2009

THE BEST New Playwrights

Edited by Lawrence Harbison
Introduction by Gina Gionfriddo

A Smith and Kraus Book

2009

The Best New Playwrights

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CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRIGHTS
SERIES

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FOREWORD

The 2008–2009 theatrical season was one of the strongest in my memory. Even Broadway chipped in, with more plays in one season than one usually sees in five. Unfortunately, none were by new playwrights, so I couldn't include any of these fine plays in this volume, but I would like to start off by thanking the checkbooks who allowed me to see wonderful plays on Broadway like Neil LaBute's *reasons to be pretty* (no capitals, For Some Strange Reason), Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage*, Michael Jacobs's *Impressionism*, and Moisés Kaufman's *33 Variations*. I got to see stars like Jane Fonda, Jeff Daniels, Marcia Gay Harden, James Gandolfini, Jeremy Irons, and Joan Allen, and journeyman faves like "downtown theater" queen Marin Ireland and Zach Grenier, who was in not one but two Broadway plays in the same season: Roundabout's revival of *A Man for All Seasons* (in which he played Cromwell) and *33 Variations* (he received a Tony nomination for his performance as Beethoven). Now, if only some of these stars (i.e., actors with big TV or film reputations) would decide to "risk" doing a play by a bonafide new playwright, God would be in his heaven and all would be right with the world, as far as I'm concerned. Ah, well. Maybe next year.

I have been editing Smith and Kraus's annual Best New Playwrights anthology since 2000. This year's edition is the best one I have ever done. I know, I know: I say that every year; but really, you are about to read some truly extraordinary new plays by new playwrights.

Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* is a comedy about an American family — a Korean-American family. Mom has decided to throw a party for dear old Dad, a traditional Korean sixtieth birthday party called a *hwangap*. Dad left the family years ago to return to Korea, but she has persuaded him to return to the United States for the party, much to the consternation of their daughter and eldest son. Their youngest son, who has serious emotional problems, thinks it's kinda cool that Dad is home after all these years. With a light touch and just the right amount of sentiment, Suh explores the reasons why the complex birthday boy left his family, why he has decided to return, and

the effect this has on his family. This terrific play was produced Off Broadway jointly by The Play Company and the Ma-Yi Theatre Company, a prominent New York producer of new plays by Asian-American playwrights.

Rajiv Joseph's *All This Intimacy* just missed my cut last year, but I was really looking forward to Second Stage's production of his next play, *Animals Out of Paper.* I was not disappointed. This is another comedy! Things are lightening up! Its characters are an origami artist, a high-school teacher who is her biggest fan, and a teenaged origami prodigy. Teacher persuades artist to coach his prize pupil, who turns out to be a folding genius but who has a serious chip on his shoulder, which causes him to let on that he doesn't care at all about his great gift. Will the artist make her charge realize what a gift he has? Will the lovelorn teacher win the heart of his lady love? Read the play and find out.

I always enjoy my trips to Abingdon Theatre Company and have chosen two plays from them in years past (Lynne Kaufman's brilliant *Daisy in the Dreamtime* and artistic director Jan Buttram's hilarious *Texas Homos*). This year's Abingdon play is Steven Leigh Morris's gripping drama *Beachwood Drive*, whose central character is a single mom from Russia who is working as a prostitute in Los Angeles for an unscrupulous madam who is involved with the Russian mafia in America. A laconic LAPD detective is trying to nail the madam and her confederates, and he hopes to enlist the help of the hooker and a john who has fallen in love with her. Will he be successful? Will Our Heroine escape the clutches of the evil madam? Read the play and find out.

The Women's Project had a terrific season. The high point was Catherine Trieschmann's comic drama *Crooked*, about a teenaged girl with a slight physical deformity who has dreams of becoming a writer. She lives with her mother, who has recently moved to a new town, and Our Heroine is having difficulty fitting in until she makes friends with another girl — who falls in love with her. I'd tell you more — but why don't you just read the play?

Ensemble Studio Theatre produced Deborah Zoe Laufer's offbeat comedy *End Days*, about a Christian woman who believes the Rapture is nigh, largely because Christ Our Lord has come back, and is hanging out in her house. Her angry goth-chick daughter is appalled by Mom's delusion, but her husband has hardly noticed it, as he spends all day sitting at the kitchen table in his pajamas with his head on the table, terminally depressed since he lost his job after 9/11, as well as many of his coworkers who perished on that tragic day when he took the day off and therefore was not in his office at the World Trade Center when the plane hit. Laufer's best character, though, is an incorrigibly upbeat teenaged neighbor kid who is in love with his classmate, the

goth-chick. He's more than a bit strange. He dresses every day in a white jump suit a la Elvis and is trying to learn guitar so he can compose love ballads for his lady love, who thinks he's a total dork until he introduces her to Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time,* and she gets hooked on science, aided and abetted by a wonderfully witty Hawking himself, played by the same actor who plays Jesus. Will teenaged Elvis win the heart of his gothic love? Will the Rapture come? Read the play and find out.

You may recall that 2008–2009 was all about politics in the Real World, what with the election and all. Atlantic Theatre Co. had a hit with Beau Willimon's dark political satire *Farragut North*, about conniving spin doctors in an election campaign. As an antidote to all the hype and hoopla, Willimon tells the truth about what really goes on behind the scenes of an American political campaign, and it ain't pretty. You want to know why it hardly matters who gets elected? Read this play.

Finally, I'm finishing up with another comedy, Wayne Lemon's strange and wonderful *Jesus Hates Me*, from Los Angeles's Chance Theatre. We are at the Blood of the Lamb miniature golf course, which features a statue of the crucified Christ on the seventeenth hole. The operation is run by a bipolar woman with the help of her son, who is looking for a way out, any way out. This wild comedy dots the "i" in "irreverent." Want a lot of laughs? Read this play.

I'm pretty sure you're gonna love all these terrific new plays by new playwrights — so much so that you're gonna wanna produce 'em all!

—Lawrence Harbison
Brooklyn, NY

INTRODUCTION

Last month, I gave up the TV writing job I've had for the last four years because I wanted more time to write plays. I had some time to write plays — on weekends, a couple hours in the morning if I forced myself up at dawn — but I didn't have time to *wrestle*. I write plays kind of like I drive. I get lost, I get frustrated, I go places I did not intend or want to go. I get where I need to go by first getting lost, and it's hard to get lost — good and scary, off the grid lost — in two-hour blocks sandwiched between script meetings.

In his book about the dramatic impulse, *Three Uses of the Knife*, David Mamet offers this opinion on why theater remains essential in the film/television/Internet age: "The theater exists to deal with problems of the soul, with the mysteries of human life, not with its quotidian calamities." When I read that, I understood why writing a play is necessarily a harrowing ordeal while writing a TV script feels like good, wholesome work. Like building a house or baking a cake, writing a TV show requires you to observe certain rules and formulas. And I like rules and formulas. I like the guarantees they imply: Follow this blueprint, you'll have a house. Follow this recipe, you'll have a cake. How good — that's up to you, but I promise you houses and cakes are in your future, not oceans and cats. There are no such guarantees when you embark on a play. Uncertainty is your stock and trade and, according to David Mamet, your only fit subject.

Every night before bed, I wind down with an hour of soothing certainty: Nancy Grace's nightly crime report. It's loud, it's lurid, and it's the same show every night: A child's murder offers Nancy and her call-in audience an opportunity to articulate how superior they are to the child's killer and/or negligent parents. It's a perverse ritual of reassurance that soothes me for reasons I don't completely understand. Like eating chocolate icing out of a can, watching Nancy Grace feels like giving my whole nervous system the night off. Here is blunt, Old West certainty; people are either good or bad, and the bad ones must be punished. Solve the crime, punish the offender, cry justice! Like I said, I like rules and formulas and guaranteed results.

A doctor once told me how much he respects doctors who "treat patients who don't get better." There's great pleasure and satisfaction, he told me, in getting results, be it a cure or merely an improvement. But there are patients — lots and lots of them — who just don't get better, who suffer and die or, perhaps worse, suffer and live, in spite of the doctor's best efforts. "No one wants those patients," he told me, "It's too depressing to fail all the time."

To write plays, you have to be OK with failing all the time. I agree with Mamet that the playwright's highest calling is to wrestle the unanswerable. Help us see it, give us an opportunity to sit in a room together, and bear it. Craft something beautiful out of our human mess. All the plays in this collection meet these challenges gorgeously. You are in for a treat.

—Gina Gionfriddo

Ms. Gionfriddo's plays include U.S. Drag, After Ashley, *and* Becky Shaw, *for which she won the 2009 John Gassner Award administered by the Outer Critics Circle.* After Ashley *and* Becky Shaw *premiered at the Humana Festival and went on to be produced successfully Off Broadway. Her work is published by Smith and Kraus and the Dramatists Play Service.*

AMERICAN HWANGAP

Lloyd Suh

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Lloyd Suh is the author of *American Hwangap* (Lark Play Development Center/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, produced at Magic Theater in San Francisco, Ma-Yi/Play Co. in New York, Tanghalang Pilipino in Manilla), *The Children of Vonderly* (Ma-Yi), *Masha No Home* (EST, East West Players), *The Garden Variety, Great Wall Story, Happy End of the World*, and several shorter plays, including *Happy Birthday William Abernathy, Not All Korean Girls Can Fly* (both at EST Marathon), and *With a Hammer & a Nail* (EST/Thicker Than Water). His plays have been presented across the country at theaters and festivals including the Ojai Playwrights Conference, New York Stage & Film, McCarter Theatre Center's IN-Festival, Stamford Center for the Arts, and others. He has received grants and commissions from the NEA/Arena Stage New Play Development Project, Children's Theatre Company, the Jerome Foundation, South Coast Repertory, Theatre Communications Group, the New York Foundation of the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Suh currently serves as artistic director of Second Generation and codirector of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab, the largest resident company of professional Asian-American playwrights ever assembled.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS

American Hwangap was first produced at The Magic Theatre (Loretta Greco, artistic director), in San Francisco, opening night April 11, 2009, with set design by Erik Flatmo; costume design by Brandin Barron; lighting design by York Kennedy; and sound design by Fitz Patton. The production stage manager was Briana Fahey, and the dramaturg was Jayne Benjulian. It was directed by Trip Cullman with the following cast:

CAST

CHUN ..... Keone Young
MARY ..... Jodi Long
DAVID ..... Ryun Yu
ESTHER ..... Angela Lin
RALPH ..... Jon Norman Schneider

The New York premiere was a coproduction of Ma-Yi Theatre Company (Ralph B. Peña, artistic director; Jorge Z. Ortoll, executive director) and The Play Company (Kate Loewald, founding producer; Lauren Weigel, managing producer), at The Wild Project, opening night May 17, 2009, with set design by Erik Flatmo; costume design by Junghyun Georgia Lee; lighting design by Paul Whitaker; and sound design by Fitz Patton. The production stage manager was Jenn McNeil. It was directed by Trip Cullman with the following cast:

CAST

CHUN ..... James Saito
MARY ..... Mia Katigbak
DAVID ..... Hoon Lee
ESTHER ..... Michi Barall
RALPH ..... Peter Kim

The play was produced as part of the Lark Play Development Center's "Launching New Plays into the Repertoire Initiative" supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Partner organizations include The Play Company, Ma-Yi Theater Company, The Magic Theatre, (and others TBD).

Originally presented by New York Stage & Film Company and The Powerhouse Theater at Vassar, July 27 to 29, 2007. Developed at the Ojai Playwrights Conference (Robert Egan, artistic director).

CHARACTERS

MIN SUK CHUN: Fifty-nine, a Korean immigrant to the United States, returned to Korea and now back again. Probably either tall, large, or otherwise imposing. His English is actually quite good though rusty, it comes and goes, but he speaks quickly, often, and confidently, even when he doesn't have the words.

MARY CHUN: Fifty-eight, his ex-wife. Reinvented. A modern Asian-American woman. Speaks proficient English, though may be tinged with a slight accent.

RALPH CHUN: Twenty-nine, their youngest son. Brilliant, damaged. Lives in his mother's basement.

ESTHER CHUN: Thirty-one, their daughter. Twice divorced, a perpetual student. Unsettled.

DAVID CHUN: Thirty-four, their eldest son. An investment banker. Away.

SETTING

Suburbs. Texas.

TIME

2005.

AMERICAN HWANGAP

SCENE 1

Ralph in a traditional Korean hanbok. *He holds a small cup.*

RALPH: I wrote a poem for you, Dad. It's called "American Hwangap."

I'd recite it for you but I put it in my pants pocket, and when I changed into this thing, I forgot to transfer it from the other pants, and it was kind of long so I can't remember how it goes. But um.

I don't know you very well. But I mean I like you and stuff. When I picture you away from home, you're in the desert with a knapsack over your shoulder, you have a grizzled beard with the mud of the earth on it, you're alone and undaunted by the distances from you to everyplace else.

That bigtooth maple out in back of the yard, that's the one we planted, all those years ago. It's a climbing tree now. If you climb the tree, Pop, the leaves will spill and I'll rake them. You should climb it. It's roots are down.

I hope you stick around this time, Dad. That'd be pretty cool.

My prescription says that I'm not allowed to consume alcohol, which sucks, so I guess I'm just gonna pretend I'm drinking it.

(He pretends to drink.)

Happy Birthday.

(Lights.)

SCENE 2

David at an office, suit and tie. Ralph in the basement wearing pajama pants and a T-shirt. His arm is in a cast. They are talking on the phone.

RALPH: We went shopping and I got a birthday present, guess what I got.

DAVID: Birthday present for Dad?

RALPH: It's a book about birthdays. It has all famous people's birthdays, and you can look up your birthday and find out what famous people were born on your same birthday as you.

DAVID: Oh yeah?

RALPH: I was born on the same day as Florence Nightingale and Katherine

Hepburn and Yogi Berra and Emilio Estevez and Tom Snyder who I don't know who that is and skateboarding legend Tony Hawk and Kim Fields who was Tooti on *Facts of Life.*

DAVID: Great.

RALPH: Dad was born on the same day as Sean Diddy Combs Ralph Macchio Laura Bush Will Rogers Walter Cronkite and Matthew McConaughegehey or however you pronounce it.

DAVID: OK.

RALPH: When's your birthday David and I'll look it up.

DAVID: You don't know when my birthday is, champ?

RALPH: If you tell me I'll remember because I just forgot for a second.

DAVID: September fourteenth.

RALPH: Right September fourteenth, just a sec I have the book here let me look. *(Ralph fumbles to read the book while still on the phone.)* September fourteenth is Sam Neill and Joey Heatherton and Harve Presnell and Clayton Moore.

(Short silence.)

DAVID: That's everyone?

RALPH: Well and you too, David.

DAVID: Right.

RALPH: David I don't know who those people are.

DAVID: Clayton Moore, that sounds familiar, was he an astronaut or something?

RALPH: No it says he's the Lone Ranger.

DAVID: Oh the Lone Ranger.

RALPH: Yeah.

DAVID: I guess that means I gotta get to work getting famous, huh champ? Us September fourteenthers are slacking off some, I gotta carry the load and get real famous, right?

RALPH: Oh yeah David you can get famous and then you can be in the book. But then I have to get Dad another book because then this one will be old.

DAVID: Hey is Mom around?

RALPH: Mom yeah no, she's still at work and then she had to go to the grocery she said but she'll be back by six.

DAVID: Grocery, huh?

RALPH: Yeah she's gonna get a cake for the party and like some food and stuff. She's gonna make a big *dduk-gook* and some *gahl-bee.*

DAVID: So this is really happening.

RALPH: You're coming home, right, for Dad's birthday?

DAVID: We'll see, champ. How you doing anyway?

RALPH: How am I doing, I'm doing great.

DAVID: That's great, I heard you broke your arm though.

RALPH: Yeah I got it in a cast, what happened was I clumb a tree and I fell.

DAVID: Clumb?

RALPH: Yeah I saw a tree and I clumb it.

DAVID: I think you mean climbed there, champ.

RALPH: Right yeah climbed.

DAVID: Yeah it's climbed if you want to be correct about it.

RALPH: Oh well then I definitely clumb it then 'cause there was nothing correct in how I did it.

DAVID: I see.

RALPH: You wanna sign my cast?

DAVID: Sure thing.

RALPH: OK so then come home for Dad's birthday and then you can sign it.

DAVID: How's your nerves?

RALPH: Oh they come and go.

DAVID: You taking your meds? Whadda they got you on?

RALPH: Something called Triloramine. You know something about pharmaceuticals, David?

DAVID: Yeah I know something about everything. You like that stuff?

RALPH: I guess so, I don't want to talk about it any more. Except don't worry about me, you should just come down home for the party.

DAVID: Yeah well I'm working on it, kid.

RALPH: It's actually kind of a sweet deal. I get to sit around with my butt hanging out of my pants all day, I don't have to have a job and people let me get away with stuff like at the hospital when my arm was broke the doctor was all hesitant to shoot me up with painkillers on account of my nervous situation and it sucked really so I called him a fucking cunt. And no one got mad. So it's like I'm a short-bus kid only nobody thinks I'm stupid, they actually treat me like I'm supersmart or some kind of genius, which I guess is technically true if you want to break it down in terms of standardized psychoanalytic testing methods, but that's ultimately not very helpful on account of me most of the time feeling like I'm teetering toward a very nearby precipice beneath which is untold personal misery and psychological disaster.

(Silence.)

DAVID: We all of us live every day on that precipice, buddy.

RALPH: Cool.

DAVID: Just bear that in mind for comfort.

RALPH: I talked to Dad you know.

DAVID: No shit.

RALPH: No shit.

DAVID: What did you guys, I mean what did he say?

RALPH: Well the conversation was basically broken up into two main categories, the first being his plans for his visit and the second having more to do with like feelings.

DAVID: Ah.

RALPH: So he's here now, he's landing at the airport and then meeting up with Esther, and she's going to drive him up here for tonight and then tomorrow we're gonna have a party.

DAVID: Did he say anything about me?

RALPH: Um. About you David?

DAVID: You know what, forget it. Just tell Ma I called, 'kay?

RALPH: I've been writing poetry David.

DAVID: Say again?

RALPH: The kids in the neighborhood they have a band called The Love Song of J. Alfred Punk Rock, and they want me to be in it or something so I've been writing songs and occasionally lyrics, which is like poetry, mostly it's blank verse except for some of them which rhyme only not in a corny way.

DAVID: Blank verse is great. So Mom'll be back by six, huh?

RALPH: You want me to read you a poem David?

DAVID: What's that?

RALPH: I said yeah Mom'll be back at five, in the meantime you want me to read you a poem?

DAVID: OK sure, but wait five, or did you say six?

RALPH: This one's my best one it's called "Weazleton."

DAVID: That's an ace title, champ.

RALPH: Weazleton is my dog's name.

We live in my mother's basement
playing ping pong and the daily crosswords.
His nerves are a tatters from a fall
last fall or the fall before.

A dog never knows his father
because puppies are litter,
sold before they're old and gray,
some stray,
given away.

It's a dog's life.

If I could talk to Weazleton
I would ask if it bothers him
that a dog never knows his father.
In fact I can,
so I ask
and he licks my hand
and poops.
This must be an answer.

(Silence.)

That's the end.

DAVID: That's a tops poem there, champ.

RALPH: You like it David?

DAVID: I like it more than you can know, buddy. I like it a lot.

RALPH: It's autobiographical.

DAVID: Yeah, buddy. I know.

RALPH: Cool.

DAVID: I know.

(Lights.)

SCENE 3

Chun and Esther at a diner, window seat. Beyond them, mountains and desert. Chun eats; Esther drinks coffee. It's dusk.

CHUN: I remember well this desert. So different so same is with Korea, mountain here like mountain there only so apart and lonely or things of this nature. In Korea see mountains, cannot help but dream of going to top of mountain but here is almost like hope for hop from one mountain to another, learn to fly or dream of wandering one to the next instead, strange how different mountains can be.

ESTHER: Um hey Dad?

CHUN: Mm.

ESTHER: Could we maybe just have some silence for like two seconds?

CHUN: Yeah OK.

(They sit in silence for like two seconds.)

CHUN: You are have some boyfriend?

ESTHER: Dad.

CHUN: What?

ESTHER: No, I don't have a boyfriend.

CHUN: Oh. Because on purpose or because nobody wanting be boyfriend for you?

ESTHER: Heh. Uh, I you know, I really don't know.

CHUN: This something maybe you need to know.

ESTHER: I can handle it Dad, thanks.

CHUN: If you're in need of advice from Daddy, I have advice to give.

ESTHER: Yeah no I don't need any advice.

CHUN: OK.

(Esther drinks her coffee.)

CHUN: Thing about boys, Esther, is that sometimes man is need to feeling like he is so important or have so much freedom or something, maybe boys certain age not good for appreciate things woman are having, type of nurture and good feeding and things of this nature.

ESTHER: Dad please.

CHUN: But after certain age man is begin to understanding need for good woman, *cham-han ah-gah-shee*, who can taking care of things for man, not just crazy wild hoochie time.

ESTHER: OK.

CHUN: Maybe it's good thing you don't settle for man who cannot appreciating you.

ESTHER: That's really not the problem, Dad, thanks though.

CHUN: You know Kim Jong Il?

ESTHER: Do I uh, Kim Jong Il, well yeah.

CHUN: He has nuclear weapon now.

ESTHER: I know, I read the paper.

CHUN: Is unexpected situation.

ESTHER: Yeah I guess so.

CHUN: In Korea maybe you know maybe don't know, but Kim Jong Il he is kind of weird guy.

ESTHER: I understand that.

CHUN: Still so complicate you see, many people in Korea want reunification, but so divide so many years, hope for together but philosophy so different. Has been so long divided, so now they spend one whole lifetime apart.

ESTHER: Right.

CHUN: You date Korean man?

ESTHER: I said I'm not dating anyone Dad.

CHUN: Hypothetically. You are date somebody, is he Korean?

ESTHER: I don't know.

CHUN: Because I think is important for you to knowing, Korean people are kind of fucked up.

ESTHER: Yeah I already know that.

CHUN: So enough about me, tell me a story about you.

ESTHER: Uh . . . what?

CHUN: What is a day in the life of Esther?

ESTHER: I uh what?

CHUN: You are in school.

ESTHER: Yeah. I have classes.

CHUN: You're too old for school.

ESTHER: Thanks.

CHUN: How many school you've been to?

ESTHER: This is my uh, third, maybe fourth — depends on how you look at it, fifth degree.

CHUN: Why? This is satisfy you?

ESTHER: Not really.

CHUN: Mm.

ESTHER: It fills the day.

CHUN: Mm, fills the day, OK. Can I just give you one little advice? I am sixty soon, used to be for Korean people this means entire life, somebody is become sixty years old he better get ready for die soon. But now sixty of course is not so old, after all Clint Eastwood he is probably like eighty years now, so this is OK. But how much time left? Hm? Life is short time for to do something filling days.

ESTHER: Um.

CHUN: When your turn at end of life, Esther, you should be unencumbered of regret.

ESTHER: OK.

CHUN: Regret, wasted time, when mountains surround us.

ESTHER: Look, Dad.

CHUN: Mountains I never clumb.

ESTHER: Never what?

CHUN: Clumb? Climbed?

ESTHER: Mountains you climb.

CHUN: In any case Esther, don't waste time.

ESTHER: Dad why are you here?

(Silence.)

CHUN: Well, reason I went to Korea, you know, is because when I lost my job I lost everything here, American new life was lost, and I could only think this West was not for me. I lost my . . . I lost my ride. You know?

ESTHER: No.

CHUN: OK.

ESTHER: Explain it.

CHUN: You know what is planned obsolescence?

ESTHER: What?

CHUN: Planned obsolescence, important concept. Engineer of products understand that part of job is to make sure one day it's gonna stop working, why? Because manufacturer want to make sure you buy another. This is American way, you buy say stereo system, sound good look sexy or whatever, then one day kerplooie, stereo system breaks, Americans say oh well, this is the way of things, go buy new stereo. So engineer is create flaws, we plan demise of product to sell more stereos, and I think you know where I'm going with this.

ESTHER: Um.

CHUN: My American life had planned obsolescence. Company gets what it need from me, technology changes, young kids know new things, old guys go by the side, fall off, die or whatever, just die. I became obsolete.

ESTHER: So then what'll you do now?

CHUN: Relearn cowboy way.

ESTHER: You were never a cowboy.

CHUN: I was.

ESTHER: No Dad.

CHUN: I was.

(Silence.)

But also in Korea, I was there one lifetime too late. Try to order banana from grocer, I say "banana" instead of "bah-nah-nah," and this Korean, to him I am not Korean. I turn TV and Smurfs you know Smurfs, they talking Korean! And I say hey this is not Brainy Smurf voice, Brainy Smurf voice up high, not this crazy Korean Brainy Smurf voice. And then when *hwangap* is coming, they are make such big deal, my brother he says big party to have, remembering lifetime of Chun Min Suk, but Chun Min Suk life was not in Korea, was here, Mommy here, David, Esther and and and what is third one?

ESTHER: Ralph.

CHUN: Ralph yes. Thinking of you here, American *hwangap* maybe would be *hwangap* for me.

ESTHER: Oh.
CHUN: This is why I am here.
ESTHER: For your birthday party.
CHUN: For my life, Esther.
ESTHER: Right.
CHUN: For my life.
(A silence.)
ESTHER: I don't know what to say to you.
CHUN: OK.
ESTHER: You left us.
CHUN: OK.
ESTHER: You know what, let's just pay up and head out, they're waiting at home.
CHUN: Yes.
ESTHER: Can I just say, Dad, can I just say . . . ?
CHUN: Anything you want.
(A silence.)
ESTHER: We should pay now.
CHUN: How much is it?
ESTHER: Never mind, I got it.
(She takes the check and her purse.)
(Lights.)

SCENE 4

The dining room. Ralph over a laid-out newspaper, ripping the tails off soybean sprouts and placing them in a bowl. Mary stands beside him, David in his office. They phone.

DAVID: So I don't get how it works.
MARY: Well *hwangap* just means a sixtieth birthday. The ceremony is the *janche*, and the *hwangap janche* is a celebration of the life. A man turns sixty, his zodiac cycle is ended, so we celebrate the occasion. Of a lifetime lived.
DAVID: Yeah I still don't get how it works.
MARY: Well in the olden days you'd prepare a banquet, and there would be speeches and tributes from family and friends, usually formal but ours won't be.

DAVID: I hear you're making tons of food.

MARY: Ralph's helping.

RALPH: Tell him I'm here if he wants to talk to me.

MARY: He says he's here if you want to talk to him.

DAVID: So what do you want from me?

MARY: It's not a complicated thing, David, all you have to do is show up and see the man. I have a feeling it'll be good for you.

DAVID: Is there supposed to be a bunch of bowing?

MARY: Well that's how it usually works, but you don't have to do anything you don't want to.

DAVID: Oh all right, then I'm not coming.

MARY: David.

DAVID: You know what your problem is?

MARY: Oh do I have just one?

DAVID: You're a pushover.

MARY: Oh is that right.

DAVID: Looks that way from where I sit.

MARY: Well you can't see anything from that far away, kid, I'll have you know that I share a birthday with Rosa Parks, Oscar de la Hoya, and Lawrence Taylor.

RALPH: And Charles Lindbergh and Alice Cooper.

MARY: Yeah.

RALPH: Did he hear me?

DAVID: So where's he gonna stay? At the house?

MARY: If he has to.

DAVID: Yeah, that doesn't sound like a good idea.

MARY: He'll sleep on the couch.

DAVID: And where am I supposed to sleep?

MARY: You can sleep in the basement maybe.

RALPH: Yeah he can sleep in the basement.

MARY: Ralph doesn't mind.

RALPH: Tell him it's gonna be awesome.

MARY: Esther in the other bedroom, you and Ralph in the basement, your father on the couch, sounds reasonable to me. Ralph says it's gonna be awesome.

DAVID: Just lemme understand what's expected here: are you planning on a series of weepy hugs? Is all forgotten? Or is there recrimination involved, a little weekend of arguments and fistfights?

MARY: Which would you prefer?

DAVID: Well obviously I'd most prefer not to drop everything and just rush down for some supplication congratulation situation.

MARY: Don't you have anything you want to say to him? To ask?

DAVID: Not so much, no.

MARY: Oh I don't believe you. I'm sorry, David, but I don't.

DAVID: Just don't go to bed with him.

MARY: Oh give me some credit.

DAVID: Just don't.

MARY: Come home, all right?

DAVID: We'll see.

MARY: We're all here, David. The whole family, together. You shouldn't leave us waiting for you.

DAVID: Oh yeah why not? Isn't that what he did?

(Silence.)

MARY: I suppose it is, David, yes. In which case you can choose to do the same or else be quite unlike him in that.

(Silence.)

RALPH: Does he want to talk to me now?

DAVID: I gotta go.

(David hangs up.)

RALPH: Can I talk to him real quick?

MARY: He had to go. We'll try him again later.

RALPH: Oh.

MARY: I think that's plenty of *kong-namul.*

RALPH: Can I keep shucking anyway, Ma?

MARY: Oh I think we have more than enough there Ralphie.

RALPH: But I like it and I wanna keep shucking.

MARY: OK.

(They shuck together.)

(Lights.)

SCENE 5

Esther holds a small cup.

ESTHER: Funny thing about birthdays. You left just before I turned sixteen, I remember you sent a card. It says "Isn't It Great, You Just Turned Eight." I got nothing the year after, but you did send a sweet sixteen card when

I turned eighteen. So I actually sent you a sixtieth birthday card about ten years ago, maybe you got it, I don't know, but I thought at the time you might find it funny. You weren't there for either one of my weddings, but I did get the toaster you sent after my first divorce.

And you know, I kind of loved that. I kind of loved wondering if and when something might randomly appear in the mail, even after anything had long since stopped arriving.

I guess that means a part of me has always wanted this. A second chance. But now that you're back, Dad, I'm not so sure I really want it anymore.

Maybe I should just get on a plane and head to Korea. Maybe that's the only thing that makes sense. The missing of you, the leaving of you, the back and forth away and away and away from you.

I don't know, Dad.

I didn't get you a card.

Maybe I'll send you one next year.

Wherever you are.

(She drinks, holding the cup with two hands.)

Happy Birthday.

(Lights.)

SCENE 6

The basement. Esther enters from the stairs.

ESTHER: So you still live down here.

RALPH: For now.

ESTHER: I could really use a drink.

RALPH: I have Juicy Juice juice boxes.

(Silence.)

ESTHER: What flavor?

RALPH: Grape.

ESTHER: Yeah I'll have one of those.

(Ralph gets juice boxes for both of them.)

ESTHER: This is some serious work you've done down here.

RALPH: Yeah every month or so I try to do a significant upgrade and/or renovation. How was the trip?

ESTHER: Dusty. Your fly is open.

RALPH: I don't mind. You wanna sign my cast?
ESTHER: How long are you gonna live here?
RALPH: As long as I can I guess. Here's a pen.
ESTHER: Who are all these signatures from?
RALPH: Kids in the neighborhood.
ESTHER: Frank Paul Peter Hazel Jeff?
RALPH: Yeah, they all signed it.
ESTHER: How old are these kids?
RALPH: Frank twelve Paul nine Peter eighteen Hazel seventeen Jeff I think he's eight.
ESTHER: Ralph, you're thirty years old.
RALPH: Twenty-nine.
ESTHER: Is that your guitar?
RALPH: Yeah. You want me to play you a song?
ESTHER: No.
RALPH: OK. Hey did you get Dad a birthday present?
ESTHER: No.
RALPH: When's your birthday?
ESTHER: January twenty-fourth.
RALPH: I have a book!
ESTHER: Did you get Dad a birthday present?
RALPH: Just a second.
ESTHER: You seem excited about this thing, huh Ralphie?
RALPH: Ernest Borgnine, Aaron Neville, Neil Diamond, Yakov Smirnoff, and Mary Lou Retton.
ESTHER: That's a weird thing to say.
RALPH: Those are people whose birthday is the same as yours.
ESTHER: Ah, yes, I knew about the Borgnine.
RALPH: Oh you knew?
ESTHER: Hard not to know about the Borgnine, it follows you, a thing like that. Yakov Smirnoff, that's news to me.
RALPH: I don't know who that is.
ESTHER: Sure you do, unfunny Russian cold war crossover comedian.
RALPH: Nope.
ESTHER: "Wadda country?!" Really no? Dad was way into that guy.
RALPH: Wait, he was, really?
ESTHER: Oh yeah, he would do impressions. "Ung. Wadda country!" *(Smirnoff laugh)*
RALPH: Wow.

ESTHER: Yeah.

RALPH: I wish I remembered that.

ESTHER: No. You don't. But it is nice to know that I share a birthday with such notaries of lame.

RALPH: Totally.

ESTHER: What's it mean, you think?

RALPH: Well, there's evidence to support a truly scientific basis for astrology, keep in mind. The phases of the moon, earth's rotation and the placement of the stars all correspond to tides and directly affect human and animal biorhythms, even weather, and have been known to wreak havoc with everything from natural disaster to the schedule of women's menstrual cycles, so the kind of thing has merit. Although in the East, it's the year as much as the time of year, so maybe that's how Mary Lou broke out and won the gold.

(Silence, as she stares at him.)

ESTHER: What's the secret, Ralphie?

RALPH: Secret to what Esther?

ESTHER: You got it all figured.

RALPH: No.

ESTHER: You got the beanbags, Ralphie, you got the beanbags and the basement, and I wanna live your life.

RALPH: OK.

ESTHER: Not just the basement, I wanna live in your head; how did you get this way?

RALPH: What way?

ESTHER: You're faking. Tell me you're faking.

RALPH: Um faking what?

ESTHER: This really doesn't bother you? Dad back after years of nothing and Mom all of a sudden fixing *dduk-gook* and *gahl-bee*, trotting out the old wares like it's a hero's welcome?

RALPH: I'm confused here.

ESTHER: *(Pokes him.)* This doesn't bug you? What he did?

RALPH: *(Forceful.)* Hey cut it out, all right?

(Esther backs away.)

ESTHER: Sorry.

RALPH: I mean *fuck*.

ESTHER: Sorry, Ralph.

(Silence.)

RALPH: *(Sunny.)* It's cool.

(A silence.)

RALPH: You want me to play you a song on the guitar?

ESTHER: No.

RALPH: OK.

(Lights.)

SCENE 7

Chun and Mary in the dining room. He carries a small bag.

CHUN: Your English so good.

MARY: Thanks. That's all you brought?

CHUN: Don't need much.

MARY: OK.

CHUN: So how's David?

MARY: He's well.

CHUN: He's coming?

MARY: I think so.

CHUN: He's where?

MARY: New York.

CHUN: No shit.

MARY: No shit.

CHUN: What he is doing there?

MARY: He's an investment banker.

CHUN: Investment banker no shit.

MARY: No shit.

CHUN: What is investment banker?

MARY: I'm still not so sure myself.

CHUN: I like your hair.

MARY: I didn't fix it.

CHUN: Looks good the natural.

MARY: Well my friends told me to doll it up, but I didn't.

CHUN: Doll it up?

MARY: To look all desirable for your return, some sort of visual ex-wife tactic of trying to look dazzling, I don't know what purpose it'd serve.

CHUN: You always look dazzling.

MARY: Shut up.

CHUN: I should maybe have combing my hair.

MARY: We've seen each other at our worst. There's no need for that crap.

(Silence.)

CHUN: I'm off the sauce, by the way.

MARY: Oh.

CHUN: Four years.

MARY: That long.

CHUN: OK three weeks. But I were quit for real for four years ago, just had a bad few weeks I'd rather not talk about that one, anyway wasn't my fault.

MARY: Sure.

CHUN: So what should I calling you?

MARY: Huh?

CHUN: *Yuh-boh* I can't anymore calling you, Myung-hee seeming so wrong so long time ago, Mrs. Chun you are not anymore. You are have new name?

MARY: My name is Mary.

CHUN: OK then Mary.

MARY: Yes?

CHUN: I love you, Mary.

MARY: Shut up.

CHUN: OK.

MARY: You have a place to stay after the party?

CHUN: Yeah no problem.

MARY: OK.

CHUN: I'll go to hotel or something.

MARY: You have money for a hotel?

CHUN: No.

MARY: Well I guess you can stay here.

CHUN: Oh OK thanks. Such the unexpected. Where?

MARY: Couch.

CHUN: Oh.

MARY: When Esther goes you can take the other room.

CHUN: So then no man will coming middle of night, nobody to worry about?

MARY: Huh?

CHUN: I don't know, maybe if you are have some man who maybe is coming around sometime, maybe you do maybe you don't. Just you know want to make checking sure not have to worry about something like that.

MARY: What's the question?

CHUN: So no man I am have to worry about.

MARY: No, there won't be any men over.

CHUN: I see.
MARY: I stay at his place when I see him.
CHUN: Ah.
MARY: There's linens in the laundry room.
CHUN: 'Kay.
MARY: You wanna clean up a little first?
CHUN: No I like the dust. America soil on my hands, I like the dust on me.
MARY: Yeah OK.
CHUN: Hey check out my PJs.
MARY: Yeah those are real sexy.
CHUN: Long shorts.
MARY: OK good night!
(She starts to go.)
CHUN: Going to bed already?
MARY: Yeah well big day tomorrow, we should get some rest. You need anything first?
CHUN: Um.
MARY: Toothbrush? Razor? Book to read?
(Silence.)
CHUN: Can I get a hug?
(Silence.)
MARY: Yeah OK.
(They hug. It lasts awhile. It's good.)
CHUN: Yeah OK.
MARY: Right.
CHUN: Is that bedroom?
MARY: No. I mean yeah, I think so.
CHUN: What?
MARY: I mean yeah. You uh wanna . . .
CHUN: Maybe OK.
MARY: Have a look at the place, I mean.
CHUN: Right no hanky-panky.
MARY: Yeah.
CHUN: Because kids downstairs.
MARY: Just for a second.
CHUN: Right.
(They work their way to the bedroom. They barely make it there. Clothes in the hallway. Lights.)

SCENE 8

Early the next morning, same. Mary, fully dressed, stands in the doorway, talking into the bedroom.

MARY: The kids are downstairs asleep. They wouldn't have seen anything. Come on, up up.

CHUN: Uh?

MARY: I don't need this kind of weird this weekend. You can't be in my bed.

CHUN: *Jahn-kah-mahn. (Chun enters, wearing long pajama shorts.)* Good morning.

MARY: Nice pants. All right, I set up the couch so it looks like you were on it, mussed up the sheets and threw around towels and stuff. Pop on the TV, I'll make some eggs.

CHUN: Was fun last night.

MARY: Shush.

CHUN: Sorry if I fall asleep too fast after.

MARY: Oh I was expecting that.

CHUN: Anyway yeah.

MARY: Now look, I'm not saying that what happened doesn't mean anything, but it also doesn't mean *everything.*

CHUN: Uh-huh.

MARY: Do you understand?

CHUN: No.

MARY: We're not gonna make a habit of this.

CHUN: Oh.

MARY: Maybe once or twice more, but that's it.

CHUN: OK.

MARY: I mean from time to time, just not a regular thing.

CHUN: What is mean regular thing?

MARY: I'm not the woman you knew, maybe last night was familiar, but I live a different life here, without you. I'm nimble and I'm out in the world, I have a *life,* do you see? Ask anyone in the local real estate game, and they'll tell you, that Mary, she can head 'em up and move 'em out.

CHUN: Uh-huh.

MARY: I'm not at home in the wait with a hot meal and a pair of slippers. I take flamenco lessons, I drive stick, I got an ever-growing set of friends and associates, and when we play bridge, they say I'm the one to partner with.

CHUN: Wow.

MARY: If you think you can just roll up in here lookin' all sexy and turn me back into some do-it-all darn-your-socks kimchee-burying melon-cutting *ah-joo-mah,* well you've got another thing coming, understand?

CHUN: I'm not sure.

MARY: This old house might seem familiar, but it's mine now, see? We paid the mortgage you left us with, me and the kids, so it's our roof you're under, and you don't get to just jump in and suddenly call this home.

CHUN: OK.

MARY: And the kids are not to know this happened. Tell me you understand.

CHUN: Yup.

MARY: We're not together.

CHUN: Uh-huh.

MARY: That's never gonna happen again, I'm no sucker. Now what do you think of that?

CHUN: Um.

MARY: Answer fast, the kids'll wake soon.

CHUN: I think . . .

MARY: Yeah?

CHUN: I think you gonna change your mind.

(A silence.)

MARY: Don't count on it.

CHUN: I love you, Mary.

MARY: Shut up and put your pants on.

CHUN: I love you.

(She goes. Shouts from off.)

MARY: And wipe that grin off your face, old man.

CHUN: You bet.

(He doesn't. Lights.)

SCENE 9

Esther on the phone, basement. Ralph sits on a beanbag, playing video games. David at his office. They phone.

ESTHER: Mom and Dad are having sex.

DAVID: Say again?

ESTHER: I said Mom and Dad are having sex.

DAVID: What, right now?

ESTHER: Last night. Mom took a quilt and she flung it around all over the living room couch to make it look like they hadn't. This morning I woke up and Dad was sitting there wearing socks and slippers and it was all over their faces.

DAVID: Oh.

RALPH: Ask him when he's coming.

ESTHER: Why do I have to be here and you get to be so far?

RALPH: Ask him when he's coming.

ESTHER: Are you coming?

DAVID: The flight's long and I got piles on my desk.

ESTHER: Bring a laptop.

DAVID: Maybe.

RALPH: What'd he say?

ESTHER: So it doesn't freak you out that they're . . . you know?

DAVID: Heh heh. Well. Wanna hear something funny?

ESTHER: Yes please.

DAVID: I must have been about twelve or so, it's when the three of us shared a room in that second-floor alcove, and every night there were sounds of thumps and moans all through the house. You thought a Demon Gnome had taken lodge in our floorboards with bad teeth and claws, you remember any of this?

ESTHER: Um no.

DAVID: One night I got up to investigate. This was during my Encyclopedia Brown phase, so I picked up my Sherlock hat and a magnifying glass, and I told you I was off to slay this Demon Gnome and bring you its head for proof.

ESTHER: I wanted the head?

DAVID: Yeah you were obsessed with severed heads, kiddo, I don't know what to tell you.

ESTHER: Gross.

RALPH: Hey what are you guys talking about?

DAVID: So anyway, it became pretty instantly clear that the gnome wasn't in our lawn or in our halls, but right in the middle of the master bedroom.

RALPH: Hey Esther what are you guys talking about?

ESTHER: I don't need to hear the rest of this, David, thanks.

DAVID: Oh but you do. Because at that moment I had a realization that there was no gnome, that the penile head shape of my Sherlock hat was of some deep psychological symbolism, and that the magnifying glass held

in my sweaty, shaking palm also portended my prepubescent shock into manhood.

ESTHER: Shut up.

DAVID: Now I'd never seen an image of what a man and woman do together before. I'd heard stories, of course, but they got a lot wrong — like Jacob Cross who said the guy sticks it in and then pees to make a baby. And yet, I could picture every thrust, and every grind, he was on top of her, her legs bent up and forward with her ankles around his shoulders.

RALPH: Is he coming?

ESTHER: I'm gonna hang up now.

DAVID: No you won't.

RALPH: Don't!

DAVID: You won't and I'll tell you why. It's the same reason I opened the door.

RALPH: Hey Esther?

DAVID: I knew what was behind it, and I opened it anyway.

ESTHER: No!

DAVID: I sat there quite awhile in fact, studying the shadows. Eventually, they slept, and I watched their spent bodies heave in time with the guttural snore of the old man's satisfaction, his exhausted exhilaration (or was it mine?), but before I returned to bed, I went into the kitchen and selected the most twisted raw oxtail from the fridge in order to present it to you as the severed head of the now-slain Demon Gnome.

ESTHER: What the why?

DAVID: You'd already fallen asleep, so I just tucked the oxtail gently into the overalls of the Teddy Ruxpin you were cradling and whispered a secret in your ear before saying an audible good night to you, to Ralph, to Teddy and my then-defunct innocence, but most of all to the oxtail Demon Gnome, who headless and bloody would inevitably rise again.

ESTHER: What did you whisper.

DAVID: "Don't open the door."

(Silence.)

ESTHER: You totally just made all that up.

DAVID: Yup.

ESTHER: I hate you!

DAVID: You *were* obsessed with severed heads though, that part was true.

ESTHER: Come home, David.

DAVID: We'll see.

ESTHER: Fine.

RALPH: What'd he say?

DAVID: Don't open the door.
ESTHER: What?
DAVID: Huh?
ESTHER: Did you just say something?
DAVID: Who, me?
ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: Nuh-uh.
ESTHER: You didn't?
DAVID: Nope.

(Silence.)

RALPH: Hey.
ESTHER: That story, David?
DAVID: Yeah?
ESTHER: You *didn't* make it up, did you?

(Silence.)

DAVID: Just the part about the severed head.

(Silence.)

ESTHER: Please come home.
DAVID: I'll call you later.

(They hang up. Esther looks at Ralph, who says nothing and just goes back to his video game.)

ESTHER: Oh, sorry Ralph, he got tied up, he'll call again later.
RALPH: He's not coming, is he?
ESTHER: I don't think so.
RALPH: Mm.
ESTHER: How's your game?

(Abruptly, he drops his video game controller, picks up the console and throws it in a violent motion to the ground. Destroys the thing. He walks calmly out of the room. Esther sits alone, stunned still. Lights.)

SCENE 10

Esther in the basement, reading a worn composition book. Mary enters.

MARY: I'm about to roll the dumplings, you wanna help?
ESTHER: Nope.
MARY: What are you reading?

ESTHER: Ralph's poems, compositions, doodles, and stuff. Have you seen these?

MARY: Only what he reads to me aloud. I never wanted to snoop.

ESTHER: The centerpiece is an ongoing series of epic poems. In iambic pentameter. All about this mutant space alien child trapped on earth with an assortment of special abilities, but he can't figure out how to use them.

MARY: Sounds pretty interesting.

ESTHER: Yeah the first couple hundred pages or so focus mostly on the kid's fish-out-of-water-type misadventures where he just doesn't fit into the world, but more recently he's gone off though the galaxy in search of his father.

MARY: Huh.

ESTHER: The space alien doesn't have a sister.

MARY: Does he have a mother?

ESTHER: He does, actually. An adoptive Asiatic earth mother who discovers him in a rice paddy as a foundling infant to raise him as her own. She's benevolent and moral, a nurturer.

But ultimately quite permissive.

To his detriment, I think.

MARY: I see.

ESTHER: "And once the Nub did find his way to earth"

. . . that's what he calls the kid, he calls him a "Nub."

"And once the Nub did find his way to earth,

He fell upon a field of rice and wood.

An earthling woman brought him home and hearth

This foundling super Nub who could be good."

MARY: Can I see?

ESTHER: I thought you didn't want to snoop.

MARY: Oh, right.

ESTHER: How long are you gonna let him live down here?

MARY: As long as he needs to.

ESTHER: What about Dad? Are you gonna, what, let *him* stay in the basement too, live rent free and act like a baby, become a science-fiction poet himself?

MARY: Esther.

ESTHER: They just get to break things and break things, don't they? And then you just make them sandwiches, let 'em go off in my car to go have fun, so now what am I supposed to do?

MARY: What do you want to do?

ESTHER: I wanna go home.

MARY: Isn't this home?

ESTHER: Not really, Mom, no. I shouldn't have come.

MARY: I'm glad you did.

ESTHER: You seem to have found a way to occupy yourselves without me.

MARY: What's that supposed to mean?

ESTHER: One of my therapists once told me that I lack a definable pattern, I've just hopped from one set of obligations to the next, so I don't mind if you oblige me to behave a certain way, I'll try it, just tell me what I'm supposed to do.

MARY: You can do anything you want.

ESTHER: Oh really? Anything, well, wouldn't that be nice? OK, great, you think I wouldn't have loved to drive up to the airport in a decent car? With a husband who could be appropriately polite and tell Dad a bunch of nice stories about all the great stuff I've done, how I, just . . .

(A long silence.)

MARY: You know, when your father left, *my* mother was furious with me for not going with him.

ESTHER: What?

MARY: Well, that's what I was supposed to do, after all. My husband was going home, I was supposed to go with him, and take you kids with me.

ESTHER: Wait.

MARY: Of course I didn't want that. It wasn't the best thing for you, either, you were still in school, it was an easy decision to make at the time, but after awhile . . . I mean, Esther, I can't tell you what's best for you. But you don't have to just do what you're supposed to, don't you know that?

ESTHER: Well gee, Mom, I don't know, because right now it looks like you're just doing what he tells you. He comes wandering back through the dust and guess what, he gets a party.

MARY: Oh, Esther. You think I'm just doing this because he told me to?

ESTHER: Well, yeah.

MARY: No, I asked him to come.

ESTHER: Wait, what?

MARY: I asked him. This isn't just for your father, don't you understand? It's for you. Ralph and David. I mean, you've read these books, Ralph's poems, you see what's in these. He has powers, things inside him that he doesn't know how to use, and needs to find his father to show him how.

All right fine, I've read them. I wasn't snooping, he wanted me to

see them, I mean he lays the notebook on the kitchen counter open to specific pages.

