picture*)

BUTLER:
You blinked. Last time.
(Takes another picture)

BUTLER:
Why did you cross your eyes?

HARRY:
So they won't recognize me and send you the money!

BUTLER:
What? Why? You want them to recognize you. You want to be rescued.

HARRY:
I don't care if they rescue me as long as Mike escapes! So does it look like me or not?!

BUTLER:
It still looks like you. Kinda creepy... eh, it'll work.

HARRY:
Mike! If you can hear me, run!
(This wakes up MIKE and he runs onstage. LARRY spots him and follows him)

HARRY:
Wrong way Mike! Didn't you hear me screaming earlier?!

BUTLER:
Didn't Larry take care of you?
(LARRY runs onstage. MIKE stands onstage clueless of his next line. SOUND runs on and hands him a script.)

MIKE:
Where are we? Oh! I guess I died. Didn't really look at the script all too well. Hmph, makes it easier for me.
(MIKE dies a dramatic death onstage.)

BUTLER:
No, not there. Too messy. Larry, take him away.
(LARRY drags MIKE off)

MIKE, as ACTOR 3:

By the way, y'all totally butchered the convict part. You ought to be more hesitant when announcing you've been to jail. Not that I would know anything about the stigmas that come along with being a convict...

(Curtain closes)

SCENE 5- The "Boys"

WRITER:

And that's all we have! The end. Zilch! It's over! So it kinda has an untraditional plot... as you can tell, nothing is resolved. It doesn't really classify as a tragedy or comedy and this is what makes it so fresh, so modern. The audience will eat it up! It'll make them want more! They will have to come back for it's half-written sequel.

BRAGSTONE:

Ah, it was... interesting. But isn't that the idea we told you you couldn't do? I remember you being all excited about it when you first started. I said it wasn't school appropriate. Surely this isn't the same idea.

WRITER:

Ah, well it is... But it's not all I have! I was just refreshing your memory. I have a couple more shows up our sleeves.

BRAGSTONE:

A couple? You went above and beyond. Well, I'm excited. Carry on.

WRITER:

With the sequel or the other shows?

BRAGSTONE:

Whichever.

WRITER:

You don't want to know how it ends?

BRAGSTONE:

It's less about the ending and more about the journey. And so far, I have been on no journey.

WRITER:

Well then, moving on. This next show has been tested in front of an audience before. Most money I ever made was from this show. I hope you don't mind. It's called: Choir Boys. *(ACTORS 1 through 5 walk onstage, in front of the closed curtain. They sing "ooooh" in a 5 part harmony multiple times. They change keys every time. ACTOR 4 is off every time.)*

BRAGSTONE:
Is this some kind of joke?

WRITER:
Yes, yes it is. It's a parody of *Falsettos*. You know, the Tony award-winning musical?

BRAGSTONE:
Yes, I know what *Falsettos* is. Why are you wasting my time?

WRITER:
Sorry, I was just giving the actors and the audience a moment to not think. This required no thought on their part.

BRAGSTONE:
Oh, it required thought. I was thinking "when is this going to end" as soon as it started.

WRITER:
That was our intention. To make everyone comfortably uncomfortable.

BRAGSTONE:
You definitely accomplished that.

WRITER:
Ok, our next show is titled *Busboy*. I'll give you a quick synopsis of it while the actors get ready. Better yet, I'll have LIGHTS and SOUND do it for me while I go talk to the cast real quick.

SOUND:
WRITER! I found the post! Here, I'll pass it around. (*hands out papers to audience members*) You better fess up if you recognize the username. I may not be able to tell if you are lying, but I'm sure the tigers backstage can smell deceit. If it comes down to it, I'll have each and every one of you stand in front of the tigers' cage and tell me you don't know who tattled.

WRITER, *playing dumb*:
What ever are you talking about? (*to board members*) I have no idea what has gotten into him. (*to SOUND*) Be sure everyone gets a look at it.

LIGHTS:
Busboy is a musical about a busboy.

SOUND:
Thank you so much for listening to our synopsis and we hope you enjoy the show.

WRITER:
Keep talking.

LIGHTS:
Oh, uhhh... We forgot to mention the part that the busboy's friend goes behind his back and tells his boss that the busboy didn't come up with the new menu in time of the grand opening for their new restaurant.

SOUND:
So the busboy has to scramble and pretend that he did.

LIGHTS:
This results in the busboy becoming extremely angry and hostile towards his best friend, so he takes his best friend on a "camping trip" and ends up tying him to a tree and leaving him out to face the rabid tigers that inhabit the local woods.

SOUND:
Let's just say it does not end well for the best friend, a.k.a. the snitch.

TRIPPIE:
Is this supposed to be a knock off of *Waitress*? If so, the plot is waaay off.

BETTY:
Yeah, I'm not sure where they are going with this idea.

BRAGSTONE:
Umm.. Next! WRITER! WRITER! We decided you can skip this one. We have a pretty good idea of what happens and we want to hear your other ideas.

WRITER:
You do?

LIGHTS:
I wonder why?

SOUND, *to audience*:
Do any of you recognize the username? Better confess!

T
RIPPIE:
What is he talking about?

WRITER:
Beats me. Our next show is a fun one. It's family-friendly too.

BRAGSTONE:
Excellent. Can't wait.

WRITER:
It's called Bob the Sponge.

SCENE 6- Bob the Sponge
(Curtains open. There is a table centerstage. The actors are visibly huddled behind it)
(ACTORS 1 and 2 are seaweed. ACTOR 3 is PATRICIA. ACTOR 4 is BOB. ACTOR 5 is ROCKY)

BOB:
When is the bus going to come? We've been waiting here for hours.

ROCKY:
Uh, Bob the Sponge, we've only been here for 42 seconds.

SEAWEED:
Forty-two. Forty-three. Forty-four. *(continues counting behind other lines)*

PATRICIA:
Yeah, Bob the Sponge... haven't you been listening to the seaweed count?

BOB:
Yes, Patricia. I have. But don't you find it weird that these two seaweed clumps-

SEAWEED:
Clumps?

BOB:
Oh, sorry. Don't you find it weird that these two seaweed strands have been following us around ever since we left one piece island?

ROCKY:
Now that you mention it... yeah. It's kinda strange. Maybe I ought to use my karate skills on them... Haaaaaa-yaaaah!
(SEAWEED continues counting)

PATRICIA:
Rocky the rat, don't do it!

BETTY:
What is happening?

TRIPPIE:
I have no idea.

BETTY:
Is this a children's show? Did we ask them to write a children's show?
(BRAGSTONE stands up and starts to walk on the stage.)

PATRICIA:
Oh look! Another creature is joining us!

ROCKY:
It looks like a porpoise. Oh I sure hope it's a friendly porpoise!

BRAGSTONE:
Enough! I've had enough of this!
(WRITER runs onstage)

BRAGSTONE:
We have sat here for nearly thirty minutes trying to understand your silly little plays. This is ridiculous. None of these shows have any meaning. And they may or may not be stolen ideas from other Broadway shows! Did you even come up with one original idea?

WRITER:
Yes! I did... You just haven't seen it yet. I was waiting for you to say something.

BRAGSTONE:
Waiting for me? To say something?

WRITER:
Yes! Erm... see the thing is... I wasn't sure if you would like my real play idea. It's sorta... different. *(Mouths to other actors)* Help me.

BRAGSTONE:
How so?

WRITER:
How so? Uhh... because... you are in it right now.
(ACTORS flinch and shake their heads.)

A
CTOR 2, *whispering*:
What are you doing?

BRAGSTONE:

You mean your play idea is about someone who is writing a play?

WRITER:

Ye- yeah... Yes! Exactly!

BRAGSTONE:

And the main character is a dud who is only good at procrastinating and has no talents? So they rely on some rag-tag team of “actors” to come up with ideas for them?

WRITER:

Kind of...

BRAGSTONE:

And they have some cheesy cricket sound to fill in for the lack of laughs produced in the audience?

WRITER:

Well...no, the crickets are real-

BRAGSTONE:

This is incredible! Of course, it has no real plot or theme... but it still counts as an original play!

WRITER:

Really?! Thanks, I guess.

BRAGSTONE:

You guess? I had no idea I was part of your show! Only a genius could pull something like this off!

WRITER: (to ACTORS and audience)

Can you believe this? How crazy? I didn't even have to write a show...

BRAGSTONE:

Ooooh! And if you ever perform it somewhere else, you can make it interactive! You can have the audience participate! And the part where the lights and sound crew come on like earlier is just hilarious!

WRITER:

I know, right!

BRAGSTONE:

Well that was just fantastic! Maybe you can even get it published! I'm going to go tell the superintendent all about this. I'll see you tomorrow! Eight a.m. meeting, my office to discuss publication. Bye!

(The board members exit the auditorium.)

WRITER, *to audience*:

What are the odds? I mean, I'm stealing ideas from y'all and she just comes in and writes a play without me thinking one bit. One thing that Bragstone said, did stick out to me. What's the point of this show? I mean there is no plot or theme. You all dragged yourselves out here tonight to help me. Me! You could be hanging out with your pals or stuffing your face at Arby's, but you chose to come watch this show. Of course, all money will be donated to select students attending ThesCon, but I hope we earned every penny of it by entertaining you. *(To ACTORS)* There has got to be some message or lesson learned here tonight.

ACTOR 1:

How about procrastinating rocks!-

ACTOR 2:

Or "When in doubt, call your improv troupe to help you out?"

WRITER:

I like it. It rhymes.

ACTOR 3:

You could make it, "Don't break the law or you will have to do community service."

WRITER:

I don't think that's very personable. Do you?

LIGHTS:

Work for what you want?

ACTOR 4:

Practice makes perfect?

WRITER:

We didn't practice one bit!

ACTOR 4:

I know! And so does the audience. They'll never not practice ever again after sitting through this show.

ACTOR 5:

Oh! It should be, “It all works out in the end, even if you weren’t there for the beginning.”

WRITER:

Hmm... Let me think. Why don’t we take a little something from each of your ideas? It could be “Procrastination rocks only when you have a solid troupe to help you out and a loving community worth supporting that makes you want to be perfect from beginning to end.”

SOUND:

What a mouthful. Just make it, “Your community is the foundation for the things you will grow up to be and do”. You know how the audience helped us with ideas in the beginning? How the actors agreed last minute to help you? And now you have a play that earned you an A, not to mention your diploma! You may even get it published! And you’re going right back around and giving back to your community through TheCon grants. Sorry I changed it, your version is just so wordy.

WRITER:

It’s the writer in me.
(Cricket sound)

ACTOR 1:

Was that supposed to be a joke?

WRITER:

No.
(Cricket sound)

ACTOR 1:

So are we going to get paid now?

WRITER:

Not tonight, everything earned tonight will be donated. But if the play gets published, I’ll divide it evenly amongst you all. I won’t keep one penny of it.

A

CTOR 2:

You don’t have to do that. I kinda had fun... Didn’t y’all?
(Cricket sound and SOUND’s phone rings)

SOUND:

That was the P.I. I hired him to find out who told Bragstone about tonight’s show.

WRITER:

And...?

SOUND:

Oh! You'll never guess who it was. Oh and I'm gonna need a check for that. Who knew private investigators were so expensive?

WRITER:
Who was it?!

SOUND:
Oh. It was that guy! (*points at the person in the audience who we put the cricket container under*) Yeah, the guy in the 5th row, aisle seat.

ACTOR 4:
I feel like we should charge him or something for putting us under all this pressure.

WRITER:
No, actually I'd like to have a word with him. (*WRITER walks to audience member.*) First off, were you not listening during my opening speech?! NO! PHONES! Secondly, sorry for getting so upset earlier. I'm kinda grateful the board members came or else I'd still be pitching the murder mystery play from earlier to them tomorrow.
(*Cricket sound*)

WRITER:
Wait a minute, is that...? (*WRITER looks under the chair and pulls out tupperware filled with crickets*) Are these yours?! Why did you bring crickets in?! Are you trying to sabotage the show?! Get 'em out of here!

LIGHTS:
I got 'em, I got em'!
(*LIGHTS runs down from the booth and grabs the container. LIGHTS heads backstage, but trips and spills the crickets everywhere.*)

WRITER:
Okay, we are now charging ynou for an exterminator. Ladies, gentlemen, and even cricket guy, also known as super snitch, also known as play sabotager, thank you for coming out here tonight. Thank you for sticking through the show and playing it off when the board members came and crashed the party. We really couldn't have done it without you. So, once again, thank you.
(*Curtains close. House lights come up.*)

USHER:
Waaaaait! I'm supposed to ask you all if you would like to donate any more towards our ThesCon grants? So far we have made _____, and we can give _____ people financial support. If we get just _____ more we can send another student! So as you leave tonight, feel free to leave as much money in the donation buckets located at all the exits. We will

have actors walking around with collection buckets also. Thank you all for attending!
Toodaloo!

CURTAIN

Gay Polyamorous Cowboys

Ella Jarvis

Act I

Scene 1

TIMATHY is on Horseback. MARTHIN stops him.

TIMATHY

Get out of my way. I've got somewhere I need'a be 'fore sundown.

MARTHIN

Now you listen real close, Tim. I'm tired of your self-absorbed shit that you think your damn busywork is more important than what I'm fixin' to tell you.

TIMATHY takes a beat, then nods.

TIMATHY

Fine. Spit it out, then.

MARTHIN

It's the hole. We've found somethin' that looks just like them pictures and your stories, right off the side'a the trail the caravan's takin'.

TIMATHY

...You're kiddin' me.

MARTHIN

I ain't. When you ever known me to lie, in all the time me n' you've been together?

TIMATHY

When you tolf Daile n' I that you were wanted in the last town over so we'd pay for your drinks.

MARTHIN

Stop playin', Tim, I mean any real time I've been to lie to you. Can you even tell me one?

TIMATHY considers.

TIMATHY

Guess not. It's got th' compass n' all?

MARTHIN

'Zactly the one you told us, Tim, with your Sips's name on it and all.

TIMATHY

And the doll?

MARTHIN

Yeah, the little chewed-up dog thing. I got it with me, Tim. Stop fussin' about it all--

TIMATHY

You know, that was Vannie's doll. He always carried that dang thing 'round with him, and he didn't even let me touch it. Dropped it in the pen with the horseshoe crabs and 'bout near killed one of the poor fuckers.

MARTHIN

Yeah, well—

TIMATHY

He gave it to me. 'Fore we jumped in that portal out, when everythin' was crumblin' to shit. I didn't know what was happenin', but they's all tellin' me it was all fine tellin' me that it'd just be a minute and we'd all be okay, buildin' a new house somewhere new. Then I popped out of that there hole, n' they weren't—

MARTHIN

--You shut up, Tim. 'Fore you have one of those panic attacks you did when we asked you to marry us. Are you comin' or would you rather finish your stupid fetch quest first?

TIMATHY

Fine, fine. You shut up now 'bout all that, I'm fine.

MARTHIN

You're comin', then? We thought you'd wanna get out of this shithole soon as you could get your hands on the way out. We'ze got our bags packed n' all.

TIMATHY pauses.

TIMATHY

You n' Daile both?

MARTHIN

'Course, Tim. And we ain't ever leavin'. Wherever you go, we go, n' we knew what we were in for the moment we put them rings on our fingers.

TIMATHY

You ain't ever leavin'. That's right. Like hell you are.

Timathy chuckles.

I knew I wasn't gonna let you go from the first time I laid my eyes on y'all.

The two share a beat of silence.

MARTHIN

...We should get goin'. Daile's been waiting outside that hole for a minute too long. A

storm's brewin' that way anyways.

TIMATHY

Right.

Scene 2

Daile is already standing on the stage, near the aforementioned hole. He holds the compass.

TIMATHY and MARTHIN walk up to him.

DAILE

Y'all get here okay?

TIMATHY

Sure thing, we did. You ready or what?

DAILE

Hold on, now, Timmy. I wanted to talk to you 'bout somethin' before we get goin'.

MARTHIN

Now might not be the best time for that, sweetheart.

DAILE

Then when is the time?

DAILE gives MARTHIN an annoyed look, and he backs down almost immediately.

That's what I thought.

TIMATHY

What's goin' on?

DAILE

You know how this is a portal to another universe, 'n all?

TIMATHY

Yeah?

DAILE

And how we don't know 'bout where your parents are?

TIMATHY

Mhm?

DAILE

And you were separated from 'em when you went through a portal last time?

TIMATHY doesn't respond, and there's a pause to signify this.

I'm not sayin' it'll happen, but who's to say we'll be comin' with you? Your mom was

holdin' you and you got thrown out here—n' what if you ain't even find your parents or nothin'?

MARTHIN

We should just go—

TIMATHY

No, he's right. We really can't be sure'a all that.

MARTHIN

Are you changin' your mind?—

TIMATHY

--I ain't finished. What I'm tryin' to say is, we don't know. We don't know what's on the other end of that portal. We don't know what's on the other end of that portal, together or not, family or not.

MARTHIN

Sounds like you're changin' your mind—

TIMATHY

I ain't finished. But whatever happens, I ain't never forgettin' you. Wherever we end up, I'll find a way back.

TIMATHY shakes his head.

But all that's hypothetical. We'll end up together, n' we'll end up with my folks. Y'all don't need to worry.

MARTHIN

I don't think that's how it works.

DAILE

It's not.

TIMATHY

But we can hope, yeah?

DAILE

Guess so, Tim. Whatever happens, we're prepared. Bein' on the run from the government is only fun for so long.

MARTHIN

Are you actually on the run?

DAILE

You thought I wasn't?

MARTHIN

I thought it was a joke, like when I said it to y'all for free drinks.

DAILE

That was a joke?

The hole in the ground makes a threatening sound, interrupting them from going on a longer tangent.

TIMATHY

We should get goin'.

MARTHIN

Yeah.

DAILE

Didn't you have somethin' you were doin before we were meant to be leavin'?

TIMATHY

Just tellin' someone somethin' or the other 'bout a dead guy. It ain't important. Let's just go.

They jump in the portal hole.

Lorelei

By Sarah Phillis

ACT I

Scene 1

LORELEI walks into the dining room where MIMI and POPS are sitting.

MIMI

Are you ready for school? Damon said he would walk with you.

LORELEI

Why can't I just do home schooling again? I didn't hate that as much.

POPS

Because your Aunt had more energy than us and we can't keep up with everything you need to learn.

LORELEI frowns and grabs a plate of eggs, but only pushing them around with her fork.

There is a knock and POPS gets up to open the door. DAMON comes in and walks towards
LORELEI.

DAMON

Lorelei! How've you been? I haven't seen you since-

He waves his hands to avoid saying something.
Since you moved to live with your aunt.

LORELEI opens her mouth to talk but nothing comes out. LORELEI sighs and puts her plate down.

LORELEI

(Signing)

Yes, missed you

LORELEI gives him a hug and grabs her bag. DAMON follows her.

SCENE 2

LORELEI sits down at her desk, grabs a book, and starts reading. CARWYN walks in and sits beside LORELEI.

CARWYN Hey! You're the new girl right?

LORELEI looks up at him and then back down to her book. CARWYN is confused.

TEACHER walks in and to the front of the class.

TEACHER

Welcome to the first day of school after spring break.

TEACHER looks at LORELEI, who looks up from her book.

Would you like me to get a translator?

LORELEI shakes her head and takes out a pad of paper. She looks displeased to be using it.

LORELEI

(Signing)

Writing, not signing

SCENE 3

CARWYN is walking up to LORELEI, who gets up and hurries off stage to the restroom.

DAMON walks up to CARWYN, stopping CARWYN from following her.

DAMON Sorry about her, she doesn't like strangers.

CARWYN Oh, because she's mute? Why can't she just talk?

DAMON scowls, and exhales sharply.

DAMON

(Defensively)

Because she can't. She can't talk. You don't need an explanation. She just can't.

SCENE 4

LORELEI and DAMON are sitting on the floor of LORELEI's room.

DAMON

(Angrily)

You're going to have to make friends! You can't push people away!

LORELEI

(Angrily) I did just fine at my Aunts staying clear of people.

I'll be fine!

LORELEI gets up and storms to her desk, turning around to face DAMON.

LORELEI

(Signing) You stay out of my mind.

LORELEI grabs the book she was reading, ignoring DAMON.

DAMON

Come on, Lorelei, stop this. I'm sorry I snapped at you.

LORELEI ignores him. DAMON gets up and walks off stage.

LORELEI looks up after he leaves and starts to cry.

Scene 5

LORELEI is laying down on her bed, facing her wall. DAMON is standing by the door, with the door open.

DAMON

Come one Lora, lets go, I'll be there with you. It's just a bonfire.

LORELEI turns over to face DAMON

LORELEI

(Signing)

I don't want

DAMON

Come on, it'll be fun, I promise I'll stay with you and if you don't like it after an hour we can leave.

LORELEI sits up and glares at DAMON. She then picks up a plush animal and chucks it at DAMON.

Scene 6

MIMI and POPS are sitting in the living room reading. LORELEI walks in. MIMI pats the seat next to her.

MIMI Come sit, I haven't seen much of you this week.

LORELEI I have some reading to do and I have to annotate.
Maybe some other time.

LORELEI grabs some post it notes and two large books. DAMON comes in and sees LORELEI.

DAMON Lora, want to do some of the math homework.

LORELEI turns around and gestures at her book.

LORELEI Sorry, later maybe, I have to do stuff.

LORELEI leaves and MIMI gets up and walks over to DAMON.

MIMI

Don't fret, she'll be back to us soon. She's having a hard time adjusting, but she'll come back. She always does.

POPS looks up from his book and looks at MIMI

POPS Wha?

MIMI

(Loudly) She'll be back with us soon.

POPS gets up and shakes his cane in the air.

POPS They'll be here soon? WHO?!

Scene 7

LORELEI walks into the classroom. She sits in the back of the room. She is staring off into space and tapping her finger on the desk. DAMON and CARWYN walk into the class and sit on opposite sides by the wall. DAMON routinely glances back at LORELEI.

TEACHER All right, today we will be starting a group project.
I will list off the pairings

DAMON and CARWYN groan and LORELEI looks around nervously.

TEACHER
Okay; Hailey and Kai; Mel and Ryder; Damon and Bella; Arius and Celine; Carwyn and Lorelei.

CARWYN and LORELEI look at each other and then at the TEACHER

LORELEI shakes her head quickly and scribbles something on the pad of paper.

LORELEI
(On the paper) I can work alone. Please!

TEACHER I'm sorry, but this is a pair project.

CARWYN walks over and sits beside LORELEI. Who promptly scoots a bit away.

TEACHER
Now, this project will Look, I know you be about the french aren't happy and you revolution and how it wants to work alone but effected the economy we have to work in the long term. You together on this and can make a collaborate. Okay? I presentation, or and mean you can write it play, or anything, as down or whatever. I long as it shows the just need you to- french revolution-

LORELEI
(Signing) No, loud stop.

LORELEI covers her ears and puts her head down on the desk.

Scene 8

CARWYN is sitting on the floor of his room, with a laptop on his lap.

CARWYN
(Signing)
Hi Nice meet you

CARWYN
(Speaking)
Hi nice to meet you

Scene 9

CARWYN and LORELEI are sitting a a desk with a few papers around them.
LORELEI taps on CARWYN's shoulder to get his attention. She points at something CARWYN was writing.

LORELEI
(Signing)
Where you get that

LORELEI hits her forehead lightly and grabs her paper and begins to write the question.

CARWYN I, um. Where did I find it?

LORELEI looks at him surprised and nods slowly.
CARWYN's face lights up as he got it right and hands her a book.

SCENE 10

DAMON walks over to LORELEI dejectedly. LORELEI perks up and gives him a hug.

LORELEI
(Signing) I'm sorry.

DAMON
(Jokingly)
Oh so now that I've 'bout given up hope you start talking to me?

LORELEI rolls her eyes and hits his shoulder softly.

Scene 11

DAMON is sitting on the ground of LORELEI's room. LORELEI is sitting on her bed. DAMON walks in.

DAMON Sorry I'm late, my mom needed me to do something.

LORELEI
(Signing)
Okay, him read loud, thank you for coming DAMON looks over to CARWYN to begin translating.

DAMON
Ha, she said you were-

CARWYN I do not read loud, you just kept bothering me!

DAMON
(confused) You know what she said?

CARWYN
Not completely, but I guessed the rest that I didn't know.

LORELEI throws a pillow at him and chuckles.

LORELEI
(Signing) I told you 10 minutes ago.

SCENE 12

DAMON, CARWYN, and LORELEI all stand together and throw a bunch of paper into the air.

DAMON
(Laughing) No more school! No more work!

CARWYN Hell yeah! Freedom!

CARWYN takes starts drinking his water.

LORELEI

(Speaking and laughing) We still have school next year!

CARWYN opens his mouth in a gasp and starts coughing. DAMON grins and pats her on her shoulder.

SCENE 13

CARWYN

(Signing)

Hi, thank you meet you

LORELEI

(Confused)

Why are you thanking me

NEVILLE TO PERCIVAL

By Bailey Parker

I feel as if I've known you
a thousand years, my dearest.

A thousand times we've died in each other's arms.
A thousand times we've lied in a lovers' grave.
A thousand times gardens have grown from us.

Lifetimes have passed every time
I glance from the pages of a book
and my eyes, without fail, find yours.
Love after love blazes then burns out,
thread after thread winds then unwinds
every time I hear your name sleeping soundly in the air—

The air that fills your lungs,
the lungs that send beating
blood back to your heart.
The air that fills mine, too;
the air I hold most precious,
for it allows me to sing of you,
and that faraway look in your eyes,
and the parting of your pink, pondering lips.
How supple are those lips,
how supple is this living air!
How supple *I* can be!

Is that not what you want, darling?
Someone who can bend through
every twist and turn of your nose,
your eyebrows, your mind, your tongue?
Someone who is flexible enough to wrap
themselves around you—you mighty,
unweathered stone!—and wait patiently
while you find the courage to brave your biology,
to weave through every grain of sand and glass
and bone and diamond you hold so strongly,
so unwaveringly, within your chest, your mouth?
I am not strong, love, but I am supple;
I am the wind, the water that's created you.
I have shaped you in the corner of my mind,
and I have loved you in the depths of my heart;
am I not what you want?

And You Fall in Love with Them Both

By Sidney Ducleroir

There is nothing revolutionary
about writing about love.
But isn't there?

Isn't it revolutionary
To remind yourself that
Falling in love is beautiful and expansive?

You sit alone at a pizza joint
It's the weekend and you're on the patio
The weather is nice
And the beer is cold.

They are understaffed but you don't care.
The lone musician is on break,
Chatting with regulars,
Guitar flung to his back.
The girl in the multicolored top,
The most beautiful one at the table says,
"Alright Gary, get back to it"
He looks at her with a mischievous grin,
"That's what she said," he draws.

And you fall in love with them both.

Gary reclaims his spot behind the mic
spends some time tuning. He flips down his shades
"Now I'm Big Fun"
And the patio cheers.

One of his strings snaps.
He flips his shades back up
"Oh now wait, hold on Big Fun,
Gary has to fix this."
Once Big Fun returns he says,
"I'll probably be out of tune, but...
Bless my heart."

Your waitress, Cassie you think,
Wears a messy bun and a smile that dazzles.
She seems unbothered by the understaffed
And over-busy evening.

She compliments your bag
And brings you bruschetta.
There is nothing revolutionary
about writing about love.
But isn't there?

You sit under a tree at your favorite park.
A little girl, maybe four or five
Skits past flying a kite
Until she sinks ankle deep in mud
Hidden by the grass.

Her kite falls when she stops in her tracks
And the top corner is mud soaked.
Worse, she realizes her feet are covered
And her precious white sandals too.

She stands for a moment before the tears come.
Here comes her father
Concerned but confused
At what could have happened
On his watch.
He carries her away to mommy
Who has wet wipes that will fix it.

And you fall in love with them both.

There is nothing revolutionary
about writing about love.
But isn't there?

A boy you know sits on a stool
At a table opposite to yours
At the coffee shop you both favor.
It's full, busy as usual.

You look up to sudden movement
He scrambles to open the door for the owner,
who smiles, five gallons of milk in each hand.

It isn't the first time it's happened
And you fall in love with them both.

You stand on a little wooden bridge.
You're at the Botanical Gardens.
It's December but it's Georgia, so you aren't cold.

It's so quiet here.
Two chipmunks chase each other around;
Playful and blissfully unaware of you.

And you fall in love with them both.

I'm sitting somewhere in this world.
Me. I. The person who wrote this.
I'm real and I'm *somewhere* in the world.

And I'm falling in love with you.

Fear

By Youbin Park

from the earliest times, Fear nurtured us.
she taught us to stay away from the cold,
to avoid the beasts,
and to seek company with others.

because of Fear, we came together.
she told us to tame the beasts and establish our place,
to build a community that provided protection,
and to use our minds to outsmart nature.

because of Fear,
we have conquered the land beneath our feet,
the sky within our palms,
and the sea locked in our eyes.

we no longer sensed Fear.

but Fear whispered to us one last time,
to look for her not in the eyes of the beasts,
not in the clear waters before the storm,
but in each other's eyes.

after she spoke, the people scattered;
eyes glistened with Fear,
screams and cries filled the air,

knives and bullets tore through flesh,
and the blood painted the land crimson.

Fear no longer nurtured us.

Out By the Tracks

By Zagreus Rivers

The sun was only a whisper on the horizon as Dallas Gatlin lifted the garage door and walked his bike onto his paved driveway. The wind, yet to be softened by the moisture of rain, was harsh and biting on his face. His brisk pace only exacerbated the chill in his lungs. Dallas's hands were already aching as he began the two-and-a-half mile trek to his job at the Hill Stop gas station.

The neighborhood was quiet as he pedaled past the small, cookie cutter houses that lined his street. Dallas didn't need to check his friends' homes, knowing that the windows of their bedrooms remained empty and dark. Not even Harper's father was awake at this hour despite his lengthy commute to work up in Katzdale. Now, the morning, or whatever came before it, was his and his alone. The slightly deflated tires on his bike wobbled as he rode, pushing them to their limits in order to make it to work on time. He wasn't willing to risk a dock in pay or Lena working overtime just because he overslept. She always told him that he could take a break if he wanted to, but he needed the money far more than he needed time to grieve. He could mourn when he got home from work.

The sky was gently getting paler, like ink diluting in water. He could see swirls of clouds forming in the expanse of the dawn sky. Birds chirped sharply as they too awoke in the early light. The boughs that held their abandoned nests shuddered in the breeze, knocking together with dry thunks, like a game of pick-up-sticks. Though the birdsong and clacking branches were soon drowned out by the piercing wail of the train as it made its way down the tracks across town. Dallas huffed as he took his turn wider than usual, the low pressure in his cracked tires made turning more frustrating, especially at the speed he was going. It would make little difference in his commute time, but the seconds it took felt like minutes, which felt like hours, which felt like years.

The gradual decrease in the density of trees was a welcome sight and empty golden fields opened out before him. The tall yellow grass looked ochre in the purple twilight, flowing in waves as the wind picked up. The dimming neon sign of the Hill Stop Gas Co., affectionately called "the Hill Stop," loomed in the distance, the age of its exterior visible even from a half-mile away. Lena's million-year-old rust bucket of a truck was still parked near the back by the dumpsters. She leaned against it, her boots scuffing against the cracked pavement as she watched Dallas ride up. She was a tall woman, probably close to six foot, with dark brown hair kept in a messy bun at the nape of her neck. The sleeves of her flannel shirt were rolled up to her elbows, proudly showing off the tattoos her wife had done for her over their years together.

"I'd give you a ride if I could. It's gotta be hell bikin' five miles a day, six days a week."

Her voice was kind, if not a bit tired, and he knew she meant it.

"Can't leave the station unattended," he replied, shaking out his numbed hands.

“Ah yes, what a tragedy it would be if someone were to show up during the five minutes it would take for me to leave, get you, and come back.” He huffed out a laugh, propping his bike against the telephone pole behind Lena’s truck. Brushing the dirt off his jeans, he ignored the twelve missing persons posters stapled to the pock-marked, weathered wood.

“You know how Randall is. If he caught wind of that shit, we’d both be outta jobs.” He could *feel* Lena roll her eyes, even with his back turned to her.

“I’m just sayin’, you don’t have to work so hard. You can take breaks if you need to.” The smile that befell his face was sad and thankful all at once. He knew she meant well, he could see it in her eyes when he turned to look at her.

“I’m *so* close, Lena. Just a few more weeks and I’ll have enough. Tuition is ridiculously low in—”

“In Carterville, I know. That doesn’t mean you gotta burn yourself out before you get there. You gotta let yourself rest once in a while.” He knew she was right, but he had spent enough of his time working to save up money.

“It’s just a few more weeks, Le. I’m less than a thousand bucks away. I get my paycheck in two days and I can start applying. Then I just gotta coast by ‘til May. I am *this* close to gettin’ out.” Her shoulders slumped and he could see her worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“*Two* weeks. Then you’re givin’ Randall his goddamn shifts back.” From the way she looked at him, he could tell this was non-negotiable, the set of her crossed arms and the clench of her jaw were enough to tell him that. “*Two weeks.*”

“Two weeks,” he agreed, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Though she tried to hide it, he could see the relief in her eyes. “Now go home, Marcie’s probably wondering where you’ve been this past half-hour.” She scoffed through her smile and ruffled his hair affectionately.

“Yeah, yeah. Call if you need anything.” She walked back to her death trap on wheels and, with a final wave, pulled out of the parking lot and disappeared into the mass of trees just down the road.

Dallas waved back, waiting until he couldn’t see her truck anymore before walking to the Hill Stop’s entrance, the door screeching as he pulled it open. It always did that. No matter how many times he doused the damn hinges in WD-40, it still sounded like someone kicking a dying cat. At this point, they didn’t even need a bell on the door.

The interior of the Hill Stop looked like it belonged in an old magazine clipping from the sixties, sepia-toned aging and crinkly texture included. He’d bet his next paycheck that the paint was at least that old. No security cameras either. If they lived in a worse area, it would be a miracle that they hadn’t been robbed yet, but Dagonborough wasn’t the type of town for that. The walls were a white that had turned pale yellow with age and a faded green stripe that ran half-way down them like a belt. The floor was tiled and dingy and no matter how much they were scrubbed, the stains never came out.

At six fifty-nine am, Dallas clocked in, printed his name on the sign-in sheet and made his cursory rounds between the shelves, checking for low stock or empty spaces. Finding none, he made his way back behind the cashier counter and sat in the creaky wooden stool, waiting. That was the worst part about this job. He didn't mind the long hours and lackluster pay—it's what he expected from an entry level job—but most of his time was spent waiting for anyone to show up. Honestly, the only reason they hadn't shut down yet was because there wasn't another gas station for almost forty miles. So Dallas waited.

Eventually, Mr. Ellis came in to top off for his commute to Goldstein Realty up in Katzdale proper.

“How are you this morning?”

“Doin' alright.”

“Terribly sorry to hear about your sister, son.” Dallas only nodded.

“Give your parents my best.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Fifteen on pump two, please.” Then he was waiting again, listening to the screech of a train across town.

Theseus's mother, Lisa, came in around noon. She brought him a baked treat he couldn't pronounce and handed him a pack lunch with no room to protest.

“Nothing in here is gonna give you the nutrients you need, Dallas. You're a growing boy.” She had said. “I'm so sorry for your loss, sweetheart.” Then she was off to visit his friend at college.

He looked through the meal she had carefully put together, a ham and cheese sandwich with the crusts cut off, a small fruit salad without honeydew melon, and a can of his favorite cherry soda, a brand you could only get in Katzdale. He ate his lunch while fighting back tears.

It was another couple hours before anyone else showed up, so Dallas spent his down time sweeping the floors and staring at the road through the windows. The man who broke the stagnance in patrons was none other than Virum's father—chief of police and abusive piece of shit—Martin Wells. He was a tall, burly man, though shorter than Dallas by a few inches. He wore a white button-down, dark navy slacks, and a pair of shiny black work boots. Basically his uniform without the jacket. Dallas watched as Captain Fuckface did that weird swagger he did when he was trying to seem more important than everyone else. The prick scratched his salt-and-pepper beard as he sauntered up to the counter, like a prick.

“Mr. Gatlin, how are you doing on this *fine* afternoon?” Dallas had to repress a half-groan half-scoff. Nothing this asshole said ever sounded sincere. It always felt like he was either mocking you or trying to intimidate you.

“I’m fine, sir. Can I get you anything?” His attempt to cut the small talk short did not go unnoticed. He could see the chief’s smile become strained with distaste.

“I’m just here for gas and some beer. Y’know it’s always so expensive at Reggie’s.”

Yeah, sure, buy beer from a gas station so it’s *less* expensive. Dallas forced a smile.

“You heard from my girl at all? She hasn’t called once since she left for college.” There was nothing in the world that Dallas wanted more than to correct his friend’s shitty dad on his pronouns. Unfortunately, he couldn’t imagine a single situation in which he or Virum wouldn’t end up dead or traumatized, so the safe route it was.

“Haven’t heard a thing. She’s probably busy with essays and literature n’ all that.” The incorrect pronouns felt like ash on his tongue and even though it was the “right” thing to do, he still felt bad about it. Dallas watched uneasily as Wells’s hand settled by his holstered pistol and his jaw tensed.

“Well, hopefully some times in the real world’ll knock some of that dyke shit out of her. Set her on the right path and all. There’s no place for that type of sin in this town,” the chief said, his voice hard and eyes piercing. Dallas’s hands were shaking, his lungs suddenly devoid of air. He still remembered the phone call he got from Virum two summers ago.

“Lucy’s parents found out about us. They told my dad. He’s gonna fucking kill me, Dal.” Virum missed a few days of school after that and came back wearing a turtleneck and an entire infirmary’s worth of bandages on his face. Dallas had known better than to ask what happened. News traveled quick in Dagonborough.

“What number are you at, sir?” Dallas swallowed thickly, now very fucking grateful he hadn’t come out to anyone other than his friends. Chief Wells exhaled gruffly but maintained his terse smile, pulling out his battered brown leather wallet and slapping a twenty on the linoleum counter.

“Pump one,” he said with barely-concealed disgust and stalked down the aisle towards the refrigerated section at the back of the building. Dallas watched his hand as he walked away, it was still resting by his holster. He came back with his beer and Dallas did his usual spiel.

“Would you like a bag for that?” “Do you want your receipt?” “Thank you, come again.” He watched as Chief Wells made his way to the door, “Oh, and Dallas,” he paused, looking back at Dallas for a moment, his eyes glinting cruelly in the fluorescent lights. “Real sorry to hear about your sister. Cancer’s a real *monster*, isn’t it?” The door squealed as he left.

“*Pig...*” Dallas muttered, his hands still trembling. His glare followed the chief as he returned to his ugly-ass truck and pumped his gas. He didn’t stop watching him until that suspended nightmare disappeared behind the trees. Chief Wells’s departure was punctuated by another wail

from the train. Dallas slumped back down on the creaky wooden stool and waited again, his mood significantly soured.

Ten o'clock couldn't come quick enough and Dallas was already outside getting his bike when Lena pulled up. She waved to him as he pushed his bike towards her, almost a mirror of their interaction fifteen hours ago. She looked gentle as always, her hair was messy and the red flannel she'd been wearing this morning had been switched with a green one, same scuffed boots and worn-out jeans.

"Everything runnin' smoothly?" He nodded, resting the bike against his hip while he stretched, coaxing his joints to crack and settle comfortably.

"Yup, she's all yours," he grinned, his bones popping. In some strange way, the sound reminded him of the crackling bonfires he and his friends used to enjoy.

She rolled her eyes, "Oh boy, lucky me." Dallas smiled through a yawn.

"You sure you don't want a ride home," she asked, eyeing the slump of his shoulders. He shook his head, rolling out his shoulders and moving his leg over the metal frame.

"Nah, the ride'll tire me out, it'll help me sleep better."

She scoffed, noticing the already dead-tired look on his face. "If you say so." Motherly concern crept into her voice. She made her way towards the Hill Stop, ruffling his hair as she passed.

"Ride safe, Dal, and call me when you get home, alright?" He nodded, his foot resting on the pedal. With one final wave, he was off, rolling down the road like a one-legged hellcat, the train howling in the distance.

The night breeze felt far less stifling than the early morning wind. It was a gentle glide against his back, cool and clean in his lungs, and each drag of breath felt smooth. The lightning bugs blinked like turn signals in the pitch night, their yellow-green glow shining like stars in a black sky. The dingy gleam from the Hill Stop Gas Co. sign faded gradually behind him as he rode further into the trees, their cover smothering most of the external light. His only beacon was the faint glow of a streetlamp a mile up the straight road and the moon above him. The moon was full tonight, peering down at him like a spotlight from beyond the forest, bathing their branches in her light. It was like the gods were watching over the earth with subtle curiosity.

His concentration was broken by the sound of a vehicle approaching behind him. He turned back for a second, the truck wasn't moving around him. Dallas pulled over towards the curb, moving out of the way as fast as he could. His front tire caught on the rough concrete curb, throwing him forward into the grass. The impact was like a kick in the chest, all his air leaving him in one painful heave. He was laid out flat on his back, eyes frozen on the stars as he tried to regain focus on his surroundings. He could feel pain seeping in through the edges of his adrenaline fueled body, breathing shallow and stuttered in his shocked state.

He was vaguely aware of a car door shutting and heavy footsteps jogging up to him, he could hear how the grass crunched beneath their weight. The hands that helped him sit up, though

gentle, had a rough urgency to them that he couldn't place, like they were worried but in a hurry at the same time.

"Can you hear me, Dallas?" He froze, the voice was gruff and familiar. He nodded, his movements stocky as Chief Wells kneeled in front of him. His button down and slacks had been replaced with jeans, a t-shirt, and jacket.

"Are you okay? Can you move?" Dallas wiggled his legs and then his arms before he nodded again. He could feel The man's eyes on him as he tried to stand.

"Yeah, I- I'm okay," he mumbled, begrudgingly, leaning heavily on the hand the man offered him. He took a few deep breaths before he squatted down by his bike, checking for any damage.

"Oh *fuck*." There were two, half-inch long slits in the side of his front bike tire, a pinch flat and the aluminum rim was *definitely* bent. He groaned, resting his head against his hand.

This was *exactly* what he needed right now.

"You need a ride home?" Wells offered from behind him, and Dallas thought for a moment. He was still about two miles from home and it would take more than a half-hour to walk there, which meant he would get to bed late, and he had work in the morning. He could always walk back to the Hill Stop and ask Lena, but then she'd have to leave it unattended. He sighed.

"Uh, sure, I guess," he shrugged, picking up his bike and hauling it towards the man's redneck monstrosity.

The man clapped him on the shoulder, "Sorry about your bike, Dallas. I can't help but feel partially responsible for it." The boy shrugged and sighed.

"It's my own fault for not reinflating the tires before I left, the pressure gets too low and I guess they got pinched between the rim and the curb," he grumbled, looking dejected at the flat front tire. "Not sure how I'm supposed to get to work tomorrow, but I guess I'll figure something out."

"Well, maybe your dad could drive you. In the meantime, I could probably take your bike up to a mechanic in Carterville, see if we can't get it fixed before your next shift." The offer almost stopped Dallas in his tracks, he didn't think he'd ever seen the man be so *accommodating* before and he couldn't think of any reason he would be in this moment. He'd been responsible for far worse things in the past and had no remorse for them. The offer set him on edge a bit, but at the same time, he *really* needed his bike fixed.

"Really?"

Wells huffed out a laugh and opened his trunk so Dallas could load up his bike.

"Sure, the missus wanted me to make a trip to the hardware store anyway. Somethin' about the shower sealing in our bathroom." Dallas hummed as he closed the trunk, apprehensively walking over to the passenger side.

“Well, uh, thanks all the same, Mr. Wells,” he said, climbing into the seat of the man’s truck. Wells climbed in on the driverside.

“No problem.” The man started the truck, driving carefully down the straight road. Dallas tried to let himself relax a bit, it was only a five minute drive, he was gonna be fine whether he trusted Chief Wells or not. They passed the street lamp.

“Saw your father at the bar a few nights ago. He said you're gettin’ pretty close to havin’ enough for college.”

“Uh yeah, less than a thousand bucks away. Gonna start applying next month,” he said, picking at the hem of his shirt, eager for the ride to be over. Dallas frowned but nodded anyway.

Has his dad started drinking again?

“Any plans for after you graduate?” Dallas glanced at the man for a moment before answering.

“Uh, not really, just gonna get outta town, try and find a job that pays more than seven bucks an hour,” he half-laughed, hoping to lighten the mood. The chief only hummed curtly, his face remaining neutral.

Dallas watched as they approached the turn-off for his street, but Wells didn’t slow down for the turn. He didn’t turn at all.

“Uh, sir, you missed the turn.” He looked over at the chief, anxiety welling in his stomach.

“Did I?”

Dallas felt his heart drop into his guts, goosebumps creeping up his arms as he swallowed thickly. He tried not to panic, but something was very, very wrong.

“Y’know what? It's okay, you don't even have to turn around. I can just walk home from here.” He fumbled for the door handle, pulling sharply at the plastic bar, praying it would open. The handle moved, but the door did not. The lock knob was down too but he tried to wrench it up anyway, his fingers too clammy to get any traction. He felt the cold, harsh steel of a gun shoving harshly into his side.

“Stay in the car, Dallas.” He was gonna throw up. This *couldn't* be happening, this couldn't be *fucking* happening.

“Mr. Wells, please, if this is about the bike, it's fine. I can fix it myself, I promise.” The words spewed from him like water out of a faucet. Everything felt like it was moving too fast.

The gun was jammed further against his body.

“Be quiet.” Wells’s voice was cold and unforgiving.

“Mr. Wells, please let me out of the car!” He choked, tears welling in his eyes, his breath stuttering with oncoming sobs. “Please, please just let me out! I won’t say anything, please, just

let me go home!” Dallas was hyperventilating, it felt like his heart was beating out of rhythm and couldn’t see through the tears anymore. “Please,” he pleaded urgently.