He wants me to help him find his father. To help him find himself. And when a boy can say that, and feel that, and put it face up on the countertop for everyone to see, well doesn't it make you think you might want that for yourself?

ESTHER: Want what?

MARY: To face the thing that made you. To make it see you.

(Short silence.)

Think about it.

Anyway, come help me roll the dumplings, all right?

(No response.)

You like dumplings, don't you?

ESTHER: Stupid. Everybody likes dumplings.

(Mary goes up the stairs. Esther stays looking at the staircase. Linger. Lights.)

SCENE 11

Mary holds a small cup.

MARY: We've all done things we're proud of, and things we're not.

Today, I hope you can reflect on the best of times — like our first years in America, so suddenly arrived. We were around the same age as our children are now, so we had the luxury then of imagining we might make of our lives whatever we dared to.

It's been a long time. I'm glad we could be together on such a meaningful day. One that allows you to consider not just where you've been, but where you are, right now.

And right now, you're here with us.

I'm proud of the fact we're still here, in this house we used to share.

I'm proud of our children.

Look at them.

And let yourself be proud too.

And if there are things you're ashamed of, well then let yourself be ashamed as well.

And we'll go from there.

Hwangap chook-ah hab-nee-dah.

(She drinks. Lights.)

SCENE 12

On a lake, in a fishing boat. Probably about an hour from sunset. Chun and Ralph. Lines in the water.

CHUN: Good to sometimes coming here and fishing, line in the water. Eat sandwiches from plastic baggie, put on unusual hat for sun blocking, things of this nature. I used to do this after work sometimes, your mother at home and me so stress out from the bastards in engineering, the HR fuckwads, out here this is nothing like this. Out here is just self and artificial catgut fishing line, water away from desert, fish don't talk back or nagging, so good for calm.

RALPH: It's nice.

CHUN: Is important to be calm.

RALPH: I know.

CHUN: You scared your sister, you know, with this throwing video games into crashing on floor and everything.

RALPH: Yeah, I'm sorry Dad.

CHUN: You know what Ralphie, I think is OK. Sometimes is not big deal to scare Esther, she maybe kind of a little how you say tightass.

RALPH: Yeah.

CHUN: What a man does, Ralph, what he does is OK sometimes to say hell with it, I am what I am.

RALPH: I am what I am.

CHUN: There are things man is have to do that woman is know nothing about.

RALPH: Like what?

CHUN: Like you know, carry things on his back and and, yes and things of this nature.

RALPH: Uh-huh.

CHUN: Man must be strong. Be unafraid of anger if he is have it. I don't criticize what you did by throw video games this afternoon. I think sometimes video game machine or whatever is in your way, sometimes objects such as this, they have it coming.

RALPH: I can see that.

CHUN: You were angry.

RALPH: I was upset I guess.

CHUN: You were mad about something particular?

RALPH: Sometimes I do things and I don't remember why I did them, know what I mean?

CHUN: Yeah.

RALPH: You do?

CHUN: It happens.

RALPH: I guess it does.

CHUN: How long have you living in Mommy basement, Ralphie?

RALPH: Um. I guess since my nervous situation. You know about my nervous situation?

CHUN: Hard not to notice, Ralph.

RALPH: Right.

CHUN: What happened to you?

RALPH: I just kind of cracked out I suppose, I'd just as soon not talk about it.

CHUN: Why?

RALPH: Important to be calm and it riles me to talk about it, I'd rather keep my focus on the fishing.

CHUN: I see.

RALPH: They're not biting, are they?

(Silence.)

CHUN: Do you think is my fault, Ralphie?

RALPH: Sometimes I just, I have so much feeling, Dad. I get this head full of much too much, and I lose control. I'm like some kind of werebeast. Or a mutant child with an empathic superpower, I can harness the pain and the joy of the entire world. A type of lycanthropy controlled by the moon or the tides, like I'm the devil. I can be so good but oh man I can be so bad as well.

CHUN: I don't understand.

RALPH: I'm an engineer.

CHUN: No shit.

RALPH: I have a master's in nanotech.

CHUN: You wanted be like me?

RALPH: No.

CHUN: Oh.

RALPH: After grad school I tried to get a job, but one day I woke up from this dream in which a girl I was apparently seeing (but only in the dream, I had no girl at the time), woke me from another dream to tell me she had been back from a trip to Ecuador. It really bothered me that I had missed it, and I got so angry at this fictional girlfriend that when I woke up for real I went to the airport and flew to Ecuador myself.

CHUN: Wait, in a dream?

RALPH: No, this was real, this part. I flew to Ecuador.

CHUN: You did this really?

RALPH: I did. And only after the long flight did I realize I'd lost my way.

CHUN: I know this feeling.

RALPH: You do?

CHUN: Oh yeah.

RALPH: Mom had to fly down and get me. I've been in the basement ever since. But I wish I'd stayed in Ecuador, you know. Because when I think about it, Dad, I think about it and I wanna live in the world.

CHUN: Yeah.

RALPH: Dad I want you to know who I am!

CHUN: I want to know that too.

RALPH: I'm trying to tell you who I am!

CHUN: I'm listening, Ralphie.

RALPH: Do you understand?

CHUN: Ralphie, I . . .

RALPH: Do you?

CHUN: . . . no.

(Silence.)

Ralph. Do you like living in Mommy basement?

RALPH: Well yeah.

CHUN: Really?

RALPH: Well yeah, I mean, no not so much, really I guess, no.

CHUN: What do you like?

(Silence.)

RALPH: I like this fishing.

CHUN: You do?

RALPH: I wish we'd come here sooner.

(Silence.)

CHUN: There's no fish.

(Silence.)

RALPH: It doesn't matter.

(They sit, lines in the water. Linger. Lights.)

SCENE 13

Front porch swing. Around sunset. Esther stands, leaning and smoking a cigarette.

(Chun enters. A silence.)

ESTHER: I know you and Mom've been hittin' it.

CHUN: What?

ESTHER: Hittin' it. I know you've been like, you know, *together.*

CHUN: Oh.

ESTHER: So what's that about?

CHUN: You shouldn't smoke.

ESTHER: I know you want one.

CHUN: Can I?

ESTHER: No.

(A silence. She gives him the pack, he takes one.)

CHUN: Can I get a light?

ESTHER: You can suck my butt.

(She hands him her lit cigarette butt, he uses it to light his. Hands it back, a silence as they smoke.)

ESTHER: You wanna know what else I found out?

CHUN: What?

ESTHER: All that crap about you coming home to repair your obsolescent ass, turns out that was all lies.

CHUN: What are you talking about?

ESTHER: You didn't come back for me, didn't come back for your family, you came back because Mom told you to. Didn't you?

CHUN: So what?

ESTHER: What do you mean, so what?

CHUN: I came back for *me*, Esther. You have to understand. I came for myself.

ESTHER: Yeah I got that.

CHUN: Can I ask you something?

ESTHER: Don't ask me if you can ask me something. I hate that.

CHUN: What?

ESTHER: If you ask me if you can ask me something, then you're already asking me something. If you were really worried about whether or not asking me something was somehow an inconvenience or presumptive, then you wouldn't ask me the question of whether you can ask, would you?

CHUN: You get upset, Esther, about strangest things.
ESTHER: Yeah well.
CHUN: Yell at me about ask question, what's the matter with you?
ESTHER: What's the matter with you!
CHUN: Such a child.
ESTHER: Oh am I.
CHUN: You are.
ESTHER: All right, drop it then.
CHUN: Fine.
ESTHER: What's your question then?
CHUN: Never mind.
ESTHER: Just ask the question.
CHUN: No.
ESTHER: What's the question?
CHUN: I forgot.

(Silence, they smoke.)

Oh OK, I remember now.

ESTHER: So?
CHUN: Are you angry because I left, or because I come back? Which one is worser one?
ESTHER: That's a stupid question.
CHUN: Is it?

(A silence. Esther puts out her cigarette.)

ESTHER: You know, the second man I married, Dad, he was just like you.
CHUN: Was he.
ESTHER: We had a baby.
CHUN: You . . . ?
ESTHER: We had a baby and I didn't want you to know, you didn't deserve it.
CHUN: Esther.
ESTHER: I lost that baby, Dad, and I lost my fucking mind.

That baby came out of me cold, do you get it? I lost him and I know that happens, couples lose babies and I know that.

But I'd already given him a name.

I'd bought sheets, toys, books, and a car seat, Baby Bjorn and all that bullshit for the little guy, and he was gone.

And we were gonna try again, because that's what you're supposed to do is try again, but I couldn't touch my stupid husband. I didn't want him near me. He smelled like you. And he walked like you. This husband and surrogate you.

So which was worse, the coming or the going? That was the question, right? Well it's actually a good question now that I think about it. I wasn't unhappy when you left Dad, truly.

I wasn't unhappy until I realized what it meant that you left.

Because I wanted a family so badly.

And couldn't get one.

And you had it all the time.

Had it right here.

And you didn't care.

(She goes back into the house. Lights.)

SCENE 14

Night. Chun in the dining room. David in his office. They phone.

CHUN: Had hoped you would come around.

DAVID: Well Dad, things are pressing here.

CHUN: We have cake.

DAVID: I heard.

CHUN: You do OK up there, New York?

DAVID: Well we do our best.

CHUN: You are have some girlfriend?

DAVID: Yeah I have some of those.

CHUN: Oh good.

DAVID: Wish I could be there, Pop, really do.

CHUN: Still time.

DAVID: How's that?

CHUN: We had looking it up on Internet. Flights from New York still coming, red-eye for way back too possible, one at eight-fifteen arrive here just before eleven, there is time difference so is OK.

DAVID: Eight-fifteen's not a good time, Pop, I can't squeeze in a red-eye tonight.

CHUN: Then maybe next week I can come to New York.

DAVID: Yeah maybe you can. How's the weather down there, fella?

CHUN: Dry.

DAVID: Should be good, should be good.

CHUN: How is job?

DAVID: It's righteous, Pop.

CHUN: What's that?

DAVID: It rules. I'm King of the World six days a week, I got money falling out of my asshole, that's what you want to hear?

CHUN: I want to hear you are happy.

DAVID: Happy, what's that?

CHUN: I wish I could see your face, can't uh decipher your, your tone.

DAVID: My tone is on purpose evasive, Pop, that's one of my trade skills.

CHUN: Oh.

DAVID: See, I'm wearing a robe of red Italian silk right now, smoking Cuban cigars with some leggy blondes who wanna get up on this.

CHUN: That doesn't tell me anything. Think of me, David. I have no home, no car, no horse. I have a bag of belongings that wouldn't hurt your shoulders were it strapped to your back for days, and yet I'm happy.

DAVID: Oh are you?

CHUN: A little.

DAVID: I'm not so sure I get the concept.

CHUN: I know this tone now.

DAVID: Is that right.

CHUN: I know this tone you speak with me, it is pretend to be cold.

DAVID: Wait you think I'm pretending?

CHUN: Afraid to see me.

DAVID: Oh I see.

CHUN: Afraid to come see me, afraid to speak on phone, this is why finally you are call back after so many yes I'll try to and probably I will be there but now finally you are call too late to arrive but this is not talking. Come home, David.

DAVID: No thanks.

CHUN: I need to explaining more better to you, everybody coming to me, telling me of their disappointment, their upset, but I need to telling myself too.

DAVID: I got another call here, Dad.

CHUN: One second. Because you see. My brother, he is big man in Korea, making buildings, apartment and shopping stores, and when he were sixty like me now, his *hwangap* was massive with buildings he had constructed, markings on the earth, he can say *I built this.* Engineer he was too, like I was engineer, but I had build only tiny cogs in tiny machines, not by my blueprint. I look at *janche* and who is there? I have only thing to show for this life, what I have made, just you David. I made you, to

become what I could not be. Come home. David. Come home. Come home. Come home.

DAVID: You made me?

CHUN: Yes.

DAVID: Well yeah, Dad, but by your blueprint, you made me to leave you.

CHUN: . . . What?

DAVID: No, Dad, I'm not happy. But I don't hate you, I just don't fucking care. OK? Because when you left, I learned to be a man. I guess you changed since then, chief, but I didn't. I'm not sure if it's really what you wanted me to be, but I know what I became.

CHUN: Come home.

DAVID: I became this.

CHUN: Come home.

DAVID: I became this.

(David hangs up. Chun puts the phone down, does not hang it up. The bleat of the disconnect.)

SCENE 15

Chun stands in a suit and tie. Ralph, in his hanbok, *sits with Esther and Mary at the dining room table, each with a small cup. A birthday cake, plates, dishes, and a bottle of* soju.

CHUN: I thank you my family for wonderful *hwangap janche*. Thanks Ralphie for wonderful birthday book, which talking about astrology, you know. And this book such beautiful book because it is tell story all about who we are.

You know I was born sixty years ago. Same also is Korea. This is year of Korean independence, so like me these are countries sixty years old, one whole lifetime. And same as with me this country was create division within itself, broken to two separate countries in which family was divided.

But now I have come back. When first I left, I was maybe little bit . . . I left because things were taken from me, small things, my job, my pride, but when I left I lost much bigger thing. I see now that I left behind much better life here that I could have lived.

I was not allowed *hwangap janche* in Korea. My brother tells me I cannot have *janche* without wife, without children, in Korea I cannot

stand up and say I lived a life when was fill so full of shame. I cannot call myself a man.

But when you are sixty you can have much bigger party than what I have now. I want you each of you children when you are sixty to stand in real your home, with family you desire, to look back on sixty years you lived and feel proud, OK? Not like me.

And to my oldest son David, who is not come to me, well maybe I will come to you. If there is a way to prove myself to you, then I will do this way.

But I thank you for spending such a day with such a man.

(He picks up a small cup.)

First drink in long time.

(Mary picks up the bottle of soju, *pours with both hands.)*

Thank you my family.

(He drinks. He takes the bottle from Mary, she doesn't stop him. She turns back to the table and begins to clear the plates. Ralph and Esther help her, in no rush. Chun turns his back as they exit. He drinks straight from the bottle now. Lights.)

SCENE 16

Night. Esther on the porch, keys in one hand, phone in the other. She talks to David.

DAVID: What'd you eat?

ESTHER: At least one of everything on the table, damn that woman can cook.

DAVID: Mother's milk.

ESTHER: I wish you'd been here.

DAVID: Chin up, sweetheart. You made it through, birthday's over, right? They say the ones still standing after, you know what they call 'em?

ESTHER: What's that?

DAVID: The "winners of the party."

ESTHER: Hooray.

DAVID: Means you can go home now.

(Silence.)

Head held high, you can go home with dignity.

(Silence.)

Esther? You still there?

ESTHER: Yeah I'm still here.
DAVID: Oh, thought I lost you for a second.
ESTHER: I'm feelin' kinda funny.
DAVID: Yeah too much Korean food'll do that.
ESTHER: Can I call you back later, David? I think I need to get out of here.
DAVID: You sound a little iffy there, sweetie, why don't you tell me what's up?
ESTHER: I'll call you in the morning.
DAVID: No, don't.
ESTHER: What?
DAVID: Morning's no good, I got you know meetings and shit, let's just talk now.
ESTHER: I was just getting in the car when you called, I feel like I wanna like go somewhere.
DAVID: You sound a little down, tell me what's on your mind.
ESTHER: I'm not down.
DAVID: Are you sure?
ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: Really?
ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: Good.
ESTHER: Well see ya later then.
DAVID: Yeah OK.
ESTHER: All right.
DAVID: G'bye.
(Silence.)
ESTHER: You still there?
DAVID: Yeah.
ESTHER: Yeah me too.
DAVID: Wanna hear something funny?
ESTHER: I guess.
DAVID: You know when I got out of college, I went off for some internship, before you married that guy Richard?
ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: I gave you some excuse when I got to the wedding, the reason I missed your reherasal dinner and barely showed up in time.
ESTHER: I was just glad you were there, I don't remember the excuse.
DAVID: You wanna know what really happened?
ESTHER: Do I?
DAVID: Well I left the office on my last day and went to the airport to fly

home, but when I got there I had an idea. I traded in my ticket for a roundtrip overnight to Seoul.

ESTHER: Hold on.

DAVID: The best wedding gift an older brother could give. I was gonna find the old man and bring him home, bolt through the doors of the church and let him give you away.

ESTHER: David —

DAVID: That would've been something, huh?

(Short silence.)

ESTHER: It would have.

DAVID: So anyway I land in Seoul and look up our cousin Sunman, you know the one who speaks perfect English?

ESTHER: Oh yeah, the fat one?

DAVID: Yeah, figured he could help me track the old man down, but it wasn't quite that easy.

ESTHER: What do you mean?

DAVID: When he told me where your father was, I beat the living shit out of him.

ESTHER: Oh.

DAVID: Your father was in prison. He wasn't working for his brother like he said. He was doing six months, for doing the same thing I did.

ESTHER: What?

DAVID: I ended up in prison myself until that fat fucker Sunman dropped the charges. And as I sat there in a South Korean jail cell, I said look at me. My father is in jail. I'm in jail. And I will not become my father.

ESTHER: David, you didn't.

DAVID: I will not become my father.

(Silence.)

Esther are you still there?

(Silence.)

ESTHER: Yeah I'm still here, David, I just, I don't know what to say.

DAVID: You still feel like going somewhere?

ESTHER: I don't know.

DAVID: Where do you want to go?

ESTHER: I thought something might occur to me if I just started driving.

DAVID: Feel like going further?

ESTHER: Where?

DAVID: New York maybe?

(Silence.)

ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: Yeah?
ESTHER: I'll go to the airport.
DAVID: You don't have classes?
ESTHER: I'll take the absences.
DAVID: I'll totally pay for the flight, take a cab when you touch down, you know the address?
ESTHER: Of course.
DAVID: Oh. Good. And don't worry either, I'll be here when you land. I don't really have meetings in the morning.
ESTHER: Yeah.
DAVID: I made all that up.
ESTHER: I know, David.
DAVID: Cool.
ESTHER: I know.
(They do not hang up. Lights.)

SCENE 17

Chun in a tree. It's late. His tie is loosened, his shirt untucked. He's singing, probably something traditionally Korean, and drinking from a fifth of Jim Beam. He's having a great time up there. Mary enters.

MARY: So there you are.
CHUN: Saw the tree and I clumb it. Wanna come up too?
MARY: Why don'tcha come down.
CHUN: Hell no, is nice up here.
MARY: Really.
CHUN: Best tree ever.
MARY: You sure I can't convince you to come down?
CHUN: Actually I been wanting get down for about an hour now but I don't think I can.
MARY: Is that bottle empty?
CHUN: Nope little bit left.
MARY: Maybe I'll have one with you.
CHUN: Up in tree?
MARY: No I'll stay down here, just pass it to me.

(He screws the lid on it, throws the bottle down, she catches it. Doesn't drink, just sets it on the ground.)

CHUN: Oh. OK. Good party.

MARY: Yeah you clean up all right.

CHUN: Pants a little tight for some reason.

MARY: Well they hung in my closet fifteen years, I guess you've put on some baggage.

CHUN: Fuck it.

(He takes off the pants and throws them out of the tree.)

MARY: Nice.

CHUN: Wooot!

MARY: Hey, you're gonna wake the neighbors, you know.

CHUN: How old you are?

MARY: You don't know how old I am?

CHUN: Fifty-nine.

MARY: Fifty-eight.

CHUN: Ah, almost like me.

MARY: Oh I don't know about that.

CHUN: Pretty fucking cool to be sixty. Look at me here, no pants full of Jim Beam and sitting in tree, night Texas wind all around and still can see mountains though it's dark.

MARY: You're old.

CHUN: Bullshit. Because sixty years is rebirth, when Zodiac ends is a baby born anew. You know I'm Year of the Cock. Wood Cock.

MARY: I'll bet you are.

CHUN: No really, Year of Wood Cock and then twelve years of each every animal, five elements Wood Cock twelve years then Earth Cock twelve Fire Cock Metal Cock Water Cock twelve each and this is first year in all whole sixty my life is Wood Cock again.

MARY: OK then.

CHUN: I'm reborn!

MARY: Oh?

CHUN: First day of new my life! *(He almost falls out of the tree.)* Oops.

MARY: I really think you should get down from there.

CHUN: Marry me, Mary.

MARY: What.

CHUN: Marry me, all right?

MARY: Shut your drunk face.

CHUN: If I were earthbound I would fall on my knee, I want you be my wife again.

MARY: I'm gonna go get you a ladder and some coffee, OK?

CHUN: Check left-hand pocket of pants down there.

MARY: No.

CHUN: Check it.

MARY: Why?

CHUN: Just check inside the goddamn pocket.

(She does; inside is a ring box. She opens it, a ring.)

MARY: What the hell is that.

CHUN: It's a ring.

MARY: Yeah I can see that.

CHUN: So now you know this is not just stupid drunk question, but whole thing quite premeditated.

MARY: I'm not gonna marry you, idiot!

CHUN: Yes you are.

MARY: This isn't cute.

CHUN: Yes it is.

MARY: You don't know what you're talking about!

CHUN: Yes I do. Because I was so broken in Korea. Whole time I wanted to come back, but I didn't want you see me so full of shame. But now, after this *hwangap,* I am happy again.

MARY: You're happy after that?

CHUN: Almost. Because when you said to me this is not my home. Yes. But I have a plan.

MARY: A plan.

CHUN: Mm. Step one, you marry me.

MARY: Wow.

CHUN: Step two is I will be such best husband this time. We can do whatever you want, like this flamingo dance or whatever, things we did when first we married, like um, like you know things of this nature. Holding hands and watching sun set, sit on front porch every nighttime forever till we die.

MARY: That's romantic.

CHUN: Oh yeah. You'll see. Together all the time, I'll be hanging around you constantly. Always talking talking talking, no matter what you're doing, you will never be alone. I'll be talking talking talking all the time.

MARY: Oh my God you poor man.

CHUN: Why, whatsa matter?

MARY: What do you expect me to say to this?

CHUN: I hope that please you can just say yes, yes, you will marry me. Mary. Because you are most number one best thing for me.

When you said to me, come back. When you told me this, it means we can start over, not from when I left, not from when I became bad husband, bad father, but to beginning of America when still we had all whole world in front of us, because sixty years is rebirth! Step three of plan is I'm a baby now! Waaah!

MARY: I don't wanna hear the any more of this plan.

CHUN: OK, well that was last step of plan anyway.

(She goes to the bottle of Beam, picks it up.)

You know, I am OK to try different plan. If maybe this one you don't like.

(She unscrews the cap on the bottle.)

Um. Is there anything about it you like?

(She takes a drink.)

MARY: I like the notion you're a baby.

CHUN: Wah.

MARY: Yeah. *(She sets the bottle on the ground.)* You'd almost make sense if you were somehow still an infant.

CHUN: You can be a baby too, we can each be each other's baby.

MARY: Oh no. Not for me. I did what I needed to, when I hit sixty I get to be *old*. I'm looking forward to that. But you, you have to try again.

Here's a place to start: The only thing a baby needs to know is who loves them. Not who they love, but who loves them.

(She stands on tiptoes and holds the ring box out to him.)

CHUN: Maybe I'll just hold on to it awhile.

MARY: All right.

(He takes the ring.)

CHUN: In case you know, you change your mind.

MARY: You want a ladder now?

CHUN: In a minute.

(A silence. She sits, her back at the root of the tree.)

CHUN: What do you want to talk about now?

MARY: Let's just sit. Let's don't talk.

(They sit. Don't talk. Lights.)

SCENE 18

The wee hours, basement. Chun still in his suit, shirt untucked, tie loosened. No pants, but the long Korean PJs. He's playing video games. Ralph wakes.

RALPH: Whatcha doin', Dad?
CHUN: Saving humanity from resurrected dead people bodies.
RALPH: Oh. What time is it?
CHUN: Dunno.
RALPH: So how's it, I mean how's it going?
CHUN: I think zombies gonna win.
RALPH: Yeah that's a hard level.
CHUN: Shit I died.
RALPH: Yeah that'll happen.
(He sets the controller to the machine on the couch beside him.)
CHUN: Had fun tonight?
RALPH: Yeah, good party.
CHUN: I could use a drink.
RALPH: I have Juicy Juice juice boxes.
CHUN: What?
RALPH: Here.
(Ralph gets juice boxes, gives him one.)
CHUN: How do I do this?
RALPH: Yeah you gotta pop the straw in the hole.
CHUN: Strawinthahole?
(Ralph does it for him.)
CHUN: Oh.
(They drink.)
RALPH: You want me to play you a song on the guitar?
CHUN: No.
RALPH: OK.
CHUN: Son?
RALPH: Yeah, Pop?
CHUN: How well you are know your mother?
RALPH: Pretty well I guess.
CHUN: Mm. OK. Well maybe you can helping me.
RALPH: With what?
CHUN: I have idea on maybe how to make your mommy marry me.
RALPH: No shit.

CHUN: Need some advice. So. What kind of things your mother like?

RALPH: Like what do you mean?

CHUN: Go to movie, basketball game or things of this nature, what kind of things I can doing to you know wooing her?

RALPH: Oh.

CHUN: Whatever you can helping with I am appreciate.

RALPH: Well she likes cooking shows.

CHUN: What shows?

RALPH: Cooking shows. TV programs with average-looking people in a kitchen sharing recipies.

CHUN: They are just cook?

RALPH: It seems to make her happy when I eat a lot. It's an easy way to make her happy, she makes the food and I eat it, works out good for everyone.

CHUN: So just I eat and this is make her happy?

RALPH: There was a guy I think his name was Norman, I think he was like a white guy. He tried to take her white-water rafting once, and she came back all mad, and I never saw him again after that, so my advice is to not take her white-water rafting.

CHUN: OK good to know.

RALPH: So you're going after Mom then, huh?

CHUN: Gonna try.

RALPH: Where you gonna stay?

CHUN: Well thought I might wanna talk to you about this Ralph.

RALPH: Yeah?

CHUN: I think you need to moving out of Mommy basement, OK?

RALPH: What?

CHUN: OK?

RALPH: You mean like now?

CHUN: Yeah. Because I'm gonna need to living in Mommy basement now, OK?

RALPH: Wait.

CHUN: What do you think?

RALPH: You're gonna live down here?

CHUN: That's my plan. Try to work my way up.

RALPH: That sounds awesome.

CHUN: Maybe hopefully.

But you gotta go.

(Silence.)

When does cast come off?

RALPH: Ten to fourteen days.
CHUN: OK this is good time frame.
RALPH: Wait what?
CHUN: After ten to fourteen days, you should find your own place.
RALPH: OK.
CHUN: What?
RALPH: I said OK.
CHUN: Really?
RALPH: I can do that.
CHUN: Wow.
RALPH: What?
CHUN: That was easier than I thought would be.
(Short silence.)
Wait, are you sure?
RALPH: Yeah.
CHUN: Wait but hold on Ralphie, I don't know about this.
RALPH: What's the problem?
CHUN: I mean look at you, where you gonna live, what you're gonna do?
RALPH: Well I'm gonna be in this band called The Love Song of J. Alfred Punk Rock.
CHUN: Huh?
RALPH: Peter's brother, he's the drummer, he has a house where the whole band lives, they practice there too, it's pretty cool and they said I could live there if I wanted, but I guess I just wasn't ready or whatever.
CHUN: Oh.
RALPH: It's actually just down the street.
CHUN: Oh.
RALPH: But that's awesome cause I mean I'd like to like, see you, Dad.
CHUN: OK.
RALPH: I mean I thought that if you were around and stuff, maybe you and I, we could maybe go fishing again or something.
(A silence.)
CHUN: Would like this too, very much, Ralph.
RALPH: You want me to play you a song on the guitar?
CHUN: No.
RALPH: OK.
(Silence. They drink their Juicy Juice.)
CHUN: On second thought, yeah.
RALPH: What? OK!

CHUN: Play me a song, Ralph.

(Ralph runs to the guitar. He plays. Chun listens. After a few bars, he starts to hum, maybe sing along, or clap in a steady rhythm. Ralph's playing might not be skilled, but it might be beautiful. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY

ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER

Rajiv Joseph

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Rajiv Joseph's play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was produced at the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles at the Kirk Douglas Theatre during their 2008–2009 season under the direction of Moisés Kaufman. *Bengal Tiger* has recently been awarded a grant for Outstanding New American Play by the National Endowment for the Arts. Joseph's New York productions include *Animals Out of Paper,* Second Stage Theatre, summer 2008; *The Leopard and the Fox* (adaptation), Alter Ego, fall 2007; *Huck & Holden*, Cherry Lane Theatre, 2006; and *All This Intimacy*, Second Stage Theatre, 2006. In Los Angeles, *Huck & Holden* was produced by The Black Dahlia Theatre in 2006. Future productions of *Animals Out of Paper* are currently scheduled in Australia and France. Through the Lark Play Development Center, Joseph has traveled to Mexico and Romania, where *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was translated into Spanish and Romanian, respectively, and performed in staged readings. The Ariel Theatre in Tagur Mures, Romania, will produce *Animals Out of Paper* in spring 2009. Last spring, Joseph was awarded the Paula Vogel Award by the Vineyard Theatre, and this winter he received the 2009 Kesselring Fellowship. Joseph is a founding member of The Fire Department, a new New York–based theater company, and has been a contributing writer on their first two theatrical events, *Speakeasy* and *At War: American Playwrights Respond to the War in Iraq*. He is a former Lark Playwriting Fellow and Dramatist Guild Fellow. His plays have been published by Samuel French, Dramatists Play Service, and Smith and Kraus. He received his BA in creative writing from Miami University and his MFA in playwriting from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He is currently a language lecturer at NYU with the School of Art and Public Policy and the Expository Writing Program. Joseph served for three years in the Peace Corps in Senegal, West Africa.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Animals Out of Paper was originally producted by Second Stage Theatre Uptown at the McGinn/Cazale Theatre in New York City, opening on August 4, 2008, with set design by Beowulf Borin; costume design by Amy Clark; lighting design by Josh Bradford; and sound design by Bart Fasbender. The production stage manager was Stephanie Gatton. It was directed by Giovanna Sardelli with the following cast:

CAST

SHURESH ..... Utkarsh Ambudkar
ILANA ..... Kellie Overbey
ANDY ..... Jeremy Shamos

CHARACTERS

ILANA: Female, forty to forty-five.
ANDY: Male, thirty-five to forty-five.
SURESH: Male, seventeen, Indian, raised in the United States.

TIME

Present.

Note: A backslash (/) indicates where the following line is meant to begin by overlapping the current one.

ANIMALS OUT OF PAPER

SCENE 1

Dim lights illuminate the extremely messy studio apartment of Ilana Andrews, who sleeps on her couch in a bathrobe. Origami models of animals and abstract shapes fill the apartment. Also empty bottles, large stacks of folding paper, newspapers, books, and clothes strewn everywhere. There is a fire extinguisher on the kitchen counter and an enormous pile of empty and used Chinese food take-out boxes. There are also several diagrams of a human heart; some are in color, some drawn in pencil. One is very large, with measurements drawn over the heart.

Directly above Ilana, hanging from the ceiling, is an enormous origami hawk, three or four times its normal size, folded in such a way that it looks like it's about to pounce on its prey. Its huge talons are wide open, hovering several feet over Ilana.

The apartment buzzer buzzes. Ilana is startled. No one ever buzzes this door. She just stares at the intercom from the couch. The door buzzes a few more times. She slowly walks to the intercom. She presses it and speaks.

ILANA: Hello?
ANDY: *(Intercom.)* Hello?
ILANA: Yes?
ANDY: Hi.
ILANA: Yes?
ANDY: Ilana Andrews?
ILANA: That's me . . .
ANDY: Hi.
ILANA: Can I help you?
ANDY: Andy Froling.
ILANA: Who?
ANDY: Andy Froling. American Origami.
ILANA: Is there something you need?
ANDY: Could you buzz me in?
ILANA: Who *are* you?
ANDY: Andy Froling. American Origami.
ILANA: Yeah, *I don't know you.*
ANDY: American Origami.

ILANA: What about it?

ANDY: I'm the treasurer. *(Beat.)* Can you buzz me in?

ILANA: Look, I don't know you.

ANDY: It's just that it's raining.

ILANA: It is?

ANDY: It's pouring. Look out the window. It's a monsoon.

ILANA: I don't have a window.

ANDY: Could you buzz me in?

ILANA: What do you want?

ANDY: I have some stuff for you. We tried mailing it to you, but it comes back. Could you buzz me in please? I'm getting soaked out here.

ANDY: I just need to drop this thing off.

(Ilana paces around, nervous, not wanting to let this person in. She lets her finger off the button and stares at the intercom as if it were a dangerous thing. She presses it again and Andy's been talking.)

ANDY: . . . who told me he thought it looked like a lozenge or maybe a dorsal fin. But I don't know . . . it was so beautiful. Like the most beautiful thing I ever saw. I'm sorry, but I guess I just wanted to say that.

ILANA: What?

ANDY: Could you just please buzz me in?

(Ilana goes to the couch. Leans against it for a moment. Returns. She presses the button again.)

ILANA: Hello?

ANDY: Hi.

ILANA: OK.

(Ilana takes her finger off the intercom button and just stares at the box for a long moment. And then she buzzes him in. She just stands there waiting. A knock on the door. Ilana opens it. Andy enters, totally drenched.)

ANDY: Hi.

ILANA: Yeah. Hi.

ANDY: Andy Froling. American Origami.

ILANA: Yeah. Hi.

ANDY: I'm the treasurer. *(Seeing the hawk, starts to enter.)* Wow, that is a big bird.

ILANA: Yeah. *(Alarmed as he starts to enter.)* Hey!

ANDY: What?

ILANA: I've got a lot of paper . . . There's paper . . . . Like everywhere. Don't get my paper wet. Just . . . just stay right there. Don't move.

ANDY: I'm here. Not gonna move.

ILANA: Thanks.

ANDY: *(Looking at the hawk.)* Wow.

ILANA: Yeah.

ANDY: WOW.

ILANA: Yeah.

ANDY: It's so nice to see you again.

ILANA: Yeah. When did we meet?

ANDY: The convention?

ILANA: Right.

ANDY: I'm the treasurer.

ILANA: This past June.

ANDY: Yeah . . . And the four previous Junes. / I've been . . .

ILANA: / Oh. Right . . .

ANDY: Yeah.

ILANA: Yeah.

(Awkward pause.)

ANDY: *(Holds out a folder.)* So, this is . . .

ILANA: Right!

ANDY: Yeah, just some . . .

ILANA: And this is . . . ?

ANDY: Yeah, just some . . .

ILANA: I should sign them?

ANDY: Sure. I mean, no, it's just informational. We wanted to make sure you got it. I mean, if you don't get the stuff . . . I mean, we want to make sure that you're gonna be with us again in June . . . Will you?

ILANA: Sure.

ANDY: It's just that your mail was sent back.

ILANA: I moved.

ANDY: And so . . . you live . . . *here* now . . . In your studio?

ILANA: It's temporary.

ANDY: I'm sorry for intruding.

ILANA: Sorry you got wet.

ANDY: Water's water. It doesn't hurt any. Rain is sacred, that's what I say. All water is holy water.

ILANA: Yeah?

ANDY: Why not? WOW, that is just a huge bird. What is that? Is that a composite?

ILANA: Yeah. There's five pieces in there.

ANDY: It looks so alive! So eaglelike!

ILANA: It's a hawk.

ANDY: A hawk! Pouncing! *Pouncing on its prey!*

ILANA: Well, it's been GREAT talking to you, but . . .

ANDY: It's just so well crafted. Really phenomenal. And I love what it does to the room!

(Ilana looks around the room and then at the bird.)

ILANA: You like it?

ANDY: I love it.

ILANA: Well, if you can get it down, you can have it.

ANDY: The hawk? Are you serious?

ILANA: I can't get it down. And I'm sick of it.

ANDY: How'd you get it up?

ILANA: My ex-husband put it up there.

ANDY: Oh.

ILANA: Yeah.

ANDY: I'm sorry.

ILANA: Don't be. Do you want the bird?

ANDY: I'd love it! WOW! An Ilana Andrews original! Where's your ladder?

ILANA: I don't have a ladder. If I had a ladder, I could get it down myself.

(Andy looks around the room.)

ANDY: OK. If I put that ottoman on top of the couch, I think I could reach it and snip off the line. You think?

ILANA: You'll have to take off your shoes. You're going to have to dry off.

ANDY: Shoes off!

(Andy pulls his shoes off. Ilana takes a roll of paper towels and hands it to him.)

ILANA: Here. Take as much as you need.

ANDY: Oh, wow. Thanks . . .

(Andy takes a lot of paper towel, mops himself up, head to toe.)

ANDY: This place is great. Just great.

(He points to a Chinese take-out box.)

ANDY: Hey did you do that? That's great.

ILANA: Those are take-out boxes.

ANDY: Oh.

ILANA: Yeah, that's Szecheuan beef.

ANDY: It's just that there's so many. I thought it was conceptual.

ILANA: I haven't been out in a while.

ANDY: So you've been ordering in. Chinese food. That's great. I don't like it. Allergic. MSG.

ILANA: I'm getting tired of it myself.

ANDY: Yeah, you look tired.

ILANA: Thanks. Well, I am.

ANDY: It happens, you know. People get tired. I drink tea.

ILANA: You drink tea.

ANDY: When I get tired. It relaxes and energizes me AT THE SAME TIME. Great stuff, tea. Do you have any?

ILANA: Tea? Yeah, I have tea.

ANDY: Oh, then you should drink some.

ILANA: Um. OK. Yeah.

ANDY: Are you going to make some?

ILANA: I guess. Do you . . . uh . . . do you want some?

ANDY: I'd love some tea. Thank you.

(He hands the large soaked wad of paper towels to Ilana. She takes it awkwardly and goes to a little kitchenette, fills two mugs with water, and then puts them in the microwave. Andy looks up at the bird.)

ANDY: Oh, she's a beauty. And you're a genius.

ILANA: I'm not and you don't know me.

ANDY: I know your work. I took your class on the scaled koi.

ILANA: It's a fish. Anyone can fold that.

ANDY: I can't. Still can't.

ILANA: I must not have been a very good teacher.

ANDY: You were. You were a great teacher. I know, because I'm a teacher. Calculus. High school. Heights High. *(Fist in the air; like a school cheer.) Heights Hiiigh!*

ILANA: I have Lemon Zinger.

ANDY: Oh, that's fine. I'm a big fan of the zingers. And by the way . . . regardless. I'm sorry about your, um, the divorce. It's just difficult to be with someone and then to not be with them.

ILANA: Have you been married?

ANDY: No, never.

ILANA: Then you don't really know do you?

ANDY: I guess not.

ILANA: No. You don't.

ANDY: It's just that . . . we heard about it at AO. AO. — that's "American Origami."

ILANA: I got it.

ANDY: And then your mail got returned to us. And you never answered e-mail

and your cell phone got disconnected . . . and we got sort of worried for a second there.

ILANA: Who was worried?

ANDY: Well, I was. I mean . . . I pretty much do everything anyhow.

ILANA: You don't even know me.

ANDY: I'm just saying I was worried.

ILANA: Don't worry about me.

ANDY: OK, I won't.

ILANA: DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME!

ANDY: OK, I WON'T.

ILANA: I am FINE. I'm fine, OK? FINE. I AM FINE.

ANDY: OK.

ILANA: Don't worry about me.

ANDY: I won't.

ILANA: I'm fine.

ANDY: Yep.

ILANA: You want sugar or honey?

ANDY: Honey.

ILANA: I don't have honey.

ANDY: Sugar.

ILANA: I have enough problems, I don't need the treasurer for American Origami hunting me down to give me a *brochure.*

ANDY: It wasn't just the brochure, why I came over.

ILANA: What else?

ANDY: Your, um . . . AO dues? Yearly dues? They were due December first.

ILANA: Are you kidding me?

ANDY: It's no big deal! It's only twenty-five dollars!

ILANA: You came over here because I'm late on my membership dues?

ANDY: I already paid it.

ILANA: *You* paid my dues?

ANDY: It wasn't a big deal! I didn't want to bother you, but, like I said, I was worried . . .

ILANA: DON'T PAY MY FUCKING DUES!

ANDY: OK!

(Ilana storms to her purse and goes to her wallet.)

ILANA: Twenty-five bucks? Fine. Here. Here's twenty-five bucks for AMERICAN ORIGAMI. You guys must doing GREAT if you're shaking people down for twenty-five bucks . . . *(No cash in her wallet.)* I don't have any cash. Can I write you a check?

ANDY: Ilana, please, don't worry about it! I shouldn't even have brought it up!

ILANA: But you did.

ANDY: Please, just forget I said anything.

(Ilana goes to get the tea.)

ILANA: Unbelievable. I crawl into a hole for two months, and the only person who notices is the treasurer from American Origami. If I dropped dead tomorrow, my gravestone would read: "She owed twenty-five dollars in dues." *(She goes to him and hands him the cup.)* Here's your Lemon Zinger.

ANDY: Thank you. This is very nice.

(Ilana goes back to her cup. She's pent up.)

ILANA: My dog ran off.

ANDY: Oh . . . I'm sorry.

ILANA: I lost my dog.

ANDY: That's tough.

ILANA: Yeah, it's tough.

ANDY: Have you checked the pound?

ILANA: Shut up.

ANDY: OK.

(They drink their tea.)

ILANA: He had three legs.

ANDY: Really?

ILANA: Yeah.

ANDY: It's sad when dogs only have three legs.

ILANA: He could barely walk across the kitchen floor for the past two years, and then one morning he's gone. Poof. Disappeared.

ANDY: Ah.

(They drink.)

ANDY: Lemony.

(They drink.)

ANDY: I count my blessings.

ILANA: That's great. Good for you.

ANDY: No, I literally count my blessings. I keep them in here.

(Andy goes into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small book, with a rubber band around it.)

ANDY: When I think of one, I number it and add it to the list.

ILANA: You're kidding me.

ANDY: It's just something I do. *(He opens it, reads.)*

Number 1: My health. *(Looks up.)* That's pretty basic. *(Reads.)*

Number 2: I can still go bowling, even with my elbow.

Number 1,943: I like teaching and am good at teaching.

Number 2,845: It is quiet and warm in my apartment in the morning and I always can have a cup of tea and look out my window. *(Looks up.)* I mean, that's a blessing! That's an honest to goodness blessing!

ILANA: Right.

ANDY: *(Reads.)* Number 3,971: Turkey Jerky. *(Looks up.)* TURKEY JERKEY! *(He flips through.)* I'm at 7,904 right now. 7,904 blessings counted.

ILANA: You've counted seven thousand blessings. How long did that take?

ANDY: I started when I was twelve. I had a fortune cookie. It said: "Count your blessings."

ILANA: You're very literal, aren't you?

ANDY: Sometimes they get repeated, but that's OK, I say. *(He looks back in the book.)* Oh, listen to this one. Number 5,848: *Folding What I Lost* by Ilana Andrews.

ILANA: My book?

ANDY: Yep!

ILANA: My book is one of your blessings?

ANDY: It's my favorite book. One of them, anyway. My favorite origami book.

I love that book, oh mister, yes I do. I've only read it about two hundred times! I keep extra copies around just to give it to people who I like. I say: Just read this. You don't even have to fold to like this book.

ILANA: Come on . . . it's an origami book.

ANDY: *(Reads.)* Number 126: Origami.

ILANA: Origami.

ANDY: Number 127: The way I feel when I am folding.

(Ilana knows what he's talking about for the first time. They look at each other. Then Andy goes back to the book.)

ANDY: Here's another one about your book.

Number 5,962: Folding Ilana's models which are the things she's lost in her life and reading her little essays about them. They are like little poems. Folding things I never lost and it makes me think about losing things I never even had. And it is sad, but a good sad, like melancholy.

And then I have the next one: Number 5,963: Melancholy. *(Looks up.)* I think I was thinking that melancholy is kind of a blessing, because it's not a serious sadness, it's more like a sweet sadness, and it's nice to have some melancholy and read something nice or listen to music or to fold. If I wrote a book, maybe I'd call it *Melancholy Folding* or

something. Not that I'd ever write a book, being that I don't write and I don't fold well enough to write a book on it, but I guess I sometimes think about it anyhow, sort of like a harmless fantasy. Boy, I'm talking a lot. I'm sorry. Sometimes I talk and I forget to stop. Sorry. I'll shut up.

(Awkward silence. Andy looks up at the bird.)

ANDY: I can really have that?

ILANA: If you can get it down.

(Andy looks around the room. Andy puts his little book on a table. He picks up the ottoman and puts it on the couch.)

ANDY: It's like making a fort!

ILANA: Yeah. A fort.

ANDY: *(Studying the bird.)* Let's see . . . let's see . . . Scissors?

ILANA: Right over there.

(He gets them.)

ANDY: Will you spot me?

ILANA: Yeah.

(Andy climbs on the couch and then the ottoman.)

ANDY: Don't let me fall.

ILANA: I won't.

(Andy cuts the string and the bird falls.)

ANDY: YES! BIG TIME YES!

(He gets down. He puts the ottoman back. He picks up the bird.)

ANDY: Fan-freaking-tastic.

(He looks at her. He smiles like a kid.)

ANDY: Thank you.

ILANA: It's fine. It's fine. It's . . .

ANDY: What?

ILANA: Nothing, I . . . *(Forcing herself.)* Thank you for reading my book.

ANDY: I love your book! Thank you for writing it!

ILANA: OK.

ANDY: Can I ask you something?

ILANA: OK.

ANDY: How did you get the idea for it?

ILANA: I don't know. I just did.

ANDY: You "just did." WOW. WOW.

ILANA: I mean . . . *(Beat.)* When I was thirteen, I had this sort of medallion of a dragonfly, it was made out of pieces of volcanic glass. It hung in my bedroom window and it was like my favorite thing.

But when my family moved, I lost it. I was so upset. I was really . . . so upset.

I don't know, it was the first time I realized that things could just vanish from your life.

And then, I don't remember why, but one day I just started to fold it. I had a piece of paper, and I made this one single fold in it . . . I stared at it . . . and then I slowly started to . . . I don't know, I tried to fold my lost dragonfly. I tried to make the paper look like volcanic glass.

ANDY: Are you going to . . . Um . . . Are you going to fold your dog?

ILANA: *What?*

ANDY: Something you lost. Are you going to fold your lost dog?

ILANA: No. No, that's . . . You don't understand. I think you should probably go.

ANDY: Oh. OK. OK, yeah, I should probably get going . . .

(Andy starts to put on his shoes. He has to sit on the floor to do this. His laces are knotted, and he has to try hard to untie them.)

ANDY: So . . . Do you ever . . . Ha! Do you ever . . . tutor people?

ILANA: What?

ANDY: Tutor. Origami.

ILANA: No. I don't ever do that.

ANDY: Of course not. But would you? I mean . . . *would* you?

ILANA: No. I never would. You seem very nice, but no.

ANDY: Oh, it's not for me! Silly Andy! I would never even *presume* that you'd tutor *me!* Gosh, sometimes I'm a HUGE idiot!

ILANA: Oh . . .

ANDY: I have this student . . .

ILANA: Oh. Right.

ANDY: Great kid! And he's big into folding, and . . .

ILANA: Yeah, I don't do that.

ANDY: Look, this kid. He was taking calculus as a freshman.

ILANA: I'm sure he's very talented.

ANDY: We have a calculus club. It's like an after-school activity for anyone who's into calc.

ILANA: Sounds wild.

ANDY: Suresh is his name. He shows up and he's the hit of the club. It wasn't just about calculus, it was about winding Suresh up and watching him run his mouth.

ILANA: He sounds like a great kid.

ANDY: Trust me. Suresh is tops.

ILANA: I just don't tutor. I'm not a people person, and I'm not a good teacher.

ANDY: You are though. Your class, your book . . . I mean, you kind of really affected me, you know? I don't say it lightly.

ILANA: Well, that's very . . . That's not . . . I don't tutor.

ANDY: That's too bad. *(Beat.)* His mother died last year.

ILANA: Wow. How sad.

ANDY: She was crossing the street, and she got hit by a car, and the car took off. A hit and run. They never caught the guy.

ILANA: You know, that's awful, but you're not going to guilt me into anything, OK? / I don't feel guilt. I'm immune to guilt. I don't fucking tutor.

ANDY: / I'm not! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry it came out that way.

ILANA: Origami doesn't need tutors. He can read books, he can go on the Internet, he can fold whatever he wants. There's nothing I could say that would make him any better or any worse.

ANDY: You won't tutor him. I get it.

ILANA: Send him over to MIT. They've got that origami club. They're all hotshots.

ANDY: I know all about the MIT origami club, and you'll understand if I don't want to expose my student to that sort of collegiate hedonism. Besides, you're the best there is.

ILANA: No, I'm not.

ANDY: Yes, you are.

ILANA: Is this why you came here today? To try and get me to tutor your student in origami?

ANDY: That's not the only reason I came. I just thought I'd try. I'm sorry.

ILANA: OK. Fine. Now go.

(Andy still seated, still can't untie his shoes. But he grabs his bag and takes out a plastic shoebox. He opens it and slides it over to Ilana.)

ANDY: He's been doing origami for like three months. And those are some of his models.

(Ilana looks into the box. She starts taking out beautiful origami models of insects and animals.)

ILANA: Your student folded these?

ANDY: There's a Moroccan Hissing Cockroach. Actual size. Physiologically accurate. One piece of paper. There's a tarantula. Same thing.

ILANA: Wait . . . your . . . *student* folded *these?* He folded these himself? Did you show him how to do this?

ANDY: Are you kidding? *I* can't fold those. Ilana, *Suresh sees folds before they happen.* He looks at a flat piece of paper and sees everything that needs to be done. It's like he has X-ray vision.

(Ilana pulls out an extremely complex geometric shape.)

ANDY: He did a bunch of animals and then became obsessed with complex polyhedra. Ilana: You've never seen someone fold like this kid. He's like Jimi Hendrix if Jimi Hendrix folded polyhedral origami.

ILANA: This doesn't make any sense.

ANDY: Why not?

ILANA: Because these . . .

ANDY: It's good, right?

ILANA: *(Looks at him.)* It's really good.

ANDY: Listen: It's the middle of Suresh's junior year last year, and his mother is killed by this hit-and-run. I mean, it's just awful. And poor Suresh, once he comes back to school, he's just . . . he's just a shell of the kid we knew. Which is understandable, but it was so hard to see him like that.

And then that summer, he and his sister and his dad went to India. And when he came back to start his senior year, I mean, he just stopped caring or something.

He dropped out of calc club, which, you know, *that* hurt. Of course, he's still pulling straight A's with his eyes closed. He had his pick of colleges, and then he up and decides to go to *Brown.* He got into *Yale and MIT* and he's going to *Brown.* I mean, this kid is acting up every which way.

He's in my advanced calc class and just sleeping through it. He's way ahead of everyone in there. This kid knows way more than me.

So I think to myself: I love this kid. I feel bad for him. Why waste that mind of his? So I gave him a book of basic folds.

(Andy looks in the box and pulls out an origami toad.)

ANDY: Look at this. Look at this frog. He did this after about two weeks of folding in his whole life.

ILANA: He did this after two weeks?

ANDY: Two weeks. Most people start by folding a boat or a flower. He folds a Amazonian toad.

(Ilana studies the model.)

ANDY: I want to help him. And I thought . . . He's just too smart for everyone else. But he's not too smart for you.

ILANA: I don't know, I have to think. I'm sorry. I have to think about this.

ANDY: I totally understand! *(Referring to the models.)* Look, keep those. Hold on to them. I put my card in there. Call me. Think about it. And thanks for this bird. Boy, I hope it stopped raining!

ILANA: Either way, you have to take that with you.

(Andy puts out his hand to shake hers.)

ANDY: Ilana, as always, it's been a pleasure.

(They shake hands.)

ILANA: Bye.

ANDY: So long!

(He picks up the bird and plays with it, making hawk sounds.)

ANDY: CAW! CAW!

(He "flies" it out of the room, exiting.)

ANDY: *(Offstage.)* CAW! CAW!

(Ilana closes the door behind him. She goes to her couch. She looks at Suresh's models, marveling at them, touching them as if they were precious and delicate. She looks up to where the hawk had hung and is now conscious of its absence. She looks on her coffee table and sees that Andy forgot his little book.)

ILANA: Great.

(She looks at it. She flips through it. She begins to read it. She becomes absorbed by it. Lights fade as hip-hop music fills the space.)

SCENE 2

Ilana's studio. A few days later. The place is still a mess. Ilana is out of her robe, but still dishevelled. She's still reading Andy's book. She's engrossed in it. She flips through it, finding other pages, as if trying to piece a story together. The buzzer buzzes. Ilana, once again, is startled. She goes to the intercom.

ILANA: Hello?

SURESH: *(Intercom.)* Yo.

ILANA: *Hello?* Who is it?

SURESH: Yo.

ILANA: Suresh? Andy's student?

SURESH: What up?

ILANA: I thought you weren't supposed to come until noon.

SURESH: It's noon.

ILANA: It is?

SURESH: Yup. High noon.

(Ilana takes her hand off the intercom.)

ILANA: Shit.

(She buzzes him him in. She puts Andy's book on the table and tries to straighten herself up. She opens the door. A few seconds later, Suresh enters. He's got his iPod earphones in his ears.)

ILANA: Hi. Sorry. I lost track of time. Suresh?

SURESH: Hey.

ILANA: I'm Ilana. Andy told me all about you.

SURESH: Who's Andy?

ILANA: Mr. Froling.

SURESH: Fro Dog.

ILANA: Yes, "Fro Dog." How are you?

SURESH: I'm cool. What happened in here?

ILANA: What do you mean?

SURESH: I mean: What happened in here?

(Ilana looks around.)

ILANA: Nothing.

SURESH: *Something* . . .

(Beat.)

ILANA: Well come on in.

SURESH: You like some organic hip-hop?

ILANA: What?

SURESH: These some smooth cuts. Check it . . .

(Suresh takes one of his earphones out of his ears and puts it into Ilana's ear. They're connected by his earphones. They stand very close to each other, and he plays music that fills the space. He sways along with it, almost as if he's dancing with her. After a while, he removes the earphone from his ear and puts it in Ilana's other ear. The music swells. He sways off. He looks around her studio at origami models while Ilana stands there listening to music. She's taken aback by the whole thing. Suresh picks up Andy's book and starts flipping through it. Ilana rips the earphones out, the music stops.)

ILANA: Put that down!

SURESH: What's this?

ILANA: Put it down!

(He does.)

ILANA: That's none of your business!

(She picks up the book and holds it.)

SURESH: OK. Sorry.

ILANA: Here.

(She hands him back his iPod.)

SURESH: *(Referring to the music.)* Dope, right?

ILANA: Fascinating. Thank you.

SURESH: What is that, your diary or something?

ILANA: No.

SURESH: What is it?

ILANA: Nothing. Just something I've been reading. Look, why don't we sit down and, you know, you can fold me something.

SURESH: Protective.

ILANA: What?

SURESH: Protective.

ILANA: What's protective?

SURESH: You are. Of your reading material. This place is crazy.

ILANA: Yeah. It's crazy.

SURESH: Fro Dog said you were like a professional origami person.

ILANA: Yeah, I am.

SURESH: Could I get something to drink?

ILANA: Sure, I've got water, tea, and milk.

SURESH: What kind of milk?

ILANA: I don't know. Skim milk.

SURESH: Skim? Hell no. I don't drink no skim milk. Why you got all these hearts?

ILANA: I'm studying it.

SURESH: The heart?

ILANA: Yeah.

SURESH: Why?

ILANA: It's a job.

SURESH: Origami?

ILANA: Yeah.

SURESH: Someone paying you money to fold a heart?

ILANA: No.

SURESH: So why you folding a heart?

ILANA: It's a project. I'm trying to fold a mesh heart sleeve.

SURESH: A mesh what?

ILANA: Heart. Sleeve. It's a project commissioned by a a medical research team. It's complicated.

SURESH: What, too complicated for a dumb kid like me?

ILANA: No.

SURESH: So?

ILANA: OK, so in treating congestive heart failure, usually you need open-heart surgery. It's invasive. You have to crack open a person's sternum. Here: Show me your fist.

(Suresh holds out his fist. As she speaks, Ilana uses her own hand as the mesh heart and pantomines it slowly unwrapping around Suresh's fist.)

ILANA: OK, so your heart is about the size of your fist, right? So these doctors have developed a way to insert a small tube into a person's chest and, through that tube, pumping in a mesh netting that, when it exits the tube, unfolds in such a way that it can surround the heart, providing pressure.

(Her hand is wrapped around Suresh's fist.)

ILANA: It's a new treatment.

SURESH: That's tight.

ILANA: My job is to devise a crease pattern for this mesh netting so that it unfolds precisely around the heart.

SURESH: You gonna account for the heartbeat?

ILANA: Let's hope so.

SURESH: I mean, the heart is always pumping.

(Suresh squeezes his fist and twists it in a hard rhythm, as if it were a beating heart.)

ILANA: Yes, the heart is always beating, and so we're talking about some serious crease patterns. It's a matter of predictability.

SURESH: Predictability how?

ILANA: *(She gets a piece of paper.)* Well, for example, if I'm going to fold this . . . *(She almost folds the paper, but then stops.)*

SURESH: Yeah? What?

ILANA: Nothing, look, why don't you fold something?

SURESH: No, but show me what you were going to show me.

ILANA: Later. I want to see you fold something.

SURESH: But how are you gonna do it?

ILANA: I'm going to figure it out.

SURESH: How?

ILANA: I just will.

SURESH: Word.

(He holds his fist out for a fist bump.)

ILANA: What?

SURESH: Hit it. Come on, now. Fist bump.

(She awkwardly fist bumps him.)

SURESH: That's what I'm talking about.
It's like our hearts bumping.
Heart bump.
BaDump BaDump.

(He wanders around her apartment, looking at her models. He picks up a rabbit origami piece from a shelf.)

ILANA: So . . . Andy said you have like a senior project.

SURESH: Who's Andy?

ILANA: Fro Dog.

SURESH: Fro Dizzle.

ILANA: He said you might want to, you know, study origami. I guess. Although I really don't know what you'd want to do here.

SURESH: This place is crazy.

ILANA: Yeah. It's crazy.

SURESH: What is this, a rabbit?

ILANA: Yeah.

SURESH: It don't look like a rabbit.

ILANA: Well, it's a rabbit.

SURESH: It looks like a dog.

ILANA: It's a rabbit, OK?

SURESH: I could fold a better rabbit than this one.

ILANA: Then do it.

(Suresh's phone rings. He checks it and then silences it.)

SURESH: All I'm saying is that if you gonna be designing a mesh heart to get pumped into someone's chest, you better work on your rabbits first.

ILANA: Thanks for the advice.

SURESH: Do you really think this rabbit is good?

ILANA: No, OK? That rabbit is not good. It's flawed. It lacks a rabbit essence. But we're not going to fold brilliant pieces of origami every time we sit down. We mess around with a model, we play with it, we test crease patterns, and after a few tries if we're lucky, we come out with a model that satisfies our aesthetic standards. OK? So, yeah, that rabbit sucks. So what? It's a sketching.

SURESH: Yeah, a sketching of a dog.

ILANA: *(Frustrated.)* It's NOT A DOG, it's a RABBIT!

(Suresh looks at her, and then goes back to studying the rabbit.)

ILANA: You don't do sketchings, do you?

SURESH: Huh?

ILANA: You don't have to try and "figure out" a model. You just do it, isn't that right? You just see something and know how to fold it.

SURESH: I dunno.

ILANA: Look, I saw your models.

SURESH: The ones Fro Dog brought over?

ILANA: Yeah. These.

(Suresh shrugs.)

SURESH: They're not that good.

ILANA: Yes, they are. You're very good. Will you fold something right now?

SURESH: I don't feel like it.

ILANA: Why are you even here?

SURESH: Fro Dog.

ILANA: Fro Dog WHAT?

SURESH: He told me to come. He was really excited and everything, I guess that, you know . . . You're like his hero or something. He told me to come. Fro Dog's my boy, you know? So I come.

ILANA: What are you talking about?

SURESH: Fro Dog said your dog ran off.

ILANA: He told you that?

SURESH: Yeah, he was talking about it. He seemed real concerned about you and everything. Because of your divorce and that your dog ran off and you're living in this place and not answering your phone and all that.

ILANA: OK, that's enough. Everyone knows a little too much about me these days.

SURESH: You check the pound? For the dog?

ILANA: Yes I checked the pound! I checked every pound every day for a month. Of course I checked the stupid pound.

SURESH: So where'd he go?

ILANA: I don't know.

SURESH: Usually you gotta keep a dog tied up.

ILANA: Oh my God . . . Look, my dog was twelve years old. He had three legs, no teeth, and no ears either. Wherever he ran off to, he's not alive any more. Some animals, I guess they want to die alone.

SURESH: How come he didn't have any ears?

ILANA: His previous owner cut them off with hedge clippers.

SURESH: Why?

ILANA: I don't know, because his previous owner was an abusive piece of shit. He's going to rot in hell. You traumatize a dog, you rot in hell. Simple as that.

SURESH: What about a cat?

ILANA: Fuck cats. Look, are you going to fold something or not? Because if you don't want to be here, then just leave.

SURESH: You miss him?

ILANA: My dog?

SURESH: Yeah.

ILANA: What do you think?

SURESH: I guess you must miss him.

ILANA: I do.

SURESH: Fro Dog said you got a divorce because the dog ran off.

ILANA: Fro Dog talks too much.

SURESH: Word.

ILANA: Why do you talk like that?

SURESH: Talk like what?

ILANA: The way you speak. It's incongruous.

SURESH: I talk the way I talk.

ILANA: But you talk the way you talk for a reason.

SURESH: Why do *you* talk like *that?*

ILANA: I'm just asking —

SURESH: You think I should sound Indian or something?

ILANA: Not at all.

SURESH: Then how should I sound then?

ILANA: Anyway you like.

SURESH: OK, then, so this is how I like.

ILANA: Why don't you just cool it with the attitude?

SURESH: Why don't you just suck my dick?

ILANA: EXCUSE ME?!

SURESH: Talking about, *why you talk black like that?* Racist.

ILANA: Fuck you.

SURESH: I don't have to talk anyway I don't want to talk, bitch.

ILANA: Did you just call me a bitch?

SURESH: Yeah, bitch, I called you a bitch.

ILANA: GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY STUDIO!

SURESH: Fine!

ILANA: Leave!

(Suresh's phone starts ringing.)

SURESH: You gotta relax.

(Phone still rings.)

ILANA: Just get out of here.

(Phone rings. Suresh looks at it.)

SURESH: I gotta take this.

ILANA: Take it outside! I'm serious . . .

(He answers it. Everything about his voice and manner changes. He turns away from Ilana, not wanting her to see or hear this.)

SURESH: Hi Dad.

What's wro . . . ? Where's Rahel?

Dad just . . .

(Beat.)

Go into the freezer. There's some chicken in a Ziploc. Just take it out and put it in the sink.

(Beat.)

I'm taking care of it, OK?

(Beat.)

I know you're hungry. I know.

In the freezer.

The SINK.

No nothing's going to happen it's going to defrost.

I'm coming home now. We'll eat. OK?

OK. Bye Dad.

(He hangs up.)

SURESH: I gotta go.

(They look at each other.)

SURESH: I'm sorry I told you to suck my dick. That shit is disrespectful.

(Ilana doesn't know what to say to him.)

SURESH: I'm out. *(He starts to leave.)*

ILANA: You cook?

SURESH: Huh?

ILANA: You're cooking dinner tonight?

SURESH: I cook dinner every night.

SURESH: How many times you gonna have to sketch out that mesh heart before it's ready?

ILANA: As many times as it takes.

SURESH: What if it doesn't work?

ILANA: I don't know. I hope it does.

SURESH: Yeah. What's the medium anyway, some sort of synthetic fiber?

ILANA: Something like that.

SURESH: Shit. That's tough. Pleats are gonna drive you crazy on this.

ILANA: Yeah. They are.

SURESH: You know what I learned the other day about pleats? You know how the only way to get rid of a pleat is?

ILANA: You have to collide it with another pleat.

(Suresh holds out his fist. Ilana awkwardly fist bumps him.)

SURESH: Word. Shit is whack.

SCENE 3

Lights shift. The doorbell rings. Ilana buzzes the buzzer. Moments later Andy enters.

ANDY: Hey!

ILANA: Hey.

ANDY: Hey! Thanks for letting me come over again. What a flake I am! I've never forgotten that thing in my entire life. I'm kind of lost without it. How's it going? How did it go with Suresh? He seemed pretty excited about you.

ILANA: He did?

ANDY: Oh yeah! He's really excited to do his senior project here and everything. Your apprentice! The sorcerer's apprentice!

ILANA: He called me a bitch.

ANDY: He *what?*

ILANA: He told me to suck his dick.

ILANA: WHAT?

ILANA: Other than that, nice kid. Quality kid.

ANDY: I am *so sorry.* I had no idea! Oh Suresh!

ILANA: He came all the way over here, and he wouldn't fold anything. He doesn't even *like* folding. He said he came over here as a favor for you.

ANDY: He said that? A favor to *me?* He was so excited in class today! He said you were amazing and everything!

ILANA: He's a real piece of work.

ANDY: *(Remembers something in his bag.)* Oh, and he wanted me to give you this! *(Andy takes out a small origami rabbit.)*

ANDY: It's a rabbit! He folded it for you!

(Ilana takes it and looks at it.)

ILANA: I hate this kid.

ANDY: No! He's a great kid! Trust me! He wanted me to tell you to unfold it. He said there's a message inside.

ILANA: Yeah, I bet there is, the little brat.

(But she starts to unfold the model carefully.)

ANDY: So . . . um . . . my book?

ILANA: It's right there.

(Andy sees his book and takes it.)

ANDY: Great! I guess I was so excited to get that hawk. Great hawk, by the way. It's in the den! I have a little room, I call it the den. It's where I fold.

(Ilana unfolds the rabbit. Suresh has written a note on the paper. She reads it.)

ANDY: What's it say?

(Ilana reads it carefully again.)

ILANA: I don't know. It's like a poem or something. A poem in a rabbit.

ANDY: See? Great kid.

ILANA: What is it with you guys? I've got Suresh writing me poems, and I've got you writing about my book and my scaled koi and the stupid dress I wore at the convention last summer.

ANDY: What?

ILANA: Your blessings. Your counted blessings.

ANDY: Your dress? I didn't read you that one. That one about your dress.

(Ilana looks at Andy.)

ILANA: Right . . .

ANDY: Did you read this?

ILANA: Your book? Well, I . . . I mean . . .

ANDY: You read my book?!

ILANA: You left it here!

ANDY: You READ this!? You don't just READ somebody's BOOK!

ILANA: I read it, Andy, but can you just listen / to me . . .

ANDY: / It's PRIVATE! It's a very private thing!

ILANA: You took it out. You read to me from it.

ANDY: Select entries!

ILANA: It was just sitting there, and I picked it up, and I, you know, I started flipping through it . . . .

ANDY: You might have gotten the *idea* that these things might be *slightly personal.* You might have stopped reading. I mean, there's other stuff in here . . .

ILANA: I shouldn't have read it. Andy, I shouldn't have read it, I'm sorry. But I started and I couldn't put it down.

(Andy paces around and then stops.)

ANDY: Look, For a long time, Ilana . . . I've really . . .

I took your class on the scaled koi last summer at the convention and you were wearing this green dress. This green summer dress. And that's why I couldn't fold the koi. I was just watching you fold and talk and walk around and . . .

I really like you. I mean, I have a really big crush on you.

ILANA: I know, it was in the book.

ANDY: Oh MAN!

ILANA: Andy, listen . . .

ANDY: People have two sides, OK? They have their inside and their outside, and I don't really need for everyone to be reading my book! Nobody's ever read this before.

ILANA: People have more than two sides.

ANDY: Some people. But not me. There's this. And then there's *this.*

ILANA: But *this* . . . *this* is . . .

ANDY: What?

ILANA: It's amazing, Andy.

ANDY: No it's not.

ILANA: It is. It's just so . . . . *Weird* . . .

ANDY: Yeah, great.

ILANA: But it was, I mean, I have to tell you . . . it was creepy seeing myself in there. It felt invasive.

ANDY: Well I'm SORRY! I didn't mean for you to read it!

ILANA: But it was more than that. There's so much in there and I've been trying to figure it out. I mean, it's like a catalog of everything that's ever happened to you . . . even your wisdom teeth, even mosquito bites, even your . . . your . . . *wisdom teeth!*

ANDY: How much of this did you *read?*

ILANA: I read all of it.

ANDY: Oh jeez! I have to go. *(He turns to go.)*

ILANA: Don't go . . .

ANDY: Now you know everything I might have told you, anything I might ever have told you . . . you know it all now, so it's been nice knowing you. Thank you. Good-bye.

ILANA: *(A little desperate.)* Please don't go . . . .

(He stops and looks at her.)

ILANA: Don't leave. Just stay for a second? I mean . . . You come barging in here and you take my hawk and you leave your blessings, and you know, it would be great if you just didn't leave for a second. Could you just not leave for a second?

(Andy turns as if he might stay a little bit longer. An awkward silence.)

ANDY: I had seven wisdom teeth. My X-rays are in textbooks for oral surgeons. So I'm kind of famous.

ILANA: Yeah. Yeah, I know, I read it.

ANDY: Right.

(Awkward silence.)

ANDY: What was Suresh's poem about?

ILANA: It was about my dog.

ANDY: Oh, that's nice. That's a nice thing for a poem.

ILANA: You need to tell me something. I read your book. I read it twice, Andy. There's something you need to tell me.

ANDY: OK . . .

ILANA: You always write . . . as one of your "blessings" . . . you always write, "I've never been hurt."

ANDY: So?

ILANA: You write it about twenty-five times or more throughout the book. "I've never been hurt. Not really."

ANDY: I haven't.

ILANA: And then, you know, this book is just filled with . . .

It's filled with PAIN, all these really awful and tough things that have happened to you.

I mean, your parents.

Your sister.

The time you tried stand-up comedy.

ANDY: I *really* wish you hadn't read this.

ILANA: So can you just tell me how you can be thankful for these things?

ANDY: I don't know.

ILANA: I mean, what is a blessing anyhow? Anything? Can it be anything?

ANDY: I don't know what they are, they're my my feelings. I think about them, and I write them down. It's just what I do. And I have been hurt once. I hurt my elbow.

ILANA: Pain isn't a blessing. Unless you're totally crazy, it's not something you sit around being thankful for. It just isn't.

ANDY: I don't know. It might be.

It's not *pleasant* . . . but it's real.

Anyhow, it's just my book. It's just stuff I write.

I don't expect you to understand.

Nobody understands me.

(Ilana cautiously goes to him and kisses him. She steps away.)

ANDY: OK. Wow.

(He steps towards her. Nervously leans in and kisses her longer.)

(Lights shift and hip-hop music fills the air. Suresh enters and begins cleaning the space. Eventually Andy and Ilana exit.)

SCENE 4

Ilana's studio, one month later. The studio is immaculately organized and clean. Suresh, with iPod in his ears, at a table, folding a fourteen-inch Tyrannosaurus. Ilana enters with a stack of mail. She's well dressed and groomed for the first time, coming from a business meeting. She stops and looks at the studio, seeing it organized and clean for the first time. She's not happy about it. She yells Suresh's name, but he can't hear her until the third time she yells:

ILANA: SURESH!

(Suresh takes off his earphones, the music stops.)

SURESH: Yo, what up?

ILANA: What happened here!?

SURESH: What?

ILANA: What did you DO to this place?

SURESH: I cleaned it.

ILANA: What did you do with all my things?

SURESH: I threw 'em out.

ILANA: WHAT?!

SURESH: Chill! I'm kidding! I put it in boxes and stacked them in the closet. And I put your documents and shit in the file cabinet. And over there I got some crates filled with your folding paper. It's a lot more efficient this way.

ILANA: This is not what I asked you to do.

SURESH: I asked you if I could straighten up.

ILANA: "Straighten up"!

SURESH: Check it out: Shit is straightened.

ILANA: You can't come into my home and change everything!

SURESH: Why you gotta always be like this?

ILANA: I thought you were just going to throw away the food!

SURESH: You know, I got on my knees and scrubbed the damn kitchen floor.

There was some nasty shit all in that grout, you know? I even got behind the fridge.

ILANA: Where's my crease patterns?

SURESH: In the box marked "crease patterns."

(Ilana goes to a stack of boxes. Suresh puts the earphones back on. Hip-hop fills the air. Ilana starts speaking again, but we can't hear her. She realizes Suresh can't hear her. She shouts his name again.)

ILANA: SURESH!

(He takes the earphones out, music out.)

SURESH: WHAT?

ILANA: Can you turn off your music for two seconds? Where's . . . where's that . . . um . . . there was an envelope . . . it was marked I think with . . .

SURESH: The mesh heart shit?

ILANA: No. Yeah, I mean . . . the documents from the medical team.

SURESH: File cabinet. Top drawer.

(Ilana goes to it.)

SURESH: So how'd it go?

ILANA: It went fine.

SURESH: They cool with you?

ILANA: It went fine.

SURESH: What did you tell them?

ILANA: Listen to your music.

SURESH: I don't want to anymore.

ILANA: Fine.

SURESH: Fine.

ILANA: It's going to blizzard. You should probably get home. It's going to dump on us tonight.

(Ilana goes to the fridge and takes out a carton of milk, which she drinks from for the rest of the scene.)

SURESH: A Tempestuous Valentine's Day. Fro Dog taking you out?

ILANA: Huh? Yeah, sure.

SURESH: Frodesiac! Candlelight dinner and everything.

(Ilana suddenly looks around for something.)

ILANA: Suresh, where's the fire extinguisher?

SURESH: Where's the fire?

(She finds the fire extinguisher and puts it on the kitchen counter and holds it for a moment, relieved.)

ILANA: What is that, a dinosaur?

SURESH: Word. A Tyrannosaurus. I love the Tyrannosaurus. Anybody who says they have another favorite dinosaur is LYING. Trust me. You can't love dinosaurs and not be like BFF with the T-Rex. You know what I'm saying?

ILANA: Whatever. I like the Brontosaurus. That's my favorite.

SURESH: That's cause you're a woman. Brontosaurus is a woman's dinosaur.

ILANA: So? Tyrannosaurus is juvenile.

SURESH: Shut up.

ILANA: *You* shut up.

(Ilana flops on the couch.)

ILANA: I can't work in a clean environment. It's just the way I am. I need to see everything at once. I need clutter.

SURESH: Clutter'll grow back.

(Suresh gets a plastic shoebox.)

SURESH: I folded something for you, it might be helpful for the mesh heart . . .

ILANA: Jesus, how much did you fold today?

SURESH: The T-Rex. But I finished some other stuff I've been working on, too. I busted a phat icosehedran using that Japanese stone tile number fourteen with the foil-looking backside. That shit is off the hook. And then *this*, though . . . this is some serious action . . .

ILANA: *(Half laughing, half serious.)* Would you just stop!

SURESH: What?

ILANA: Just stop!

SURESH: Oh-kay . . .

ILANA: I just need you to slow down. Do you understand? I mean, I come home and my whole place has just *morphed* into somebody else's space, and I'm trying to just gather my thoughts, and you're here folding away. Just folding away.

SURESH: I thought I was supposed to.

ILANA: Could you stop being a genius for two minutes please? Listen to your music.

SURESH: *You* should listen to my music! Don't you have a stereo or something?

ILANA: My ex took the stereo. He took all the music.

SURESH: You want, I can burn you some CDs.

ILANA: What? Rap Music?

SURESH: Hip-hop.

ILANA: No thank you.

SURESH: You haven't even listened to it.

ILANA: I don't need to listen to something to know I'm not going to like it.

SURESH: How can you even say that? Of course you do. Especially you.

ILANA: Why especially me?

SURESH: You been struggling with that mesh heart? Why? Because you haven't found the zone yet.

ILANA: I'm not struggling.

SURESH: I'm just saying, music can help.When Fro Dog gave me those books, I cruised through the animals and shit real fast. It was the complex polyhedra that threw me for the loop. So I'm sitting there, trying to wrap my brain around that shit, and I got my iPod on, you know? And I'm listening to this MC laying down these dope rhymes, freestyling, and there was something about his rhymes and his voice that just sort of spoke to my paper, to my hands. So I always think that folding is just like freestyling. It's like folding is like the evolution of a rhyme. So you gotta freestyle a little bit.

ILANA: I gotta freestyle. Thanks for the advice.

SURESH: Yeah, improvising your rhymes. Or your folds. Like, say you want to fold a simple cube. Boring. OK, but here's where you start, a simple fold, a simple rhyme. So I'm gonna freestyle. On what? What should I rap about?

ILANA: What, you're going to rap?

SURESH: Yeah, give me a topic.

ILANA: Anything?

SURESH: Yeah, give me something.

ILANA: OK . . . um . . . *(She holds up her carton of milk.)* OK, how about milk?

SURESH: Milk.

ILANA: Yeah. Rap about milk.

SURESH: That's whack.

ILANA: Well, that's what I want.

SURESH: Awright. Shit. OK. What is that? Nasty-ass skim milk?

ILANA: That's exactly what it is.

SURESH: Skim.

Awright then.

Check it:

One percent, two percent, skim and whole
Drink it down fast, make your body feel cold
Keep your bones strong now, even when you're old
May not want to do it, but you'll do what you're told

OK, right?

ILANA: *(Sarcastic.)* Very impressive.

SURESH: But that's simple. I figure, we take it to the next level. If that was a cube, let's say this next rhyme is like, an octahedron.

(He thinks.)

See, I'm all about prevention of osteoporosis
But some motherfuckers gonna always oppose this
With bones so bad you got halitosis
And they splinter and crack and I know that you know this.

ILANA: Yeah, it's cute Suresh. I'm glad you can rhyme about milk. Somehow I don't see this helping me fold the mesh heart.

SURESH: But check it: It's still too simplistic. It's a basic rhyme scheme. The rhyme always comes on the last word.

It's like if you had all your folds in the same place? You'd never fold anything cool.

So the adept MCs they'll fold their rhymes in different places. And so the shape of their language is unpredictable. Unpredictability! It's a good thing . . . In music, in origami.

ILANA: Do you even read music?

SURESH: What, like notes and shit on a page?

ILANA: Yeah, notes on a page.

SURESH: Hell no.

ILANA: I figured you didn't. Rap has no musical notation. There's no way of writing it down.

SURESH: Why's music gotta be written down? You gotta just play it, sing it, freestyle it. Like this: Check it.

ILANA: Great. More milk rhymes.

SURESH: I'm trying to demonstrate something to you, OK? Why you gotta be so mean about it?

ILANA: OK OK OK . . .

SURESH: I'm about to up the ante. We about to fold a stellated truncated icosahedran. I'm gonna bust some serious shit, now Ilana. You ready for some serious shit?

ILANA: I am ready for some serious shit.

SURESH: *(He bobs his head, thinking; this is done slowly, with a tinge of uncertainty, since he is making it as he goes along.)*

My girl Ilana she don't know but she a lady madonna
She drinkin' skim milk and dairy cause the calcium gonna
Give her bones and her tones

and whatever she wanna
Cause she my prima Ilana
Homogenized her momma,
Supersized manana
Hypothesized McDonald's fries
would sweat her like a sauna.
Now the silk trade's gone
And the milkmaid's song
Can't be Kellis cause her milkshake kicked it back to Hong Kong.
My White Russian she's a lush and barely wearin' a thong
She barely carryin' along
A fairy tale that's gone wrong
She pullin' tubes with ice cubes
Milky hits from the bong.

ILANA: *(Laughs.)* So you just made that up? Just now?

SURESH: Yeah, that was just off the top of my dome.

ILANA: You just invented those rhymes as you were speaking them?

SURESH: Word. And there's themes in there, you know, milkish themes. And if that were a crease pattern, it'd be all the fuck over the place.

ILANA: But it's not a crease pattern, it's a rhyme scheme.

SURESH: Same thing!

ILANA: No, not the same thing! And you can't freestyle something that's going to wrap around somebody's heart.

SURESH: Why not?

ILANA: Because it's too important. It's somebody's sick heart. I'm not going to just wing it.

(Beat.) Just because you can fold anything you want doesn't mean you understand everything. You told me to think about tessellations. So I did. And it sounds good, but it really doesn't help at all. You might as well tell me to think about shapes.

For me it's not about improvisation, it's about rigor, OK? If origami is music, it's a fugue. It's a repeating theme, painstakingly arranged on paper before you can do anything with it.

SURESH: *(Disimissive; like a child.) You're* a fugue.

ILANA: I am not a fugue.

SURESH: Yeah you are. You're just a repeating theme, sitting on your couch, eating the same damn szecheuan beef every night, complaining about everything and never folding nothing.

ILANA: Fuck you.

SURESH: And dropping F-bombs like mad.

ILANA: At least I can read music.

SURESH: So?

ILANA: You only understand things one way. You don't understand how I fold like I do.

SURESH: How do you fold then?

ILANA: So, look I have this one crease pattern . . . oh, you'd love this . . .

(Ilana goes to look for it.)

ILANA: I had this terrific paper I bought in bulk from Japan, really strong fibrous stuff, and I took it to this research and development company. I got permission to use their industrial laser cutter so I could make these complicated folds.

SURESH: You used a laser?

ILANA: It was cool.

SURESH: You used a laser to fold?

ILANA: If you put it on a really low setting, you can just score the paper. It's perfect for folding. You're gonna LOVE this.

(She can't find the stuff. Her files are all organized and put away.)

SURESH: It's kind of like cheating, though, right?

ILANA: It's not cheating.

SURESH: Cheating. Cheater. Laser Cheater.

ILANA: If I could even find my stuff maybe I could fucking show you.

SURESH: F-bomb. Cheater.

(Ilana takes a large crate that Suresh had organized and dumps it on the floor. Paper everywhere.)

ILANA: Now I'll find it!

(Suresh flips out, but Ilana doesn't realize how serious he is right away.)

SURESH: What are you doing!?

ILANA: I'm finding my stuff!

SURESH: I just did that! That took me all day!

ILANA: That's why I don't clean! It's a futile endeavor.

SURESH: *What's your problem?!*

ILANA: What?!

(Suresh goes and tries to reorganize the paper.)

SURESH: It took me all day! I had everything in there totally organized, a whole system and . . . and why'd you go do this!

ILANA: Suresh! Calm down!

SURESH: *(Realizing his organization is lost.)* Aw SHIT, MAN! This is FUCKED! You fucked it all up!

ILANA: It's OK! It's just paper!

(Suresh hits the ground and then gets up, facing her.)

SURESH: All that work and you just ruined it!

ILANA: *(Slightly losing temper.)* I didn't ask you to clean, Suresh, and it's just paper anyhow!

SURESH: This place was disgusting. Trash everywhere, junk everywhere.

That's probably why your husband left you. That's probably why your stupid dog ran off. 'Cause you're such a mess all the time.

(Ilana steps back, hurt, far more than Suresh intended. She doesn't say or do anything, but it's clear to Suresh he hurt her. A long silence. Suresh wants to say something, to apologize but he doesn't know how. Somehow in this silence they agree to let it pass.)

ILANA: *(Quietly.)* You need to go home now. It's late, and it's going to blizzard.

(Suresh gets his coat and bag. He goes to the plastic shoebox he had earlier. He opens it and takes out an origami three-dimensional life-sized human heart.)

SURESH: I made you a heart.

(He gives it to her. Ilana takes it.)

SURESH: To help you with the mesh heart sleeve.

ILANA: When did you do this?

SURESH: I dunno. All week.

SURESH: Everything's there. Every chamber and valve.

Exact proportions of an adult-sized human heart. Or mine, anyway. I made it the size of my fist.

Happy Valentine's Day or whatever.

(Ilana holds the heart, amazed at its quality.)

ILANA: How did you do this?

(Suresh looks at her, shakes his head.)

SURESH: *(Points to a diagram of the heart.)* I looked at that. And I folded it.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II
SCENE 5

A romantic restaurant, later that night. Ilana and Andy sit at a table sipping wine.

ANDY: Valentine's Day! What a messed-up holiday. I haven't had a date on Valentine's Day since . . . well . . . let's just say, it's been a long while.

ILANA: Since Maxine?

ANDY: *(Chokes on his wine.)* How do you know about Maxine?

ILANA: Your book, Andy.

ANDY: Oh for crying out loud.

ILANA: I'm sorry.

ANDY: Yes. Since Maxine.

ILANA: I should just . . . not mention it.

ANDY: Maxine and I . . . well, it wasn't the best relationship ever.

ILANA: I know.

ANDY: It was probably my worst relationship ever.

ILANA: Well . . . . I mean, it was your only one, right?

ANDY: Jeez!

ILANA: I'm sorry. It's wrong of me to . . . I should just erase all that from my mind.

ANDY: Maxine. Maximum Maxine. Deep inside, a good person.

ILANA: I mean, she killed all your plants. On purpose.

ANDY: It's weird to not be able to lie a little to someone. I mean, you know? You know every detail about me now. Why should I even lie?

ILANA: Don't lie, then.

ANDY: I guess I'm going to try not to.

My heart. On a sleeve. For you.

(Goes into his breast pocket.)

Which reminds me. Here.

(From his breast pocket, Andy takes out a one-dimensional origami pink symmetrical heart Valentine.)

ANDY: I made you a valentine.

ILANA: You did?

ANDY: I folded it.

ILANA: It's lovely!

ANDY: It's stupid.

ILANA: It's a lovely heart.

ANDY: It's a Valentine.

ILANA: Andy . . . It's so sweet.

ANDY: Happy Valentine's Day.

ILANA: I didn't get you anything.

ANDY: Oh, don't worry about that.

ILANA: I just . . . I don't know, I've never been a huge fan of Valentine's Day.

ANDY: No, I know. I mean, it's a total corporate . . . commercial . . . consumer . . . event.

ILANA: Yeah. No. I mean, that's not why . . . I mean . . . about ten years ago . . . My husband and I, we were engaged at the time . . . . I'm sorry. You probably don't want to hear this . . .

ANDY: No, I do!

ILANA: This is a . . . this is a pretty miserable story, but we were living in this tiny old house. This wasn't ON Valentine's Day, it was like a week before, I think. And we both got really drunk and got into a huge argument. And Demba . . . Demba was our dog . . .

ANDY: The dog who ran off?

ILANA: Yeah, but this was when he was only about two years old . . . Demba would get really excitable, especially when Mike and I would fight. So we stuck Demba in the garage that night, because he kept barking and jumping around. You know, he was a shepherd mix . . . a big dog . . . anyhow, we were drunk and we passed out in separate rooms, and Mike passed out with a stupid cigarette in his hand. And the house caught fire, and neither of us woke up.

ANDY: Oh my God . . .

ILANA: See, the house was a mess anyway . . . but I had so much paper. Reams and reams of different paper, all over the place, hanging off the kitchen table, the sofa, all over the place. It went up quick. But Demba smelled the smoke, and he chewed his way through the door into the house. The door was solid . . . a really strong, hard wood. And he broke off most of his teeth, he got splinters in his gums . . . and he tore his way into our burning house and woke me up and then woke Mike up. And we got out. And the house burned down.

ANDY: That's incredible.

ILANA: So, Valentine's Day kind of always reminds me of being in the vet's office, while Demba had splinters removed from his gums.

ANDY: God!

(They sip their wine. Ilana looks at Andy's Valentine.)

ANDY: He was a good dog.

ILANA: Yeah he was. He sure was. Anyhow. Enough of that. Sorry. Not a great . . . I'm not the greatest date in the world tonight.

ANDY: You're perfect.

(They smile at each other.)

ILANA: Yeah. Perfecto. *(Beat.)* Anyhow, in the mail today, I received an invitation. To a very exclusive origami convention.

ANDY: Really? Where?

ILANA: Nagasaki.

ANDY: Nagasaki?! Nagasaki, Japan?

ILANA: Some people I met back in the nineties. During the Bug Wars. Some of the best folders in Japan.

ANDY: Yeah!

ILANA: But it's really soon: Next month.

ANDY: Are you going to go?

ILANA: Oh, absolutely. And the interesting thing is, I can bring a guest.

ANDY: REALLY!?

ILANA: Yes, they'll provide room and board for a guest . . .

ANDY: Ilana! WOW! I mean . . . . That's . . . so . . . . I've never even been out of the country before!

ILANA: I was thinking about taking Suresh.

ANDY: Oh. Oh yeah, you should definitely take Suresh.

ILANA: I mean, he's my apprentice now. He's doing his senior project with me. I should take him.

ANDY: Of course.

ILANA: Andy, I'm sorry. I just thought —

ANDY: No! Jeez! Silly Andy! Sometimes I just get ahead of myself.

(Andy picks up another piece of bread. Lifts it to his mouth, but then puts it down. He's trying not to show his disappointment.)

ILANA: It's not that I wouldn't *want* you to come . . .

ANDY: No! I mean, of course.

ILANA: It would be a really great experience for Suresh. He'll see some things he's never seen before.

ANDY: Yeah. It would be great for him to see that, too. Those things.

ILANA: I think it's best. Don't you think?

ANDY: Of course. Absolutely of course. Nagasaki!

(Raises his glass.) Here's to Nagasaki.

(Ilana raises her glass.)

ILANA: Here's to you, Fro Dog.

(Andy laughs. They drink. Andy finishes his glass in a huge gulp. He pours another glass.)

ANDY: Suresh's been calling me that since his freshman year. Everyone at school calls me Fro Dog now.

All my life, I've never been cool.

But I'm a little cool now.

Suresh made me a little cool.

I mean, I'm not REALLY cool. But I'm Fro Dog. "Fro Dog" is a thousand times cooler than "Mr. Froling."

ILANA: I think you're cool.

ANDY: No, you don't. But it's OK, I don't mind. *(Quotes.)* "So much of what I am is what I've lost."

ILANA: *(Not registering.)* Mm-hm.

ANDY: I love that.

ILANA: Yeah. What?

ANDY: That's you. That's from your book! " . . . So much of what I am is what I've lost." I LOVE that!

ILANA: Oh . . . oh yeah!

ANDY: You're amazing, you know that?

ILANA: *(Quietly.)* Yeah. I mean. Yeah, right. Why do you like that book so much?

ANDY: What are you talking about? It's my favorite book!

ILANA: But it's not like . . . *literature.* It's not something you read for *wisdom.*

ANDY: I do.

ILANA: Andy, I'm not a writer, OK? I'm not a writer, I'm an origamist.

ANDY: But your essays . . .

ILANA: You're probably the only person who's ever bought it, much less read it, much less memorized it.

ANDY: Well, it IS the number-two best-selling origami book in the country.

ILANA: Number two, huh?

ANDY: But it's one of a kind.

ILANA: My ex-husband . . . he copyedited my book. He really, really copyedited it.

ANDY: He did? OK. So?

ILANA: The ideas were all mine. But I wrote some notes on each one, and then Mike, he, well . . . he wrote it out. I mean . . . those words you've memorized . . . those aren't my words. Those are Mike's words.

ANDY: Well, that's surprising.

ILANA: I wasn't trying to deceive anyone.

ANDY: It's still your book. It's still the things you lost. Why they're important to you. They're still your memories. And so it's still you.

ILANA: You read my book, I read yours. Yours is totally true, mine is ghost written. I know everything about you, and you still don't know anything about me.

ANDY: So tell me something.

(Ilana thinks.)

ILANA: OK. OK, so . . . I haven't folded a piece of paper since Demba ran away.

ANDY: You haven't? Why not?

ILANA: I don't know. I just can't do it anymore.

ANDY: But you're the best folder ever.

ILANA: No I'm not.

ANDY: So can't you fold now? Can you fold this napkin?

ILANA: No, I can't.

ANDY: Try. Just one fold. One fold to start.

ILANA: No, please, I can't.

(Awkward beat. They both drink their wine.)

ANDY: Look, I know you read my book, so there's not a whole lot of mystery that I'm bringing to the table here? But I just want you to know something, and I'm speaking right now as a guy who's not himself, and as a guy who does not normally drink wine and is now on glass three: I think there's a good chance that I could be somebody very good for you. I think I could be the guy who comes into your life and helps you put it back together. I am sitting right here, and I am a guy who will do anything for you, anything.

ILANA: That's very sweet.

ANDY: "Very sweet"? That's the best I got, Ilana. I can't do better than that.

ILANA: I'm sorry. I'm just . . . *(Referring to the chandeliered hearts.)* Look at these stupid hearts. I hate Valentine's Day. I'm a horrible person for this day. I'm probably the wrong person you should be with.

ANDY: Ilana . . . You're not, um . . . You not breaking up with me, are you?

ILANA: I don't know.

ANDY: Because it's Valentine's Day, and that would really suck.

(She smiles at him.)

ANDY: I'm trying to be more brave and impulsive. You make me want to be that way.

ILANA: It's good to be brave and impulsive.

ANDY: OK, then . . . Marry me.

ILANA: *What?*

ANDY: I swear to God, marry me. I know this is like our third date, but I would marry you right now. Seriously. Brave and impulsive. Brave and impulsive. Ilana: Marry Me.

ILANA: Andy, you need to stop drinking wine.

ANDY: This isn't the wine. Look, I know it's crazy, but what the heck. Life is short, opportunities are scarce, love is rare. Marry me.

ILANA: You're serious.

ANDY: I'm serious.

ILANA: I'm not even divorced yet.

ANDY: OK.

ILANA: So I can't marry you right now.

ANDY: But that's not a no.

ILANA: It's not a no. It's just reality.

ANDY: That's good. I'll take not a no. I'll take it.

(She smiles at him and kisses him.)

ILANA: Nicest guy ever. *(Beat.)* I have to pee.

(She exits. Andy looks after her, takes out his book, writes in it.)

SCENE 6

A hotel room in Nagasaki. Night. Suresh stands by a window, listening to his iPod/iPhone. We can hear his hip-hop. His cell rings, and he switches the music off and answers.

SURESH: Yeah.

Hey.

Yeah, I'm here.

How's Dad?

He did?

Well what did you do?

Why not?

Rahel, what's your problem? I ask you to take care of one thing for one week and you . . .

No, you shut up. How difficult is this? Huh?

Hang up then! Fine, hang up then! What?

(A knock at the door. Suresh goes to it, opens it and walks away. Ilana enters.)

SURESH: *(Still on phone.)* No. I put everything in stupid Tupperware in the freezer and all you have to do is . . .

Well then do it then!

Forget it, I'm going. I hope you both starve.

Hello?

Hello?

(Suresh hangs up and sits on the bed.)

ILANA: *(Concerned.)* Are you OK?

SURESH: Me? Yeah, I'm cool. My stupid sister can't take control of the house for one week is all.

ILANA: Where have you been?

SURESH: I been laying low.

ILANA: What happened to you today?

SURESH: Nothing happened.

ILANA: Where'd you go?

SURESH: Nowhere. I was in the garden.

ILANA: You missed the award ceremony. They gave you an award, but you weren't there.

SURESH: I didn't feel like going. What's your problem?

ILANA: I've been looking for you ALL DAY! You scared me. I just didn't know where you were. What were you doing in the garden?

SURESH: I was looking at the fish.

ILANA: You were looking at fish.

SURESH: Yeah.

ILANA: The whole day, looking at fish.

SURESH: I just felt like it, OK?

ILANA: Is this because of what happened this morning? At the memorial?

SURESH: Nothing happened at the memorial.

ILANA: You made that man cry.

SURESH: No I didn't.

ILANA: Yes you did.

SURESH: No I DID NOT.

(Suresh goes to the window.)

(Ilana goes up to him. She touches his back. He recoils, as if she burned him.)

SURESH: WHOA! What! Don't touch me, OK?!

ILANA: OK! I'm sorry! I only . . . / I'm sorry, I'm sorry, OK?

SURESH: / What do you want? I just want to . . . just don't do that.

ILANA: Suresh, I'm sorry.

SURESH: Yeah. Just . . .

ILANA: I'm sorry I touched you.

(Suresh sits on the bed. And then he looks at Ilana.)

SURESH: I didn't mean to do that. You can touch my back. I'm not a freak.

ILANA: No. You're not. I'm sorry. Can I sit down here?

SURESH: Yeah.

(She does. They're quiet for a moment.)

ILANA: You spent all day at the fish pond?

SURESH: Pretty much.

ILANA: What were the fish like?

SURESH: They would get into these feeding frenzies. I had pellets.

ILANA: You were feeding them?

SURESH: Big orange and white fish. Koi fish. I never seen so many fish like that. I'm all about the fish pond.

(Beat.) You think when it happened, all the fish died too? I was wondering that when I was looking at the fish pond. You think they all died?

ILANA: I guess they must have.

SURESH: I mean, it was radioactive fire, right? Everywhere. But if they were deep down enough . . . they would have been OK, right?

ILANA: I don't know how deep you have to go to avoid something like that.

SURESH: Me neither. But I bet you could go deep enough. The smart fish probably did. There were some big old dudes swimming in there today. They would just chill, let the pellets come to them.

I loved those fish, you know?

They're like rolling around in the water, jumping on each other, feeding, feeding . . . It was like a rumble of activity, and the water's all green.

ILANA: It sounds nice.

SURESH: The fish went away after I ran out of pellets and it got dark. But I could see the moon in the water and everything. I can see why people have fish ponds. I can see why people look at fish.

ILANA: It seemed like you were . . . I don't know . . . *disturbed* this morning. I mean, the memorial. You didn't even speak after we left it.

SURESH: It's supposed to be disturbing.

ILANA: But what you did there . . . You understand why people were staring at you, and why, you know, that old man . . . . how what you did made that man cry today, / and how . . .

SURESH: *(Suddenly angry.)* / I DIDN'T MAKE HIM CRY.

(Calms immediately.) It's an emotional place. The place makes people cry.

ILANA: What you did there, what you folded.

SURESH: I was just folding.

ILANA: No you weren't. You weren't just folding. Tell me why you folded those ravens.

SURESH: They weren't ravens, they were crows. Or blackbirds. It didn't mean anything. It was just something different than all those stupid little paper doves.

ILANA: It meant something.

SURESH: No it didn't.

ILANA: Yes it does. Yes it does, see, you have this intense vision, but you don't understand why you're folding what you are. How you made their heads. The way their heads turned away.

SURESH: It's better to give a bird something to do.