“I *said*. Be. *Quiet*.” The gun was forced so harshly against his ribcage, Dallas thought he might break a rib. He hiccuped and coughed and spluttered in response, snot running from his nose in thick globs. Wells continued to drive, one hand on the wheel, the other coiled tightly around the gun, which Dallas realized with horror, was not his service pistol. His driving remained careful, calm, calculated, like he had done this before. Dallas’s eyes shot around the cab of the truck, looking for anything to help him get out. He could yank the steering wheel and cause a crash, but with the gun at point blank range he’d probably end up shot. He could grab the gun, but he knew for a fact that Wells would overpower him. He hiccuped again. All he had going for him was his speed and size. He was tall and thin, light and long-legged. He could make a break for it when Wells got him out of the car and he could probably get away if he hauled ass and didn’t run in straight lines. The chief was a damn good shot, he’d seen as much when his dad dragged him along to go hunting with the two a few years back.

Dallas kept his eyes on the scenery around them, trying to make heads or tails of where they were and what direction he’d need to run. He watched as they drove over the train tracks and further into a break in the trees. The truck stopped with a jolt, catching Dallas off guard.

Wells’s thick, burly hand gripped tightly around the back collar of both his shirts, dragging him across the long seat and towards the driver side door, the gun now in his other hand. The chill in the air seemed far more sinister now that he was being held hostage, and before Dallas could even think about running, the gun was jabbed painfully into his spine..

“Walk.” Wells gave a hard shove with the gun and Dallas could only comply. His knees shook as he stumbled over the rocky and root riddled ground, still trying to find a way out of this. The hike was short and soon they were reaching a clearing where the trees were less dense. He could see other dark figures there, fifteen that he could count, their black clothing shrouding them in the shadows of night.

“You got him?” A man’s craggy voice called out. He froze for a moment, trying to place where he’d heard it before.

“Yep.” The chief grunted from behind him, now practically dragging him towards the others. They started to move in slowly, circling around Dallas like sharks.

“He leavin’ like the others?” Another man’s voice asked. Wells hummed in the affirmative.

“Dallas is gonna be hoppin’ a train outta town tonight, boys.” A cacophony of voices snickered at the chief’s words. Their chattering sent chills through Dallas’s bones.

“What the *fuck* is going on! Who the hell are you people?” Dallas’s voice was raw and choked as he spoke, panic rising in his body like a bathtub filling with water. He was thrown to the forest floor, Wells’s heavy, black work boot stomping down on his chest, keeping him pinned.

“What’s going on, is that this town doesn’t need people like *you* in it anymore!”

“What the fuck does that even *mean*?” Dallas was lost. What was going on? “*Fags*

like you, takin' up jobs you don't deserve. Jobs that could've gone to someone who planned on *stayin'*, givin' back to the community. Now you're takin' all that time an' money to go to college an' not comin' back. Not givin' back to the community that got you there in the first place!" The voice he had recognized earlier growled out, kicking at his already bruising side.

"What the fuck are you talking about? This town hasn't done *shit* for me. I'm the one who's been working fifteen-hour shifts for more than a year, I'm the one who's been working my ass off to get where I am, not this town. Are you forgetting that, up until last week, all my parents' money has been going towards my sister's medical bills? All the money for college tuition has come from *my* paychecks, *my* hard work, not theirs. All this town has done is drive my friends away and saddle me with no fucking future, why the fuck would *anyone* want to stay here—"

A swift kick to the face shut him up quickly, his mouth filling with blood. He groaned as a gray hiking boot pressed his face into the dirt. Dallas had to strain his eyes to glare over at Chief Wells, struggling to move his head from underneath the shoe.

"Do you know what it's like to watch the town you helped build die? To see your own blood abandon you and the home you built for them? You're all the same. Just a bunch of selfish fuckin' *leeches*. There's nothin' for nobody in this town an' your takin' all we got left an' fuckin' off to Katzdale. You're suckin' the soul outta our town and leavin' it to die." The chief snarled, stomping down on Dallas's sternum as he spoke, grinding his spine into the ground beneath him. His pulse thrummed in his skull as his vision blurred. He couldn't even scream, his mouth refused to release anything other than an agonizingly haggard exhale. He couldn't fucking breathe, his chest spasmed as he desperately tried to take in air in panicked choked-off gasps.

Dallas's entire world shifted as his neck cracked to the side, he could only barely register the kick. His vision exploded into a blurred nightmare as pain jolted through his system, warm liquid filling his nose and pouring down his mouth. He gagged on the blood. A hellish scream ripped out of him as a boot stamped down on his knee with a sickening *crack*. He gagged as someone kicked his throat, a cough forced out of him as another shoe dug into his hip. He tore and clawed at Chief Wells's leg, rolling and trying to knock the man off balance. The earth thrummed beneath him, the rumble of an oncoming train filling the night. He could almost feel the beat of the side frames as they propelled the iron beast down the track. He wrapped his trembling hands around the man's ankle and pushed as hard as he could, lurching in the opposite direction. Wells fell with a thud and a snarl. Dallas scrambled, clawing at the dirt to pull himself up, his shoes barely gaining traction before something came down hard on his spine, grinding down with rage.

He was flung onto his back, a large calloused hand wrapping around his neck. Wells looked down at him in disgust before bashing his head into the ground.

"I told you, we don't need that kinda *sin* in this town, or *anywhere else*," Wells snarled, breathing like a bull. Dallas's vision blurred, his ears ringing. His entire world became foggy, a distant murmur in the back of his mind. The pain faded as the rumble of the train enveloped his senses, thrumming beneath his numb fingertips. Wells sneered down and Dallas met his gaze, eyes glazed over and unfocused. Something cold pressed against his forehead, digging into his skin.

The wail of the train was drowned out by the shot.

SIR LANCELOT AND THE RED VILLA OF CORTENOVA

By Jessica DeMarco-Jacobson

In the year of our Lord and Saviour Jesù Christ, 1452, that upon great adventures occurred all across the continent of Europa, none was so spectacular of that of Sir Lancelot of the Lake and his conquest of the Red Villa of Cortenova. May the Blessèd St. Francis de Sales and St. Genesius of Arles guide me in recounting this tale and ensure its accuracy upon the drop of my quill; may it be told to the best of my ability, without flaw.

While other accounts of Sir Lancelot—particularly those written in the sour land of cod and potato fritters—say he returned to Camelot after saving Queen Guinevere in the miserable tale titled “The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” our sources in the Italian peninsula sayeth differently.

As our books sayeth, the morning thereafter Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere coupled in a night of great passion, King Arthur lied down on their marriagebed and was unable to taketh his morning nap. As he shifted about under the silken sheets, he noticed that it was something under his pillow that had prevented him from slumber. Immediately, he reached out from under the pillow and discovereth a strange plaything and extravagantly red-laced undergarments that smelled of his Queen. Never had the Queen wore this when they coupled, and Arthur knew the rumours of cuckholdry ‘bout the castle were whispers of truth. His face turned as red as the undergarments, and despite his great friendship with Lancelot, he knew that his knight must seeketh repercussions. Otherwise, the citizens of Camelot would consider him lacking fortitude.

When belltower rang twelve times, Arthur calleth the members of the court to gather ‘round his throne, and he announced the banishment of Sir Lancelot to Lombardy in the Italian peninsula, citing not the adultery that occurreth in court of late, but instead Lancelot’s soul requiring penitence. For Arthur desired not to admit his failure in the nightly duties of marriage nor that Lancelot bettered him in those sacred and profane activities. And Arthur holdeth misconceptions of Italy being a licentious land with the most beautiful maids; surely these maids would test Lancelot’s promise to remain chaste.

“My liege, I am saddened by my banishment, but I accept your command, as you are my liege and no higher authority has my full loyalty, besides that of God himself. I will make the long journey to Lombardy and seeketh redemption for my wretched soul,” sayeth Lancelot.

Thereafter Lancelot packed his belongings and saddled his favourite horse which he calleth Mercedes after Our Blessèd Lady of Mercy who inspires such mercy within our own hearts. Lancelot calleth upon God, the Virgin Mary, and Jesù Christ and renewed his promise of chastity before making way. While he rode across the moat for what he believed was the last time, he shed several tears, and so did the people of Camelot, for they held Lancelot with great regard, despite his sins. And while some books sayeth that Queen Guinevere cryeth the most for Lancelot’s lost soul, our books sayeth it was Arthur’s heart who grieved the most, for the sanctity of his beloved kingdom.

Before Lancelot exited the borders of Camelot, his dear son Sir Galahad requested that he journey with his father, having already received permission from King Arthur to do so. And so Lancelot and his son travelled across great distances and many waters to arrive in Lombardy.

And just before crossing the English Channel, Lancelot thought it appropriate to maketh pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Æthelwuld, a Franciscan friar from the swamps of Wales, long celebrated for his imperviousness to nightly passions. Our books sayeth the shrine holdeth Æthelwuld's smallest left toe, which was sliced by the sharp tongue of a succubus who attempted to seduce him with her womanly charms during a holy vision. Blessèd be the Lord, when the succubus attempted to remove his sackcloth, a bright holy light shone from therein, and the succubus was slain by God's charity. And so Lancelot spent three days meditating and praying before Æthelwuld's smallest left toe, inspired by the saint's self-restraint and long life of celibacy.

With no specific direction, Lancelot thought it best to venture towards Lago di Como, for many noblemen of all sorts have lived there throughout the ages. As Lancelot and his son trudged through the untouched Alps, they came upon an old, abandoned villa, nestled between the pines. Foliage and ruin grew over the old building splotched with red paint and ornately decorated. Certainly, the Lord had forsaken this realm many a year ago; and so Lancelot and his son felt compelled to venture inside the building and clear of any unholy beasts.

As our books sayeth, this Red Villa of Cortenova, which the citizens calleth *Casa delle Streghe*, was not plagued by sinister monsters or beasts. Legend has it that a rich old Italian count constructed the villa with his massive wealth and the help of a brilliant architect. Be it illness or fate, God taketh the architect's soul within a year, may he rest in Heaven with our Lord. The Count, upon seeing the wretched Lucifer's hold over the land, abandoned the half-built villa and escaped to Piacenza with his wife, in hopes of fleeing the evil. Since then, the beautiful courtesans of Cortenova pursued their businesses there, and those that were not there to purchase their services engaged in other devious tasks like playing tennis outdoors or making wagers on rolling six-sided dice.

When Lancelot and Galahad entered the villa, they were appalled by the sin that occurred before them. Galahad, preferring the company of his fellow knights than the pleasures of women, was seemingly unaffected by the charms that the courtesans offered. Meanwhile, Lancelot, nearly forgetting his promise to God, was very tempted by them. However, he knew he and his son had a task at hand and had to clear of house of its evils. Sir Lancelot made his way to the matron, who barkept at a counter.

"Milady, I cameth all the way from Camelot to redeem myself of sinful behaviour, and upon my journey, I saw this house of Lucifer. Do tell me, what has put your people under this spell to commit sin each day?" asked Sir Lancelot, bowing down to the matron.

"The books sayeth that a beast of Beelzebul plagues this house. If you can stay the entire day and night without indulging in any sins, perhaps we will be lifted of this wretched curse—for we were once children of God like you and your son," replied the matron.

Galahad sought a single bedroom and counted his rosary beads, forcing a fast upon himself so he not be tempted to engage with anything within the villa. Meanwhile, Lancelot knew not what to do. A courtesan eyed him, and he felt drawn to her, and so they conversed.

"I shall help you with your task, Sir Knight. But you must follow me to the courtesan's quarters." So Sir Lancelot followed her up the stairs, dreading what was to come. Many lovely ladies sat upon their beds, sleeping, or playing *scopa* with one another.

"You must taketh this Grail, Sir Knight, and serve these ladies food and drink until your task is completed. It is the only certain way we can be sure you do not fall into sin and become trapped into the Curse of the Red Villa," said the pretty courtesan.

Despite great temptation, Sir Lancelot successfully accomplished this difficult task. He achieved this by recounting the tale of the beloved St. Æthelwuld and his fallen left toe and thinking of his love of Guinevere. For even if that love was forsaken, he would not abandon her for some Italian wench in Lombardy. And so when the light of the Lord breaketh dawn, the matron screeched like a banshee and suddenly transformed into a very unseemly green demon, which flew up to the second set of stairs where Lancelot was serving wine and food with a Grail. Lancelot, being one of the greatest knights in combat, drew out his sword and promptly slayeth the foul creature. All of the people in the Red Villa forsook their sinful tasks, whether it be courtesantry or tennis, and forthwith began a holy pilgrimage to Rome to receive absolution for their years of debauch'ry. Our books sayeth the demon was sent by the loathsome Morgan le Fay to test the strength of Arthur's court, but such things are difficult to be sure of.

And so, having achieved his task, Lancelot and Galahad stayed in Cortenova for a year, the former practicing great restraint and helping the maidens of Italy with even the smallest of tasks. And once the year passed, Lancelot and his son journeyed back to Camelot, seeking Arthur's forgiveness, which he had given. Arthur embraced Lancelot and Galahad, joyous upon their return. Queen Guinevere smiled more brightly than she ever had before, and our books sayeth that Lancelot visited Guinevere's chambers that night, but it is unknown what occurred between them—a chaste kiss or something more.

I pray you, all that readeth this tale of Lancelot and his son, Galahad, that you see it within yourself to send what florins you can depart with to the nunnery in Aviano, the home of this author.

For this story was ended the first year of the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick the Third, by Foscharina d'Aviano, most loyal learned nun and knocknobbler of Friuli, Jesù help her. May his might bring mercy to you all.

PURPLE PROSE AND OTHER CLICHÉS

By Bailey Parker

It's the hottest August in decades. The birds have fallen silent from choking on their fevers, and, even if they could sing, the wind is too still to float their arias from tree to tree.

Jane doesn't mind the absence of birdsong, but she minds the stillness of the invisible ocean humans have decided to drown themselves in. Her *idiotic* delivery girl uniform is gluing onto her body, and there's no breeze to rush through her and offer *some* relief from the heat.

She straightens her posture, letting her bike glide along the freshly paved road. She looks forward, past the piles of flowers lying in the basket, studying the ripples of the road as it turns ultraviolet, winding. She continues to pedal, ignoring the illusion. The path is straight. The path is the same as it's always been. It will lead her to 224 Gardenia Street, apartment no. 8, like she knows it should.

She looks up at the sky, only to feel her hairs stand on end. The sky is a fierce blue, a shade she's never seen the sky stained with before. It's like the darkest blue of the ocean, just before darkness takes over, just before we lose sight of all that we truly know lives beneath the waves. The young leaves growing from the trees turn from a rich green to a sickly yellow as they stand flush against the dark sky. Everything is shockingly clear, unsettlingly so.

"Damn it," Jane mutters, noticing a stray daisy fall out of its bundle and land in the melting asphalt. She stamps her feet on the ground, stopping herself immediately. She turns and grabs the fallen daisy, carefully brushing it off and tucking it back into its bouquet. This is for the first order in this batch of deliveries, so she hopefully won't have to worry about picking it up multiple times if it falls again. She's nearly at Gardenia Street. Nearly, nearly there.

The apartment building at Gardenia Street is charming, built with white bricks and accentuated with black fire escapes and stairwells. Most of the doors have wreaths or welcome signs hanging on them, adding perfect pops of color, almost creating a strange sky covered with familiar rainbows. It's not an old building, but it's not brand new either.

Apartment no. 8 is on the first floor of the building, so Jane doesn't bother with locking up her bike. She walks up to the door, which has a wreath of wildflowers very similar to the bouquet hanging on it. Jane grabs the bouquet from the basket and knocks on the door, rocking back and forth on her heels while she waits for the door to open. She checks her watch—3:55. Only a little more than an hour and she'll be off for the day.

A woman answers the door, which takes Jane a bit by surprise. She looks down at the bouquet and notices the name on the receipt, Monica. It's strange that she didn't notice a

woman's name there before. She looks back up, flashing a smile that, according to Mrs. Lindsey, guaranteed her a job as a delivery girl.

Monica smiles back at her. She's tall, muscular, her dark, coiled hair tied up in a messy bun. "Oh, thank you so much!"

"Of course!" Jane replies, handing her the bouquet. "This is a lovely bouquet. People don't usually order bouquets like this. They always go with roses. Do you mind if I ask what the occasion is?"

"Oh, not at all!" Monica says. "It's my wife and I's anniversary. She grew up with wildflowers in her backyard, so I've gotten her a bouquet of them for every anniversary since we've been together."

A strange feeling suddenly fills Jane's chest—one she's felt before—that's strangely *comforting*. It feels like an echo, an endless reflection of two mirrors facing each other. It makes her smile falter, just for a moment. She recovers, though, hoping that the moment of weakness wouldn't be noticed and taken for disgust or discomfort.

"How long have you two been together?" Jane asks, keeping her voice bright.

"Five years," Monica beams. "We've been married for three now."

"That's wonderful," Jane replies, that strange feeling *growing* within her, threatening to crawl up her throat. "What's her name?"

"Allison," Monica answers, a blush beginning to stain her cheeks. "She's just the best person you could ever meet. Oh, I just know she'll *love* these flowers." She lifts the bouquet a bit to study the flowers more, but the same daisy falls out of it, reminding Jane of how small it looked lying in the road. Guilt strikes her suddenly, a bolt of cold lightning. She goes to pick it up before Monica can react, dusting it off again and handing it to her.

"Thank you," Monica chuckles. "What's your name, honey?"

Jane flushes, both from embarrassment and the use of the word *honey*. Only her mom calls her little pet names like that. "Um, it's Jane."

Monica takes a wallet out of her pocket to pull a twenty-dollar bill out of it. "Well, Jane, here's a tip for you. Seriously, thank you so much."

Jane's eyes widen. "Oh, that's more than your flowers were, I couldn't."

"No, I insist," Monica reassures her. "Get yourself some water on the way back or something. It's boiling out there."

Jane accepts the twenty, staring at it in awe. She's lucky to get a *five* as a tip, if the person tips her at all. "Thank you. This is so nice of you."

“No problem,” Monica smiles kindly. “You stay safe out there, okay?”

“I will,” Jane replies. “I hope you and Allison have a good anniversary.”

“Thank you, honey,” Monica calls as Jane starts to walk away.

Jane looks over her shoulder and waves goodbye, then mounts her bike and continues onto her next delivery. It’s a seemingly random assortment of flowers for a guy named Michael, who lives at 890 Foxhole Court, which is only about half a mile away. The strange feeling she felt standing at Monica’s door fades into a blurry, almost dizzying contentment that paints the smallest smile on her face. Or maybe she *is* getting heatstroke and she *does* need to use that twenty to get some water. She shakes her head and makes her way to Michael’s, that smile never leaving her face.

The trip and the delivery itself go fine, though Michael didn’t give Jane a tip—he just wanted to get something nice for a first date with a girl he met online. It’s not a big deal, really. Most people don’t think about giving her a small cash tip.

Her next delivery is a dozen red roses for Chad. She rolls her eyes as she sets off on her bike. This guy is going to be an asshole and she knows it.

Jane always texts the number on the receipt as she leaves to deliver to them, but for some reason she forgot to do the same for Chad as she left Michael’s. She, unfortunately, realizes this as she lifts her hand to ring the doorbell at Chad’s apartment.

Chad opens the door, and he isn’t dressed like someone who would order a dozen red roses. A dozen red roses meant that he probably cheated, or forgot an anniversary, or—if Jane wants to be positive—he’s finally popping the question. Chad’s face *screams* desperate, though, and he’s dressed in a graphic t-shirt and khaki shorts. Jane *sincerely* hopes that Chad is going to change into something nicer before he gives these roses to whoever he’s wronged.

He immediately points out that the roses are red, not white, and he specifically ordered white roses. Jane starts to apologize and tell him they can make another bouquet for him; they have plenty of white roses back at the shop. He bites back that he doesn’t have time for that, and before he slams the door in her face, he hisses that he’ll be asking for a refund in the morning.

Jane stands there for a moment, completely stunned. Sure, they’d gotten orders wrong before, but she’d never had someone slam a door in her face because of it. She sighs and checks her watch. 4:25. She’s almost three miles away from the shop with a whole bouquet of flowers sitting in the basket, and the sun is beating down on her in noxious waves.

She turns around and sees a shop across the street with a bike rack next to it. A wooden sign hangs above the door, mounted to the brick wall. In a neat serif font the shop’s name is declared—*Paperbound Booksellers & Café*. Jane almost bursts into tears, she’s so relieved. Maybe the café will have good iced coffee, which sounds like the perfect remedy for the day she’s had. She parks her bike and decides to take the bouquet with her and at least offer it to whoever’s working inside. Mrs. Lindsey won’t be happy that Jane gave it away for free, but at least it ended up with *someone* and not in a dumpster.

Jane opens the glass door and the coolest, softest breeze rushes over her. She can suddenly feel every bead of sweat resting on her forehead, feel the heat of stars in her cheeks instead of a blush like the roses in her hand. A voice welcomes her to Paperbound, but she doesn't quite hear it, and she doesn't look to see who the voice belongs to. In her daze, she looks only forward at the interior of the shop.

The floors are wood stained a pale, honey-like color. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases line most of the walls, each shelf neatly filled with a rainbow of books. Jane assumes the bookcases *were* white, but any visible blank space has been painted to fit some sort of theme—the fiction section seems to be painted a certain way, and the poetry section and the history section. The bookcases are too far away for Jane to notice any further detail; from here she can only distinguish different color schemes.

Directly in front of her are a handful of white tables with more books stacked on top of them. The one closest to Jane has a sign that reads "Timeless Classics" placed in the center of it. The first book Jane notices is *Pride & Prejudice*, written by the author her mother named her after. She takes a few steps closer, noticing at least ten other copies of Austen novels. Seeing her namesake on every shelf of every bookstore she's been to has never affected Jane before, but this particular display pulls her in against her will. She's never seen most of these covers before—some look so old they could be first or second editions, the pages fading to pale browns and dirty yellows. Some look almost brand new, and handmade rather than made by a well-known, established publisher.

She puts the roses on the table and picks up a seemingly handmade copy of *Emma*, her mother's favorite Austen novel. The cover is a pale, cream color, soft and warm to the touch. It's engraved with navy blue and gold flowers, all surrounding the silhouette of a woman with rich, brown curls and an elegant, white dress. The title, written in delicate calligraphy with gold ink lies at the top, shimmering with the tiniest shift of the light. Jane Austen's famous signature lies at the bottom, a simple arrangement of letters larger than the life she was given speaking louder than she was able to.

Jane opens the book, leafing through the pages until she finds the page that famously and adoringly proclaims, "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more." She stares at the line for a moment, her eyes reading over it several times as she starts to smile. She closes the book and looks at the back cover to find a price. Twenty-five dollars. She can already see the smile on her mother's face if she were to give this to her, the light in her pale, tired eyes brightening. Her mother had just had her birthday a couple of months before, but surely she wouldn't mind a random gift, too, especially one as beautiful as this.

"Need help findin' anything, ma'am?"

Jane jumps, the book falling out of her hands. She recovers quickly, though, and goes to catch it when another pair of hands catches it at the same, too. Jane quickly pulls her hands away, a burning flush flooding her entire face. Thankfully, the book ended up in the other person's hands and not on the floor.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am, I didn't mean to scare you," they say, holding the book out to Jane.

Jane lets herself look up at who she assumes is the employee that greeted her as she walked into the store, who's smiling nervously at her. The employee's smile relaxes a bit as her eyes meet Jane's, revealing dimples and teeth ever so slightly crooked. *She has a really pretty smile*, Jane thinks.

Dark brown freckles are scattered all over the employee's face, but especially across her cheeks, which are starting to turn pink. Her eyes are a dark brown, too, shining like stars, shining even brighter as they squint from the width of her smile. She wears glasses with perfectly round, golden frames that match her wavy, honey blonde hair that's tucked behind her ears. Her left ear, Jane notices, is slightly pointed, like an elf's.

"I-it's okay," Jane manages to say, tearing her eyes away from the employee's face. She notices the employee's lanyard, which is decorated with buttons and pins, the most noticeable of which being a pride flag that Jane recognizes as the lesbian flag. That *feeling* she got at Monica's returns, but stronger. She's suddenly speechless again, and helpless to the mad and wild beating of her heart. Her eyes, darting about in a panic, notice the nametag hanging at the end of the employee's lanyard, with the name Emily written in perfect and, frankly, *adorable* cursive. Jane squeezes her eyes shut, shakes her head once, and takes the book from Emily. "I... get lost in my own little world sometimes."

"I understand," Emily replies with a light chuckle. She has a Southern accent, but not the obnoxious kind that Jane is used to hearing in movies and TV shows. It's subtle, adding a melodious lilt to her voice.

"Yeah," Jane chuckles, too, awkwardly.

"Hey, you're one of those flower delivery girls," Emily smiles, pointing at Jane's lilac polo shirt. "But not the one in the commercial, I don't think."

Jane laughs again, but a bit more naturally. "No, I'm not the one in the commercial. That's Lauren. They couldn't have paid me enough to convince me to go in front of a camera."

"Did you just come off your shift with some extra flowers?" Emily asks, gesturing now at the roses still lying on the table.

"Oh, yeah," Jane replies, not thinking. "If your store is looking for some floral decoration, I'd be happy to give them to you."

"Oh, thank you so much," Emily grins. "I'm sure my boss won't mind."

Jane takes a step backward as she sees Emily reach for the flowers, not wanting another incident like when she almost dropped the book. Emily picks up the flowers, taking a moment to feel their velvet petals and smell their sweet, syrupy scent. She gives Jane another smile, then turns on her heel and walks towards the front desk.

"So, *Emma*, huh?" she calls over her shoulder as she places them behind the counter.

“Oh, um, yeah,” Jane stammers, starting to get her breathing back to normal. “It’s my mom’s favorite, so I was thinking about buying it for her.”

“Your mom has good taste, then,” Emily replies, approaching Jane again. Her mouth drops open suddenly, her eyes widening. She shakes her head, chuckling. “Where are my manners? I’m Emily. And, let me guess, you’re Emma? Or Jane, maybe?”

Jane’s lips clumsily spread into a smile. “It’s Jane. My parents made Emma my older sister’s middle name, so when I came along my mom picked the next best thing.”

“Nice to meet you, Jane,” Emily says, grinning. She starts to hold out her hand for Jane to shake, but her cheeks flush again as she quickly shoves it into her pocket. “Well, do you wanna look for anything else while you’re here? We have the best selection in the county, in my humble opinion.”

“Oh,” Jane stammers. “Well, what do you recommend? In general, I guess. I haven’t been here before.”

“Well, I’ve read just about every book we have here,” Emily chuckles lightly. She doesn’t seem to be bragging, though. She says it so casually it almost makes Jane laugh, too. “You’ll have to be more specific about what you’re looking for. Fantasy, literary fiction, nonfiction, LGBTQ…” she trails off, shrugging. “Just pick a genre. It’ll be an adventure scavenging the shelves. It’s been a slow day, so I’m sure I’ll have time.”

It takes all of Jane’s willpower not to flinch at *LGBTQ*. That’ll give Emily the wrong idea, and that’s the last thing Jane wants to do. Jane shakes her head as the warmth burns even brighter, hotter. Nervously, she checks her watch. 4:35.

She looks up at Emily, who’s looking at her expectantly, eyebrows raised, smiling kindly. Jane can’t help but smile, too, her posture relaxing slightly. “Um,” she begins, shrugging. *LGBTQ* is still echoing in her mind. Maybe if she asks for those kinds of recommendations it’ll make up for almost seeming like a bigot. Curiosity—small as a mustard seed—has been planted within her, too, whether she recognized it or not. Her tongue ties itself into knots, but she manages to reply, “How about LGBTQ?”

Emily’s smile breaks into a grin, her eyes squinting into crescent moons. Jane notices then how long and curled Emily’s eyelashes are, only a few shades darker than her hair. Her cheeks darken even deeper, but she breaks eye contact with Emily and bows her head so she can hide her blushing.

“Awesome!” Emily says. “We do have a whole LGBTQ section, but I’m gonna take you to the classics section. Trust me. I think I have the perfect book for you.”

“Okay,” Jane nods, following Emily as she crosses to the other side of the store. Jane swipes at her cheeks, as if it would make the blush go away. Her heartbeat has somewhat returned to normal, but there’s still an unusual rhythm to it, as if it were skipping happily down a bright, sunlit street.

Emily kneels in front of a shelf painted the same shade of tan as a perfectly aged book, detailed with famous lines from classic novels written in black cursive. Emily's fingers dance across the spines like piano keys, creating a glissando throughout time. She pulls one out, muttering a small hurrah. She stands up and turns around, handing it to Jane.

It's a paperback, made with a light and soft paper. The cover is a light blue, with a navy silhouette of a woman in the middle of it. Inside her is a mandala of cresting waves, skirts of seafoam cascading down her back.

"*The Waves* by Virginia Woolf," Emily says as Jane reads. "It was published in 1931, and it was her last novel. It's very... experimental, let's say. The first few pages are a little confusing, but it shouldn't take you long to catch on to what's happening. It's definitely one of my favorites. Dare I say it may be in my top ten."

Jane's brow furrows. "1931? And you said this is an LGBT book?"

Emily nods, her smile widening and her eyebrows raising. "You have a canonically gay character, and you hear a lot about his crushes on different boys." Her words come out in a passionate rush, as if she's been keeping in an exciting secret and is finally blurting it out.

"And her readers were okay with this?" Jane asked, unable to keep herself from catching Emily's infectious smile.

"I think that by the time she wrote it, she knew who her audience was and that they would be accepting of Neville and his queerness." Her beaming grin shrunk to a small, almost shy smile. "And that's nice to think about, you know? That people like me have always existed and were looking out for each other, or finally putting their feelings on the page without needing to hide it under lock and key. It's really comforting for me."

Jane's smile shrinks, too, that warmth continuing to swell. "I'm sure."

"I should warn you, though," Emily adds, shaking her head slightly. "The book gets pretty dark towards the end. But it's an amazing book, overall. It's bittersweet, but in the way that makes you feel so much but it's *okay* that you're feeling so much. It makes you feel more human, I think. I really think you'll like it. You also just strike me as someone who appreciates purple prose, and *The Waves* is full of it."

Jane smiles timidly, pressing both books to her chest. "I do?"

"Yeah," Emily replies, so sweet and genuine Jane feels a hot blush burst in her cheeks. "Some say it's cringy or cliché, but you just seem like you would enjoy a dash of poetry in your prose. I don't know, maybe I'm just assuming since you're a flower delivery girl."

"Oh," is all Jane can manage for a moment. "Um, no, you're right. I do enjoy it."

Emily grins, and for a moment, Jane thinks pink starts staining her cheeks, too. "I'm glad to hear it. I'm sure you'll love *The Waves*, but if you don't, feel free to come back and give me a piece of your mind. And maybe... I'll give you a free iced coffee in exchange." The words

clumsily stumble from her mouth, but her uplifted chin and raised eyebrows try to tell Jane that she's more confident than she's feeling.

"I'll hold you to that," Jane laughs. Her heart quickens again, but it doesn't make butterflies materialize in her stomach, or make her throat suddenly feel dry and thick. It makes her feel *light*, floating and dancing on a perfect summer breeze. It makes her realize the warmth rising in her cheeks is soft as candlelight. She starts rocking back and forth on her heels again, spending a moment or two longer on her tiptoes than she normally would. "*Maybe* if the iced coffee is good, I'll come back."

Emily's shyness sheds as she smirks. "Oh, we've got the *best* iced coffee in town—for miles, even." She holds up the end of her lanyard, showing off her pride button. "It's certainly lesbian approved."

Jane was on her tiptoes, but she falls back onto her heels, faltering for just a moment. That word echoes in her mind until it somehow reaches her tongue. She presses her lips together, keeping her voice hidden as her tongue forms the shape of that unfamiliar, unreal word. She suddenly feels both lighter and heavier at the same time. Her feet want to sink into the floor until she disappears. Her head wants to look up at the ceiling and get lost in it until she finds herself. She recovers, raising an eyebrow. "But is it Jane Fennelly approved?"

"It, in fact, has not passed that test yet," Emily replies, nodding her head at almost every syllable. "But I think it's prepared for that test to happen today, if you're interested."

"Why not?" Jane shrugs, letting herself chuckle. To her own ears it sounds nervous, but Emily doesn't seem to notice. "I have time."

"Perfect!" Emily grins, wide and toothy. "Follow me, Ms. Fennelly."

She crosses to the café, and Jane follows a step or two behind her, watching Emily's hair bounce and brush against her shoulders in golden waves.

There's a small, wooden door separating the café counter from the rest of the store, which Emily latches shut behind her. Jane stands awkwardly beside the counter, feeling uncomfortable both for leaning against it and *not* leaning against it. She settles for a strange middle ground, standing flush against it and resting her folded arms on its surface, her books sitting in a stack next to her.

"Would you like just a straight iced coffee, Jane, or do you want me to add some *pizzaz* to it? A flavor shot or two?"

"Oh, um," she stammers, turning red after hearing Emily say her name. "Straight...?"

Emily turns from the espresso machine to look at Jane, her brow furrowed from confusion but smiling. "Straight?"

Jane bites her lip, beginning to smile. "Yes. Straight."

Emily chuckles. “Gotcha.”

She turns back around, and Jane lets out a huge exhale as quietly as she can. She checks her watch. 4:45. She should probably just take her iced coffee, pay for it and the books, and be on her way back to the shop. Sure, she could call and say she’ll be a few minutes late and talk to Emily more, but then that would be one less person to help close the shop. And as much as she loves Mrs. Lindsey, she gets rightfully pissy when people working delivery are late getting back.

“So, I imagine you’re a student?” Emily asks over the shriek of the espresso machine.

Jane blinks, shaking her head. “Oh, yeah, I am. I imagine you are, too.”

“Yes, I am,” Emily confirms, smiling. “What’s your major?”

Jane freezes. Her eyes land on her stack of books. “Literature.”

Emily turns around again, even more confused. She studies Jane for a moment, and a small smile returns to her face. “You’re lyin’ to me,” she says. It’s not accusatory. It’s just a simple statement.

Jane never understood the phrase “beet red” until this moment. She drops her head, looking at the grain of the wood counter. “Math education,” she admits quietly.

“Middle-grade? Secondary?” Emily’s voice is soft, genuine.

Jane looks up, and sees Emily looking right in her eyes, everything about her face is just... *kind*. Jane doesn’t know where it comes from, but she chuckles. “Middle-grade. My mom always said I have the patience to be a middle school teacher, and I like the math you learn at that point in school better, anyway, so...”

“You seem like you would be a good teacher,” Emily says, her smile widening. “If only I knew you when I still had to take math classes.”

“Yeah,” Jane chuckles softly, looking back down at the counter.

Emily doesn’t reply immediately, and Jane swears she can feel those brown eyes studying her like a precious jewel. Finally, Emily says, “You seem like an almond milk kinda gal.”

Jane looks up and sees Emily following through on her assumption, pouring almond milk into the cup until it’s just full. She feels herself blushing. *How did she know I like almond milk?*

Emily puts the lid on the cup, swirling it as she sets it down in front of Jane. “Now’s the time,” she says giddily, giving her a straw. “Let’s see if it gets your seal of approval.”

Jane finds herself staring at Emily’s hand, maybe just for a moment too long. Emily has what Jane’s mother would call piano hands—long, elegant fingers with smooth skin, a perfect and round curve to her palm. Her fingernails are painted black, and cracked at the top, as if the polish has been bitten or chipped off.

When Jane takes the straw, she tries her best to avoid brushing her hand against Emily's. She's successful, thankfully. But Emily's hand almost immediately goes into her pocket, out of sight. She looks back up at Emily's face, and she's caught in a trance again.

Emily is smiling, but it's fading slowly from her face, so slowly that Jane almost doesn't notice it. There's the smallest wrinkle at the tip of her nose, the slightest scrunch, that hides some of her freckles. Her eyes are a centimeter too wide, flitting across Jane's face, staring at her hand. Is she really that nervous about Jane trying the coffee? But as Jane stares at her another moment longer, she thinks that Emily is still so beautiful that she'll make her heart burst out of her chest.

Jane shakes her head as the thought comes to her mind, her eyes naturally falling on her drink. She chuckles lightly, out of nerves more than anything else. She hears Emily chuckle, too, and that puts her slightly at ease. She stabs the straw into the lid and finally takes a sip. She's initially met with a hint of sweetness, but then it melts into the bitterness of the coffee, perfectly balanced with the nuttiness of the almond milk.

"So...?" Emily asks, a hint of nerves still present in her voice.

"This is *amazing*," Jane replies, her eyes wide.

She looks up and sees Emily break into a grin, wider than any grin that's beamed from her face since they met. Her hands fly out of her pockets as she triumphantly raises her arms in the air. "She likes it!"

"More like *loves* it," Jane replies, taking another sip, and the flavor suddenly feels more enhanced, but still not too strong. "Oh my god, forget the books. The iced coffee is the only thing worth anything here."

"And you tried to tell me you were a literature major," Emily laughs. Any nerves she had before have completely dissolved. "Oh, but I'm so glad you like it! Now, I can tell the whole town that our iced coffee is both lesbian *and* Jane Fennelly approved."

"There'll be a line all the way down the block every morning before you open," Jane laughs, too. "They'll storm in as soon as you open the doors."

"Oh, we're not used to that kinda business," Emily replies, shaking her head. "We'll have to buy double of everything we already get. But, hey, what's wrong with a little bit more cash in your pocket?"

"Absolutely nothing," Jane answers with a nod. "You're welcome, by the way. I expect that either a new drink be named after me, or the entire store being named after me. Either would be the perfect display of your gratitude to me, the Savior of Paperbound."

Emily nods back, still laughing, but the last burst of it turns into a snort, short and quick and squeaky. She immediately covers her mouth with her hands, her eyes widened.

"You're adorable," Jane giggles, and it takes her a moment to realize what she's just said.

Emily's eyes widen even more. Her hands slowly fall from her face, revealing her half-open mouth. Her eyes are searching Jane's face again, shining with something Jane can't name, something that makes her afraid to give it a name, give it power over her.

"I'm so sorry," Jane stammers, her face burning bright red again. "I don't know what came over me."

Emily shakes her head, smiles now. "No, no, thank you, that was really sweet of you to say. I just don't hear that a lot and it took me by surprise, I guess."

"Oh... yeah," Jane replies, half-smiling. A thought enters her mind, sweetly—how could anyone *not* adore this girl? Then another, bitter now—how could *you* adore her? A voice other than her own whispers this to her. No, *two* voices. The same two voices that criticize her every move, her every thought—her father and her sister, spitting out tendrils of poison. There's no antidote for it, no natural immunity. Every person that it touches is corroded, stripped to their bare bones. What her father and sister don't know is that Jane has been caught in the crossfire, only receiving a stray drop or two. But the drops are accumulating, enough for Jane to be familiar with the taste of the poison, its smell and its color. She's the favorite yet unknown victim of her family's abuses, forced to watch strangers be reduced to dust and then face a longer torture, a slower death.

"Are you ready to check out?" Emily asks, her voice... different. Jane wants to say it's darkened into something sad, disappointed.

"Um," Jane stammers, realizing she's clutched her books to her chest. She looks at her watch. 4:51. She really should get going. Especially before she embarrasses herself even more, before the echo of the poison takes on a life of its own. "Yeah. Sure. Sorry."

"It's okay," Emily says, shrugging. She goes out the little wooden door and walks towards the counter. Jane follows her, her books heavy in the crook of her arm and her coffee freezing against her fingertips. Her blushing has turned embarrassed, ashamed, emitting a heat more like an eye on a stove—harsh, ready to burst into an inferno and *burn*.

"I really am sorry about what I said," she finds herself saying. "It... It just came out of my mouth before I could stop it."

"You don't have to apologize, Jane," Emily replies, half-chuckling. In any other situation Jane would've found this condescending, but hearing it from Emily is somehow reassuring. "It was a compliment, and I really did appreciate it."

A sigh of relief tumbles out of Jane's mouth. "Okay, good." She trails off on the last word, dissolving into a more nervous chuckle. "I just... I don't know. Don't listen to me."

She looks down at her books as she sets them in front of Emily, her ephemeral relief tightening back into anxiety. There was *The Waves*, holding the tides of time within it. According to Emily, it also holds the same tides that lull within Jane. The sound of its voice—quiet, whispering—haunts her as much as the voices in her head does. And below *The Waves* was *Emma*, full of a wit and charm that orbits an ultimately selfish heroine, who finally softens

when a man can't find enough words to describe his love for her. There was the queer, tragic ending, and the straight, happy ending—both in Jane's hands.

A metaphor made real leaves a bitter taste in Jane's mouth, leaves a thick lump in her throat. Her hands shake as they push the books towards Emily, her eyes twitching as they war between looking down at some imagined abyss or up at someone that shouldn't be beautiful in Jane's eyes. But Emily *is* beautiful. Her voice and her laugh are beautiful. Her hands are beautiful. Her way of knowing—somehow—who Jane is just by looking at her is beautiful and *terrifying*. But looking downwards wins the war, and her hands retreat to the small of her back. They hold each other, trying to convince themselves they don't need another pair of hands to hold them, too.

"Jane?" Emily says softly. "Did you hear me?"

Jane lifts her head, focusing her eye contact on her books. "No, sorry."

"Your total's \$42.38."

Jane fumbles through her pocket for her wallet, her hands still shaking. She's somehow able to get out her card, but she pauses before handing it to Emily. Maybe if she just doesn't look at her hands, the transaction will be over, and she can leave, and she can start heading back to the shop, and she can forget that all of this happened.

Do you want to forget? A voice similar to her own whispers, echoing from the recesses of her mind.

Jane shakes her head, muddling the thought into a senseless jumble of letters and syllables. She holds out her card, and she doesn't look at Emily's hands. She hears the machine ding when the purchase goes through, and a whirring as the receipt is printed.

"Jane?" Emily says again.

"Hm?" she hums in response, afraid to let her tongue loose again. She lets herself look at Emily's shirt—a soft, white button-up. The collar is rounded, rather than pointed.

"You remind me of someone I used to know," Emily begins, speaking slowly.

Jane lifts her eyes a bit, focusing on Emily's honey blonde hair brushing against her shoulders. She raises her eyebrows, hoping that's enough of a response.

"What the hell," Emily mutters, chuckling dryly. "You remind me of me. Back in Tennessee. 16, 17, 18 years old."

Jane's eyes drop again to the counter, her stack of books.

"Lost," Emily continues. "Confused. Lonely."

The word *lonely* strikes a chord. Maybe that's why the sky felt like a darkening ocean. Maybe that feeling that keeps rising in Jane's chest is something close to belonging. She felt it when she brought the bouquet to Monica and she talked about her wife. She felt it when she met Emily and they talked as if they'd known each other for years.

"It's okay if you are, Jane," Emily says after a moment. "I know I just met you thirty minutes ago and I barely know anything about you, but I see your pain and I understand it. I've felt it, and I bore it alone. I don't want you to do the same."

Pain. Jane's head snaps up, and she finally sees Emily's face again.

Her brows are ever so slightly furrowed, her mouth half-frowning. Her nose is scrunching again, too, and the absence of only one or two freckles feels so *heavy* in Jane's chest. She makes the mistake of looking into Emily's eyes, finding the distinct sheen that precedes tears and a *kindness* that Jane has never seen before, let alone be directed at *her*.

"I..." Jane begins, stammering. "No... no, I'm not... I..."

Emily's face *falls*, turning into something Jane could only describe as *pity*.

"Listen, I'm sorry," Jane continues, frantic, shaking her head. "I don't have time to unpack this right now. I'm... I'm not like you and that's... that's okay, too, isn't it? And I'm not like my dad or my sister, either. I'm not a hateful person. I could never be like that, but I'm not like you, either, and that's okay. It's all okay."

Emily looks more confused and concerned than ever, shaking her head as if it would help her make sense of what just came out of Jane's mouth. "Of-of course it's okay. Being an ally is a good thing, too. I didn't mean to assume anything about your sexuality, you just... seem like you could use a friend."

"I have friends," Jane replies, feeling but not sounding defensive.

"I'm sorry," Emily sighs, shaking her head again.

"It's... *fine*. As long as you understand that I'm not like you," Jane takes a deep breath, chewing on her lip. "It's fine."

Emily doesn't reply at first. Jane is about to ask for her receipt and leave when she notices something out of the corner of her eye—Emily's hands, only an inch or two away from hers, her fingers ever so gently stretching and reaching. Jane doesn't move her hand away this time. She looks up at Emily, finally letting herself look in her eyes.

Her heart lurches as she suddenly feels as if she's staring at her own reflection, seeing the same pain and fatigue in Emily's brown eyes as she does in her blue eyes. In Emily's eyes, though, there's some sort of light or sheen, something that—to Jane—implies that the pain is old, somewhat healed. There's a question in Emily's eyes, too, warm and kind and patient. *Can I hold your hand?*

Jane feels tears pool in her eyes as she nods weakly. *You can hold my hand.*

Emily is still slow, careful. She gently runs her thumb over Jane's knuckles before fully placing her hand on top of hers. Jane's heartbeat quickens again, but not into a chaotic stutter. It returns to that sweet, light skip it had before. The good warmth returns, gently numbing everything that had swelled within her. Emily's hand is warm, too, but not as soft as Jane was expecting. Her fingertips are slightly callused, her palm rough like the inside of a sweatshirt you've washed too many times. Jane lifts her hand a bit, allowing her fingers to interlock with Emily's. She studies the way their hands seem to fit perfectly into each other. She lets her thumb brush over Emily's, the skin softer there, warmer. Jane feels herself smile, but her lips are trembling, too. She presses them together, then lets herself take a deep breath. She keeps staring at their intertwined hands as she says, "I lied, Emily. I am like you."

"I know," Emily replies, making it sound as simple and sweet as she always does. "And it's okay that you are. And it's okay if lying has gotten really easy. Maybe a little too easy. You don't have to lie to me. You don't have to lie to anyone that walks through our door. Lying still takes a toll on you, even if it feels as easy as breathing. You deserve a break from it, even if it's just for a little while. Even if it's only when you're under this roof."

A tear finally escapes. "I've never said it out loud before," Jane says. She'd heard Emily's speech, and her heart had warmed when she heard it, but her mind was stuck on that simple fact. She admitted it. She admitted it while holding a girl's hand. She admitted it.

"It's okay," Emily reassures her. She covers their hands with her other one, holding tightly. "It's all gonna be okay. There's nothing wrong with you. There's nothing wrong with the way you love. You are the way that you are, and that's okay. Okay?"

Jane shakes her head, biting back a sob. "I don't feel that way yet."

Emily squeezes Jane's hand even tighter. "That's okay, too. I understand."

Jane nods, taking a deep but shaky breath. Her eyes land on *The Waves*, trailing the edge of every crest of the sea. "You said his name is Neville. And he doesn't get a happy ending?"

Emily sighs. "No. Not really." She pauses, then squeezes Jane's hand again, getting her attention. Once their eyes meet, an endless reflection, she says, "But that doesn't mean you can't get one, either."

Jane bites her lip as it trembles, a few more tears escaping from her eyes. "God, I hope I can," she chokes out.

Emily pulls her hands away and reaches across the counter, bringing Jane in for an awkward but much-needed hug. Jane is frozen, feeling Emily's chest rise and fall as she breathes for her for a moment. Jane melts into the hug as she starts breathing by herself again, wrapping her arms around Emily's waist. She closes her eyes, feels the warmth in her chest swell into a symphony, feels her heart sway to its music, feels her smallest pieces begin to mend.

"You *will*," Emily tells her, her voice soft in tone but strong in conviction. As the words drip into Jane's ears like honey, she can't help but believe them.

Truth fills everything. It's the voice hidden in each note of Jane's newfound sympathy, it's the thing that colors the blood flowing through her calmed heart. Truth is the pressure locking her body to Emily's, and truth is in the air she inhales, forcing out lies with every exhale. Truth is in Jane's hands now—it's tangible and real and *gentle*. For the first time in her life, she doesn't fear the truth. For the first time, she doesn't feel like the wrong heart was sewn into her chest. For the first time, she feels *relief*.

She hugs Emily tighter, finally smiling. "Thank you."

SNAPSHOTS OF A SILENT COMPOSER

By Ana Dinis Perez

From the defying and isolating summer of 2020, a quote from Sylvia Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath, 58-59).

SPOILED FRUIT

He bashed his face onto mine and gave me a disgusting kiss in the mouth; I tried running, too late, his right hand already coiled around my long curly hair, pulling me into his bedroom, pitch-black, red door, old man smell, I started yelling, and he let me loose, I was 6, him a farmworker almost 60 years old.

Five years later.

I still can feel his drunken hands touching me, silently playing around an area you don't want to be touched at 11 years old, a stranger who has already tripled your age, all while your mother and father sitting at the front of the car driving, chatting, and listening to music at 2 in the morning. My panic at that moment manifested inwards amid a second sexual assault. I pushed his hands toward him at least 17 times, but they kept coming back like ants after candy; this is perhaps the most silent I have been in my life. I didn't want to make a scene; I didn't want to disturb anyone, even if that meant losing my dignity. The assault finally came to an end when he told my dad we had to stop to let him go pee, my father had to get out of the car to assist him and me, with tremors all over my body in a few words, told my mother what had been going on. The remaining time of the trip, my mother sat with me in the back, holding my hand, and the guest moved to the passenger seat; my dad, well, he later justified the man's actions with his level of drunkenness. Nothing was recapitulated after the incident.

MEMORIES OF A COUSIN

Three things: she taught me my first dance steps, how to masturbate at the age of 7, and perhaps, the instigator of some of my narcissistic ways when it comes to worrying about the way I look, what I wear, who I am shopping for. A little bit of background, she is five years older, at birth, was given the Japanese name of Sanako after her half-Japanese second cousin, and was the granddaughter of an alleged Nazi that escaped post-war Germany and that quickly established in Venezuela. As a child, I spent lots of time with her, at some point considering her a sister, the older sister I wished I would have had, and the one I stopped talking to amidst family turmoils, my grandpa killing himself, moving to the capital, all that in an attempt to escape the bad, silencing the memories, the town of tragedies I wish my brain stopped thinking about, obliterating unresolved events kept as memories drew apart my relationship with my cousin and anyone around her thus failing to be the cousin I once was.

A SUICIDE

The coffee was bitter at grandpa's funeral; the cookies were stale, the bouquets few. He hung himself, "Patarata," a nickname he acquired from the locals after immigrating from Portugal to Venezuela and later founding a successful business. This bakery fed an entire town and kept its doors open under his close administration for about 45 years. Nothing is perpetual. Looking at the casket, I noticed his mouth had been glued shut and that he didn't have any clothes under the white blanket that covered him. It didn't look like he hung himself, I thought. My father looked at the coffin in a parallel, crying like I hadn't seen it before. I see my dad carrying the casket at one corner, four men in total in each corner to the church for the afternoon service. I see all kinds of people around the church, most of the employees, others for a good afternoon gossip, close friends, and the few family members around, even my grandmother, who always wished my grandpa had never thrown her out of his life. She later said he would not have killed himself if he was still with her.

The ways my grandpa acknowledged my presence was often unconventional, mainly using me as a walking stick. His days were always full of work; I am convinced his whole purpose in living was working, and when he fell ill, his sole purpose suddenly glimmered, and suicide shone so brightly in his head, like the morning he acted upon it. His walking stick, my rather small existence, I was patient, I walked at his pace, I delayed games, his palm on one of my shoulders, I tilted my head upwards and gave him a good look, I thought to myself, what a tall man. Nothing is perpetual.

NORTH AMERICA

When I came to this country, I embodied and met all the characteristics of a frugal visitor, a tourist. Slowly, the tourist within me became a Minnesota state resident and rapidly absorbed and adopted all the norms and guidelines of what it means to be a U.S citizen. Even before stepping foot on the alleged American soil, my mother told me that my number one goal was to adapt, and at the time, the phrase "to adapt" I interpreted as renouncing my identity and mimicking what everyone else did or said, completely unaware of what was being thrown at me.

Slowly, the things I considered to be an important part of living, things like, reconnecting with my family, hobbies, reading, singing, and dancing, the social life I wanted for myself stopped to matter for a while, I was too upset to care because I felt divided in the inside, failing to move past my faulty state of adaptation, not feeling comfortable and at ease with myself, memories of the country I left behind now rotting in corruption, childhood traumas, a victim of a discorded family succumbed me to the point of exhaustion.

For a while, the necessity to take action seemed pointless. I was being moved almost unconsciously by the circumstances and people. I felt I had no control over my mental health by school bell rings and appointments, so I decided to shut down. Life was just passing by, and my awareness of the present moment became clouded. All the intricacies of human socialization that seem to happen from time to time did not matter, had no point, made no sense, played no leading role, played no role whatsoever. During those years at boarding school, to the point where my depressed self started to emerge, head down, I walked through school hallways, almost as if avoiding eye contact with anyone. For weeks, I stared at the floor and counted the cracks in it, the places where floor patterns and colors changed, where cleaning was neglected. At only 16 years of age, I had already contemplated the idea of disappearing, evaporating in thin air, deeply questioning the meaning of my existence and those around me. I went so far as to ask the point of mastering the violin, an instrument I had been playing since I was eight and a half years old, and the sole reason I was studying abroad. I asked those same existential questions to the adults around me, who seemed to resemble walls that remained unmoved and deaf. These human walls built houses to store evil creatures inside them, fed the vein, the arrogant, the self-centered, always hungry for money and power, walls covering the space and light where a fig tree should have been nurtured to bear fruit of possibilities.

At the time, I did not stop and wondered if I was the wall killing the fig tree. If all of this was a result of self-abandonment and discontent, immaturity, I was wasting precious time dwelling in the past and expecting an answer from the outside instead of the inside. I wanted a perfect living situation and ended up thinking that if I waited long enough under that fig tree, figs would fall into my lap and magically decide the fate of my life.

LIFE IS FINE

by

Langston Hughes - 1902-1967

I went down to the river, I
set down on the bank. I
tried to think but couldn't,
So I jumped in and sank.

I came up once and hollered!

I came up twice and cried! If that
water hadn't a-been so cold I
might've sunk and died.

But it was Cold in that water! It was cold!

I took the elevator
Sixteen floors above the ground.

I thought about my baby And
thought I would jump down.

I stood there and I hollered!
I stood there and I cried!

If it hadn't a-been so high
I might've jumped and died.

But it was High up there! It was high!

So since I'm still here livin',
I guess I will live on.

I could've died for love

But for livin' I was born

Though you may hear me holler,

And you may see me cry

I'll be dogged, sweet baby,
If you gonna see me die.

Life is fine! Fine as wine! Life is fine!

A MURDER AND VIEUXTEMPS VIOLIN CONCERTO NR. 4

It's 2018. I am 17 years old and a senior in high school. I have not seen my mother for a year, yet, she is downstairs in the bedroom, sleeping during the day, crying at night. I am angry; I am dejected; I am angry again; it's fall break. Her brother, 47 years old, was killed by his wife, her lover, and an acquaintance of her lover. Her entire family plotted it, and it took place at the entrance gate of my uncle's farm. Upon arriving at the gate, the wife stepped out of the car, led herself to the gate then gunshots followed. I wonder if he was able to make sense of the situation before death. I wonder if he gave her a last look and knew what was happening, what killed him, who killed him. My mother did not know the wife had been involved in the incident, part of the plan. The wife made sure to paint in a completely different scenario. Then the truth escaped the cave, and hearings, lawyers, blood tests, and attempts of murder on my parents unfolded. For years I dreamt of my teeth falling and calls in which I was told my parents were murdered. It felt like hell. Then I thought, nothing is perpetual. I could only make peace with the affair when I played Vieuxtemps Violin Concerto Nr. 4. I played the whole thing in my head, the whole list of events that my mother had told me happened, and made out the rest my mother was afraid to tell

me. The older I get, the more I keep composing little snapshots of my past in my head, all silently never leaving my head. It has become a coping mechanism. I say I'll make a movie out of it one day; I will type it all away, give it a voice and leave it there, in plain, transparent air.

CODA

Like Sylvia Plath in her book *The Bell Jar* I too feel my life branching out like a big fig tree, bearing marvelous fruit, the fruit of infinite dreams, my dreams of one day becoming an actress, a writer, a good cousin; of accepting loss, dreams, oh dreams I see “wrinkle and go black” because I am tied to the ground, swollen whole by mundane insecurities and past events that have poised clear water, childish innocence; for years I was the personification of great privilege and simultaneously great nonconformism, always feeling the heartbreaking effects of my uttermost poverty of mind and soul. I feel away, detached, asleep, then a sudden spark makes hope my biggest ally. I wish to learn to celebrate the wonders of the “ordinary” and never to rummage the past. My dreams of becoming an actress, a writer, a good daughter, and a cousin have been long waiting at the fig tree; I want to choose one but not lose the rest, I stop my old self and take action; thus, I no longer want to be the silent composer in my life’s story.

FREEDOM FROM SPEECH

By Youbin Park

The first time I stood in front of my fourth grade class, I forgot my own name. To be precise, I forgot my English name that was so carefully assigned by my parents. There were too many letters to remember, so many sounds to round out and combine; my mouth was wired-shut, and I stood for an embarrassingly long time before being silently dismissed.

What I thought I knew from my forty-five minute lessons from Korean public schools proved to be useless, and my ABC's and miscellaneous thematic vocabulary stood no chance against real American children. While I mechanically ironed out my "h" sound in "white" and struggled to distinguish "word" and "world," children around me bent English around their tongue like mounds of clay forming into whatever shape it desired to be on a potter's wheel.

My English was too stiff, too separated like the hardened sounds of Hangul, and I hated the way English felt in my mouth. It was like putty; syllables slipped and the wrong parts of my vowels were rounded. I could not wash the flashing sign of my foreignness embedded so deeply within my tongue.

I carried around a dictionary everyday. Oftentimes, I eavesdropped in conversations to pin vocabulary words I did not understand, and the rare times I was spoken to, no one was patient enough to wait for me to shuffle through to the first letter of their sentence in my dictionary. So I did not speak, and I did not want to be spoken to. This sentiment was shared among my classmates, and I spent my time enclosed in a glass cage. My struggles were apparent for everyone around me, and they were on display; I, in the cage, had no choice but to pretend that I could not see beyond.

My first essay I turned in was translated entirely from Google. I wrote my essay in Korean, and paragraph by paragraph, I copied and pasted until I frankensteined a traditional five-paragraph format argumentative essay. My teacher gave me full marks, not because I had a perfect essay, but because my English was so hopeless that she did not want to kick an already dead horse.

Even after my accent was masked and I no longer walked with a dictionary, writing haunted me for years. My essays did remain mechanically translated for a few years, because I had no self-esteem to spare for the sake of improvement. I cried thinking about the muffled snickers and narrowing of eyes whenever anyone read my paper; peer-grading, in particular, made me want to run out into a busy intersection.

So I conquered. I read like a madman and collected vocabulary words like Pokemon cards. I asked first for my paper to be reviewed by teachers and excellent writers only for me to receive my essays flooded with red ink. But I didn't enjoy writing. I wanted to kill the flaw that made me foreign. I wanted so badly to be embraced by the language I despised.

And that is exactly what I wrote about the first time I wrote voluntarily. There were no conventions or rules or deadlines strangling me; it was just my raging hatred, an empty piece of paper, and a half-filled G2 pen from Walmart. So I wrote about how much I hated being here, in

a slurred mix of Korean and English. Only I could faintly trace my thoughts afterwards. It was rough, but raw; I threw it away in embarrassment, but I think of that scrunched up piece of paper as my debut. I knew then, that I had to write again.

From then, something within me was disturbed. I had these urges to write, an uncomfortable sense of need, to write down my heart's content until it was enough. I remember my first piece of poetry I wrote outside of abstract jumbles-- it was about my father. As I began inking each word, I remember a burning sensation in my soul; it was like a small spark fanning into a flame, escaping my body through a click of a pen. I had brought my pain from the past to the present, but I was consoling my future--to heal from the past.

The first time I performed this piece, I did not rehearse once, nor did I plan to perform. The opportunity presented itself, and I did not have a choice to avoid it. I stood silently on the stage, but this time, I spoke.

And I was free.

DEATH OF A SMALL TOWN AND THE MEMORIES THEY HOLD

By Kailey Katzfey

Small-town America is dying, and it is dying fast. Small-town culture as we know it will soon cease to exist: neighbor knowing neighbor, fancy meals out at chain restaurants, and leaving the door unlocked. Small populations of only hundreds continue to dwindle and may soon not even require a population sign. But why are small towns disappearing across the United States? Simple. People are leaving: in death or moving vans.

I grew up visiting my great-grandmother in one of these declining small towns. Every summer, Christmas, and Spring Break were spent on the farm in the middle of nowhere field country: Polo, Missouri.

The fields ran farther into the distance than I remembered. I hadn't laid my eyes on them in several years, but even then, they didn't seem so big. The corn fields ran along each side of the empty road and had recently been cut down, shown in the covering along the field. I had always enjoyed looking at fields, I would just stare out the car window into the great beyond until it was covered by woods.

The "Polo Trip" as we called it was always the longest and most brutal trip. No matter where you come from, travelling there feels like the longest car ride in history. This is due to the back roads, rolling, empty hills, and the feeling of not moving even when you're going 15 over the speed limit. That day, the trip was only four hours, a mere skip in the pond for Midwesterners, but the mood of the day and the black clothes made it feel longer.

My great-grandmother Iva was my favorite grandma growing up. She seemed to have this light around her that would make anyone feel better. She always took care of the people she loved, and she dedicated her life to doing just that.

At the house, my family and I would wake up to the smell of breakfast. She made the best bacon, toast, and eggs you've ever tasted, and the chocolate milk would wash it all down – she always had a large supply of chocolate milk ready for my sister and me. At least twice every trip, she would make cinnamon rolls along with the bacon, and they would be gone from the dish in less than a minute. I'm not a morning person, but when I was at grandma's, I could eat her breakfast at six in the morning and not care at all.

I can remember sometimes waking up before breakfast was ready to the sound of pots and pans banging against one another. I would sneak through the house, my toes squishing into the plush, brown carpet, and look through the living room doorway into the kitchen to find my Grandma Iva, already dressed and ready for the day, placing raw bacon into the popping grease. I

would smile, take in the smell of the yummy food, and crawl back to bed for just a little more sleep.

Polo, Missouri is a small town in the Kansas City metropolitan area, which was always ridiculous to me as the upbeat, busy Kansas City felt like it was 100 miles away from the quiet farm my grandma lived on. Polo is in Caldwell County and was founded in 1871 as a train stop for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Co. For most of its history, Polo has been home to under 600 people, only getting to 606 residents in 1920 – according to census records.

The population is mostly comprised of an older white percentage. Of all the years I visited Polo, I can only recall seeing one or two younger people, both of which were clerks at the only Dollar General in the area. Most people we saw would complement my grandma on her adorable grandchildren and then pinch our cheeks with wrinkly fingers.

The smooth road and expansive fields soon turn into the small downtown of Polo. The town square consists of two insurance places, three liquor stores, a hair salon, and Hyklas Foods (a grocery store chain only in the surrounding area and home to the best Roast Beef you'll ever have). The town is home to just over 500 people, a number that never changed the dozens of times my family drove past the "Welcome to Polo" sign just outside the city limits. I would always joke with my dad that there were more dead in Polo than living, as there are numerous cemeteries filled with hundreds of graves. I cringed at the joke today.

The small twists and turns of downtown turn back into a smooth road and the expanse of fields as we keep on our journey. Grandma Iva lived only a few miles away from the square and her church was a mile away from the hilly road leading to her house. I knew we only had a few more minutes before we would be there, and I had begun to dread seeing the little church again.

Some of my earliest and clearest memories are of my time spent in Polo. I can clearly remember the 65th wedding anniversary party held for my Grandma Iva and Grandpa Harold at the little church. The theme was blue and white with streamers and balloons all around and the cake tasted terrible – it was the icing that did it.

My cousins and I oversaw the front table where guests would sign the book – we're still not sure why our parents put us in charge. I have never understood the point behind wanting to know who was at your party 30 years after it happened, but that was our job. It was not a hard job for four kids to handle, but we somehow almost messed that up. My cousins, Disha, who was 11, and Chan, 10, my sister, 2, and me, 5, were sitting at the table when Chan accidentally knocked one of the lit candles with his elbow, causing it to fall flat on the tablecloth. He quickly picked it back up and somehow leaving no damage, but we still joke about how we "almost burned the church down."

According to data from the United States Census Bureau, nearly half of cities in the United States have a population under 1,000 people. So how are small towns dying? As our

world becomes more advanced in technology and systems, more people begin to shift away from small-town lampposts to the flashing lights of bigger cities. Small towns of the Midwest farmlands represent an old lifestyle where 65% of the world's population had lived in rural areas only 50 years ago. But in the new lifestyle, 65% will live in cities.

The population shift into cities shows a want and need for better resources: more access to medical care, better school systems, and more job/career opportunities. As our world evolves, so do we. We, as people, want more and better things that cannot be easily accessed in small towns. For example, in Polo, there are only two schools: Polo Elementary (K-6) and Polo High R-7 (7-12). Additionally, the nearest hospital was over 20 miles away in Richmond; not a desirable distance when your grandmother lives alone and falls a lot. This was part of the reason as to why my family moved my grandma off the farm and to Springfield (the third largest city in Missouri).

Dad soon started slowing down the car and we pulled into the gravel parking lot of the church. Everything in Polo was small, including the two-room church that three dozen people attended. The plot of land the church and cemetery sat on was small and the cemetery took up over half of that. A couple dozen members of my grandma and grandpa's family lines were buried here, as most of them had been lived every moment of their lives in Polo.

We parked next to my uncle's truck and began to climb out. I, being in the very back of the car, had to wait for my sister and Grandma Becky (my mother's mother) to get out – I had a while to wait.

It was a bright and sunny, but cold day. The winds rolling over the flatness of the fields made it so that the chill seeped into your bones. The five of us, me, my parents, my sister, and my Grandma Becky, all shuffled across the little lot and made our way to the door leading to the lobby. Dad held the door open as we walked inside.

I don't remember my great-grandfather too well as I was only 8 when he passed away. But I can remember feeling the difference in the air of the house afterwards. I remember Grandma Iva being especially quiet at the funeral and would only lightly smile when my sister or I would sit by her. She squeezed our hands hard that day, like it was the only thing holding her down.

I remember that Grandpa Harold loved gooseberry pie; it was his favorite. There was a large gooseberry bush that stood tall next to the shed in the backyard and whenever we visited my sister and I would pick gooseberries so Grandma could bake Grandpa a pie. We would come in with a bowl full of bright green berries and cuts all over our tiny hands from the thorns, but the smiles on Grandma and Grandpa's faces made it all worth it. My sister and I didn't even like gooseberries – they were too bitter.

Even after Grandpa Harold died, my sister and I still liked to pick berries – it was a fun pastime and it was the only time we could ever do it, plus it made feel like characters in old movies. Grandma would still smile when we brought in our bowls, but there was no one to give

the pie to since Grandpa was not there to eat it. Mom would usually give the pie to the neighbors a half-mile down the road.

I have never lived in a town as small as Polo. I've always lived in suburbs of bigger cities: Burnsville (Minneapolis), Naperville (Chicago), Prospect (Louisville), and Newnan (Atlanta). Towns that had the word "thousand" on the end. But I spent much of my childhood visiting various family members across the small towns of Missouri. Several weeks of the year, my family and I would trade the bustle of neighbors and noise for the quiet country and no internet of the farmlands. Instead of children screaming outside next door there were dozens of cows quietly mooing in the night.

I prefer the quiet country and expansive fields to the bustle of the city. I would like to go back someday, live on a big plot of land with rolling green hills and a small home for me to grow old in – the same life my Grandma Iva had.

The church was set up in the same way it always had been, but it seemed smaller than I remember. The same white, fold-out tables and chairs sat in the lobby as a sort-of dining hall set up. The coat rack next to the door held the same wire hangers as it did ten years ago. And the same large fern sat in the corner by the door. It was a breath of relief to some things could remain consistent in my life.

The church was made up of two rooms: the lobby/dining area and the chapel. The lobby was a large, open floor plan room with a kitchen in the back separated by a counter. The floor was an ugly off-white tile, and the walls were a boring beige. It had always been a large contrast to the chapel. The chapel was a smaller room with six rows of individual theater seats lined with red velvet on either side of the aisle. The bright red of the carpet had not dimmed in the six years since I had been there, and the dark color of the wood at the altar complimented the lighter wood paneling of the walls.

It was there in the chapel, by the altar at the front of the room, where the coffin was. It was silver and the lid was open. My family and I had already seen her back in Springfield, but she looked different in the chapel. In the funeral home, she had looked cold and puffy, and the makeup they put on her looked too bright for her pale skin. I had expected her to look the same way after the funeral home drove her across state. But Grandma Iva looked more like herself here in the chapel in her casket. God, I hated thinking about that. *Her* casket – it just didn't sound real. Her cheeks were not a bright pink like yesterday, but rosy, more subtle, and her skin didn't look cold or puffy. Maybe it was all the red carpet and the warmth it added to the room, but she looked as if she was just sleeping. She looked like she was home.

Richard, my grandma's youngest son and my great-uncle, lived with Grandma Iva his whole life. She dedicated her life to taking care of him, and after Grandpa died, he was all she had in the house with her. Richard, or Richie as my family would call him, was mentally retarded and his feet were backwards. Growing up, I found him scary because he couldn't talk clearly and

it sounded like he was yelling when he got excited, but he was a big sweetheart. He would give you big hugs and get very excited when you came through the door.

He used a wheelchair, but he preferred to crawl around and my sister and I would take those opportunities to play with the chair. Richie loved coffee mugs and clocks, and there were at least a hundred of each around the house.

A dark cloud hung over the family when he got sick. Mom flew back to Missouri to be with Grandma Iva and him in the hospital, and my dad drove my sister and I the long trip back for the funeral. There was a blizzard that week. Only about a dozen people could attend the funeral and the pallbearers and the pastor were the only ones who could get out to the gravesite. The rest of us stayed inside the warm church, I held Grandma's hand and once again she held on tight.

The issue of small towns disappearing makes me question whether Polo too will disappear off the map, but I believe small towns, and Polo, will never be truly and completely gone. Small towns across the United States are often small because they are farming communities, communities that provide to the United States and world economy. Their contributions are too great to be totally done away with, so as small towns might be getting smaller, they will never truly fall off the map as long as the soil is good.

Lunch is served before the service starts. It consists of roast beef (like Grandma Iva used to make), mashed potatoes, rolls, a plethora of desserts, and much more that I cannot remember. I, along with my family, was focused on the roast. My dad and I sat on the outskirts of the tables and dug into our familiar platters.

Roast beef is a very important dish on my mom's side of the family: Grandma Iva would cook two giant roasts during family visits, and they were always delicious. No one been able to replicate the absolute gift that was Grandma's roast; Mom certainly tries but even she knows nothing can compare. It's a family joke that the reason no one can replicate it is because there is no Hyklas Foods outside of the Polo area.

The taste of the roast nearly brings tears to my eyes since I knew exactly where it was from. I also knew that after today I would probably never have this great of a toast again, for after today there would be no reason to return to Polo. I joked with dad that we should stop by the Hyklas on the way out of town and buy out their supply – he laughed at that.

It was two weeks earlier when I knew the time for another funeral was coming. My mom had called me to say that she was flying back to Missouri the next morning. In my family, "flying back to Missouri" is code for "someone is not doing well, and I need to be there in case the worst happens." It was the week before Thanksgiving, which meant that we would be going back in a few days, and I prayed that Grandma Iva would hold on just long enough for me to see her just one last time. The plan was for my dad, my sister, and I to leave early Saturday morning for Missouri so that we might see her before anything happened. But on Friday night, after

getting back from school, my dad hugged me and told me that Grandma had passed away early that morning – she was gone.

There was no reason for us to leave any earlier, so we decided we would leave Sunday morning since the funeral would be on Wednesday. I held my dad's hand the rest of the night, like my grandma used to hold mine – good and tight.

I don't believe that many younger people like to plan how they'd like their grave to be, but I know exactly what I want. I'd like to have a nice monument building to accompany my gravestone in a place with a pretty view. I want this for two reasons. One, so my spirit has a nice landscape to look over, and two, so my family and friends have a nice place to visit me.

I also believe that I have attended more funerals in the first 21 years of my life than most people do in their lifetime. Just in my first three months of life, I attended two funerals: my great-grandparents on my dad's side. And it is because of my plethora of funeral and visitation memories that I know where I want to be buried and I know how to put together a funeral. Death has weird effects on the brain.

The funeral service was a blur. My family entered the chapel first and made our way to our reserved rows, the rest of the crowd following behind. My parents and aunt and uncle sat on the front row, and "the cousins" as my sister, I, and my cousins are known as sat in the row behind them. I was squished between Disha and my sister, and was behind my mom, with her mom, Grandma Becky, behind me.

The pastor began by talking about how wonderful of a woman my grandmother was and proceeded to emphasize how she had been a member of the church for many. He then led us in prayer and decided the next best thing to do was to sing my Grandma Iva's favorite hymn. He recalled how she requested it every service and began to sing "Amazing Grace."

I had not cried since learning of the news, but there was something about the power of that song in that moment that pushed the tears down my face. I couldn't control it and just sat there among the singers, crying covered in thick tears and snot. My cousin put her arm around me, and my sister grabbed my hand – I gripped it nice and tight.

Each Polo funeral has some type of extreme weather to accompany it. At Grandpa Harold's there was mild flooding (2009), at Richard's there was a blizzard (2011), and at Grandma Iva's there were high winds. The walk out to the gravesite is a short but cold one, and the tent above does not do much to hold back the wind. My mom, sister, and Grandma Becky sit in the plush green chairs in front of the casket, while my dad and I stand on the side, with his arm around my shoulders.

The prayer at the grave is short and soon people begin to file out, hop into cars, and drive off. My family stands with the pastor while people leave; my mom thanks him for a beautiful service and continues to talk about Grandma Iva. Meanwhile, I walk over to the casket for a moment alone to say goodbye. I place my hand on the top, the cool metal biting into my hand,

and say to myself, “I love you. I miss you and thank you for everything.” I reach up and pluck three flowers from the casket spray and step back.

The family plot in the cemetery is small. My Grandma Iva and Grandpa Harold are buried together, Richard’s grave is the first on the left, and Grandpa Ron’s, my mom’s dad, is the next on the left. I place the flowers on each stone and walk back to my dad’s side, sadly thinking that I will probably never see the three graves again. The family branch from Polo is dead and has finally fallen off the tree. No one else in the family will be buried here – it’s too far out of the way.

The heat is blasting in the car, and I am once again in the back. We left the church parking lot and were now in a caravan with my uncle’s car driving towards Grandma’s house. I hadn’t seen the house in six years, and I was nervous. I wasn’t sure how different it would look, or if it was even there, but I was excited. The long curves of the road were familiar, and the big hills made my stomach drop like it used to.

The first thing I recognize are the black cows across the street. There were always about fifty of them in the pasture across from the house and they would “moo” throughout the night – I wish I would’ve petted one when I was younger. Looking away from the cows, I train my eyes onto the house. It was the same, and the large tree was still out front. The new owners had kept the gravel driveway, and cars I didn’t recognize filled it. Random garden decorations that my grandma would’ve hated were scattered across the front and back lawns. The old shed was still there, and I wonder if the stray cats still lived in it.

While the rest of my family are loud in their observations, I sit in the back of the car in total silence. I want to soak up every moment I can and try to blink as few times as possible. Dad drives slowly so we can all get a proper look before we turn around and leave it behind us; I keep staring out of the back window until the hills take away my last view of a place I consider a childhood home. It is nice to see the things that used to be familiar sights of childhood, because I know that even though much has changed over the years, I still had my memories.

Small towns across the United States are dying and slowly disappearing into history. But this isn’t true. My trip to Polo for my grandmother’s funeral is proof of that for me. Although time has passed and people have grown, moved on, or passed away, the city of Polo and the places in it have remained the same. The small little church with bright red carpet, the black cows sitting across the street, and the memories I hold. No place or person can truly die or disappear if memories are kept alive. It is foolish to believe that I will see Polo many more times before my eventual passing, but I hope to make it back to see the “Welcome to Polo” sign at least one more time. To prove that the little town isn’t dying, rather that it’s just holding on tight to its identity of being a small town outside of Kansas City, Missouri.

“TEXT WITHOUT CONTEXT”: JESSARD DEAL’S LITERARY ALLUSIONS IN LOUIS OWENS’ *THE SHARPEST SIGHT*

By Maja Nearing

Louis Owens was a novelist and academic of Native American and Irish-American descent. Over the course of his career, he made significant contributions to the field of Native American Studies not only as a writer but also as a professor at several universities in California and New Mexico. His novel *The Sharpest Sight* was first published in 1995 by The University of Oklahoma Press as the first work under its American Indian Literature and Critical Studies series in an effort to give Native American literature a more substantial platform for recognition. Hidden among the main plotline that follows a murder mystery, the novel itself puts a spotlight on the power of literature, reckoning with the complex realities of how knowledge can be used. The character Onatima, a Choctaw elder of mixed blood who is educated and wise, stresses the importance of minorities being well versed in the American and English literary canon as a means of self preservation and empowerment. Jessard Deal, the novel’s violent bar owner “who champions literature and most frequently quotes from canonical texts” (LaLonde 317), exemplifies this advice in action in the worst ways possible. And while Deal makes his “twisted allusions” (Holbert 22) throughout the entire novel, relying on “text without context” which is a truly “powerful and perilous” thing (Holbert 10), the truth of just how dangerous his beliefs are is best exemplified near the end of *The Sharpest Sight* when Deal abducts and rapes Diana Nemi. In this scene, the literary allusions abound, all of them bastardized, and when analyzed together show that Jessard Deal is the perfect example of just how dangerous the wilful misuse of knowledge can be.

The Salinas Valley setting of *The Sharpest Sight* is home to something that is “replete with destruction, violence, evil, passion, death, and darkness” (Graulich 41) with no one contributing more to this darkness than Jessard Deal himself. Arguably the most vile character, Deal is “a satanic figure,” the physical embodiment of evil in the novel (Holbert 43). From the character's first appearance to his last, Deal is consistent in two things: his thirst for violence and his proclivity for twisting the meaning of literary works. Owens gives readers “a [clear] frame for Deal” through the use of “lines that repeat his beliefs about what constitutes a moral world” (Holbert 11), both directly and indirectly. It is abundantly clear to readers, even if they are not significantly well versed in what Owens refers to as the “Euramerican” literary canon (qtd. in Holbert 2), that Deal’s belief system and use of literary allusions as a justification and support is destructive and backwards. Though “Deal’s intellect and knowledge [is evident in] his power over language” (Holbert 11), he derives additional power from the other characters in *The Sharpest Sight* often being baffled by his allusions and therefore missing out on much of the

nuance of Deal's speech. As such, readers are left alone with the "menace" of Deal's "deadly and twisted...speech" that they alone are capable of analyzing (Holbert 9).

Allusion is typically used in literary works to create a connection between the work being alluded to and the one it is alluded to in, usually in order to draw parallels that make a new point. *The Sharpest Sight* is no different and as such contains numerous "incredibly detailed allusions to classical mythology and various literary works" (Holbert 1) throughout the novel; in fact, the text relies on these allusions in many instances, particularly when it comes to Jessard Deal. Deal's allusions range from correctly quoting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on several occasions (Owens 190, 237, 250) to misquoting Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* "for his own amusement" (Owens 150, Holbert 12) and completely destroying the meaning of not only Robert Frost's poems "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Design," but also Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Tithonus" (Owens 235) among others in what is perhaps one of the most disturbing out of context uses of literary allusions to ever exist.

By using so many literary allusions, particularly with Jessard Deal being the mouthpiece for the majority of them, Owens seems to be trying to signal that there is something "wanting and dangerous" that makes up "the traditional canon" of American and English literature

(LaLonde 317). No one speaks to this idea more than Onatima does. Early on it is revealed that Onatima went to college to "get a white education" at the request of her mother (Owens 89) where she learned about "the stories that count" (Owens 109). As she tells Cole, everyone has a duty to go to college and become educated so that it is possible to know "the real stories, the ones we have to pay attention to, the ones [the white people] use to change the world" in order to "make something of [themselves]" (Owens 109). Onatima asserts that it is essential for Native Americans, and it can be extrapolated that this is true for any minority, to be knowledgeable about the American and English literary canons since that literature is part of what gives them the appearance of superior knowledge. Being in the know creates a way to weaponize the ostracization of those who are not in the know and as such, as Luther says, it is important to "be aware of the stories [white people are] making about [indigenous peoples], and the way they change the stories we already know" (Owens 91). It is posited that the "subjects of the dominant culture want to write and perpetuate a narrative of mastery and control and a particular reading of the nature of the world" (LaLonde 316), an opinion that seems in line with Onatima's views. Similarly, she further implies that with this knowledge comes power, but that many, like Luther, choose to sometimes hide their knowledge to fit in better since "people are always going to be afraid of a [person] with power" (Owens 114). *The Sharpest Sight* explores this idea and consequently confronts "the problem of identity and the negative and positive roles literature has played and can play in articulating a sense of self" (LaLonde 306). This is particularly evident in Deal's character as he bases such a large portion of himself on the literary knowledge that he believes grants him power and superiority.

In an interesting contrast to how Onatima hopes minority cultures will use knowledge of the stereotypically white literary canon, Jessard Deal has become well versed in the Euramerican literature and uses that knowledge to his advantage with destructive and abominable results—results he iniquitously welcomes. It is no secret that Deal is as far from a saint as one can be, but it is initially unaddressed exactly how such an atrocious character has been so well educated. This conundrum is eventually solved when Deal himself obliquely gives some major insight into his past and how he came to be as well versed in literature as he is when he reveals that he:

never had the luck of a good education, but there was a period in my life when I had a great deal of time on my hands...in a small room with a very small window, in a hard, desert place. Outside the window was a stone wall, and above the wall was a sky that never changed. I had access to a library, and thus it was that I came upon the solace of words. (Owens 212-13)

Deal claims that he found solace in discovering the literary arts while in prison, but really he just found a new way to exert control by “[selecting] certain lines...from various sources and, with the change of line order or an inserted phrase or two, twists the meaning to fit his own perverted beliefs” (Holbert 16-17). Deal then attempts to use these bastardized literary allusions to connect with people; however, his version of connection is “fundamentally flawed” much like “many of the canonical texts” as both “fail to establish and maintain real connections” (LaLonde 317) since Deal is actually just trying to lord his superiority over others. As a result, Deal does not use his understanding of the literary canon to better himself nor does he use it to better anyone else, not even his community, in the way that Onatima believes to be important. In fact, “Deal is the most thoroughly deracinated character to be found in the novel because he has been torn from not one but multiple cultures” (Holbert 10) since he has distanced himself from the Native culture by reveling in his violent ways and using his knowledge not for good but for evil.

Deal makes numerous literary allusions every time he appears on the page. The sources of these allusions are all over the place, as are his interpretations of their meaning. One memorable case where Deal’s allusions, though malicious, are decidedly not offbase is when he is speaking to Dan Nemi and Lee Scott. At the end of this discussion, Deal segues from an allusion to Loony Toons (Owens 190) where he implies that the men to whom he is speaking to are idiots, “telling [them] that they are crazy and...little more than...caricatures of real people,” to directly quoting *Hamlet* to “[mock] their ignorant speech” (Holbert 13). This proves the Deal can understand the conventionally accepted meanings of these literary works, take them in an appropriate context, and use them to make his point. Therefore, it can be assumed that his twisting of the meaning of literary works when he makes his allusions is a willful decision and not simply the result of a fundamental misunderstanding; Deal deliberately misinterprets the works he alludes to in order to support his own agenda.

The most significant instance where this wilful misinterpretation takes centerstage is in Deal’s speech to Diana that he makes before and during his assault on her. His dialogue in this scene is riddled with literary allusions, all of which are bastardized to fit his own prerogative. Deal makes allusions to various works, but none more significant or recognizable than the allusions to two of Robert Frost’s poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and “Design,” and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Tithonus.”

In the case of the two Frost poems, Deal’s allusion amounts to asserting that “the woods really are lovely, dark and deep, and full of constant unaccounted deaths. It really is design of darkness to appall, for you see, design does govern even in things as small and inconsequential as you and me” (Owens 235). In the context of Frost’s 1923 poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the line that Deal alludes to, “the woods are lovely, dark and dark” (line 13), is meant to be literally and in a beautiful, if desolate, sense that creates a melancholic atmosphere as a result of isolation and weariness. Deal twists this line to be taken not just literally, but also in terms of how the woods are referred to metaphorically in the context of his wilful misinterpretation, wherein the woods are representative of both a metaphorically and literally

vast darkness, as they provide cover for a great many sins, murder chief among those, which is what, in Deal's mind, makes them lovely. The second sentence of Deal's dialogue alludes to Frost's 1936 poem "Design" that ends by contemplating "What but design of darkness to appall?— / If design govern in a thing so small" (lines 13-14). What Frost meant to be an open-ended question that muses on existence is instead reconceptualized by Deal to instead be "an absolute" with "the intent [changing to be] one of [an] evil design that governs all things"

(Holbert 16). This seems to be his way of directly "[implying] that evil is a force of nature" (Graulich 43), and the most powerful one at that, by using Frost's nature imagery and musing on the order of the world out of context. He then uses this "skewed interpretation" to justify his "carefully designed and appalling rape of Diana in the darkness of the forest" (Holbert 16).

Another of the most significant poems that Deal misquotes during this scene is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Tithonus," a poem which "refers [back] to the Greek myth of Tithonus, a beautiful mortal who loved and was loved by Eos, the goddess of the dawn" (Holbert 15). Deal fundamentally disregards the themes of love, power, aging, and death that the poem focuses on and instead takes it out of context. As is Deal's tendency, he uses it to justify and poeticize his own horrific mindset and actions against Diana since:

Rather than [regarding] the ancient story retold in the poem as a lesson against trying to gain power to which one is not entitled, Deal prefers to see this as an example of female betrayal. His own elucidation of the poem to Diana says that Tithonus 'made a mistake. He trusted a woman' (Owens 235). Considering the context of Deal's speech, it is clear he is not going to make the same mistake as did Tithonus. (Holbert 16)

Deal takes "Tithonus" and twists it to be about how men ought not trust women as the entire gender is out to get men and will inevitably cause their downfall. He has taken a poem wherein a man regrets being granted immortality by his lover as a result of his own ignorance and turned it into a misogynist's manifesto, harping against the dangers of trusting women who are inherently out to trick all men to "justify [his own] suspicion" (Holbert 17).

Jessard Deal is to blame for a lot of violence that occurs in *The Sharpest Sight*, using his knowledge to wreak havoc by incensing others and then twisting his knowledge into a game of chess that no one other than Deal himself is aware is being played. Almost paradoxically, this means that he, like Onatima, subscribes to the belief that knowledge of the Euramerican literary canon is used by the majority, to some degree, to manufacture superiority over the minorities. Deal, however, does not decide to educate himself so that he may protect himself and be aware; he instead educates himself because he is a power hungry tyrant who wishes to weaponize his knowledge. In the most disturbing scene of the novel when Deal rapes Diana, his "entire speech is poetic, written in a kind of prose-stanza" that is so masterfully entwined together that "his own speech and his poetic allusion are hard to separate[, forming] beautiful prose" the effect of which, "[when] used in a rape scene[,] intensifies the horror of the event for the reader" (Holbert 14). For the reader, "this is a kind of intellectual rape" as "the lines of poetry have been ripped from" not only "their source" but also "their intent" which has the affect of "leaving the reader to cope with feelings of...pleasure at that recognition and disgust at what it means" (Holbert 14-15), a feeling that entirely sums up how one ought to feel about Deal as a whole. Jessard Deal is impressive in his ability to make these incredibly complex literary allusions and rely on them so,

but at the same time he is utterly terrifying because of his parallel ability to warp the meaning of the texts that are central to the American and English literary tradition.

BINARIES, IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND BRIDGING THE GAP

By Melanie Miller

“Don’t just sit on the fence,” a statement many in the literature field have heard one, too many times. Often, we are faced with the task of making an all or nothing decision, even if the factors to consider are unstable to the more traditional norms in which we tend to associate them with. Black or white; male or female; yes or no, are some of many dichotomies that are assumed to be right or wrong, often viewed as separate entities that cannot touch or blend. This idea is called binary thinking, and it is deeply ingrained into human society and culture by our communities. The books *Sula* and *The Sharpest Sight*, authored by Toni Morrison and Louis Owens respectively, tackle the traditional binaries. They explore the intricate ways in which a community can positively or negatively impact an individual through themes of duality, binaries, and identity. Morrison and Owens challenge the notion of dichotomy through coexistence and overlap.

Binaries consist of two opposites such as right and wrong; good and evil; male and female, and so on. The binaries are often made to be defined as an opposite of its counterpart. For instance, light is defined as being pure and truthful, while its binary counterpart, dark, is defined as being sinful and ignorant (Green 00:03:26 - 00:03:32). This dominance of one binary over another is not only a simplified way of thinking, but it can have detrimental effects when applied to humans in terms of race, sexuality, gender, and so on. Meilin Tsao explains that this type of thinking is almost completely instinctual, traditionally allowing us to make quick decisions in life-threatening situations (3-4). While binary thinking allows us to make quick judgements that are necessary for our safety, it is too often used in literature or other parts of society where it produces indirect negative consequences on communities. Instead of implementing critical thinking skills, binaries are convenient, “the simplest way to get complex” (Tsao 2). It is easier to say yes or no instead of thinking about the intricacies and overlapping that occurs in something. In turn, this creates a society that believes in an all or nothing mindset, that a person must be fully invested in one thing and not at all with the other. In her book *Sula*, Toni Morrison immediately breaks and challenges the binary mindset, showing that both binaries can coexist, and overlap at times.

Sula follows the story of two best friends, Sula and Nel. Sula and Nel, upon first glance, are polar opposites. Sula being outspoken and daring, and Nel being conservative and caring. The story begins with Morrison explaining the story of the community where both Sula and Nel grew up in, she says “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots,” that “there once was a neighborhood” (14). Immediately, we are met with two binaries, the nightshade and blackberry, commonly associated with Sula and Nel. Nightshade, being Sula, “is an unusual plant that produces toxic berries,” while blackberry, being Nel, “is a common plant that produces nourishing fruit” (Green 00:01:30 – 00:01:39). Morrison eliminates binary thinking in the very beginning for readers, explaining that both nightshade and blackberry were rooted in the neighborhood, existing peacefully alongside each other in the community.

This concept not only shows how both coexist, but we are given many examples of the binaries overlapping with one another, making it hard for readers to even determine a set binary in the first place. As we learn about both girls, we associate Sula with the nightshade because of things like her chaotic upbringing and sleeping with Nel's husband, while we associate Nel with the blackberry because of her conservative upbringing and choosing to care for Sula's grandmother out of her own goodwill, putting them into traditional binaries because of these factors. However, it becomes difficult when we learn that Sula searches for structure and tries to rescue her drowning friend Chicken Little, traits commonly associated with blackberry. On the other hand, Nel enjoys Sula's lifestyle and is intrigued by the death of Chicken Little, all being traits of the nightshade. This overlapping occurs, making it difficult at times to decipher a right or wrong, good or evil. This is how Toni Morrison successfully breaks down binaries, showing how they can overlap to the point they blur together, making both one in the same.

The names of characters in *Sula* also take on an important meaning. Most of the names in *Sula* are biblical names that represent many different people or meanings. This is important because names, especially of characters, gives insight into them. In an article by Jason Reynolds and others, they found that among a study of Korean adoptees who reclaimed their Korean birth name in turn of their given, often Anglo-American, name felt it was a "unifying and integrating process," showing just how much a name can connect one with their identity and community. Sula's name, as we learned in class, means peace while Nel's name means horn, yet another example of binaries at play and how they overlap. While invisible to us on the outside, we can find the overlap of binaries by searching deeper into names, whether given or (re)claimed. In an article by Brad Williams, he begins early in the text by stating another connection found in names with a personal statement made by Jack Dalton. Dalton recalls of his early adulthood when he first met his birth mother, a Yup'ik Eskimo, who gave him a Yup'ik name (Williams). The name Dalton was given is "Cup'Luaraq," meaning "little reed pipe" which represents the "bridge between two worlds," due to the versatile uses of the object (Williams). In Louis Owen's *The Sharpest Sight*, we are introduced to Cole. Cole is a half white and half native American teenager internally struggling with the binaries of his race. Although Cole has an American name, we learn that his uncle gives him his Native American name, Taska Mikushi Humma, meaning little chief warrior. These Native American given names, much like the reclamation of Korean names by Korean adoptees, gives biracial people a connection to both identities and communities. The significance of having both Anglo-American and cultural names, or being able to choose your identity, serves the purpose of breaking the binary, allowing both to blend and become a unified "other" option in a person.