ILANA: It meant something. You wouldn't have done it if it didn't mean anything.

SURESH: For you.

ILANA: Yes, for me. For that man. For everyone who was there watching you fold those birds and not speaking, not saying anything. When you fold paper, Suresh, people watch. They can't take their eyes off of you. And then when you fold something like those birds . . . it touches people.

SURESH: You're so stupid.

ILANA: Why? Why am I so stupid?

SURESH: Kids fold doves. They go there at the epicenter and fold doves. For *peace*. Or whatever.

ILANA: Yeah. And you unfolded them and folded these ravens.

SURESH: So, they've already been folded as something else, they have weird creases in wrong places. It gives them a wrinkled texture. They look old or something.

ILANA: They looked more than old. They looked . . . . Distraught. They looked heartbroken.

SURESH: *(Angry.)* They looked hungry, OK? Not distraught, not sad, just fucking hungry.

ILANA: OK OK . . .

SURESH: I tried to fold the stupid things to make them look hungry.

ILANA: Why?

SURESH: I don't know why! Because the birds have nothing to eat. There's nothing there to eat, nothing there to feed them or, what, I don't know. I don't know, it's stupid, it's fucking retarded. I'm so sick of this origami shit.

ILANA: Why? Why are you so angry?

SURESH: This is the stupidest shit in the world. Doves. And paper cranes. And a whole conference and everything, all just for origami. What a waste of time.

ILANA: It's not a waste of time.

SURESH: Whatever. Like you even fold anyhow. I've never seen you fold a single thing. Supposed to be your apprentice or something, and what have you even taught me or shown me? Nothing. Don't talk to me about how awesome origami is if you can't even fold one piece of stupid paper.

(They are silent for a moment.)

(Suresh stares out the window.)

(Long beat. Ilana watches him as he stares out the window.)

SURESH: My mom got hit by a car. That's how she died.

ILANA: I know.

SURESH: Those kids fold doves as if it means anything. It doesn't mean anything.

And I'm at the epicenter today and I fold some stupid birds and everyone acts like I did something profound or meaningful, but it's not, it's not profound, it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything except that I know how to fold paper.

Fuck all this. I'm serious. Fuck all this.

(Ilana picks up a square piece of folding paper from the bed, looks at it, pushes it toward Suresh.)

ILANA: Look at this.

Look at this paper. It has no memory, it's just flat.

But fold it, even once, and suddenly it remembers something.

And then with each fold, another memory, another experience and they build up to make something complicated.

The paper must forget that it was ever flat, ever a simple square.

It probably can't remember it's still in in one piece.

Probably feels like too many things have happened to it. It's all twisted into something so far from what it used to be.

I guess it could unfold and become flat again. But it would never be what it was.

When it was untouched.

Folds leave scars.

SURESH: Show me your fist.

(Ilana puts her fist out. Suresh puts his hand around it.)

SURESH: Tomorrow, we should check out the fish.

ILANA: We should.

(He holds her fist.)

SURESH: Your heart's not beating.

(Ilana starts squeezing her fist like a heartbeat, like Suresh did.)

(Suresh takes her fist in both hands. He holds her fist and then kisses it.)

(He looks at her and leans in and kisses her.)

SURESH: I'm sorry.

ILANA: No . . .

SURESH: I just . . . I don't know.

ILANA: It's OK.

(Beat. They look at each other.)

SURESH: Can I kiss you again?

ILANA: I don't know. No.

SURESH: Why not?

ILANA: You don't want to kiss me.

SURESH: Yeah I do.

(He kisses her again.)

SURESH: This city is crazy.

(He tries to kiss her again. But she backs away. She takes his face in her hands and she kisses his forehead.)

SURESH: I'm sorry . . . I . . . .

ILANA: Shh. It's OK. It's OK.

(Suresh falls into her. Ilana holds him, folding him into her, close to her. She holds him, stroking his face. She looks at him, and then out toward the city.)

SCENE 7

Ilana's studio. Andy has prepared a little meal. Basket of bread, some cheese, fruit, wine. A tablecloth on the table, flowers in a vase. He's putting the finishing touches on it when Suresh enters.

ANDY: / Oh.

SURESH: / Oh. What up Fro Dog?

ANDY: Suresh? What are you doing here?

SURESH: I don't know. I just got back from Japan.

ANDY: Where's Ilana?

SURESH: I thought she'd be here by now.

ANDY: Didn't you come from the airport together?

SURESH: No.

ANDY: So . . . Did you come here for . . . I mean . . . Can I get you something?

SURESH: I came over to, you know . . . she uh . . . she packed some of my stuff in her luggage 'cause I was out of space, so I came over to get it. What about you?

ANDY: Nothing. Just, you know. Thought Ilana and I would eat a little dinner.

SURESH: Oh.

(Awkward silence.)

ANDY: Jeez! I'm sorry, buddy, do you want some bread?

SURESH: No thanks.

ANDY: It's got calamata olives baked into it. Can you believe that?

SURESH: Naw, man. I'm cool.

ANDY: So? How was Japan?

SURESH: Japan was crazy.

ANDY: That's great!

SURESH: Yeah.

ANDY: And the conference?

SURESH: Crazy.

ANDY: Great!

SURESH: Yeah.

(Awkward silence.)

ANDY: I wonder where she is?

SURESH: Yeah.

(Awkward silence.)

ANDY: How was the flight?

SURESH: Awright.

ANDY: Was there a movie?

SURESH: I guess. I didn't really watch.

ANDY: I always thought, if I took a long trip, I'd watch all the movies.

SURESH: Yeah.

ANDY: Did Ilana have a good time?

SURESH: I guess.

ANDY: Are you OK?

SURESH: Huh? Yeah. Yeah, I'm cool. Long flight, you know?

ANDY: Sure. You must have had like two or three movies on that flight.

SURESH: Yeah.

ANDY: Did Ilana watch the movies?

SURESH: I dunno. We didn't sit together.

ANDY: You didn't? Why not?

SURESH: We did on the way over, but not on the way back. She, um . . . She like upgraded her ticket? First class. And I was back in coach. Economy style, you know?

ANDY: Wow. First class?

SURESH: They let the first class off the plane first. And so . . . I guess I figured she'd be here by now.

ANDY: Huh. So she just . . . left you at the airport? That doesn't seem . . . I mean, that's strange.

SURESH: She's a strange lady.

ANDY: Did you piss her off again?

SURESH: Not that I know of. We got up this morning to leave? And she was . . . I don't know. She sort of told me that, you know . . . that this thing was finished.

ANDY: What thing?

SURESH: You know, like my apprenticeship. My senior project. She told me I was done. That I should, you know, stop coming here and everything.

ANDY: But why?

SURESH: You tell me, man. I don't understand anything she does.

ANDY: *I* don't understand her. I mean . . . I don't understand her at all.

SURESH: Bitch.

ANDY: *(Sternly.)* Hey. Watch it.

SURESH: I'm just saying.

ANDY: You don't call Ilana that.

SURESH: I know.

ANDY: Don't use that word, Suresh. Just don't use it.

SURESH: I know.

ANDY: So . . . what about your senior project.

SURESH: It's over. She gave me an A. I'm done, man. I'm done with high school.

ANDY: Well . . . Congratulations.

SURESH: Yeah. Yeah, thanks.

It's just that, you know . . .

I don't know.

I don't want to be done with high school.

I liked high school, you know?

ANDY: I know.

SURESH: I'll never forget this time in my life.

ANDY: I know.

(Beat.)

ANDY: You're going to be OK, you know Suresh?

SURESH: I don't know.

ANDY: What. What don't you know?

SURESH: *(Quietly.)* I'm having kind of a rough time.

ANDY: *(Very concerned.)* Why? What? What's going on?

SURESH: I don't know, man.

ANDY: Come here, buddy. What's going on with you?

(Suresh shrugs.)

ANDY: Japan was good, right? I mean, it sounds like you had a great time . . .

SURESH: I liked Japan, you know, the origami thing? The conference? I learned a lot.

But Nagasaki, man, it's kind of a weird place. I felt like I was kind of a different person there. And I think Ilana did too. And for one week, I got to be someone else. And now I'm back to being me. Except I still remember being someone else, and I don't know. It's like I'm two things at once. But I shouldn't be. Nobody should be. You should be one thing at once.

(Beat; Suresh looks around him.)

SURESH: I love this place. It's like a paper zoo.

(They both look around at everything.)

ANDY: I know.

(Beat.)

SURESH: I never would have met her if you hadn't, you know . . . You brought me here.

ANDY: I'm glad this was good for you.

SURESH: I don't know if it was good for me. But I definitely feel different.

ANDY: Suresh, look at me.

(Suresh does.)

ANDY: You're amazing to me. You're the most exceptional student I've ever had, and I don't know if I taught you anything, but I've learned a lot from watching you. You're brave. You have smarts, sure. But it's your heart. It's big and strong and it's going to serve you well. So listen to it. It's a reliable narrator, you understand me?

SURESH: Yeah.

ANDY: You're done with high school now, but if you ever need anything . . . I mean ANYTHING . . . you come to me. You come to me, buddy.

(Suresh covers his face for a moment, and paces around, wracked with guilt.)

SURESH: Aw shit, man.

ANDY: What's wrong?

SURESH: I feel really bad about things, Fro Dog. I'm sorry. I feel really bad.

ANDY: About what?

SURESH: I don't know. Sometimes I just don't know how to act around people.

ANDY: I know what you mean.

(Beat.)

ANDY: I count my blessings.

SURESH: Yeah, I should do that, too.

ANDY: No, I literally count them. *(Takes out his book.)* I've been doing it since I was twelve. When I think of one, I write it down in this book.

(Opens it.) Number 1: My health. That's pretty basic.

Number 2: I can still go bowling even with my elbow. I just count them.

SURESH: You write them down? How many you got?

(Andy hands him the book. Suresh flips through it.)

ANDY: I number them. I have like over eight thousand blessings in here. It helps. It's just a nice thing to do. You should try it.

(Suresh finds one and reads it.)

SURESH: "Number 4,722: I bought a really excellent rake. It rakes really well. All the leaves just get raked, but they don't get stuck in the rake. And it wasn't that expensive." *(He looks up at Andy.)* Fro Dog . . . A rake?

ANDY: Hey, I'm just saying . . . keep your eyes peeled.

(Suresh hands the book back to Andy.)

SURESH: Mr. Froling . . .

ANDY: *Mr. Froling?*

SURESH: When the school year started . . . you know . . . I dropped out of calc club . . . .

ANDY: Come on, it's OK.

SURESH: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I always liked calc club.

ANDY: Calc club always liked you.

SURESH: Yeah. Also? Mr. Froling?

ANDY: Why do you keep calling me that?

(Ilana enters. She's startled by everyone in her place.)

SURESH: Yo.

ILANA: What's going on here?!

ANDY: Well, I made dinner. And then Suresh stopped by, and . . . .

ILANA: Suresh, what's going on?

SURESH: Nothing.

ILANA: You startled me.

ANDY: We were just chatting.

ILANA: *(To Suresh.)* What are you doing here?

SURESH: Why'd you have to ditch me at the airport?

ILANA: I didn't ditch you. I just left.

SURESH: I wanted to talk to you.

ILANA: Well, we can't talk right now.

SURESH: Why are you being this way?

ILANA: Suresh . . . Please . . . let's just . . . Just let this go. Let it go.

SURESH: I don't want to let it go.

ILANA: You have to.

ANDY: Boy, you guys are like jet-lagged or something. Why doesn't everyone just relax? Let's have some food. Look, I've got a tapenade.

ILANA: Suresh, nothing happened. Nothing happened.

SURESH: *Something* happened. I don't know what, but things are different now.

ANDY: Can someone tell me what's going on?

(A beat. Andy and Suresh look to Ilana to explain.)

ILANA: Can I take a moment to gather my thoughts? I mean, we just got home, can I just . . . can I sit here for a second?

(Ilana sits on the couch. Suresh and Andy both look at her. A beat.)

SURESH: I know you're wigging out.

ILANA: I'm not wigging out.

SURESH: I'm just saying, last night . . . last night . . . I don't know what the word is.

ANDY: Um . . . what exactly happened last night?

SURESH: It wasn't even really "last night" what with the time change and everything. I think. I'm all messed up with my internal clock.

ILANA: You're reading into something that wasn't there. I'm sorry if you're confused, but nothing happened.

SURESH: Nothing happened? We kissed. We slept in the same bed. We woke up all tangled up with each other. That happened.

ANDY: WHAT?

SURESH: Fro Dog, I'm sorry, man.

ANDY: What do you mean you kissed?

ILANA: Suresh! Andy, we didn't kiss.

SURESH: Yeah we did. We kissed twice. Three times, even.

ILANA: I mean, we did, briefly, but it wasn't / a real kiss . . .

ANDY: You kissed him?

ILANA: It wasn't . . . it wasn't inappropriate. Or maybe it was, but Andy, you have to listen to me . . .

ANDY: I'm listening.

SURESH: Fro Dog . . .

(Andy puts his hand up, to quiet Suresh.)

ILANA: It isn't what you think . . .

ANDY: I don't think anything right now. Except that you . . . *kissed* . . . my *student* . . . You *slept* . . . you *slept* with him?

ILANA: No! Not like that! We fell asleep in the same bed. Look, it was a strange moment. But it didn't mean anything.

ANDY: Ilana . . . We're talking about my student here. I brought you my *student.* I entrusted to you a kid who . . . this *kid* . . . *this kid* . . . *Ilana!*

ILANA: Nothing happened!

ANDY: This is like predatory!

ILANA: It wasn't predatory.

ANDY: Yes it is!

ILANA: Suresh, was it predatory?

SURESH: Naw.

ILANA: See?

ANDY: Shut up, Suresh! The adults are talking right now. THE ADULTS, ILANA.

ILANA: It was this weird moment between us. But nothing happened. I held him. I just held him.

ANDY: You *held* him? Do you know what would happen to me if I *held* a student?

ILANA: Andy, you're / not getting this . . .

ANDY: / I'd be fired! Because it crosses a line! To say nothing of KISSING and SLEEPING IN THE SAME BED in a HOTEL! Lines CROSSED, Ilana! Lines CROSSED!

ILANA: OK! But Andy, you weren't there! You don't understand the situation!

ANDY: I don't need to!

ILANA: Yes you do! Because I'm not . . . Suresh and I have a different relationship . . .

ANDY: No you don't! That was not part of the agreement! He comes to you to do a senior project . . . . You take him to Nagasaki . . . I mean, the way you painted that . . . he's your *protégé* . . . he's your *apprentice* . . . he'd learn so *much.* I hardly thought this was the kind of education you had in mind.

SURESH: Yo, Fro Dog . . .

ANDY: Don't "Fro Dog" me!

SURESH: It was different. I mean, it was weird, but I kissed her, she didn't kiss me.

ILANA: You see? Nothing happened.

SURESH: No, something happened! I kissed you!

ILANA: And I kissed you back and it was wrong and I wanted . . . I wanted something BUT I DIDN'T TAKE IT!

ANDY: He's SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD!

SURESH: I'm eighteen.

ILANA: He's eighteen.

ANDY: He's a kid! For God's sake, Ilana, he's a kid!

ILANA: I did the right thing!

(Andy paces; not knowing what to do with himself.)

ANDY: I don't understand how / you can . . .

SURESH: / Fro Dog, man . . . I'm sorry . . . .

I don't know what happened.

It was a crazy night. I feel like I was an insect and I molted.

I mean, it's why I came here today, Ilana. I just need to talk to you.

I molted and now I don't reckognize myself.

ILANA: Yeah, well welcome to the rest of your life.

ANDY: No. No, you don't say that to him. Suresh, you go ahead and you figure this out, like you figure everything out. You're always going to recognize yourself. That's your gift, buddy. Don't let her tell you different. She doesn't know.

ILANA: It was a KISS! It was just a kiss! It doesn't mean anything!

ANDY: It doesn't mean anything?

(He takes out his book.)

I've been counting my blessings my whole life. Putting them in this book.

But the best blessing I ever wrote in there, the blessing that made me feel the most *blessed* was number 7,906.

(He reads it.)

Ilana Andrews kissed me.

Ilana Andrews kissed me.

Ilana Andrews kissed me.

(He looks up.)

I had to write it three times.

ILANA: Andy . . .

ANDY: What a JOKE.

ILANA: Can you please calm down?

ANDY: I'm trying! I'm trying to figure out why I shouldn't feel totally betrayed right now, but I can't. I'm sorry, I can't.

ILANA: But you do it all the time! Your book, you're always finding the silver lining, finding blessings in the worst things . . .

ANDY: It's not easy, OK?! It doesn't just HAPPEN. It takes time. It takes time for me to do that.

(He flips through the pages.)

ANDY: I don't just sit around thinking everything is perfect all the time.

(He rips a page out.)

This stuff is just . . . it's just . . . it's not all true it's things I hope for!

(He rips another page out.)

But what is it anyway? Nothing. It means nothing.

(Andy starts ripping more pages out of his book, tearing his book up.)

ILANA: What are you doing!

ANDY: Just take it. Take it, take it, take it, take it, take it.

(A pile of pages on the floor.)

ILANA: Andy . . . don't do this! Please, don't, I made a mistake, OK? Just don't do this!

ANDY: I never wanted you to read that. It was every last thing about me and you read it and then you just walk away and you humiliate me. So keep it. Keep it all, but I have to leave.

(Andy exits.)

(Ilana, holding some loose papers, drops them, runs to the door after Andy, but he's gone. Ilana doesn't move. She stands at the doorway for a long moment.)

(Suresh starts to gather up the papers.)

ILANA: Stop. Don't do that.

SURESH: I'm just gonna pick them up.

ILANA: STOP IT! SURESH! Don't pick them up! I swear to God, don't pick them up!

(Suresh continues to pick up the papers, quickly.)

(Ilana goes to him and grabs his face like a child.)

ILANA: What did I say to you!? Put those down! Put them down! Drop the papers, Suresh. Drop them NOW. Let them go. Let go of the paper.

Let go.

Let go now.

(Suresh puts his hand over hers and holds it to his face for a moment and drops the papers.)

ILANA: It's not your mess. You don't need to clean it up.

SURESH: I want to.

ILANA: It's not yours to clean.

SURESH: Fro Dog wrote his blessings in that book! That stuff is important! You should at least pick it up. That would be the right thing to do, you know?

ILANA: You need to go. You need to go home now. I can't help you. I'm sorry I never could. Everything I touch I hurt.

SURESH: Not me.

(Beat.)

Not me, Ilana.

You didn't hurt me.

(Ilana doesn't answer. She looks through the pages.)

SURESH: I gotta start doing that. Counting my blessings and everything. Fro Dog, he's usually right about things, you know?

My health. Got that. Got to remember that.

Meeting you.

Coming here.

Hanging with you in the afternoons and everything.

Blessings.

You know.

Meeting you.

Going to Japan with you.

Nagasaki.

Folding you stuff.

Little rabbits, dogs, T-Rexes, little birds I folded for you.

Being able to come here. Meeting you. Knowing you.

You hooked me up this semester.

That's a blessing, you know?

I gotta remember it. I always will.

(Suresh get his bags and starts to leave, but looks at her. They look at each other. She raises a fist to him. He bumps it with his fist. He exits.)

(After a beat, Ilana goes to the pages on the floor and gathers them up very carefully. She takes them to her desk and puts them on the desk, looking through them. She takes a piece of folding paper and returns to the couch. She stares at the paper and then slowly makes a single fold.)

END OF PLAY

BEACHWOOD DRIVE

Steven Leigh Morris

Beachwood Drive is dedicated to Cathy Carlton and Alan Mandell.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Based on police case files on human trafficking, *Beachwood Drive* was developed with the asssistance of the LAPD, the U.S. Department of Justice, and council-member Tony Cardenas's office of the Los Angeles City Council, which hosts a task force on human trafficking. The New York production triggered vigorous discussions from organizations opposing human trafficking and rights abuses.

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

In Los Angeles, Steven Leigh Morris has had plays commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum and presented in its New Works festival, in addition to A.S.K. Theater Projects' Common Ground Festival, Pacific Resident Theater, Playwrights' Arena, the Open Fist Theatre, and the Blank Theatre Company. He has also been playwright-in-residence at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and the Actors' Gang. Overseas, he's been a playwright-in-residence at Moscow's Theater on Spartacus Square and the Actors' Gang in Los Angeles. In addition to being presented by the Abingdon Theatre Company in New York City, a production of Morris's *Beachwood Drive* that was staged by Playwrights' Arena was invited to the Lublin International Theatre Festival as part of a four-city European tour. Morris currently serves as critic-at-large for the *L.A. Weekly*, where he was theater editor for ten years until that position was eliminated in January 2009. His theater articles have been published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times, American Theatre Magazine, DRAMA* magazine in London, *World's Fair Magazine* in San Francisco, and *Back Stage West* in Los Angeles. Morris has also written numerous articles for the *L.A. Weekly* on diverse topics ranging from the politics of urban redevelopment to barnyard poultry.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Beachwood Drive premiered at the June Havoc Theatre of the Abingdon Theatre Company (Jan Buttram, artistic director; Kimt T. Sharp, associate artistic director), New York City, October 29, 2008, thanks to the generous support of Z. Clark Branson, with set design by Ken Larson; costume design by Deborah J. Caney; lighting design by Matthew McCarthy; sound design by David Margolin Lawson; and video design by Kymberly Mortensen. The production manager was Ian Grunes; the D+P production stage manager was Genevieve Ortiz; and the casting director was William Schill. It was directed by Alan Mandell with the following cast:

CAST

NADYA ..... Lena Starostina
HANSONIA ..... Brenda Thomas
KATERINA ..... Kat Peters
ROCKY ..... David Medina
VERA ..... Maria Silverman
WILLIAM CROMWELL ..... Peter Brouwer

CHARACTERS

HANSONIA: Forties, African-American female novelist and arts writer for a Los Angeles–based alternative newspaper.

NADYA: Thirties, female immigrant from Odessa, Ukraine, now a prostitute in Los Angeles.

ROCKY: Midthirties male, Latino meat packer from El Monte, California; descended from Tongva branch of the Gabrielino Indians, the indigenous tribe that dominated the Los Angeles area before the incursions of the Spanish in the mid-1700s.

VERA: Forties, female immigrant from Moscow, runs an escort service in Los Angeles.

WILLIAM CROMWELL: Sixties, a fatigued Caucasian homicide investigator for the Los Angeles Police Department; has tried in vain numerous times to retire.

KATERINA: Nadya's ten-year-old daughter.

SETTING

Various locales: an apartment on Beachwood Drive, a semi-artsy, semi-upscale district of actors and industry execs that winds up toward the Hollywood sign; a cottage bungalow, next door to the apartment on Beachwood Drive; and an interview room at the Hollywood station of the Los Angeles Police Department. Each setting need only be distinguished by a suggestion — a wall hanging, a piece of furniture, or a shift in the placement thereof — rather than encumbering details, as the play's structure is somewhat dreamlike.

TIME

The present.

BEACHWOOD DRIVE

PROLOGUE

We hear the bucolic piano of Schumann's "Of Strange Lands and People" from his Kindersehnen *as we see on a screen the projected image from a computer. It slowly becomes recognizable as a pornographic website: a "video stream" picture of a Caucasian woman, wearing a halter top and panties, rollicking on a bed and smiling into the webcam. The motion, rather than being cinematically seamless, is jumpy. Rather than a live video with its transmission of fluid motion, the webcam image is a series of static poses that change every five seconds or so, grainy pictures of the model smiling coyly, running her fingers through her hair. Adjusting the strap of a halter top to reveal a sliver of breast before pulling the strap back up. Soon, the camera angle reveals a computer keyboard in the bed with the model. She pulls it within her reach and types diligently. In a corner of the screen, we see a "dialogue box" with the following, running text:*

<JIMMY:> Sometimes, at places, like intersections, at red lights, I see you.
<BETTY:> Oh, at red lights. That's rich.
<JIMMY:> No, I mean, you know what I mean.
<BETTY:> Sure, I know what you mean.
<JIMMY:> I mean on hazy afternoons, out by Lincoln Park, by the lake, by the fountain, I'll be waiting at a light, and that's when you come to me, out of the mist, like a dream, like an angel.
<BETTY:> Oh, stop.
<JIMMY:> Don't tell me to stop. You've never seen me. I see you everywhere, but you've never seen me.
<BETTY:> From your words. I see you through your words.
<JIMMY:> How can we meet?

(Suddenly, the picture of "Betty" squelches and disappears into static as the music fades.)

ACT I
("HANSONIA")

Lights up on Hansonia's bungalow on Beachwood Drive: a hardwood floor; an upholstered chair; a throw rug; a wooden desk and bookstand, both overflowing with papers and books; a suspended African mask and suspended tribal-themed paintings. No discernible walls or door. Hansonia, an African-American woman in her forties, stands awkwardly leaning over her desk. In the upholstered chair sits Nadya, a Caucasian woman, midthirties, recognizable as "Betty" from the webcam transmission seen in the prologue. Hansonia and Nadya's dialogue overlaps:

HANSONIA: The point being, well, the point *not* being the money. . .

NADYA: I can pay.

HANSONIA: Of course.

NADYA: I *will* pay . . .

HANSONIA: It's really not necessary. We're next-door neighbors.

NADYA: What difference does *that* make? It's your time. I should pay you.

HANSONIA: It's *babysitting* for heaven's sake.

NADYA: I *must* . . . I must pay.

(Pause.)

HANSONIA: OK. Whatever. Tea, you said?

NADYA: Please.

HANSONIA: That'll be two dollars, plus tip.

NADYA: Very funny.

HANSONIA: I use leaves, not bags. Never use bags.

NADYA: Yes, yes, me too. Exactly. The brew. It just isn't the same.

HANSONIA: The leaves are from Bombay, not Russia. I hope that's all right.

NADYA: Hansonia, I'm not Russian.

HANSONIA: Sorry. Is there even such a thing as Ukrainian tea?

NADYA: Everything grows in Ukraine.

HANSONIA: Nadya, to me, Odessa is still Russia. Gorbachev is still in power, I'm nostalgic that way. He was your Lincoln. Wanted to preserve the union. Yeltsin was Robert E. Lee. Ended up selling the farm. I remember what used to be called the *balance* of power.

NADYA: Hansonia, please, I'm not political. I hate politics.

(Pause.)

HANSONIA: I still think Gorbachev had the right idea.

NADYA: Well, good for him.

HANSONIA: *(Playing a slightly cruel game, but with humor.)* And now the Western wolf is unfettered, dancing the privatization jig like a Banshee. Even Putin's crackdowns, that's just window dressing . . .

NADYA: *(Tensely.)* The walls have ears! *(Almost whispering.)* I am not yet an American citizen, and I would like to be.

(Pause, Nadya's paranoia is a revelation for Hansonia, who exits. Nadya rises, stares at the suspended African mask. Hansonia reenters with a tea service: a Russian samovar and two cups. Seeing the samovar, Nadya smiles.)

HANSONIA: *(Referring to the samovar.)* St. Petersburg, 1992. Cultural exchange, Russian and American novelists. The Russians wound up in Houston, in August, poor bastards.

(Hansonia sets the service on her desk. Pours two cups of tea, offers Nadya one of them. Nadya remains standing.)

HANSONIA: I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just forgot where you come from.

NADYA: *(Remains standing.)* I know you're a kind person. I wouldn't be here if you weren't. *(Referring to the mask.)* Where did you get this?

HANSONIA: Kampala. Literary conference, 1998. It's a Baganda mask. The tribe dates back to the fourteenth century. You wouldn't know it to see Uganda today . . .

NADYA: You keep bringing the world to your home.

HANSONIA: Pieces of it. It's sort of my job.

NADYA: It's a beautiful home.

HANSONIA: It's kind of dusty and . . .

NADYA: The character.

HANSONIA: Thank you.

NADYA: There aren't many people I would trust with my daughter.

HANSONIA: Yes, I believe you; I'm quite honored, actually. How old is she, exactly.

NADYA: When we met, by the bus bench, I felt you were somebody I could trust. I almost never get that feeling from . . . from anybody. She's ten.

HANSONIA: Nadya, we only met yesterday. I said hello, you said hello back, and then we were talking about Chagal. How many people on the street can one engage in a conversation about Chagal?

NADYA: If you could come at six, we could all spend some time together. So Katerina can feel more comfortable with you. I know she likes you already. I'll leave by seven. The code is 502.

HANSONIA: This is only the second time we've met. Are you always so trusting — I mean, with your own daughter?

NADYA: *(After a brief pause.)* Are you judging me?

HANSONIA: No!

NADYA: There's a situation I have to deal with. Tonight. A friend is dying. In the hospital. I found out about it yesterday. You seem like someone I can trust.

(Silence.)

HANSONIA: Is there anything I should bring?

NADYA: Maybe some of your art books. That would be good for her.

HANSONIA: I'm not . . . I'm not experienced with children. I have none of my own.

NADYA: I know.

HANSONIA: How?

NADYA: I can tell, from your home.

HANSONIA: *(Almost defensive.)* I have several nieces and nephews.

NADYA: Then what are you worried about?

HANSONIA: Yes. . .

(Pause.)

NADYA: So we'll see you tomorrow at six.

HANSONIA: Right.

(Nadya sets her cup on the desk and crosses upstage into darkness. The lights abruptly shift to an overhead shaft, like a broad circular spotlight, on Hansonia. Her words are now in the direction of the audience.)

HANSONIA: "A friend is dying," she said. "In the hospital." Of course I knew she was lying. But why was she trusting me, almost a stranger, with her daughter?

So I'm babysitting Cathy — Katerina, her mother called her. Cathy and I are watching TV, which I never do at home. But I'm not in my bungalow, with my cats and dust and reheated coffee. No. I'm in the gleaming condo next door, on the fourth floor, in a building with a buzzer and palm trees that smack against the windows in the Santa Ana winds. Eleven p.m. Cathy and me sitting on the rug playing Nintendo. The coffee-table book of glossy Kandinsky graphics that I brought, especially for this occasion, remains unopened. Nadya's still not home. The game gives me nightmares, I say. The violence. Cathy calls me a wimp and turns off the TV. We both stare at the cream condo walls. I sense a ghost behind the window and curl my fingers into the carpet shag — next to the Styrofoam box with the cold Chinese food. Bare

walls. Not a trace of Old World decor. No embroidered curtains, no hand-painted plates on the walls. Spotless, like a clinic.

(Through the following, Katerina, a ten-year-old girl in overalls and sneakers, creeps into the periphery of light, like a ghost. The spot opens into a general wash.)

HANSONIA: How old were you when you left Odessa?

KATERINA: Eight.

HANSONIA: Do you remember it?

KATERINA: Some

HANSONIA: And what do you remember?

(She shrugs.)

HANSONIA: Do you miss it?

KATERINA: No.

HANSONIA: Were you rich or poor?

(She shrugs.)

HANSONIA: Did you ever go hungry?

KATERINA: No.

HANSONIA: So tell me something about Odessa.

KATERINA: Grandma and grandpa. . .

(Katerina falls silent. Stoic.)

HANSONIA: And how is it different from Los Angeles?

KATERINA: Mama has many more boyfriends here. *(Brief pause.)* Mama says one day we'll live someplace else.

HANSONIA: Like where?

KATERINA: I don't know.

HANSONIA: Odessa?

KATERINA: Oh no. We couldn't go back there.

HANSONIA: Why not?

KATERINA: Vera.

HANSONIA: Who's Vera?

KATERINA: Mama's boss.

HANSONIA: So why can't your mom just move? Get another job?

KATERINA: Vera's mean.

HANSONIA: Mean?

KATERINA: We tried to move but Vera wouldn't let us.

HANSONIA: Move where?

KATERINA: Chicago. Mama's got a cousin there.

HANSONIA: How could Vera stop you?

KATERINA: It's not Vera. It's her men!

(A woman crosses behind the window in shadows. Hansonia turns suddenly.)

KATERINA: Why are you always so scared?

HANSONIA: Ghosts . . . I still believe in ghosts.

(Through the following, Katerina slowly withdraws into the darkness. Spotlight on Hansonia.)

HANSONIA: *(In the direction of the audience, which is a jury, or a detective.)* She came to see me two times, in my home. I work mostly from home, even for the newspaper I write for, they let me, they *encourage* me to work at home, probably because of my depression. Morbid depression. Clinical depression. I refused their medicines because I *welcome* my illness, though of course I don't enjoy it. It challenges me and fuels my creativity, leads to clairvoyance. I learned this from reading about Abraham Lincoln, who repaired a fractured nation while similarly depressed. He'd walk into a party and read poems about the pointlessness of life and the inevitability of death, yes, at dinner parties! And in such a frame of mind, he repaired this fractured nation. And that's why I refuse their medicines. I live by two edicts: Never take antidepressants and never watch television.

I want to write an American story told by a white member of a southern lynch mob. That was actually James Baldwin's idea, and I'd like to take him up on it. Pick up where Mark Twain and William Faulkner left off. We have to understand the violence from the victimizers' view as well as the victims', then the story speaks to *everybody*, speaks to our actions from Manila to Mississippi, to Baghdad. I'm sorry — what was your question?

What did I know at the time? Empirically, nothing. But I felt for that child and the danger she floated in. Though I fear that's of little use for finding the people you're after.

(Pause. Through the following, Katerina wanders back into the periphery of the light.)

(Lights shift into a general wash.)

HANSONIA: Are you OK? Are you locked out?

KATERINA: Mama's got visitors.

HANSONIA: Uh-huh. You want a glass of milk?

KATERINA: No.

HANSONIA: Are you hungry?

KATERINA: No.

HANSONIA: Does she know where you are?

KATERINA: Who?

HANSONIA: Your mother.

KATERINA: She told me to come here.

HANSONIA: A phone call might have been considerate.

KATERINA: She wanted to, but Vera was in the room. *(Seeing Hansonia's perplexed expression.)* Are you married?

HANSONIA: Men find me depressing. Women too.

KATERINA: Where'd you get all these paintings?

HANSONIA: They're my father's. He was a collector. He left them to me.

KATERINA: Is this why you're always so spooked?

HANSONIA: I am *not* always spooked!

KATERINA: What's in the box?

HANSONIA: Mementos. A ring from my aunt Mattie. A tie clip my cousin George used to wear. Help yourself.

(Katerina reaches into the box and pulls out a miniature oil painting, no frame, peeling and crusted.)

KATERINA: What's this?

HANSONIA: A portrait. Don't know how it got there. She's a woman who now comes to me in my dreams. She pays me visits, just like you. She says my blood is hers. Came from the Ivory Coast, she says, to the Charleston Bay. 1619. Locked in steerage. Bodies stacked five high. Coated in vomit. Visited by rats. Lost five children and a husband on the passage. Almost died herself. She says I must write her story.

KATERINA: Will you?

HANSONIA: No . . . I don't like being told what to do. So she comes to me in my dreams and gives me nightmares, out of spite.

(Katerina just stares at her. Feeling the awkwardness, Katerina returns the portrait to the memento box and picks up a newspaper she recognizes.)

HANSONIA: That's the paper I write for.

(Katerina flips through it, shows Hansonia an advertisement near the back.)

KATERINA: There's Mama's picture.

HANSONIA: *(Observing, shocked.)* "Russian beauties www.exoticbeauties.com" *(Pause.)* Do you know what "adult services" means? *(Katerina shakes her head no.)* Good. Do you know why her photo is in the paper?

KATERINA: Because she's beautiful.

HANSONIA: Yes . . . Exactly. Let me make you a sandwich.

KATERINA: No thanks.

HANSONIA: *(Slightly irritated.)* Do you not eat? Do you not drink? *(Gathering composure.)* Do you have friends to play with after school?

KATERINA: No.

HANSONIA: Too enigmatic?

KATERINA: Huh?

HANSONIA: They don't understand you.

KATERINA: I don't know.

(She stares at the painting.)

HANSONIA: You're always welcome here. I also had an absent mother. I was also lost in the world at your age.

(Hansonia approaches Katerina and slips a lock of the child's hair through her fingers. Katerina slips back into darkness. Spotlight on Hansonia, to audience, or jury, or detective.)

HANSONIA: So in her office, I ask Charlotte — she's the editor — if there's nothing we can do about the ads in the back of the newspaper. She stares at me as though I've lost my mind.

"I find the ads personally offensive — repugnant," I say.

"Me too," she replies. "But that's all beside the point. Which is a free market."

"On the web," I say, "MSNBC is in partnership with the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek,* leaving it to compete, if that's the correct term, with only *two* companies that can match its technological prowess: Time-Warner and Disney. Keep in mind that Time-Warner owns CNN while Disney controls ABC and ESPN. So where's the free market?"

"In the back of our newspaper," she says.

(After a pause, Katerina enters the periphery of light, holding a binder.)

Dusk. I'm staring at a blank computer screen. Two weeks since Cathy's last visit. You know the next part. I gaze upwards, across the room, and there she is.

KATERINA: *(Ebullient.)* I have something to show you. It took me a week.

(Lights shift into a general wash.)

HANSONIA: *(To Katerina.)* How are you? What have you been doing?

KATERINA: This.

(She opens the binder, removing a series of sheets, a tender ritual, the unveiling of butcher paper cut into small pieces — crayon drawings. Katerina lays them on the floor.)

KATERINA: You're the first person I've shown. It's crayon.

HANSONIA: Is that an apartment building?

KATERINA: Uh-huh.

HANSONIA: Soviet style. Odessa?

KATERINA: It's Grandma . . . And Grandpa.

HANSONIA: *(Shocked by the contents.)* They're still there?

KATERINA: Uh-huh.

HANSONIA: And what do they do?

KATERINA: Nothing.

HANSONIA: Do you ever speak with them?

KATERINA: Sometimes

HANSONIA: On the phone?

KATERINA: Uh-huh.

HANSONIA: And what do they say?

KATERINA: That I should go home.

HANSONIA: To Odessa?

KATERINA: Uh-huh.

HANSONIA: Do they talk about their parents?

KATERINA: Their parents are dead. They were shot. In a ditch. With their friends.

HANSONIA: But do they talk about them?

KATERINA: They tell stories.

HANSONIA: And do you remember these stories?

KATERINA: Some. Not really.

HANSONIA: Next time you speak with them, ask them to tell you more stories. Then you must remember them. It's very important. Will you do that? For me?

KATERINA: OK.

(Hansonia returns the papers to Katerina and spontaneously holds her, clutching the child, who returns the affection before slipping away into darkness, as the lighting closes in on an wide spotlight pool.)

HANSONIA: *(To audience, or jury, or detective.)* Those drawings. . . were *horrific* — image after image of figures lying in blood, shot in a bathtub, strangled, hanging from a doorway, and that's when I fully absorbed the reality of the danger. When Nadya was released the following morning, I was already back here.

(Nadya bursts in, numb with despair.)

NADYA: Never. Not in my life.

HANSONIA: Never what?

NADYA: You will *never* see her again. Not in this house.

HANSONIA: What are you talking about?

NADYA: My daughter. Or me.

HANSONIA: OK. And why is that?

NADYA: Like you need to ask.

HANSONIA: Well, yes, I do.

NADYA: I spent the night in *jail!* Does that mean anything to you!?

HANSONIA: It was *me* you called, to take care of Cathy, to bail you out, remember?

NADYA: Who else *was* there?

HANSONIA: So what's the problem?

NADYA: Someone reported me.

HANSONIA: It wasn't *me.*

NADYA: Oh, please. . .

HANSONIA: What makes you think it was *me?* It could have been any neighbor. Talk about traffic. They might as well have built an off-ramp from the Hollywood freeway leading right up to your door!

NADYA: It was a sting operation. Somebody *told* them.

HANSONIA: For heaven's sake, they could've been tipped off from the *newspaper.* You *advertise,* remember! You're on the *web!* You're not that difficult to *find!*

(Pause, as Nadya paces back and forth before spinning in on Hansonia.)

NADYA: You're lying.

HANSONIA: *(After a slight pause.)* I'm not lying. I did tell a friend about your situation, that you were a *victim.*

NADYA: What friend?

HANSONIA: His job is to protect victims.

NADYA: Fuck! . . . Fuck! I've *never* trusted you.

HANSONIA: You're distraught.

NADYA: I don't trust anyone in this fucking city of smiles and hugs. Where I come from, people on the streets are like ice, which is exactly how they feel. No, "Hi, how-ya-*dooo*in — good-to-*seeee*-you-again" bullshit before they cut your throat.

HANSONIA: Nobody cut your throat.

NADYA: *Somebody* did. What business did you have talking to *anybody* about me . . .

HANSONIA: What kind of mother leaves her daughter with a stranger while she's out turning tricks?!

NADYA: You keep my daughter out of this! Don't you even *speak* about my daughter! You understand *nothing!* Do you understand *that,* at least?

HANSONIA: All right then. *(Nadya turns away.)* Look at me, damn you, *Look* at me!

(Nadya faces her.)

HANSONIA: I did *not* report you. I was trying to *help* you . . . *and* Katerina.

(Nadya turns away.)

HANSONIA: I am your friend. Your *only* friend, it seems. *(Pause.)* How did you get caught?

NADYA: I told you it was a *sting* . . .

HANSONIA: The guy comes in . . . Don't you *screen* these people?

NADYA: He asked me how much I charged and for what.

HANSONIA: And you told him.

NADYA: Yes. Next thing I was in handcuffs. Thank goodness Katerina was in school.

HANSONIA: Don't they train you people for situations like that?

NADYA: Just like that. Ten words, and I'm in jail.

HANSONIA: Aren't you supposed to wait until they're completely undressed? 'Cause a cop will never completely undress.

NADYA: Yes, I knew that.

HANSONIA: So what were you *thinking?*

NADYA: Obviously, I *wasn't thinking.*

(Silence.)

HANSONIA: What did you come here for? Other than to berate me.

NADYA: To say good-bye.

HANSONIA: What for? *(Pause, distraught.) What for!!?*

NADYA: It was stupid. Everything I've done this week has been stupid. I'm sorry I troubled you.

(The lights shift into wide spotlight on Hansonia.)

HANSONIA: *(To audience.)* And Katerina never came to visit again. I think that's what hurt me the most. Sometimes, I still see her on the bus bench, a ghost behind a blur of traffic. Or maybe it's really her. Staring aimless up Beachwood Drive, squinting into the sun.

(A tight circle of white light beams down from overhead on Rocky, a Latino man in his thirties, dressed in a tan, net tank top that reveals Native American tattoos [feathers and headdresses] on his muscular arms and shoulders, black sports trousers, and sneakers. He has flowing shoulder-length black hair that he tosses out of his face as he performs solo the Gabrielino "Bear Dance." At Rocky's feet, a tray of incense sends a trail of smoke and scent wafting up and around him. He is positioned on the balls of his feet, knees bent, leaning slightly forward, The dance consists of him shifting his weight from one foot to the other, back and forth to the pulse of a chant that he sings. As he shifts his weight back and forth, he slowly turns in place. He holds a rattle in one hand that he shakes to help sound the dance's steady pulse, accompanied by the following chant, which he sings:)

ROCKY: *Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory*
Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory
Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory
GGGGGRRRRRRUUUUGGGH (With the shaking of the rattle.)
GGGGGRRRRRRUUUUGGGH
Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory
Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory
Hyang ya cron-na lod-a nory
(A female figure slowly crosses the stage in shadow once more, this time watching, menacing.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II
("ROCKY")

Lights up on a bed, a chair. Spartan design. A room in Nadya's apartment. Dressed in a nightrobe, Nadya sits in the chair smoking, talking into a cell phone.

NADYA: *(Into phone, in Russian.) Da . . . Da. Fsyo narmalna. Uh-uh. Nee znayoo. Da. Adeen chas. Katya s-tboi? Ha-ra-shó. Uh-hmm. Paka.*
(Rocky enters the playing area. Nadya hangs up, stares at Rocky. Says nothing.)
ROCKY: What was that about?
NADYA: My daughter.
ROCKY: You have a daughter?
NADYA: That's what I just said. *(Nadya takes a long drag on her cigarette.)* How's the tea?
ROCKY: Excellent. Fuck I don't know. I don't drink tea. I don't *like* tea.
NADYA: So why'd you ask for it?
ROCKY: Because you *offered* it. Where's yours?
NADYA: I didn't want any.
ROCKY: You have a beer?
(Nadya rises, taking Rocky's mug before crossing out into the shadows, as Rocky shifts to another side of the room, terribly uncomfortable. Nadya returns with a bottle of Anchor Steam, hands it to Rocky before returning to her chair. Pause. Nadya puffs on a cigarette.)

ROCKY: How old is she? Your daughter.

NADYA: Too young for you.

ROCKY: That's not why I'm asking.

NADYA: Good.

ROCKY: Look I'm trying to be a little bit human here, OK . . . Maybe you can return the ball?

NADYA: I was joking.

ROCKY: You were not joking.

NADYA: I was joking. Will you relax. She's ten.

ROCKY: Does she know what you do?

NADYA: Much of the time.

ROCKY: How you make your living?

NADYA: I don't really know. Truth is, we've never discussed it. Like I said, she's ten.

ROCKY: That is so . . . I'm sorry.

NADYA: What for?

ROCKY: For finding this all so disturbing.

NADYA: I'm sorry you're disturbed. How's the beer?

ROCKY: I haven't tasted it yet.

NADYA: I know. That's why I asked. Why don't you drink it and give me a break from your judgments.

ROCKY: Look, I didn't mean to. . .

NADYA: I know you didn't. You think I would do this if I had a choice?

ROCKY: But you *do* have a choice.

NADYA: Thanks for that information. Please drink your beer, and let's get on with this.

ROCKY: Maybe I should leave.

NADYA: If you want.

ROCKY: I don't even know your name.

NADYA: They didn't give it to you?

ROCKY: Yeah, they did. But I forgot. Natalya?

NADYA: Nadya. From the Russian verb *nadyéyatsya* — which means "to hope." Where I come from, we call that irony.

ROCKY: And all this time, I thought your name was Betty.

(Nadya stares away, taking a drag from her cigarette.)

ROCKY: So is it Betty or Nadya?

NADYA: What difference?

ROCKY: I have a right to know your name. I have an investment. . . You don't look much like a Betty. Betty Rubble. Betty Crocker. Nope, not you.

NADYA: I don't know those people. Who are they?

ROCKY: *(Playing with the sound of her name.)* Naah-dya. Is that made up too?

NADYA: How did you know about Betty? From my web page? Of course, that's how you got the number.

ROCKY: So why didn't he say it was Betty? That operator. That's what I don't understand. I got the number from *Betty's* website. Suddenly I'm speaking to some guy with a thick Russian accent, thicker than yours. I ask for Betty. He says they have no Betty. Two brunettes, Nina and Olga, and a dirty blonde named Nadya.

NADYA: Dirty blonde?

ROCKY: His words, not mine — it's not an insult. So I know what you look like from the webcam, even though your hair color's next to impossible to figure out, but I say, yeah, she might be a blonde, why not? And when I walk in your door, I understand I've struck gold. I found you! I've been downloading you for months, see, we've been talking to each other over the keyboard. I'm Jimmy, see. I'm the guy who dreams you up at red lights in Lincoln Park. Remember me now? *(Pause.)* So how's it going?

(She stares at him, as he offers his hand; she cautiously shakes it.) You're way better looking in person.

(Nadya slips off her robe and tumbles into the bed.)

NADYA: You can leave your money on the table.

ROCKY: No problem.

(Rocky sets a wad of bills on the table.)

NADYA: There's a shower down the hall.

(The lights jolt into a tight circle, bearing down on Rocky, speaking directly to audience, or jury or a detective.)