The Sharpest Sight follows a young half Native American boy named Cole who struggles with his identity both internally and externally. Cole is described as looking fully white besides for his eye shape, with the "epicanthic fold Indians often had" (Owens 27). The doubt Cole has in his identity is first seen through a conversation between him and his father. He says "I'm not an Indian, I'm mostly white," to which Hoey, his father, replies "you're a mixed-blood and that's Indian. It's what you think you are that matters" (Owens 47). The binary of Cole not relating to his white or Native American side is all too common a theme in biracial children. Is it genetics and appearance that makes someone who they are or is it their practiced culture? Cole struggles to find this answer within himself and receives no help from his community. Although it is told through the lens of white and black biracial students, Rhea Perkins helps showcase the constant duality biracial people learn to live with through factors of history and personal accounts taken from biracial college students. Perkins explains that the history of biracialism stems from a

polarizing area from both the black and white communities. As most of us know, black skin in early American was tied to the opposite definition to its binary counterpart of white skin. Once interracial mixing was presented, Perkins explains that lighter skinned African Americans “were seen as more attractive, intelligent, and capable, mainly due to their biological connection to their white slave-owner” (2). This doesn’t mean lighter skinned or white-presenting African Americans were given the same opportunities as whites, as made clear by the “One Drop Rule,” defining “anyone with at least one drop of black blood as being black” (Perkins 2). This rule not only separated biracial people from their black communities, but also their white communities while simultaneously allowing white people the power to control what it meant to be biracial (Perkins 2). Hoey and Cole’s uncle, Uncle Luther, reclaim this control that was traditionally taken from them by encouraging Cole he is as much Native American as a full blood. While this would be a simple and happy conclusion to the binaries of race and identity, it doesn’t stop there. In an interview with a biracial college student, Perkins asks the student’s perspective on their social experiences being biracial. The student then gives an interesting insight, claiming to identify as mixed, but that his identity shifts in other’s perspectives depending on who he is hanging out with (Perkins 7). He states that when he is “with his White friends, he is the Black kid and if he is with his Black friends, he is the White kid,” which shows the boundary setting that occurs through binary thinking. While he is isolated by both of his communities, he is also exposed to the destruction of binaries, in that he is not one or the other, a blend of two things that have become one like previously mentioned. Cole is introduced with this as well, being labeled a “half-breed.” Initially, Cole thinks of the term in negative light, as Hoey explains “a half-breed can’t be trusted, is a killer, a betrayer, a breed” (Owens 26). As the story continues, we see Cole’s perspective shift in terms of his identity and the term “half-breed.”

In Brad Williams article *A Bridge Between Two Worlds*, he considers many “gaps” or binaries, that the biracial Native American community has faced that coincide with the term “half-breed.” He finds that the term resonates differently among the community, with some embracing it and others outright rejecting the term altogether, but a similarity between both sides being that they all make what they want out of the term. Williams calls on biracial Natives such as Wanda Conley. Similar to the history of biracialism as mentioned in the last paragraph, she has felt the “othering” effect from both her biological identities, explaining that she “was treated badly by the Natives,” and “by the whites” (Williams). Williams then identifies Cana Welm, who explains that the term half-breed “to be a very precise term,” which separates biracial people from the traditional binaries, a term that is completely its own and is for them to reclaim (Williams). As for those who dismiss the term, Jack Dalton, for example, states that he “[identifies] [himself] as Jack Dalton,” when introducing himself (Williams). Williams explains that this is a common way of bridging the gap. This doesn’t oppose looking beyond the binary, it in turn embraces that both binaries work alongside each other, like I have previously said, to make one new thing. Although there is no clear indication of Cole’s preferred identity, we can see the gaps in his struggle with identity begin to close after his time spent with Uncle Luther. As he grows closer to his Native American culture, we see that Cole does not choose one or the other, he sets his own meaning and identity for himself as a half-breed instead of the romanticized versions often told in movies, media, or by others around him.

Binary thinking is an instinctual thought process that has aided humans in making quick decisions in life-threatening situations. The process usually results in one binary being defined by the opposite of its counterpart, creating unnecessary hierarchy. While useful in the past, binary thinking creates a simplified version of thinking about complexity due to its convenience

as opposed to critical thinking and judgement. In an age that is advancing faster than we can type, binary thinking serves little purpose and can lead to detriment when applied to terms of race, class, identity, and so on. Toni Morrison shatters the binary by placing both the nightshade and blackberry together, explaining how they were rooted in the community of “the bottom” peacefully. While the two berries represent Sula and Nel, Morrison does not strictly attach them to one or the other. Instead, she shows how both Sula and Nel show characteristics of both, blending so closely together that they are unable to be put into one category, ultimately becoming one. Louis Owens challenges the binary in *The Sharpest Sight* through the main character Cole. Cole struggles with his biracialism, being commonly labeled “half-breed.” Throughout the story, Cole breaks the struggle between having to choose between two worlds by making his own identity. Instead of following what he is told he is or appears to be on the outside, he bridges the gap on his own volition, choosing to acknowledge both his white and Native American sides. Toni Morrison and Louis Owens both have different approaches to challenging the binary, but they do so very similarly. While Morrison shows how binaries are inherently fuzzy, often blending with no clear distinction, Owens shows taking pride in both, acknowledging the differences, and making an entirely new and individualistic term altogether. Both are equal in showcasing the major impacts of community contribution to the binary, leaving it up for people to identify the overlaps, and how the community can thrive on coexistence of the binaries.

GAWAIN REBORN

By Sidney Ducleroir

Arthurian legend is a living breathing being. It is ancient and shaped by many hands and minds. The three most quoted sources in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* are, respectfully, the Bible, William Shakespeare, and Alexander Pope, yet all these are finite beings. They have definite beginning and ending dates. Arthurian tradition holds a different place in world culture because it is a tradition that is a thousand years old and it continues to evolve and expand into the 21st century. Throughout those thousand plus years, this tradition has grown into each period it lived through. There is no one person it can be attributed to and everyone who encounters and studies King Arthur gains something different from it. Notable classic authors of this tradition include Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Sir Thomas Malory.¹ More recent authors include Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Thomas Berger.² As the tradition evolves into contemporary years, film and television productions become part of the tradition, allowing John Boorman, Alexandre Astier, and Richard Thorpe³ to make their contributions. All this is to say that those of us alive and writing today have the opportunity to contribute to the sprawling universe of Arthuriana whose start date is unknown and whose end date is inconceivable. The newest and perhaps most legitimate addition to this tradition comes in David Lowery's 2021 film "The Green Knight" which is a retelling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,⁴ a 14th century epic, chivalric romance by an anonymous poet referred to now as the *Gawain* poet. Lowery's film stars Dev Patel as Gawain and reimagines the story with modern morality in classical style. "The Green Knight" alters symbols such as the Endless Knot, the green girdle, and the hunted animals. It also includes the new aspect of portraiture. Lowery's retelling presents the *Gawain* story in a way that is conceivable, entertaining, and relatable to a contemporary audience while maintaining the integrity of the original story and falling into place of the Arthurian tradition. I intend to examine these changes made to the text and the role that they serve in the scope of the story and the tradition.

The first mention of Arthur that is acknowledged is in *Y Gododdin*. This is a poem composed by the poet Aneirin around 600 C.E. discussing the battle at Catraeth during the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain (Aidan). At this mention Arthur was not yet a king; he was merely a symbol of a great warrior, a comparison for the sake of competence and glory. Aneirin

¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth is the author of *Historia Regum Britanniae*; Chrétien de Troyes is known for many medieval romances, among them the poems *Lancelot*, *Perceval*, and *Yvain*; Marie de France is known for her twelve lais, including "Lanval" and "Chevrefoil" which mention Arthur and his table: Sir Thomas Malory compiled the eight book epic *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

² Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote the twelve poem retelling of Arthurian legend in the late 19th century; Thomas Berger's 1978 novel *Arthur Rex: A Legendary Novel* revolves around Arthur's story.

³ John Boorman directed, produced, and co-wrote the 1981 film *Excalibur*; Alexandre Astier is the creator, director, writer, editor, composer, and lead actor in the early 2000's French television show, *Kaamelott*; Richard Thorpe directed the 1953 film *Knights of the Round Table*.

⁴ All quotes taken from the text are from James L. Rosenberg's 1959 translation. All quotes will be cited with corresponding line numbers.

writes, “He fed black ravens on the wall/ Of a fortress, though he was not Arthur” (Bolkard). Perhaps there is an entire tradition predating Aneirin that we have yet to discover or understand; for now this is the first mention of Arthur and the ‘beginning’ date of Arthurian legend. *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* was written by the *Gawain* poet (sometimes referred to as the *Pearl* poet) sometime in the late 14th century. The *Gawain* poet is renowned for his ambitious style and generous use of adjectives. The epic follows King Arthur’s nephew and knight, Sir Gawain on his yuletide quest to complete a beheading game set forth by the terrible and fantastic

Green Knight. Second perhaps only to *Le Morte D’Arthur*, it is the most important piece in the Arthurian canon. Assuming a late 1300 distribution year, the *Gawain* Poet’s masterpiece is closer in date to David Lowery’s film than it is to the first mention of Arthur. Aging out of this tradition is not a legitimate possibility. While Arthur slept through some centuries, he always resurfaced when people needed him. I argue that this film is a valid part of the living tradition of Arthuriana. Any changes the director, actors, and writers made are comparable to the differences between Latin and Welsh tellings of Arthur and his battle with Vortigern.

In the years between *Y Gododdin* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur became a renowned king with a competent court and a cunning, desirable wife and queen. In the years between the *Gawain* poet’s Gawain and Dev Patel’s Gawain, we see a similarly large change of character. The original Gawain is well known as the best of the court and is loved closely by his uncle and by Guinevere. The Gawain of 2021 is not this. He is flawed. He drinks and romances and is above all, terrified by the prospect of the quest he agreed to on a whim. This depiction of Gawain reflects the needs of the audience. Medieval audiences wanted true escape and heroics. They wanted a glorified and perfect king and court who play by the rules and always chose good. That is what audiences wanted and what bards and poets produced. Modern audiences would have called Gawain a ‘Mary Sue.’ Modern audiences hold *honor* in a less severe light and need depictions of fault and fear and humanity to find themselves interested in a quest. There needs to be something to gain and something to lose. Gawain experiences a bildungsroman of sorts and faces proper danger and terror for the first time in his privileged life and it leaves a mark. Neither version of Gawain is better or worse, they accomplish what is necessary for their audience and that is it. The film includes a horrifying vision that totally alters Gawain’s character. He runs away. There is no honor and truth here, no redemption. He got what he deserved when he removed the belt and dislodged his head, for at that point he was no hero of Arthur’s court. When the scene shifts back to Dev Patel alive and kneeling the audience realizes how terribly wrong the vision was. This glimpse of what could have been is not only a moment of cinematic genius, but it also works to drive the *Gawain* poet’s themes portrayed in the *Endless Knot*.

Gawain produced by the *Gawain* poet keeps his *Endless Knot*; he keeps the chivalry and courtesy and love of the Virgin Mary. This Gawain has never been known to falter in his loyalty and duty to the crown of Arthur. The major reduction of the knot is something to be discussed, but the possibility of a life lived wrong portrays it all the same. The five fives of the *Endless Knot* are as follows: five senses, five fingers, five wounds of Christ, five joys of Mary, and the five facets of chivalry: frankness, fellowship, cleanliness, courtesy, and pity (640-669). The Pentangle, the Five Fives, the *Endless Knot*, whatever name it takes, it is a sign that takes the poet nearly thirty lines to explain. This is time that Lowery does not have. Even if he did, it would not be as effective for contemporary audiences as it was for medieval ones. Ross Arthur explains, “it is a conventional sign, and not a natural one, for if it were a natural sign, according

to contemporary theory, it would have the same meaning for all people at all times and would certainly not need the lengthy explanation it is given” (Arthur 26). Lowery opts to leave the Endless Knot for fans of the *Gawain* poet to hunt for and for casual viewers to casually view.

The knot is shown more as Arthur’s symbol than Gawain’s, displayed prominently on the floor of his court. Perhaps this suggests that Arthur takes on the original Gawain’s traits of chivalry. As Gawain’s ax, shield, and armor are prepared, Guinevere speaks the five fives. She bestows them upon Gawain though his form is absent from the shot. These virtues undertaken with such care and fierceness in the original text are passively accepted by an unavailable Gawain. There is great emphasis on the crowns of the king and queen. Arthur and Guinevere are not peers to the Knights, youthfully laughing and jostling around the court. They sit, aged and resolute, separate from the rest. Their crowns are each composed of two circles; a traditional crown with a perpendicular ring at the back. They are haloed by this second ring which brings instant attention and drama to the pair. While it is not the traditional pentangle, it is a different sort of Endless Knot. The *Gawain* poet’s other work sheds light on the significance here, “In *Pearl*, to begin with an obvious example, we are told that the endless roundness is what makes a pearl the appropriate symbol for the kingdom of heaven” (Arthur 31). Arthur quotes the author of *Dives and Pauper*’s connection of the Endless Knot to the tradition of exchanging wedding bands, “The ring is round and has no end as a sign that their love should be endless and nothing should separate them but death alone” (32). The Circle, like the knot, is endless and attributes those cyclical traits of chivalry to Arthur and Guinevere. Gawain is bestowed with the crown in his vision and it topples to the floor along with his head. The endless circle falls victim to the endlessness of the girdle.

So what takes over the space left by the knot? Gawain, like any good action hero, must have a code to live by, perhaps one that he develops during his hero’s journey. Perhaps the green belt is that. Originally gifted by his mother, stolen by thieves with the rest of his belongings, and inexplicably regifted by The Lady, the belt keeps his head on in his vision of the future. This could be his new sign, retaining the endless nature of the knot and standing for fear and misdirected desire; yet, he casts it off in his final moments. It falls away and his head is soon to follow because of his decisions fueled by fear. Perhaps the famed crown that sits on Gawain’s head during his vision and in every piece of promotional material; yet, the actual Gawain never takes it up and adopts the meaning that King Arthur attaches to it. Perhaps his yellow cape, which brings him to the forefront of every scene and carries through the original Gawain’s colors of red and gold; yet, there is no promise tied to that cloak.

Gawain is left with no concrete symbol for the virtues he acquires along his journey. It may seem that because he adopts no sign for truth and valor, he does not adopt the concepts.

However, it is obvious with his surrender to the Green Knight that he has changed. The Gawain from before the quest would have run and found an alehouse in which to drink away his responsibilities. Lowery recognizes that maintaining symbols of virtue are not important to a modern audience, but maintaining the virtues themselves are. The original Gawain keeps the girdle with him, confessing only after he is safe from beheading. He carries it back to court, confesses his shame, and maintains the girdle for the rest of his life as a mark of his error. That scarlet letter would not impress an audience in 2021. What is more impactful, is understanding one’s mistakes and correcting them, even if you must suffer the consequences.

Greenness is a focal point in the poem mainly due to the Knight and the many moments of natural imagery. However the girdle is also a crucial part of this, “The focal nature of the green girdle is reinforced by the structure of the poem, which might be best described as a set of concentric circles” (Solomon 271). Gawain becomes someone who is relatable because he is flawed. As his virtue is lost, his following grows. This flaw perhaps lessened him to medieval audiences, but contemporary ones find it comforting. Lowery’s Gawain starts his journey flawed. He does not need to fake humility in order to take on the quest as the original Gawain does, “I know I am the weakest both in wit and warfare, And little would the loss of my life be felt; Only do I owe to fame that Arthur is my uncle;” (354-356). Here, Sir Gawain gives a lengthy speech appealing to Arthur's pride and fame. He is confident enough in his position that he is able to make this appeal and be sure that it will work. Film Gawain has something to prove. His lack of experience has been recently called into thought and a challenge of this caliber seems the perfect moment to prove his worth. Even when the original Gawain betrays himself and his Endless Knot by withholding the girdle, readers understand it as his *one* fault. It makes him human and proves that he is afraid. His choice is made out of self-preservation. Arthur and the other members of the table understand and accept his motivations while Gawain punishes himself for the rest of his life. Gawain’s perception is that “As long as a man is capable of committing one of the seven deadly sins, as long as he is capable of breaking one of the ten commandments- that is as long as he is alive - he is capable of putting an end to his state of being in accord with Truth, an end to his faith” (Arthur 92). Gawain ironically meets his end at the hands of the color that typically connotes growth and rebirth.

In the original text, the court is young and lively and foolish and happy to be goaded by the Green Knight, “Here about this bench I see but beardless boys. If I were strapped in steel on a stirring charger, Here no men to match or measure me with my might.” (280-282). The court that Lowery depicts is serious, aged, and almost to a point of deteriorating. In either case of an inexperienced court or a tested one, this is undoubtedly a tale of youth becoming learned to the ways of the world. Gawain’s shield is highlighted at the open of his quest. It is made with care and blessed yet it only makes it to the point of Gawain’s capture by the thieves in the wood. The thieves step off the depiction of the Virgin Mary, breaking the shield with a definite, permanent noise while Gawain lies tied and helpless. Mary is Gawain’s guardian to whom he entrusts his life, yet the film Gawain spends no time grieving her. She is a sign that was thrust upon him. His dedication to religion is performative at best. His mother understandably mocks his claim of being at mass in the opening sequence. Gawain is never shown praying or paying any homage to God or the holy mother; the exact opposite to the original Gawain. It is clear that the *Gawain* poet’s Gawain is as dedicated to religion as was expected of knights in his time, but Lowery includes religion as an afterthought. It is highlighted in order to accommodate tradition, but only for that reason. The loss of Mary is not as important to him as the loss of a functioning shield following his simultaneous loss of his horse, his ability to move and talk, his weapon, his food, and his money.

Introduced into the tradition by Lowery, is the intense focus on self image. Gawain’s race goes unmentioned, it is a nonsubject, yet he is not the image of a medieval, British hero that contemporary audiences expect. He instantly becomes other in his race, his beauty, and his youth. Gawain’s portrait is highlighted three times. Once before his quest, he stands self-conscious for a portrait that seems traditional and unremarkable. The second time, his image is captured by The Lady through a complex system of light. Here he has traveled far and survived

against great odds. He is increasingly self-possessed, but he continues to carry the fear and ignorance of his adolescence. The third time comes as a moment during Gawain's vision. Gawain, his young queen, and his remaining child sit, awaiting ruin, in front of the image captured by The Lady. The image of youth is contrasted with the adult Gawain who wears his crown and his grief side by side. He sits on his throne, yet he slouches over; he is kingly but he is also a coward. Over these three moments, Gawain's progression is exhibited. It is telling that there is no vision of Gawain the King sitting for a royal portrait. His image from youth is all that is available to hang. In his vision, he is unchanged from the static moment of his would be beheading. He ages, but he can not change in a dynamic way. He is forced to uphold the image of fear and fault. A major part of the fault he is reminded of is his betrayal of Essel. He was false during the creation of the image, claiming the bell Essel gave to him held no significance as a token. The Lady works hard to seduce him and it proves effective as she rips the bell from around his neck. The brilliant choice to double cast these two roles deserves mention. The Lady and Essel are played by the excellent Alicia Vikander. Vikander's portrayal of both women that Gawain is close to places them in contrast to each other as well as uniting them in contrast against the young queen in the vision. The same face haunts him from the moment he steps away from his home. The portrait carried the memory of both the woman who took it and the woman he betrayed during it and several times after.

There is no such motif of Gawain's physical image in the original text. Instead, his *character* is examined. Solomon explains, "Thus the situations which try the loyalty, courage, and chastity of Gawain are comprehended as separate elements which by jeopardizing specific aspects of Gawain's excellence undermine the knight's pride in himself" (Solomon 267). Gawain's character is brought into question by The Lady and the Green Knight. Each claim that because of his behavior, he cannot be *the* Sir Gawain who is legendary for his chivalry and honor. This offense is taken badly by Gawain and he acts foolishly to regain his reputation. His name is the original form of portraiture, he has his arms, his horse, and his colors and shield; yet these are easy enough to discredit, "many romances contain scenes that address the problems within heraldic signification systems more directly and demonstrate that simple knowledge of outward signs is not sufficient for an understanding of inner reality" (Arthur 50). His outward sign of the Endless Knot is broken at the hands of the girdle because of fear. What is essential is his good name and the *Gawain* poet focuses on the legend of Gawain to make that sentiment effective. However, are modern audiences familiar with Gawain's good name and his virtues? For the majority, no. Lowery must craft an equally effective symbol for the man, and what better symbol than his visage. The physical form of Gawain is all that we know of him at the start of the film. That image is built up and torn away so many times throughout the film that it becomes as effective a symbol for personhood as the name of the man.

Creative liberties were taken, aspects of the knot and its associated images changed and some things, like the portrait, were added. Among those aspects added, is the notable role of the fox who becomes a moral and spiritual guide for Gawain. The fox's role in the original was as part of the hunting game. In the original text, Gawain stays all three nights. The first night's hunt produced a deer, the second a boar. The deer and boar are hunted as a sign of prowess. The third night gave the fox which "was regarded as vermin to be hunted out and destroyed" (Savage 3). The *Gawain* poet calls the fox Reynard, a sly fox hero of several medieval cycles, "Reynard was wiley" (1728). The *Gawain* poet's fox evaded capture for as long as it could but eventually was overtaken. Lowery's fox is more Reynard than he is hunted. His early introduction and penchant

for keeping Gawain on track and relatively out of trouble make him a guide on Gawain's journey. Like the progression of Gawain over the centuries, Reynard takes on an evolved form of the original. Foxes have maintained their place as symbols for sly tricksters in contemporary pop culture yet they are seen less as vermin. The wit of the fox had taken center stage. This Reynard is that. He is sarcastic and sharp in his humor; his wit surpasses Gawain's as they become companions. It is Gawain whose early leave saves the fox from death by the host. In turn, the fox does his best to dissuade Gawain one final time. He becomes that "amoral, cowardly, and self-seeking" thing of legends while still being "a sympathetic hero, whose cunning is a necessity for survival" (Britannica). The fox survives this tale. The lack of shape in the hunt is apparent here. The importance was on the *three* days of hunt, three kisses, three meals. Lowery forgoes the power of three, allowing Gawain to achieve sexually and flee his hosts. Where in the original text, "On the third day, then, a false beast is roused in the forest, and a false man revealed in the castle; a sly fox is caught in the wood, a "sly fox" in the castle"(Savage 5). His last night before beheading is spent in front of the Knight, sitting in anticipation. He is no "sly fox" but a terrified young man. The glory of a lord's hunt is irrelevant to contemporary audiences. Instead, Lowery again relies on Gawain's fear. He sits frozen, dreading the moment that the knight opens his eyes yet unable to leave.

The original text has Gawain delivered to the Chapel by a guide of the Host's house. The guide tempts Gawain as the fox does in the film, "let this game alone And go away from this grim place by an easier path! Go out by another gate, and God speed you well," (2118-2120) His appeal is declined and Gawain goes on. Paul Delany entertains the suggestion that the guide is Bercilak, the Green Knight himself. It suggests that this is another test of the game. Delany eventually rejects this theory due to a lack of evidence, but it is an interesting thought. Gawain of the film gets no such test because he prematurely flees from the castle and his fox guide. The single secret identity plot twist is excluded, rendering the double identity plot twist impossible and irrelevant. But why this choice? Would it have been ineffective to include the Knight's secret identity? Delany's second suggestion of the guide as a perfectly normal man, who speaks to a Knight far above him in status with familiarity and presents the temptation of fleeing is also interesting. In this situation, the guide and The Lady play similar roles, both promising safety for the price of Gawain's honor. Finally, Delany lands on his preferred reasoning for the Guide's insolence towards Gawain, "that he knows about the hidden girdle and therefore objects to Gawain's self-righteous invocation of Divine Providence" (233). Despite what the *Gawain* poet intended, none of these options are given to 2021 Gawain. Instead, his fox warns him, he rides off to his assumed death and never sees his guide, the fox, again. But we trust the fox's strangely spoken warning. It comes as a shock, since he previously had not spoken, but the relationship between the fox and the knight was able to be developed completely. This presents the option to run as something legitimate. This is no random servant that speaks out of turn, this is a trusted friend, a sly animal friend, but a friend nonetheless. Lowery condenses these two roles in order to build strength. He makes a similar choice with Morgan and the mother, compressing two roles into one so that unity and trust is built for contemporary audiences.

David Lowery, as the writer and director of this film, performs a complete reimagining of a classic epic. Undertaking such a project is a risky choice. Maintaining the integrity of the original story is crucial to the success of the film among fans of Arthuriana and medievalists alike; however it is also crucial to revitalize this story so that it appeals to those who have never heard of Gawain and his quest. Stories such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were originally

created as entertainment. They conveyed traits that people thought attractive in a hero and that people would want to mimic. It is integral to make a film of Gawain enjoyable so that it can become a part of the larger tradition. Lowery succeeded in making a film that captures modern audiences desire for creative cinematography, relatably faulty heroes, imperfect endings, and an overarching feel of legacy. By changing the personality of Gawain, altering his key symbols, adding images of self and guides, “The Green Knight” slides gracefully into modern Arthurian tradition. Many things are left unknown, as a great sorcerer once said, “My mouth would not be any more valuable than anyone else’s. *Let such secrets lie.* Think about what you have to do now” (Wilhelm, italics added). And so, the secrets of this film will continue to be analyzed along with other key Arthurian texts. The question remains, “If not even the truest knight of the Round Table can maintain his truth, what hope is there for ordinary mortals?” (Arthur 158). The answer is a secret to be discovered by each audience member.

A FATHER'S STORY

By Dallas Curry

ScreenWriters Notes

Logline- Guided by only a notebook left for him and his foster siblings, a kid has to put clues together and search for his dad, the one thing he feels is missing from his life.

Role of L- Each and every character gets a name except "L" but he remains nameless because "L" can be anyone of us just like "Q", "S", "Z", "D", "B" and "J" can be anyone of us.

EXT. RILEY RESIDENCE. NIGHT.

A car pulls up to a house in the middle of the night. A man (face hidden) puts his head on the steering wheel and takes deep breaths-- a few sniffles get out.

A baby can be heard from the back of the car.

In a car seat a baby, L, is waking up and making *baby noises*.

The man gets out of the car and checks the address of the home.

He gets the car seat out and another bag. He makes his way up the steps and places the baby on the doorstep. He makes sure the child is wrapped and tucked in.

He places the bag next to the car seat along with a note and an envelope labeled "*money*".

It begins to rain and drops of water fall onto the letter.

The water ruins some of the ink and where the child's name is just reads "L"

The man rings the doorbell before running back to his car and driving off.

A couple opens the door and looks at the child. The man, MR. RILEY , walks down to the road to check to see who left the child.

MR. RILEY comes back to his wife, MRS. RILEY, who is now holding the child in her arms. A smaller kid pushes their way outside.

MR. RILEY

Jonathan... Shouldn't you be in bed?

JONATHAN

Ummm... Nooooo.

MRS. RILEY

Anything?

MR. RILEY

No, another one just left.

MRS. RILEY

It's so sad, but at least we can give them a better home.

MR. RILEY

You think they even bothered to name them.

MR. RILEY picks up the letter.

MRS. RILEY

Well?

MR. RILEY

L?

MRS. RILEY

That's... interesting.

MR. RILEY

We're changing it right?

JONATHAN

No. I like it.

JONATHAN messes with L's fingers.

JONATHAN

My new brother L.

The family walks inside with the child and its belongings.

The car drives back around as the door closes before driving off again.

TITLE CARD- **A FATHERS STORY**

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. DAY.

MRS. RILEY is in the kitchen making pancakes as many kids run in and out of the kitchen.

MRS. RILEY

HEY! Watch out and stop running in the house!

BELLA

Sorry Miss Mom

The kids continue into the living room where MR. RILEY is watching tv. The kids begin opening doors and cabinets and run into a different room.

A boy, RASPIN, comes up from behind MR. RILEY's chair.

RASPIN hands MR. RILEY a dollar and runs off.

Transition

L is hidden in a dark place, the voices of all his brothers and sisters can be heard all around him.

L snickers as he hears all the footsteps fade into the distance.

transition

JONATHAN is sitting at his desk playing a video game.

The kids burst into his room.

EVIE

JONATHAN! Do you know where L is hiding?

JONATHAN

Evie what does the sign say?

EVIE

No- body A- lala- Ohwed

JONATHAN

Right, wait- it says “nobody allowed”. So that means don’t bother me.

EVIE

But we only have-

JONATHAN

(whispers)

Nobody

(closes door)

TIM and BELLA run into an older girls room.

The girl, GEORGINA, is sitting on her bed on the phone.

GEORGINA

I mean I want to go, but my parents are too strict- What are you guys doing?!

TIM and BELLA proceed to dump GEORGINA's laundry basket and open her closet door.

BELLA

Playing hide and seek. We can't find L or Rاسpin.

GEORGINA

They aren't here. Now shoo. Out. All of you. All of you!

GEORGINA opens her wardrobe to reveal Rاسpin hiding inside of a dress.

TIM

Gotcha!

TIM grabs Rاسpin and pulls him out of the wardrobe.

Rاسpin

That's not fair. The older kids rooms are off limits.

BELLA

Then why were you there?

Rاسpin

Because you guys can't be.

TIM

Hurry up. We have to find L before Mrs. Riley-

MRS. RILEY

KIDS, BREAKFAST!

EVIE
DANG IT!

All the kids make their way into the kitchen where L is smiling at a big plate of pancakes in front of him.

L
That's 47 wins for me.
(L sticks his tongue out)

BELLA
That's not right, at all.

RASPIN
I think he's cheating. We've played too many times for you not to be found.

L
I'm just good at hiding.

TIM
You can show us where you hide?!

L
Then I can't hide there again.

EVIE
Hide somewhere else.

L

I can't. I use the same spot every time.

TIM

You're lying.

L

Nope, scouts honor.

BELLA

I believe him.

JONATHAN

L, quit yapping and pass the syrup.

L passes the syrup to JONATHAN

L

I'm just the best hider in the whole world.

RASPIN

Second best. I haven't been given any time to find you since I'm always hiding.

BELLA

You just volunteered yourself as a seeker next time.

RAPSIN

What?! No.

GEORGINA

Shoulda kept your mouth shut.

RASPIN

(Mocks her with mouthful)
Sheeda kapt yo mouf shut.

MRS. RILEY

Your mouth is full Raspin, please close it.

RASPIN

Yes ma'am.

MR. RILEY

L, your birthday is in three days and you haven't told us what you want to do. Have you even thought about what you've wanted to do?

L

Nope. Probably the same as every other year. Spend it with you guys.

JONATHAN

Not at all. You're turning 13. The teenage years. Sweaty pits and cracking voices. Sooner or later hair is going to-

MRS. RILEY

Jonathan! We're eating.

JONATHAN

Right. Sorry, but anyways let's go big man. Go big or go home.

L

I don't know. I'll think about it.

MR. RILEY

Don't take too long. It's a special day.

RASPIN

Special?! I spent my 13 birthday with the flu

ALL

We all did!

RASPIN

Oh yea... Those were good times.

BELLA

It was last year.

RASPIN

Like I said- Good times

MRS. RILEY

Jonathan and Georgina don't forget you guys have to watch the kids tonight, me and dad are going out tonight-

GEORGINA

I can't. I told you George and I are helping his dad at the station and-

JONATHAN

-I still don't get how you can date someone with the same name-

GEORGINA

Not the same. GEORGE and GEORGINA. Hear the difference?

JONATHAN

Same difference.

GEORGINA

I think it's cute.

JONATHAN

I think it's cringe. Isn't that supposed to be a red flag?

GEORGINA

No, your lotion and box of tissues are though-

MRS. RILEY

We are eating!

TIM

Yea no one wants to hear about your boogers!

RAPSIN

Not boogers.

EVIE

What?

RASPIN

Its-

(leans in to whisper)

MRS. RILEY grabs RASPIN's ear.

RASPIN

OW OW OW! I was gonna say snot.

MRS. RILEY

Now you're not going to say anything. Jonathan, are you staying at least?

JONATHAN

I mean I could, but so many people want me to hang out tonight and a new movie came out-

MR. RILEY

\$25

JONATHAN

Deal.

BELLA

We're only worth \$25?

L

I say I'm worth at least a grand.

BELLA

Me too-

L

-Eh... A buck fifty if you keep your mouth shut.

BELLA

You're one to talk-

EVIE

I think I'm worth a gazillion.

RASPIN

Dollars!?

EVIE

Fairy dust!

MRS. RILEY walks up to EVIE and kisses her forehead.

MRS. RILEY

I think so too.

RASPIN

Can't believe you took the job for 25\$

JONATHAN

I would've done it for free.

MR. RILEY

We would've paid more.

JONATHAN

Wait what?! I would like to make a counter offer.

MR. RILEY

Deals been made.

JONATHAN
I didn't sign anything.

MR. RILEY
A man's word is worth a million signatures.

GEORGINA
History says you're wrong.

MR. RILEY
I make history everyday.

MRS. RILEY
Especially in that bathroom.

RASPIN
I hope you're talking about the craps Mr. Riley takes.

MRS. RILEY
I am... You and I are going to have a serious talk about what you watch on tv.

RASPIN
A little adult swim never hurt anyone.

MR. RILEY
Well I better hurry up before I'm late. What do you guys have planned for today?

MRS. RILEY
I just finished Laundry so gardening.

RASPIN

Imma become number one in hide n seek today.

L

Sure buddy.

BELLA

I'll be babysitting these morons.

JONATHAN

That's actually what I'll be doing.

EVIE

PAINTING! IMMA PAINT A BIG PICTURE!

MRS. RILEY

I can't wait to see it.

MR. RILEY

I hope all of your endeavors go as planned.

MRS. RILEY

Have a good day at work. I'll see you tonight.

MR. RILEY

Bye guys.

MR. RILEY leaves the kitchen

RASPIN

You guys ready for another game of hide n seek?

EVIE

Imma go paint!

TIM

Have fun!

BELLA

I guess we're down Evie then.

L

That's fine. It doesn't matter how many eyes you have. You can't find me.

BELLA

Oh really?

L

Yea

BELLA rushes to the corner

BELLA

1... 2... 3...

TIM, RASPIN and L run out of the kitchen.

MRS. RILEY

Kids! Plates.

JONATHAN

I got it mom.

MRS. RILEY

Thank you Jonathan.

TIM runs into the bathroom and hides in the tub.

RASPIN and L rush upstairs.

RAPSIN

Where are you heading?

L

Can't tell you.

RASPIN

May the best hider win.

L

I plan on it.

RASPIN hides inside of a closet.

L checks to make sure no one is watching and runs into a room.

L walks around MR. RILEY's office, he opens the door into the closet. L climbs a safe and tries to reach the top of the closet and accidentally grabs a box and falls.

The box falls over him and papers fly everywhere.

The box is labeled "L's Things". L begins to pick up everything that scatters and looks at it.

L looks at his birth certificate and adoption papers.

L begins to put things into the box and he comes across a black book. Engraved on the front is
“A Father’s Story”.

L opens it and begins to read it.

Transition

BELLA

59... 60. READY OR NOT HERE I COME.

BELLA rushes out of the kitchen and makes a beeline for the bathroom.

BELLA

Tim you gotta do better than that.

TIM

Aw man! Was I first?

BELLA

Yes, but I’m going to find everyone quickly.

BELLA runs upstairs and sees a towel stuck underneath the door.

BELLA opens the door to reveal RASPIN.

BELLA

Mom just did laundry so fix the towels.

RASPIN

Did I beat L?!

BELLA
Of course not.

BELLA begins to walk down the hall and L walks past her reading the book.

BELLA
Found you- What are you doing?

L
Reading this thing.

BELLA
Well... Found you. I guess.

L
Yea congratulations.

BELLA
Hey um... What is the book about?

L
I think my dad...

BELLA
Oh like your real one?

L
I think so. I gotta talk to Jonathan real quick.

BELLA
But what about the game-

L keeps reading the journal until he makes it to JONATHAN's room.

JONATHAN is watching a stream on his computer.

JONATHAN

Nope- You guys aren't allowed to hide in our rooms.

L

I'm not hiding. I wanted to ask you something.

JONATHAN

What is it?

L

Do you remember the night you guys got me?

JONATHAN

Vaguely... I was like 6, umm... It was at night obviously- very cliché baby in a basket drop off. Uh raining and your name was something, but we and by we I mean I opted to keep your name as L. Thought it was cool, but nowadays I hear letter names are common.

L

Nothing else comes to mind?

JONATHAN

No... Sorry. Why?

L

I have this journal that- I think at least is from my dad.

JONATHAN

I mean the man dropped off a lot of stuff. The general things, records, certificates and such. I don't remember a journal, but I was 6.

L

Alright thanks.

JONATHAN

What's in it L?

L

Stories. About him and his life and I don't know I haven't gotten that far.

JONATHAN

Sounds neat... You plan on reading it all?

L

Yea- I never met the guy and if this is all I have of him then I might as well know where I come from.

JONATHAN

Not always about where you come from L.

L

I know, but it's cool to know, you know? I mean how many of us actually know our real parents?

JONATHAN

Georgina, Raspin and I, but we're also older... I mean it's cool, but I mean they're just strangers to me. The old fart busted a-

(pause)

They gave birth to me and whatever, but the Rileys are the ones who raised me.

L

I know. Just cool.

JONATHAN

Alrighty... Do me a favor and close my door, Raspin is a slippery one.

L closes the door and heads into the hallway where BELLA is waiting.

BELLA walks beside him as he reads.

BELLA

So you know your dad?

L

If you're going to eavesdrop, do it right.

BELLA

You guys basically shout.

L

No, I don't know him, but I have this journal that tells me everything I need to know.

BELLA

Like?

L

He was born in January and he is a capricorn.

BELLA
That's not very interesting.

L
It's more than I knew yesterday.

BELLA
Well what else is there?

L
His favorite food is frito chilli pie with extra jalapenos and beans. He says he also enjoys
Dynamo Expressos.

BELLA
Like the diner?

L
Maybe... Do you think he still likes it?

BELLA
Why? Are you going to see if you can meet him?

L
Maybe... I mean I can read all of this all day long, but meeting him and talking to him would be
something else.

BELLA
I mean if you want. I don't know if it's a good idea.

L
Why?

BELLA

Georgina hates her parents. When she met them she came back crying and locked herself in her room for a week. She said they were awful people.

L

Well... Maybe he won't be that bad. Look, it says he volunteered as a firefighter and lives in a circle whatever that means.

BELLA and L walk into RASPIN who is still folding towels off of the floor.

RASPIN's eyes light up with excitement.

RASPIN

You found him?! Where was his spot?! I told you it wasn't that good!

BELLA

No, it was a draw. He gave up.

RASPIN

That's not a draw...

BELLA

I gave up too.

RASPIN

You guys got mega boring. Imma go watch tv so get me when we're doing something fun.

RASPIN runs down the hall.

BELLA kicks the towel mess in the hallway.

BELLA

RASPIN YOU IDIOT! FINISH THE TOWELS!

L walks off and walks into his room.

BELLA follows.

BELLA(CONTD)

So are you going to check?

L

Check what?

BELLA

The diner. There's only one dynamo diner. It's a block away from that one downtown spot.

L

What?

BELLA

You know. Maple? No Marrocos? No that's not it. Marbury! Marbury Avenue, but that means it's probably on Marrocos.

L

I can't just go out there and search for him.

BELLA

Why not?

L

Because... I'm 12.

BELLA

Harry potter was 11 when he fought Voldeman or whatever.

L

You didn't read Harry Potter

BELLA

I watched the movies.

L looks at her skeptically and continues to read the book.

BELLA is reading along as she continues to talk.

BELLA

Come on me and Raspin can help.

L

How?

BELLA

We could go through the book together. Find clues so we can find him. I mean just look, we go to the diner and find whoever is eating frito chili pie and a dynamo expresso.

L

And if I see him?

BELLA

Talk to him. What else would you do?

L

I guess you're right.

BELLA

Of course I am.

L

So we just go to this diner?

BELLA

Yep, I'll go get Raspin.

BELLA leaves the room and L, still fascinated by the book, reads some more.

He might actually meet his dad.

Transition

L walks down the stairs to find RASPIN and BELLA throwing their jackets on and getting ready to embark on their journey.

L is wearing his usual outfit, a trashy blue hoodie accompanied by jeans and a black beanie.

RASPIN is putting his shoes on.

RASPIN

We ready to go?

L

I am if you guys are.

BELLA

We were waiting on you.

RASPIN

Alright then let's go. I kinda wanna try this frito chilli pie.

EVIE runs and wraps her arms around RASPIN.

EVIE

Where are we going?

RASPIN

(breaking her grip)

We aren't going anywhere. The three of us are going somewhere real quick.

EVIE

I wanna go!

BELLA

Maybe next time Evie... This is more of a big kid thing.

EVIE

No fair. I'm a big kid.

RASPIN

You still believe in Santa?

EVIE

Yea...

RASPIN

Then you're not a big kid.

EVIE

Not my fault you don't have Christmas spirit.

BELLA

Evie I promise next time we'll take you, but for now-

GEORGINA is walking towards them ready to leave the house.

GEORGINA

Take her where?

RASPIN

The-

L

Playground. The one with the big dragon statue.

EVIE

YOU'RE GOING TO THE PLAYGROUND!

BELLA

Quiet down Evie.

GEORGINA

She can run along with you guys if Jonathan or mom says it's okay, just make sure you watch her.

L

Well this was more of an us thing.

GEORGINA

You guys are weird. Just take Evie with you. It's not like you're taking Tim.

TIM looks up from the tv. He was hidden behind a basket. His face is covered in cheeto dust.

TIM
Take me where?

EVIE
They're going to the playground.

TIM
REALLY?! Can I go... Please!

GEORGINA
Tim No, but Evie yes.

TIM
No fair.

RASPIN
Georgina... Can we please not take Evie along for this one?

L
Please. We'll take her next time. I promise.

BELLA
Yes absolutely. 100%

GEORGINA
What are you three planning on doing?

L
Nothing we're just... Doing older kid things.

GEORGINA

You guys are 12 and 13 what could you possibly be-

L

We can explain later, but trust us.

GEORGINA

(looks at them skeptically)

Fine... Just this once.

GEORGINA gets ready to leave.

L

Georgina?

GEORGINA

Yes

L

Can you drop us off? It's a long walk.

GEORGINA

Hurry up. I have places to be.

BELLA, RASPIN, L, and GEORGINA leave the house.
They all get into the car and GEORGINA begins to drive.

GEORGINA

So where are you guys really going?

L, RASPIN and BELLA look at each other.
GEORGINA adjusts her rearview mirror to see them.

GEORGINA

I'm not stupid guys.

L

Well-

BELLA

L...

L

She might as well know.

GEORGINA

Know what?

RASPIN

L's gonna meet his dad.

GEORGINA

What?!

L

Raspin!

RASPIN

What?

L

We weren't supposed to tell anyone.

RASPIN

Didn't you tell Jonathan?

L

No.

BELLA

You're an idiot.

GEORGINA

L... You shouldn't rush into this. Have you talked to him? How are you meeting up with him?
For all you know-

L

I'm not meeting him... More like looking for him.

GEORGINA

Like he's missing?

L

No... I have this book. It's a journal from my dad... It talks about him and his life.

GEORGINA

Where'd you get that?

L

It doesn't matter. All I know is when I read this I feel closer to him. Like I'm finally getting to
know him.

GEORGINA

L... Sometimes it's not always what it's made out to be.

BELLA

We're just looking... We don't even know if he'll be there.

GEORGINA

Where?

RASPIN

Dynamo Diner. Home of the Dynamo.

GEORGINA

That's where I'm taking you guys?

L

Yes please.

GEORGINA

It doesn't matter what I say does it?

L

Nope.

GEORGINA

Do you really want to meet him?

L

Now more than ever.

GEORGINA

Fine, but keep me updated and be careful out here. Don't talk to strangers or anything stupid.
Make sure you guys stick together at all times.

BELLA
We will.

GEORGINA

Thank god Evie stayed home. Call me if anything happens even if someone stubs their toe. When you're done go straight home. I'm serious. This is all the Where's Waldo you're doing for today.
Bella, you're in charge.

BELLA
Got it.

RASPIN

What?! I'm the oldest. Why am I not in charge?

GEORGINA

Your shirts inside out Rospin and you're wearing two left gloves.

RASPIN
My fingers are small...

GEORGINA parks at the DYNAMO DINER and lets them out.
She rolls down the window.

GEORGINA

Stay safe! And L... Just don't get your hopes up... Don't forget we're your family too.

L
I won't. Thanks Georgina.

GEORGINA

No problem, see you guys later.

RASPIN

Bye.

BELLA

See you!

GEORGINA drives off.

INT. DYNAMO DINER. DAY.

The children walk into a fairly empty diner. They look around and as they're walking RASPIN will occasionally look inside people's bowls and plates to see what they're eating.

They sit at a booth.

RASPIN

No fritos anywhere.

L

Maybe he's not here yet. What does an espresso look like?

BELLA

Not like any of these.

L

Crap.

WAITRESS walks up to the kids.

She is staring at her notepad.

WAITRESS

Hello, Welcome to Dynamo Diner, home of the Dynamo. What can I-

She looks at them.

WAITRESS

Where are your parents?

RASPIN

DEAD!

(pause)

No, I'm just kidding. It's just us.

WAITRESS

You kids are very young... Do your parents know you're here?

RASPIN

Hopefully they're looking down on us...

L

Yes they do. We were just wondering if-

BELLA

Can we get some waters?

WAITRESS

Sure thing.

WAITRESS walks off.

L

What was that for?

BELLA

What did you plan on asking her? Hey, we're looking for my dad. We have to play it cool or they'll kick us out.

L

Then what do I say?

BELLA

We can start by figuring out who has money.

RAPSIN

I got two dollars.

L

Ten.

BELLA

I have five bucks so we have a good 17.

L

Okay?

BELLA

We'll order the frito chili pie exactly how your dad does. Then she might say something like hey blah blah blah gets that.

L

You're a genius.

RASPIN

I was gonna get the fritos anyways, so I'll take partial credit.

L

It says he gets frito chilli pie with extra jalapenos and I think extra beans. What about espresso?

BELLA

(shakes head)

Not enough money, but espresso isn't that unique.

L

Right.

WAITRESS comes back with their waters.

WAITRESS

You dolls ready to order?

BELLA

Yes please.

L

Can we have the frito chili pie with extra jalapenos and beans?

WAITRESS

Sure thing sugar. Is that all?

L

Yes.

The WAITRESS walks to the back and places order.

L looks at BELLA confused. RASPIN is distracted by the frost building on the window.

L

She didn't say anything...

BELLA

Just wait. We'll figure something out... Raspin?

RAPSIN

Huh?

BELLA

Focus.

L

Maybe it's a common dish? That's why she didn't know or say anything.

BELLA

Well then let's ask.

L

That's weird...

BELLA

Wanna find him or not?

RASPIN

YooHoo! Waitress.

L

(Whisper)

RASPIN!

The WAITRESS walks over to them.

WAITRESS

Yes sweetie?

RASPIN

Me and my friends wanna know if our meal was rare.

WAITRESS

I'm afraid I don't know what you mean.

RASPIN

Like do people come in all the time asking for chili fritos and extra beans and jalapenos.

WAITRESS

I'm not sure. I've only been working here this year.

L

Oh... Thank you.

WAITRESS

No problem. Why do you ask?

BELLA

School project. We're figuring out what food people like.

WAITRESS

That's cute, well if there's anything I can do to help just let me know.

RASPIN

Chef!

WAITRESS

What?

RASPIN

Chef Dynamo would know.

L

There is no Chef Dynamo.

WAITRESS

No, but there is a Chef, Yuri. Been here for about thirty years.

BELLA

Really? Do you think he'll know if anyone else eats this?

WAITRESS

More than I would.

L

Can we speak to him?

WAITRESS

I'll ask him. Just sit tight.

WAITRESS walks into the kitchen and talks to the chef.
The kids continue to sit at the table and watch as RASPIN devours the frito chili pie.

RASPIN

Oh yea... Your dad has taste.

L

Thanks?

RASPIN

(licking fingers)

You sure we only have 17 bucks?

BELLA

Well it's 6 dollars now.

RASPIN

We paid 11 dollars for a bag of chips and chili?!

BELLA

We added more beans and jalapenos.

RASPIN

I take back what I said about your dad.

L

Ditto.

CHEF YURI comes out from the kitchen, He is very tall with a stained apron. His hair is pulled back into a man bun and wrapped in a hair net and chef hat. He has a massive beard.

He speaks in a thick accent and approaches the kids with a limp.

CHEF YURI

Hello Children! I was told you had some questions for me yah.

L

Umm... Yes, you see we- We are doing this project type thing at school and we just wanted to know how popular the frito chili pie was...

BELLA

With extra beans and jalapenos.

RASPIN

And a dynamo expresso.

CHEF YURI looks at them puzzled and tilts his head.

CHEF YURI

Very specific... I know of only a few who get- have gotten that specific order.

BELLA

Really?

CHEF YURI

Well yes. We stopped serving the dynamo espresso years ago and only a few people still request it.

L

Do they still come here?

CHEF YURI

Yes... One man without fail shows up every Wednesday at noon, the other shows up everyday at 7:30 fresh out of work, while the other stopped showing up years ago. All the same order with extra beans and jalapenos.

L

Who are they?

CHEF YURI

Let's see... Um there's Taylor Morris, Dave Concord and I forget the last guy, like I said he stopped coming years ago.

L

Okay great. Thank you.

CHEF YURI leaves and heads back into the kitchen.

RASPIN finishes the fritos and licks the chili off of his fingers. The kids huddle together as if they're sharing secrets.

L

So we just wait for the guy who gets off of work everyday and see him.

BELLA

At 7:30? What are we supposed to do for that long?

RASPIN

Beats me.

L

We could find more clues?

BELLA

Dave Concord... Why does that sound so familiar?

RASPIN

Concord Industries... The place that makes the cars and stuff.

BELLA

You're right. Well maybe.

RASPIN

What do you mean maybe? I am. I did a project on him.

BELLA

Why?

RASPIN

It was either him, the dead author guy or the singer everyone chose.

L

What?

RASPIN

Famous people from Dolina, look I say we go to Concord Industries and see the Dave guy.
What's the worst that can happen?

L

That my dad is a successful businessman and gave me away?

RASPIN

Or he gave you away to become a successful businessman.

BELLA
Raspin, how is that any better?

RASPIN
(shrugs)
It sounded better.

L
I guess we can check out Concord then. How do we get there?

RASPIN and L both look at BELLA.

BELLA
I'll make the call.

Transition

L, BELLA and RASPIN sit in the back of GEORGINA's car. GEORGE sits uncomfortably in the passenger seat.

GEORGE
(Awkwardly)
So... Um... What are we doing again?

RASPIN
Following clues in the journal to find L's dad.

GEORGE
Right... Right.

L

Sorry to bring you guys along, but we didn't really-

GEORGINA

It's fine L, Just remember what I said okay?

L

You got it.

GEORGE

So say... by chance Dave Concord is your father. What happens next?

L

I don't know. I-

BELLA

He's just going to talk to him. That's step one.

L

Yeah I just want to talk to him.

RASPIN

Sounds like we're going to jump him.

GEORGINA

We aren't doing any sort of jumping anywhere. It's a quick confirmation and discussion.

They arrive at Concord Industries and the kids get out of the car.

L looks back at GEORGINA

L

You're not coming with us?

GEORGINA

I'll be right here if you need me, but if a huge group goes in to confront him it won't go over well.

BELLA

We got this L.

GEORGINA

I'm guessing we should keep the car running?

BELLA

Yes please.

INT. CONCORD INDUSTRIES. DAY.

L, BELLA and RASPIN walk into the building. The lobby is very vast and broad. Just by looking at it you can tell it was cold. There were banners on the wall leading to a desk with a secretary. Men in suits walk in and out of the building.

L walks up to the secretary.

RAPSIN puts his hand on L's shoulder.

RASPIN

Let me handle this.

RASPIN smirks at the secretary and flips his hair over.

RASPIN(CONTD)

Hey.

SECRETARY

Can I help you?

RASPIN

Well it depends. Can you help me?

BELLA facepalms.

SECRETARY

Listen kid. We don't have time for your games and-

L

We're here to see Dave.

SECRETARY

May I ask why?

RASPIN

Business stuff.

L

He's helping me with a school project. You know the whole famous city person thing.

SECRETARY

Dave does those via virtual call at your allotted time slot.

L

He said we can meet in person because I don't have a computer.

SECRETARY

Use a library.

BELLA watches RASPIN and Ls failed attempts.

BELLA falls to the ground and throws up.

SECRETARY

Jesus Christ.

(into mic)

We need a janitor in the lobby.

L

Bella, are you okay?

BELLA looks at them and smiles and waves at them to go.

SECRETARY walks over to BELLA

SECRETARY

Let's get you to the bathroom. You two stay in the lobby.

SECRETARY and BELLA head into the restroom and L and RASPIN make their way to the elevators.

They walk in with a bunch of businessmen and take it up.

L

(To Rospin)

How are we supposed to know where he's going to be?

RASPIN

I don't know.

L

What if he's in here?

RASPIN

(looks around)

DAVE.

The businessmen all look at RASPIN.

RASPIN chuckles.

RASPIN

Dave?

They all look away.

The doors open and the businessmen scurry out. L and RASPIN follow.

L

What now?

RASPIN

Find help

L and RASPIN walk around a modern office. There are many meeting rooms and desks with computers where workers are typing up a storm.

RASPIN

L?

RASPIN points to a break room.

L and RASPIN walk into it to find a man in an oversized business suit eating a snickers and adding the wrapper to a vast pile on the table.

ESCANOR

(gulps)

Can I help you boys?

RASPIN

Uh... We're looking for Dave?

ESCANOR

Dave? His office is the last one on the right. Down this hall.

L

Thank you.

L and RASPIN leave the breakroom and head toward DAVE's office.

They walk into the office and DAVE is sitting at his desk.

DAVE

(confused)

Can I help you?

L

Umm... Yea I-

DAVE

Are you here for the project?

RASPIN

No. Use your words L.

L

You're the one who gets the frito chili pie with the extra beans and jalapeños?

DAVE

Yes? Why do you ask?

L

Did you write this?

L shows him the journal and DAVE looks at it. He reads the book and takes interest in it.

DAVE reads and looks at L as he does.

DAVE

This book? You're looking for your father?

L

Yes...

DAVE

I'm sorry, but I didn't write this book. I don't have any children.

L

Oh...

DAVE

I'm sorry, but if you read here it says that your dad, whomever he may be, is allergic to almonds and has a tattoo of a dragon, You should take a real good look at this book. There's a lot of clues in here.

L

Thank you and sorry again for-

DAVE

Don't worry about it.

Transition

BELLA is sipping on a cup of water in the lobby as a janitor is cleaning up her "diversion".

RAPSIN and L walk back into the lobby and signal to BELLA

BELLA

(To Secretary)

You know... I'm feeling a lot better thank you so much.

BELLA runs after L and RASPIN who are running out of the building.

They run into GEORGINA's car.

RASPIN

Drive. Drive! DRIVE!

GEORGINA

What happened?!

L

Nothing. He's not my dad.

GEORGINA

(sincere)

How are you feeling?

L

Like I have a lot more work to do.

GEORGE

Alrighty. Where to?

Everyone gives GEORGE a weird look.

GEORGE(CONTD)

What? I'm invested now.

GEORGINA

Well... What's next L?

L

Back to Dynamo Diner. Someone will be there at 7:30.

INT. DYNAMO DINER. EVENING.

L is sitting on a stool with BELLA and RASPIN.

They're all enjoying a variety of meals. RASPIN is still eating chili frito pie.

CHEF YURI walks out of the kitchen with a plate of "Frito Chili pie" *extra beans... extra jalapenos...*

The kid's eyes follow him as he places it in front of someone in a trench coat.

WAITRESS also walk out with a small cup of coffee. She places it alongside the “frito chilli pie”

BELLA
That’s him.

L
Taylor Morris...

RASPIN
Stupid last name...

BELLA and L look at RASPIN.

RASPIN
(mouth full)
What?!

BELLA
What’s your last name?

RASPIN
Riley.

BELLA
Your real one.

RASPIN
Das.

L

Das?

RASPIN

Das none of your business.

(Slaps table and laughs)

Everyone in the diner turns their heads towards RASPIN.

Everyone, but TAYLOR MORRIS.

RASPIN(CONTD)

No, but seriously it's Das.

BELLA

Raspin Das?

RASPIN

Don't try me Bella Knightly.

BELLA

Don't use my government name.

L

I'm going up to him.

BELLA

Good luck.

L walks up to the man slowly. As he approaches him he can hear himself breathing and his heart beating faster.

L reaches out and touches the man's shoulder.

TAYLOR MORRIS turns around revealing a man who could not be more different from
L(Ethnicity wise)

TAYLOR MORRIS

(Accent)

Hello

L

(beat)

I- sorry... you just reminded me of someone...

L walks away from TAYLOR MORRIS and out of the diner.

RASPIN and BELLA follow him out.

BELLA and RASPIN enter the car and find a very confused GEORGE and GEORGINA.

GEORGINA

What happened?

BELLA

(surveys car)

Where's L?

Transition

L is sitting behind the diner and ripping out pages in his book.

Pages fly everywhere amongst the falling snow.

L

(To himself)

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid! Just give me your dumb name! Help me! I just want to find you.

A page falls in front of L... It lands perfectly on top of the freshly layered snow.
The page is starting to get ruined when he picks it up and reads a name... *OFFICER JEFFREY*

L's DAD(V.O.)

I used to get into some stuff. I met a guy who would always be there when it went down. We got real close all those nights spent in the cruiser. Officer Jeffrey... I'll never forget that man.

L stands up and wipes his tears from his face.
L walks away from Dynamo Diner and his "family"

INT. PRECINCT. NIGHT.

L walks into a busy precinct with many officers/detectives bustling around. The precinct is decorated with christmas decorations

L walks in and sees a man handcuffed to a chair.
The man is angrily trying to break out of his handcuffs.

CRIMINAL

You have the wrong guy man. Open your eyes.

OFFICER

Shut up. I got work to do.

L walks around and bumps into a bigger officer.

LIEUTENANT JENKINS

What are you going kid?

L

I'm looking for Officer Jeffrey.

LIEUTENANT JENKINS

Never heard of him.

L

He's a police officer.

LIEUTENANT JENKINS

With a title like Officer Jeffrey I'd hope so.

L looks at him disappointingly.

LIEUTENANT JENKINS

(sighs and groans)

Wait here.

L sits in a chair as LIEUTENANT JENKINS types away at a computer.

LIEUTENANT JENKINS

You're in the wrong county. Only Officer Jeffrey I see is in the next one over. Now get outta here kid.

L

Thank you.

L leaves the precinct.

transition

EXT. DYNAMO DINER. NIGHT.

BELLA and RASPIN find a few papers from the journal behind the diner and run them to
GEORGINA.

GEORGE is standing outside of the restaurant when JONATHAN pulls up in his car with TIM
and EVIE.

BELLA

Look at this one over here. It says that he went to Benedict High.

GEORGINA

That's not going to help much... We don't have a name or face or even year.

RASPIN

He played baseball, but I don't know if it was for a school or-

JONATHAN

Georgina?! What happened?

GEORGINA

We were helping L look for his dad and he-

JONATHAN

Why?

GEORGINA

He wanted to meet him.

JONATHAN

You know how these things go. We have to call them-

BELLA

No, not yet. We can cut L off. We have a few pages from his-

JONATHAN

This isn't a scavenger hunt!

BELLA

I know it's not! I'm just trying to find L.

RASPIN

We're all trying to. He's just upset. He'll come back when he wants to.

GEORGINA

We were just trying to help him.

JONATHAN

I know, but-

(kicks car)

Shit!

TIM

(from inside car)

Ohhhh Jona-den said a bad word!

GEORGE

Tim quiet down okay. Wanna play on my phone?

EVIE

I WANT TO!

GEORGINA

We'll be fine. He'll have to come back tonight. it'll be too cold and-

JONATHAN

-and if he doesn't?

BELLA

He will... I know he will.

RAPSIN

Let's just keep reading these pages.

transition

INT/EXT. BUS. NIGHT.

L is sitting on a bus staring out of the window at the falling snow.

A couple is bickering on the bus as L is reading the journal.

The girl, HOPE, is dusting off her boyfriend's ugly Christmas sweater.

HOPE

You're filthy... Didn't I wash this last night?

Q

Yea, but like the dogs and-

HOPE

-Everyone blames things on dogs... Eating homework, passing gas-

Q
I seriously doubt I'd blame the dogs on ruining my sweater, why are we even visiting your parents?

HOPE
I thought you liked my parents.

Q
I do... They just don't like me.

HOPE
(kisses Q's cheek)
Everyone likes you Q.

L stares out the window and sees the fire station and police station.

L grabs the rope and rings the bell.

The bus driver comes to a halt.

L walks out of the bus and treks through the snow until he reaches the police station.

INT. POLICE STATION. NIGHT.

The police station was similar to the other one, decorated with Christmas decorations and many people working. L wanders through the station and finds an office labeled "CAPTAIN BANKS"

Transition

INT. POLICE STATION(CAPTAIN BANKS OFFICE). NIGHT.

CAPTAIN BANKS is sitting at his desk drinking hot cocoa out of a "worlds best cap'n" mug.
Across from him is UNCLE OLIVER who is pacing.

CAPTAIN BANKS
You should take a seat Oliver.

UNCLE OLIVER
I'm worried about him...

CAPTAIN BANKS
We both are-

L knocks as he enters the room.
Both CAPTAIN BANKS and UNCLE OLIVER look at him.

CAPTAIN BANKS(CONTD)
Can I help you?

L
Yes... I'm looking for an Officer Jeffrey. I was told that he'd be here.

CAPTAIN BANKS
Where are your parents' kids?

L
Outside... I just have a question for him.

CAPTAIN BANKS
Officer Jeffrey was let go a while ago... Maybe about a year ago. I can give you an address if
you want.

L
Yes please. I- that would be great.

CAPTAIN BANKS types on his computer and writes down an address and hands it to L.

L(CONTD)

Thank you.

L leaves the office and heads outside to find it close to pitch black outside.

The wind and snow pushed against him as he walked alone in the dark. He continued to push forward as the wind and cold grew stronger.

His hood falls off of his head. As he reaches to grab it the pages he shoved into his journal begin to fly away in the wind. He watches helplessly as his dad drifts further and further away from him.

transition

INT. RESTAURANT. NIGHT.

Soft classical music can be heard overhead

MR. RILEY and MRS. RILEY are dressed nicely at a restaurant.

They are enjoying a nice dinner with one another and MRS. RILEY gets up to take a call.

MR. RILEY fiddles with a ketchup bottle and looks around to make sure no one is watching before adding a dollop of ketchup onto his steak.

MRS. RILEY

Babe?

MR. RILEY

(jumpy and defensive)

What?! It's honestly not that bad. AI has too much of a-

MRS. RILEY

-not about your weird steak habits. It was the kids. Apparently they're all going to see a movie.

MR. RILEY

Oh... So that means that you and I-

MRS. RILEY

Eyes up here tiger. As much as I'd love to- our kids, more importantly Raspin is an awful liar.

MR. RILEY

You think somethings wrong?

MRS. RILEY

A mother always knows.

MR. RILEY

(to waiter)

Check Please.

INT. LIBRARY. NIGHT.

The Riley Children are in the library looking at the random pages they've collected.

GEORGE is reading a story to TIM and EVIE in the corner as JONATHAN, RASPIN, BELLA and GEORGINA are analysing the soggy pages.

An Old lady, Librarian, walks up to them occasionally to remind them of closing.

JONATHAN

Did you call mom?

GEORGINA

Raspin did not too long ago.

JONATHAN

What did you say?

RASPIN

That we were watching a movie.

JONATHAN

You're an idiot.

RASPIN

What?

JONATHAN

A movie at 11:37?!

RASPIN

What should I have said? "L is missing and we're on a manhunt for him?"

GEORGINA

You should've said we were at a restaurant.

RASPIN

Everyone's a critic.

BELLA

Just read the pages.

RASPIN

I am, I am.

JONATHAN

We're reading the same stuff over and over again.

BELLA
I know damnit. Shit!

RASPIN
Woah!

BELLA
Sorry, but this isn't doing anything.

GEORGINA
She's right...

BELLA
He doesn't have these pages so what's the point? What are we going to do, find his dad first?

RASPIN
We have to do something.

BELLA
Like what?

JONATHAN
Call the police.

GEORGINA
What!? No.

LIBRARIAN
Inside voices dears.

RASPIN
Sorry...

JONATHAN
We can't keep hoping we'll find him. It's late and what happens if we don't find him tonight?
We hope he comes in before morning? That he isn't kidnapped or dead somewhere.

GEORGINA
You're overreacting.

JONATHAN
Am I? Georgina, look around. He isn't coming back. He's upset and you let him get away.

GEORGINA
Me?

JONATHAN
Why would you let him entertain this idea of finding his dad? He left for a reason... The bastard left like 12 years ago. He left a baby in the rain because he didn't want him. We do though. We want L.

BELLA
It's not Georgina's fault. It's mine.

RASPIN
No it's not.

BELLA
Yes it is. I'm the one who told him to look for his dad. To read this dumb journal and look for clues. I made him run away.

JONATHAN
Bella... It's not- look it's all of our faults. I should've said something when he showed me the journal.

GEORGINA

I shouldn't have just let him go off on his own.

RASPIN

I should've shared the fritos.

GEORGINA slaps the back of RASPIN's head.

RASPIN(CONTD)

I should've taken this more seriously.

BELLA

What are we going to do... What if we can't find him?

JONATHAN

We'll find him.

RASPIN

Cuisine.

GEORGINA

What?

RASPIN is now sitting upside down and pointing at a soggy piece of paper.

In the corner of it and in wet ink there's a scrambled word.

RASPIN

Cuisine?

BELLA
That says cruiser.

JONATHAN
Like a police cruiser?

GEORGINA
Maybe... I mean it means something.

JONATHAN
So we call the police?

GEORGINA
No.
(Points to George)
We call his dad.

Transition

GEORGE is awkwardly talking on the phone.
Everyone is surrounding him listening in on the conversation.

GEORGE
Yes sir... I- No, no a kid. Like maybe 5'4", dark hair... blue-

GEORGINA
(whisper)
Brown.

GEORGE

Brown eyes. He has a journal and- you have? Wait where? How long ago... What do you mean you don't know? Ask him. Sorry. No, don't have an attitude, it's just urgent. No, "not report it urgent". Next county? Okay can you contact them maybe? Really? Thank you... No, I don't know- It's like midnight. What- Dad- Fine...

(to Georgina)

Dad wants to know if you're coming over for dinner tonight.

GEORGINA

It's midnight?!

GEORGE

That's what I said.

(in phone)

No she's not. It doesn't matter-

(to Georgina)

Mom made pot pie.

GEORGINA

I can come over for lunch tomorrow.

GEORGE

(in phone)

She said for lunch tomorrow. I'll clean it when I get home- dad call the other station!

GEORGE hangs up the phone.

GEORGE

Parents amirite?

GEORGINA

Babe?

GEORGE

Right... He was there and he went to the police station in the next county over- if we go now we can probably intercept him. It's closer than we were before.

GEORGINA

Right...

GEORGINA looks at TIM who is sleeping on the floor

GEORGINA(CONTD)

I'll take the kids home... Jonathan can you and George-

BELLA

No. I'm going.

GEORGINA

Bella it's late and- They'll be home soon.

BELLA

But-

JONATHAN

We'll find him Bella.

GEORGE

I promise short stuff.

RASPIN

I'm at least going.

GEORGINA

Raspin.

JONATHAN

It's fine... Boys night out- better story than me and George out alone.

GEORGINA

Fine, but as soon as you find him-

BOYS

We know.

BELLA

We'll see if there's more clues in his other belongings.

JONATHAN

Smart. Let's go guys.

Transition

JONATHAN, RASPIN and GEORGE sit in the car and check the time.

RASPIN

Gawlee... Mr. Dad is not going to be happy that I broke curfew.

JONATHAN

It'll be fine.

GEORGE

Relax little dude. With us on the job nothing bad is going to happen.

Transition

The boys are speeding down the road when blue and red lights start flashing from behind them.

GEORGE
Ah shit.

Transition

BELLA and GEORGINA are digging around in L's box of belongings

GEORGINA
Sons of a bitch didn't even sign the birth certificate. No one did.

BELLA
What? How does that make any sense?

GEORGINA
It doesn't, but people are assholes.

BELLA
There's nothing here.

GEORGINA
Well we have to keep looking.

BELLA
What's this?

BELLA picks up another paper.

GEORGINA

Oh my god...

Transition

EXT/INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX. NIGHT.

L walks into a very *depressing* and *trashy* looking apartment complex.

He passes the front desk worker who is barely hanging onto consciousness.

L takes an elevator.

As he goes up the elevator it makes a series of *metallic noises* that shouldn't be happening.

L walks off of the elevator and into a hallway.

He keeps checking the address as he walks down the hall. He grips his book tighter as *sketchy* and *shady* people enter and exit their apartments.

As he reached the room number that he was given there's an orange paper taped onto the door.

"EVICTED"

L stares at the piece of paper and kicks the door.

The landlord walks up to him and grabs L's shoulder

RAUL

Hey kid knock it off!

L

Sorry... I was just expecting someone here.

RAUL

Who? Jeffrey? The deadbeat is probably at one of the bars.

L

Do you know which one?

RAUL

What am I? His babysitter? Look why don't you just get going before- what are you even doing out this late kid?

L

I'm looking for someone.

RAUL

Lost your dog or something...

RAUL sees L get visibly uncomfortable.

RAUL(CONTD)

(sighs)

You're lucky I'm in the Christmas spirit. Jeffrey likes the old pub down the block. It's called Red Hot Heron. If you get there he'll probably be the only one there.

L

Thank you.

RAUL

No problem... If you see him tell him Raul said he needs to get his shit tog- sorry language. He needs to get a hold of himself.

L

Will do.

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. NIGHT.

MR RILEY and MRS RILEY walk into their house and find TIM and EVIE sound asleep on the couch. GEORGINA is watching tv and doing BELLA's hair.

MRS RILEY looks at them both and stares into their *souls*
MR RILEY walks around the living room and sits down in his recliner.

MRS RILEY

Jonathan's car isn't here.

GEORGINA

He, Raspin, George and L are on a “boys night out”

MR RILEY

At 1:30 in the morning?

BELLA

Time is just a social construct.

MRS RILEY

You sound like Raspin.

GEORGINA

After the movie they were excited about some new game that was supposed to drop. I believe they're camping out the store.

MRS RILEY

All of them?

GEORGINA

Yes...

MRS RILEY

So what movie did you guys see?

GEORGINA

The cartoon one... with the dog and his treasure map.

MRS RILEY

Who paid for everyone?

GEORGINA

George... His dad gave him money for helping out at the station and he wanted to treat everyone out. You know he loves the Riley's.

MRS RILEY

You're a better liar than Raspin, I'll give you that...

GEORGINA

Thank you, but I don't know what you're talking about.

MRS RILEY

Raspin said you guys were seeing the new animated princess movie.

BELLA
Idiot

MR RASPIN

What's going on?

INT. RED HOT HERON. NIGHT.

L walks into a low lit bar with music softly playing in the background. The bar is pretty much empty except for the bartender, a janitor and a lonely man with his head down and shot glasses all around him.

The bar reeked of depression and the mood was at an overall low.

The bartender stared at L as he took a seat next to OFFICER JEFFREY.

BARTENDER

Benjamin's Buttons?

L

Sorry?

BARTENDER

Can I see some ID?

L

I'm not here to drink I-

BARTENDER

-Then what are you doing in a bar?

L

I just wanted to talk to this man right here. It won't take long and then I'll be out of your-

BARTENDER

No, that's too much of a liability and-

OFFICER JEFFREY raises his hand. He doesn't lift his head from the counter.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Another scotch.

BARTENDER

I think you've had enough.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Not if your voice still annoys me.

BARTENDER

Last one Jeffrey then you're out.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Whatever

BARTENDER walks off to get a drink.

L

Officer Jeffrey?

OFFICER JEFFREY laughs loudly and it fills the empty room.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Haven't been called that in awhile.

OFFICER JEFFREY runs his finger around each shot glass then licks off the remaining alcohol.

L

Umm... I- I have this journal and it says you knew my father...

OFFICER JEFFREY

I know a lot of people, kid... That doesn't really narrow it down.

L

All it says is you guys were close and-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Why does it matter?

L

I'm looking for my dad...

OFFICER JEFFREY

Left you for a reason didn't he.

L looks away and wipes some tears from his eyes.
BARTENDER brings OFFICER JEFFREY his drink

OFFICER JEFFREY(CONTD)

Now the shit is working.

L

Raul said get a hold of yourself.

OFFICER JEFFREY

I am a hold of myself.

L

You're sitting alone in a bar drinking your sorrows away.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Sounds like a dream

L

Feels like a nightmare.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Now your voice is annoying me.

L

Just tell me what you can about my father.

OFFICER JEFFREY

I don't know you father kid.

L

Then figure it out.
(L begins reading book)

He was a volunteer firefighter. He played basketball. He-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Shut up.

L

(ignoring him)

He likes Hip Hop music. He did something with a soup kitchen. He liked Dynamo Espressos.

OFFICER JEFFREY

I said shut up! Dammit give me another shot.

BARTENDER

I'm cutting you off man. That's enough for tonight.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Asswipe.

L

He-

OFFICER JEFFREY

I already told you to shut up.

L

Then help me. You're a police officer right? Do your job and help me.

OFFICER JEFFREY

In case you're too blind to tell I'm not an officer anymore kid. Haven't been for awhile.

L

Sorry... I just-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Assumed? That makes an ass of you, ya know?

L

I didn't know.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Doesn't matter.

L

So that's why you're drinking?

OFFICER JEFFREY

I'm drinking to forget now, shut up. Fucking kids.

L

Forget what?

OFFICER JEFFREY

What are you a therapist? Piss off.

L

You haven't helped me and maybe if I can help you-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Help me?! You gonna pull a doctor frankenstein and bring a kid back to life?

L

No... I-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Goddammit. You idiot, now I'm seeing it again.

L

I'm sorry-

OFFICER JEFFREY

Shut up!

(laughs)

I wasn't wrong in what I did. I did it anyway... Stupid fucking kids.

L looks visibly uncomfortable. The bartender and Janitor go about their business.

OFFICER JEFFREY

JJ... That name is constantly ringing in my head. All his friends, screaming and shouting. I just did what I was supposed to. All I did...

L

Did you- I'm sorry.

OFFICER JEFFREY

Shut up. I didn't ask you to speak to me. I didn't ask you to sit next to me. Your dad is dead.

L

What?

OFFICER JEFFREY

You described my partner. Died like three years ago during a shootout. Dakota Reynolds. Now shut up and leave. I'm tired of seeing kids.

L gets off of the stool and leaves the bar. He writes *Dakota Reynolds* in his journal.

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. NIGHT.

Everyone is in the Rileys house sitting in the living room.

MRS RILEY is on the phone calling someone and MR RILEY is chewing out the boys.

BELLA and GEORGINA are searching through L's things that are now in the living room.

MR RILEY

Speeding. Really?

JONATHAN

It was an emergency and luckily-

MR RILEY

If the next words out of your mouth are "luckily it was George's dad" then you can forget getting your keys back.

RASPIN

We said we were sorry... We were just trying to help.

MR RILEY

We know, but this is stuff you talk to us about. Don't you think we would've helped out more? We've read the dumb journal and we've tried finding his dad, but he's a ghost.

BELLA

You tried finding L's dad?

MR RILEY

Yes... We-

(looks at a sleeping TIM and EVIE)

We have contacted all of your parents in case any of you ever wanted to meet them. It's what we do. Because if we don't this will happen.

GEORGINA

That's a bit of a stretch.

L walks into the house and everyone goes quiet as they look at him.

L looks around at everyone.

L

(crying)

I'm sorry- I really am, but I-

BELLA runs up to him and hugs him.

BELLA

You're an idiot.

MRS RILEY hangs up the phone and joins the hug followed by GEORGINA.

MRS RILEY

It's okay. We just want to make sure you're safe and alright.

JONATHAN

We were all worried about you.

L

I know and I'm sorry...

RASPIN

L did you-

MR RILEY hits the back of RASPIN's head.

RASPIN(CONTD)

Ow... We're all thinking about it.

MR RILEY

Read the room.

L

He's dead...

GEORGINA

I'm sorry L, I know it must hurt a lot and-

L

I'm fine... I'm just really tired...

MR RILEY and MRS RILEY look at one another.

MRS RILEY

Okay sweetie. Go ahead and go to bed.

L

Thank you.

L heads upstairs.

Transition

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. NIGHT- LATER.

Everyone is in bed. The Riley Residence is quiet as the grandfather clock in the hallways ticks away. It reads 3:45.

All doors are shut in the hallway until one is opened.

L sticks his head out. He's dressed in a different coat and shoes. He has a bag over his shoulder and the notebook tucked under his arm.

He looks back into the room to see RASPIN snoring.

He closes the door and quietly sneaks down the hall. He stops by the room labeled "*BELLA*" and hesitates. He raises a fist to knock before lowering it.

He heads downstairs.

He is about to leave out the front door, but before he can in stereotypical fashion- JONATHAN turns on a table lamp revealing himself.

JONATHAN

A little late for fresh air.

L

If you're going to try and stop me then don't waste your breath.

JONATHAN

I'm not going to stop you. You'll just find another time and place to leave.

L

Then why are you up?

JONATHAN

To go with you. I'm not letting you go out on your own again.

L

I have to!

(Looks around worried... Hushed tone)

He's my dad. None of you should-

JONATHAN

We're all here for you L. Whether you like it or not we're family.

L

I'm trying to find my real family. I have to see for myself.

JONATHAN

What? A snowy tombstone.

L

It's better than words on a page.

JONATHAN

Then let's go.

L

I'm going alone. We didn't go with you when you met your parents.

JONATHAN

Yea well truthfully I wish you did.

L

Just go to bed Jonathan.

JONATHAN

How do you expect to get to the cemetery in the middle of a snowy winter night all by yourself?

L

I'll manage.

JONATHAN

You'll die.

L

I have layers.

JONATHAN

I have heated seats.

L and JONATHAN stare at each other. The silence is loud. The ticking gets louder as their eyes get sharper.

L

Fine.

JONATHAN

Alrighty. Let's get moving before Georgina finds out.

L

She doesn't know?

JONATHAN

Are you kidding? She'd kill me if she knew.

L

She'll kill you when she finds out.

JONATHAN

True, so let's make it quick.

Transition

INT. CAR. MOMENTS LATER.

L and JONATHAN drive in silence. The snow gently falls on top of the car as they approach a red light.

L looks at the notebook and back at JONATHAN.

L

Why do you wish we were there?

JONATHAN

When I met my parents?

L nods

JONATHAN(CONTD)

I don't know. I mean it wasn't some special thing like yours or Georginas. I mean you're doing a scavenger hunt to find the guy and Mr. Riley had to practically beg and force Georginas parents to meet her. Mine was simple, if you could say that. I don't know what I was looking for, but I mean they're people. I went with Mr. Riley and met them... Susan and Conner, those are my parents... My real last name is Kurt. I met them at their house and it was nice. They have two dogs and three kids... I have three siblings. A set of twin sisters and a brother no older than me. I talked to all of them and the truth is it meant nothing to me. It was like meeting a new kid at school or camp. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. I wasn't begging them to take me back, but I just had to know... Which is why I knew you did too.

L

What happened with Georginas parents?

JONATHAN

Ah shit man... I don't know if- After Mr. Riley convinced them to meet up, it went south quickly. Georgina was just like you, she was excited to meet her real family. She wanted answers and wanted to live with them or whatever. From what I heard and what she told me is that when

she got to the house it was awful... They lived in Stonewall before the whole gentrification shit. I don't know much about it- I never went down there, but apparently they were drunk and aggressive. She realized who they truly were not her parents, but some people who gave her away. She just wanted to know why they did what they did, but her... "Dad" got angry and- let's just say it's a good thing Mr. Riley was there. Since then both Mr and Mrs. Riley have been cautious about the whole meeting the parents thing.

L

But Raspin met his-

JONATHAN

Raspin is an immigrant. There's a huge difference in the situations, but hey every situation is different.

L

Yea... My dad is dead.

JONATHAN

You can't help that L... We're here.

EXT. CEMETERY. NIGHT.

L and JONATHAN get out of the car and walk into the cemetery. They leave tracks in the snow that only increase as they search for the grave.

L stops in his tracks.

He touches a cold tombstone with the name "DANIEL REYNOLDS"

JONATHAN walks up behind him.

JONATHAN

L Reynolds.

L

You know that L isn't-

JONATHAN

Yea it is.

L

Well I guess this is it.

JONATHAN

How do you feel?

L

Empty. Unsatisfied. Numb.

JONATHAN

The last one is probably because of the cold.

L

Should I leave the book here?

JONATHAN

At the grave?

L

Yea by the flowers.

JONATHAN

Flowers?

(Jonathans sees the bouquet)

L, someones been here. To this grave.

L

Well yea, but I don't see why that matters.

JONATHAN

Follow me.

JONATHAN walks through the labyrinth of tombstones until he finds what he's looking for. A small building on the outskirts of the cemetery with a singular light on.

L

Jonathan what-

JONATHAN

Graveyard shift.

JONATHAN and L walk into the building and find a middle aged man doing a sudoku puzzle.

WORKER

Yes?

JONATHAN

How often does Daniel Reynolds grave get visited?

WORKER

How should I know?

JONATHAN

Come on man. Help us out- Christmas spirit.

WORKER

I don't know man. Maybe twice a week. His wife-

JONATHAN

Wife?!

WORKER

Yes, Jess Reynolds. She's a widow.

L

Jess Reynolds?

JONATHAN hits the back of L's head.

JONATHAN

Takes two to make a kid genius.

L

Holy shit I have a mom!

JONATHAN

Do you have an address for Jess?

WORKER

(sigh)

You really suck the fun out of a non working job.

L

Please sir. I can find my mom now.

WORKER

Okay okay just hush. It's like 4 in the morning.

WORKER prints off a paper and hands it to JONATHAN.

JONATHAN

Thank you.

Transition

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. NIGHT.

A phone is buzzing on a nightstand. It continues to shake and hum until GEORGINA picks it up.

GEORGINA

(groggily)

He-llo

Transition

INT. CAR. NIGHT.

L and JONATHAN are sitting in the car outside of JESS house.

JONATHAN

Georgina!

GEORGINA(O.S)

Why are you screaming? Why are you calling me?

JONATHAN

I'm out with L right now.

L

Hi Georgina.

Transition

GEORGINA

Why are you out? Where are you?

JONATHAN(O.S)

Look, this isn't 20 questions. We went to see L's dad's grave and we-

GEORGINA

-You didn't think to wake me?!

JONATHAN(O.S)

What do you think I'm doing right now?

GEORGINA

What?! I'm on the way-

Transition

JONATHAN

No. Look, we just need you to distract mom and dad when they wake up.

GEORGINA(O.S)

Are you kidding me Jonathan?! We just had this talk with them.

JONATHAN

I know, but we just need some time to check something out.

GEORGINA(O.S)

Why? Where are you going?

JONATHAN

We might've found out where his mom lives.

GEORGINA(O.S)

No, Jonathan wait- L's-

JONATHAN

Sorry. I don't have time- but we're almost here.

GEORGINA(O.S)

(to herself)

I'm surrounded by idiots...

JONATHAN

Technically we're nowhere near you. Look, we're just going to talk to her then go home. Easy Peasy.

Transition

GEORGINA

No, Jonathan. Listen. Bella and I-

Hang up tone.

GEORGINA(CONTD)

Idiots.

INT. CAR. NIGHT.

L and JONATHAN sit inside of the car staring at the house. The sun is starting to rise.

L looks at his notebook and back at the house.

L

I wonder if there's a "Mothers Story"?

JONATHAN

Well... Hopefully you're about to find out.

L

Hopefully...

JONATHAN

Sleep for a bit... I'll wake you up when it's morning.

L leans his seat back and falls asleep.

Transition

INT/EXT. JESS HOUSE. NIGHT.

JONATHAN wakes L up.

L

What?

JONATHAN

Your mom... You ready?

L

Did you just make a your mom joke?

JONATHAN

No... L, get out of the car.

L *begrudgingly* gets out of the car and JONATHAN follows behind him.

They make their way up the couple of steps leading to the door.

L takes a deep breath before ringing the doorbell.

After a couple of minutes an African American woman, mid forties, opens the door.

JESS

Hello?

L

Hi... Umm is this where Jess Reynolds lives?

JESS

That's me.

L

Oh... Um I- I have this notebook and I've been following these clues and- I don't really know how to explain it... I think Daniel- your husband is... was my dad.

JESS looks at both of them puzzled before seeing the car in the back. She looks at the boys who are clearly tired.

JESS

Why don't you two come in and we can talk.

Transition

JONATHAN and L sit at a table and are both offered sausage biscuits for breakfast as well as a coffee.

JESS(CONTD)

This book... It's from your dad?

L

Yes... Apparently he wrote it and left it for me- with me when he dropped me off at- with the Rileys.

JESS

And Officer Jeffrey said that your father was my husband?

L

Yes ma'am.

JESS

So you think I am your mother?

L

I'm not entirely sure anymore.

JESS

I've been with Daniel since freshman year of college... No break ups. Nothing. For the past 20 years, we've had no children.

L

You don't think that-

JESS

I know sweetie.

(hands L a picture)

That's Daniel.

L stares at the picture of DANIEL and JESS. The beautiful African American couple stand at the base of a volcano in Hawaii.

L

Sorry for bothering you.

JESS

It's no trouble... Can I see the book?

L hands her the book and she reads it in silence.

JONATHAN places his hand on L's shoulder.

JONATHAN

How you feeling?

L

I don't know... On one hand my dad isn't dead, but... I'm back at square one.

JESS
Maybe not... Right here on page 74.

JESS slides the book to L.

JESS(CONTD)

Your dad worked on a production of Oklahoma at the community theater. They put on the show once every 15 years. I'm sure in a program somewhere you can narrow it down and figure it out from there.

L
Seriously?

JESS
As a heart attack.

L
We should get going. They should be opened right?

JONATHAN
We should go home first...

L
No. We just got a big clue... Jonathan please.

JONATHAN
30 minutes L.

L
Thank you so much and Thank you to Miss Jess.

JESS

No problem... I'm glad I could help you. Now I should probably go help Jeffrey wherever he is.

L

Red Hot Heron. Tell him L says Hi.

JESS

Will do.

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. DAY.

BELLA charges into GEORGINA's room and gets on her bed.

GEORGINA who is on the phone complains.

GEORGINA

Bella! Not in my room-

BELLA

Where's L?

GEORGINA

Close the door.

BELLA

Where is he?

GEORGINA

He and Jonathan went out to follow another clue to find L's dad.

RASPIN falls into the room.

RASPIN

You mean he's not dead?!

GEORGINA

Hush! And close the door!

BELLA

What are you talking about?

GEORGINA

Long story short. Went to the grave and found the man's wife and it wasn't his parents so he's following another clue.

BELLA

You didn't want to wake us?

GEORGINA

Welcome to my world now, be quiet. They'll be back soon.

BELLA

So we just have to wait here?

GEORGINA

No. We help decorate for his party.

RASPIN

What party?

GEORGINA

L was really upset so I thought throwing him a surprise birthday would make him feel better. George is on the way with party supplies.

RASPIN
Oh brother...

INT. THEATER. DAY.

L and JONATHAN are waiting in the parking lot of a theater.
A man puts in the code to a door and it opens.

JONATHAN
Go, go, go.

L and JONATHAN run across the parking lot before the door shuts.
They walk backstage and try to blend in as they sneak around.

L
I don't see why we had to sneak in.

JONATHAN
Because we couldn't have gotten in any other way. My buddies and I used to sneak into this place to- they just... lock all the doors and this was the only way.

L
Okay... Well now what?

JONATHAN
Find someone who can help us.

L
Okay well what about the office?

JONATHAN

And get thrown out? No, we need someone else.

JONATHAN walks off as L is looking away.

L walks around backstage and gets jumpscared by a large man dressed in a *Shrek* Costume.

L runs away from the man and hides in a room. He closes the door behind him and hears singing

L walks into a rehearsal room to see an array of actors dressed as *fairytale creatures*.

CAST

And that is how the little ogre came
To live on the swamp with a beautiful princess
And his best friend, and his best friend
And a gingerbread man and a very handsome puppet
And an elf and a fairy godmother and a witch
And a cross dressin' wolf and three pigs

What makes us special?
What makes us special?
What makes us special?
What makes us special? Makes us strong

We are witches, we are fairies
We are weirdo's, I'm an Aires
We're a giant different sampler here to try
We are puppets, we are rabbits
We are hobbits with bad habits
We're a screwy but delighted crazy stew

We are different and united
We are us and we are you
This is our story, this is our story

This is our story

L sits behind them and waits for them to finish. As if on cue they all break character and go take a break. A few people stare and smile at L while others ignore him.

A man is sitting on the piano playing random keys as he writes in his notepad.

L

Excuse me?

The pianist ignores him. L continues to move closer to him.

L(CONTD)

Excuse me... I need some help. I'm looking for someone.

The pianist continues to ignore him.

L(CONTD)

My dad... He ummm... He left this notebook with me around 12 years ago. It says that he worked here.

L opens to the page and puts it in front of the pianist.

L(CONTD)

It says here he worked on *Oklahoma*, you guys did that show like 14 years ago.

The pianist continues to ignore L and reads the book.

L(CONTD)

I want to find my dad... Do you- does this sound familiar? Any of this? Does it sound like someone you knew?

The pianist reads and finally looks at L

L(CONTD)

Hello? Please could you just answer me?

PIANIST signs to L(ASL)

PIANIST

Slow down. I can't read your lips.

L

I... I don't know what you're saying.

PIANIST

I am deaf. I am trying to help you?

L

I don't know what you're saying?! I just want to find him. I want to find my dad!

PIANIST

What is your name?

L

Say something! Talk to me! I don't know any of the signals.

PIANIST

Breathe

The pianist places his hand on L's chest and looks him in the eyes.

The Pianist takes three deep breaths and then signals for L to mimic him.

L takes three deep breaths and calms down.

L

(sniffling)

Please... I've been looking for so long... I just want to find him.

L falls to the ground and cries. The Pianist writes in his notebook and slides it to L.

L reads the piece of paper. "I know your dad"

L(CONTD)

You do?! Where can I find him?

The Pianist writes some more.

L(CONTD)
(reads paper)

He worked on a few shows here. He's stopped for a while now, but I remember one thing. What thing?!

The Pianist writes some more.

L(CONTD)

He mentioned living by birch trees. Like the neighborhood? He lives in birch trees?

The Pianist nods.

L hugs the Pianist.

L

(sniffles)

Thank you... Thank you so much.

PIANIST

You're welcome.

L leaves the room as the Pianist continues to play. L runs into JONATHAN.

JONATHAN

Where'd you go? I thought you were following me.

L

I found him.

JONATHAN

Your dad?!

L

No... Where he lives... The birch wood neighborhood.

JONATHAN

Are you sure about this?

L

Positive. I feel it Jonathan. I'm getting closer.

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. DAY.

GEORGINA's phone rings and GEORGE rushes to pick it up.

GEORGE

It's Jonathan

GEORGINA

Answer it.