ROCKY: The sides of beef are shipped in cold storage from the Central Valley. Same with the pork, the lamb. Mutton. Poultry we don't deal with. That's another division. And my job is to stand at a steel table and slice 'em into sirloins and rump roasts and tenderloins and pork chops and lamb chops and . . . Ten hours a day more or less. Seven years give or take. Wearing a bloodied apron, brushing away the flies. Buzz saw and hatchet slicing and chopping through bone and fat, little specks of blood flying like sparks. Flying right into my face sometimes. S'posed to wear gloves, but I don't. 'Cause I like the *feel* of the stuff, the raw animal muscle. I like the sound of the *slap* when I flip it over, onto the conveyer belt. This is music to a butcher, this is the pulse. . . July eleventh, that was the first night we actually met. Betty and me. Nadya was her real name, from Odessa, so she said. That was the first time in twenty-five years of

marriage I'd been unfaithful. *(Brief pause.)* Second time, actually, if you call if you call it unfaithful to French kiss a temp secretary outside a meat-packing plant. And the first time, what was remarkable to me, after an hour, I paid for an hour, two hundred dollars including tip, after an hour, she called on the phone and said something. And I wasn't dressed or nothing. After she hung up, she said we could go another hour, it was fine with her. She wasn't supposed to, but she just told them I paid for *another* hour, which I didn't, and I thought that was remarkable, that maybe this was something more than just another . . . sale. About a year back, we got a computer for Tony, that's my son. For his fourteenth birthday. Not much of an athlete or a scholar, my boy. Got a B minus in Spanish, and that's pretty humiliating when your last name's Gonzales, and your Salvadoran grandmother speaks nothing but Spanish in the house. Video games and computers, those are his interests. Hobbies from school, from friends. Tony was the one who taught me the difference between software and hardware, it was all like Martian to me, but to him it was as basic as breathing. And sometimes you just sense the importance of something, like an instinct. So Angelica and me, we talked it over, Angelica's my wife, a deeply religious woman, goes to church almost daily. Catholic turned Pentecostal, God save us, deeply conservative in too many ways, but even she had the wisdom to see that high tech for our son would be an investment. A desktop Toshiba with America Online. Tony taught me how to use it. How to log on with my own password, my own ID. But I knew *his,* see. One night, they're both asleep, I push the history button, to see what Tony had logged onto the day before. For no reason, really. That's when this porno comes up. Yeah, it was a shock, not just the porno, but to understand that your teenage son is downloading this shit into your living room. I was even more pissed off that I couldn't block the flow. These windows are popping up on the screen like fireworks, four sometimes five at a time: triple-X shit, from Taiwan and Poland, Australia and Argentina. Bondage and cocksucking, men with boys, girls with dildos and donkeys, and I think *shit. (Brief pause.)* My son. The fruit of my loins. His tattoos I can tolerate, the piercings, fine, his gang friends I don't like but I understand — but *this?* If I don't calm down, I say to myself, I'm gonna strangle him right now, while he sleeps. So I turn off the computer, take a couple of shots of tequila and try to sleep next to my wife, who is curled up in a ball, her back to the center of the bed. Next morning, Angelica's getting up to go to the office. She works as a clerk at the county court, I say nothing

about what I saw, 'cause I know it'll give her a heart attack. But before Tony heads out to school, I say "Tony. Wait a second. Come here. Listen. No porno in this house, got it? It's still my house. And I don't want that shit in my house, so I'm having that porno-blocking thing put it, soon as I can get someone to show me how to do it . . . You know how to do it?" He says no. I say "Fine, asshole. I'll figure it out myself." On my lunch break, I call AOL, they explain how to activate the parental controls, which I do that night. So now there's this strain between me and Tony. Even more than before. But I understand his curiosity, I really do. 'Cause sometimes at two a.m., when I couldn't sleep, I'd log on, but not to porno. There's these websites, you pay a monthly fee, where you can talk to people. And that's how I met "Betty," she called herself. And at first I was real slow, plunking out each letter 'cause I don't type. But when there's a need, you get quicker. And I was saying things I had never said to Angelica, would never say, and thought to myself, whooah, what is going on here? And I tried to reconnect with Angelica. To talk to her in the same way, sexy provocative, in Spanish, in English. She just laughed. I bought her new clothes and underwear. We made love every night for a week, and for a while Angelica was like a flower slowly opening, reopening. Until the guilt set in. Or maybe it was just exhaustion. And that's when the old patterns came back: her coming home from her prayer meetings, and curling up into a ball, with her back facing the center of the bed. I tried to take Tony to the dance rehearsals of the Gabrielenos. I'm fifty percent Gabrieleno, and I tried to get Tony to come with me, but he was too angry. . . So late at night, two, three times a week, I'd log on to Betty. And we'd flirt until the sun come up. . . So what's going on? I mean, do you have any leads? What can I do to help, I mean, what can I do?

(As the lights expand into a general wash, Nadya emerges from the periphery, wrapped in a robe. Rocky takes a slug from his beer.)

ROCKY: Sorry I'm late.

(She motions for him to sit in the chair, which he does. Nadya settles onto the edge of the bed.)

NADYA: *(Lighting a cigarette.)* How've you been?

ROCKY: OK.

NADYA: Working?

ROCKY: Of course. What else?

NADYA: In the supermarket?

ROCKY: Yeah.

NADYA: Stocking shelves. *(Brief pause.)* I just don't understand.
ROCKY: What don't you understand?
NADYA: How a guy like you doesn't have a wife. Or a girlfriend.
ROCKY: Yeah, well it's probably the money. I don't make that much.
NADYA: But you spend it on me.
ROCKY: That's right.
NADYA: Not every woman thinks just about money.
ROCKY: That's very weird, coming from you.
NADYA: That's because you don't know me at all.
ROCKY: We've made love six times. I know you a little.
NADYA: All right. Then where do I come from?
ROCKY: Odessa.
NADYA: Good! And what did I do there?
ROCKY: I don't have a clue.
NADYA: You said you knew me.
ROCKY: You were an engineer.
NADYA: A bartender.
ROCKY: *(Holding up his beer.)* To you. *(Rocky drinks. Pause.)* And where's *your* boyfriend?
NADYA: Men aren't interested in women like me.
ROCKY: Fascinated, but not interested.
NADYA: Whatever.
ROCKY: *I* am.

(After a brief pause, Nadya crosses to Rocky and holds him close. After they separate, she takes a drag of her cigarette.)

ROCKY: Can we meet sometime? Outside of this room?

(Pause, Nadya exhales.)

NADYA: I think I'd like that.
ROCKY: Where's Cathy?
NADYA: With a neighbor.
ROCKY: The black woman?
NADYA: Yes, Hansonia. We have an hour. If you want.
ROCKY: If I want?
NADYA: Who are you, Jimmy?
ROCKY: Who am I?
NADYA: Where do you come from? Jimmy — Is that really your name?
ROCKY: Los Angeles.
NADYA: No, I mean like your great, great grandparents.

ROCKY: Los Angeles. We're from a very . . . ancient . . . tribe. Lived right here, on acorns and lizards and fish. For a thousand years. Built boats, weaved baskets, and made jewelry. Wore tattoos, bathed every day, and laid out in saunas we built along the rivers.

NADYA: You make it sound like a dream.

ROCKY: It was just life, I guess. Until the Spanish.

NADYA: We had the Germans.

ROCKY: It's an old story. Yet here we are . . . making love. There's something to be said for that.

(Suddenly, Nadya rises from the bed and exits the stage, causing Rocky to rise, awkwardly, cross to the bed and fluff one of the pillows, for no particular reason. Nadya reenters with a sketch pad in her hand, she lays it open on the bed.)

ROCKY: These are yours?

NADYA: I've been doing these all my life. Now Cathy does the same. Yes, these are mine.

ROCKY: *(Flipping through the pages.)* They're just shapes and colors.

NADYA: Emotions, that's all. There's no story there. This one I did when I was fifteen.

ROCKY: Uh-huh. *(Flipping through the pages.)* I don't . . . I don't understand them but I think they're . . . I think they're beautiful.

NADYA: *(Nervous, biting her nail, snatches them away.)* OK.

ROCKY: What do you mean, OK?

NADYA: I mean OK, that's all. You don't understand them, that's all.

ROCKY: What's to understand?

NADYA: Nothing. You're right.

(After a pause, she picks up the sketchbook, closes it, and leaves it on the bedstand. Rocky walks away from the bed and stands near the chair, plays with his beer bottle.)

ROCKY: Thank you . . . Thank you for showing me those.

NADYA: You can leave your money on the table. Or you can do it after.

ROCKY: Are you deliberately trying to humiliate me, or is it just some kind of afterthought?

NADYA: I said you can leave it afterwards if you want.

ROCKY: I heard what you said. I heard exactly well what you . . .

NADYA: Look, Jimmy. You're lonely, maybe you want romance with your fucking, or to feel we're on a date or something, but you still have to *pay*.

ROCKY: I know that. Believe me, I know that. *(Pause.)* Do you hate men?

NADYA: No.

ROCKY: Do you hate *me?*

NADYA: How can you say that? I just showed you my sketches.

ROCKY: But you hate this job.

NADYA: Of course.

ROCKY: Because?

(Pause.)

NADYA: Why do you come here? Month after month?

ROCKY: No . . . No you don't. *You* answer the question.

NADYA: Isn't it obvious?

ROCKY: Nothing is obvious since I met you! The more we make love, the more I obsess on you. It's supposed to be the other way around, isn't it? Isn't it the men who are supposed to be so . . . untouched, and the women flipping out . . .

NADYA: I *am* flipping out.

ROCKY: No you're not, you're just *fine.*

NADYA: I'm flipping out! In my way, I'm flipping out!

ROCKY: Not over *me.*

NADYA: Oh, that's pathetic.

ROCKY: Yeah, but true.

NADYA: What do you want from me?

ROCKY: Why did you show me your sketches? What the fuck was *that* about?

NADYA: I thought maybe you'd like them?

ROCKY: I *did!*

NADYA: So??!!

ROCKY: It was about closeness, wasn't it? Something with no price tag! Something *human.* Here!!! . . . *(Rocky opens his wallet, takes a stack of bills and throws them down on the table.)* Here's to being human!

(Pause.)

NADYA: Why do you come here month after month?

ROCKY: Do you want me to stop?

NADYA: No, no. I want to understand.

ROCKY: You want to understand . . . Let me help you understand. OK, I keep coming back because I like you. That's a very complicated idea, but if you think on it long enough, maybe it'll sink in. Maybe I even love you. You give me no reason to, I understand. You enjoy rubbing my nose in shit. Maybe it's because I'm completely fucked up. Maybe it's just chemistry. Maybe you're just so exotic for me, but I find myself very attracted to you! As a lover. As a human being. *That's* why I come back month after month and put up with your crap. Are you happy now?

NADYA: Come to bed.

ROCKY: Now we're talking.

NADYA: How old are you?

ROCKY: Thirty-four.

NADYA: And your name's really Jimmy?

ROCKY: Why are you always testing me?

NADYA: It doesn't add up.

ROCKY: What doesn't add up?

NADYA: That you should be so alone. With your brains. With your personality.

ROCKY: Is that why you keep pushing me away? There are thousands of very smart, kind, lonely people in this city.

NADYA: Hansonia says we need a common story. A shared story, that we all have a place in.

ROCKY: What are you *talking* about? *Fuck.*

NADYA: That's when we stop being strangers. When your story has a place for me. And my story has a place for you. That's when we come together.

ROCKY: OK.

NADYA: Simple, yes? Jimmy?

ROCKY: What?

NADYA: Come to bed.

(Nadya crawls into the bed as Rocky undresses to his underwear, carefully folding his clothes and placing them on, or draping them over, the chair, as Nadya watches.)

ROCKY: *(In his underwear.)* I'm using the shower. Five minutes.

(Rocky exits the stage. Nadya crawls out of bed, crosses to the chair, picks up Rocky's trousers and withdraws and opens his wallet. Peers at it, compartment by compartment. She puts it back into the trousers and puts them back on the chair. She picks up a cell phone and dials.)

NADYA: *(Into cell phone.) Pa-ma-geé pazshalsta. Cherez pyat minoot. Da. Ho-ra-shó.*

(She hangs up as Rocky reenters with a towel wrapped around his waist.)

ROCKY: You got any soap?

NADYA: Don't bother. You can go home

ROCKY: What? What is it now?

NADYA: Rocky. Rocky with a wife and son. Or are you going to tell me that was all in the past. That you're not seeing them anymore, not since the divorce. You didn't even get visitation rights. Is that going to be the story now?

ROCKY: *(After a pause.)* What did you? . . . Go through my wallet?

NADYA: Rocky Gonzales. There's no room for you here.

ROCKY: You know, I have a right to some privacy.

NADYA: I have a right to some *truth!*

ROCKY: No, you don't. You really don't. That's what I'm paying you for. That's the right you give up when you take my money.

(She picks up the bills and throws them at him. Neither of them pick up the bills from the floor where they've scattered.)

NADYA: *(Calmly.)* Get out.

ROCKY: Look, in a month, I'll call you.

NADYA: Don't.

ROCKY: I don't want to leave it like this.

NADYA: Go, Indian man. Work your spell on somebody else. Aren't you people supposed to be about tribe and home and family and the truth of the spirits. How's your marriage?

ROCKY: My marriage is *fine.* Thanks for asking.

NADYA: Yes, I can see.

ROCKY: I still love you. I will always love you.

NADYA: Blah blah blah.

ROCKY: And you of course tell the truth to all your johns.

NADYA: Except for my name, yes.

ROCKY: OK, OK . . . So we've reached a new level of truth. See, our stories are coming together.

NADYA: I trusted you. Sort of. So much as one can trust in this business. *Kakaya dúra.* Go home to your tribe.

ROCKY: I HAVE NO TRIBE! THEY TOOK IT AWAY AND MADE ME A SLAVE. WHY DO YOU THINK I'M *HERE??!*

(Silence.)

(From the periphery, an elegant , well-dressed, and manicured woman in her late thirties named Vera enters the room through the wall of light.)

VERA: Is there a problem here?

NADYA: He was just leaving

ROCKY: Fuck you!

VERA: *(Cool as ice.)* Please don't talk to my staff that way.

ROCKY: Fuck you, too!

VERA: *(Gathers the strewn money.)* Please put your clothes on and leave.

ROCKY: *(Scrambling into his clothes.)* I'll shut you people down. I'll have the vice here sooner than you can blink

VERA: Of course you will.

ROCKY: Jesus, what am I saying? What am I doing?! I'm losing my mind!!!

VERA: Of course you are. We understand. Do check your wallet. Make sure everything is there.

ROCKY: *(Rifling through his wallet.)* Yeah! Yeah!

VERA: License?

ROCKY: Yeah.

VERA: Credit cards?

ROCKY: Yeah, fine.

VERA: Good luck to you, Mr. Gonzales.

ROCKY: Right.

VERA: Have a nice day.

(Rocky leaves, flustered. Pause. Vera crosses to and picks up Nadya's sketchbook that she left on the bedstand. Vera flips through a few pages, closes the book, hands it to Nadya, who clutches the book of memories. Vera stares at Nadya sternly for just a moment before leaving the room. Nadya clutches the sketchpad, trembling.)

(Lights shift to overhead spot.)

ROCKY: *(To audience.)* After Vera threw me out, I found Nadya again, through her website. Of course I changed my name. And we spoke to each other again like lovers. And there she was again, in my living room, a mirage in my son's computer, dancing for me at two a.m.

(Lights fade to black.)

END OF ACT TWO

ACT III
("CROMWELL")

The lights suddenly flip to a general wash as Cromwell appears.

HANSONIA: Detective Cromwell?

CROMWELL: Yes?

HANSONIA: Hansonia Levcourt. They told me . . .

CROMWELL: Yes, yes of course. Please come in, Ms. Levcourt. Have a seat.

(Hansonia sits.)

CROMWELL: Can I get you some coffee, or tea, or water or something.

HANSONIA: Some water would be nice.

CROMWELL: Yes, well that we have. That we can provide. In abundance. Tapwater, I'm afraid. Is that all right?

HANSONIA: It's fine.

CROMWELL: Unless you'd care for some sherry?

HANSONIA: Water will be fine, thank you.

CROMWELL: Right.

(Cromwell scoops up the bottle of sherry and the two Styrofoam cups and swiftly exits. Meanwhile, Hansonia opens her purse and withdraws a makeup kit. Peers at herself in the mirror, pulls out an eyeline pencil and cleans a tiny blotch near her eye. Cromwell returns with two Styrofoam cups. He sets one in front of Hansonia, keeps the other for himself, remaining standing.)

CROMWELL: You really should have tried our coffee. We have custom flavors: swamp mud, battery acid, and skunk turd.

HANSONIA: Detective . . .

CROMWELL: Yes, I know. What are you doing here? Right. They told me you were here to post bail for Nadya. That's very good of you. I've seen kin who wouldn't do as much. I asked them to send you my way. I want you to know I have nothing against Nadya. Nothing personal.

HANSONIA: Who supervised the sting operation that led to her arrest?

CROMWELL: I did.

HANSONIA: Nothing personal?

CROMWELL: She keeps dangerous company, Ms. Levcourt. We're after her company, not her. That's why she's being released so swiftly.

HANSONIA: Are you pressing charges?

CROMWELL: Ms. Levcourt, we are the police. We stop traffic and give tickets. We give candy to small children. Then we arrest them ten years later and deprive them of their rights. But we *don't* press charges. That's up to the district attorney.

HANSONIA: You make recommendations, no?

CROMWELL: Yes, which are often ignored.

HANSONIA: How exasperating for you.

CROMWELL: Well, yes it is, now that you mention it.

HANSONIA: Then how do you strike deals?

CROMWELL: In consultation with the district attorney.

HANSONIA: And how close are you with the DA's office?

CROMWELL: They hold us in contempt.

HANSONIA: You have their phone number?

CROMWELL: Of course.

HANSONIA: You have a phone.

CROMWELL: Oh, yes. We're very well equipped on that score.

HANSONIA: Well, then.

CROMWELL: Well then, *what?*

HANSONIA: Then you're closer than you admit.

CROMWELL: Your point being?

HANSONIA: Nadya wants to become a citizen. That will never happen if they press charges. Have them drop the charges. Please.

CROMWELL: Do you know how *expensive* a sting operation is? This is public money, Ms. Levcourt. And what do we have to show the public for its trust if we let guilty people go free?

HANSONIA: You just said you weren't after Nadya.

CROMWELL: I said we were after people far more dangerous than her. But if we don't find those dangerous people . . . She was prostituting herself, Ms. Levcourt.

HANSONIA: She is trying to support herself and a ten-year-old daughter.

CROMWELL: This is what employment agencies are for. Job placement centers. Trade colleges.

HANSONIA: You've obviously never watched your children go hungry.

CROMWELL: Have *you? (Brief pause.)* You are a never-married novelist, Ms. Levcourt. And a journalist with a diagnosis of clinical depression. What could you possibly know about the world?

HANSONIA: How do you know so much about my life?

CROMWELL: That's why they call me detective. But I was a composition major in college. Oooh, that was a long time ago. I have enormous respect for people like you, people who know how to command language. Commanding people is nothing, scare them and they follow, but *words* . . . Once I dreamed of being the next Ogden Nash. And here I am. Pathetic, isn't it.

(Cromwell drifts off into a reverie.)

HANSONIA: Detective?

CROMWELL: Yes.

HANSONIA: You called me here for a reason?

CROMWELL: Facts are all lies, and myths are all true. Who said that? Yeats, that's right. William Butler Yeats. Scrapping through the Irish backwoods to collect and preserve the Celtic stories. The stories, he learned, were more true than the facts they derived from. They held more meaning. A larger meaning. My job, you see, is to sort through stories, so many stories, as they rub up against each other, and my job, you see, is to credit and discredit, smooth out the edges, until we have an official story, a report, which is something like a myth, I suppose. An official

truth, even more true than the facts. This is my work, Ms. Levcourt, something like Yeats', something like yours, I imagine.

(Brief pause.)

HANSONIA: We are adrift, sir.

(Cromwell revels in the phrasing of Hansonia's last line.)

CROMWELL: Nicely put. *(Brief pause.)* You see, I hold such affection for the Irish, yet my name is Cromwell. Do you see any irony in that?

(Brief pause.)

HANSONIA: Not really.

CROMWELL: Everything is interconnected, of course. You are who you are because of slavery.

HANSONIA: Detective . . .

CROMWELL: Masters and slaves, bonded and severed by blood and economics. It's the history of the world. In America, it becomes a brutal lockstep involving everyone who sets foot on this land. Masters and slaves. You should write about *that.*

HANSONIA: I am.

CROMWELL: Good! I hope it's not more whining about abuse.

HANSONIA: It's from the point of view of a white bigot.

CROMWELL: Excellent! Something even *I* can relate to.

HANSONIA: An American creation myth.

CROMWELL: Now let's not overdo it.

HANSONIA: Detective . . .

CROMWELL: Yes, yes, I know. What do I want from you? Everything is interconnected. Did Nadya tell you how she came here?

HANSONIA: In handcuffs.

CROMWELL: I mean to this country?

HANSONIA: She just said she came here.

CROMWELL: In handcuffs — in a manner of speaking. I'll bet she never mentioned *that.* Indentured. It's a traditional American saga, as I'm sure you know. You're her friend?

HANSONIA: Yes.

CROMWELL: Obviously. And what is the origin of this friendship?

HANSONIA: Marc Chagal.

CROMWELL: The painter?

HANSONIA: Is there another?

CROMWELL: That's awfully highbrow.

HANSONIA: Sometimes it can't be helped.

CROMWELL: All right. So you got together to play whist with Marc Chagal playing cards that you bought at the museum?

HANSONIA: We got together so I could babysit her daughter.

CROMWELL: Katerina.

HANSONIA: Yes.

CROMWELL: In her apartment?

HANSONIA: Yes.

CROMWELL: How many times?

HANSONIA: In *her* apartment, twice. The second time, yesterday, after Nadya was arrested.

CROMWELL: And the first?

HANSONIA: Months ago, I don't know.

CROMWELL: Who answered the door?

HANSONIA: Nadya.

CROMWELL: Nobody who looked like this?

(Cromwell throws a photograph on the table. Hansonia inspects it.)

HANSONIA: No.

CROMWELL: Did you ever notice that person hanging around?

HANSONIA: Not that I remember.

CROMWELL: We think she lived in the same building.

HANSONIA: This is the person you're after?

CROMWELL: Her name is Vera. To the best of our knowledge, she is involved in — well, in addition to prostitution — all manner of schemes to raise funds. Let me count the ways: gasoline tax fraud, credit card fraud, embezzlement, extortion, racketeering, and very possibly murder for hire.

HANSONIA: Ridiculous. When she could have learned some real skills at City College.

CROMWELL: My point exactly.

HANSONIA: Detective . . .

CROMWELL: Have you noticed strange men hanging 'round her building?

HANSONIA: I haven't been paying attention to her building.

CROMWELL: You live next door.

HANSONIA: I haven't noticed.

CROMWELL: *(Throwing a number of photo on the table.)* Do you recognize any of these men?

HANSONIA: *(After perusing the photos.)* No.

CROMWELL: This one's Dimitry. Dimitry Tomasian. Armenian. First, he found a way to tap into AT&T's phone lines and create his own discount

long distance service. Then he set up a phony oil refinery, all on paper, to buy and sell gasoline while hijacking the taxes for his own profit. This is no fool. The FBI nailed him on that one, with our help, of course. And did they thank us?

HANSONIA: Why should I care?

CROMWELL: Because being thanked is a very important courtesy! It gives one a deep-seated sense of well-being!

HANSONIA: I mean about Dimitry.

CROMWELL: You should care because you're Nadya's friend, or so you say.

HANSONIA: What's that got to do with . . . ?

CROMWELL: I'm getting to that! You should care also because you're committed to the principle of civil rights, or so I read, under your byline, in that petulant screed you call a newspaper. Dimitri was Vera's partner. Together, they smuggled in women from Eastern Europe, this was years ago, inviting young women to work as live-in housekeepers and such. The deal was that the women's airline tickets to America, and their housing, would be paid for by their earnings in the United States. The other part of the deal was that their passports would be held in trust. Barely speaking the language. No ID. They slept on motel-room floors and ate pasta, until somebody finally chose them to do whatever needed to be done. Their debt kept escalating according to the whims of Dimitri and Vera. Indentured servitude with a little extortion thrown in for spice. This is how Nadya entered the United States. Or so we believe. Did she mention anything of this to you?

HANSONIA: No, not a word. How do you know this?

CROMWELL: The testimony of other victims.

HANSONIA: How did Katerina get here?

CROMWELL: Nadya paid for it. How do you think?

HANSONIA: Sweet Jesus. . . Slavery.

CROMWELL: Sort of. Though she was calling her friends in Odessa boasting about how much money she was making here, which adds a certain nuance to her role as victim. Whatever it is, it's a cycle we're trying to break. And we will. Eventually. Perhaps you'll start to pay attention from now on.

HANSONIA: How so?

CROMWELL: Perhaps you'll go through life with your eyes a little more open. All right, never mind life, let's just start with your neighborhood. And if that's too far-reaching, how about the building next door. If you see Vera, or any of these gentlemen, perhaps you'll let me know. Here's my card. We're excellent at protecting witnesses. Believe me, we're not like

those FBI scum who turn in their own mothers for bonus pay. We're the Los Angeles Police Department. We have a code of honor.

(Hansonia stares at him, jaw dropped, not knowing whether or not he's serious. She exits. Lights dim and come up again on Cromwell and Rocky, at the same location.)

CROMWELL: So you admit. . .

ROCKY: No, I don't admit . . .

CROMWELL: Mr. Gonzales . . .

ROCKY: You can't trap me . . .

CROMWELL: Nobody is even *trying* . . . You are *not* the person we're after, I don't know how much more *clear* I can . . .

ROCKY: How is she?

CROMWELL: She's fine! Well, no, she's not fine. She just spent the night in jail.

ROCKY: How can she? . . . How can you . . . You fuckheads, she's got a ten-year-old *daughter!*

CROMWELL: We're fully aware of . . . She's not the person we're after.

ROCKY: Then what was she in *jail* for?

CROMWELL: For offering a sixty-dollar blow job to one of our undercover agents, since you asked. That is illegal, Mr. Gonzales, as I'm sure you're cognizant. Arresting prostitutes, *and* their clients, is among the many services we provide.

ROCKY: *(After a brief pause.)* Are you threatening me?

CROMWELL: Not really, not yet. I hadn't gotten around to that part. You're way ahead of me, Rocky.

ROCKY: You got nothing on me!

CROMWELL: We have your name and telephone number in her client book. Which is why I called you in.

ROCKY: What does that prove? Nothing!

CROMWELL: Absolutely correct. But what does it *imply?* — that's the next question. You have a wife, Mr. Gonzales? And a son? What might they *infer* from your name being in Nadya's client book? Do you know the difference between imply and infer? Did you ever go to college, Mr. Gonzales? *(Pause.)* High school, perhaps? Did you graduate? Hit the old glass ceiling, eh? Frustrating, isn't it, I know. This isn't exactly what *I* wanted to be doing with my life. Interrogating the likes of you. Hardly my vision of a future when I was eighteen.

(Cromwell drifts off in a reverie.)

ROCKY: What do you want from me?

CROMWELL: Now you're catching on.

ROCKY: The fact is . . .

CROMWELL: *(Overlapping.)* The fact is . . .

ROCKY: *(Overlapping.)* The fact is that you don't have . . .

CROMWELL: *(Overlapping.)* The fact is . . . Mr. Gonzales.

ROCKY: *(Overlapping.)* You don't got shit on me. I know the law.

CROMWELL: *(Overlapping.)* Mr. Gonzales, be quiet.

ROCKY: *(Overlapping.)* You don't got . . .

CROMWELL: *(Overlapping.)* Mr. Gonzales . . .

ROCKY: I'm calling my lawyer, I don't gotta, what the fuck do you want with me, anyway?!

CROMWELL: Gonzales!

ROCKY: I know my rights!

CROMWELL: GONZALES! Shut the FUCK UP!

(Pause.)

ROCKY: *(Calmly.)* I know my rights.

CROMWELL: I don't believe you do. It's just you and me in a room. Do you see any witnesses? *Please* don't belittle my intelligence with blather about your rights.

(From a briefcase, Cromwell removes a gardening glove, holds it up.)

CROMWELL: Do you know what this is? *(Cromwell lays the glove on the desk.)* Put it on. Don't be shy.

ROCKY: Is this some kind of trap? Trying to get my prints on some . . .

CROMWELL: Such paranoia. Rocky, you've been watching too much court TV. Look. *(Cromwell puts it on, takes it off.)* See, now my fingerprints are all over it. As they were before, I should add. Go on, try it on.

(Rocky puts the glove on, stretches his hand into its fingers.)

CROMWELL: Feels good, yes? Do you know what it's made of?

ROCKY: Leather? Pigskin.

CROMWELL: Close. Actually, it's made from the scrotum of the guy before you who sat in that chair and talked about his rights.

(Rocky slowly removes the glove and sets it on the table.)

ROCKY: That's bullshit

CROMWELL: *(Smiling.)* Of course it is. Honestly now. Do you really think we're such barbarians? You can't believe everything you read in the papers. Do you read the papers, Rocky? Do you? . . . Read?

ROCKY: Fuck you.

CROMWELL: Let me get you a Diet Pepsi?

ROCKY: No thank you.

CROMWELL: I'm going to get myself a sherry. Perhaps you'll join me in a sherry?

ROCKY: No, thank you. But help yourself.

CROMWELL: All right. You're a cranky customer.

(Cromwell exits. Rocky exhales, stares around the room. Rises from his chair. Circles the desk, paces, stops. Returns to his chair. Cromwell reenters with a bottle of sherry and two Styrofoam cups.)

CROMWELL: *(Grandiosely enthusiastic.)* Hel-lo again!

(Cromwell sets the cups on the table and pours a shot into each cup. Sets the bottle on the table, places one cup in front of Rocky before picking up the other cup.)

CROMWELL: Here we go! *(A toast.)* May we be . . . forever young.

(They both knock back a slug.)

ROCKY: Can I bail her out?

CROMWELL: That's already been arranged.

ROCKY: By who?

CROMWELL: I'm not at liberty to say.

ROCKY: She needs to be with her daughter.

CROMWELL: She will be. Very soon. She only spent one night in our hotel.

ROCKY: And then?

CROMWELL: Then what?

ROCKY: She goes before a judge?

CROMWELL: I'm really not at liberty to . . .

ROCKY: Detective Cromwell.

CROMWELL: Call me Bill. Please. Like all my other good friends.

(He pours Rocky another shot of sherry. They drink.)

ROCKY: Are you going to arrest me?

CROMWELL: For what? Infidelity and moral turpitude are still legal in this country. Thank goodness. Besides, we don't have much on you, except for your name in a hooker's address book. Which suggests, but does not prove, that you paid her a visit or two. *(Placing handcuffs on the table.)* No, Rocky, if I were going to arrest you, I already would have pulled out these handcuffs right here, placed them on the table just like this, and said, "Mr. Gonzales, you're going down because we know you paid for nookie, in violation of penal code section 653.20 (A)." Do you have any recollection of those words crossing my lips? Do you? *(Brief pause.)* Rocky!

ROCKY: No.

CROMWELL: That's right. So you'll tell me nothing more than you sat in her

kitchen and played gin rummy. And I'll have the good grace to believe you, if that's what you'd like. *(Pause.)* Is that what you'd like?

ROCKY: *(Softly.)* Yes.

CROMWELL: I can't hear you. My hearing's faltering as I get older. That's why I tend to shout. IS THAT WHAT YOU'D LIKE?

ROCKY: YES!

CROMWELL: Yes, *what?*

ROCKY: Yes, sir!

CROMWELL: *Please* . . . Call me Bill. And let's put these nasty things away. *(Cromwell returns the cuffs to his vest pocket and the glove to his case.)* Now, when was the last time . . . More sherry?

ROCKY: Thanks, I'm fine.

CROMWELL: All right. When was the last time you saw Nadya?

ROCKY: In person? Seven weeks ago.

CROMWELL: How else, if not in person? *(Pause.)* That's a reasonable question, Rocky.

ROCKY: On the Internet.

CROMWELL: Chat room?

ROCKY: More private than that. Webcam.

CROMWELL: Why didn't you see her in person?

ROCKY: She threw me out.

CROMWELL: You beat her up or something?

ROCKY: She found out about my family.

CROMWELL: So?

ROCKY: I led her on.

CROMWELL: Led her on? That you were an eligible bachelor?

ROCKY: Exactly.

CROMWELL: Mr. Gonzales. How stupid do you think I am.

(Brief pause.)

ROCKY: But it's the truth.

CROMWELL: The truth is she was angling for a green card, and you were the chump she was setting up to marry.

ROCKY: That is not the truth.

CROMWELL: All right. Have it your way. Let's presume for the sake of argument she was smitten with you. The poor dear. The little innocent. Why didn't you tell her the truth about your family? Money was exchanged. You weren't exactly inviting her out to the high-school prom?

ROCKY: To get closer.

CROMWELL: Lying is a curious way to get close to somebody. A police strategy, mainly.

ROCKY: We can each be many people. I wanted to be somebody else.

CROMWELL: You must be feeling much the same way right now, I'd imagine. . . . So why did you pursue her?

ROCKY: Because I loved her.

CROMWELL: In my line of work, that's called stalking.

ROCKY: I still love her.

CROMWELL: *(A little embarrassed.)* More sherry, Mr. Gonzales.

ROCKY: I've had enough.

CROMWELL: Evidently . . . Mr. Gonzales. . .

ROCKY: Rocky, please Bill, call me Rocky.

CROMWELL: I need to know, Rocky, why you kept pursuing her?

ROCKY: I told you.

CROMWELL: What deal went bad?

ROCKY: Love.

CROMWELL: Gonzales. If you don't stop fucking around, I'm going to pick up the phone and tell your wife absolutely everything. . .

ROCKY: I don't know what you want! I'm telling you the truth!

CROMWELL: I need to know, Rocky, when you called Nadya on the phone, who answered? Was it Nadya?

ROCKY: No! It was a man.

CROMWELL: And did you ever meet this person?

ROCKY: I don't believe so.

CROMWELL: You don't believe so? *(Throwing a photograph onto the table.)* You never saw this woman?

ROCKY: She's the one who threw me out.

CROMWELL: What's her name?

ROCKY: I don't know.

CROMWELL: It's Vera, and you know perfectly well. What was the deal that went bad? Some deal with Vera. How much money did she steal from you?

ROCKY: Steal from *me?*

CROMWELL: *(Bellowing.)* Look, asshole, we know you were her partner. We *know* that's why you kept after Nadya, 'cause through Nadya you could reach Vera, right? Right? RIGHT?!

ROCKY: *(Plaintive, near tears.)* I don't know what you're *talking* about!

CROMWELL: Then figure it out! Before I throw you in a holding cell with all the other reprobates! How does Vera operate and who does she know?

Throw us a bone and all your sins are forgiven!

(Rocky collapses weeping on the table. After a pause, he collects himself.)

ROCKY: Bill, if you can, take *me* instead, in Nadya's place. Please, just let her be with her daughter. Let her have a life here. Throw me to the wolves if you want, I don't care. I cherish her.

CROMWELL: Gonzales, Jesus . . .

ROCKY: Maybe she *was* guilty of what you say . . .

CROMWELL: *Maybe?* We've got it on fucking tape!

ROCKY: But I *know* her. She would go a straighter path if she had the chance. And a stain like this on her record can only . . . How is a person like Nadya supposed to make something of her life? Call my wife, tell her everything. My life is over anyway. I don't care anymore.

CROMWELL: Gonzales, what are you *saying?*

ROCKY: Call my wife. Tell her everything. Put me in shackles. What difference? I've been a slave my whole life. This is like, this is like . . . This is like the destiny of the Indian nations. This is like . .

CROMWELL: Put a cork in it, Gonzales! How much did you drink before coming here?

ROCKY: *(Indignant.)* I am *not* I am *not* an alcoholic! Sorry, but that stereotype, the defeated urban tribesman. Not me. I couldn't hold a job with electric knives and saws if I was an alcoholic. But I was very nervous after I got your call, and yes, I did have a few tequilas.

CROMWELL: Which, mixed with sherry.

ROCKY: *(Opening his arms, grandiose.)* I am the man you see!

CROMWELL: Gonzales!

ROCKY: Please call me Rocky . . .

CROMWELL: Mr. Gonzales! *(Brief pause as they stare at each other.)* We are clearly wasting each other's time here. Call your wife yourself, tell her whatever you want. The best would be that you'll be late, and then take a few hours to sober up. Please don't drive anywhere in that condition.

ROCKY: OK.

CROMWELL: Thank you for your time, Mr. Gonzales.

ROCKY: OK.

CROMWELL: You can get up now. *(Pause, as Rocky remains seated, frozen.)* Can you get up?

ROCKY: OK. *(Rocky stands with as much dignity as he can muster.)* I'm sorry I couldn't help you more.

CROMWELL: That's all right.

(Lights shift to overhead spot.)

ROCKY: *(To audience.)* After Vera threw me out, I found Nadya again, through her website. Of course, I changed my name. And we spoke to each other again like lovers. And there she was again, in my living room, a mirage in my son's computer, dancing for me at two a.m.

(Lights fade and come up again on Hollywood police station. After a brief pause, Nadya enters the room, standing in a periphery of light. Sensing her, Cromwell faces her with a look of disdain, not lost on Nadya.)

CROMWELL: This was your first arrest. Not much fun, is it. Let's hope it'll be your last. I just have a few questions, and then you can be on your way. When did you first enter the United States?

NADYA: August 29, 2001.

CROMWELL: Through Los Angeles?

NADYA: Yes.

CROMWELL: So you missed seeing the Statue of Liberty? Shame. That sight proves to be an inspiration for so many of our newcomers. You entered on what kind of visa. Tourist?

NADYA: A work visa.

CROMWELL: H-1B?

NADYA: Yes.

CROMWELL: Your area of expertise being . . . ? *(Silence.)* Let me guess. Computer science? You arrived on a visa that indicated you were a hardware specialist, is that correct?

NADYA: Yes.

CROMWELL: And *are* you a hardware specialist?

NADYA: No.

CROMWELL: Are you a *software* specialist?

NADYA: No.

CROMWELL: Are you any kind of specialist at all? Please don't answer that. You might incriminate yourself further . . . What are you going to do now?

NADYA: I don't know.

CROMWELL: Return to former habits?

NADYA: I don't know.

CROMWELL: Or try a new path? Do you know how many excellent courses they offer at City College? *(Pause.)* But that's not why I called you here. I need you to tell me about Vera.

NADYA: I don't know any Vera.

CROMWELL: Let me refresh your memory. *(Cromwell throws a photo on the table.)* Ring any bells? Nadya, I fully appreciate your dependence on the woman. She brought you here, exploited you and helped you at the same

time. It *was* she who brought you here, wasn't it? *(Pause.)* All right. We have to try a new game. It's called Tell the Truth. This is how it works. I ask you a question. And you tell the truth. The trick to this game is that I'm a police detective, which means that I may already know the answer to many of the questions I'm asking you. And if I know, and I know that *you* know, but you don't know that *I* know, and you stay quiet, then I know that you're not really telling the truth, and you lose points.

NADYA: They said I have the right to remain silent. They said I have the right to have my lawyer with me.

CROMWELL: Oh, Nadya, Nadya. You are absolutely correct. That's what they said and that's what they meant. But let's look at the larger picture for a moment. I ask you a few simple questions. You employ your right to remain silent. I send you on your way with a certain compassion but still perturbed by your being so stubborn. In a few weeks, right when you're in the middle of your constitutional law course at City College, you're going to be called before a judge to answer the charge of prostitution. It will all be a matter of public record, a record that will have been sent to the Department of Homeland Security. Now, this public record will not stand you in good stead when it comes time to renew your visa, for what, the fifth time, the deadline renewal being . . . ? Remember, we're playing Tell the Truth.

NADYA: February twelfth.

CROMWELL: Correct. So by Valentine's Day, you'll realize that you're really in a bind. Your current visa expires . . . When?

NADYA: July seventh.

CROMWELL: So you've clearly worked this out for yourself already. By the end of July you'll be egregiously out of status, your constitutional law course will be next to useless.

NADYA: What constitutional law course?

CROMWELL: You and your daughter will soon become immigrants nonstatus, nongratus, you will now be forced from lack of alternatives back into prostitution, ever watching out for the LAPD and the feds, which may or may not even care, *or* which may send you to an even more unpleasant detention center at a place aptly named Terminal Island, while your daughter is placed in foster care. If you ever emerge from Terminal Island, you will be unceremoniously returned to Odessa, without Katerina, where you will do . . . whatever people do in Odessa. Now let's consider another option. Let's imagine this entire, unfortunate episode, the arrest, the pending charges, imagine it all just . . . disappearing. Poof!

(Pause.) So. Let's try again. It *was* Vera who brought you here, wasn't it. It was Vera who purchased the phony visa, right? *(Silence.)* What was your first job here? Live-in housekeeper up on Mount Olympus? Wiping kids' snotty noses, cleaning soiled diapers, having to ask permission to walk down the hill on your so-called day off? Dodging sexual advances from the master of the house? But when he beat you, it was Vera who got you out of there. Nursed your wounds.

NADYA: So why are you asking me?

CROMWELL: To be certain.

NADYA: Nothing is certain.

CROMWELL: Nadya, in the existential evasion department, you're way out of your league. Did you or did you not work for Vera, as has been recorded in the testimony of five other witnesses?

NADYA: Yes.

CROMWELL: Thank you. That's a start. A small start. Is everything accurate I've said to this point about Vera and your connection to her?

NADYA: Yes.

CROMWELL: All right. Is she living in your building?

NADYA: Not anymore.

CROMWELL: Where is she?

NADYA: Detective Cromwell . . .

CROMWELL: Is she still in Los Angeles?

NADYA: I don't know.

CROMWELL: Knock it off . . .

NADYA: Detective . . .

CROMWELL: You have her phone number, I'm sure.

NADYA: She kills people, I mean she's capable . . .

CROMWELL: We know that.

NADYA: Then *please.*

(Pause.)

CROMWELL: OK, we can get you moved to another neighborhood; another city if you want. New ID. New life. We can do that. *(Brief pause.)* I'll take personal responsibility for your safety.

NADYA: Please don't make promises you can't keep.

CROMWELL: I'm a man of my word.

NADYA: I'm sure you are. You just don't understand Vera.

CROMWELL: I think I do. West Hollywood 1998. A sheriff's deputy follows up on a truck parked illegally in a driveway. Oleg Sherell opens the door, bloodstained from head to toe, in the process of dismembering a body

in the kitchen, cutting off the fingers. We were told it was Vera's work, but we were never able to pin her down. Now we have this prostitution racket, which the sting operation has made verifiable, but we're coming up a little short on some of the details.

NADYA: Please don't ask me any more questions. I've said too much already.

CROMWELL: A new start, Nadya. For you and your daughter. We know you've been trying to escape Vera's clutches for years. We know she's been threatening to hurt your parents. We can get them into the United States, to be with you and Katerina. Your whole family together again. A new start.

(Pause.)

NADYA: Fuck you. Fuck you and your new start. Give me one, give me one good reason why I should trust you. Because you're the *police?* In this city, there is not one, not *one* person who *ever* told me the truth, who didn't *back* out of a commitment. I'm sorry, but that is my experience. A lawyer I met. She wanted to be my friend. I said OK. I knit sweaters. She wanted a sweater for her baby. Fine, I made her one. I didn't ask anything for it. But she said she would help me with my papers. I didn't ask. She *offered.* When it's time to file my green card application, she's very busy, getting ready to move back to Texas. OK, one rotten peach, you say. But this happens time after time. You think I didn't try to open a clean business here? You think I didn't try? Imported accessories from Ukraine. Handcrafted jewelry. Very simple, very classy, not folk, but trendy, things that would sell here. I took them to a shopkeeper on Franklin, we talked, we laughed, we told stories, I showed her samples. She told me what was interesting for her, what was not. She placed an order. I said let's make a contract because the rings and broaches have to be sent in from Odessa, she says, oh it's such a small order, I'm good for it, she says. I'm good for it. I spent money on that order, a few hundred dollars, no, not thousands, a small order, but that's not the point. When I call to make the delivery, my phone calls are not returned. When I show up at the shop, she's too busy to see me. What can I do? Take her to court? This is the kind of truth I find in this city, time after time. Any idiot can make it through a crisis, it's the day-to-day living that kills you. That's from Chekhov. Vera, only Vera kept her word. Only Vera could get me out of trouble. Where I come from, when we break our word, we know the cost. The rules are clear. And so is the cost: A broken bone. A bullet in the throat. In Ukraine, we have what you people call justice. You Americans use this word, you talk about it, but you never do

anything about it. Our justice is clear. Your justice is a joke. Your jails may be filled, but what's that got to do with justice? Tell me why I spent a night in jail for an honest deal struck between two adults, while that shopkeeper, who broke her word, who cost me money, sits behind her booth, counting her money and making jokes about stupid Russians. And now I'm supposed to betray Vera for *you.* For your clean life? For your new start? *Fuck* you!

(Silence.)

CROMWELL: Whenever you go for your citizenship interview, I strongly suggest you find a tone that's slightly more uplifting.

NADYA: If I broke the rules, like you people say, why are you making deals with me?

CROMWELL: I'm trying to *help* you, you stupid . . .

NADYA: Stupid what? Say it. Stupid whore?

CROMWELL: The woman is a killer.

NADYA: So are *you.*

CROMWELL: Madam!

NADYA: Easy to call people names isn't it.

CROMWELL: You are completely inverting . . .

NADYA: I know about your witness protection program. Didn't do a very good job protecting Olga Lermentova, did you? Natalia Vragova. You gave *them* your word, as well? I'm sure they took your good word all the way to the bottom of the LA River.

CROMWELL: That wasn't me. That was Criminal Intelligence. I'm Vice. It's a different division.

NADYA: But you must be working with Criminal Intelligence.

CROMWELL: Yes, I am. But I told you, you have my personal assurance . . .

NADYA: Please! . . . Detective . . . No more stories. No more lies.

CROMWELL: Fine . . . Fine . . . One moment, please.

(Cromwell leaves the room. After a pause, Katerina enters the room, standing in the edge of the light. Katerina and Nadya remain at a distance from each other.)

KATERINA: Mom?

NADYA: What are you doing here?

KATERINA: Hansonia brought me.

NADYA: Oh, for God's sake . . .

KATERINA: Is it something bad?

NADYA: No.

KATERINA: I shouldn't be here?

NADYA: No, it's fine.

KATERINA: Where were you? Where've you been?

NADYA: Here. They needed me here very much, more than I wanted to be here.

KATERINA: Did you do something bad?

NADYA: No. They needed my help. What did you do last night?

KATERINA: Watched TV with Hansonia. Spoke with Grandma and Grandpa.

NADYA: They called?

KATERINA: No, I called them.

NADYA: Did you say I wasn't there? *(An awkward silence.)* You told them, didn't you? And what did they say? Tell me the truth!

KATERINA: That I should be living with *them.*

(Pause, as Nadya absorbs the blow.)

NADYA: And is that what you want?

KATERINA: No! I want to be with you!

NADYA: Is Hansonia still here?

KATERINA: I think she went home already.

NADYA: And why aren't you in school?

KATERINA: I wanted to see you.

NADYA: *(After a pause.)* Come here.

(Katerina walks over toward her mother, who embraces the child, impassioned. Nadya starts to cry.)

KATERINA: What's wrong?

NADYA: Nothing. It's just a very difficult time, that's all.

(As Nadya continues holding Katerina, Cromwell appears at the edge of the light.)

CROMWELL: *(After a pause.)* You can be on your way right after the evaluation.

NADYA: What evaluation?

CROMWELL: Family services. They're on their way.

(Nadya glares at him.)

NADYA: Family services? What for?

CROMWELL: The judge's order, remember? To determine whether or not you're a fit mother. I wouldn't worry. I'm sure it'll be fine.

NADYA: Fit mother?

CROMWELL: The judge's order.

(Pause.)

NADYA: And what if I'm *not* a fit mother?

CROMWELL: In *their* view . . .

NADYA: In *their* view.

CROMWELL: I'd rather not think about that. And I'm sure you wouldn't either. *(Silence as Nadya's reality of losing her daughter sinks in.)* Poof. All these troubles can vanish into the air.

NADYA: A new city?

CROMWELL: Tuscon, Arizona. Fine schools. Clean streets.

NADYA: A new name. A new passport. A new driver's license. My parents rushed here, in secret.

CROMWELL: Like magic.

(Nadya is now sobbing uncontrollably, which concerns Katerina.)

KATERINA: Mom?

NADYA: *(Through her tears.)* 818-479-3294. That's her cell phone. I don't know where she lives.

CROMWELL: That doesn't matter. We'll track it through the cell. I can't thank you enough.

NADYA: Christ what a mistake.

CROMWELL: No mistake at all. Let me take you home.

NADYA: No, that's all right we can. . . . Of course, we have no car.

CROMWELL: Wait by the side door. I'll be there in five minutes.

(Nadya and Katerina exit together.)

CROMWELL: *(In spotlight, to the audience/investigators.)* The mistake was not her disclosing Vera's telephone number. The mistake was me driving Nadya and Katerina home. They knew Nadya had been arrested. Vera and her people, they track these events, so they were watching, they were there when Nadya and Katerina got out of the car, my car, the car of the man they came to associate with Vera's subsequent arrest, and trial, and prison term. I dropped them off at least a block away, for precisely that reason, but somebody must have noticed, because two days later, the federal marshals were ambushed. Nadya's murder was enough for me. Too much. And so I retired. After over forty years of service. To be truthful, they *asked* me to retire. Not because of Nadya's murder but because of some unrelated statements I made afterwards.

(To Hansonia, who has entered from the periphery. The lights are now half wash, half spotlight on Cromwell.)

CROMWELL: This is what I said: I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina. English stock, my great grandparents. The English, they say, have an affinity with the American South. The one — perhaps only — American dialect that English actors always get right is that of Dixie. Some common vowels they say, but it's really common attitudes. Aristocratic foundations. The implicit understanding that all men are *not* created

equal. I told them of how, at fourteen, I had run around with a lynch mob, of how I was wrongfully acquitted in the murder of an old black man, a neighborhood drunk, we hung him, for no reason in particular, decimated his body, left him dangling from an oak a mile from the highway. And they wanted me to say, these people in human resources, they wanted me to say how the experience gave me nightmares that returned over decades. But that was all nonsense, and I said so.

(He smiles.) Yes, I'm an old bigot with blood on my hands. And if you want to understand this country, you better start with me. Stories. Everywhere stories. What is true, Ms. Levcourt, and what is trickery? Very confusing, isn't it. Perhaps together we can sort it all out. An American creation myth, you call it? The report you're writing.

HANSONIA: It's actually a novel.

CROMWELL: Yes, of course it is. Pulling together a number of stories, no doubt. Trying to have them cohere into a larger truth, like trying to create order from the motions of moths around a light.

HANSONIA: Something like that.

CROMWELL: And all told from the point of view of a white bigot, you said?

HANSONIA: Yes.

CROMWELL: From the South, of course.

HANSONIA: Of course.

CROMWELL: Perhaps the leader of a lynch mob.

HANSONIA: Exactly.

(Brief pause.)

CROMWELL: That was James Baldwin's idea.

HANSONIA: I know. *(Pause.)* And where is Katerina?

CROMWELL: They have her now. Vera's boys. We'll keep working to find her. We'll find her, you'll see.

(Hansonia's eyes well with tears. Cromwell extends his hand, but Hansonia simply leaves as the light goes down on Cromwell.)

END OF ACT THREE

ACT IV
("VERA")

A pool of light on Vera, seated, in prison attire, addresses the audience/investigators. She holds a lit cigarette.

VERA: You want me to tell you that I pulled the hair of my classmates until their scalps bled? That my father and all my brothers sodomized me, and my repressed rage landed me here? Or would you like me to say I'm sorry that Nadya came to a bad end and that I had something to do with it. All right. I'm sorry. Happy? *(Vera takes a deep hit, blows out the smoke in the direction of the audience.)*

Mind if I smoke? *(Pause.)* My past is none of your fucking business, and what difference does it make anyway? What's done is done. But I'll tell you a joke. An old Russian joke. Svetlana comes out of her apartment building, stepping over a pile of dog shit in the snow to get to the sidewalk; the apartment manager sees this and says, "Svetlana, is that from your dog?" Svetlana says, "Pyotr, what dog? You know I don't have a dog, but I'll clean it up anyway!" *(Pause, another drag on the cigarette.)* That, you see, is a portrait of my people. A nation of slaves. It was fashionable a few years ago to blame the communists for this, but you can find the trait much further back — in Dostoevsky, in Gogol, in Pushkin, they all talk about it. There's a reason we had Stalin. Did you ever have a Stalin? Twenty million people he sent to the gulag. Did you ever have anything *close?* Joseph McCarthy, and you made quick work of him. If we had Joseph McCarthy, in three months he would have been the Minister of Culture. In another three months he would have been president. *(Another drag of the cigarette.)*

These cigarettes are shit, where'd they get these, Lithuania? Now, may I remind you of how you took this entire country by displacing then murdering hundreds of thousands of people who were living here, fairly peacefully, before you showed up. So you know where you can shove your Bill of Rights and your equal opportunity under the law. Talk about a racket! May I also remind you of Chicago in the twenties, that your modern capitalism was pretty much jump-started by gang warfare. We're cousins, my friend. But here's the difference. You stole this country because you wanted it.

We hung on to Russia because nobody else would have it! We were there first. We didn't conquer anybody. We were just Slavs wandering around with nothing better to do. Somebody said, OK it's either Paris or this ditch; we settled for the ditch. We didn't have your ambition, your Protestant work ethic, not even your slaves. We had vodka, and we were *exhausted.* When I first came to this country, I worked as a security guard at the County Museum of Art. Your monument to high culture. Minimum wage, with all the black and Armenian and Latino and Fil-

ipino guards standing around for eight hours a day and begging for overtime. It was our job, our duty, to be invisible. And I went to some of their homes, and I saw the poverty, their families, and that this was their life, all their hope, and that America also was a nation of slaves, not so different from Russia. I am not stupid. And I quickly started to see the possibilities this country could afford, by its own standard of slavery. And that's what I did. But I was *good* to my people. I was loyal to them if they were loyal to me. Can your beloved corporations say the same? Am I sorry? I had no choice. And so now you're here to offer me a reduced sentence if I help you find the people who did this to Nadya . . . right? If they were loyal to me, I won't betray them . . . But they were not all so loyal. *(Vera throws her cigarette on the floor.)* I'll be out soon. *(She smiles.)* You'll see.
(Lights fade to black.)

EPILOGUE

The bucolic piano melody from the opening movement of Schumann's Kindersehnen *("Of Strange Lands and People") is heard, as the light comes up on the suspended upstage screen and the video stream of "Betty," who, now wearing trousers and halter top, sits on the bed, staring into the camera with a Mona Lisa smile. She plays with a strap of her halter top in a motion that jerks from one frame to the next. Suddenly the image is scrambled in static, and the screen goes black.*

END OF PLAY

CROOKED

Catherine Trieschmann

For my mother, Donna.
Special thanks to Mike Bradwell, Arielle Tepper, Julie Crosby, Dan Kois and the Waterside Seven Writers' Group, especially Gwydion Suilebhan and Mary Lane.

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Trieschmann's plays include *The Bridegroom of Blowing Rock* (L. Arnold Weissberger award), *Before the Fire, crooked, The World of Others,* and *Hot Georgia Sunday.* Her work has been produced Off Broadway at the Women's Project, the Bush Theatre (London), Florida Stage, the Summer Play Festival, Actor's Theatre of Louisville, Theatre in the Square, and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, as well as developed with LARK, LAByrinth, Williamstown, Florida Studio Theatre, Ars Nova, and the Dallas Theatre Center, among others. Her work is published by Samuel French, Methuen, and Smith and Kraus. Originally from Athens, Georgia, Trieschmann currently resides in a small town in western Kansas, where she's working on a commission for South Coast Repertory Theatre and Manahattan Theatre Club.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS

Crooked was first performed in a workshop production at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2004, with costume design by Donald Sanders and sound design by Claire Campbell. Emily Ballou was the stage manager. It was directed by Elena Hartwell with the following cast:

CAST

LANEY ..... Shelly Stover
ELISE ..... Vanessa Shealy
MARIBEL ..... Katherine Sanderlin

Crooked was presented as part of the Summer Play Festival in July 2005, with set design by Susan Zeeman Rogers; costume design by Sarah Tosetti; lighting design by Aaron Black; and original music by Shane Rettig. Madelaine Hartman was the stage manager. It was directed by Linsay Firman with the following cast:

CAST

LANEY ..... Shelly Stover
ELISE ..... Effie Johnson
MARIBEL ..... Katherine Sanderlin

Crooked premiered at the Bush Theatre in London in May 2006, with set and costume design by Libbie Watson and lighting design by James Farncombe. Julia Crammar was the stage manager. It was directed by Mike Bradwell with the following cast:

CAST

LANEY . . . . . .Amanda Hale
ELISE . . . . . .Suzan Sylvester
MARIBEL . . . . . .Debbie Chazen

Crooked premiered Off Broadway at Women's Project in April 2008, with set design by Jennifer Moeller; costume design by Ilona Somogyi; lighting design by S. Ryan Schmidt; and sound design and original music by Jane Shaw. Jack Gianino was the stage manager. It was directed by Liz Diamond with the following cast:

CAST

LANEY . . . . . .Cristin Milioti
ELISE . . . . . .Betsy Aidem
MARIBEL . . . . . .Carmen M. Herlihy

CHARACTERS

LANEY WATERS: Fourteen, has dystonia, which causes one of her shoulders to draw up, as though she has a slightly hunched back.
ELISE WATERS: Forties, Laney's mother.
MARIBEL PURDY: Sixteen, Laney's friend, chubby and radiant.

SETTING

Mississippi. Living room and porch of the Waters' house; the school stadium bleachers; church sanctuary.

TIME

The present.

CROOKED

SCENE 1

Laney reads her story to the audience.

LANEY: Ernest's hands smelled like lemons and gunshot. Every Monday, he parked his lemonade stand at the entrance of the park, where it stood solid as a bank. He liked the feel of the sun on his back, hot and burning like an open sore. He liked the children's laughter and when a little face approached him cheery as a Fruit Loop. On weekends, Ernest left his house through the kitchen door and with his rifle and his forty-five wandered the woods, shooting at any target in sight: a glass bottle, a pinecone, a squirrel. He was as sharp as a Cuisinart. Ernest lived for his lemonade and his guns for many happy years, until suddenly everything started to get blurry and confused. He forgot what day it was and where he was supposed to be, and one day he filled his lemonade stand with his rifle and his forty-five and instead of serving up lemonade, he served up bullets, straight between the eyes.

(Pause. Lights up on Elise who is in the living room, reading the story from a notebook. Laney turns to her.)

LANEY: What do you think?

ELISE: It has some nice imagery. I like the little details.

LANEY: What details?

ELISE: I like the Fruit Loops. I like the Cuisinart.

LANEY: What do you think about the plot?

ELISE: The plot is a little gruesome.

LANEY: Is it shocking?

ELISE: Yes, it's shocking.

LANEY: Is it exciting? Did you feel your arm hairs rise like you'd just been electrocuted?

ELISE: Electrocuted?

LANEY: Yes.

ELISE: Maybe not electrocuted.

LANEY: Then what?

ELISE: The plot could use some work.

LANEY: Why?

ELISE: Well, the ending comes out of nowhere. Maybe Ernest should take a little longer to deteriorate.

LANEY: It's a short story, Mom.

ELISE: Yes, Laney. But not all short stories have to be that short.

LANEY: I want it to be that short.

ELISE: Well then, maybe you should make the ending a little more realistic.

LANEY: You always say that.

ELISE: I always say what?

LANEY: You always want me to be more realistic.

ELISE: With your fiction.

LANEY: With everything.

ELISE: Did you have a bad day at school?

LANEY: Did you have a bad day?

ELISE: I asked you first.

LANEY: So.

ELISE: No, I've had a great day.

LANEY: Why? What'd you do?

ELISE: I made a list. Lists. I listed things.

LANEY: Like what?

ELISE: Like possible jobs. I made a list of possible jobs in order of preference. You want to hear?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Number 1: librarian.

Number 2: paralegal.

Number 3: administrative assistant. NOT not-for-profit.

LANEY: What about social work?

ELISE: I'm giving up social work.

LANEY: Why?

ELISE: I'm becoming a misanthrope instead.

LANEY: I know what that is.

ELISE: I know you know what that is. You're gifted. Too gifted.

LANEY: Are we gonna be poor?

ELISE: No. Maybe. I should make a list. Ways to avoid being poor:

Number 1: get a job.

Number 2: marry a rich man.

Number 3: marry a rich woman in Vermont or Cleveland, or wherever it is you can marry a rich woman these days.

LANEY: You'd have to divorce Dad.

ELISE: I have. The papers are filed.

LANEY: Oh. Who's going to take care of him?

ELISE: The doctors. His parents — your Grandma Liz and Pop — are still there, making sure he's OK. Nothing's changed.

LANEY: Except now, he's not your husband. You can get a brand-new husband, make me have a brand-new Dad.

ELISE: Yes, I've made a list. You want to hear it?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Number 1 . . .

LANEY: I'm not playing . . .

ELISE: Holden Caulfield.

LANEY: That's my boyfriend!

ELISE: Number 2: Heathcliff.

LANEY: Ugh.

ELISE: What? He's dark and handsome and mysterious.

LANEY: He's whiny.

ELISE: No, he's not. He's in love.

LANEY: Yeah, so in love he ruins the lives of everyone he ever meets.

ELISE: You're right. He is kind of a sociopath. Number 3: Atticus Finch. Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch.

LANEY: He'd be OK.

ELISE: Yeah, he would. Neck rub?

LANEY: OK.

ELISE: This is good for us.

LANEY: What?

ELISE: Getting away. Moving back here.

LANEY: I never lived here.

ELISE: I know, but I did. I never thought I'd move back to this house. But it's not so bad. It's got a lot of character, don't you think?

LANEY: It's got mold.

ELISE: No it doesn't. Where?

LANEY: There. That crack in the wall. It's green.

ELISE: That's not mold. That's moss. I think.

LANEY: Same thing.

ELISE: Well I'm glad we're here. This is going to be a good change for us.

LANEY: It's good for my writing.

ELISE: How so?

LANEY: Suffering is good for writing.

ELISE: Suffering is not good for writing. Suffering is good for depression.

Reading is good for writing. Reading William Faulkner. He lived here, you know.

LANEY: I know. You've said that like a zillon times.

ELISE: I keep thinking you're going to be impressed.

LANEY: I am. He's on my Best American Authors list twice.

ELISE: How can he be on it twice?

LANEY: Two of his books are on it.

ELISE: Which two?

LANEY: *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying.*

ELISE: Did you make up that list?

LANEY: No. Mr. Caruthers wrote it.

ELISE: Oh God.

LANEY: What?

ELISE: Mr. Caruthers was a failed writer trapped in a middle-school library.

LANEY: I liked him. You should like him. You both make lists.

ELISE: He's a fish. A carp.

LANEY: A carp?

ELISE: Yes. A scaly, slippery carp.

LANEY: I think he had bedroom eyes.

ELISE: What do you know about bedroom eyes? You better not know anything about bedroom eyes.

LANEY: Bedroom eyes are eyes that make you want to go to bed.

ELISE: Who would want to go to bed with a carp?

LANEY: Me!

ELISE: Elizabeth Lane Waters . . .

LANEY: Mom! I'm kidding. Geesh . . . I wouldn't go to bed with Mr. Caruthers. He's like forty.

ELISE: You better not go to bed with anyone.

LANEY: Mom, who would want to go to bed with me?

ELISE: Laney . . . baby . . .

(Elise pulls Laney toward her. Laney pulls away.)

ELISE: I'm not finished.

LANEY: That's enough.

ELISE: You said it helps.

LANEY: It doesn't help. The doctors said.

ELISE: It makes you feel better.

LANEY: But it doesn't help. Not really.

(Pause.)

ELISE: He hit on me once.

LANEY: Who?

ELISE: The carp. At a PTA meeting. When Peter first got sick.

LANEY: Gross.

ELISE: I thought you said he had bedroom eyes.

LANEY: A carp can't have bedroom eyes.

ELISE: No, you're right. A carp can't have bedroom eyes. You look tired, Laney.

LANEY: I'm not tired.

ELISE: Yes, you are. You have bedroom eyes. Eyes that want to go to bed.

LANEY: I have work to do.

ELISE: Homework?

LANEY: No, my work.

ELISE: You're fourteen. You don't have work that's not homework. Child labor laws.

LANEY: I have my writing.

ELISE: You've written enough for today.

LANEY: I have to fix the plot. You're the one who said I have to fix the ending, and so I have to stay up and fix it. It's your fault!

ELISE: You don't have to fix it tonight.

LANEY: Yes I do. You shouldn't be so picky if you want me to go to bed on time.

ELISE: It's time for bed.

LANEY: Why can't you just leave me alone?

ELISE: Oh, let me see . . . yes, that's right, I'm your mother.

LANEY: God, I hate you!

ELISE: Oh, go to hell, Laney. *(Pause.)* I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's a hard time for us. For me. Forgive me?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Forgive me tomorrow?

LANEY: Maybe. It has to be perfect. I'm going to show it somebody.

ELISE: Who?

LANEY: A girl at school. She likes my writing.

ELISE: You made a friend?

LANEY: Don't look so surprised.

SCENE 2

Earlier the same day. Outside the high school. Maribel sits on the stadium bleachers, finishing her lunch. Laney approaches her.)

LANEY: Hi.

MARIBEL: Hello.

LANEY: I didn't know we could eat out here.

MARIBEL: We're not supposed to.

LANEY: Oh.

MARIBEL: I just hate it in there.

LANEY: Me too.

MARIBEL: You could eat here.

LANEY: OK.

MARIBEL: The security guard comes out here sometimes. I just hide beneath the bleachers when I see him.

LANEY: You're a rebel.

MARIBEL: No. I'm just Maribel.

LANEY: Laney.

MARIBEL: You're new, aren't you?

LANEY: Yeah.

MARIBEL: Where'd you move from?

LANEY: Madison, Wisconsin. But my mom grew up here.

MARIBEL: I was new last year.

LANEY: Yeah? Where from?

MARIBEL: Nowhere. I mean, I didn't move. I used to be homeschooled by my mom, but she got in trouble because she never got registered as a home-school teacher or something, so now I go here.

LANEY: Oh.

MARIBEL: But I'm behind. I have to take some of my classes with freshmen. It's so embarrassing.

LANEY: You don't have any classes with me.

MARIBEL: You're probably in advanced classes. You look advanced.

LANEY: I'm not. I'm not advanced.

MARIBEL: You look advanced.

LANEY: I'm not.

MARIBEL: I wish I were advanced. But I'm remedial. Remedial is worse than being advanced. Remedial is like being retarded.

LANEY: No, it's not. It just means you need to catch up is all.

MARIBEL: You're nice.

LANEY: Thanks.

(Pause.)

MARIBEL: So, have you found a church yet?

LANEY: Church?

MARIBEL: Yeah.

LANEY: No. I don't go to church.

MARIBEL: So, you don't know about Jesus then?

LANEY: What about him?

MARIBEL: That he died for you. That he died for you to save you from sin?

LANEY: Oh, I don't believe in sin.

MARIBEL: Why not?

LANEY: I just don't.

MARIBEL: You're kinda funny looking with your back and all.

LANEY: Thanks.

MARIBEL: Anyone talk to you since you came to this school?

LANEY: The teachers. You.

MARIBEL: Any other students?

LANEY: No.

MARIBEL: See. That's sin.

LANEY: Whatever.

MARIBEL: Don't feel bad.

LANEY: I don't.

MARIBEL: I get sinned against all the time in this school — Deedee Cummings pulled down my pants in gym class today — but I don't mind, because I know that the things of this earth, they're not lasting. *(Pause.)* You think I'm a freak, don't you?

LANEY: No.

MARIBEL: Yes, you do. I can tell.

LANEY: Well, yeah. You're kinda freaky.

MARIBEL: I know it's kinda freaky to bring up Jesus when I've only just met you, but look at it this way: I mean, you could die tomorrow, you could die this afternoon — you know a car wreck or a heart attack or something—and at least, I would know that you didn't die not ever having heard of Jesus, and maybe, just maybe, because of this conversation, because I talked to you about Jesus, when those headlights are facing the passenger seat and you know you're about to meet your end, you'll remember Jesus and how much he loves you, and you'll ask him into your

heart right then and there before you die, and then you won't have to face everlasting hell.

LANEY: I don't believe in everlasting hell.

MARIBEL: But there has to be punishment for people who sin and sin and keep sinning. If there isn't everlasting hell, then Hitler and Stalin and Deedee Cummings will never get punished for what they did. All the people in this school who ignore you will never get punished either.

LANEY: That's one way of looking at it, I guess.

MARIBEL: Thank you. I think you're very pretty anyway. I mean, even with the hump and all.

LANEY: It's not a hump.

MARIBEL: What is it then?

LANEY: It's the muscles in my back. They're working against one another. It's called dystonia. Having a humpback is called kyphosis. I don't have kyphosis. I have dystonia. It's different. It's temporary. I'm glad I have it.

MARIBEL: You are?

LANEY: Yeah. I'm glad I have it, because it has shown me how shallow people are here. At my old school in Wisconsin, where I used to go before my dystonia got bad, I had lots of friends, in lots of different groups. I was going to be on the homecoming court. I mean, they hadn't had elections, but everyone told me I was going to be on it. Not that I really wanted to be on it. Homecoming court's kinda lame and all, but I would've been on it.

Here, nobody talks to me. But I haven't changed. My essential personality hasn't changed. So I know the reason they don't talk to me is because of my dystonia, and I'm glad I have it, because now I know how shallow people are. It's a good thing to know, don't you think?

MARIBEL: Yes, it is. You would have looked amazing on homecoming court, especially if you put your hair in a French twist. I could do it for you.

LANEY: Maybe later.

MARIBEL: I didn't mean now. I meant for when you get elected to the homecoming court. Next year when your back gets better and everyone realizes how pretty you are, and I'll lose all my baby fat and grow new skin. We'll be on the homecoming court together!

LANEY: Except we'll turn it down, because the homecoming court is lame.

MARIBEL: Completely!

(They laugh, a little tentatively still. Laney grimaces.)

MARIBEL: Does it hurt?

LANEY: Sometimes.

MARIBEL: Can I touch it?

LANEY: No!

MARIBEL: It's just . . . when someone's sick at church, we pray for them. We lay hands on them. It helps sometimes. Sometimes Jesus chooses to make them feel better. Sometimes he doesn't though.

LANEY: Why is that?

MARIBEL: I don't know. It's one of God's mysteries. Like my little brother, Gabriel. He was born with a cleft lip. No one knows why. It's one of God's mysteries. People used to gasp when they saw him. Does that happen to you?

LANEY: No.

MARIBEL: When Deedee Cummings pulled down my pants, the whole room gasped. Like they all took in one big gulp of air together. And then they laughed. Afterwards Melissa Jenkins put her arm around me, real nice like, like she was gonna take care of me, but when we got to the locker room, she handed me a razor and said I should use it to shave my pubes so I'd look better the next time.

LANEY: I meant to say, yes. I've had that happen. Not the pubes thing. But the gasping.

MARIBEL: Do you want to come to church with me on Friday?

LANEY: I don't know. What's it like?

MARIBEL: Well, there's a band. Piano, drums. Marcus Grayson used to play the guitar, but he doesn't come anymore.

LANEY: I know who he is. He's a junior. He has bedroom eyes.

MARIBEL: Yes, he does. But he doesn't come anymore, so now there's only the piano and the drums. My dad's the preacher.

LANEY: He is?

MARIBEL: Yeah, but he also sells cars, used cars like Hondas and Mitsubishis, because the church is small and can't afford to pay his whole salary. I was going to get a Mitsubishi for my sixteenth birthday, but then I couldn't because I failed the test. When the tape said to turn on the right blinker, I turned on the left. That's a stupid reason to fail a test, I know, I just got so nervous. What does your dad do?

LANEY: I don't have a dad.

MARIBEL: Is he dead?

LANEY: Yeah.

MARIBEL: Do you miss him?

LANEY: I don't want to talk about it, OK?

MARIBEL: Sure. But going to church, you know, it might help.

LANEY: OK. I'll go.

MARIBEL: Really?

LANEY: Sure.

(Maribel hugs Laney.)

LANEY: It's no big deal.

MARIBEL: No one in this entire school has ever agreed to go to church with me!

LANEY: Well, new experiences are good for my writing. That's why I said yes. Not because I need help.

MARIBEL: You're a writer?

LANEY: Yes.

MARIBEL: I've never met a writer.

LANEY: You want to read one of my stories? I wrote it during second period.

MARIBEL: OK.

(Laney takes a notebook out of her backpack.)

LANEY: It's a first draft, so it's not perfect or anything. You're the first person I've shown it to.

MARIBEL: Really?

LANEY: Yeah.

(Laney hands the open notebook to Maribel who reads the story silently. She looks up at Laney, eyes shining.)

MARIBEL: Wow. That's intense. You're the most talented person I've ever met.

(Laney grins.)

LANEY: Thanks.

MARIBEL: Can I tell you a secret?

LANEY: Yeah.

MARIBEL: You swear you won't tell anyone? Promise to God?

LANEY: Yeah, I promise.

MARIBEL: I think I have stigmata.

LANEY: You mean, like when you bleed from your hands and feet?

MARIBEL: No, not that kind. I read about stigmata on the Internet in the library, and I think I have the invisible kind, where you feel the pain in your hands but there's no blood.

LANEY: What pain?

MARIBEL: The pain of Jesus. The pain of the whole world.

LANEY: In your hands?

MARIBEL: Yeah.

LANEY: That's intense.

MARIBEL: It is.

LANEY: What does it feel like?

MARIBEL: It feels like my veins are about to pop, and they . . . *(Maribel looks down at the notebook.)* They "bulge beneath my skin like big blue worms, squirming just below the dirt."

(Laney squeals in delight; she can't help herself.)

MARIBEL: What?

LANEY: No one's ever quoted me before!

SCENE 3

Maribel and Laney sit in the living room.

MARIBEL: I wish you could spend the night Friday.

LANEY: Why'd she say no?

MARIBEL: Because she's a you-know-what.

LANEY: No, what?

MARIBEL: You know.

LANEY: No, I don't. What?

MARIBEL: You know what.

LANEY: No, I don't know what. What?

MARIBEL: Stop it!

(The girls burst into laughter. Elise enters with a bag of groceries, a carton of cigarettes poking up out of the bag.)

ELISE: You must be Maribel.

MARIBEL: Yes. Do you smoke?

ELISE: Yes.

MARIBEL: You shouldn't smoke.

ELISE: You shouldn't judge.

LANEY: Mom!

ELISE: Right. Sorry. I've taken up bad habits in my spare time. Biting my nails, tweezing the hairs on my legs one at a time, smoking. But you shouldn't smoke, or bite your nails, or tweeze the hairs on your legs one at a time. It may not give you lung cancer, but it definitely makes your legs red and blotchy, you know, like when you get razor burn down there . . .

LANEY: Mom!

ELISE: What? Am I an embarrassment?

LANEY: Mom's unemployed.

ELISE: It's making me a little nuts. Sorry.

MARIBEL: I forgive you.

ELISE: Thanks. What are you two up to?

LANEY: None of your business.

ELISE: Well, would you like a cocktail to go with that? Coke, Sprite, milk?

MARIBEL AND LANEY: Sprite.

(They burst out laughing.)

LANEY: We're synchronized.

MARIBEL: On the same brain plane.

ELISE: I see.

(Elise starts to exit for the kitchen.)

MARIBEL: Mrs. Waters . . .

ELISE: Elise. Call me Elise.

MARIBEL: Elise, have you ever asked Jesus into your heart?

ELISE: No.

MARIBEL: Do you want to?

ELISE: No.

(Elise exits.)

LANEY: You shouldn't bring that Jesus stuff up around my mom.

MARIBEL: I knew it wasn't the right moment, but I just thought, what if she had a heart attack or a stray bullet hit her while she was in the kitchen, and she died, and I never told her about Jesus, and then that would always be with me you know, that I had this opportunity and didn't use it.

LANEY: A stray bullet?

MARIBEL: I know. It's not likely, but there was a drive-by shooting here once.

LANEY: What do you mean here?

MARIBEL: Well, not right here. But nearby the college.

(Elise returns, gives cans of Sprite to the girls.)

ELISE: There you go.

LANEY: Maribel and me, we're going to the school dance on Friday. OK?

ELISE: Really?

LANEY: Yes.

ELISE: I thought you said you hated school dances, that they were humiliating drills in gender oppression.

LANEY: You said that. In Madison. I said the gym stinks too bad to want to dance in it.

ELISE: Right. Why the change of mind?

LANEY: Maribel wants to go, don't you Maribel?

MARIBEL: Uh-huh. I want to dance with boys.

ELISE: How old are you, Maribel?

MARIBEL: Sixteen.

ELISE: And you two have classes together?

MARIBEL: Oh no. Laney's too advanced to have classes with me.

LANEY: Maribel was homeschooled, but her mom never got certified, so she's behind. She's really smart about literature though. She's a great critic. The best.

ELISE: Oh. *(To Maribel.)* What books do you like?

MARIBEL: I like short stories.

ELISE: What short stories?

MARIBEL: Laney's.

ELISE: I see. So what do your parents do, Maribel?

MARIBEL: My dad's a preacher. Of the Church of the Redeemer. It's a holiness church, but we don't pick up snakes or drink poison, or any of that crazy stuff. Just full submersion baptism, prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues.

ELISE: Do you speak in tongues?

MARIBEL: No, I don't have that gift. Laney, we should pray and see if you have it though. Maybe you have the gift of tongues, and I could interpret, since we're on the same brain plane.

ELISE: Interpret?

MARIBEL: Yeah. When someone in the church speaks in tongues, sometimes another person interprets. Like when God has a message he wants someone in the church to hear.

My mom and dad were given a prophesy of my brother Gabriel having a cleft lip. God gave the message to Mom in tongues, and then sister Rebecca interpreted. She said, "Be comforted in your deformity." And then Gabriel was born with a cleft lip.

ELISE: Seems kind of vague. We all have deformities. Emotional ones at least.

LANEY: Mom, I don't think God meant it as a metaphor.

ELISE: How do you know what God meant?

LANEY: How do you know? You don't even believe in God.

ELISE: Neither do you, young lady!

LANEY: Maybe I do.

ELISE: Oh really?

LANEY: Well, I believe in sin, I believe in that much.

ELISE: You believe in sin?

LANEY: Yes. Hurting people, ignoring people, *divorcing people.* That's sin.

ELISE: Watch it, Laney.

MARIBEL: Sin is what keeps us from God.

ELISE: No, rationality is what keeps us from God. Seeing the world as it really is keeps us from buying into a patriarchal mythology that has kept women oppressed for centuries.

LANEY: Mom!

ELISE: What? Aren't I allowed to express my opinions?

LANEY: No!

MARIBEL: What do you mean?

LANEY: What?

MARIBEL: *(To Elise.)* What you just said.

ELISE: It means, honey, that religion has been used to keep women from pursuing their full potential.

MARIBEL: I don't feel that way.

ELISE: Well, you don't right now. But trust me, you don't want to find yourself having to obey some backwards Bible thumper who will only let you out of the house to go to church and to pick up a box of diapers at the Piggly Wiggly.

MARIBEL: I don't plan on getting married.

ELISE: Well, then the only choice you have is to live a life of celibacy, which trust me, is no fun. People need to have sex.

LANEY: Mom!

ELISE: What? I just think Maribel should seriously consider her options before she makes up her mind completely.

LANEY: She didn't ask for your opinion.

ELISE: Do you want my opinion, Maribel?

MARIBEL: Yes.

ELISE: See? Laney never wants my opinion about anything. She thinks I'm too critical.

LANEY: Maribel just said that to be nice, didn't you Maribel?

ELISE: Did you? Were you just being nice?

MARIBEL: I don't know.

ELISE: It's OK, honey. Just don't believe everything your daddy says in the pulpit. And don't believe everything Laney says either, for that matter.

LANEY: Get out of here!

ELISE: I'm going. You two have fun. But I'm keeping my ear to the door. Absolutely no speaking in tongues.

LANEY: Get out!!!

ELISE: I mean it.

(Elise exits.)

MARIBEL: I don't want to get married, because I plan on giving my life to God entirely. But I wish I could have sex. I'm still a virgin. I've been fingered once, but you can be fingered and still be a virgin.

LANEY: Maribel . . . just shut up for a minute OK!

MARIBEL: Why? What'd I say?

LANEY: It's just . . . maybe you shouldn't talk so much. You sound stupid sometimes.

MARIBEL: I'm not. I'm not stupid.

LANEY: I know you're not. But sometimes that's how you sound.

(Maribel, clearly distressed, starts rubbing her palm.)

LANEY: What's wrong? Are you like going to cry?

MARIBEL: No, no I'm not. *(Pause.)* I'm gonna wait outside for my Mom. She'll be here soon.

LANEY: You want me to wait with you?

MARIBEL: No.

LANEY: OK. I'll call you tonight.

MARIBEL: If you want.

LANEY: I do. I do want to.

MARIBEL: OK. Bye.

LANEY: Bye.

SCENE 4

Laney reads the following story to the audience. Elise sits in the living room behind her. She cannot hear Laney.

LANEY: Veronica's young life was marked by one constant thing: the cruelty of her mother . . . Eliza, who having stolen Veronica from her father when she was a baby, now forced her to clean every floor in the house until it shone like aluminum foil. The only escape Veronica had from Eliza was when she rode her bike as far away from the house as she could, the cool September air filling her lungs full to capacity, just like she had filled the tires in her bike full to capacity with her bike pump. One day, Eliza found the kitchen floors not to her liking, and so she confiscated Veronica's bike and gave it to the Salvation Army. (Eliza liked to keep up the pretense of being a good person to the outside world.) This was the last straw for Veronica, who decided she could stand it no more. So in the middle of the night, she snuck into Eliza's room, stuck her bike pump

into Eliza's belly button, and filled her so full of air, she exploded, her bits and pieces decorating the walls.

The End.

(Laney turns to Elise and stares at her triumphantly. Elise looks up at Laney questioningly, wearily.)

SCENE 5

Laney and Maribel sit in the church choir loft. It is dark. Maribel hands a flashlight to Laney. They turn on the flashlights.

LANEY: I like the sanctuary like this. Empty.

MARIBEL: You said you liked the service.

LANEY: I did. I just like it better like this. Quiet.

MARIBEL: You said you wanted to convert. If you convert, you have to go to service.

LANEY: I know.

MARIBEL: You could have converted during the service.

LANEY: I didn't want to convert during the service. I want to convert with you. Alone. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?

MARIBEL: No.

LANEY: I like your mom.

MARIBEL: Why?

LANEY: She's quiet. My mom's never quiet. I'm still not talking to her. She's so embarrassing, God . . .

MARIBEL: You can't do that.

LANEY: What?

MARIBEL: Take the Lord's name in vain like that. If you're going to convert, you have to stop doing that.

LANEY: OK.

MARIBEL: Are you ready?

LANEY: We should eat first. I brought some cake from the potluck.

MARIBEL: We can't eat in here.

LANEY: Come on. It's a special occasion. I'm gonna get saved, right?

MARIBEL: Yes.

(Laney hands Maribel a piece of cake. They eat.)

MARIBEL: I told my parents we were playing flashlight tag with the youth group. The youth group always plays flashlight tag on Friday nights.

LANEY: Why couldn't you just say we'd be here?

MARIBEL: We're not supposed to be here.

LANEY: Why not? I'm converting, right? They want me to convert, don't they?

MARIBEL: Well you're not supposed to sneak into the sanctuary to convert. You're supposed to convert during the service, walk to the front of the church while everybody sings, "Just as I am."

LANEY: I like this way better.

MARIBEL: Me too. *(Pause.)* The adults, they all think flashlight tag is a godly kind of fun. But it's not. I got fingered playing flashlight tag.

LANEY: How'd that happen?

MARIBEL: The whole point of playing flashlight tag is so you can hang out in the dark woods with boys. One night, I was wearing a skirt, and Marcus Grayson told me to come hide with him in this dry creek bed, and while we were crouching there, I felt his fingers all of a sudden walking up my leg. I didn't move. But they kept walking up my thigh, until he fingered me.

LANEY: Did it hurt?

MARIBEL: No, it didn't hurt. It felt good. Kinda. I just wish he had kissed me is all. I've never been kissed. Have you?

LANEY: Sure. I kissed a boy at my school in Wisconsin. Quentin Compson. We kissed in the library after school. We frenched. And then we got interrupted by Mr. Caruthers.

MARIBEL: Who's that?

LANEY: The librarian. He was cool though. We didn't get in trouble or anything. Mr. Caruthers just sent us outside.

MARIBEL: Have you ever been fingered?

LANEY: No.

MARIBEL: Well, if you want to get fingered, we can go play flashlight tag. Marcus Grayson isn't here, but Henry Bowen is, and he tries to finger everyone. He'd try to finger you, even though you got, you know, a hump.

LANEY: It's not a hump. I think it's slutty to be fingered.

MARIBEL: It's not like having sex. You can be fingered and still be a virgin.

LANEY: It's still slutty. Especially if the person doesn't kiss you.

MARIBEL: The next time I tried to hide with Marcus I followed him through the woods, but he kept zigzagging back and forth through the trees. When I finally caught up with him and tried to hold his hand, he said, "Get away from me, you big fat cow." I laid down on the ground in the woods and got stigmata.

LANEY: I don't really think you're slutty. Marcus Grayson is an asswad.

MARIBEL: *(Giggling.)* You can't say that here.
LANEY: What?
MARIBEL: You can't cuss.
LANEY: I didn't cuss. I just said asswad.
MARIBEL: You said it again.
LANEY: You mean asswad?
MARIBEL: *(Laughing even harder.)* Laney, I'm serious.
LANEY: Don't be such a tightass.
MARIBEL: Laney!
LANEY: Asswad, tight ass, asshole, asinine.
MARIBEL: Stop it!
LANEY: Asinine is not a cuss word.
MARIBEL: It's not funny.
LANEY: Then why are you laughing?
MARIBEL: Because you're not being serious.
LANEY: I'm as serious as a cereal box.

(The laughing subsides. They both calm down a little.)

MARIBEL: Are you ready now?
LANEY: I guess.
MARIBEL: You have to be sure. It doesn't count if you're not sure.
LANEY: I'm sure. What do I have to do?
MARIBEL: First you have to confess your sin.
LANEY: OK. I confess my sin.
MARIBEL: No, you have to be specific. List all your sins.
LANEY: Aloud?
MARIBEL: Yeah. It's the first step in getting saved.
LANEY: Give me an example.
MARIBEL: OK. Dear Jesus, please forgive me for allowing Marcus Grayson to finger me. 'Cause even though being fingered isn't as bad as having sex, it's still a sin.
LANEY: But I've never been fingered.
MARIBEL: Well, you just have to list your other sins.
LANEY: OK. Like what?
MARIBEL: Like drunkenness and sloth and greed. Holding other idols before God. Stealing. Murder. Cussing.
LANEY: Dear Jesus, please forgive me for saying ass.

(They both start giggling.)

MARIBEL: You're not supposed to laugh.
LANEY: I'm sorry. It's just funny. The word, ass.

MARIBEL: Do you want Jesus to come into your heart or not?

LANEY: I guess. What's it feel like? When Jesus comes into your heart?

MARIBEL: It feels . . . it feels like even if nobody ever speaks to you, or hears you, or even touches you ever again, it doesn't matter, because everything's OK. All the pain you feel, it just goes away and everything's OK. Someone sees me and hears me and knows everywhere that I hurt. And he just takes all that pain on himself, so I don't have to feel it anymore. So I'm whole. So I'm healed.

LANEY: I'd like that. To be healed.

MARIBEL: You want me to help you confess?

LANEY: OK.

MARIBEL: Close your eyes and repeat after me. Dear Jesus . . .

LANEY: Dear Jesus . . .

MARIBEL: Please forgive me for my sins.

LANEY: Please forgive me for my sins.

MARIBEL: For using your name in vain . . .

LANEY: For using your name in vain . . .

MARIBEL: And for ignoring you for fourteen years . . .

LANEY: And for ignoring you for fourteen years . . .

MARIBEL: For my lustful thoughts and hurtful deeds . . .

LANEY: For my lustful thoughts and hurtful deeds . . .

MARIBEL: I ask forgiveness.

LANEY: I ask forgiveness.

MARIBEL: You say that if we confess with our mouths that you are God, and if we believe in our hearts that you were raised from the dead, then we will be saved. Elizabeth Lane Waters, do you confess?

LANEY: I confess.

MARIBEL: Do you believe?

LANEY: I believe.

MARIBEL: Now ask Jesus to come into your heart.

LANEY: Come into my heart Jesus!

(Pause.)

MARIBEL: What do you feel?

(Pause.)

LANEY: Nothing. I feel nothing. It didn't work.

MARIBEL: You have to mean it.

LANEY: I meant it!

MARIBEL: You have to really mean it.

LANEY: I really meant it.

MARIBEL: If you really meant it, it would work.

LANEY: It didn't. I really meant it, and it didn't work.

MARIBEL: That's not possible. Let's do it again.

LANEY: I'm not doing it again. I asked Jesus into my heart, and he didn't enter.

MARIBEL: Jesus doesn't say no!

LANEY: He did to me.

MARIBEL: Laney, we have to try again.

LANEY: I'm not trying again. You can't make me try again.

MARIBEL: But I don't want you to go to hell.

LANEY: I don't believe in hell.

MARIBEL: I don't want you to go to hell, because you're the only friend I've ever had.

LANEY: You don't need friends. You have Jesus.

MARIBEL: I need you. I love you, Laney.

LANEY: You do?

MARIBEL: Yes. Let me pray for you. If you won't try again, let me pray for you, OK?

(Laney nods. Maribel grabs Laney's hand, closes her eyes and prays for her fervently.)

MARIBEL: Dear Jesus, it's Maribel. Maribel and my friend Laney. I ask that you forgive me of my sins, for thinking so much about Marcus Grayson and being fingered. I pray that you forgive me for wanting to kill Melissa Jenkins and Deedee Cummings. I pray that you'll help me to forgive them. Forgive me for the hatred in my heart. But most of all, I ask that you forgive me for not being a better witness to Laney, because if I had been a better witness, I know she would have felt you, because I know you never say no to anybody, and if Laney thought you said no, it must be because I did something wrong. I pray that you enter Laney's heart, dear Jesus, so she won't have to suffer everlasting hell, because Lord, she is so beautiful and full of gifts, like her writing, and I know you'll want to keep her near you always. Lord, I know you have mysterious ways, and I can't know your every hair the way you know my every hair, but I know you don't say no. So Lord, I'm asking that you forgive me, forgive me, not for myself, but so Laney might be healed by you too. Amen.

(Maribel opens her eyes, glistening. She looks at Laney.)

(Silence. It's electric. Slowly, Maribel smiles.)

MARIBEL: Do you feel that?

LANEY: Yes.

MARIBEL: Do you know what it is?

(Laney shakes her head.)

MARIBEL: It's the holy ghost.

(Laney leans in and kisses Maribel on the mouth. It is sweet and gentle and a beat too long.)

SCENE 6

The living room. Elise is up, waiting for Laney. She has a glass of wine, and the bottle sits beside the chair. When she hears Laney enter, she hides the bottle.

ELISE: How was it?

LANEY: Fine.

ELISE: Did you dance?

LANEY: Some.

ELISE: Really? Who with?

LANEY: Maribel.

ELISE: Did you take your medicine?

LANEY: God . . . I'm not a baby.

ELISE: I know. You want some hot chocolate? I could make some hot chocolate. Not the crap-packaged kind. The from-scratch kind. With marshmallows. And a peppermint stick.

LANEY: I'm not hungry.

ELISE: Sit down.

LANEY: I'm not talking to you.

ELISE: I've noticed. But you can sit down, can't you? Sit with me and not talk. We can sit in silence. With chocolate and marshmallows and peppermint goodness and your favorite movie of all time: *The Bicycle Thief.*

LANEY: That's not my favorite movie of all time. That's your favorite movie of all time.

ELISE: That's right. You prefer *The Goonies.*

LANEY: I do not.

ELISE: You love *The Goonies.*

LANEY: Do not.

ELISE: You used to love *The Goonies.* What do you love now? What does my beautiful grown-up girl love now?

LANEY: Being left alone.

ELISE: I don't believe you.

LANEY: Why did you have to attack Maribel like that?

ELISE: I didn't attack her.

LANEY: You did so. You insulted her religion.

ELISE: I expressed an opinion. I'm sorry if it embarrassed you. *(Pause.)* Do you want to talk about your dad?

LANEY: No! God . . .

ELISE: I think you're upset about your dad. I think that's why things have been rough between us. I think Gregory Peck is turning out to be a sorry stepfather.

LANEY: I hate it when you do that!

ELISE: What?

LANEY: Make jokes like that. It's not funny.

ELISE: I joke, therefore, I cope.

LANEY: God . . .

ELISE: Laney, you're so old. How did you get to be so old?

LANEY: Have you been drinking? Are you drunk?

ELISE: Not drunk. Buzzed. I'm not a drunkard. I'm a buzzard.

LANEY: I'm going to my room.

ELISE: I got a job. That's why I'm having a glass, a bottle, of wine. To celebrate.

LANEY: You got a job?

ELISE: I did. I'm a busy, buzzard of a bee. I got a job.

LANEY: That's great, Mom. You need a job. You're crazy without a job, you know.

ELISE: You're looking at the new office manager, that's right, office manager, not administrative assistant, for Jerry L. Startler, Esq. He's a torts lawyer. Ambulance chaser. He wore a seersucker suit. My father wore a seersucker suit. I think that's why I said yes. It's a horrible job.

LANEY: You don't know. You haven't started yet. Maybe he'll let you make lists.

ELISE: Right. Ways to find clients: One, bribe ambulance drivers. Two, stake out the chiropractor's office. Three, go under cover as an EMT.

LANEY: You could go back to social work.

ELISE: No more social work. This is the beginning of my new life. No more social work. Jerry L. Startler, Esq. pays better than social work. And he seemed grateful that I took the job, even though he's a torts lawyer. That's the secret ill of social work, Laney. The people you try to help, they aren't grateful. They're suspicious and mostly crazy. Poor people are not saints. They're just poor and stupid and often crazy. Rich people are often stupid and crazy too, but they're rich. So all things being equal, I'll take the rich and stupid over the poor and stupid, because the rich, they can pay, and I'm in a place in life where I want to get paid.

LANEY: That's great, Mom.

ELISE: But after I said yes, and Jerry L. Startler, Esq. shook my hand, oozing gratitude, I got into my car and cried. I just sat there and cried, 'cause now I'm the kind of person who wants to get paid. Isn't life grand?

LANEY: I guess.

ELISE: Laney, stay and sit with me, cuddle with me. I can't take your petulant teenage thing tonight. Stay and be my little girl. I need my little girl, my Flopsy. I have nobody else in the whole wide world. Stay.

(Laney sits next to Elise. Elise cuddles her.)

ELISE: Are you my Flopsy?

LANEY: Yes.

ELISE: And who am I?

LANEY: Mom . . .

ELISE: I'm your Mopsy. *(Pause.)* Who do you love?

LANEY: You know.

ELISE: Tell me. Tell me who you love.

LANEY: I love you, Mom.

ELISE: That's right. My little girl loves me, and I don't need anything else? Do I? Do I?

LANEY: No.

(Elise sits up and starts to massage Laney's neck.)

ELISE: And I'm going to start being less embarrassing. I am. Starting now, I am going to be the most unembarrassing Mom ever. Your friends will always be welcome here, even the crazy religious kind. I'll bite my tongue, when they evangelize, I promise. I'll chalk it up to the hazard of moving South again. Even though I hate it. I'll bite my tongue, OK?

LANEY: OK. *(Pause.)* If I tell you something, will you promise not to get mad?

ELISE: What is it?

LANEY: Promise you won't get mad.

ELISE: Promise I won't get mad.

LANEY: It's two things really.

ELISE: You can tell me anything.

LANEY: I'm a lesbian.

(Elise stops massaging Laney's neck.)

ELISE: Really? Since when?

LANEY: Since tonight. And I've been saved. I'm a holiness lesbian.

ELISE: A holiness lesbian?

LANEY: Yes. I believe in the power of the holy ghost, and I kiss girls. And I

didn't go to the dance, so I guess that makes three things you can't get mad about.

ELISE: You didn't go to the dance?

LANEY: No. I went to church with Maribel. And then I got saved. And then we kissed.

ELISE: You kissed Maribel?

LANEY: On the mouth.

ELISE: Laney . . .

LANEY: You promised you wouldn't get mad.

ELISE: I'm not mad. I'm sober. Suddenly, I'm sober.

LANEY: And I'm glad that I'm a holiness lesbian. I'm proud. If there were a holiness lesbian march, I'd march. It's a good thing.

ELISE: I didn't say it wasn't.

LANEY: But you wouldn't march, would you? You wouldn't march to support my lifestyle.

ELISE: Lifestyle? You have a lifestyle now? Where do you hear these things?

LANEY: I don't hear them anywhere. It's who I am.

ELISE: Laney, one evening is not a lifestyle.

LANEY: Don't try to make this not a big deal. It's a very big deal.

ELISE: Yes, it is a big deal, Laney. And I'm just trying to deal with it, so don't put on the dramatics. Come back to earth for a little while. I'm not oppressing you, I'm just taking it all in.

LANEY: Are you going to disown me?

ELISE: Laney, of course not. Be realistic.

LANEY: Don't say that! I hate it when you say that!

ELISE: Calm down. Look, if you're a lesbian, I'm fine with that. And if you want to join the Holiness Church of the Redeemer, then I'm fine with that too, although admittedly less so. But I also think you're a little confused, because the pastor of the Holiness Church of the Redeemer is probably not going to be too happy about you kissing his daughter.

LANEY: She kissed me too.

ELISE: Fine. Whatever. I just think you need to give yourself a little more time before you start making all these declarations, because you see, the Holiness Church of the Redeemer is not going to receive a fourteen-year-old, self-declared lesbian with open arms.

LANEY: I'm not self-declared. I just am. I'm a holiness lesbian and nothing is ever going to change that.

ELISE: Fine. You're a holiness lesbian.

LANEY: I admit, I might meet some resistance, some prejudice. Maybe I'll get thrown out of the church, and Maribel and me will have to move to another town. But when my memoirs are published, other fourteen-year-old holiness lesbians will read them and won't feel so alone.

ELISE: Your memoirs?

LANEY: Yes. My memoirs.

ELISE: Laney, I know you love a good story. And this, it's a good story. But are you sure it's you? Because if it's not you, then you're most likely going to hurt someone.

LANEY: I'm going to put that in my memoirs. I'm going to tell the world that you said that, that you're an unsupportive mother!

ELISE: Go ahead, blame me for everything. That's what I'm here for, to feed your fourteen-year-old delusions. That's what this is, Laney. It's a delusion, and you know, you just can't afford to have delusions, because they run in the family.

LANEY: Why do you hate me?

ELISE: Laney, I have never given you any reason to think I hate you. You mean more to me than anything in the world. You know that.

LANEY: Yes. *(Pause.)* Why do you hate Maribel?

ELISE: Because she's poor and stupid. And a little bit crazy. And because frankly, she's not good enough for you. Not nearly.