RASPIN comes in confidently.
In high pitched voice(helium)

RASPIN
I'll handle this pretty boy.
(Raspin answers phone)
Hello?

JONATHAN(O.S)
Georgina?!

RASPIN
No... It's Bella

JONATHAN(O.S)
Shut up Raspin. Where's Georgina?

RASPIN
Baking the cake.

JONATHAN
What ca- nevermind. Tell her we'll be home soon. Made a breakthrough and yea bye...

GEORGINA
What'd he say?

RASPIN
Blah blah blah be home soon... blah give Raspin cake blah love Jonny boy.

EXT. BIRCH NEIGHBORHOOD. DAY.

L and JONATHAN drive around and JONATHAN searches for a house.

JONATHAN

How do we know which one is his?

L

It says he lived in the middle of a circle... I'm guessing he meant the cul de sac.

JONATHAN

Well we're in luck... There's only one.

L

So the middle house right?

The cul de sac has three houses in it. One was very packed with cars and the other was for sale.
The middle one was *just right*.

JONATHAN pulls into the driveway.

L

(deep breath)

Will you come with me?

JONATHAN

Of course.

L and JONATHAN make it to the front door and ring the doorbell. There's commotion from inside and the door opens. A familiar looking mid 20s man opens the door.

DEVIN
Hello. How can I help you?

JONATHAN
You're the coffee guy.

DEVIN
(laughs)
Yes... I'm the coffee guy. My name is Devin by the way.

L
Devin... How old are you?

DEVIN
27. Why?

JONATHAN
Oh... Sorry.

DEVIN
It's no issue. Being 27 isn't that old.

L
It's not that...

DEVIN
Then what is it?

L
I-

(holds up book)

I've been looking for my dad and I've searched through all the clues and followed the ones I could and... it led to you.

DEVIN

Oh... I'm sorry, but I can assure you I'm not your dad.

L

I know.

DEVIN

How did the clues lead to me?

L

We found someone who knew him and he said he lived by birch trees and in the middle of a circle.

DEVIN

Oh so neighborhood and cul de sac right?

L

Right.

DEVIN

What about the birch trees in Stonewall?

L

What?

DEVIN

There's an actual birch woods in Stonewall. Maybe he meant that and not the neighborhood.

L

By birchwoods... Not in it. Thank you. Thank you so much.

JONATHAN

You don't know how much this means sir.

DEVIN

Don't call me sir... I'm not that old.

L

One last try?

JONATHAN

One more shot. Let's do it man.

Transition

JONATHAN and L are in the car driving through Stonewall. They pass the courts, a shut down high school, and a diner with a mural on the side.

JONATHAN

I know I said we'd be home soon and I'm telling you right now with 100% certainty we will be. Just give us an hour.

GEORGINA(O.S)

The party is ready and Mom and Dad are getting suspicious.

JONATHAN

I know and I am sorry, but I know you got this. See you soon bye.

JONATHAN hangs up the phone and parks the car.

They are parked in a trailer park. The trailers seem to form a deofrmed circle with one in the center of it all.

L

(to himself)

In the middle of a circle.

JONATHAN

Are you ready for this?

L(CONTD)

I'm scared...

JONATHAN

What?

L

For the past day and a half... I've been hunting him. I never thought about what I'd actually say. I met so many people and got closer and farther away. What if it's not him?

JONATHAN

Then we'll try again.

L

What should I say?

JONATHAN

(deep breath)

Say... "I'm L... I'm happy I finally got to meet you"

L

(deep breath)

Okay...

(beat)

I want to go alone.

JONATHAN

Are you sure?

L

I need to Jonathan.

JONATHAN

Okay... I'll be right here. Promise me you won't run off.

L

Promise.

L gets out of JONATHAN'S car and walks up to his fathers house.

L reaches the door and hears muffled yelling.

L knocks and waits at the door. A groan can be heard from inside as a man opens the door.

L's DAD

Whatever you're selling I'm not buying.

L

I'm not selling anything.

L's DAD

Oh... Well what are you doing here? Games on.

L

I-

(deep breath)

I'm your son...

L's DAD

(solemnly)

Come in.

L walks into the strangely tidy mobile home. The only mess is the littered beer cans on the table and counters.

L's DAD sits on the couch.

L's DAD(CONTD)

Want something to drink? I got Dasani.

L

No thanks.

L's DAD

Why are you here?

L

I wanted to meet you. I have your book.

L shows him the notebook.

L's DAD

(sips beer)

Your mother gave that to me.

L

I used it to follow... find you.

L's DAD

Why?

L

So I could finally meet you.

L's DAD

I met you already. When you were born. Was that not enough?

L

I... I just wanted to actually meet you. See my real family.

L's DAD

Family? Let's see. Your grandparents died in a plane crash. Older sister to a miscarriage and your lovely mother... You killed her. That's your family brat.

L

What are you talking about?

L's DAD

Does Nancy Drew need another hint? You killed her. When she was giving birth to you.

L

I- I-

L's DAD

What? Don't remember? Well I do! I remember every fucking second of it. Her screams of agony. Her cries. Begging me to make it stop. Make you stop! But no you just kept on coming. The crying lasted all night. Until hers stopped and yours came. They said they did all they could, but in the end she died. I traded the best woman in the world for a hellspawn like you.

L sniffles and begins to silently cry.

L's DAD(CONTD)

That fucking book wasn't for you to play where waldo with. It was so you wouldn't look for me. There's a reason there were no calls or messages or letters. I didn't want you around. Even now... You look just like her. I couldn't stand it so I grabbed you and threw you on some peoples doorsteps. You weren't my problem anymore.

L sits down in a chair and stares at his dad.

L's DAD(CONTD)

That letter specifically said don't contact me. Ever! Now I have a fucking crybaby in my house ruining the game for me. Fucking Unbelievable.

L

I'm sorry...

L's DAD

Save your breath. It's not worth either of our time. We're not family. You're a bastard, you know that? Now go.

L

But I- I wanted to-

L's DAD
GET OUTTA HERE!

L's DAD throws a beer at L's head and he ducks. The glass shatters against the wall and the alcohol sprays on L.

L runs to the door and looks at his furious dad.

L
I'm L... I'm happy I finally got to meet you...

L slams his door shut and runs back to JONATHAN'S car.
JONATHAN looks at L who's crying and panicking.

JONATHAN
What happened? L what's wrong?

L
Just take me home Jonathan.

Transition

INT. RILEY RESIDENCE. DAY.

The house is decorated with many birthday decorations and everyone is waiting bored in the living room.

GEORGINA walks into the room and grabs BELLA

BELLA
Where are they?

GEORGINA
L found his dad.

BELLA
Are you serious?

GEORGINA
It didn't go as planned. He- Jonathan said that L was really upset and that-

SLAM!

The house door swings open and L runs inside of the house. He runs past everyone crying and disappears.

MRS. RILEY
What's going on?!

MR. RILEY
Jonathan don't you dare move.

JONATHAN stops in his tracks and faces his furious and confused parents.

JONATHAN
Do you want the long or short version?

MRS. RILEY
I want the truth.

Transition

L is hiding in a spot crying. He's tearing out the pages in the journal and ripping them up. As he does it he hears a door open.

He stops. He stays quiet.

BELLA appears and sits next to him.

L

(sniffles)

How long have you known?

BELLA

About your hiding spot? Like 4 games ago.

L

So you let me win.

BELLA

No, but everyone was so bad that it made it easier to find them on the way to get you.

L

I finally met him...

BELLA

I heard. How are you feeling?

L

He hates me and I killed my mom. What kind of kid kills their own mom?!

BELLA

It wasn't your fault L. You were a baby. If people blamed babies for everything then the world would be a sucky place.

L

I did it though. He left me because of what I did.

BELLA

He left you because he was a bad person. I don't care what you did when you were a day old. No parent should blame their kid for anything. Not like that.

L

I did it though. No arguing that.

BELLA

I know... I saw her death certificate. Georgina thought we shouldn't tell you because at the time you thought you lost your dad already.

L

I lost them both. It was my fault.

BELLA

L... It's his fault. His fault for not being a real dad. He shouldn't have done what he did. It was wrong.

L

That doesn't-

BELLA

Look around you L. Mr. Riley is more of a parent. Mrs. Riley is. Jonathan is. Georgina is. Hell I can even say Raspin is. They all took care of you and helped you when you needed it and what did your dad do? Write in a journal. The man couldn't even use the right "There".

L chuckles and wipes his face.

BELLA(CONTD)

I know this isn't what you wanted. You wanted your dad to be this awesome person you read about. We all do, but the truth is if they were awesome they would've kept us. Took care of us. That's what a real parent does. A real family. Look around L. We all would drop anything to be

there for you. Even George and he isn't even a Riley?! So forget your stupid old man. You have a stupid loving family.

L

Thank you Bella.

BELLA

You're welcome. Now come downstairs before Raspin eats your cake.

L

Cake?

BELLA

Ah crap... Well... surprise!

L

You guys threw me a party?

BELLA

Yea and we even invited some people.

L

Like who?

Transition

L comes downstairs to see a room full of all the RILEY's, CHEF YURI, DEVIN, JESS, PIANIST and GEORGE.

L

You guys didn't have to do all of this.

GEORGINA

We wanted to L. We care about you and wanted to show you how much we did.

L

Yea... but I've been so difficult these past few-

JONATHAN

You haven't done anything we all haven't or will-

(points to TIM and EVIE)

Do.

MR. RILEY

Don't get me started...

TIM

CAKE!

GEORGE

I'm with little dude.

EVERYONE gathers around the cake and L blows out the candles. As everyone is eating RASPIN interrupts the peace.

RASPIN

So...

L

What?

RASPIN

Did you at least find out your last name?

BELLA

Raspin! Read the room?!

L

No... It's fine. I did.

GEORGINA

What is it?

L

Riley.

END

THE GAMES WE PLAY

By Latisha Spikes-Brown

Character Page

Arya

The main character, she is a woman looking for real love.

Viola

Best friend to Arya and also someone with varies resources

Carlos

Arya's ex-boyfriend and someone who has been playing a dangerous game

James

A man who enjoys the game he is playing even with the challenges that come

Lorelie

A player at the poker game

Jamilia

A player at the poker game

The shadow

An entity which interacts with the main characters

Stage Setting

This play takes place in various locations. Which include a restaurant, a coffee shop, a poker game and a hotel room and some small locations such as the mall, and a wedding. It also jumps through time as well.

In The Beginning

Curtain opens to reveal a living room, Arya is sitting on a window bench talking on the phone. Smiling and playing with her honey brownish, black hair, listening to Skrillex on a radio.

The date is Tuesday, March 21st 2043

Carlos

Hello beautiful, how are you. I wanted to let you know I will be in Glory this weekend until Monday. You know it's too bad we can't meet.

Arya

I don't know about that. I mean that's two hours away. Besides, don't know if we are at that stage yet?

{Sitting up all the way}

Carlos

I understand completely, but I mean we have been exchanging phone calls, and text messages for over a year now. I am sure you know by now that I would never hurt you. Besides we could meet somewhere public, say maybe the mall for dinner. They have an amazing seafood restaurant there. I wanted to try it and would love some amazing company.

Arya

Well..

{places her fingers on her lips and takes a moment to think}

Carlos

I am sorry I didn't even ask. Do you have plans this weekend?

{Carlos starts to smile to himself. Picks up his phone, scrolling through locating a name James, sends a messages}

Carlos texting James

I have made contact. Throwing the bait now. I will let you know when she is on the hook.

{Carlos looks back at phone. Arya finally speaks}

Arya

I have never been to Glory. I would love to see how Glory looks. I do like the idea of finally meeting and seeing their mall. We can plan something.

Carlos

I like the sound of that. Let me call you right back. I am checking into the hotel now.

{Carlos hangs up the phone and sends another text message to James. Arya makes a call to her best friend Viola}

Carlos Text message to James

Hay J. Got her on the hook now. Do you have the other details ready for this weekend?

{Arya on the phone talking to Viola}

Arya

Hay V how are you?

Viola

I am good. You sound like you are in a good mood. What's up homana.

Arya

You know that guy I was telling you about.

Viola

You mean your message buddy.

{Viola laughs lightly}

Arya

Yes, My message buddy. Well..anyway we finally going to meet.

Viola

I am not so sure that's a good idea. Arya I mean this man could be a rapist or a serial killer. Or just wanting to get you into your pants. You know so many of these guys just trying to get laid.

Arya

I have this feeling he is not, Would it be okay if I come see you after I leave him?

Viola

Si, You better be meeting this guy in a public place. Please make it clear to him, he ain't getting no sexo that that weekend.

Arya

Oh hell no. I am not even playing that. Ain't going to be no netflix and chilling here. I am sending you a picture of him and already got it set to send you my location when I leave that day. And going call you when I leave Gloy's Mall too.

Viola

Oh, hermana you meeting this amigo in Glory. I can send someone to watch over you if you want.

Arya

Thanks sis. Na I think I will be okay besides if he gets out of line I know how to handle it.

Viola

I am not playing. If that Mutha fucker does anything to you or If I don't hear from you. I will come kick his ass. Trust that hermana. He better behave himself.

Arya

I know you would. You know I think sometimes you're itching to kick someone's ass

Viola

I just look out for those I love. Always. See you this weekend hermana. Adios

Arya

Adios V

{As they hang up the phone, Carlos calls again.}

Carlos

Okay, all checked in. Laying in bed thinking about you. I am so excited ,finally going meet you. I cannot wait.

Arya

Me either. It will be nice to finally have our first date. And to do some traveling. Until tomorrow

Carlos

Night, beautiful.

{he says with a wicked smile}

End Scene

with Arya sitting starting to sing to herself happily

The First Date

Curtain opens with Arya pulling into the parking lot of Glory's mall. She is getting herself ready to get out.

Arya

{talking to herself}

I cannot believe I actually drove two hours to actually meet this guy, I must be out of my mind, but here is to adventure. Besides I have been talking with him for over 18 months, and we are in public.

{Takes a deep breath, Phone Rings}

Carlos

{on the phone}

Hey,I just finished my meeting and heading to the mall. Are you here?

Arya

Ya I parked at the mall. I am going to head inside and get us a table. See you when you get here.

Carlos

Great. I will call you text when I am close.

{Soon the two are sitting at the table together. Carlos is smiling at Arya and takes a moment to notice that he is set up to sit across from her. Sits down beside her.}

Arya

I cannot believe you are here finally.

{Before she can finish Carlos pulls out a small box and flower, a pink and purple rose. Her favorite.}

Carlos

I am so happy your are. You are so beautiful. Why don't we first and than walk around the mall after.

{he smiles shyfully to he}

{Once the two have finished eating they go out into the mall. Carlos reaches out and grabs her hand and the two continue on into the mall. They laugh and talk until the mall closes. In the parking lot Arys bids him farewells and goes to spend the rest of the weekend with her friends. Yet they continue talking everyday}

End Scene

with them walking out of the mall together and light go down

A Romantic Getaway

Curtain Opens to reveal a standard hotel room with a king sized bed. And a large window overlooking the beach. A month has passed since the two had their first date and meeting in person. They have planned to meet again as Carlos comes to town.

Carlos

I am so excited to see you again. I missed you.

Arya

Me too. I cannot believe that a whole month has gone by since we had dinner together that night.
What shall we do this time?

Carlos

Let's take a shower together.
(walking undressing toward the bathroom)

(Thinking a moment, then following suit she enters the bathroom. Carlos looks out the shower to see Arya still dressed smiles)

Carlos

I won't bite you unless you want me. Look I am not trying to have sex. We can wait for that. I just want to take a shower with you. I was wondering if I could wash your hair and maybe you could wash mine.

Arya

That does sound Interesting and fun. Only if you promise to be gentle and not pull to hard.

(Smiles, then joins him)

(Carlos gets out of the shower first and walks into the bedroom dressed with the towel wrapped around his head. He walks over and picks up his phone)

Text to James from Carlos

Man this one is going to be something serious. She will be eating out of hand soon enough.

(When Arya walks in Carlos is sitting on the bed. He is smiling at her and licking his lips.)

Carlos

I want to give you a foot massage, and then we can watch a movie.

End Scene

with Arya sitting on the bed and he takes her foot into his hands.

The Wedding

Curtain Opens to reveal a home office with a desk, computer on it, a desk chair and couch nearby. 2 years pass and Carlos has introduced Arya to his parents and siblings, and he has met hers. He sends her flowers and they dance together every time they are together.

Arya is sitting at her computer writing replays to a few emails, smiling and singing to herself. The couple has been together for 11 months. They are talking on the phone early one morning.

Arya

Hello handsome, how is your day going?

Carlos

Hello beautiful. It's okay. What about yours?

Arya

Just sitting here thinking about this weekend. You are sure that your dad won't mind you inviting me to his wedding?

Carlos

Oh no, he invited you. Besides, I want my best friend and my favorite to deal with any drama that might happen.

Arya

Well I am going to be bringing you a nice surprise.

Carlos

(sounding annoyed)

Honestly I am worried about going. So please don't back down on me. And I cannot wait to see what this surprise is.

Arya

Okay, I will be there then.

(The couple meets at the hotel and checks in together The next night at the wedding reception. Carlos is talking to Arya as they are slow dancing.)

Carlos

Hay I wanted to tell you something

(holding her tighter)

Arya

What's up?

(slightly smiles and looking into his eyes)

Carlos

I thought I could stop myself, But I am falling in love with you. You are an amazing woman.

Arya

Really thanks for saying that. Hay, Carlos.

(Kissing him and whispering in his ear)

I am falling for you too.

End Scene

As the reception ends they head back up to the room. They are laughing and kissing.

What the Fk**

They are talking on the phone..

Carlos

How did you like the wedding last weekend?

Text from Carlos's to James

Man taking her to my father's wedding worked and she is completely on hook now. Get ready to do your part now?

Arya

Yes, It was amazing. Let me know when you get home.

Carlos

(with an attitude)

You know I am not sure if you are aware but you are acting like a love sick puppy. Honestly that wedding was terrible spending it with you. I need some space. You should check yourself.

Arya

What? Did I do something wrong?

Carlos

No, I just wanted. Forget get you will never understand anyway

Arya

I am sorry. Can you tell me what I did wrong?

Carlos

I don't want to argue with you. Just

(hangs up the phone)

(Four hours later. Text comes through on Arya's phone from Carlos)

Text from Carlos to Arya

Listen, I am not going to keep talking. It's time to make some moves that will benefit us both.
You do and I will do me.

Arya

(Looking at the phone)

What the fuck just happened here. Seriously he is just going to break up in a text message. I will
just give him some space

(as she begins to cry)

(3 days pass and a text message comes through from Carlos)

Text from Carlos to Arya

She is cool. She's a good woman. Beautiful and smart. And she has you back and will be there
when you need someone

Text from Arya to Carlos

What?

(Arya looks at her phone confused)

Text from Arya to Carlos

What the hell did you just send me. Who are you talking to?

Text from Carlos to Arya

This is my homie, he thinks we are just friends. Just play along

Text from Arya to Carlos

Is this Carlos

Text from Carlos to Arya

Ya, Why?

Text from Arya to Carlos

Can you tell me what the hell is going on please.

Text from unknown number

Hello Beautiful I was wondering if you and I could maybe talk sometimes. Your homeboy said you are good people. I am looking for a good woman to settle down with and wanted to see where we could go.

(Arya deletes the message from this unknown number, starts to cry and blocks Carlos's number. Arya gets up from her desk and walks into her bedroom.)

The Shadow

You know you did something wrong.

(Talking through tears)

Arya

I don't know what I did. I thought things were great.

The shadow

You know what you did

Arya

No I don't

The shadow

You talked to much. You didn't believe in him. You should have done more of something.

Arya

But I did. And I told him so. I thought he knew I did

The shadow

You weren't woman enough. You wanted him to trust you

Arya

I thought he did. We were together for two years. I gave him my respect, my love, my trust

The shadow

You are an idiot. Who will love an idiot. You were never enough for him.

Arya

I don't know. I don't know . I didn't do anything. Nothing... nothing to deserve this.

End Scene

with Arya laying the bed with her face buried in the pillow, uncontrollably crying.

The Chance

Curtain opens to reveal Arya sitting at a small table at a coffee shop reading a book. The weather is warm, with a slight breeze and the soft sounds of Linkin Park playing in the distance. A man walks by her table stopping for a moment looking down at her.

James

Excuse me, ma'am. Don't mean to disturb you, but

Arya

(looking up , over her book. Annoyed)

What?

James

I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if we could share a table together. There doesn't seem to be any open seats. I promise I will not bother you.

Arya

No, thanks find a seat somewhere else please

James

Ah, come on miss don't be so cold. This place is full today and I just want to drink my coffee and read my book. Won't bother you at all. I swear.

Arya

Does it look like I'm the capacity police. Not my issue.

James

Man are you salty.

{flashes her a smile}

Arya

You think that smiling at me is going to change my mind. News flash you ain't that cute. Now please stop bothering me.

{James walks off, placing his book in one hand and huffing . As he passes the trash the throws the cup away and shakes his head}

James

{calling on the phone}

Carlos, you really picked a good one. She is going to be a little of a change. I like it. She is absolutely salty now.

Carlos

What do you mean she is salty ?

James

She basically bit my head off. And wouldn't budge on letting me sit at her table at all.

{laughing to himself}

She is really going to be fun.

{hangs up the phone. The stranger continues over and over to try and get her to let him sit at her table encountering resistance each time. Finally he heard the words}

Arya

I guess.

{Pushes the chair out for him with her foot.

The stranger sits down, pulling out a book of his own. And after a few minutes he gets up and leaves with his order. A week later Arya is back at the coffee shop engulfed in her book. When again the stranger walks by. This time he sits at a table beside hers.}

James

Excuse me

Arya

What?

(sounding annoyed)

James

I am sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to say you are a beautiful woman.

(He then gets up from the table and goes inside the building. This continue to happen for over 6 weeks until)

Arya

Are you ever going to stop finding a way to sit by me and say the same thing everyday?

James

Yes, I have something new to say today

Arya

What

(Sounding playfully annoyed)

James

James

Arya

What

James

My name is James

(he gets up and shakes her hand and disappears into the building again.)

End Scene

with Arya watching smiling as he disappears again. Looking back down at her book

Best Friend

Curtain opens to reveal a bedroom and Arya sitting on the bed, when the phone rings. Three months have past and her best friend Viola is calling her.

Viola

Hola homana,.How are you.I haven't heard from you in a while.

Arya

(forcing herself to speak)

I.. I..I am okay

(trying to sound normal)

Viola

Alight Arya spill it. Whats up?

Arya

Carlos broke up with me then tried to pass me off to someone else.

(choking up)

Viola

What? What fuck where the hell he at.. I am going to put my foot in his
ass.

Arya

I don't know where he is. But I am done. He better never try and contact me again.

Viola

You damn straight.You sure I can't find him and beat his ass Hell you know I can make a call
and have his ass beat no matter where he is.

Arya

(smiling)

You know you're are really crazy ass Latina. But Gracis. What were you calling about?

Viola

(Huff)

Oh, shit.I was calling to invite you out tonight

Arya

No, I will not be good company right now.

Viola

Chica please sitting at home crying over some sorry as mutha fucker who doesn't know a good thing when he had it. Come on out, get fucked up and forget him for a while. Don't make me come drag your ass out physically.

Arya

You are at

(getting up and walking to her door)

my door aren't you.

(opening the door)

Viola

You know me so well. Now get your ass in there and get dressed.

Closed Scene

as the women walk out the door.

Poker

The curtain opens to the two women sitting at a poker table with satin purple covering. There are two other chairs at the table. The two women are talking with each other.

Viola

So tell me more about this situation between you and Carlos

Arya

Nothing much to tell apparently I am not the woman he wants. We seemed good at the wedding and after he just called and said basically fuck off

Viola

Are you fucking serious. What a asshole

Arya

Yes, you know I have no idea what I did wrong, and it hurts I thought things were going so well. Now I am stuck within my head trying to figure what I could have, should have done different

Viola

Don't do that . He apparently has some issues. You know what fuck him. Tonight we 're going to get drunk and play some cards. I believe this card game will be good for you.

Ayra

I don't know if I will be good company but I am all on board for drinking to forget.

{a tear rolls down her face}

Viola

Okay then let's get this party started

End Scene

With the woman laughing and playing poker

The Games we Play

The curtains open to reveal Carlos sitting in a hotel room drinking a couple of beers.

Carlos

It went off perfectly. That stupid girl really believed I loved her.

James

Sounds like you have really gotten good at this. I cannot believe you actually spent years with this one and never lost sight of the end game

Carlos

Oh please it was easy. You know how women are. If you buy them things, compliment them, pretend to be listening. They think you love them. Dumbasses

James

You are right. Now she is in her place. I have already started my part. Now that she finally dropped her guard.

Carlos

Oh please tell me how you have started your end. One day maybe we can switch and I can be the recovery

James

I found her at the coffee shop just like you said. She was already interested. I am being mysterious right now. In a few I will make my move to get her out of her comfort zone. And she will finally understand. This is a man's world. Women bow to us.

Carlos

You are right How about another drink

End Scene

With the men conversing

The Poker Game

Curtain Opens There is a round table in the center of the room. four chairs are round it, with players in them. Arya and Viola are sitting sipping on wine playing poker.

Viola

Hay Kya I was wondering something

Arya

Oh no,

(forcing a smile)

Viola

Have you spoken with Carlos since that night?

{Arya looks over at Viola rolling her eyes and tilting her head to the side}

Arya

Why do you keep bring up Carlos

Viola

I will tell you later. How about another round of drinks

{Two other players walk into the room and sit down}

Viola

Glad you could join us. You're late. Are we good?

First woman

Yes we are. Hello there you must be Arya, my name is Loreli.

Viola

Oh yes where is my manners, That is Jamilia and Lorelie. Shall we play.

{The woman sit and begin to play cards}

Arya

You know I shouldn't be so down I did meet someone else. He has been passive aggressive but hopefully I will see him again soon

Jamilia

Be careful girl, some of the men are only about the games they can play

End Scene

With the two women looking at each other

James and Carlos conversation

Setting: back in the hotel room

Carlos

So when do you plan to lure her completely in?

James

I have another two chance meetings then I will make sure she goes on the date that she will never forget.

Carlos

Glad to hear. That dumb ass girl needs her ass handed to her.

James

Just remember I will let you know when she is at her lowest.

Carlos

Okay I will be waiting James. I cannot wait to see the show.

End Scene

The Hook

Curtain opens to reveal the coffee shop Arya is sitting in. Looking around she pretends she isn't looking for her mystery man.

James

Hello beautiful fantasy meeting you here again

{he moves his chair closer to hers and starts looking deep into her eyes}

James

Listen ,I have enjoyed our conversation, but I have to go. Do you think maybe we can have dinner together soon.

Arya

You know. Maybe ..I am not sure if it would be a good idea.

{James reaches out to touch her hand. But something feels off and she snatches her hand back off the table.}

James

Okay, well this was still an amazing night. I really hope we can have another amazing date.

{Arya turns to leave and James looks down at the ground a moment when Arya turns back around and speaks}

Arya

Well..What hell sure why not.

{They part ways}

Carlos

Scene: Carlos is sitting on the phone with another woman

Carlos

Oh ya, I am single. I saw your picture and you look so beautiful. I cannot wait to see where this goes. Oh no I have been single for two years. Yes I am looking to find the right woman to spend the rest of my life with. Oh no I am not into drama or trying to hurt anyone. Yes please let's keep talking and see where this goes.

{hangs up the phone}

The Shadow

Nicely done. Now you are making the right moves. This one should be even easier.

{Carlos sits on the bed looking down at the ground and back at his phone}

The Shadow

Don't even think about calling her. You have played your part. Remember you are a man.

Carlos

Shut up I know. I am moving on ,nothing to worry about. I am just getting my mind right to hook this new target.

The Shadow

We talked about this before. You know you cannot think or talk to her ever again.

Carlos

I just want to hurt her more. I mean maybe it would help James hook her more. He was so mad when he left last time.

The Shadow

James's just feeling inadequate. He should have let you be closer to this chick. She would already be devastated and locked inside her own head.

Carlos

Oh no I am going to call and help James. Trust I know what I am doing. This will work.

{picks up the phone and calls Anya, she answers on the final ring}

Arya

Hello, who is this please

Carlos

Really Arya, you forgot me already. It hasn't been that long since you were laying in my arms. I mean hell its only been six months or do you have that many men already.

{Arya looks at the phone and rolls her eyes}

Arya

What do you want Carlos?

Carlos

I wanted to see how you are. It has been sometime since we talked and I figured you have healed and we can be friends now.

Arya

Are you serious right now?

Carlos

Yes, I still care about you and want you in my life.

{Arya looks at the phone with one eyebrow raised}

Arya

I don't know about being healed. Friends? I mean it I am really not sure if we can be friends after what you done ever. You are seriously out of your mind right now?

Carlos

I think we can. All we have to do is try.

Arya

`How in the world could we be friends after what you did to me. Honestly. Tell me that.

Carlos

Because I know you want to as much as I do. And miss me too

Arya

Honestly, I have not been thinking about you but moving on.

Carlos

You don't have to pretend to be strong with me. I love you love me.

Arya

Speaking of love. Grant me this. The truth of why you just broke things off

Carlos

Honestly, I couldn't trust you

Arya

What the hell are you talking about?

Carlos

You were going on lunch dates and going out with other men

Arya

You mean going on meetings with clients for my job as a the senior manager of fundraising

Carlos

What. I didn't know that was why?

Arya

Ya, I bet. That's what happens when you pretend to listen to someone talk and not actually paying attention.

Carlos

Let's just try and catch up then. Like what have you been up to.

Arya

Fine, what could you need to say to me?

Carlos

Oh man I am so glad we are going to try and be friends. I just want to share in the joy I am feeling?

Arya

Before you share your joy, can you answer something for me?

Carlos

Sure what's up?

Arya

Why did you break up with me like you did and try to pass me off on someone else like that?

Carlos

Well since we are honest I couldn't take just being with you anymore. Anyway on to my good news. Hey, what was the name of the place you told me about that you wanted to go on a honeymoon if you got married again.

Arya

You remember. Really being with me was that bad. Seriously.

Carlos

Yes, it was anyway I remember it now Heavenville. I am glad I remember I am going to book a flight there for me and my new friend. I like what she is talking about. I cannot wait to have sex with her and she might just be my new girlfriend.

Arya

Excuse me. You know what Carlos you have a fucked up night.

{hangs up the phone and begins to cry}

The Shadow

I told you you were not good enough for him.

{Arya stops crying and just sits looking into the darkness}

Arya

You might be right, maybe I did do something wrong that made him think I wasn't good enough. What if I was more supportive or maybe I should have offered him to move in or to move in with him. Or maybe I should've never told him I was falling for him. What did I miss?

The Shadow

It's you. You will never be enough for him or anyone. You should accept that.

Arya

You might be right. Maybe it is my curse. Maybe I will end up alone. But what could have I done, I cannot believe I am allowing myself to think about this. Fuck him, Why would he need to call me and tell me about a new girlfriend anyway, What is his real issue?

End Scene

Another Poker game

A week has passed since the last card game and the players have gathered once again.

Viola

Wasn't sure if you were coming?

Arya

Oh I had to. I need some advice actually.

Ladies at the table

What's up?

Arya

Well I am not sure if Viola clued you all in but I had met a mystery man. A rather sexy mystery man. Anyway over the past few months we have chit chatted at my favourite coffee shop, nothing big. And he is always sweet and charming. Easy to get along with. He usually sits at his own table but this time sat with me and we talked for hours. He asked me out in the end. But I cannot shake the feeling that something doesn't feel right.

Viola

What do you mean something doesn't seem right

Jamilia

Did he say something odd

Viola

Was he quick to be affectionate or talking about sex, or asking sex related questions?

Arya

No nothing like that. Well you know Carlos and I broke up, and it seems strange that so soon after this guy notices me. I mean no one ever noticed me before.

Lorelie

Come on, you mean to tell me that the whole time you and Carlos was together you didn't get guys coming at you.

Arya

You know I did. Which, I still don't understand what that's all about. I mean damn why not notice me when I am single

All the woman

Right !!!

Viola

But back to the issue at hand. Could it be he was always just watching and just worked up the nerve to talk with you.

Arya

Just something just doesn't feel right about him and this

Viola

Well why did you continue to talk with him and accept the date. Then?

Arya

This is where I am asking for your help

Viola

Okay,how can we help?

Arya

V, I am not going to lie. I know you have some skills that I don't want to know anything about, but. And I was wondering if you and your friends can use those skills to find out what's with this dude.

{Jamilia looks over at Viola, shakes her hand in agreement, then over at Lorelie and nods.}

Viola

We will help you, but will you be able to accept what we find?

Arya

If it puts my mind at ease then I am good with it.

End Scene

Operation First Date James

Curtain opens to reveal a round table with four chairs. Candle light and soft piano music playing by the large bay windows. The characters walk onto the set.

James

You look amazingly beautiful

{As he walks behind her and pulls out her chair}

Arya

Thanks you so much. You clean up really great as well.

James

I am glad you agreed to come out with me. I have been watching you for a long time and never thought that someone as beautiful as you would even go out with someone like me.

{Arya with one eyebrow raised. Playing with the side of her dress under the table, tapping her foot}

James

So how was your day?

{They continue to talk, Arya takes her phone out of her purse and makes a call under the table, then places it on her lap.}

Arya

So tell me more about yourself James, like where were you born? And why you were so afraid to talk to me originally? Have you ever lived anywhere? You know things like that.

Back to the Poker Game

Scene: The poker game room. There are a few screens on the walls, with a woman sitting in a chair typing away on a keyboard. Jamilia is sitting putting a gun together, Lorelie is taking papers off a printer and Viola is sitting with headphones on.

Viola

Okay ladies she made the call, Jamilia, start the recording. We need voice rec and fascial rec fast. Let's help our friend.

Jamila

Yes ma'am.

{The woman continue accessing the information, listening closely to the rest of the conversation}

back at the restaurant

James

This has been an amazing date. Do you think maybe we can get to know each other better. Say, maybe a second date.

Arya

Umm . Ya sure why not.

{As they part ways James moves in to kiss Arya. Arya moves backward and looks at him a moment shaking his hand then walking away}

Curtain Close

James and Carlos are meeting again

Curtain opens to reveal a hotel room. In walks Carlos

James

(angerly)

Is there something you have forgotten to tell me about?

Carlos

Why are we meeting. You said we wouldn't meet until the deed was done. Did you do it already.
Damn man you are good that was fast

James

No, dumbass. That little girl of yours is alot smarter than you apparently thought. She refused my charm enough to not let me get a kiss on the first date. And whatever impression you made on her she is really skeptical.

Carlos

What the hell do you mean?

{the door opens, the men look toward it but no one is there. A figure is seen by the audience sitting in a chair in the shadows}

Carlos

She was the perfect choice. She is beautiful but doesn't consider herself to be. She has been alone for many years, She is strong willed and strong opinionated. She fights for others and also willing to be there for those she considers her friends. That's why I choose her. She more than anyone needs to be put back into her place. The pain I gave her will make sure she remembers she is nothing more than a girl and has no power over man like she thinks.

James

You idiot.. You choose.. You son of

{ James walks off)

End Scene

Looking inward

Carlos is sitting on the bed alone.A voice is in the shadows speaks

The Shadow

Carlos you screwed up.

Carlos

She deserved what I did. I did the right thing I know I did.

The shadow

Did she now. Are you sure. I mean you seemed uncertain

{Getting up pacing back and forth}

Carlos

She is beautiful and smart with a smile that lights up the room.

{Shaking his head}

No she deserved what I did

She is amazingly beautiful, how she can make even a stranger feel better. And people just come up and just talk to her.

The Stranger

Oh Carlos you are such a screw up. Just like you were when you ex laughed in your face when you caught her in bed with your best friend.

Carlos

No, she deserved what I did, She did

I remember how her kiss tasted, like honey mixed with the sweetest strawberries . She could smile just a little and my heart would skip

The Shadow

You are weak, a small and weak boy

Carlos

NO! NO! She deserved it. I did the right thing. I know it. She is just like my first love. She is just like. Charming and getting anything she wants with a smile. She would have gotten me if I had not done what I did to her. She would have left and cheated just like my ex. She would have made me look like a fool. I did the right thing.

{pouring himself a alcoholic drink, drinking it quickly and fixing another}

She isn't wonderful. She needed to be reminded what she is. She is nothing more than another loud mouth female. Smiling and using men. We have to get them before they get us.

{picking up the bottle and place the glass down, taking another sip}

The Shadow

You are in love. You are weak and in love with her. You could not keep control of yourself. She has won

Carlos

No, I will not hurt again. I will never be that sad idiot guy crying over another female ever. No they are not meant to be trusted.

{choking up}

I cannot and don't love her. I cannot. It doesn't matter that I miss holding her in my arms. It doesn't matter that I wanted to cry when I knew I broke her heart, it doesn't matter. I am a man and I am strong not weak. I am a man and I will not be defeated.

{Sitting down on the bed, placing the bottle down, whipping a tear from his eye}

The Shadow

You are not strong, you are not a man. You are a wimp

Carlos

No, I am a man I am strong, but I am weak without her. I have to tell her.

end scene

Fallen Souls

Curtain Open At the poker game, the women are sitting around playing cards and going over information.

Arya has gone to the card game after her date with James.

Arya

Hello ladies, I am ready for something stiff to drink and some good company.

{walking over the table and sitting down in the chair with a huff}

Viola

We got some information you are not going to believe.

{the other women sit down at the table except Viola}

Viola

We have a problem.

{pointing at the papers on the table}

Viola

We think Carlos and James know each other and what's worst we believe that they actually were stalking you before Carlos and you met.

{Arya looks down and starts to stiff through the papers, looks up crying}

Arya

So I was just some... some.. Mark

Jamilia

Ya it looks like it. We found evidence from cameras around everywhere you normally go to. And it shows them always watching you

Lorelia

The worst part is you're not the only one they might have done this to others.

Arya

What would they get out of this. He doesn't know anything about me or have access to my bank accounts, or my family or anyone I know.

Viola

That's the only thing we cannot figure out. Is why they are doing it and what they are getting out of it, but we are going to keep looking.

{the woman put the papers to the side and Jamilia deals the cards}

End Scene

“Carlos and James conversation”

Setting:back Inside of a hotel room.

James is sitting on the bed alone with a book, and a large map spread on the bed.

James

Damn it Carlos has made this shit harder for me. This chick supposed to fall for me. And now I messed up and tried to kiss her. Shit. Now I have to see if I can convince her to change her mind and get this plan back on track. Knew I should have never brought him into my plan.

{from a chair in the shadow of the room}

The Shadow

You are right. He is making your plan fail You should have done this yourself, How could you have trust him to do a man's job. You know how to make the highest scores and how to make sure they can never resist.

James

You are right. I am the high scorer. I graduated from being a loser to being the one in control of the game now. I can make sure I am protected. I don't need to know her. Just need her to spread those legs and let me in.

The shadow

Exactly, so what are you waiting for, what are you going to do. Pick up that phone and call her. Make her listen.

James

No, I need to let her be in her thoughts. Got to let her feel the regret.

The Shadow

No, she needs you to wear her down. She needs you. Make her see that.

End Scene

Game Aray

Setting Carlos Hotel room

Carlos is sitting and talking on the phone to a woman. As she laughs he continues talking, yet finds himself looking out into space. He quickly gets off the phone with her and continues looking into the nothingness of the room.

The Shadow

What are you doing? You're supposed to be listening and focusing. This is your new target.

Carlos

Shut up. I am getting my game together. I know what I have to do

The Shadow

Do you, you just got off the phone. You are supposed to making sure she falls for you

Carlos

I am doing what I am meant to do. Leave me alone. I am giving her time to miss me

(looks down at his phone.)

The shadow

Awe , your thinking about Arya.

Carlos

No, I am not

The Shadow

Then why are you looking at her name in your phone then

Carlos

I was just looking for my backup target thats all. I am not thinking about her

The Shadow

Yes, you are. Its okay you know you love her.

Carlos

No, she was my mark nothing more

The Shadow

Yes, you do. Then call her and tell her that

Carlos

Hell , no I won't do that. I have done enough to her.

The shadow

Exactly, You do care about her

Carlos

Even it I did. I do not love her. She is now James's mark. I cannot tell her anything.

The shadow

What if you could

Carlos

I cannot , leave me alone you are trying to confused me.

The Shadow

Oh, no I would never do that. I am just asking you are you really being honest with yourself Why didn't you stay

Carlos

Because she was a mark

The shadow

Why didn't you stay

Carlos

Because she was a mark

The shadow

WHY DIDN'T YOU STAY!

Carlos

Because I love her and didn't want to trust that she would love me if she know how terrible I am.

The shadow

You mean that you are afraid of actually letting yourself be vulnerable with anyone.

(sitting on the bed, crying)

Carlos

I know I cannot trust anyone not my family, the people I work with, James or even Arya. All woman want to do is hurt me. They always have and always will

The Shadow

Awe the truth cometh, but is Arya like them?

Carlos

Doesn't matter she has to be, besides she will recover. I know she will recover

End Scene

With Carlos sitting on the bed holding his head

Reeling in

Setting James hotel room

James is sitting playing with a bottle in his hand. He picks up his phone and finds Arya's phone number.

James

Time to make contact again. Now it's time for the charm.

The Shadow

You sure your ready to destroy her already. You just did the first date.

James

Oh yea. She had a wonderful time. Besides I can walk about that kiss now. And get the second date for the killer setup

The Shadow

I hope you can because if you can't she will be onto you.

James

Oh please. No one can resist me.

The Shadow

Are you sure?

James

Oh yes, time to put my magic to work.

(dials the number)

Arya

Hi, James how are you?

(Arya looks at the phone waiting for him to answer. Placing it on speaker and hits record on her phone.)

James

Hay listen I want to apologize for what happened last week. I didn't mean to overstep after our date. It was just I was having such a good time I mis-read signals.

Arya

It's okay. I just wasn't trying to move so fast.

James

I understand. And again I apologize

Arya

So what's up ,

James

Wow straight to the point. Okay well I was wondering if you wanted to go again.

Arya

I am not so sure about that

James

Come on.

Arya

I don't think so

James

Come on. Please give me a chance to redeem myself.

(There is a knock at Arya's door. Opening the door she hits the mute button)

Arya

Come in V. He is on the phone now.

Viola

Good I have the equipment to trace the call.

Arya

Thanks

James

Hay are you still there

(Unmutes the phone)

Arya

Ya sorry I put the phone in my pocket. Guess it hit the mute button.

(James looks at his phone in shock, and started to panic)

James

Hay listen, come on let me try and take you out again.

(Viola shakes her head in agreement)

Arya

I guess okay I can let you redeem yourself.

James

Great. Then I will talk to you later

(They hang up the phone. Arya turns to Viola)

Viola

We got his location. Now we can really make sense of this shit.

End Scene

Coming to Head

Setting: Within the restaurant; All the characters are together

A month has passed since the first date and last conversation between Arya and James.

Viola

We have gotten them trapped at the restaurant. Finally we will make this stop.

Arya

I will go in first. James will confess

Viola

We will give you a one count

{Arya walks into the restaurant and sits at the table. James walks into the room, slowly making his way to the table}

Arya

Thanks for agreeing to meet with me James

James

I am glad you finally let us schedule our second date. You have been on my

{cutting him off}

Arya

Oh please,

(playing with the knife on the table)

James I know about your GAME I guess you can call it.

{getting up from the table and walking over to him. Placing her hand on his chest}

James

What are you talking about. I don't play any games ever.

Arya

James, James, James.. Drop the act. I thought it was interesting that you came along within weeks of Carlos leaving. I had never seen you before at my coffee spot. Not once and you belined for me each time you came in. LIke how forceful you were the first time about sitting at my table no matter how much I said no. And continued to bother me until I said yes.

James

I wasn't means to be forceful I just knew you were someone I wanted to be with

{Suddenly the door opens and the people in the building all leave. A woman walks in pushing Carlos in front of her}

Viola

Look what the cat dragged in

(playfully sarcastic)

Carlos

Arya I have no idea what is going on here.

Viola

(gives him shove)

You are so full of shit. We found evidence that Carlos and James
which isn't their names by the way. Apparently Carlos has been moving around every few
weeks, always having another girlfriend. And until about three years ago they had a good game
going on until you Arya

{Jamilia walks in}

Jamilia

We were able to track down most of the women they played. And according to his social media
he has been bragging about another one biting the dust. Which gave us a link to a gentlemen's
club.

{The door opens and the shadow walks in taking a seat sitting in silence}

Lorelia

Which is worse is that he also caused the death of four women.

Calos

I did not kill anyone.

Arya

Carlos what did you do?

Carlos

I did not kill anyone. I did not

Viola

No, not directly just taking the bullshit game out in the world and playing with woman's emotions. Which caused those women their lives .They all committed suicide

(Arya stands and walks over to Carlos. Stops a moment starts to walk away then turns and stands facing him)

Arya

Oh so I was just a mark to you. You pretended to love me

James

Dude you give men a bad name. I cannot believe you would play with women like that. You have some real issues.

(Carlos looks over at James with a look of shock and throws his hands up into the air)

Carlos

Yes, at first but it wasn't always a lie. I.. I .. you.. Made ... me

(James starts to get up from the table when he feels hands on his shoulders pushing back down into the chair. Looking up he sees the face of Jamilia looking down at him)

Viola

Where are you going, pretty boy. You are not a victim here, not innocent at all.

(James give a look of disbelief and confusion)

Viola

Oh ya we found the connection between you two and know all about your past to. You used your looks to date the woman after you buddy started the game.

Arya

Please stop talking Carlos or whatever you name is

Carlos

I know I have no right to say this, but it's the truth. I love you Arya. You made me realize I can love and it's okay. You are a wonderful person

All the woman together

Oh please bullshit

The shadow

You are all petty. It was easy to pick all of you. I had fun playing with all of you. It proves the point I've always known. Love is an addition and when you twist that search for it just right you humans always attack each other.