SCENE 7

Maribel, Laney, and Elise have just finished eating dinner. An empty pizza box sits on the floor. Elise is drinking a glass of wine, the bottle beside her.

MARIBEL: My mom won't let us order pizza.

ELISE: No?

MARIBEL: She won't let us eat fast food.

ELISE: Pizza isn't fast. They always say it will be a half hour, but it always takes forty-five minutes.

MARIBEL: My mom cooks every night. You don't cook every night.

ELISE: No.

MARIBEL: Don't you like to cook?

ELISE: No, I have never liked to cook.

MARIBEL: Did you cook for Laney's dad?

ELISE: No. It's one of the benefits of being a heathen, you don't have to cook for your husband.

LANEY: Mom!

ELISE: Peter did the cooking, before he . . .

LANEY: You look very pretty tonight, Maribel. With your hair pulled back like that. It's very silky and pretty.

MARIBEL: Thank you. *(To Elise.)* You grew up here, right?

ELISE: That's right. This was my father's house. He was a literature professor at the university.

MARIBEL: He wrote short stories like Laney?

ELISE: No, he wrote long books about short stories.

LANEY: Would you like some more Sprite, Maribel? I'd be happy to get you another one.

MARIBEL: OK.

(Laney awkwardly kisses Maribel on the cheek. Maribel is unaware and unresponsive. Elise notices. Laney exits.)

MARIBEL: What did Laney's dad do?

ELISE: Peter? Peter was a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin.

MARIBEL: What's that?

ELISE: Well, a sociologist is someone who studies sociology, you know, the study of how people interact with one another. How they behave in groups, how social institutions operate, that kind of thing.

(Laney enters with the Sprite.)

MARIBEL: Did you have sex before you got married?

LANEY: Gross! You can't ask my mom about sex.

MARIBEL: Why not? My mom won't ever talk about sex. She didn't even tell me what a period was. I thought I had sat on a razor in the bathtub or something. I couldn't figure out why I was bleeding. I bet Elise told you all about periods when you got yours.

ELISE: Laney hasn't . . .

(Laney silences Elise with a look.)

ELISE: I told Laney about periods long before she ever got one.

LANEY: Can we please talk about something else?

ELISE: I don't know why you're so embarrassed. We're all women here.

MARIBEL: Even though you don't know Jesus, Elise, you're much nicer than my mom.

ELISE: Well, thank you, Maribel, I think. You girls can ask me anything, you know. I'm not embarrassed.

MARIBEL: Is it true that you can't use tampons until you get married?

ELISE: What?

MARIBEL: Sister Rebecca told me that unmarried girls have to use pads. She said you can't use Tampons until you're married.

ELISE: No. That's absolutely false. Using Tampons has nothing to do with getting married. It just has to do with comfort and bathing suits.

MARIBEL: Did you have sex before you got married?

ELISE: Yes.

MARIBEL: What did it feel like?

LANEY: I thought you weren't ever going to have sex.

MARIBEL: I'm not. But since I'm never going to experience it, I want to know what it's like.

ELISE: OK. I'm going to tell you girls the truth about sex, something that no other mother in the whole state of Mississippi will ever tell you. One . . .

LANEY: Not a list . . .

ELISE: Yes, a list. A sex list. One, don't expect your partner to know how your body works. Learn how your body works yourself and teach your partner if necessary.

LANEY: You said you were going to stop being embarrassing!

ELISE: I lied. Two, sex feels really good when it's with someone you're not supposed to do it with. It feels great.

MARIBEL: Really?

ELISE: Yes. Three, that kind of sex feels great. But sex feels most amazing after about ten years of being with someone. When you've gotten over that first phase of bliss, and you've gotten through the onset of disillusionment, and you're finally in this groove of accepting the body beside you for all its flaws, and you've stopped trying to shape it, or bend it to your will, or even looking to it to get you off. When you're just lying there and can accept the body beside you for merely being there beside you, that's when sex can creep up on you and be more wonderful than you ever thought.

MARIBEL: You're thinking about Laney's dad, aren't you?

ELISE: God, yes.

(Pause. Laney's very uncomfortable in this territory. She picks up the pizza box.)

LANEY: I'll take this out.

(Laney exits. Elise calls after her.)

ELISE: You don't have to.

(Pause. Maribel and Elise are alone.)

MARIBEL: Can I tell you a secret?

ELISE: Sure, honey.

MARIBEL: I have stigmata.

ELISE: What?

MARIBEL: I have stigmata. But not the kind where you bleed from your hands and feet. The invisible kind.

ELISE: The invisible kind?

MARIBEL: Yes. Sometimes I get this pain underneath my skin, and my veins feel like they're going to pop if I don't do something!

ELISE: And what do you do when this happens?

MARIBEL: I pray.

ELISE: Right. I see. *(Pause.)* You know, it's not uncommon for teenage girls to feel that way.

MARIBEL: To have stigmata?

ELISE: No, not stigmata. But to feel a kind of invisible pain, you know . . . a physical manifestation of emotional distress. Sometimes girls hurt themselves, cut themselves, to make the pain visible. Have you ever wanted to do that?

MARIBEL: I don't have that. I have stigmata.

ELISE: Well, you think you have stigmata.

MARIBEL: No, I have it.

ELISE: OK. You have it. But you know, you could talk to someone at school. Maybe a guidance counselor?

MARIBEL: About my stigmata?

ELISE: Right. *(Pause.)* Well, you can talk to me. If you get another case of . . . stigmata, you could call me.

MARIBEL: Why?

ELISE: Just to check in. Let me know you're OK.

MARIBEL: OK!

ELISE: Fine.

(Laney returns.)

LANEY: What are you talking about?

(Pause.)

ELISE: Secrets. Sex secrets.

LANEY: Tell me!

ELISE: I thought you didn't want me to talk about sex.

LANEY: I don't. Because I'm not ever going to have sex. Not with a man.

ELISE: Can I hold you to that?

LANEY: I'm not.

ELISE: We'll see.

MARIBEL: At least Laney's kissed a boy. I've never even done that.

ELISE: What boy did Laney kiss?

LANEY: It's not important.

MARIBEL: She kissed a boy named Quentin Compson. At her school in Wisconsin. She told me.

ELISE: Quentin Compson?

MARIBEL: Yes!

ELISE: Laney!

LANEY: What?

ELISE: You told Maribel you kissed Quentin Compson?

LANEY: So?

ELISE: Why not David Copperfield? Why not Huck Finn?

MARIBEL: I don't get it.

ELISE: Come on, Laney, 'fess up.

LANEY: I don't know what you're talking about.

ELISE: Maribel, Quentin Compson is a character in *The Sound and the Fury,* a novel by William Faulkner. Laney's never kissed a boy.

MARIBEL: Oh. Why did you say . . . ?

LANEY: There was a boy named Quentin Compson in Madison. His parents named him after Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury.*

ELISE: Laney!

LANEY: What?

ELISE: Just 'fess up.

LANEY: You don't know everything I do.

ELISE: But Quentin Compson is a fictional character.

LANEY: I just told you, Quentin in Madison was named after the Faulkner character.

ELISE: But there was no Quentin Compson in Madison!

LANEY: You don't know the name of every boy in Madison.

ELISE: I know that people in Wisconsin do not name their children after characters from Faulkner.

LANEY: Fine, don't believe me.

ELISE: Good, 'cause I don't.

(Pause.)

MARIBEL: I failed my driver's test. When the man said to turn on the right blinker I turned on the left. It was so stupid of me.

LANEY: You've told me that story.

MARIBEL: I was telling Elise.

ELISE: That's too bad, honey. I'm sure you can take it again.

MARIBEL: My dad says I have to wait another year. Keep practicing and all.

He sells Mitsubishis but he doesn't make much money off of it, because he doesn't like to fool poor people. He says Jesus wouldn't fool a poor man into overpaying for a Mitsubishi.

ELISE: No, I guess he wouldn't.

MARIBEL: I guess a sociologist wouldn't fool a poor man into overpaying for a Mitsubishi either.

ELISE: Well, Peter wouldn't at least.

MARIBEL: Do you mind talking about him?

ELISE: No. It's fine.

MARIBEL: When did he die?

ELISE: Who?

MARIBEL: Laney's dad.

ELISE: Laney's dad is not dead. Laney, did you tell Maribel that your father was dead?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: He's not dead.

LANEY: I know.

ELISE: Why did you think he was, Maribel?

MARIBEL: I don't know.

ELISE: Did Laney tell you that?

MARIBEL: I think so. I don't know.

ELISE: Laney?

LANEY: I didn't tell her that. She assumed he was dead, and I let her. I didn't lie.

ELISE: Peter is not dead. He's severely mentally ill. You hear me, Laney?

LANEY: I know! It's not like I don't know that.

ELISE: He's institutionalized. He's not dead.

MARIBEL: Oh.

(Pause.)

ELISE: Maribel, I think it's time I took you home.

LANEY: But we were gonna watch movies!

ELISE: Not anymore. You can watch movies another time.

LANEY: But you said!

ELISE: I changed my mind.

LANEY: You can't just change your mind.

ELISE: Yes, I can. Get your things together, Maribel. I'm going to get my keys, and then we're taking you home.

LANEY: Why do you have to always ruin everything!

(Elise exits.)

LANEY: God! I hate her!

MARIBEL: Did you kiss Quentin Compson?

LANEY: Yes! God, she doesn't know everything. *(Pause.)* I don't want you to go.

MARIBEL: It's OK.

LANEY: I mean it.

(Laney puts her hand on Maribel's knee. Maribel stands up quickly.)

MARIBEL: I want to go. I don't feel so good.

LANEY: At least let me give you something first.

MARIBEL: What is it?

(Laney takes a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and hands it to Maribel.)

LANEY: It's a story for you. I'm dedicating it to you.

SCENE 8

Laney reads the following story to the audience. Maribel sits on the stadium bleachers, reading the story.

LANEY: It is a sunny day in June. She wears a yellow dress and sits in a field dotted with dandelions, as white and full as cotton swabs. She picks the flowers and blows on them one by one, beheading them with her sweet breath. Sometimes the wind takes the feathery petals away, but sometimes it brings them back, so her silky brown hair is littered with white, like snowflakes. Like dandruff. I sit beside this girl, watching her behead the dandelions one by one, and as the sun sinks into the sky and fireflies come out for the night, I slowly walk my fingers up her creamy, white thigh.

SCENE 9

Laney approaches Maribel sitting on the bleachers.

LANEY: Hey.

MARIBEL: Hi.

LANEY: I tried calling you yesterday. Did you get my message?

MARIBEL: Uh-huh.

LANEY: I thought you were going to take me to church.

MARIBEL: My mom didn't feel like driving out to get you.

LANEY: Why didn't you call and tell me?

MARIBEL: I did. Your phone was busy.

LANEY: Maybe we were trying to call one another at the same time. You know, synchronized.

MARIBEL: I figured Elise could take you, if you really wanted to come.

LANEY: I did want to come.

MARIBEL: Why didn't you then?

LANEY: I wanted to go with you. Look, I'm sorry I lied about my dad. You want my dessert?

MARIBEL: No. I'm full.

LANEY: Well, will you at least look at me?

(Maribel turns around.)

MARIBEL: Sometimes Satan tricks me.

LANEY: What?

MARIBEL: When I was little, I tried to baptize Gabriel in the bathtub. I wanted to make sure he was saved, even though he was just a baby, so I ran the water in the bathtub, got Gabriel out of his crib and baptized him. He almost drowned, but my mom came in and pulled him out. Then she laid her hands on me and said, "Satan, I bind you from my daughter, Maribel. Satan, I cast thee out!"

LANEY: Why?

MARIBEL: Because Satan was tricking me. Made me think I wanted to baptize Gabriel, just so's he could drown.

LANEY: I don't believe in Satan.

MARIBEL: You're saved now. You have to believe in Satan.

LANEY: No. I just believe in Jesus.

MARIBEL: I think Satan still tricks me sometimes, confuses me into thinking something's good, when it's really bad.

LANEY: Like what?

MARIBEL: Like you. Converting you. I think I did it wrong.

LANEY: Why?

MARIBEL: Because you're acting funny.

LANEY: How so?

MARIBEL: Your story.

LANEY: You didn't like it?

MARIBEL: No.

LANEY: What didn't you like about it?

MARIBEL: You know.

LANEY: It's a made-up story. It doesn't mean anything. It's fiction. You know what fiction is, right?

MARIBEL: Yes.

LANEY: That's all it is. It doesn't have anything to do with my conversion.

MARIBEL: You didn't write like that before.

LANEY: I was just trying to write in a different genre. You know what a genre is, don't you?

MARIBEL: Uh-huh.

LANEY: What? What is it?

MARIBEL: You know.

LANEY: Yes, I do. I was just trying to write something different. A romance. My earlier stuff was realism. I wanted to try a romance this time. I didn't mean to freak you out.

MARIBEL: I didn't freak out.

LANEY: You weren't supposed to take it so realistically. Romance is not realistic.

MARIBEL: Oh.

LANEY: That's OK. I forgive you. I know you don't know all that much about writing. Like you don't know about genres and metaphors and stuff cause you're in remedial classes, so it's understandable that you wouldn't get it.

MARIBEL: I got it.

LANEY: No, you didn't.

MARIBEL: I'm not stupid. I got it. The girl in the field with the silky brown hair. That's my hair.

LANEY: So?

MARIBEL: So, that story was about me.

LANEY: It wasn't about you. It was inspired by you.

MARIBEL: I don't want to inspire your romance.

LANEY: You and Marcus Grayson.

MARIBEL: Marcus?

LANEY: Yeah. He was the narrator.

MARIBEL: The narrator?

LANEY: Yeah, you know, the person describing the girl in the field. It was inspired by you and Marcus. You know, the story of how he fingered you. But it's not the real story. It's romance.

MARIBEL: But you said I.

LANEY: So?

MARIBEL: You said, I walk my fingers . . . you know.

LANEY: So?

MARIBEL: So, I is you.

LANEY: No, it's not. I is the narrator. I is a made-up person. In this case, I is a made-up person inspired by Marcus Grayson. I guess I could see how it might bother you. But nobody knows it was inspired by you and Marcus, and it's not like I can control what inspires me.

MARIBEL: That story was about me . . . and Marcus?

LANEY: Yeah. You know the thing that happened in the woods. But also, I saw him looking at you.

MARIBEL: You did?

LANEY: Yeah, he was looking at you, all admiringly. With longing in his eyes.

MARIBEL: He was?

LANEY: Yeah. I saw it.

MARIBEL: When?

LANEY: On Friday. After school, when we were waiting for the buses.

MARIBEL: He was looking at me?

LANEY: Yeah. With longing in his eyes. Like he was thinking about how you . . . felt. And that's what inspired me to write the story.

MARIBEL: Oh.

LANEY: I didn't mean for it to freak you out.

MARIBEL: It didn't freak me out.

LANEY: You were talking about Satan and drowning and stuff.

MARIBEL: It didn't freak me out.

LANEY: Talking about Satan is pretty freaky.

MARIBEL: You have to believe in Satan if you're going to believe in Jesus.

LANEY: How come?

MARIBEL: Because if it weren't for Satan, then Jesus wouldn't have had to die on the cross.

LANEY: I thought Jesus died for my sins, not for Satan.

MARIBEL: Satan is sin. Satan is original sin.

LANEY: So my sin comes from Satan. That's cool.

MARIBEL: Why?

LANEY: 'Cause that means Satan is responsible for my sins. Blame him.

MARIBEL: No, that's not how it works.

LANEY: Well then explain it to me, because your religion doesn't make any sense.

MARIBEL: It's your religion too.

LANEY: I don't believe in Satan.

MARIBEL: You have to believe in Satan, if you believe in Jesus.

LANEY: Why?
MARIBEL: It's hard to explain . . .
LANEY: How am I supposed to believe in something when you can't explain it clearly?
MARIBEL: Satan is original sin.
LANEY: You've already said that.
MARIBEL: Satan makes us do bad things, but you can't just blame him . . .
LANEY: That doesn't make sense!
MARIBEL: Satan is . . .
LANEY: I'm waiting . . .
MARIBEL: Satan is . . .
LANEY: Go on . . .
MARIBEL: . . . a metaphor.
(This stumps Laney.)
LANEY: For what?
MARIBEL: For the harm we've done to God. For the harm we do each other.

SCENE 10

Elise is in the living room, reading the paper. Laney enters and sits down on the other side of the room, ignoring her mother. She flips through her notebook.

ELISE: You want the funnies?
LANEY: No.
ELISE: You used to find the funnies funny. What are you working on?
LANEY: None of your business.
ELISE: If it's none of my business, why'd you come downstairs to work on it?
LANEY: I'm tired of my room. I need a new creative environment.
ELISE: You want to spend time with me.
LANEY: No.
ELISE: You want to read your new story to me.
LANEY: No, I don't. I don't even have a new story. If I had a new story, I wouldn't need a new environment.
ELISE: I think you want an audience.
LANEY: God! If you're gonna be like that, I'll go.
ELISE: You don't have to go.
(Laney stays.)

ELISE: So how's Maribel?
LANEY: She's fine.
ELISE: Are you two still an item?
LANEY: Yes.
ELISE: Still lesbian lovers?
LANEY: God!
ELISE: Just kidding! I'm kidding. Sit.
LANEY: Why do you have to be like that?
ELISE: Like what?
LANEY: All nice to my friends, like you're a cool mom or something, and then insult me in front of them.
ELISE: I didn't mean to insult you. You shouldn't lie to Maribel all the time.
LANEY: You're embarrassing. Talking about sex all the time.
ELISE: Well clearly Maribel needs someone to talk about sex with.
LANEY: Talking about periods. God. I can't believe you told her I didn't.
ELISE: I'm sorry. For that. I shouldn't have said that. But you shouldn't have told Maribel that you kissed Quentin Compson. Christ.
LANEY: It's not a big deal. That's the kind of stuff people are supposed to lie about.
ELISE: You shouldn't lie about your dad.
LANEY: God! You make me sick.
ELISE: What's new?
LANEY: I can't believe how you got all weepy over Dad like that, like he was your long lost love or something.
ELISE: Your dad is my long lost love.
LANEY: You're divorcing him. He doesn't get to be your long lost love.
ELISE: Who says?
LANEY: Me. You don't get to be sad.
ELISE: Laney, if you haven't noticed, I've been sad. I am sad. I will be sad. Deal with it.
LANEY: You don't have any right to be sad. You divorced him.
ELISE: I know. I'm a monster.
LANEY: You said, till death do you part.
ELISE: We did not say till death do you part.
LANEY: Yes, you did.
ELISE: We got married by a man in an Elvis suit. We didn't say till death do you part.
LANEY: But that's what marriage means!
ELISE: What would you have me do, Laney, what?

LANEY: You shouldn't have sent him away.

ELISE: One, is he a harm to himself? Yes. Two, is he a harm to others? Yes. End of story.

LANEY: He never hurt me.

ELISE: No, he didn't. And do you know why? Because I made sure that he didn't.

LANEY: He wouldn't have hurt me.

ELISE: Not Peter, no. But the disease very easily could have. Would have. Did.

LANEY: I'm fine.

ELISE: You're fine?

LANEY: Yes.

ELISE: Let me list all of the ways you are not fine. One . . .

LANEY: Not your freaking lists!

ELISE: You can barely sleep through the night. Two, you can't even stand up straight, because the muscles in your back are in a constant state of tension. Three, you've decided to become a holiness lesbian.

LANEY: I knew this was about that . . .

ELISE: Four. You have created a delusional relationship with a grossly immature sixteen-year-old who thinks that she has invisible stigmata!

LANEY: She told you?

ELISE: Yes, she told me.

LANEY: It's not delusional.

ELISE: OK, Laney, OK. You and Maribel are in love. Go write it in your memoirs. The coming of age of a holiness lesbian . . .

LANEY: Don't do that!

ELISE: What?

LANEY: Don't make fun of me!

ELISE: Laney, I've got to take a break. I can't go another round with you today. Can we take a break?

LANEY: No!

ELISE: What do you want from me?

LANEY: Dad understood my writing. He never made fun of me. He said I would win the Nobel Prize for literature someday.

ELISE: That's because Peter was the dreamer. I'm not. I'm the practical one. That's why he was the theorist, and I was in the trenches. That was the difference between us. I'm sorry that you got stuck with the practical one. But that's who I am. I don't believe in giving people false hope. I don't believe in telling lies.

LANEY: You put him in there. You can get him out.

ELISE: Was he a harm to you?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Did he ever put you in harm?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Did he ever wake you up in the middle of the night waving a kitchen knife?

LANEY: He was trying to protect me.

ELISE: He thought he was Abraham. He thought you were Isaac.

LANEY: He was trying to protect me!

ELISE: He thought God was telling him to sacrifice his child.

LANEY: He wouldn't have hurt me. Ever.

ELISE: No. But his delusions almost did.

LANEY: You could have tried something else.

ELISE: I tried everything. And then he walked into your bedroom with a knife.

LANEY: You didn't try everything.

ELISE: I did. I tried everything, and then he walked into your bedroom with a knife. Don't you think I want him back? Don't you know that I would have rather lost him to cancer or a car accident, a forest fire, a gas leak, spontaneous combustion, the plague, anything other than this? Do you know how horrible it feels to know that that body, that beautiful body, that lay next to me all those years is in the world, that it's in the world, looking just like him but not him. Something else entirely.

LANEY: You didn't try everything. If you really wanted him back, you would have prayed.

ELISE: I would have prayed. Great. To what? To the same God who was telling him to slit your throat?

LANEY: If you really wanted him back, you would have prayed to God for him to get better, and he would. But you don't, 'cause you don't believe in God, because you're too smart to believe in God. So you don't pray, and you haven't tried everything, and so he's sitting there waiting for you in everlasting hell!

ELISE: Don't you ever talk to me like that again.

LANEY: Why the hell not?

ELISE: Because it makes you sound like a crazy person.

SCENE 11

Laney tries to revise her first story. She speaks to the audience.

LANEY: Ernest's hands smelled like gunshot and lemons. No.

They smelled like lemons because he used to eat lemons like oranges. He'd place the fruit in his mouth and peel it with his teeth, while he manned his lemonade stand. No.

Ernest's hands smelled like gunshot and lemons, because he ate the yellow fruit, while cleaning his guns. He'd place the lemon between his teeth and peel off the bitter skin. The . . . the bitter skin that . . . that . . .

Ernest's hands smelled like lemons. He ate the sour fruit like oranges. He'd peel the bitter skin with his teeth and spit it out on the ground. He'd litter his shoes with yellow lemony bits and pieces. At the lemonade stand. At the lemonade stand where the children lined up, they lined up and watched him do it. They watched him do it . . . They watched . . . They watched while he pulled out his gun . . .

Ernest's hands smelled like lemons. They smelled like lemons, because . . . because . . .

My father. My father would put a lemon to his mouth and eat it like an orange.

SCENE 12

Late at night. In the living room, Laney and Maribel have been drinking wine. They hold up their glasses.

LANEY: I thought the wine was supposed to turn into blood.

MARIBEL: Only Catholics think that.

LANEY: So you just drink the wine and call it blood?

MARIBEL: No, we don't drink wine. We drink grape juice.

LANEY: Why do you drink grape juice?

MARIBEL: Because drinking alcohol is a sin.

LANEY: But Jesus drank wine.

MARIBEL: I know. But they didn't have pure water back then.

LANEY: What?

MARIBEL: The water in biblical times. It was contaminated. That's why they had to drink wine.

LANEY: Where did you hear that?

MARIBEL: I don't know.

LANEY: Well if Jesus could turn the water into wine, couldn't he just have decontaminated the water?

MARIBEL: I don't know. I guess.

LANEY: I mean, the fact that Jesus chose to turn the water into wine, rather than just decontaminating it, proves that drinking alcohol is not a sin.

MARIBEL: Maybe.

LANEY: Here, here.

(Laney takes a big gulp. Maribel follows suit.)

MARIBEL: When is Elise coming home?

LANEY: I don't know.

MARIBEL: You said she'd be here.

LANEY: She will be. She had some work thing to go to.

MARIBEL: You think she'd let me French twist her hair when she gets back? I think her hair would look good in a French twist.

LANEY: Are you like in love with my mom?

MARIBEL: No. I just want to know when she's coming home.

LANEY: Later.

(Laney pours more wine into Maribel's glass. Maribel considers the full glass before her.)

MARIBEL: Drunkenness is definitely a sin.

LANEY: Then we won't get drunk.

(Laney clinks her glass against Maribel's and takes a long sip.)

MARIBEL: Laney?

LANEY: Yeah?

MARIBEL: I think I already am.

LANEY: Already what?

MARIBEL: Drunk.

LANEY: Me too.

(They erupt into a fit of giggles.)

MARIBEL: You want to know something?

LANEY: What?

MARIBEL: I'm going to ask Marcus if he wants to go to church with me next week!

LANEY: But you said he didn't go anymore.

MARIBEL: He doesn't. That's why I'm gonna ask him.

LANEY: I don't think that's a good idea.

MARIBEL: Why not?

LANEY: Well if he wanted to go to church, he would. He already knows about Jesus and everything.

MARIBEL: I know.

LANEY: So why do you want to ask him?

MARIBEL: You know.

LANEY: No.

MARIBEL: You know.

LANEY: No I don't.

MARIBEL: You said he was the narrator. You said you saw him looking at me.

LANEY: Oh.

MARIBEL: With longing in his eyes. I think he wants me to ask him. I'm going to do it. Monday, after school.

(Pause.)

LANEY: I don't think you should.

MARIBEL: Why not?

LANEY: Well, I might've been wrong.

MARIBEL: What do you mean?

LANEY: I might've been wrong about him looking at you like that. I mean, he was looking at you and everything, but there might not have been longing in his eyes.

MARIBEL: But you said . . .

LANEY: I know. That's what I thought at the time, but now that I think about it again, I could've been wrong.

MARIBEL: Were you lying again?

LANEY: No! I wasn't lying. But you know it's really hard to know what people are thinking sometimes. They might be thinking one thing, but look like they're thinking something else. Like maybe Marcus wasn't looking at you with longing in his eyes. Maybe he was looking at a girl standing behind you.

MARIBEL: Was there a girl standing behind me?

LANEY: I don't know. Maybe. I can't remember. *(Pause.)* Don't get upset! I don't think there was a girl behind you. I really do think he was looking at you all longingly, but just in case, maybe you shouldn't ask him to church right away. Just give him some time. Let him make the first move.

MARIBEL: You think he will?

LANEY: I think he definitely might.

(Maribel slowly smiles. They clink glasses again and drink. Elise enters.)

ELISE: What's going on here?

(Laney and Maribel try to hide their glasses.)

LANEY: Nothing.

ELISE: Nothing? Having a cocktail party are you?

MARIBEL: We were just taking communion.

ELISE: Communion?

MARIBEL: Uh-huh.

LANEY: We just wanted to see what it tasted like.

MARIBEL: Laney said that since Jesus chose to turn the water into wine instead of decontaminating the water, then drinking alcohol isn't a sin.

ELISE: Laney said that?

MARIBEL: Uh-huh.

ELISE: Maribel, you shouldn't believe everything Laney says. Haven't you learned that by now? To bed. Both of you. Right now.

(Pause.)

LANEY: OK, but we have to say our prayers first. Maribel?

MARIBEL: Yeah?

LANEY: We have to say a prayer.

ELISE: Laney, stop it.

LANEY: You know a prayer, right?

MARIBEL: I know lots of prayers.

LANEY: Then say one.

ELISE: I said to bed!

(Maribel and Laney kneel.)

MARIBEL: Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to sheep.
I said sheep.

(Maribel erupts with laughter.)

ELISE: *(To Laney.)* Why are you doing this?

LANEY: I'm not doing anything.

ELISE: You're doing this intentionally.

LANEY: What?

ELISE: Making me crazy!

LANEY: I can't make someone crazy. Either they're crazy, or they're not.

ELISE: You know what I mean.

LANEY: Maribel, finish your prayer.

MARIBEL: OK. The Lord is my shepherd I do not want. He maketh me to sheep in green pastures.

(She can't stop giggling.)

ELISE: All right. Prayers are finished. To bed.

LANEY: That's not the end of the prayer. Is that the end of the prayer, Maribel?

MARIBEL: No.

LANEY: It's not the end of the prayer.

ELISE: You are on thin ice, young lady.

LANEY: Finish the prayer, Maribel. And then we'll go to bed.

ELISE: Fine. Finish the prayer, and then you'll go to bed, and then you'll be grounded for a month.

LANEY: Fine. Maribel?

MARIBEL: Lo, though I walk through the pasture of death. I feed no evil, for thou art with me . . .

LANEY: For thou art with me.

MARIBEL: I feed no evil. No evil is fed by me.

LANEY: No evil is fed by me. Thank you, Jesus.

ELISE: Stop it, Laney.

LANEY: *(To Maribel.)* Go on.

MARIBEL: At the table of my enemies, you feed us sheep.

LANEY: You feed us sheep!

ELISE: That's enough.

MARIBEL: You feed the sheep us.

LANEY: You said we could finish the prayer.

MARIBEL: Us, the sheep, you feed!

ELISE: Maribel, will you please shut-up!

LANEY: You can't tell my friend to shut-up!

ELISE: Goddamnit, Laney! I've had enough of you. All this stops right now. All the histrionics and hissy fits. All the hand-raising and praising out to the Lord. It stops right now.

LANEY: You can't make me stop believing in God. You can't control my mind like that.

ELISE: I'm not trying to control your mind, but I am putting a stop to all of this.

LANEY: All of what?

ELISE: All of your drama! All of your lying and lesbianism and bedtime prayers. It stops right now.

LANEY: You can't stop who I am.

ELISE: I'm not trying to stop who you are, but I am going to make you be honest with yourself. With everyone.

MARIBEL: You're a lesbian?

LANEY: No. No, I'm not.

ELISE: But you told me that you were a holiness lesbian. That's what you said, isn't it?

MARIBEL: A holiness lesbian?

LANEY: That's not true.

ELISE: Were you lying?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Well, are you lying now?

LANEY: No.

ELISE: Which is it, Laney? Were you lying to me earlier, or are you lying to Maribel now?

(Pause.)

LANEY: Maribel, my mom thinks you're poor and stupid and crazy.

MARIBEL: You do?

ELISE: Laney!

MARIBEL: You said that about me?

LANEY: Yes. My mom thinks you're stupid and crazy and that your religion is a pile of shit.

ELISE: Laney, shut your mouth!

MARIBEL: You think that?

ELISE: No.

LANEY: Yes, you do. Don't lie.

ELISE: I'm not lying. You are way out of control, young lady.

LANEY: You said it.

ELISE: I never said your religion was a pile of shit, Maribel.

LANEY: You said she was stupid and crazy. Don't lie.

MARIBEL: Did you say that?

ELISE: No.

LANEY: Don't lie!

ELISE: I said, I said . . . I just don't agree with your beliefs, that's all.

LANEY: She thinks you're a bad influence on me.

ELISE: I thought that at first. But I don't think so anymore.

MARIBEL: You think I'm a bad influence?

LANEY: Tell her she's stupid!

ELISE: No!

LANEY: That's what she said about you, Maribel. She said you're stupid. And fat. And lazy.

ELISE: Maribel, I never said any of those things . . .

LANEY: She thinks you're grossly immature. She thinks you're borderline retarded!

ELISE: Shut your mouth!

LANEY: She said if you were her daughter, she'd divorce you! She said she'd lock you in the attic, where you would grow old and mad and humpbacked and alone forever. That's what they do to people like us. They lock us in attics so no one ever has to see us or talk to us or look at us ever again. Look at how disgusting we are! Look at me! Look at me and tell me how disgusting I am, how disgusting and humpbacked and mad, mad, mad I'll always be! Tell me!

ELISE: Laney, baby . . .

LANEY: Say it.

ELISE: No.

LANEY: Say it!

ELISE: No. How can you think that?

LANEY: How could I not? This is what I see. Maribel, you disgust me.

(Laney runs out of the room to another section of the house, perhaps to her room or the front porch. Elise looks down at Maribel sitting on the floor, crying and shaking. She hesitates for a brief moment, then chooses to run after her daughter.)

(Split scene. Lights remain on Maribel in the living room, deeply distressed. She rubs her palms together, trying to get rid of the pain. She rubs her hands against the floor, the sofa, anything to get rid of the pain. Shaking, she lifts her hands upwards to release the pain, but it does not work.)

ELISE: Laney, baby. You are none of those things to me. You are none of those things period.

LANEY: This is what I see.

ELISE: Look at me. We are just having a rough time right now, but you are none of those things.

LANEY: But that's what you really think, isn't it? You think I'm unrealistic. You think I'm delusional! You think I'm gonna end up like Dad.

ELISE: No, you are dead wrong.

LANEY: Don't lie.

ELISE: I don't think that.

LANEY: Don't lie to me!

ELISE: OK. Listen to me. Sometimes I'm afraid you might inherit your father's illness. But you know what, Laney, that's all it is. Fear. Stupid, insidious fear. And I'm so sorry I let it creep into this house. I'm so very sorry, because where I truly see your father in you is in your creativity. In your brilliance. I believe you are going to accomplish great things. But I can't promise everything is going to be OK in twenty years or even to-

morrow. The truth is terrible things have happened to us. Terrible things will come again. We can't know what they will be. The only thing I can promise you is that there is nothing, nothing, nothing in the world that would ever make me leave you.

LANEY: How do you know?

ELISE: Because I'm your mother.

LANEY: No. How can you really know?

(Lights up on Maribel, still shaking and crying, the pain unbearable. She picks up the wine corkscrew from the floor.)

ELISE: Because . . . I have a love for you that surpasses all understanding.

(Maribel impales her hand with the corkscrew. The blood flows. A wave of relief. Mother and daughter embrace. Maribel remains on the floor, bleeding and alone.)

(Lights go down.)

END OF PLAY

END DAYS

Deborah Zoe Laufer

For Alex, Charlie, and David.

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Deborah Zoe Laufer is the 2009 recipient of the Helen Merrill Playwriting Award. *End Days* was awarded The American Theatre Critics Association Steinberg citation in March 2008. Other full-length plays by Deborah Zoe Laufer include *The Last Schwartz* and *Out of Sterno*. *The Last Schwartz* premiered at Florida Stage where it was nominated for a Carbonell Award for Best New Work, and it enjoyed a six-month run at The Zephyr Theatre in Los Angeles, California. *Out of Sterno* premiered at Portland Stage in Maine in March 2009 with a grant from The Edgerton Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. *The Last Schwartz* was published by Smith and Kraus in *Women Playwrights: The Best Plays of 2003*. The acting editions of *End Days, The Last Schwartz,* and *Out of Sterno* are published by Samuel French. Other plays, workshopped and produced around the country include: *The Gulf of Westchester* (Florida Stage/NNPN commission), *Fortune, Random Acts,* and *Miniatures*. Her newest play, *Sirens*, was part of Florida Stage's 1st Look Festival in March 2009 and was workshopped at Geva Theatre, Rochester, New York, in June 2009. Laufer collaborated on *Brink* for the 2009 Humana Festival, commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville. Laufer is a graduate of The Juilliard School, a two-time recipient of the LeCompte du Nouy grant from the Lincoln Center Foundation, the first winner of the Sklarz-Shapiro Award for Playwrighting, and a member of The Dramatists Guild. Website: www.deborahzoelaufer.com.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS

End Days was presented as a workshop production at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, National Playwrights Conference, Waterford, Connecticut, July 2007. It was directed by Rebecca Bayle Taichman with the following cast:

CAST

RACHEL STEIN . . . . . Zoe Lister-Jones
SYLVIA STEIN . . . . . Caitlin O'Connell
ARTHUR STEIN . . . . . Peter Friedman
NELSON STEINBERG . . . . . David Ross
JESUS/STEPHEN HAWKING . . . . . Ryan King

End Days was given its world premiere at Florida Stage, Manalapan, Florida, November 2007, with scenic and lighting design by Richard Crowell; costume design by Erin Amico; and sound design by Matt Kelly. It was directed by Louis Tyrell with the following cast:

CAST

RACHEL STEIN ..... Michaela Cronan
SYLVIA STEIN ..... Elizabeth Dimon
ARTHUR STEIN ..... Jim Shankman
NELSON STEINBERG ..... Scott Borish
JESUS/STEPHEN HAWKING ..... Terry Hardcastle

End Days was subsequently produced by Phoenix Theatre, Indianapolis, January–February 2008, with set design by James Gross; costume design by Karen A. Witting; and sound design and original music by Tim Brickley. It was directed by Bryan Fonseca with the following cast:

CAST

RACHEL STEIN ..... Phebe Taylor
SYLVIA STEIN ..... Martha Jacobs
ARTHUR STEIN ..... Bill Simmons
NELSON STEINBERG ..... Matthew Van Oss
JESUS/STEPHEN HAWKING ..... Matthew Roland

End Days premiered in New York City at Ensemble Studio Theatre, through an Alfred P. Sloan Grant, March 2009, with set design by Lee Savage; lighting design by Raquel Davis; costume design by Suzanne Chesney; and sound design and original composition by Ryan Rumery. It was directed by Lisa Peterson with the following cast:

CAST

RACHEL STEIN ..... Molly Ephraim
SYLVIA STEIN ..... Deidre O'Connell
ARTHUR STEIN ..... Peter Friedman
NELSON STEINBERG ..... Dane DeHaan
JESUS/STEPHEN HAWKING ..... Paco Tolson

CHARACTERS

RACHEL STEIN: Sixteen-year-old nihilistic goth. Feels angry and orphaned since 9/11, as both of her parents withdrew into their own worlds.

SYLVIA STEIN: Her mother, forties. Newly Evangelical, with a close, personal relationship with Jesus.

ARTHUR STEIN: Her father, forties. Deeply depressed.

NELSON STEINBERG: Sixteen. Their new neighbor. Passionate about science. Dresses as Elvis. Loves Rachel.

JESUS/STEPHEN HAWKING: Played by the same actor.

SETTING

The Stein kitchen/den. We see the kitchen table, a glimpse of the appliance area to the rear, and a step down to a small den to the right. Various other locations should be indicated with simple set pieces: a high-school locker; the sign of a triple X video store; the table and chairs of a Starbucks.

TIME

Late September, 2003.

END DAYS

In the darkness, we hear an acoustic guitar. Nelson is softly singing his ode to Rachel. A cantorial prayer blends in with and then overtakes the guitar. It is then drowned out by an Evangelical choir. Each sound is beautiful and soulful, but as they begin competing for attention, the sound becomes cacophonous and jarring. The music climaxes in one long discordant sound, which cuts out leaving only Nelson's voice held in one long, pleading word. It has the wailing minor tones of a Hebraic prayer: RAAAACHHHEEEL. Lights come up on Nelson. He is sixteen. He is dressed like Elvis, the seventie's Elvis. He is playing guitar, singing a song he has written.

NELSON: *(Singing.)* Rachel. Rachel. Rachel Stein. Harris High would be heaven, if you would be mine. If I asked you to Borders, would you decline? Rachel Stein. Before me in homeroom. Steinberg post Stein. I sit right behind you, I stare and I pine. I want you to notice, but I don't want to whine. Rachel Stein.

(A pint-sized milk carton is hurled onstage and hits Nelson squarely on the side of the head. Far off laughter. He chuckles acknowledgment.)

You guys!

(Back to the song.)

The first time I saw you was on the lunch line. Cafeteria loud. Lunch two ninety-nine.

OFFSTAGE VOICE: Hey freak!

NELSON: We both chose the tuna. It seemed like a sign. Rachel Stein.

OFFSTAGE VOICE: Asswipe!

NELSON: Ms. Holloway's class, the blackboard was thine.

You soared through equations like Albert Einstein.

OFFSTAGE VOICE: Yo. Jeff. Let's go kill the freak!

NELSON: Your mountainous math skills not short of Alpine. Rachel . . .

(A general rallying war cry. A barrage of milk containers comes hurling at Nelson. Then the sounds of a stampede of Reeboks.)

(Nelson finally takes the hint, gets up and dashes offstage.)

OFFSTAGE VOICES: Kill the freak!!!

(Lights down.)

(A church bell chimes seven times. Lights up. Morning. The Stein kitchen. Arthur sits in his pajamas, slumped across the kitchen table, asleep. Offstage we hear Sylvia.)

SYLVIA: Help! Oh no. Arthur! Help!

(The clatter of many books falling.)

Crap! Arthur, could you help me?

(Huge crash.)

Darn! Darn it!

(A beat.)

(Sylvia enters with an enormous stack of Bibles, furious and disheveled.)

Did you hear me? I was shouting for you.

ARTHUR: *(Waking.)* What? What time is it?

SYLVIA: The whole stack was coming down. It's a miracle I wasn't killed.

ARTHUR: I'm sorry. I didn't hear.

SYLVIA: Honestly. *(She goes back off and comes in with a poster of Jesus. It says, "Jesus loves you" across the top.)* Did you spend the whole night out here again? Arthur?

ARTHUR: I must have dozed off.

SYLVIA: It's a beautiful day, praise God. You need to get showered and dressed. *(Soto voce.)* You're starting to smell.

ARTHUR: I'm sorry.

SYLVIA: We're going door to door on West Lake this morning. You should join me.

(As she goes back off and reenters with yet more Bibles and a stack of brochures.)

And then this afternoon we're back in front of the triple X video store on Townsend. The first day we prayed there, twenty-two sinners went in. Last night it was less than ten. It's the miracle of prayer.

(Jesus, the same Jesus as on the poster, enters from the other door, carrying a stack of Bibles. Not sure where to put them. Sylvia clears a spot.)

Thank you, Jesus. Oh, I'll get the new youth group brochures. I can't wait to show you what I've done.

(She rushes back out. Jesus follows.)

(From offstage:)

Did you make coffee? Arthur? Could you put up a pot?

(There is a knock on the door.)

Honey, could you get that?

(Arthur doesn't move. The door opens slightly.)

NELSON: Hello?

(Nelson enters. Still in his Elvis attire. He has a guitar slung over his shoulder. His arm is now in a sling.)

Hi. Is Rachel home?

SYLVIA: *(Still offstage.)* Who is it, hon?

ARTHUR: It's the king.

SYLVIA: The what?

ARTHUR: It's Elvis.

NELSON: Oh. No. I'm . . . Nelson Steinberg? We just moved in? Last month? Number eighty-one?

ARTHUR: You're dressed like Elvis.

NELSON: Umm. Is Rachel here? I thought she lived here. I mean, I followed her home yesterday, and I saw her come here.

ARTHUR: You followed her home?

NELSON: Yesterday. Well, yesterday and Wednesday. And Tuesday. And . . .

SYLVIA: *(Entering with a stack of brochures, a knapsack, and Jesus.)* Who was that at the . . . oh!

NELSON: Hi. I'm Nelson Steinberg? From eighty-one?

ARTHUR: He's stalking Rachel.

SYLVIA: Hello.

NELSON: I live there? Across the street? Wow. I can't believe how much your place is like our place. They're like exactly alike.

ARTHUR: Condos.

NELSON: Except for the stuff inside. And our sink and refrigerator and stove and oven and counters and closet are on that side, and our table and chairs are on this side.

SYLVIA: You're the new people.

NELSON: One of them.

SYLVIA: Welcome! We prayed for you just last week!

NELSON: Thanks.

SYLVIA: I've been meaning to stop by with some baked goods but I'm just breathless with the ministry lately. The Rapture is coming, you know.

NELSON: It is?

SYLVIA: *(She looks to Jesus, smiling.)* That's what I hear!

NELSON: Great! What's the Rapture? It sounds so . . .

(Jesus pulls out some flyers, and Sylvia hands them to Nelson.)

SYLVIA: Here!

NELSON: . . . intense. And passionate. The Rapture!

SYLVIA: This will tell you all about it. It's very important to welcome Jesus into your heart, Nathan, and truly repent, so that when End Days comes you'll be saved. Here, why don't you take one for your parents.

NELSON: Well, they're dead, actually.

SYLVIA: Oh . . .

NELSON: But I've got stepparents.

SYLVIA: Great! Do you have any friends you'd like to give some to?

NELSON: Oh, sure. I've got tons of friends.

(She gives him some more brochures.)

SYLVIA: *(To Jesus.)* Look how well I'm doing today! And I haven't even left the house yet.

(Jesus pats her back. Holds up another brochure.)

SYLVIA: Right! You know, Nathan, we have a very active youth group. Maybe you'd like to join them some time. *(An aside to Jesus.)* Don't these look good? I changed the font.

NELSON: It looks great. Does Rachel belong?

SYLVIA: Well . . .

ARTHUR: No.

SYLVIA: Not yet.

NELSON: Umm . . . is she here?

SYLVIA: She must be getting dressed.

(Calling up the stairs.)

Rachel! She must still be getting dressed. So . . .

NELSON: *(Sitting at the table with Arthur.)* That's OK. I can wait.

(Sylvia and Arthur and Jesus stare at him a moment.)

SYLVIA: Well. All right then. You'll excuse me, Nathan. I need to get ready. I'm off to battle Satan!

NELSON: Nelson?

SYLVIA: *(Confused.)* Satan.

NELSON: No. My name, ma'am. It's Nelson. Nelson Steinberg? It used to be Nelson Wallen, but then my stepmom remarried, and we changed our names and now it's Steinberg. Which is so great because I get to sit behind Rachel in homeroom. Stein. Steinberg?

SYLVIA: Oh.

NELSON: I also sit behind her in calculus. She's really great in math. Really great. Which is so wonderful for a girl. Not that girls are inherently poor in math. Of course not. But, you know, sociological pressures make it uncommon for girls to excel in math or science. I bet she's great in science. Wish I could sit behind her in science.

ARTHUR: Rachel's not allowed to take science anymore.

NELSON: Wow. Too bad. Physics is amazing. They should start with physics in like kindergarten. Don't you think?

SYLVIA: OK!

(Jesus gives her a nod that they should go.)

SYLVIA: Well, I should be going!

NELSON: Kids would really pay attention in math if they had physics earlier.

(Jesus gives Sylvia a little tug on her sleeve.)

SYLVIA: I still have to collate some flyers, so . . .

NELSON: I mean, it's like if they taught you to read before you could speak. You'd think, what are all these words? Except, you wouldn't think it in words, because you wouldn't know words yet.

(Jesus points to his watch.)

SYLVIA: I really do have to be getting ready. End Days isn't going to wait or me!

(She and Jesus rush back out.)

NELSON: Did I just talk too much?

ARTHUR: Maybe a little.

NELSON: Sometimes I do that. I'm supposed to look to see if anyone's interested, but sometimes I forget to look, and sometimes even if I look it's hard to tell. People are really hard to read, don't you find?

ARTHUR: Yes.

NELSON: And then I get on a roll, and it's hard for me to stop. I'm supposed to pretend to take an interest in the other person. Ask questions so I don't monopolize the conversation. That's what they tell me.

ARTHUR: That seems sound.

NELSON: Thanks. So . . . Tell me about yourself, Mr. S.

ARTHUR: What would you like to know?

NELSON: *(Nelson pulls a list out of his pocket and consults it.)* Do you have any hobbies or special interests? That's usually a good icebreaker.

ARTHUR: Not really.

NELSON: *(Goes back to the list.)* What do you do for a living?

ARTHUR: I don't really do anything any more.

NELSON: Huh. *(List again.)* Crazy weather we're having.

ARTHUR: I haven't been out for a while.

NELSON: Boy. This is tough. Any big plans for the day?

ARTHUR: I think I might just take a little nap.

NELSON: A nap! That's great. Were you up late last night with Rachel, conversing about her various interests or plans for the future?

ARTHUR: I just don't sleep.

NELSON: You don't?

ARTHUR: At night. And then, in the day it seems to be the only thing I can do.

NELSON: It sounds like you're off your cycle, sir.

ARTHUR: Maybe that's it.

NELSON: Or maybe you're clinically depressed. Have you seen a health-care professional?

ARTHUR: Not lately.

NELSON: You shouldn't let that sort of thing go, sir. Huge mood swings. Lack of sleep. How's your appetite?

ARTHUR: I don't know. I don't really eat.

NELSON: Sounds to me like you could use some help.

ARTHUR: I'll be OK.

NELSON: That's exactly what my father said, and then one morning we found him hanging from the basement ceiling pipes. None of us saw it coming. So you really can't take these things too lightly.

(There is a long stunned silence.)

NELSON: That was inappropriate, wasn't it? Too much information. Didn't read the signs. Sorry about that.

ARTHUR: No, I appreciate your confidence.

NELSON: Really?

ARTHUR: Maybe I will make an appointment. Maybe a sleep clinic. Or something.

SYLVIA: *(Reenters with Jesus.)* Sleep clinic! You just need to do some good works.

Think about others instead of yourself, and you'll sleep like a baby, am I right, Nelson? You need to welcome Jesus into your life.

NELSON: Or sometimes warm milk helps.

(Rachel enters. She is a scowling sixteen-year-old goth. White white skin, black hair, black clothes, black lips, black outlined eyes. She sees Nelson. Deeply suspicious.)

RACHEL: What are you doing here?

NELSON: Rachel! Hi! Rachel. *(Quickly referencing his notes.)* I thought maybe since I was going that way maybe we could walk to school this morning. Together.