Arya

You are wrong. Love isn't something that is supposed to be a game or used against someone. But something beautiful and natural, something that bounds and not destroys. And you are right it has been used to cause pain , and make people bitter and even make people give up hope. Yet you are wrong mister for playing us against each other, because love isn't just someone you are romantically with but within a family and parent to their child. There is no doubt that hurt people

hurt people. Yet it only continues because hurt people don't try and learn a simple lesson. Learning to work together through the pain, being each other's shoulder to lean and cry on. Yet so many continue to search looking for someone who has never been hurt and who's baggage is not much. Leaving out those filled with love and pain never standing by them. So their hurt grows and becomes deeper causing them hurt and pushes away all that comes through.

There is nothing to do but learn to love and walk together.

The Shadow

As long as mankind lets their pain rule there will be no closer to each other and never achieve peace. For the pain is the driving force instead of you all growing and learning from it. You use it as a weapon to continue to hurt each other. And when you weaponize pain and hurt then it is no longer about the pain but the revenge. For hurting someone like you have becomes the mission. I hope you all learned how it can change the view of everything. More than that how the hurt onto another can change the love and hearts of those not even playing the game.

The end

ROOM FOR TWO

By Donni “Les” Anderson

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

A cluttered studio apartment in Boston, MA. The place could use some bleach and a fresh coat of paint. In the center of the living room, a couch has been turned into a makeshift-bed for EMMY (23), a full-time waitress with a smoker's voice and a heart of gold. She enters the living room with an illprepared birthday cake and a gift behind her back.

Emmy sings Happy Birthday teasingly as she approaches her little sister, LIV (14). On the couch, Liv covers her eyes with her hands and smiles expectantly.

EMMY

I know it's not much, but...

She sets the cake down on the table and places the box in Liv's hands.

EMMY (CONT'D) ...Here.

LIV

Can I look yet?

Liv has a strong lisp. She peeks from between her fingers, then uncovers her eyes. Emmy tackles her into a hug and a series of playful punches.

EMMY

Fourteen licks!

The two laugh and embrace, then Emmy gestures to the gift.

EMMY (CONT'D) Open it!

Liv admires the cake and makes a wish. She blows the candle out then tears away at the gift wrapping. It's an oversized sweater. She clutches it to her chest.

LIV I love it.

She gives it a big whiff.

LIV (CONT'D)

And it still smells like the store! Did you thrift it?

Emmy nods amusedly.

EMMY You're weird.

LIV

No, I'm serious it's like a whole thing!

EMMY

I've never heard of that... Is it comfortable?

Liv tries the sweater on.

LIV

And it's so warm!

Emmy fiddles with the sleeve and furrows her brow.

EMMY

Yeah, I know. It's supposed to get bad this week. Gonna need to get you some gloves, too.

LIV

I could ask Mom?

There's an abrupt silence. Liv stares at the floor. Emmy shakes her head and goes to the window.
On the windowsill, Emmy's plant droops to one side.

LIV (CONT'D)

She could knit me some. Like the last time.

After a closer look, Emmy notices a few yellow leaves on the plant.

EMMY

(to plant)

If I could just get you some more sun...

LIV

I know you hear me! Why can't—

EMMY

—Because you know how it always goes! What makes you think she'll answer this time?

LIV

(meekly)

But it's my birthday.

Emmy sighs in defeat.

EMMY

Fine, hurry up. She can't talk past six.

Liv calls Mom. Emmy tries to eavesdrop as she tidies up the apartment. After a moment, there's a deep sigh from Liv. She sulks, and then perks up instantaneously.

LIV

Hey mom, it's me. Emmy says hi!

Emmy scoffs.

LIV (CONT'D)

I was just calling to say I love you and I was just wondering if maybe you could knit me some new gloves? Or maybe we could just come visit? Let me know... Love you again.

Bye.

She hangs up and sulks again.

LIV (CONT'D) Voicemail!

She chucks the phone on the couch.

LIV (CONT'D)

(sobbing)

You were right.

EMMY No, I'm sorry.

She pulls Liv into a hug as she fights back her own tears.

EMMY (CONT'D) Hey.

(beat)

I got you some ice cream, too.

Liv smiles and the two break into a sprint for the freezer.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

A bustling restaurant kitchen. Emmy scoops ice into a bucket. She does a quick lookout, then checks her phone. ELIZABETH, a coworker (late twenties), sneaks up behind her and shakes her abruptly.

ELIZABETH

(playfully)

Move it, Emmy! Table four needs more tartar sauce!

Emmy clutches her proverbial pearls and sighs in relief.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D) Gotcha!

Elizabeth grabs Emmy by the arm and leads her outside.

EXT. BACK OF RESTAURANT - CONTINUOUS

Moments later. Emmy and Elizabeth stand near the dumpsters.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D) How's it going? Looked like you were gonna pass out back there.

She pulls a pack of cigarettes from her apron and hands one to Emmy. The two smoke and chat.

EMMY

I'm just trying to pick up a couple of extra shifts this week, that's all. Plus I spent all night trying to cheer up Liv.

ELIZABETH How was that?

EMMY

Ridiculous. She got all excited and wanted to call Mom. You know how that went.

(beat)

By the way, I got her a sweater yesterday, so thanks. I swear I'll pay you back as soon as I can.

ELIZABETH

You absolutely will not. Just tell her I said Happy Birthday.

EMMY

I will. I just don't know why she sets herself up for disappointment like that every time.

ELIZABETH

She's just a baby, Emmy. If you keep hiding this from her she's gonna figure it out on her own. And you don't want that, trust me.

EMMY

I'm trying to spare her the details. Mom's just sick. And that's all she really needs to know right now.

ELIZABETH "Sick".

She scoffs and lights another cigarette.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D) She deserves to know.

EMMY

(agitated)

Why? So she can picture our junkie mother passed out in the bathroom, soaked in her own piss and vomit?

ELIZABETH

No—

EMMY

She's so selfish. And people like her don't give a damn about the people who love them.

(beat)

Why should I care then?

Elizabeth winces. Emmy snaps out of it.

EMMY (CONT'D)

That was insensitive. I didn't—

ELIZABETH

No, it's fine. I'm doing a lot better now.

The back door flies open. Their manager, CLYDE (a stocky and sweaty man in his early fifties) acknowledges the two and dabs sweat off of his brow. They quickly extinguish their cigarettes.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

(to Emmy)

I'll see you later.

Elizabeth exits.

CLYDE

Emmy, do you have a second?

INT. RESTAURANT OFFICE - DAY

Several minutes later. A dingy office at the back of the restaurant. A tiny desk fan rattles out a meager trickle of air. Both Emmy and Clyde are sweating profusely.

CLYDE

Now as I'm sure you know, Bonnie's been out sick.

EMMY

Still? It's been 3 weeks.

Clyde dabs his forehead hesitantly.

CLYDE

Things have been pretty tight without her. Said she's got that bug that's going around.

EMMY

I don't have time for this.

She heads for the door.

CLYDE Wait!

EMMY

What, Clyde? It's burnin' up in here and you already got me working back to back doubles. I can't give you much else.

CLYDE

That's the thing... I don't need you to work doubles anymore.

Emmy's eyes grow wide.

CLYDE (CONT'D) No! This is good. You haven't gone unnoticed, I promise you. You're the first in and the last to leave...

(beat)

I was wondering if you wanted to take her place?

Emmy perks up in her seat.

EMMY

Really?! For how much?

CLYDE Excuse me?

EMMY

The pay, Clyde.

CLYDE

(sputtering) Twelve an hour?

She's disappointed.

EMMY

I'm not managing this mess for a fifty cent raise.

CLYDE Fifteen?

(beat)

Twenty! I'll give you twenty. But... we've gotta interview you first.

EMMY

Okay, so let's do it right now!

CLYDE

Can't. I've gotta give everyone a fair shot but you're a shoo-in. I'll set it up for Friday.

Emmy checks the clock and gets up to leave.

EMMY

I've gotta go. But if you're playin' me, Clyde...

She trails off as she exits.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

A starter home with a "For Sale" sign. It's quaint and nestled in the cookie-cutter suburbs. Emmy approaches the stairs quickly and tries to freshen up her appearance.

INT. HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

The inside of the house. It's furnished handsomely and cleaned from top to bottom. A couple stragglers admire the house and chat as they exit.

Emmy enters through the kitchen. A realtor in her early fifties, DARLA, shuffles through her papers as she approaches Emmy.

DARLA

Ms. Collins, you're late.

She pulls a sheet and hands it to Emmy dismissively.

EMMY

Sorry. I got caught up at work but I headed down here soon as I could.

Darla surveys Emmy's filthy uniform.

DARLA I see.

(beat)

Anyways. 20th century home...

Freshly painted and rewired. Roughly four thousand square feet so there's room for two.

Emmy tries to follow along with the sheet, but Darla's rattling off too quickly.

EMMY

Excuse me, there's two bedrooms?

DARLA

Yes, a master and a standard. And an absolutely gorgeous living room. Let me show you.

The two approach a living room with large windows. The sun illuminates the entire room. Emmy is awestruck.

EMMY

(breathlessly) This is perfect.

She runs her hands along the windowsill.

DARLA

We'd have you near the arts center and all the major parks as well. And we're in one of the best school districts. My son's enrolled there.

(MORE)

DARLA (CONT'D)

We're looking at three seventy-five to start, but we're willing to negotiate if you're interested in a variable rate rather than a fixed one.

Emmy comes back to reality.

EMMY

(bluffing)

Of course. Look, I've gotta pick up my little sister. Let me check on a couple of things first and I can get back to you.

Darla grumbles and scrawls something on her notepad.

DARLA

Of course. Here's the code to the keypad. You can take another look and call me back if you change your mind.

Darla hands Emmy the code and guides her toward the exit.

EXT. SCHOOL COURTYARD - DAY

A courtyard at the end of the school day. Students stand outside and chat while they wait for their rides. Emmy pulls up in her beater car and brings it to a rickety stop.

In the distance, Liv is teased by her classmates. A popular girl, HOLLY (16), tugs at Liv's uniform and feigns disgust. Emmy honks at the kids.

EMMY

Hey, knock it off!

Liv freezes in embarrassment then dashes for the car. She's hiked up her skirt and tied her shirt to expose her navel. As she opens the door, she wipes her poorly applied lipstick off on her arm.

INT. CAR - MOVING - DAY

Emmy drives the car. Liv stares out the window.

LIV

I thought I told you to come around the back this time!

EMMY

Yeah, no. And what the hell were you doing back there? You didn't leave this morning looking like that.

She pulls the knot out of Liv's shirt and fixes her hair.

LIV

But that's how Holly wears her shirt and I just wanted to --

EMMY

To what? To look like a hooker? I'm not paying all that money for you to play dress up all day. And I told you to stop hangin' around that girl. She's nothing but trouble.

LIV

She's my best friend.

EMMY

You have so much to learn, Liv.

(beat)

Well, I've got some good news. Guess who's got an interview?

LIV

No way! Congrats!

EMMY

Yes way! I'd be making nearly double what I make now, so I figured I'd swing by that house today. I think you'd like it.

LIV Really?

EMMY

Oh, yeah. It had these huge windows, which would be great for my plant, y'know. And you could finally get a cat and your own room like you've wanted! Wanna go take a look later?

Liv fiddles with a crumpled sheet of paper.

EMMY (CONT'D)
Is that your report card?

Liv jerks the sheet away. Emmy snatches it out of her hand.

EMMY (CONT'D)
What are you failing again? Let me see it.

She glances at it while driving. Her jaw drops.

EMMY (CONT'D) Your tuition didn't go through?
When were you gonna tell me, Liv?! Stop keeping shit from me.

LIV
I thought you guys already knew...

Emmy recollects herself.

EMMY
You know what? It's not your fault. Let me see what I can do.

INT. REHABILITATION CENTER - DAY

A pristine rehab center. Emmy approaches a female RECEPTIONIST at the front desk.

RECEPTIONIST
Good afternoon, are you here for visitation?

The receptionist goes through the motions of checking her computer.

EMMY
I'm here to see Pamela. Last name Collins.

The receptionist checks the system and stops dead in her tracks. She anxiously cross-references against another document and turns on the intercom.

RECEPTIONIST
Dr. Stevenson to the front office, please.
(beat)

Okay, I've got you checked in. If you'll just have a seat I'll have him come escort you.

Emmy waits. A few moments later, a man in his early sixties, DR. STEVENSON, approaches her and shakes her hand.

DR. STEVENSON You must be Emmy.

EMMY That's me.

DR. STEVENSON Your mother's in the sun room. Let's walk and talk.

The two walk through the facility. Dr. Stevenson lowers his voice as they chat.

EMMY
How's she doing? We haven't heard from her in a couple of weeks.

Dr. Stevenson chuckles and adjusts his glasses nervously.

DR. STEVENSON I see you haven't listened to my voicemails.

EMMY

Are you guys always this secretive?

DR. STEVENSON Well, no. It's just that full disclosure, Ms. Collins... (beat)
...We don't know how much more we can take.

EMMY What?

DR. STEVENSON I have never seen a patient as stubborn as your mother in my thirty years of practice.

EMMY What happened?

DR. STEVENSON We like to follow a three strike policy here, but your mother is really pushing her luck.

Emmy groans.

DR. STEVENSON (CONT'D) Last week we caught her nodding off during group therapy, and she's failed every single one of her blood tests.

EMMY

Well isn't that what she's here for?

DR. STEVENSON We can only do so much. The program's supposed to be minimally invasive so it doesn't feel like a prison, but, I'm afraid that might be what she needs.

They approach the sunroom's door.

DR. STEVENSON (CONT'D) This morning I caught her snorting pills in the janitor's closet. If you can't get through to her I'm afraid I'm going to have to expel her from the program.

Emmy peers through the window on the door. Inside, her mother, PAMELA (45), laughs obnoxiously at the TV and snacks at a table. Dr. Stevenson stands watch outside the room as Emmy enters.

INT. REHAB SUNROOM - DAY

Emmy enters the room. Her mother doesn't look at her.

EMMY Hi.

Pamela turns the volume up.

EMMY (CONT'D)

I heard you're giving these people a hard time.

Pamela ignores her again. Emmy slams her fists on the table.

EMMY (CONT'D) Mom!

PAMELA

Don't be so dramatic.

Emmy slaps the crumpled letter on the table.

They're gonna kick Liv out of school.

PAMELA

Is she failing again?

EMMY

Like you even care. Your half of her tuition didn't go through.

PAMELA

Yeah... Forgot about that.

EMMY

I can't cover you again. I'm already on overdraft from last month's.

PAMELA

(dismissively)

Put her back in public school.

EMMY

Great! I'll just toss her back in so they can send her home crying every day again.

PAMELA

Because of that stupid lisp? The girl needs to toughen up!

EMMY

Your daughter is about to get kicked out of school and you don't give a--
(beat)

This is a waste of my time. The doctor was right. You better get your shit together, or they're fixin' to kick you out.

Pamela turns the TV back on. Emmy exits.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Emmy's apartment. It's pitch black. She tiptoes into the kitchen but doesn't see Liv. The lights snap on and Liv is standing in the center of the kitchen inquisitively.

LIV

Where were you?

I went to see Mom.

LIV

Why didn't you tell me? What did she say?

Emmy turns on a lamp and sits down somberly.

EMMY

We're gonna have to put you in Brighton High.

LIV Come on!

EMMY

It won't be that bad. You can play soccer, and you wouldn't have to wear a uniform anymore.

LIV

So you weren't gonna tell me?

(beat)

No, you waited to do this when I was finally starting to be somebody!

EMMY

No, Liv. It's burning a fuckin' hole in my wallet. Either we have food on the table or you can keep going there. We can't have both!

LIV

You think I'm stupid? You keep sneaking off and telling me that Mom's getting better but clearly she's not!

EMMY

Mom's just sick. Sometimes people do stupid things when they're in pain.

Liv storms into the bathroom and locks herself in. Emmy pounds on the door.

LIV (O.S)

Stop lying! All everyone does is lie. I hate school. I hate Mom. I hate YOU!

(through door)

Liv, come out of there, please?

Emmy pulls a blanket and pillow and sets up outside the door.

EMMY (CONT'D)

Fine, but I'm not leaving until you come out and talk to me.

LIV (O.S)

When is Mom coming back?

EMMY Soon, Liv.

LIV (O.S) Be honest.

Emmy lets out a deep sigh.

EMMY

(tenderly)

Mom's not coming back for a while. She's been in rehab.

LIV (O.S) This whole time?

EMMY

Yes, this whole time. She's real sick, Liv. Could you please open the door? I'll tell you everything.

The door unlocks. The two embrace dramatically.

INT. RESTAURANT LOBBY - DAY

Emmy waits in the restaurant lobby for her interview. She's all dolled up and anxious. She checks herself in her reflection and talks herself up. Clyde enters the lobby enthusiastically. Emmy goes to shake his hand.

CLYDE

Oh, stop it. You ready?

They enter the restaurant office.

INT. RESTAURANT OFFICE - DAY

Several minutes later. Emmy and Clyde are laughing and chatting during her interview. Clyde glances over her resume.

CLYDE

I mean, you're a perfect fit. I see the hours you've been putting in.

EMMY

And I already practically run the bar by myself—

Emmy's phone interrupts her. She answers it and steps into the hall.

EMMY (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, just one moment.

INT. RESTAURANT LOBBY - DAY Emmy talks on the phone.

EMMY

(to phone)

Yes, this is she. She did what?!

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - DAY

Emmy comes rushing into the building. Two SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS and the principal, MR. SAMPSON, stand watch over Liv and Holly's posse of misfits.

EMMY

(to Liv)

What the hell happened?!

She grabs Liv and heads for the exit.

MR. SAMPSON

(to Emmy)

Hold on, Ms. Collins. We need
Olivia to stay for questioning.

EMMY

Not without me. Will somebody just tell me what is going on?

OFFICER 1

We got a call about these four skipping class in the locker room.

EMMY

Okay. Since when is that a crime?

Officer 2 exits with Holly and the rest of the delinquents.

MR. SAMPSON

Usually it wouldn't be a problem, Ms. Collins. But Olivia was found to be in possession of
marijuana.

EMMY What?

She gives Liv the death stare.

EMMY (CONT'D) It's legal, though.

OFFICER 1

Yes, but she's still underage, Ms. Collins.

EMMY

(exasperated)

Fine. Are you gonna arrest her?

OFFICER 1

We've decided not to press charges as she is a minor, but the school does have a zero tolerance policy.

MR. SAMPSON

We will have to expel Olivia, effective immediately.

OFFICER 1 (CONT'D) But we may be able to work something out if she talks to us.

EMMY

Sure, whatever you need.

OFFICER 1

(to Liv)

Where did you get this from, sweetheart? Did anybody sell this to you or pressure you at all?

Liv says nothing.

EMMY

(to Liv)

Go on. Answer him.

LIV No, sir.

OFFICER 1

(to Liv)

If you cooperate with me, I can make this a lot easier for all of us. Are you sure?

LIV Yes.

MR. SAMPSON

(to Officer 1)

Well, that settles it then. Would you escort these two outside, please?

EXT. SCHOOL COURTYARD - DAY

Liv and Emmy walk to the car. Emmy is fuming.

LIV

You're scaring me.

EMMY Just walk.

INT. CAR - DAY

They enter the car. Emmy tries to hold back her tears and frustration.

EMMY

What happened?

LIV Nothing.

EMMY

Nothing? You just got expelled, Liv. And you're smoking weed at school? Do you wanna end up like Mom?

LIV It wasn't me!

EMMY

Then who was it?

LIV

It was Holly! She did it.

Emmy lets out a huge sigh.

EMMY

I told you to stop hanging around that girl.

LIV

She heard the cops and put it on me. I panicked!

EMMY

Then go back in there and tell them it was her!

LIV

No way. I'll never be able to live it down. Plus it's her word against mine.

EMMY

Well, I guess that solves the tuition problem.

Liv notices Emmy's outfit.

LIV

You're all dressed up?

EMMY

Yeah. I had that interview today, remember?

Liv gasps.

LIV

Oh, God. I'm so sorry!

EMMY Let's just go.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The middle of the night. Liv sleeps on the couch and Emmy sleeps on the floor. Emmy's phone rings. She wakes up and answers it.

EMMY
(to phone) Hello?

She gasps and sits back down to take in the news.

EMMY (CONT'D)
Liv? Wake up.

Emmy hangs up the phone. She is in shock.

LIV
(groggily) What's up?

EMMY
Mom's in the ER. Get dressed, we've gotta go.
They both rush to get dressed and leave.

INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

A week later. Emmy holds back tears as she folds silverware in the back of the restaurant. Elizabeth approaches her.

ELIZABETH
(sympathetically) Haven't seen you in a bit. You alright? I heard people talking about it but I wanted to hear it from you.

They hug.

EMMY I'm fine.

ELIZABETH
(firm, but loving) Emmy.

Emmy cracks. She lets out a full-on sob.

EMMY
Mom's gone. She got kicked out of the program and they dumped her out on the street. She ODed in the parking lot but they couldn't get to her fast enough.

ELIZABETH I'm so sorry.

EMMY
Liv and I got there as fast as we could, but she was gone... And I've gotta go get her ashes today, so that's gonna run me a couple grand.
(beat)
(MORE)

EMMY (CONT'D) But Clyde's on his bullshit and won't let me leave until I finish these. And I didn't get that stupid promotion.

Emmy gets a good look at Elizabeth. She's dressed in a pantsuit and has a shiny new "Manager" pin.

EMMY (CONT'D) God, don't tell me--

Elizabeth looks away.

ELIZABETH

He said you walked out. I had no idea, Emmy. I'm sorry.

EMMY

Yeah, because Liv was caught with pot at school and I had to go pick her up!

ELIZABETH

I'll go talk to him. You need this more than I do.

EMMY

Save it. I can't believe you.

Emmy storms out of the kitchen.

INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Emmy enters holding her mother's urn. Liv sits on the couch and watches TV.

LIV

There's a letter for you.

EMMY

What do they want now?

Emmy grabs the letter from the counter. She rips it open and gasps. It's her mother's life insurance check for \$600,000 dollars.

EMMY (CONT'D)

Liv... Come look at this.

Liv takes a look. Her jaw drops. They laugh and cry.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Several weeks later at the house that Emmy toured. The "For Sale" sign is gone. Emmy and Liv park in the driveway. Emmy helps Liv exit the car as she is blindfolded.

EMMY No peeking!

LIV

What is it? Is it a... cat?

EMMY

No. Quit guessing!

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Emmy opens the house. It's nearly bare, but it's got the bare essentials. She sets her plant up with her mom's ashes on the windowsill.

EMMY Perfect.

LIV Let me see!

Emmy guides Liv to her new room. A kitten is fast asleep on Liv's brand new bed.

EMMY

Okay, you can look.

Liv rips the blindfold off. She squeals and picks up the kitten.

LIV

(playing with the kitten) I knew it!

She admires the room.

LIV (CONT'D) I thought you didn't get the promotion?

EMMY

I used Mom's check. Do you like it?

LIV I love it!

She snuggles the cat.

LIV (CONT'D) What's his name?

EMMY You tell me.

Liv tries different names for the kitten.

LIV

(to cat)

Chester. No, Sushi. No, Fluffy...

Emmy pulls a bank statement out of her pocket and hands it to Liv.

EMMY

They were talking about college funds on Oprah the other day, so I put the rest of the money in there. I figured that might be a good idea?

Liv grapples her into a hug.

LIV

I love you so much! I'm sorry I got in trouble and I'm sorry I got kicked out and I'm sorry I've been a bad sister.

EMMY

I love you, too. And you're not a bad sister. Now let's get you to school. I'll drop you off before my interview.

LIV

What if they don't like me?

EMMY

You'll be fine. Just look at this as a fresh start. Plus, I think I saw something about soccer tryouts this week!

LIV

Fine. I'll go.

She looks at the cat.

LIV (CONT'D) I like Chester.

EMMY Chester it is.

They laugh and play with the cat.

FADE OUT THE END.

DAD'S NOT DEAD

By Maja Nearing

SETTINGS

December in the near future

MOTHER's house in Palm Coast, FL MOLLY's car

[A bizarre mix of Christmas music, indie pop, show tunes, and pop punk should
always be playing in the car.]

A hotel room, clean but unwelcoming

The front porch of DAD's cabin near Skagway, AK

CHARACTERS

MOLLY, eldest sibling, late 20s, doctoral candidate, quiet with a seemingly uncharacteristic
vindictive streak

JAMES, middle sibling, mid 20s, up and coming actor, peacemaker who's keeps everyone's
secrets (including his own)

ALLIE, youngest sibling, early 20s, college student, facetious yet unpredictable when it comes
to emotions

MOTHER, late 50s, home recovering from hip surgery, bitter and casually negligent
DAD, late 60s

SCENE ONE

(Lights up on a small home office. There's a desk with an old desktop computer that looks like it hasn't been turned on since 2005, several file cabinets and bookshelves, and an armchair and floor lamp in the corner. The room would be organized if it weren't for the numerous stacks of paperwork on every available surface, some just loose sheets of paper and others in files.)

Music is playing somewhere in the house, though muffled. Occasionally we can hear someone singing along, as well as thuds like heavy furniture is being moved around.)

MOLLY is rifling through one of the file cabinets, pulling papers out at random before carefully putting them back. Trying and failing to understand the organizational system of that file cabinet, she moves on to another.

MOLLY opens a new file drawer and after flicking through it briefly, pushes all of the files back to start from the front. Pausing, she removes a stack of letters that are binderclipped together, staring at them.

MOLLY sits down on the floor, unclips the letters, and begins reading the first one. She quickly discards it, moving on to the next, then the next, and so on.

JAMES enters, followed by ALLIE.

JAMES

So I know I said Allie and I could handle the sofa ourselves, but...

ALLIE

Mr. Muscles here can't lift the damn thing.

JAMES

Look, I'm just saying, why's mom gotta have a giant sectional sofa when it's just her living here? I mean really, she never had all the nice stuff when we were all living with her.

JAMES looks down at MOLLY who is sitting stock still, staring at the letter in her hand.
JAMES reaches down to gently shake MOLLY's shoulder.

JAMES

Hellllooooo? Earth to Molly?

MOLLY hands the letter over her shoulder to JAMES without looking up and he begins to read it.

MOLLY

Dad's not dead.

ALLIE

What? Have you finally gone mental? Of course you already were mental, but having to sort all this shit? Can't say I blame you, but really? Dad? Of all the dead people? He's the one you think's come back?

JAMES

(still engrossed in the letter) Nuh-uh, Allie, stop.

ALLIE

James, you can't be serious. Dad's dead. Molly just found some old letters and is losing it. All those hours spent pouring over old books in that dark shoebox apartment then coming back here...no wonder she can't keep anything straight these days.

MOLLY

Allie...

JAMES

(shoving the letter into ALLIE's hands before dropping to the floor next to MOLLY) This cannot be happening, it just can't be.

ALLIE

(disinterestedly turning the letter over to examine it) So, what am I looking at?

MOLLY

A letter, from dad—

ALLIE

Gee thanks, I never would've guessed that what with his name written on the front of the envelope and all.

MOLLY

—postmarked two months after he “died.”

ALLIE

Okay, so maybe someone found it while clearing out his stuff and thought it'd be a good idea to send it for him since he obviously couldn't. I'm sure stuff like that happens all the time.

JAMES absentmindedly makes a noise of dissent.

ALLIE

Fine, maybe not all the time, but often enough. He was dead so someone else sent it for him, simple as that.

MOLLY

Yeah? Then explain why he says mother won't let us talk to him, or see him, or even, he fears, read the letters he sends.

MOLLY gathers the pile of letters and turns around to slide them in ALLIE's direction.

MOLLY

And explain why there are thirteen more, all postmarked up to four years after mother told us dad died.

MOLLY stares at ALLIE.

ALLIE picks up the pile of letters and retreats to the corner, sitting in the armchair.

Silence reigns for a moment, the three existing in their own heads, before JAMES brings them back to reality.

JAMES

You can't deny it. Mom's kept this from us all these years. She's been lying.

ALLIE

It doesn't make sense.

MOLLY

And why would it? Especially for you. You barely remember the man, so—

ALLIE

I remember enough! He was my dad too.

MOLLY

—so I wouldn't expect you to understand.

JAMES

Molly, hush.

JAMES turns to face ALLIE.

JAMES

She didn't mean it like that, not exactly anyway.

(shakes his head)

It was bad, Allie, real bad. Especially towards the end. And I only remember bits and pieces of it all. And you were even younger than I was, so it's less likely that you'd remember the little things. Or even some of the big things, honestly.

ALLIE

Okay, well if I've forgotten everything then why don't we ask mom when she comes back from the hospital tomorrow? Surely she'll remember.

MOLLY

No! Don't bring dad up with her.

JAMES

Please don't, mom won't take that well at all.

ALLIE

Why? Why shouldn't we just tell mom we found the letters and demand some answers?

JAMES

Allie, trust me that's not—

MOLLY

We can't tell mother, we can't say anything. She can't know that we know. It'll only make things worse if we talk to her about it and if we do you can kiss your chance at ever finding out the truth goodbye.

JAMES

What do we do? Good God, Molly....

MOLLY

We go find him, of course. We go find dad and ask him what really happened.

ALLIE

Oh, of course.

SCENE TWO

(Lights up on the living room and kitchen. The two rooms are separated by a wall and connected by two nearby doors that open into a hallway [that is upstage and isn't visible to the audience]. In the living room there is a large sectional sofa with a recliner on one end, a Christmas tree that is kitschy in a distinctly unironic way, and a large flatscreen tv. The kitchen is very minimalist, and more for show than utility, with a table in the middle.

A nondescript Hallmark type Christmas film is playing on the tv.)

ALLIE, MOLLY, JAMES, and MOTHER are all spaced out on the sofa, eating Christmas dinner as they watch the film.

ALLIE is sprawled out across the far end of the sofa, plate and glass long since abandoned on the floor.

MOLLY is curled up in the corner of the sofa, balancing a half empty plate on her knee while drinking from a mug.

JAMES is sat between MOLLY and MOTHER.

MOTHER is sitting on the recliner end of the sofa making disparaging commentary along with the film.

MOTHER

Oh, of course it all ends with a happily ever after. Until she realizes he's not who he said he was and leaves you stuck with...

MOTHER's speech tails off as she dozes off.

MOLLY is white-knuckling the mug in her hands.

Loud credits music comes from the tv, waking MOTHER up almost immediately.

MOTHER

(muttering again, picking up almost where she left off)

...are worthless. Always knew it. Completely worthless and this trash, ugh.

MOLLY gets up.

MOTHER's attention immediately refocuses on MOLLY.

MOTHER

Getting seconds already?

MOLLY freezes for a second.

MOLLY

No, just need more tea.

MOTHER

Good. Get me another slice of pie while you're in there. And my meds, I think it's time for my meds.

MOTHER turns her attention back to the tv.

MOLLY picks up the empty plates and drinkware before exiting the living room and entering the kitchen. She deposits them in the sink and remains standing there in distress for a moment before pulling out her phone and dialing a number.

JAMES gets up and goes to follow MOLLY.

MOTHER

Wh—

JAMES

(cuts her off, raising his mug and shaking it slightly) Need a refill too.

JAMES exits the living room and enters the kitchen.

MOLLY startles and quickly hangs up the phone before the call is picked up. She rapidly types out a message before putting her phone back in her pocket. ALLIE and MOTHER sit in silence, oblivious to the conversation in the kitchen.

JAMES

What was that?

MOLLY

Nothing.

JAMES

Okay.

MOLLY

I know it was my idea to not say anything about the letters, but I'd nearly forgotten how hard it is to live with her.

JAMES

I know what you mean. Just being in her presence is enough to make you doubt everything you believe in. It's hard not to lash out when you feel like you have to question whether every breath is the warning sign for an incoming attack.

MOLLY

I just—every single time she says something—every time she so much as looks at me—I just want to say it, ruin her Christmas like she ruined...everything.

JAMES

(imitating MOTHER)

“Why are there so many Christmas cards?
No one gets that many.”

MOTHER

Why are there so many Christmas cards? No
one gets that many.

MOLLY

Excellent question, Mother. Because that's what people do, they send Christmas cards to remind you they're thinking of you. Not that you'd understand because that would require a heart. By the way, how many Christmas cards did dad send us after he “died?” Oh, wait, I already know. At least four.

JAMES and MOLLY chuckle darkly.

ALLIE

Hey mom I was—

MOLLY

(imitating MOTHER)

“So what if this is her first Christmas
without her husband, why is she so
sad?” MOTHER

(ignoring ALLIE)

So what if this is her first Christmas without her
husband, why is she so sad?

JAMES

I wouldn't expect you to understand, Mother. After all, your ex husband isn't actually dead, is he?

ALLIE just stares at MOTHER.

The two continue to watch the film in silence.

JAMES continues laughing while MOLLY suddenly goes quiet.

MOLLY

(whispering)

Just, how could she? He didn't do anything, she didn't have to take him from us.

JAMES instantly sobers up.

JAMES

At least she didn't actually have him killed.

MOLLY and JAMES share a look.

MOLLY groans and drops her head to the table.

JAMES begins moving around the kitchen, making something.

MOLLY

(voice muffled)

He used to make me hot chocolate any time I was upset. Even when mother told him not to let me have any. And he always put a ton of marshmallows in my mug, but I'd always complain there weren't enough so he'd scoop out all of the marshmallows in his mug and put them in mine instead.

JAMES sets a mug of hot chocolate in front of Molly, places one in front of the chair adjacent to her, and sits down.

MOLLY looks up and her earlier sniffing turns to full blown tears when she notices the hot chocolate.

JAMES reaches over and squeezes MOLLY's shoulder.

The two are silent for a minute.

MOLLY

There aren't enough marshmallows.

JAMES

(snatching up his mug protectively) You'll have to fight me for these.

MOLLY

(laughing through tears) God, you're a horrible brother.

Beat.

MOLLY

I better get her that piece of pie.

(checks the time on her phone

And her meds, it is time for those.

MOLLY pushes back her chair but JAMES motions for her to stay put as he gets up instead.

JAMES

I'll do it, you stay put.

JAMES cuts a slice from a pie that was left out on the counter, places it on a plate, pockets a pill organizer from the counter, and grabs his mug from the table.

JAMES

I'm going to bring this out to her. You can rejoin us whenever you feel up to it.

MOLLY

Thanks, Jamie.

JAMES

Make that phone call I interrupted first though, okay?

JAMES exits the kitchen and enters the living room.

MOLLY pulls her phone back out and dials
a number.

JAMES gives MOTHER the pie and sits
back down on the couch.

SCENE THREE

(Lights up on the front porch of MOTHER's house. It is undecorated and empty.)

MOLLY enters through the front door carrying her bags, followed by ALLIE who is doing the same.

MOLLY

It's a good thing we picked James up from the airport so we all have an excuse to leave at the same time.

ALLIE

Yeah, I mean I'm surprised that mom didn't ask us to stay longer.

JAMES enters, rushing through the door and struggling to keep a hold on all of his stuff.

JAMES

Oh believe me, she just tried. You just had to leave me alone with her didn't you. I mean the audacity of that woman is astounding. My return ticket is nonrefundable!

MOLLY

James, you're not flying home today.

JAMES

I know that. She doesn't need to though.

ALLIE shakes her head at JAMES.

ALLIE

So are we going or what?

MOLLY

Yeah, in a minute.

ALLIE

Why wait?

JAMES

This is the last time you're going to be at this house without knowing the truth. Don't you want to sit with that for a minute? Things will never be the same and it feels like that means something big. We're finally going to find out what really happened and that journey begins the second we get in the car, so this—

MOLLY

Nope, moment's past. Sorry, James, the whole "this is your last chance to remember it as it was, not as it is" spiel would be lost on me.

MOLLY exits.

ALLIE

C'mon or we're gonna leave without you and you won't get to experience this life altering journey with us.

ALLIE exits.

JAMES remains where he is, looking back at the front door. He sighs then exits.

SCENE FOUR

(Lights up on the interior of a car that is on a busy road. There are car horns sounding occasionally, etc.)

MOLLY is in the driver's seat, paying close attention to the road. JAMES is in the passenger seat. ALLIE is in the backseat.

(The scene picks up in the middle of an ongoing conversation.)

ALLIE

Okay, so if I was too young to remember or whatever, why don't you tell me what happened?

JAMES

It's a lot, Allie.

ALLIE

We've got another fifty, sixty something hours in this car alone, surely that's more than enough time. Besides, Molly's only got like ten years worth of stuff to go off—you've even less—and

while we both know how she gets when she's telling a story, that'll probably only get us to, what, the Alaska border? That'll give you thirty minutes, give or take, to tell me anything she left out.

JAMES and ALLIE bicker back and forth before MOLLY interrupts.

MOLLY

Goddamn, will you two just shut it!

JAMES and ALLIE fall silent. Several car horns are heard honking.

MOLLY

Just let me get through Atlanta, okay? Then James can take over driving and I'll answer whatever questions you have for me, okay? Just. Please. For the love of God. Shut. Up.

SCENE FIVE

[The passage of time should be made visually apparent somehow in this scene as it takes place over the course of a couple days for the characters but just minutes for the audience. Stage directions in brackets are only a suggestion on how to do this.]

(Lights up on the same setting as the previous scene.)

JAMES is in the driver's seat, MOLLY is in the passenger seat and has partially turned to speak with ALLIE who is in the backseat.

MOLLY

I was eleven when dad left. James was seven and you were only three.

ALLIE

Really? I thought I was older when he left. I remember being like five.

MOLLY

You were five, give or take, when mom told us he died. Dad was still around occasionally for the first year or so. Then he moved out to Wyoming or somewhere and we didn't see him anymore. Then his phone calls and letters just stopped and a few weeks later mom told us he had died.

(Time passes.) [Lights black out and then fade back on, dimmer than previously to indicate a later hour.]

JAMES is still driving, but ALLIE is now in the passenger seat and MOLLY is in the backseat with her head back and an arm thrown over her eyes.]

MOLLY

They fought all the time. In the beginning the arguments were infrequent and behind closed doors. I would overhear them occasionally, but they'd always stop the second they realized one of us was around. Then, over time, the arguments became more frequent and less secret. Sometime around James's sixth birthday the arguments stopped being arguments and started becoming fights. Eventually, every little thing would set one of them off.

JAMES

Most of the fights were over the most ridiculous things. I'm pretty sure they fought over the color of my socks once.

MOLLY

Yeah, that was the school Christmas recital when you were in first grade.

ALLIE scoffs.

MOLLY

(to ALLIE)

The last fight was over you wanting a snack. Mother said no, dad said yes. She came into the kitchen and saw that dad had given you some of the cheese he was using while cooking dinner. She just lost it and the two of them went at it right in front of the three of us.

JAMES

Yeah, I was just trying to do my math homework. But they were all:

(imitating DAD)

"She's three, if she's hungry then she's hungry!"

(imitating MOTHER)

"She's not going to eat her dinner thanks to you!"

(imitating DAD)

"It's just a snack, she'll be hungry again by dinnertime."

(imitating MOTHER)

"Do you wan—"

JAMES cuts himself off, glancing over at MOLLY.

MOLLY

"Do you want her to end up fat like Molly?"

Beat.

MOLLY

It's not like she was ever going to win mother of the year....

(to ALLIE)

And through it all you were just sat there, munching on your cubes of cheese, looking so confused about why mommy and daddy were screaming all of a sudden.

JAMES

He left the week after that one.

(Time passes.) [Lights black out then fade back on, brighter than previously to indicate the next day.]

MOLLY, JAMES, and ALLIE are all wearing different clothes from previously. MOLLY is in the passenger seat and ALLIE is in the backseat.] JAMES is still the one driving.

MOLLY

I guess he was cheating on her, seeing some woman behind her back.

ALLIE

Dad was cheating on mom? I totally get why she said he died then, he would've been dead if I were mom.

MOLLY

Doesn't excuse anything though. From either of them. Why they didn't get divorced before it got to that point I'll never understand. I understand even less why mother stayed with him for so

long after she found out that dad was cheating on her. It's not like they loved each other and clearly it wasn't benefiting us for them to stay together, but—

JAMES interrupts MOLLY with a high pitch screech.

JAMES

Why are they merging from my left? Why are they coming at me from that side? Oh my god, I'm in the left lane because I don't want to deal with people merging! Why are they there?

MOLLY

James, calm down. Have you really never been on a road where they merge right?

JAMES

No, Molly, I clearly haven't!

Car horns honk a couple times.

JAMES continues to make high pitch screeching noises for a minute.

ALLIE

Are you done imitating a guinea pig now?

JAMES

Yes.

ALLIE

Good, then we can get back to the topic at hand.

(Time passes.) [Lights black out then fade back in, dimmer than previously.]

MOLLY is in the driver's seat, JAMES is in the passenger seat, and ALLIE is in the backseat.]

JAMES

After he left, any time we'd try to bring dad up mom would just shut the conversation down immediately as if she could just pretend he'd never existed.

MOLLY

And then, one evening after school, mother sat us all down and told us dad was dead.

ALLIE

I think I remember that. She said he had been in an accident.

JAMES

Convenient given that dad loved riding his motorcycle and wasn't the strictest about safety....

MOLLY

Unless one of us was with him.

JAMES

(inclined his head towards MOLLY in acknowledgement)

Unless one of us was with him. I'll never forget the day dad surprised you for your birthday by picking you up from school on his motorcycle and mom only found out when he passed her in the pickup line. She was so mad, she was threatening to call the cops the entire drive home as she raced to catch up with you two.

MOLLY

Mother almost canceled my birthday party over that.

Beat.

MOLLY

Anyway, mother said that dad was dead. No funeral because no one loved him and we wouldn't have been able to go anyway since it would've meant missing school and god forbid we miss school to mourn our dad. So that was that.

SCENE SIX

(Lights up on a hotel room. It is clean but not very welcoming. There are two queen size beds, a desk, a tv on a dresser, a closet without a door, a mini fridge, and a microwave. The room has three doors: one to the hallway, one to the bathroom, and one room next door.)

MOLLY enters through the hallway door, followed by ALLIE. They both immediately set their bags down.

MOLLY goes to the door that leads to the adjoining room and unlocks it. She then walks over to duck her head into the bathroom and makes a sound of approval.

JAMES enters through the door to the adjoining room, phone in hand typing furiously, and flops down on a bed with a groan.

JAMES

Remind me how many more hours of driving we have left?

ALLIE

Six, give or take depending on traffic and road conditions in the morning.

JAMES

Great.

MOLLY

What's wrong?

JAMES

My boss expected me back two days ago. He's not happy that I'm not there to work the New Years' Eve shift when I was scheduled for that night. And I'm losing out on so much of my paycheck, just to maybe go find a man who may or may not even be alive anymore who may not even want us!

ALLIE

Okay, that's a lot to unpack there.

MOLLY

Why would your boss, who last time I checked was a woman, expect you to be on set on New Years' Eve? Why would anyone be one set?

JAMES freezes, having not noticed his slip up until now.

JAMES

I, uh, have a second job.

ALLIE

Since when do you have time for a second job? You're always claiming to be busy on set.

JAMES

Well, I managed to fit it in. It's not cheap living in LA, you know.

MOLLY

James, is everything going alright with the film production?

JAMES

(defensively) Yeah, everything's fine.

MOLLY and ALLIE share a doubtful glance.

ALLIE

Really?

JAMES

Yes.

MOLLY

Because you're not sounding very convincing.

JAMES

I just had to get a second job to pick up some extra hours to cover a few unexpected expenses. Everyone has a few side hustles in LA. I work at a coffee shop.

MOLLY raises her eyebrows.

JAMES

And a bar. And I teach some dance classes at a community center. And I drive for Uber.
And DoorDash.

MOLLY

James! You should have said something if you were struggling. You have to tell us these things, we can't read your mind! No wonder why you're so—

JAMES

Why I'm so what, Molly?

MOLLY

Tired, why you're so tired and busy all the time.

JAMES

Sure, that's definitely what you were going to say.

ALLIE

James.

MOLLY

(softly)

You have to tell me these things, Jamie. I can't help you if I don't know that I need to.

JAMES

(finally losing it)

I don't need you to help me! You always think you can fix everything these days, god everyone thinks you're so perfect, Molly, that even you've started believing it. You can't fix everything. Clearly.

MOLLY

No, no, I know that. But I can try to figure something out and see if there's anyone—

JAMES

Since when has your method of attack been to sit back and look pretty while you get others to fix the problem? What happened to that little girl who used to actually help people because she

cared, not because she viewed life as a chess game and everyone around her a mere pawn? That's the Molly I need right now, that's the Molly who could help. But guess what, that's not you anymore.

MOLLY

I—that's just.... Well someone had to do it, someone had to start fixing things and it sure as hell wasn't gonna be mom! What would you have had me do? Sit by as our lives fell apart?

ALLIE

(interjecting)

Kinda still falling apart. Just in different ways thanks to you, as if that's any better.

MOLLY and JAMES

Not helping!

ALLIE

Nothing I say is ever worth attention, it is?

MOLLY

I'll address that in a second. Please just let us get this out before I forget where I was going with this.

(pauses)

Nope, it's gone already. Of course the things you say have value, but right now isn't the time for accusations masquerading as wisecracks.

(muttering)

Right, that's where I was going with it.

(to JAMES)

You want to accuse me of not going out of my way to help you when you wouldn't even tell me that something was wrong? When you say you don't even want my help? How does that even make sense, James? You can't just—

JAMES crosses the room and exits through the hallway door.

MOLLY

—run away from your problems and expect them to disappear when you won't tell anyone.

ALLIE stares at the door JAMES exited through.

MOLLY flops down onto the bed.

MOLLY

Don't worry, he'll be back soon enough.

ALLIE

Yeah, I know. I'm just wondering how far he'll get before he realizes I took everything out of his wallet. He's only got his driver's license and like five bucks.

MOLLY

Allie!

ALLIE

Call it security. So, what're we gonna do until he comes back?

MOLLY

No clue. Got any ideas yourself?

ALLIE Nope.

SCENE SEVEN

(Lights up on the hotel room. Some time has passed.) MOLLY and ALLIE awkwardly sit in silence.

MOLLY

So how were classes this semester? I'd meant to ask earlier, but the whole dad thing distracted me.

ALLIE

They were fine.

(pauses)

No, they weren't. That was a lie.

MOLLY

Really?

ALLIE

I don't wanna talk about it.

MOLLY looks over at ALLIE who is fidgeting.

MOLLY

Well, too bad because we're talking about it.

ALLIE

(suddenly angry)

Stop acting like you're my mother, you're not, you're just my older sister and I don't know why you think that gives you the right to meddle where you're not wanted.

MOLLY

What? I can't ask my little sister how school's going because that's somehow too personal?

ALLIE

If I don't want to talk about how school's going then
I don't have to—

MOLLY

Allie, I already know you're
failing.

ALLIE abruptly stops speaking, shock winning out over rage.

ALLIE

How do you know that?

MOLLY

It came up in conversation. I know people, you know that. Your advisor—

ALLIE

You talked to my advisor about my grades? They're not supposed to talk about that kind of stuff with random people!

MOLLY

Random people? I am not "random people," I'm your older sister. Did you really think Ben wouldn't tell me that my own sister is failing all her fucking classes?

ALLIE

Wait hold up. Ben? Since when is Dr. Brooks "Ben," since when are you on a first name basis with my advisor? How do you even know who my advisor is? I know I've never mentioned him by name.

MOLLY

We're friends, sue me for getting to know people. But we are not talking about me right now.

This is about you. You and how you're failing all of your classes, Allie. All of them. We're—I'm concerned about you.

ALLIE

(trying to get a rise out of MOLLY)

So you're fucking my advisor? That's how you know about my grades?

MOLLY

(ignoring ALLIE's comment)

Seriously, what is going on with you? You really thought it wouldn't come back to me? That my little sister is beginning to worry people with her behaviour? That she's falling behind in classes and no one ever sees her anymore? I've got people coming up to me left and right wondering if

the family is going through something because that's the only reason they can think of to explain

why my little sister just doesn't seem to care about anything when I spoke so highly of her and how determined and ambitious she's always been when I went to them about—
MOLLY cuts herself off. She sits down on one of the beds and puts her head in her hands.

ALLIE stares at her.

ALLIE About what?

MOLLY doesn't respond, just shakes her head.

ALLIE

When you went to them about what, Molly?

Silence.

MOLLY

(speaking in a rush)

They weren't going to accept you. Not to the advanced program anyway. So I—well, I thought—and I may have meddled a bit—a lot—but I knew some people—I only did it because I knew how much it meant to you, how badly you wanted to be in the program, so—

ALLIE

You mean how much mom wanted me to be in the problem.

MOLLY

What?

ALLIE

You knew how much it meant to mom that I get accepted to the program.

MOLLY

But it was what you wanted, you said you wanted it. You wanted to get into the advanced engineering program because it was the best one offered outside the Ivies.

ALLIE gets up and begins to gather up her things.

ALLIE

So you're telling me I only got in because of your stupid fucking blackmail scheme? Oh my god, is that why you're on a first na—

MOLLY

(adamantly)

Would you shut up about him, it isn't like that! And it wasn't blackmail! It wasn't...I just knew some people who knew some people and I managed to convince the right ones that you were the right choice for the program.

ALLIE

Okay so it wasn't *technically* blackmail but that doesn't make it okay. You still manipulated people using god knows what tactics to get me accepted to a program I wasn't good enough for.

ALLIE exits the room by going into the adjoining room. A thump is heard when she drops her things.

MOLLY

You were good enough for it—are good enough—they just couldn't see it! What is so wrong about that?

ALLIE

(from offstage)

I didn't want it.

MOLLY

Look me in the eyes and say that again.

ALLIE re-enters and stares straight at MOLLY.

ALLIE

I did not want to be accepted to the advanced engineering program at your university.

(looks away before whispering) I wanted to study poetry, like you.

MOLLY stares at ALLIE.

MOLLY

I am so sorry. I just thought—

ALLIE

No, you didn't think. And that's the problem. You don't ever think about how the things you do are going to affect anyone around you.

MOLLY

I'm so—

ALLIE

Sorry, yeah, I heard you the first time. Repeating it doesn't make it mean more.

MOLLY

When we get back to town I'll go talk to—

ALLIE

Molly.

MOLLY

Sorry.

(hesitantly)

Is there anything I can do to help you though? Is there anything I can do to start to fix this?

ALLIE remains silent for a moment, thinking.

ALLIE

Actually, there is. If I submit a major change in the next few days, could you try to get them to rush it through all the bureaucratic bullshit and get them to admit me to the classes I need to take even if they're full already?

MOLLY

Of course, I'll see what I can do.

(pulls out her phone)

Give me a second and I get an email sent to—

ALLIE

Not now, it can wait. We've still gotta deal with the whole dad thing.

MOLLY

Right, we should probably handle that first.

Beat.

MOLLY

I know I said it earlier, and that it doesn't mean much right now, but I am sorry. I didn't stop to think.

ALLIE

Yeah, you really need to start thinking things through. Like, seriously? Dr. Brooks?

MOLLY

I don't want to talk about it.

SCENE EIGHT

(Lights up on the hotel room. MOLLY is laying down on one of the beds, reading a book.)

JAMES enters through the door to the adjoining room, hovering near the doorway.

MOLLY

(without looking up)

I'll never be the one you come to with your problems first will I? Even if I'm the person who is in the best position to understand and help?

JAMES

You're not though.

MOLLY

I'm your older sister, I'm always going to want to help you. I worry about you constantly, James. So of course I want to help.

JAMES

And you're so fucked up and lost in your own little world where you're the center of the universe that you can't see that you aren't helping anyone.

MOLLY finally puts down the book, sitting up to look at JAMES.

MOLLY

Yeah, I know. Allie was kind enough to point that out multiple times while you were gone. I'm trying to apologize, but you're making it very difficult.

JAMES

Imagine what it's been like having to moderate for you all these years. And Allie. And mother. And literally everyone else in my life.

MOLLY

Yeah, I—

ALLIE enters, standing behind JAMES and staring pointedly at MOLLY.

MOLLY

Right. I'm sorry, James.

ALLIE walks around JAMES to stand near the foot of MOLLY's bed. She drops another book on the bed.

ALLIE

Found that with my stuff, thought you'd want it back now before I forgot.

MOLLY

Thanks?

ALLIE

Let's just all go to sleep, okay? We still have several hours of driving tomorrow so we'll talk about it in the morning.

JAMES exits.

ALLIE lingers for a moment before also exiting.

MOLLY flops back down onto the bed.

SCENE NINE

(Lights up on the hotel room which is mostly dark.) MOLLY is laying in bed, staring at the ceiling.

ALLIE enters through the door to the adjoining room.

ALLIE

(whispering)

Molly? Molly, are you still awake?

Receiving no response, ALLIE creeps forward and climbs onto the bed laying down on top of the covers next to MOLLY.

ALLIE

I'm sorry too. I didn't say that earlier and I wish I had.

After a moment MOLLY speaks, startling ALLIE.

MOLLY

Get under the covers before you freeze.

ALLIE scrambles to get under the covers.

ALLIE

(whispering)

James is sorry too, he's just not ready to admit it.

MOLLY and ALLIE stare at the ceiling in comfortable silence.

ALLIE

Do you think he's still alive?

MOLLY

I don't know what to think.

ALLIE

Do you want him to be?

MOLLY

I don't know, Allie. It's all so complicated.

ALLIE

Complicated. Yeah...I think I'm beginning to understand why you always say things are complicated instead of actually explaining.

Beat.

ALLIE

It's going to be okay.

JAMES enters through the door to the adjoining room.

MOLLY

Come on.

JAMES walks over to the bed and climbs under the covers.

MOLLY, ALLIE, and JAMES all stare at the ceiling in silence.

JAMES

What if he's dead?

MOLLY

I don't know.

ALLIE

It still changes everything.

JAMES

Nothing's going to be the same anymore, is it?

MOLLY

Nope.

SCENE TEN

(Lights up on the front porch of a cabin. It is cluttered with lots of outdoorsy winter stuff.)

MOLLY, JAMES, and ALLIE enter and slowly approach the door.

JAMES

Somebody's gotta ring the doorbell.

No one moves forward to do so.

ALLIE suddenly lunges forward, ringing the bell, before moving back behind MOLLY and JAMES.

MOLLY and JAMES turn to each other in shock before turning to look incredulously at ALLIE.

ALLIE

What? Someone had to do it otherwise we'd eventually have been found stood out here like idiots having frozen our asses off in the time it took for either of you to psych yourselves up enough to ring the damn bell.

JAMES

She's got a point....

MOLLY

I know, I'm just not sure if I'm ready to face him yet. What if he doesn't want to see us? What if he doesn't remember us? No, that's stupid—we're his kids so how could he forget us?

ALLIE

He could have Alzheimer's.

ALLIE saying this is the last straw for MOLLY whose composure breaks.

MOLLY

(spiraling into a panic)

Oh my god, he could have Alzheimer's. He could have forgotten us. He really could've forgotten us if he has Alzheimer's. What do we do then? What do we do after having driven all this way and he doesn't remember us because he has Alzheimer's?

The front door opens, revealing DAD.

DAD

Well it's probably a good thing I don't have Alzheimer's then, isn't it, Molly?

MOLLY whips around in shock to look at DAD.

JAMES and ALLIE stare at DAD but keep glancing at MOLLY.

DAD

You three should probably come in, can't have my kids stood out here freezing their asses off.

THE CALL

By Kiera King

Setting

Takes place in modern day in a run-down apartment. Physical walls as thin as paper, emotional walls as thick as leather.

Characters

Xalis: adult, mid-twenties, down on life, and down on luck. after losing most of the people they loved and the things that they own, they are staying with Bane* in an attempt to get off the ground. Has been staying with Bane” for almost a year. Unemployed, and asks for money often.

Bane: adult, early twenties, always trying to help people but it always ends to their detriment. Has let go of a lot of people in their life, and only has a soft spot for Xalis* since they’ve known each other for some time. But with patience running thin, they are close to saying the harsh truth without a filter and without regrets.

Scene 1: The Phone Call

Setting: Bedroom of a small apartment

We find Xalis sobbing in the middle of the stage. Xalis starts hearing buzzing from Xalis's phone. Xalis looks shocked, wipes their tears, clears their throat, and answers the phone.

Xalis

Hey... [pause] No, I'm great how about you? [pause] Really? No! That's great, fantastic. [pause] Me? Oh well, you know me, still doing [pauses] me. How's B? Oh, B is great. You know B is [pause] B. I sound off? What? Maybe your reception is off because I am totally on!

Xalis awkwardly chuckles they begin to sit back into the seat that they were in before.

Xalis

Why'd you call me?

After realizing that Xalis had said what they were thinking out loud they snapped back to reality and shockingly looked towards the phone.

Xalis

I meant as in why did you call me of all people? You know ever since you've been doing your own thing, I thought I would be the last person you'd think of.

Xalis pauses to listen to the response of the person on the other line.

Xalis

No, of course not. I've moved on from the past, I am totally in the moment these days. Between spontaneous adventures and late nights, I've been completely in my element. [pause] Well of course it doesn't sound like me, you and I haven't talked in 2 years, of course I'm not going to be the same person. [pause] Oh come on now, lying? I know it's been a while, but I've never been a liar, I wasn't even good at it.

There's a brief pause between Xalis and the person on the phone.

Xalis (seriously)

My question, you never answered it. [pause] Why did you call?

For a moment there is a brief pause with Xalis, Bane walks into the room but stops in the doorway to see a frozen Xalis.

Xalis

You're serious? No, it's just- [pause] I didn't- [pause]

After being interrupted a few times Xalis begins to tear up.

Xalis

It's fine. [pause] No, of course I don't. I'm happy for you.

At this moment Xalis begins to crack and more tears begin to fall.

Xalis

Hey, can we talk about this later, I have to meet up with someone soon. [pause] Yeah, we'll be in touch.

Bane knocks on the door after waiting a few seconds for Xalis to hang up the phone.

Bane

Hey there Xal!

Xalis

Bane! Oh my gosh, can I have some alone time please?

Xalis shoves their phone into their side pocket.

Bane

Like you haven't been alone long enough?

Xalis

Quit it, please? I don't have the energy for it today.

Bane

Do you want to talk about it?

Xalis

About how I'm feeling? No. With you? Hell no.

Bane

Well, that's the last time I try to help verbally.

Xalis

Since when are you helpful?

Bane

Since when are you so pitiful?

Xalis

B!

Bane

Prove me wrong if it upsets you that much.

Xalis

It's not that simple.

Bane

But you are.

Xalis gets up to leave but Bane grabs Xalis's arm.

Bane

The Xalis I know used to be complex and used to be twenty maybe even thirty steps ahead of everyone. Used to drop duds like dimes if they decided to go against you. You have proven that you stand for you against anyone else. You used to be the person who was so put together mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and now look at you. You look defeated.

Xalis

So? Why do you care?

Bane

I don't.

Bane releases Xalis's arm.

Bane

I won't care about anyone who doesn't care about themselves.

Xalis

Great, keep up the good work.

Xalis trudges to the door

Bane

Walk out that door, and you can't come back.

Xalis stops.

Bane

I shouldn't care about people that don't care about themselves, huh? Well then leave.

Xalis

You say that every time. You don't mean it this time.

Bane

Then just try it.

Bane tries to move past Xalis out the door, but Xalis grabs Bane's arm.

Bane

What? Do you actually have something to say?

Xalis's phone begins to buzz, and it is the caller from earlier. Xalis freezes in place.

Bane

So, you're not going to answer me or the phone?

Xalis stays frozen and Bane looks towards the door

Bane

If you're going to be like this, then don't-

As Bane is trying to leave, Xalis yanks Xalis's phone out of their pocket and throws it across the room.

Bane

Xal!

Xalis begins crying, shouting, and hitting Bane. Xalis tries to speak but the words are incomprehensible. Bane holds Xalis in their arms and tries to hold down Xalis.

Bane

Xal, you need to breathe.

Xalis continues to cry and begins kicking her legs around the ground as Bane continues to hold Xalis.

Bane

Xal, it's okay. You hear me? Please! Calm down!

Xalis begins to calm from looking around and stops screaming but continues to cry and looks around.

Bane

Xal, what happened? Was it the phone? Who called?

Xalis continues to sob progressively getting softer, but vocally becomes quieter

Bane

Xal.

Bane picks up Xalis by their shoulders while they are both still on the ground and faces Xalis

Bane

You have to tell me what's going on.

Xalis lightly escaped from Bane's arms and walked to a dresser with a locked drawer. Xalis unlocks the dresser and upon opening it Xalis drops to their knees. Bane follows behind Xalis, and does not look into the box, but closes the box instead.

Bane

How bad is it?

Xalis shakes their head while sobbing in tears

Bane

Then what's-

Xalis

It's not just some one thing that's bad... B... I'm at my end. Everything that I could have been has finally been taken away from me.

Bane

It's never going to be that way no matter what-

Xalis

Oh, screw you. You don't know what it's like much less what's going on. You think you know me so well and how I feel but you only know so much because you're nosy. Because you're always in my business. You're always trying to check on me and what I'm doing. You let me stay here and contribute nothing.

Bane

If I'm not here for you then who will be?

Xalis

I didn't ask for anyone to be here!

Xalis's anger turns into tears almost simultaneously.

Xalis

I never asked.... [sobs] I never asked for your help. I never asked for you to care. And as badly as I treat you, you still have the gall to stand there and say you care.

Bane stands there frozen and speechless at Xalis's words

Xalis

Do you wanna know what was said on that phone call, huh? That phone call was just a phone call. A consistent notification that goes off for as long as I ignore it. A notification with a contact name that triggers me into a state of fear and panic. A notification that has the ability to make my entire being filled with anxiety. That's all it was just a phone call.

Xalis wipes their tears and walks towards the door.

Xalis

Don't follow me, you're not supposed to care remember?

Xalis walks out of the door and closes it upon exit. Once the door closes Bane puts their hand on their head while sitting on the ground, still in a daze of disbelief of what transpired.

Xalis

And don't worry, I won't come back.

END

MY SIN TO HIDE

By Christina Ricks

Characters

Michael Davis Sr. - 45 Year old Loving father, husband, and proud owner of Davis Dentistry. His community views him as a perfect God fearing man who has life all figured out, but the guilt of a sin he committed weighs on him heavily.

Michelle Davis - 44 Year old Loving wife and mother who places Morgan, Michael Jr & Michael Sr. before herself. She has known her husband since highschool, so she is very loyal to him and believes that he could never do wrong.

Morgan Davis- 19 year old college sophomore who is the oldest child of Michael and Michelle. She loves her family dearly and tries to come see them every holiday. She is smart and sometimes sassy. She was raised to be perfect, so she tries her hardest to hide flaws from her parents.

Michael Davis Jr. (Mj)-17 year old youngest child of Michael and Michelle. Sometimes he feels that he is left in his sister's shadow, but overall he is a fun loving kid and annoying little brother.

Tiffany- 20 year old college sophomore who is best friends with Morgan. She doesn't have much family or many other friends because most view her as a pretty, but unapproachable girl.

Pastor Peter- Pastor to the Davis family and a shoulder to lean on for Michael in his times of despair.

Locations

Wealthy home in buckhead Atlanta Ga.

An african american church in Atlanta Ga titled Hold my Mule while I shout for the Lord ministries.

Act 1 , Scene 1

Setting: The kitchen of the Davis's family three story home in the suburbs of Buckhead Ga. Lights rise on Michael Davis Sr. and Pastor Peter having a friendly conversation.

MICHAEL SR.

It's always a joy to have you stop by Pastor Peter. Please, let me pour you a glass of water.

Michael Sr. Pours a glass of water and hands it to the pastor.

PASTOR PETER

Thank you for the glass Michael. I came by to ask you an important question.

MICHAEL SR. (*nervously*)

Okay, what would you like me to answer?

PASTOR PETER

As you know, Deacon Duncan passed away last month and we still need an honorable man to take his place. Since you and your family have been members of Hold my Mule while I shout for the Lord ministries for twelve years, I was wondering if you would do me the honor of being my head deacon.

MICHAEL SR.

Wow I...I don't even know what to say. The title of being a deacon is such a huge responsibility.

PASTOR PETER

You are one of the most honorable men in the ministry and I trust you to be my head deacon. You and your family are as close to perfect as anyone could be!

MICHAEL SR.

Thank you Pastor, I would be honored to serve as deacon in the ministry.

PASTOR PETER

Praise the Lord! I'll have the church secretary meet with you soon about your duties as a deacon.

Pastor Peter rises to exit the house, while Michelle enters

MICHELLE

Hi Pastor! Honey, Morgan just called and said that she will be bringing a friend to our thanksgiving dinner tomorrow...and before you say anything, I already told her it was fine.

MICHAEL SR. (*slightly aggravated*)

Thanksgiving day is normally reserved for the Davis family only, but since you already told her it was fine I guess I won't complain. Now excuse me while I show Pastor Peter to the door.

*Michael Sr. and Pastor Peter walk toward the front door and Pastor Peter exits the home.
The stage goes into a blackout.*

Act 1 , Scene 2

Setting: The dining room of the Davis home on thanksgiving day. Lights Rise on Michelle and Michael Jr setting up the table for the thanksgiving feast.

MICHELLE

Hey Mj can you add a fifth plate and silverware to the table? Your sister is bringing a friend to dinner today.

MICHAEL JR.

Oh for real? Does dad know? You know he hates surprises.

MICHELLE

Yes son, your father knows. I told him yesterday while Pastor Peter was here.

MICHAEL JR.

Well shit, If I knew we could bring a tag along I would have invited my girlfriend over! It's not fair that Morgan gets to break all the rules and I have to follow them like a good little puppy.

MICHELLE

Son, watch your mouth and finish setting the table!

While Michelle and Michael Jr. set the table, Morgan and Tiffany walk on stage and stand by the front doorstep of the Davis home before they ring the doorbell.

MORGAN

Girl I am so not ready for this family dinner today. How can I tell my parents that I want to change my major on a day that's supposed to be about thankfulness? I can hear my dad now

Morgan deepens her voice to mimic her father

“ Now Morgan, today is about being thankful. It's not about what you want or how you feel. Matter of fact, back in my day kids weren't allowed at the grown folks table until they had graduated college and paid their own bills.” *Morgan and Tiffany giggle at the impersonation*

TIFFANY

Well at least you have a family to spend thanksgiving with. I'm just glad I don't have to spend today with my hateful adoptive mother cause I'm definitely not thankful for her.

MORGAN

Yea you're right. I guess you should ring the doorbell cause I'm freezing like a frozen dinner out here.

Tiffany rings the doorbell and Michelle rushes over to the door from the kitchen table to open the door for the girls.

MICHELLE

Awe my baby girl! Come on in here and give your mother a hug. I missed you sweet pea!

Michelle and Morgan share a tight hug as if they have not seen each other in years.

MICHELLE

And this must be your special guest you were telling me about! Your name is Tiffany, right?

TIFFANY

Yes ma'am. Morgan, you didn't tell me your mother looked young enough to be your sister!
You are gorgeous Mrs. Davis.

MICHELLE

Awe, you are too kind! Keep complimenting me like that and you're gonna earn yourself two slices of my famous sweet potato pie after dinner.

The girls laugh as Michelle motions them into the house and walks into the kitchen

MICHELLE

Mj! Babe! Morgan and her friend are finally here! Come on and introduce yourselves.

Michael Jr and Michael Sr enter, but Michael Sr has a sudden look of shock on his face and tries to hide himself behind the refrigerator door.

MICHAEL JR.

Nice to meet you tiffany... and I guess I'm glad to have you home again sis. *Morgan and Michael Jr share a playful sibling hug*

MICHELLE

Babe are you hiding behind the fridge to stay cool? You know we have a thermostat for that right?

MICHAEL SR. *(sarcastically)*

Ha! Okay Kevin Hart, I see you got jokes. Anyway, I'm glad to have you back home baby girl. I'm assuming this is your friend who is staying for dinner?

Michael extends his hand to Tiffany for a quick and awkward handshake

MORGAN

Yes Daddy this is Tiffany. Tiffany, this is my mom, father and brother. They're an interesting bunch, but they're mine.

MICHELLE

Now that we're all acquainted, why don't y'all move to the table while I check on the turkey in the oven?

Morgan, Michael Jr, Tiffany, and Michael Sr. all move to the dining room table while stage lights fade.

Act 1 , Scene 3

Setting: The dining room of the Davis home where Morgan, Michelle, Tiffany, and Michael Sr. & Jr are sitting at the dining room table full of food. Lights rise on them as they start to talk over their food.

MICHELLE

It took me three days to cook this food so I really hope you all enjoy. Babe would you mind praying over the food?

MICHAEL SR.

Okay, everyone grab hands and bow your heads.

Everyone at the table bows their heads and holds hands. Michael Sr. begins to speak in an old baptist preacher tone.

Sweet baby Jesus or daddy God as some saints like to call you, we just want to take this time out to give thanks on thanksgiving day. Thank you for this food my wife slaved over ...or so she claims, thank you for bringing my baby girl home even though she brought a stranger with her, and thank you Lord for my son finally making it to the twelfth grade cause you know I was worried about him.

The table begins to giggle and make side eyes to Michael Sr.

Okay okay, in all seriousness, thank you God for all of my family being under one roof on this special day. They mean more to me than they know. In Jesus name I pray, amen MORGAN, MICHELLE, MICHAEL JR, and TIFFANY AMEN!

MICHAEL JR.

Good prayer Dad, even though you tried to roast me like a pack of peanuts in front of Morgan and her friend.

MICHELLE

Mj that moment has passed, let's focus on something more positive like what we're thankful for. I'll start, I'm thankful for my cooking skills because without them we would all be sitting in a restaurant instead of together at our own table. Babe, what are you thankful for?

MICHAEL SR.

Well besides being thankful for my family, I'm thankful to be offered the position as head deacon at the church.

MICHELLE

Oh wow honey that's great! Is that why pastor Peter was over yesterday?

MICHAEL SR.

Yes, he said that he needed a replacement for Decon Duncan so he chose me because he believes that our family is as close to perfect as anyone could be... but enough about me and my accomplishment, Mj what are you thankful for son?

MICHAEL JR

I'm thankful that I'll be graduating highschool in May because I'm tired of being the only young person living in this house.

MORGAN

Bro you're such a complainer! Now that Mj has had his two seconds of fame, I'm thankful to have a small break from college and to be back at home with my best friend.

MICHAEL SR.

I hope you're also thankful for your college education because Lord knows it isn't cheap. Did you know that when I was your age I had to work two jobs just to pay for my education?

I had to slav-

MICHELLE

Babe, babe, if she wanted to hear a lecture she would have stayed on campus!

MICHAEL SR.

Okay, Okay now that we have all said what we're thankful for let's dig in!

MORGAN

Wait Dad! Tiffany didn't get a chance to speak.

Michael Sr. Rolls his eyes as if he's annoyed by Tiffanys presence

MICHAEL SR.

Right, Right, why don't you go ahead and say what you're thankful for Tamika.

TIFFANY (*in a sassy tone*)

It's tiffany!

MICHAEL SR.

Okay tilapia go ahead!

Tiffany rolls her eyes and Michael Sr. tries to avoid making eye contact with her

TIFFANY

I'm thankful for my best friend Morgan and for you all being kind enough to share your family thanksgiving dinner with me. I never had family dinner growing up so this is nice to be a part of.

MICHELLE

How sweet! We're glad to have you here sweetheart. Please disregard my husband, he didn't know you were coming until yesterday. He's not good with surprises.

MICHAEL SR.

Enough about me!! Let's dig in and eat before the food gets too cold.

Everyone at the table begins to eat and try to enjoy each other's company, but everyone becomes quiet and slightly awkward.

MICHELLE

Soooo has anything interesting happened to anyone lately?

MICHAEL JR.

Yea, actually I was nominated by my classmates to run for homecoming king next semester because apparently a lot of girls at school think i'm fine and-

MICHAEL JR.

Son, the dinner place isn't the place to talk about little highschool girls who just want to sleep with you. I would much rather hear about Morgan's college classes.

Michael Jr. rolls his eyes and Morgan begins to look nervous.

MORGAN

Oh daddy, you don't want to hear about my classes. It's just the same ole same ole.

MICHAEL SR.

Of course I want to hear about your classes, my future dentist! Lord knows I can't wait to see you follow in my footsteps. It's going to be a great day when I can retire and hand the keys to Davis Dentistry over to you.

MICHELLE (*jokingly*)

Well babe, you could always hand the keys over to Mj...that is if he ever learns to take school seriously.

Everyone at the table laughs

MICHAEL JR.

Are you all gonna pick on me all day or actually finish your food?

MICHAEL SR.

Oh chill out son! Now back to Morgan, Sweetheart, go ahead and tell me about the classes you're taking. Is the chemistry class giving you problems?

MORGAN (*nervously*)

Of course not dad.... um tiffany is a science major and she's really good at it. You should ask her about any questions concerning science.

TIFFANY

Awe, that's so kind of you to say bestie. I'm just trying to finish school before it finishes me.

MICHAEL SR.

Well according to the stomach poking through your shirt you've been finishing more than school. Perhaps cookies, cakes, and pies are subjects in school now.

Tiffany's mouth drops and everyone at the table looks shocked.

MORGAN

Daddy are you serious!?! How dare you sit at this table and fat shame my best friend. Life would be boring if everyone was shaped like a lowercase letter L.

MICHELLE

Tiffany I am so sorry sweet girl, I don't know what has got into my husband today.

MICHAEL JR.

Dad, are your shoes untied? Cause you're trippin right now.

MICHAEL SR.

I will not sit at this table and let you all disrespect me as the head of this household! This is my house where I pay the bills and I have the right to speak my mind. When you kids leave my home and pay for your own you can say whatever you wish to. But as of now we're going to sit here like a normal family and finish this damn meal.

MORGAN (*beginning to cry*)

Uhh! This is why I hate coming home. Daddy it's so hard to talk to you about anything without you turning it into a lecture or some discussion about you being the man of the house who should be respected regardless of the foul things stated.

MICHAEL SR.

What are you getting at Morgan? You and your brother can come and talk to me about anything.

MICHAEL JR.

That's cap! I try to talk to you all the time but you always seem to overlook me.

MICHAEL SR.

Stop being so dramatic son, this is a conversation between your sister and I. Now what do you mean by "it's so hard to talk to me" Morgan?

MORGAN

I mean that I feel like I can't talk to you about anything. When I try to tell you something you take it personally or turn it into a lecture about me being ungrateful.

MICHAEL SR.

It seems like you're feeling froggy because your little friend is here with you, but why don't you jump by telling me something new so I can prove how easy it is to talk to me.

MICHELLE

This conversation is getting messy, let's just finish eating this food I slaved over.

MORGAN

No mom, let me prove just how hard it is to talk to him.

MICHAEL SR.

Go ahead Morgan!

MORGAN

Daddy I don't want to follow in your footsteps and be a dentist! Becoming a dentist has always been your dream for me and I followed along because I've always hated to disappoint you. I'm barely staying afloat in my classes and I feel like I'm drowning daily.

MICHAEL SR.

Wow, oh wow. I wanted you to follow in my footsteps to give you a secure future that I had to create for myself. Do you know how many college students would love to have a job already set for them once they graduate? If you decline to become a dentist and take over our

family dentistry just what will you do with your life? Live off of me and your mother until we die?

MORGAN

No Daddy, I want to be a dancer! Since I was five years old I've adored dancing and being in my dance classes but you always overlooked that fact about me because it didn't agree with the image you had of me in your head. I have always dreamed of going to New York to study dance. I don't want to be a dentist or take your place at Davis Dentistry.

MICHAEL SR.

And just what are you going to do if you can't get a job with your dance degree? Become a stripper?

Morgan is shocked by her fathers words and begins to cry. The table falls silent and everyone except for Michael Sr. has a look of shock on their face.

TIFFANY

With all due respect, you're an asshole Mr. Davis!

MICHAEL SR.

Excuse me? This is a matter between family and we did not ask for an outsiders opinion. Matter of fact, I don't even know why you're here. My wife and I did not invite you, you're just our daughters tag along, or judging by your clothing a future stripper in training yourself.

TIFFANY

My appearance didn't seem to bother you when I was in your hotel room four months ago.

MICHELLE, MORGAN, and MICHAEL JR. WHAT!?

MICHELLE

Michael Davis Sr. WHAT THE HELL IS THIS LITTLE GIRL TALKING ABOUT?

MICHAEL SR.

Babe, she's obviously lying or has me confused with someone else.

TIFFANY

Morgan, Mrs. Davis, and Mj, I have tried to hold my tongue out of respect but I just can't take it anymore.

MICHAEL SR.

You need to leave our home immediately, homewrecker!

TIFFANY

I've ruined some apartments, but I've never been a homewrecker!

MICHELLE

SOMEONE BETTER SAY SOMETHING QUICK BEFORE I SET IT OFF IN HERE!

TIFFANY

Back in august I met your husband at a hotel bar and we began to chat about how long it was taking the bartender to bring our drinks. He asked me how old I was and complimented me on my little black dress. I noticed that there was no ring on his finger and we both had a few drinks. Before I knew it I was in his hotel room and we were making love...well lust. The next morning I woke before he did and noticed a wedding ring on his nightstand. I felt terrible for sleeping with a man who I didn't know was married so I grabbed my things and ran back to campus. I swore that I would never tell anyone about that night because I was too young to be at the bar anyway and I didnt want to get in trouble for having a fake ID. I thought I would never see Michael again until I came here and realized that he's Morgan's father. Morgan and I have only been best friends for a few months so I was completely unaware of what you all looked like. I am so sorry for the damage that I unknowingly caused, all I can do now is ask for your forgiveness.

MICHELLE

Wait, Wait did you say August? Michael, weren't you at the Dentist convention in August?

MICHAEL SR.

Babe I-

MICHELLE

No, No don't "babe" me! Now I realize why you didn't pick up when I called you that night. Normally when you go to the hotel conventions you call me and say goodnight but apparently you didn't call me that night because you were too busy screwing our daughter's friend.

MICHAEL SR.

No baby, please let me expl-

MICHELLE (*angrily*)

Now I see why you've been acting differently since you saw Tiffany...Wait did you two use protection that night?

TIFFANY (*crying*)

No...We didn't but I sure wish we would have.

MICHELLE

Tiffany, are you....are you umm.. are you pregnant?

TIFFANY (*still crying*)

Yes... Yes ma'am I am pregnant with Michael's child.

MICHELLE

Which explains why your stomach is poking through your shirt as Michael mentioned earlier. I...I can't handle this right now I have to go.

Michelle cries and runs out of the room to go upstairs.

MORGAN

Really Daddy? You cheated on mom with my best friend? What happened to all those lectures about being Christ-like and perfect? You always lectured me and Mj about being good christians and you're not even one yourself. I think I'm gonna be sick.

Morgan exits the room and Tiffany follows behind her to make sure she is ok.

MICHAEL SR.

Well I guess it's just me and you now son. Seems like I've successfully chased away all of the women at the table.

MICHAEL JR.

Nah dad it's just you. I can't sit here and look at you knowing what you did to this family. I feel embarrassed to share a name with such a man who could cheat on his wife with his daughter's best friend and get her pregnant . Your life is nothing more than a wild episode of Maury now dad.

Michael Jr. rises from the table and walks out. Michael Sr. is left sitting at the table with a look of sorrow on his face.

MICHAEL SR.

God, what have I done?

Stage lights dim into a blackout.

Act 1 , Scene 4

Setting: Hold my Mule while I shout for the Lord ministries where pastor Peter is sitting on one of the seats in the church. Michael Sr. Walks in to speak with the pastor.

MICHAEL SR.

Uhh, Hey Pastor....

PASTOR PETER

Well if it isn't my new head deacon! Hey Michael, what brings you here on thanksgiving? Shouldn't you be eating with your family or watching the game?

MICHAEL SR.

I really need to talk to someone right now and you're the first person I thought to talk to.

PASTOR PETER

You can talk to me about anything Michael, what's on your mind?

Michael Sr. begins to cry and slump in a seat next to Pastor Peter.

MICHAEL SR. *(sobbing)*

I...I..I made a huge mistake Pastor. I- I- I can't breathe right now I feel like my guilt is crushing me!

PASTOR PETER

Please Breathe! Breathe! Tell me what happened.

MICHAEL SR.

Four months ago I went to the annual dentist convention which was held at a local hotel. While there I had a few drinks to relieve some stress I had been experiencing, and I noticed a beautiful young lady staring at me. I walked over and asked her about her age and complimented her dress and she complimented my suit. After exchanging compliments we talked for an hour before we decided to go upstairs and sleep together. I was drunk and I left my wedding ring on my nightstand so she was unaware that I was married. Now I feel terrible because thirty minutes ago I found out that she's Morgan's best friend from college and she's pregnant with my baby. Honestly pastor I have been carrying this guilt for the past four months and I made a terrible mistake... I...I guess it was my sin to hide.

PASTOR PETER

Michael I-

MICHAEL SR.

You must think I'm nothing more than a failed christian. Just yesterday you said that my family seemed to be perfect, but honestly we're not. I raised my kids to be perfect because that's how my mother raised me. I never had a father to model myself after so I'm doing the best that I can! I love my wife but my lust may have caused me to lose the only woman that I've ever been in love with. I...I..can't be your deacon pastor. I'm way too flawed and honestly I feel like I don't even deserve that title or the love of my amazing family. All they ever did was love me and I chose to be selfish and tear us apart.

PASTOR PETER

I don't think you're a failed Christian and It's okay if you don't want to be my deacon. You made a mistake, but I don't think you should beat yourself up about it! Being a Christian doesn't mean you're perfect, it means you acknowledge that you're flawed and depend on God to help you make your crooked roads straight and your wrongs right. The bible states in Romans 3:23 that all men have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. One sin doesn't make you a sinner.

MICHAEL SR.

So even though I sinned, God still loves me?

PASTOR PETER

Yes, It's just like a regular relationship between a good parent and their child. If your child did something to upset you, you wouldn't stop loving them because of one tiny mitsake. God has an unconditional love for you which means that it doesn't fade just because you did something wrong or went off path. All you have to do is repent and ask for forgiveness. Matter of fact Psalm 103:12 states that God has removed our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. That means that he doesn't view you as the sin you committed, he views you as his child that he loves so dearly.

Michael Sr. wipes his tears and gives Pastor Peter a huge hug.

MICHAEL SR

Thank you Pastor, I really needed to hear that.

PASTOR PETER

That's what I'm here for. Guilt can feel like a dark cloud hanging over you day in and day out so you have to learn to let it go. I know it's easier said than done, but you must take it one day at a time.

MICHAEL SR.

Yes Sir... What do I do now?

PASTOR PETER

If I were you I would go back home and ask my family for forgiveness, you can't change your past but you can change the present. Have a heart to heart with your family and let them know that it's okay to be flawed, being perfect is way too much pressure anyway!

MICHAEL SR.

You're right, pastor! I'm going to go home and try to right my wrongs.

PASTOR PETER

Be safe on your way out and please try to enjoy the rest of your thanksgiving. Even in times of trouble, there's always something to be thankful for.

*Michael Sr. and Pastor Peter hug each other and stand up from their seats. Michael exits the church the same way he came in and the stage dims to a blackout. **Act 1, Scene 5***

Setting: Lights rise on the dining room of the Davis home where Michael Sr, Michelle, Morgan, Tiffany, and Michael Jr are sitting at the dining room table.

MICHAEL SR.

I know that I'm the last person any of you want to see right now, but I want to right my wrongs in the very spot that the revelations took place. First I want to apologize to you Michelle because I have failed you and the vows we made on our wedding day. I love you dearly babe and I will fight to the death of me for our marriage.

Michael Sr walks over to Michelle to give her a hug but she pushes him away.

MICHELLE

Do you think that one tiny apology is going to make me forgive you? YOU CHEATED ON ME WITH A COLLEGE STUDENT!!! All I ever did was love you and place you before myself, but I see that was my first mistake.

MICHAEL SR.

Babe I know one apology won't change my mistakes, but it's a start! Please allow me to-

Michelle

I need some fresh air. I can't handle this right now.

Michelle exits from the dining room and walks outside to the front porch. While she walks Michael Sr. begins to talk to his children and Tiffany.

MICHAEL SR.

Morgan, Mj, I want to apologize to you two for bringing chaos to our family. I've always raised you two to be perfect, but I have to admit that I was wrong for doing so. Everyone in this room is human, which means we are going to mess up at some point in time. Pastor Peter told me that God loves his children even when they screw up so I promise to love you two even when you screw up. From this day forward our family will no longer be considered perfect, we will be considered perfectly imperfect.

MORGAN

So does this mean that I can become a professional dancer now?

MICHAEL SR.

You can be whatever you want to be babygirl! I'm no longer going to force my dream on you. It would be wrong of me to deny you the opportunity to chase your dream.

MORGAN (*slightly crying*)

Wow Daddy I never thought I'd heard such words from you. I love you!

MICHAEL SR.

I love you too my sweet girl!

Michael Sr. and Morgan hug while Michael Jr and Tiffany watch.

MICHAEL JR.

It's cute that y'all are having a coming to Jesus moment, but I'm sure nothings going to change once this Thanksgiving day ends.

MICHAEL SR.

Son I-

MICHAEL JR.

Nah dad, it seems like you always overlook me and place Morgan's feelings over mine. You and I share the same name but I feel like that's all we share. I want to know that you love me and I want to know that you care.

Michael Jr begins to cry and falls into his fathers arms.

MICHAEL SR.

Son I am so sorry, I never knew you felt like this. I can't change the past but please stick with me as I change the present. I love you more than you know and I apologize for not telling you sooner. As today has exposed, I am a deeply flawed man who is still figuring out how to be perfectly imperfect.

MICHAEL JR.

Pops I don't expect you to be perfect, I just expect you to be my loving-caring father who will be by my side as I finish highschool and go into college next year.

MICHAEL SR.

I promise to be that Son, I promise!

After Michael Sr. and Michael Jr. embrace each other the room falls silent and Tiffany is sitting with her head hung low as if she feels like an outsider among the family.

MICHAEL SR.

Finally, I would like to apologize to you Tiffany for my behavior today. It was wrong of me to talk about your appearance and to call you a homewrecker. I also have to apologize for sleeping with you four months ago. I basically led you to believe that I was a single man, but I was wrong to do so. Just tell me what you want to do moving forward and I'll adjust to you. If you decide to have the baby...well our baby I will own up to my mistakes and provide for the child as I have provided for Morgan and Mj.

TIFFANY

Thank you for owning up to your mistake Michael... I mean Mr. Davis. Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do concerning the baby. I feel like the smart choice is to abort him or her, but honestly It would kill me to destroy something living inside of me. I'm also scared to tell my adoptive mother that I'm pregnant because she already thinks I'm a whore. All my life I've felt alone, but since I've had this baby growing inside of me I have felt like I finally have a reason to belong in this world, I feel like I have someone to live for.

Tiffany begins to weep and Morgan comforts her.

MORGAN

Awe bestie I'm here for you. You don't have to go through this pregnancy alone.

TIFFANY

I'm still in shock that you're not mad with me or refusing to be my friend. I mean I unknowingly slept with your dad and this baby in my stomach is your half sibling.

MORGAN

We all make mistakes Tiffany! I'm not going to stop being your friend because you made a mistake unknowingly. I would be a terrible friend to leave you during your toughest moment.

MICHAEL SR.

Yes, like Morgan said you don't have to go through this journey alone. We both made the baby so we both will take care of our responsibility.

TIFFANY

Thank you all so much, this thanksgiving is ending much better than it started.

Michael Sr. Tiffany, Michael Jr., and Morgan all smile and begin to feel the tension in the room fade.

MICHAELS SR

I'm grateful that you all have forgiven me. If you'll excuse me I'm going to go find your mother.

Michael walks out of the dining room in search of Michelle. Stage lights dim into a blackout.

Act 1 , Scene 6

Setting: Lights rise on the front doorstep of the Davis Residence. Michelle is sitting on a step and Michael Sr. walks out of the door to talk with her.

MICHELLE

If you came out here to apologize again, DON'T! I'm really not in the mood for your excuses and guilt driven apology.

MICHAEL SR.

So you're going to throw away twenty years of marriage because of one mistake?

MICHELLE

No not one mistake Michael, a HUGE MISTAKE! You slept with another woman and got her pregnant. Do you know how embarrassed I will be when the community finds out about this? I'm going to look like an insecure woman if I stay in this marriage with you after you disrespected me by sleeping with somebody else.

MICHAEL SR.

Now let's not get into mistakes, because I stayed with you when you made a huge one.

MICHELLE

No! No Michael, do not bring that back up! We promised to never speak on that again.

MICHAEL SR.

No Michelle you need to be reminded of the way I stood by you seventeen years ago when you cheated on me, had another man's baby, and named him Michael jr thinking that I wouldn't notice.

MICHELLE (*yelling angrily*)

Michael! SHUT UP RIGHT NOW! YOU KNOW THAT WE PROMISED TO NEVER SPEAK OF THAT SITUATION.

Michelle lowers her voice to prevent the children inside from hearing her

As far as I'm concerned he is your son because you are the only father he's ever known.

MICHAEL SR.

I didn't bring that up to make you angry, I brought it up to prove that you should forgive me because I forgave you. Let's be real babe, we prance around acting like we're the perfect couple but we're not. We have both made mistakes but we somehow seem to stick by each other regardless. When I met you back in the twelfth grade I knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. You're the only woman for me and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I lost you. I don't want to lose what we have Michelle, I don't!

MICHELLE

Were you thinking about what we have when you were sleeping with Tiffany?

MICHAEL SR.

Were you thinking about Morgan and I when you cheated seventeen years ago?

MICHELLE

Michael I don't want to fight, especially not on thanksgiving day. Can we just promise to go to therapy and see where our relationship goes from there? I may not forgive you today but as time moves on I could learn to release the hurt you've caused within me.

MICHAEL SR.

At this point I'll take what I can get. I'll fight for this marriage until the day I die. *Michael Sr. hugs Michelle but she doesn't hug him back*

MICHELLE

I'm gonna head to the kitchen to prepare the sweet potato pie for the kids. I guess you can come in and grab a piece if you're still hungry.

MICHAEL SR.

Thanks, I'll be in shortly

Michelle moves to the kitchen and Michael sits on the step in front of their front door. As he is sitting Pastor Peter walks by.

MICHAEL SR.

Hey Pastor!

PASTOR PETER

Oh hey Michael! I was just on the way home to grab some dinner before it gets cold.

MICHAEL SR.

Oh okay! Thanks again for all of your help earlier. After our conversation I apologized and received forgiveness from everyone except my wife.

PASTOR PETER

Give it time Michael, your mistake created a wound for your wife that is still fresh, you have to give it time to heal. I hate to sound like a poster from Hobby Lobby, but as they say, time heals all wounds.

MICHAEL SR.

I understand pastor, but it hurts to know that she doesn't forgive me.

PASTOR PETER

Let me put it to you this way, if I had a slice of pie and wanted you to have my slice, I would give it to you in hopes that you would accept it. If I give it to you and you refuse to eat it I can't be angry with you about your decision.

MICHAEL SR. *(Jokingly)*

Are you saying I should give my wife some pie?

PASTOR PETER

No, I'm saying when you give an apology to someone you can not worry if they will receive it or not, you must just give from the bottom of your heart. Forgiveness is for you Michael, not the other person. When you asked for forgiveness you freed yourself from the shackles of the guilt and shame that you have felt for four months.

MICHAEL SR.

You're right pastor, I guess the main thing you're saying is that all I had to do was ask for forgiveness, it's not my job to worry about my family receiving it or not.

PASTOR PETER

Yes, it may sound selfish, but most times forgiveness is for ourselves and not the other person. When we ask for forgiveness we acknowledge that we were wrong and free ourselves from the guilt and shame we once had.

MICHAEL SR.

Thank you for the wisdom pastor, I know I say it all the time, but I really do appreciate you.

Michael Sr. and Pastor Peter share a hug and Pastor Peter begins to walk away.

MICHAEL SR.

I'll see you soon Pastor!

PASTOR PETER

See ya Soon Michael!

Michael waves and stands by the door as if he's about to walk in. Before he walks in he looks up as if he is looking towards God.

MICHAEL SR.

God, please give me strength to handle my pride as I continue to deal with the consequences of the sin I had to hide.

After Michael speaks he opens the front door of the home and goes back into his home. The stage lights dim and fade to black.

END OF PLAY