RACHEL: No thanks. *(Searching the cabinet.)* There's still no cereal.

SYLVIA: Honey, I thought you were going to go grocery shopping.

ARTHUR: I was so tired.

RACHEL: You haven't been out of those pajamas in three weeks. *(She finds a candy bar in a drawer and starts eating it. Under her breath.)* You're starting to smell.

SYLVIA: Don't talk to your father like that.

ARTHUR: I'm sorry.

RACHEL: *(To Nelson.)* Shouldn't you be going to school?

SYLVIA: Your father needs our love and support, Rachel.

ARTHUR: I'll go shopping today.

SYLVIA: The ministry is praying for you, Arthur. I wish you would come with me. I know if you came and asked for Jesus's love and forgiveness, you would be healed.

(Jesus opens his arms to Arthur.)

ARTHUR: I'll go shopping. I really think I will.

(Jesus shrugs.)

SYLVIA: Nelson. Have you accepted Jesus as your personal savior?

NELSON: No. But it sounds really interesting.

RACHEL: OK. Time for school. Go Nelson.

SYLVIA: Have you read the good book?

RACHEL: Mom, just let him go.

NELSON: You mean the Bible?

RACHEL: You're going to be late.

SYLVIA: There's always time for the good news.

(Jesus hands her a Bible, which she adds to Nelson's pile of brochures.)

SYLVIA: Since I began a personal relationship with Jesus, my life is filled with joy and meaning, Nelson. I'm not afraid any more.

NELSON: That's so great.

SYLVIA: Maybe you'd like to come with us this Sunday. We're having a healing service.

NELSON: I'd love to! Wow. I've got Hebrew school at two but my morning is free.

ARTHUR: Hebrew school?

NELSON: My stepmom married Ben, so I'm converting and getting Bar Mitzvahed. It's a lot to learn on top of an eleventh-grade curriculum but luckily I'm very bright. So, anyway, if your thing's in the morning, that would be great.

SYLVIA: Eight a.m.

NELSON: Excellent! Thanks! Will you be going, Rachel?

RACHEL: No.

SYLVIA: Yes, she will.

NELSON: Great!

RACHEL: No.

SYLVIA: She'll be going and Arthur will be going and now you'll be going!

ARTHUR: I think I'm free, but . . .

RACHEL: I'm not. Now go to school, Nelson.

SYLVIA: Honey, this week it's nonnegotiable.

RACHEL: I'm not going to sit through that bullshit.

SYLVIA: Rachel! Don't use that language.

RACHEL: "Religion is all bullshit." Remember?

SYLVIA: *(To Jesus, who is shocked.)* I never said . . .

RACHEL: Whenever Grandma and Grandpa asked to bring me to shul . . .

SYLVIA: Honey — Grandma and Grandpa were ultra Orthodox.

RACHEL: So?

SYLVIA: So that was a whole other thing. That was very extreme.

RACHEL: *(Referring to the Bibles and signs.) That* was extreme? Are you fucking kidding me?

SYLVIA: Rachel! Your grandmother shaved her head and wore a wig. All right? And your grandfather — if he were alive, he wouldn't even touch you now. Once I turned twelve he wouldn't touch me because I might be "unclean."

(At this, Jesus backs out of the room.)

RACHEL: They were my grandparents. They wanted me to come with them.

SYLVIA: The whole service was in Hebrew. You wouldn't have understood a word of it.

RACHEL: Whose fault is that?

SYLVIA: Where is this coming from? You didn't want to go. I let you choose and you chose not to.

ARTHUR: *(Under this, to himself.)* I'm so tired.

RACHEL: I was five years old! You said it was bullshit, what do you think I'd say?

SYLVIA: All right. Fine. You want to go to shul —

RACHEL: *(Overlapping.)* I'm not saying that's what I want.

SYLVIA: The women sit behind a curtain so the men won't be distracted from their holy thoughts . . .

RACHEL: You don't even listen to what I want.

SYLVIA: I'll drop you off there on Saturday! Or no. You want to be Orthodox — you can walk.

NELSON: You could come with me! We're Reform so — hey! We could even sit together!

RACHEL: I don't want any of it. *I* still think it's bullshit. I just don't understand what *you* want any more.

SYLVIA: Come with me to Blessed Name. Come and you'll understand.

RACHEL: It's like you shut off part of your brain.

SYLVIA: I'm happy.

RACHEL: I hate happy.

SYLVIA: Rachel . . .

RACHEL: You told me there was no God. That when we died, we were dead and that sucked but deal with it.

SYLVIA: *(Reaching for her.)* But that's terrible, honey. I'm sorry I told you that.

(Jesus drifts back into the room and stands beside Sylvia.)

RACHEL: *(Pulling away. Very upset.)* You told me to think for myself. Remember? I mean, we read Kafka together when everyone else was reading *Little Women.* We read Camus. I don't understand what happened.

(Jesus puts his hand on Sylvia's shoulder.)

SYLVIA: Look. Honey. If you came to Blessed Name . . .

RACHEL: No.

SYLVIA: I'm not doing this to punish you. I love you.

RACHEL: *(Suddenly furious.)* Then buy some fucking groceries!

SYLVIA: Rachel!

RACHEL: Stop shoving all this crap down my throat! Stop parading all over town with your nutty signs. Stop embarrassing me.

SYLVIA: I'm not trying to embarrass you. I'm trying to save you.

RACHEL: Yeah. I'll pass, thanks.

SYLVIA: I'm terrified for you Rachel. You're going to be left behind. When the Rapture comes . . .

RACHEL: Then I'll stay behind! I'll take frogs and leeches and blood in the streets over all your holier-than-thou crap.

SYLVIA: That's it! Go to your room!

RACHEL: I have school.

SYLVIA: You're not going to school today. Get upstairs.

RACHEL: Jesus wants me to be a truant now?

SYLVIA: Listen, you. Do not talk to me like that. I'm your mother. If I decide to homeschool you . . .

RACHEL: Homeschool me?

SYLVIA: . . . then you don't go to public school any more.

RACHEL: You're never home!

SYLVIA: *(Overlapping.)* If I send you to religious school, you go to religious school. If I send you to reform school, you go to reform school.

(Jesus tries to calm Sylvia down. She shrugs him off and he quickly walks offstage.)

RACHEL: *(Over her.)* Reform school? You're nuts. You've totally lost your mind.

SYLVIA: You're a minor. You do what I say. And you are going to church Sunday morning. If I have to drag you by the hair I'll do it.

RACHEL: Gee, that doesn't sound very Christian.

SYLVIA: *(Completely frustrated and furious.)* Look!!! Look, you people! I am trying to do something here. I am trying to save this family! I have found something . . . I have finally found something that has given me hope and joy and peace. I'm happy. Since Jesus came into my life, I am finally happy! And you people are not going to ruin this for me. You hear? Rachel? Arthur? You're both coming with me on Sunday, and you are going to listen to the Good Word, and you are going to open your hearts and let Jesus save you!

(There is a pause. We hear the squeal of bus brakes.)

RACHEL: There's the bus! See ya!

(She grabs her books and races out the door.)

NELSON: Wait! Rachel, I thought maybe . . .

(But she's gone. Pause. Sylvia notices that Jesus is gone. Frightened.)

SYLVIA: Jesus?

(He comes back into the room.)

SYLVIA: Oh, God. *(Collecting herself.)* Well, I really should get going too.

(Jesus hands her, her backpack.)

SYLVIA: Thank you, Jesus. All right then. *(Chipper again.)* You get dressed and go shopping now, Arthur! I'll see you Sunday, Nelson. Have a blessed day!

(She takes her backpack and signs, and she and Jesus leave. Nelson and Arthur sit in silence for a moment.)

NELSON: Wow. Rachel really doesn't seem to like me.

ARTHUR: She doesn't seem to like me either.

(They both sit glumly for a moment.)

NELSON: Guess I should head out too then.

ARTHUR: Do you have to?

NELSON: Well, I've got school.

ARTHUR: Right.

NELSON: So . . .

ARTHUR: You could skip it.

NELSON: What?

ARTHUR: If you feel like. We could play cards or something. You ever play gin, Nelson?

NELSON: I don't think so.

ARTHUR: I could teach you. It's not hard.

NELSON: Well, we've got calculus.

ARTHUR: Oh.

NELSON: First period.

ARTHUR: Oh. OK.

NELSON: Yeah. *(Pause.)* I really would like to learn, though. I mean, I've often thought that. That I'd like to learn cards.

(Arthur doesn't respond.)

NELSON: So . . . *(Pause.)* Hey, what if I came after school? How would that be?

ARTHUR: OK.

NELSON: Great! I'll come back after school. And we could play some card games.

ARTHUR: OK.

(Nelson starts to leave. Turns back.)

NELSON: Do you think you might go shopping today? Rachel seemed kind of mad about that.

ARTHUR: I guess.

NELSON: I think you should.

ARTHUR: I don't know Nelson. It all seems exhausting lately.

NELSON: What?

ARTHUR: All of it. Sleeping and getting up and washing and eating and using the john.

NELSON: Huh.

ARTHUR: We do it all every day and then . . . what? We do it all again and again and again and again. And then . . . eventually we don't do it any more.

NELSON: I'll come after school, OK?

ARTHUR: OK.

NELSON: You'll go shopping. And then I'll come after school.

ARTHUR: OK.

(Lights shift. Cafeteria sounds. Rachel sits at a long, empty table reading a textbook. Nelson heads toward her, struggling to hold his tray while maneuvering around the sling and the guitar. There is now a large bandage across the bridge of his nose.)

NELSON: Rachel! Hi! Rachel. Mind if I join you?

RACHEL: *(Refusing to look up.)* Yes.

NELSON: Oh. *(He looks around blankly.)*

RACHEL: There's an empty table over there.

NELSON: OK. *(But he just stands there, silent for a moment. Then:)* You were so amazing this morning. At the blackboard. Had you worked out that

equation before? Because you wrote it out so fast. It's like you were channeling it or . . . something . . .

(Rachel finally looks up at him.)

RACHEL: What happened to your nose?

NELSON: This? Oh, I was just horsing around with some of the guys.

RACHEL: If you'd stop dressing like that, they might stop beating you up.

NELSON: No, no. We were just roughhousing. It was all in fun.

A VOICE FROM OFFSTAGE: Hey freak!

(An empty milk carton comes flying through the air and clocks Nelson in the head. Laughter.)

NELSON: *(Laughingly, to them.)* You guys! Anyway, Nurse Liz is real nice. Stopped the bleeding in about two seconds. Patched me right up.

RACHEL: Whatever.

(She goes back to her book.)

NELSON: I was saying to your dad, it's too bad you're not taking physics. With your calculus, you'd be a natural.

RACHEL: Yeah. Look, don't come by my house any more, OK? And don't tell anybody about . . . anything at my house. OK?

NELSON: You can count on me, Rachel. What happens between us, stays between us.

RACHEL: Great.

(She goes back to her book. Barely acknowledges him through the following.)

NELSON: *(Trying to consult some notes, while balancing his tray.)* I can't believe how alike our houses are.

RACHEL: Uh-huh.

NELSON: Have you lived there long?

RACHEL: No.

NELSON: Where are you from?

RACHEL: New York.

NELSON: New York City? Wow. You're from New York City. How great is that?

RACHEL: Great.

NELSON: Why did you move?

RACHEL: My dad lost his job.

NELSON: Oh. How did he . . .

RACHEL: It blew up when a plane flew into it.

NELSON: A plane . . . Wow. Was he OK?

RACHEL: Oh yeah. He's great.

(Another milk carton beans Nelson in the head. Laughter offstage.)

NELSON: *(To offstage boys.)* Hey! You've got quite an arm!

(Another carton comes flying in.)

RACHEL: *(Shouting offstage.)* Stop it you freakin' goons!

(More laughter offstage.)

RACHEL: *(To Nelson.)* Sit. Would you just sit for Christ's sakes.

NELSON: Gee. Thanks. *(He eagerly sits down and starts eating his macaroni and cheese.)* They've got very good macaroni and cheese here. Much better than my last school. Less gooey.

RACHEL: I'd really like to just read, OK?

NELSON: Yeah? Me too. I love to read. Did you ever read this?

(He holds up his book. A Brief History of Time.*)*

RACHEL: What is it?

NELSON: It's only the greatest book ever written.

RACHEL: What *is* it?

NELSON: Stephen Hawking explains pretty much everything in the universe.

RACHEL: Does he explain why you're dressed like that?

NELSON: No, you know, like all the great scientific theories from Aristotle and Ptolemy pretty much up until now.

RACHEL: Oh.

NELSON: You would love it.

RACHEL: I don't think so.

NELSON: No, you would — I mean, it all comes down to math. Unification. To have a mathematical equation that integrates Einstein's general relativity with quantum mechanics. An equation that encompasses everything.

RACHEL: And then what?

NELSON: And then we know how it all works.

RACHEL: And then what?

NELSON: And then we can figure out how it all started.

RACHEL: And then what?

NELSON: Ummm. And then we know.

(Rachel goes back to her book.)

NELSON: He's so amazing. Stephen Hawking. He's got ALS — they told him he'd die when he was like twenty, and he's lived more than forty years past that, and he rides around in a motorized wheelchair, and he talks through a computer. It's like the greatest brain on the planet riding around on this chair. You want to borrow it?

RACHEL: No thanks.

NELSON: It's OK. I've got my name in the cover.

RACHEL: No.

NELSON: It's really easy. I mean, it's written in a way that anyone can understand. *(Pause.)* Come on. Take it. And then you can tell me what you think.

(She takes the book.)

NELSON: Great! Wow! This is so great!

RACHEL: I probably won't read it.

NELSON: But you might.

RACHEL: I might.

NELSON: And then we could talk about it. Oh my God. That would be just about the greatest thing ever.

(Rachel looks at him for a long moment.)

RACHEL: You should stop wearing that outfit.

NELSON: That's OK.

RACHEL: They won't stop beating on you till you stop.

NELSON: I'm used to it.

RACHEL: But why get used to it? Why not just be normal?

NELSON: Why do you wear that outfit?

RACHEL: So people will leave me alone.

NELSON: Oh.

RACHEL: Clearly it's not working.

NELSON: Some people think he's like a savior or something. Elvis. That he didn't really die, or that he'll rise again.

RACHEL: They're nuts.

NELSON: Maybe. My mom loved him. She got me an Elvis outfit for Halloween when I was five, and I would never take it off.

RACHEL: That was probably cute. When you were five.

NELSON: Yeah. So, I just kept on wearing it. Everywhere. Even to my mom's funeral I wore it. My dad finally threw it away, and I wouldn't get dressed. Went to kindergarten in my underwear.

RACHEL: You're kidding.

NELSON: Nope. So eventually he got me a new one. I find it really comforting. We've got the same birthday. Elvis and I. January eighth. And guess who else has it?

RACHEL: Who?

NELSON: Guess.

RACHEL: No.

NELSON: Come on. Somebody amazing.

RACHEL: Just tell me for Christ sakes.

NELSON: Stephen Hawking! The guy I was just telling you about! The book guy.

RACHEL: So?

NELSON: Isn't that cool?

RACHEL: Maybe you should dress like him.

NELSON: It's OK. They always beat me up the first month or so. But it gets old after a while. I expect it'll stop soon.

(A barrage of milk containers starts hammering at them. Laughter offstage.)

RACHEL: *(Snapping from one to ten in about a second. Picks up the milk containers and starts pummeling them back.)* Leave us alone you freakin' assholes!

NELSON: Wow. You've got great aim!

RACHEL: Friggin' Neanderthals!

(Nelson picks up a container with his good arm and hurls it back, weakly.)

NELSON: Friggin' Neanderthals!

(He grins, delighted.)

(Lights shift. Sylvia is on a folding chair in front of the triple X video store. She is having a little chat with someone off stage. There is an empty folding chair beside her.)

SYLVIA: So finally I say, *(Flirting.)* "Well, I would love it if you came with me, Mr. Jenks. We could sit together." And — boom. You know? But I thought, hey, if we can just get him there.

(Jesus enters with two paper cups of hot coffee and joins Sylvia in the other folding chair.)

SYLVIA: Thank you, Jesus.

JESUS: You're welcome, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: *(With growing passion and fury.)* It's so frustrating. I wanted to say, "Mr. Jenks, the world is a horrible, dangerous, terrifying place. At any moment you could be raped or knifed or gunned down. Some tsunami could wipe out your village, or you could get mad cow disease, or a meteor could hit, or a bus could plow into you, or you could be poisoned by anthrax, or some crazy foreign fanatic could try to blow you up."

(Jesus looks disapproving.)

But, of course you can't say that. Can you?

JESUS: No.

(They both take a sip.)

SYLVIA: This is very good coffee. But, I mean, hello! Here you are offering him eternal life and safety, off this earth, in Heaven, where nobody who would harm him could even get in.

JESUS: *(Putting a pink packet into his coffee.)* Sweetener?

SYLVIA: I'm good, thanks. I know you said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Remember when you said that? In Matthew?

JESUS: Right.

SYLVIA: But, enough already. Get some spirit. Get on board. Anyway, he loved being at the mission so much, he said he's going to come every week. So, it all worked out. And can you imagine, we nearly lost him to the Unitarians.

JESUS: Sylvia!

SYLVIA: Sorry.

(Jesus laughs.)

JESUS: Well. No, you're right.

(Sylvia laughs.)

SYLVIA: Oh Jesus! I just love you so much!

JESUS: I love you too, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: You really saved a wretch like me, you know? I wish everyone felt what I feel! I wish I could talk about you to every single person on earth.

JESUS: You're off to a good start, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Thanks.

(They each take a sip.)

SYLVIA: This is nice. Here.

JESUS: Yes.

SYLVIA: Praise God. Before you came into my life, there's no way in heck I would be out here sipping coffee in the broad daylight where any drive-by shooter could take me out. And now — let 'em try. Death is just a gateway to a lifetime with you.

JESUS: Amen.

SYLVIA: How do I get through to Rachel and Arthur, Jesus? I really lost my mind this morning, didn't I? Reform school? Crazy.

JESUS: You just want the best for them. You're a good person, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Am I?

JESUS: You're a good person. And you're doing good in the world.

SYLVIA: Thank you Jesus. It means so much to me that you think so.

JESUS: I do.

SYLVIA: Well, they're coming Sunday. Maybe they'll be moved by the spirit.

JESUS: I'll do what I can.

SYLVIA: Oh look! Here come some sinners!

JESUS: Time to pray.

(They bow their heads.)

(Lights shift. Rachel is sitting somewhere outside the school, rolling a joint. She lights up, leans back, and begins reading A Brief History of Time. *A church bell chimes four times. Lights up on Arthur. He is still at the kitchen table, but is now lying across it, asleep. There is a knock at the door.)*

NELSON: *(Offstage.)* Mr. S.?

(Arthur doesn't waken. Nelson knocks again, then enters, now on crutches. His nose is still bandaged, his arm still in a sling.)

NELSON: Mr. S.?

(He sees Arthur slumped over the table. Rushes to him, shakes him.)

NELSON: Oh no! Mr. S.! Mr. S.!

(Arthur rouses with a start.)

ARTHUR: What? What time is it?

NELSON: Don't scare me like that, Mr. S. I thought you'd done something drastic.

ARTHUR: Is school over?

NELSON: For an hour. I waited outside to follow Rachel home, but she never came. You're still in your pajamas.

ARTHUR: Oh. Yeah.

NELSON: I guess you didn't go shopping, huh?

ARTHUR: I guess not. Do you want to play gin?

NELSON: Let's go get some groceries. Do you have a car?

ARTHUR: Not any more.

NELSON: Well, we'll walk. It'll be good for us, right? And cereal doesn't weigh too much.

ARTHUR: I don't know, Nelson. I'm kind of tired.

NELSON: Where are your clothes?

ARTHUR: I'll go tomorrow. Definitely.

NELSON: Go get dressed.

ARTHUR: I haven't been outside in a while Nelson.

NELSON: It'll be fun.

ARTHUR: A long while.

NELSON: It'll be an adventure.

(Lights shift. Rachel is running to her locker at school. The hallway is dimly lit and empty. She madly starts entering her combination code. The lock doesn't budge. She tries it again, more frantic. Nothing. She begins banging on the locker and kicking it. She completely loses it and kicks and pounds on the locker hysterically. Crumples to the foot of the locker, defeated and spent. Stephen Hawking appears from behind the locker. He is in his motorized

wheelchair with its electronic speaking device. His voice is the unearthly robotic monotone of the computer.)

STEPHEN HAWKING: Maybe you should get the janitor.

(Rachel stares at him, speechless.)

STEPHEN HAWKING: Or you could just kick it some more. That seems productive.

RACHEL *(Stunned.)* Oh my God. I was just reading your book.

STEPHEN: Did you buy it?

RACHEL: No, it's Nelson's copy.

STEPHEN: You should buy it. I like it when people buy it.

RACHEL: How did you get here?

STEPHEN: Chair.

RACHEL: Oh my God. I'm cracking up. I'm my mother. I'm a nut like my mother.

STEPHEN: You seem to be having a problem with your locker.

RACHEL: Oh my God. Oh my God.

STEPHEN: And you're an atheist of convenience. Very sensible.

RACHEL: Did you come here . . . did you . . . did you travel through a wormhole?

STEPHEN: You haven't read the papers?

RACHEL: Huh?

STEPHEN: I was wrong about the wormholes. There's no surviving them.

RACHEL: Wow.

STEPHEN: Bummer, right?

RACHEL: How are you here? Am I crazy? I'm losing my mind, aren't I?

STEPHEN: This is your mind on drugs.

RACHEL: I was reading. I lost track of time.

STEPHEN: Space and time not only affect but are also affected by everything that happens in the universe. Think about it.

RACHEL: They're going to lock down the school. I can't get my books. I can't open my locker. I don't know what to do.

STEPHEN: Thirty-two, seven, forty-six.

RACHEL: Huh?

STEPHEN: Your locker.

RACHEL: Thirty-two, seven, forty-six!

(She jumps up and tries the combination. The locker opens. She turns around. Stephen Hawking is gone.)

(Lights shift. Nelson and Arthur standing in the cereal aisle at ShopRite.)

NELSON: Crunchy? Flaky?

ARTHUR: I don't know.

NELSON: Does she like frosted or plain?

ARTHUR: I don't know.

NELSON: Chex? Raisin Bran? Total?

ARTHUR: I don't know, Nelson.

(They move a few inches.)

NELSON: Wow. There sure are a lot of cereals. OK. Try to picture her sitting down to breakfast.

ARTHUR: I can't. I can't picture her at all.

NELSON: She has an empty bowl in front of her.

ARTHUR: No.

NELSON: A spoon. A napkin.

ARTHUR: I can't do this, Nelson. This is too hard.

NELSON: She reaches out. She picks up a box. She opens it and pours it into her bowl . . . What color is the box?!

(Pause. Arthur crumbles.)

ARTHUR: I don't know. I never noticed what color box her cereal was in. I never noticed that she ate cereal. I was out of the house before she got up. I came home at nine. I don't know what she ate for dinner. I don't know what she packed for lunch.

NELSON: She buys actually.

ARTHUR: I don't know. I don't know her. Let's go. Please. Let's go home.

NELSON: You could get to know her now. It'll be fun. We could both get to know her.

ARTHUR: She doesn't want me to know her.

NELSON: That's OK. She doesn't want me to know her either. You just have to be persistent.

ARTHUR: She hates me.

NELSON: No.

ARTHUR: I don't blame her.

NELSON: She doesn't hate you.

ARTHUR: I used to be a senior vice president. I used to wear a suit and tie. Now I can't even get dressed.

NELSON: You are dressed.

ARTHUR: I used to tell sixty-five people what to do. All those people. All gone.

NELSON: How about Rice Crispies?

ARTHUR: If I hadn't run into that guy in the stairwell. Some guy with a flashlight. I don't know who that guy was. I'll never know.

NELSON: Or maybe Corn Flakes.

ARTHUR: I'd be gone too. I should be gone too.

NELSON: I bet she likes Cheerios. Everyone likes Cheerios.

ARTHUR: Sixty-five people. Now I can't even get dressed.

NELSON: You are dressed, Mr. S. *(Pause.)* Hey, we'll get one of everything! It'll be great. We'll get one of every cereal. And we'll all eat breakfast together. Every day.

ARTHUR: I don't eat.

NELSON: Now you'll eat. We'll eat cereal.

(Lights shift. We hear a rendition of "Amazing Grace" as the church bell chimes ten times. Lights up on the Stein kitchen. We hear the churchgoers, Sylvia, Jesus, Arthur, Rachel and Nelson, returning. As they enter:)

SYLVIA: Never. I mean, I've only been worshipping for three months, but I've never seen a triple miracle, praise God. And on your first time.

NELSON: *(Modestly.)* I just felt . . . I mean, the music was so beautiful.

(As we see Nelson, the bandage is off his nose. Sylvia is carrying his sling and his crutches.)

SYLVIA: You let Jesus into your heart, and he made you whole. Reverend Peter was beside himself. I only wish I'd been able to fill every pew in the church to witness it.

(Rachel goes to the cabinet and takes down some Life cereal. She pours it into a bowl. Arthur, exhausted, goes to his place at the table and slumps down, more depressed than ever.)

SYLVIA: It meant so much to me that you three came today. Thank you. Thank you Jesus.

RACHEL: *(Looking in the refrigerator.)* I should have prayed for milk.

NELSON: Oh no! We forgot milk!

(Rachel begins eating her cereal dry.)

SYLVIA: While we're all so moved by the spirit, shall we make a whole day of it? I'm on my way to the women's shelter. We're ministering to the poor and offering hot lunches.

(Jesus reaches under the counter and brings out a huge soup tureen.)

RACHEL: Could you bring me back some food?

SYLVIA: Rachel! Why don't you come? You won't believe the feeling you get helping someone less fortunate.

RACHEL: I'm hungry.

SYLVIA: Arthur?

ARTHUR: I'm a little tired.

NELSON: Gosh, I'd love to. It sounds very life affirming, but I've got to go over

my Torah portion before my private with Mr. Levine. He's really going at quite a clip.

SYLVIA: Your Torah portion?

NELSON: Two kids are turning thirteen next month so we might do a triple Bar Mitzvah. But Rabbi Baumbach says I really have to pick up the pace.

SYLVIA: *(To Nelson.)* I just thought . . . I mean, you just had this life-changing experience . . .

NELSON: I did. Absolutely.

SYLVIA: Oh.

(She takes the soup tureen from Jesus.)

SYLVIA: Thank you Jesus. So, will you be coming next Sunday? To Blessed Name?

NELSON: Definitely. I wouldn't miss it.

ARTHUR: Think I might take a little nap.

(He exits.)

(Jesus gives Sylvia a little pat on the shoulder, and she is strengthened by it.)

SYLVIA: All right then. We'll all go together again! Wonderful. Have a blessed afternoon everyone!

RACHEL: Ta.

(Sylvia and Jesus leave.)

NELSON: So . . . How about that? What a morning, right?

(Rachel wads up a brochure and throws it at him. It beans him in the head.)

NELSON: Oops!

RACHEL: Catch!

(She throws another wad, which he swats at with his left hand.)

NELSON: What are you doing, Rachel?

RACHEL: Catch, damn it!

(She throws. He tries to catch with his right arm but it hurts.)

NELSON: Ow!

RACHEL: "I'm healed! Thank you Jesus! I can see!"

NELSON: I didn't say that.

RACHEL: Freakin' phony. Let me see you hop on one leg.

(He does.)

RACHEL: The sprained leg, stupid.

(He tries but it is clearly painful.)

NELSON: Well, maybe I'm not completely healed. But I'm feeling considerably better.

RACHEL: Yeah. It's a miracle.

(She returns to her dry cereal.)

NELSON: Didn't you love it there, Rachel? The music was so stirring, and Reverend Peter had such a deep booming voice, and everyone was so nice. I really felt part of something big, didn't you?

RACHEL: God whore.

NELSON: What?

RACHEL: You have to pick, don't you get that? You can't be Jewish on Saturday and Evangelical on Sunday, just to cover all your bases.

NELSON: But I like them both.

RACHEL: You're not supposed to "like" them. And they're completely contradictory.

NELSON: Everything's contradictory. It's like quantum field theory.

RACHEL: No it's not.

NELSON: It is. If you ask, "Is light a particle or a wave?" Well, actually, it can be both. I mean, if you ask a particle-like question, you get a particle-like answer, and if you ask a wavelike question, you get a wavelike answer. You just can't ask both questions at the same time.

RACHEL: Is this what you do every time you move?

NELSON: What?

RACHEL: You follow some girl home. Feed her astrophysics. Join her mother's freak-show church.

NELSON: I just . . . I like you Rachel.

RACHEL: You have no reason to like me.

NELSON: Maybe it's pheromones.

RACHEL: Huh?

NELSON: Maybe you're giving off an indiscernible smell that I can't consciously recognize but that my body chemically responds to.

RACHEL: Don't smell me then, OK!? Don't smell me. Don't like me. And don't come around here pumping up my mother any more. She's fucking lost her mind, and I don't need you here feeding her sick fantasies.

NELSON: I think your mom just loves you. My mom was like that. She wants you to be safe.

RACHEL: My mother has been inculcated into a cult.

NELSON: Maybe. Or maybe she's asking a wavelike question and you're asking a particle-like question.

RACHEL: That is such bullshit!!! How do you shove all this science down my throat and then act like you're healed. You genuinely think you were healed by God today?

NELSON: Probably not.

RACHEL: Probably not.

NELSON: But the idea of it made me happy. I would have liked there to be a miracle.

RACHEL: See, I like REALITY! Well, I don't like it. But everything else pisses me off!

NELSON: I'm sorry, Rachel. I wish I could stop pissing you off. I wish I could say the right thing. I never can say the right thing, and I want so much to say the right thing to you.

(Long pause while Rachel considers this.)

RACHEL: I read your book.

NELSON: The Stephen Hawking? You read the Stephen Hawking? Oh my gosh. Why didn't you tell me?

RACHEL: You were too busy speaking in tongues.

NELSON: What did you think? Did you like it?

(Pause. Sigh.)

RACHEL: Yeah. I liked it.

NELSON: Oh my gosh. You liked it. Wow. This is like the greatest day of my life.

RACHEL: But it's not about all that miracle crap. It's about figuring out . . .

NELSON: *(Over this.)* This is so great.! You liked it. I knew . . . I just knew you would. Oh my gosh. There are so many things I want you to read. Brian Green, Ta-Pei Cheng, Simon Signh. *(Searching through his backpack.)* I've got articles . . . videos . . . Do you know about the LHC?

RACHEL: The what?

NELSON: The Large Hadron Collider. Oh my gosh, Rachel. You're going to love this. They're building this enormous machine at Cern, outside Geneva, Switzerland.

It's this incredibly long tunnel where they'll smash together particles with such speed and energy . . . they might be able to create conditions that were present in the universe a billionth of a second after the big bang. Oh my gosh. *(Back to searching through his backpack.)* I've got this article. You're going to love this. Where did I . . .

RACHEL: Wait. They might be able to prove the big bang?

NELSON: They might be able to replicate it.

RACHEL: And prove it wasn't God?

NELSON: Well, nobody knows that. But the science is so thrilling. I want to tell you so much! I've got so much . . . Soon . . . like in the next few years we're going to be able to observe so many things that were once only wild concepts.

RACHEL: Yeah?

NELSON: Wonderful things. Unimaginable things. Technology is catching up with theory. Fast. Really really fast. I mean, this is the greatest time to be alive.

RACHEL: *(A beat. Amazed.)* You really believe that, don't you?

NELSON: I do. Absolutely. We're so lucky. Oh, Rachel. I'm so happy you read the book. I'm so happy.

(Rachel considers him. She grabs his face, a bit violently. He recoils, afraid he's going to get his nose broken again. She pulls him back in and kisses him fast, awkwardly.)

NELSON: *(Dazed.)* What was that?

RACHEL: *(Baffled herself.)* I don't know. An experiment.

NELSON: You kissed me. Right?

RACHEL: Tell me more. The Large . . .

NELSON: Uhh . . . Hadron Collider. Yeah.

(She kisses him again.)

NELSON: Yeah. Yeah. They might be able to collide protons at such high speeds? They'll be broken down so small, they might be able to pinpoint the smallest fragments of the universe. They might be able to prove that all of matter, each of us, is made up of strings. That we're all strings, vibrating like an infinitely small orchestra.

(She kisses him again.)

NELSON: You kissed me three times. What does it mean?

RACHEL: I don't know.

NELSON: Does it mean you like me?

RACHEL: I don't know. *(She kisses him again.)* Maybe.

NELSON: Probably?

RACHEL: Maybe. *(She kisses him again.)* Tell me more.

(Lights shift. A bit later. Nelson is sitting at the kitchen table, playing a tape of his Torah portion and staring off into space. Rachel has left. He reaches the end of the tape and hits rewind. Arthur enters in his pajamas.)

ARTHUR: What time is it?

NELSON: Mr. S.! I'm so glad you're awake. Something unbelievable has happened.

ARTHUR: What was that singing? I thought I was dead.

NELSON: Mr. S., Rachel kissed me.

ARTHUR: Who?

NELSON: Your daughter, Rachel Stein.

ARTHUR: She kissed you?

NELSON: Seven times. And then she left. What does it mean?

ARTHUR: Was she armed?
NELSON: No.
ARTHUR: Did she look angry?
NELSON: Not really.
ARTHUR: I wonder what it means.
NELSON: You don't know?
ARTHUR: Did she say anything?
NELSON: She said it was an experiment.
ARTHUR: Maybe it really is the end of days.
NELSON: Yeah?
ARTHUR: I'm feeling a little light headed.
NELSON: When's the last time you ate?
ARTHUR: Yesterday, I think. What's today?
NELSON: Sunday.
ARTHUR: Maybe it was Friday.
NELSON: I think you better eat something.
ARTHUR: Weren't you practicing your Torah portion? It sounded good.
NELSON: Well, that was the tape.
ARTHUR: Let me hear you.
NELSON: I think you should eat something.
ARTHUR: After. I'll eat something after.
NELSON: You promise?
ARTHUR: Yes. Sing.
NELSON: *(Sings, like Elvis.) Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basarba lefanay ki-male'al ha'arets chamas.*
ARTHUR: It's good.
NELSON: Is it right?
ARTHUR: You've got a nice voice. What is it?
NELSON: Noah. Genesis. How's my pronunciation? Can you help me?
ARTHUR: Let me have a look.
NELSON: *(Handing Arthur his Bible.)* Here's where it starts. And here's the transliteration. And I've got the translations back here.
(Arthur tries to read it.)
NELSON: Here, sir. Here it is. "And God said to Noah . . . "
ARTHUR: I need my glasses.
NELSON: Where are they?
ARTHUR: I'm not sure.
NELSON: When did you use them last?

ARTHUR: It could have been . . . a year. *(The truth of this hits him.)* Or . . . more. More.

NELSON: You haven't read anything in a year, Mr. S.?

(Arthur doesn't answer.)

NELSON: I could look for them.

(Arthur just sits in thought.)

NELSON: It's OK, sir. Hey, I'll read it to you. I'll read what it means, and then you can help me with the Hebrew. OK? Here. "And God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before Me. The world is filled with man's crime. I will therefore destroy them with the earth.'"

(Arthur sits silent.)

NELSON: Pretty wrathful stuff, right, sir? Both Bibles are like that. It wasn't what I expected. I guess it's to scare us into being good, right? Unless you take it literally like Mrs. S. And then God just said things like that because he was a really angry guy.

ARTHUR: I don't know, Nelson.

NELSON: Anyway, I guess it doesn't really matter so much, right? What it means. For now. Mostly I just need it to sound right.

ARTHUR: I don't think I ever thought too much about what it means.

NELSON: Yeah, well . . .

ARTHUR: All those years of Hebrew school. I wonder why I never thought about what it means.

NELSON: Mostly they want the Hebrew to be right. So, could you sing it for me?

ARTHUR: Me? No, no, my voice is shot.

NELSON: But if you know how to say it . . .

(Pause.)

ARTHUR: In the drawer. There should be a magnifying glass. There.

(Nelson gets it for him.)

ARTHUR: Good. Let's see. *(Sings.)* Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basarba lefanay ki-male'al ha'arets . . .

NELSON: Wow. That was *so* authentic. I mean, really. That was really really great.

ARTHUR: Yeah?

NELSON: You sound just like Cantor Epstein.

ARTHUR: No.

NELSON: Really.

ARTHUR: *(Very flattered.)* Well. I used to be OK. A million years ago.

NELSON: No way. You're like the real deal, sir.

ARTHUR: I led the whole thing, you know. My Bar Mitzvah.

NELSON: You led the whole service?

ARTHUR: Soup to nuts.

NELSON: That's very impressive, sir.

ARTHUR: Temple Sholom. I still have the pen my grandpa Al gave me. *(He feels for it in his pocket, then realizes.)* Pajamas.

NELSON: I hope you'll come. To mine, I mean. Bar Mitzvah.

ARTHUR: When is it?

NELSON: It should be in October, but . . .

ARTHUR: It doesn't matter, Nelson. Of course I'm going to come.

NELSON: Excellent, sir!

ARTHUR: We better get working. I want you to do me proud. Sing that first line again.

NELSON: *(Now trying to sound like Arthur, rather than Elvis.) Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basarba lefanay ki-male'al ha'arets.*

(His pronunciation is bad, but his voice is clear and beautiful.)

ARTHUR: *(Very moved.)* That's beautiful.

NELSON: I know I need to listen to the tape more.

ARTHUR: It's beautiful. All right. Let's get to work. Vayom*er*, not Vayom*ar*. You see?

NELSON: Vayomer.

ARTHUR: Good. *Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basar — not kol-baser,* OK?

NELSON: *Kol basar.* Good. That's good, sir. Very good. *Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basar.*

ARTHUR: OK. OK. Now it needs to rise here. Gosh, I'm starving. Are you hungry?

NELSON: I could use a little cereal.

ARTHUR: Bring it out! We'll eat while we work.

NELSON: *(Scrambling to get boxes of cereal.)* I'll bring them all. And we can have a little of each.

ARTHUR: We have a lot of work to do, Nelson. I think we're going to have to work every day after school to get you ready. I want you to sing those other boys under the Bema.

NELSON: That's great sir. I'll be here. Every day.

(Lights shift.)

(Rachel and Stephen Hawking are sitting behind Starbucks. Rachel is stoned, smoking her funny cigarette and drinking a mochachino.)

STEPHEN: You kissed him?

RACHEL: Seven times. What does it mean?

STEPHEN: It's not really my area of expertise.

RACHEL: Yeah. Me either.

(Pause while they chew this over.)

RACHEL: I loved your book. So much. So much, Stephen. Can I call you Stephen?

STEPHEN: Call me Dr. Hawking.

RACHEL: You make sense of . . . everything. Of the universe. It all always seemed so incomprehensible and pointless to me. Where *did* we come from? Why are we here? I don't know. But it makes me feel that someday we might know.

STEPHEN: The cake is in the search. Finding out is the icing.

RACHEL: Wow. Did you write that?

STEPHEN: No. It's your funny cigarettes.

RACHEL: Nelson says it's a wonderful time to be alive. Isn't that amazing? That he really feels that way? I always thought that optimism and joy were a sign of low intellect. But he seems fairly bright. When I'm with him, I almost feel hopeful. But then I go home and my mother is waiting for the apocalypse like it's a Greyhound Bus.

STEPHEN: Well, we do need to work on an alternative.

RACHEL: To what?

STEPHEN: Earth.

RACHEL: Earth?

STEPHEN: The end *is* coming.

RACHEL: Oh my God! Even my hallucinations are raving. I am so fucked up!

STEPHEN: It's all about you, isn't it? Didn't you read any of the transcripts from my symposium?

RACHEL: What did they say?

STEPHEN: We have maybe one hundred years.

RACHEL: And then what? The Rapture?

STEPHEN: An enormous rogue meteorite. A genetically engineered virus. Sudden global warming. Nuclear war.

RACHEL: But not the Rapture, right?

STEPHEN: The human race needs to spread out into space for the survival of the species. We can have a permanent base on the moon in twenty years. If we get cracking.

RACHEL: But Stephen, why not just let it all go? Human annihilation. Maybe something more intelligent will grow — less destructive.

STEPHEN: Survival of the species is one of our most basic human instincts. You should really think about why you kissed Nelson. And read my pa-

pers — buy them and read them. And give your mother a break. We're all looking for answers.

(He starts backing out.)

RACHEL: Don't leave. I have so much to ask you.

STEPHEN: You're bringing me down, man.

(He rolls away.)

(Lights shift. The church bell chimes three times. The Stein living room, late at night. There is a thunder and lightning storm. The sound of rain. Offstage we hear Sylvia calling out softly.)

SYLVIA: Jesus, where are you? *(A hall light comes on. Sylvia comes out to the kitchen in her nightgown.)* Jesus? Are you there?

(He comes out of the shadows.)

SYLVIA: Oh Jesus! Thank God. I was so scared. I just woke up, and I didn't know where you were. I thought it was happening. I thought I'd been left behind.

(She goes to him and he takes her in his arms.)

JESUS: Did you have a bad dream?

SYLVIA: There was a storm, like tonight. Thunder and explosions. The sky was on fire. I heard screaming, and I was trying to find Rachel and Arthur, but I couldn't. So I prayed that you would come and take me in your arms. And you did. *(Realizing.)* Just like now. You took me in your arms and you whispered, "It's time, Sylvia."

JESUS: *(Whispering.)* It's time Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Tonight? Now?

JESUS: Soon.

SYLVIA: This is so much like my dream. Is this my dream?

JESUS: Soon.

SYLVIA: When, Jesus? Please. I need to know.

JESUS: But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven . . .

JESUS AND SYLVIA: Neither the Son, but the Father.

JESUS: Just keep preparing.

SYLVIA: All right. *(A moment.)* But, you must have some idea when it will be.

JESUS: Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Could you just give me a general idea?

JESUS: Soon.

SYLVIA: A little less general? I know. I shall not knoweth. I know. But I feel this panic, Jesus. That it will all start happening. That I won't know where Rachel is. That she'll be off at school, or at the library, or

wherever it is she goes now, I don't even know. And it will all start happening, and I won't be able to get to her. To take her with me. Or . . . Or . . . to say good-bye. Please Jesus. Just . . . Just blink. OK?

JESUS: Blink?

SYLVIA: Once if I guess wrong, and twice if I guess right.

JESUS: Sylvia. This is not a game.

SYLVIA: Please. Just a blink. What could a blink hurt?

JESUS: You need more faith Sylvia.

SYLVIA: I know, but I'm so anxious. I don't think I'll sleep again unless I know something for sure. Now, I'm just going to say some days. One for no, two for yes.

JESUS: This isn't right.

SYLVIA: Is it going to happen tonight?

(There is a long pause. And then Jesus blinks once.)

SYLVIA: Was that a blink? Jesus, was it?

(Jesus remains stony faced.)

SYLVIA: It was! It was a single blink! It's not tonight. Thank you Jesus. Thank you so much! OK. Tomorrow. Monday.

(Jesus blinks once.)

SYLVIA: One blink. Tuesday?

(Jesus blinks once.)

SYLVIA: Was that one blink or two? For Tuesday? I'm sorry, I couldn't tell.

(Jesus again blinks once.)

SYLVIA: Not Tuesday! Wednesday?

(Jesus pauses, then blinks twice — or was it something in his eye?)

(Stunned.)

SYLVIA: Jesus. You just blinked twice, didn't you — you blinked twice for Wednesday. Or was that something in your eye? Could you do it again?

JESUS: I don't like this, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: All right. It's Wednesday. The apocalypse is coming Wednesday. End days. The Rapture. Armageddon. My dream was right. Wasn't it?

JESUS: Just keep doing your good works. Spread the good news. Save as many people as you possibly can.

SYLVIA: What about Rachel, Jesus? Will she be coming too?

JESUS: I can't say.

SYLVIA: Oh, please. She asked for your forgiveness. You heard her today in church.

JESUS: It was under some duress.

SYLVIA: But she did say it. Shouldn't that count?

JESUS: I don't think she really meant it, Sylvia. Not in her heart.

SYLVIA: Oh, Jesus. She's a teenager. You know how they are. Please forgive Rachel and Arthur. Please don't leave them behind.

JESUS: We'll see. Good-bye, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: Good-bye? Where are you going? Don't go.

JESUS: I have to go to come back. Right?

SYLVIA: Can't you go Tuesday and come back Wednesday?

JESUS: You don't need me with you every minute now, Sylvia. You're past that. You can carry me in your heart, now. You can do the good works in my name.

SYLVIA: You're mad at me, aren't you, Jesus? I shouldn't have pushed you so hard. I always do that. I'm very pushy.

JESUS: You're a good person, Sylvia.

SYLVIA: I am?

JESUS: You're a good person, and you're doing good in the world.

SYLVIA: Thank you Jesus.

JESUS: All right then.

SYLVIA: Can you just come back at night and help me get to sleep? Can you sit with me while I pray?

JESUS: You pray, and I'll listen. You dream, and I'll be in your dreams. I'll come back for you when I come back for all the saved.

SYLVIA: I'm scared.

JESUS: Have faith Sylvia.

SYLVIA: I love you Jesus.

JESUS: I love you too.

(Jesus leaves.)

SYLVIA: Come back for me.

(Sylvia stands alone as the lights fade till we see only the ghostly glow of her nightgown.)

(Lights down.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II

The church bell chimes four times. Lights up. Monday afternoon. Sylvia, Arthur, and Rachel are all in the kitchen.

RACHEL: So . . . now you're a prophet.

SYLVIA: It's not important how I know. I just know.

RACHEL: Have you told anyone else about this?

SYLVIA: Just a few people.

RACHEL: Who?

SYLVIA: I told Reverend Peter and the congregation.

RACHEL: OK.

SYLVIA: And I put an ad in the Penny Saver.

RACHEL: Was your name on it?

SYLVIA: Of course not.

RACHEL: OK.

SYLVIA: And I handed out flyers in front of ShopRite today.

RACHEL: Oh my God, Mom! What did they say?

SYLVIA: The Rapture is coming this Wednesday. Repent and be saved.

RACHEL: Oh, my God. I'll never be able to leave the house again.

SYLVIA: I'm trying to save as many people as I can. I'm trying to do good in the world. Will you wait with me Wednesday?

RACHEL: I have a social studies quiz Wednesday.

SYLVIA: It's not going to matter, honey. None of this is going to matter.

RACHEL: But when you're wrong, I'll have to make it up Thursday during study hall, which means I won't be able to audit physics, which I'm going to do now, by the way.

SYLVIA: There won't be any Thursday. The Rapture will have started, and there will be chaos on earth and we'll be gone.

ARTHUR: I just bought milk. Will it keep while we're gone?

SYLVIA: We won't need milk where we're going.

RACHEL: You bought milk?

ARTHUR: I went grocery shopping today.

(Rachel goes to the refrigerator and opens the door.)

RACHEL: Oh my God It's full! There's lunch meat. Cheese! Apples! Oranges! Yogurt! Wow. Thanks, Dad!

(She goes to him and gives him a hug. For the first time in a long time. He's very moved.)

ARTHUR: You make a list Rach. Every day you make a list. And I'll go back and get whatever you want.

(To Sylvia.)

ARTHUR: You too, honey.

SYLVIA: We'll be gone Wednesday. We won't want for anything.

RACHEL: Is there bread?

ARTHUR: Check the bread box.

(She does. Jumping up and down like a little kid.)

RACHEL: Rye! Yay! I'm going to make a ham-and-cheese sandwich! There's mustard. Yay! Does anyone else want a sandwich?

ARTHUR: I could use a half.

RACHEL: I'll split one with you. Baloney! Wow! This is so excellent. Mom, you want one?

SYLVIA: No, hon. Will you stay with me?

RACHEL: Won't Jesus be able to find me at school?

SYLVIA: I need to have you with me. I need to know that we're all going. Together. That we're all going.

(There's a knock on the door.)

NELSON: Mr. S.? *(Nelson enters.)* Hey! Everybody!

RACHEL: There's food! You want a sandwich?

NELSON: Food?

RACHEL: My dad went shopping.

NELSON: Mr. S.! By yourself?

ARTHUR: I made three trips.

NELSON: That is so awesome!

RACHEL: You want a sandwich?

NELSON: Sure. Can I help?

RACHEL: Spread the mustard.

SYLVIA: Will you stay with me, Arthur?

ARTHUR: Yes, Sylvia.

RACHEL: Pickles! For the list.

ARTHUR: Got it!

SYLVIA: Rachel? Will you stay?

NELSON: Where are we staying?

RACHEL: You didn't get the memo?

NELSON: What?

RACHEL: Jesus told my mom . . .

SYLVIA: Nobody *told* me, honey. He didn't *tell* me.

RACHEL: The Rapture is coming Wednesday.

NELSON: We have a history of U.S. government quiz Wednesday.

SYLVIA: There's not going to be any history. There's not going to be any U.S. There's not going to be any government. I know this is hard for all of you to accept, but all our earthly needs will vanish.

NELSON: What's going to happen exactly?

SYLVIA: Well, first the dead forgiven will rise.

RACHEL: From their graves?

NELSON: What was that movie? Where the dead people rise up from their graves?

SYLVIA: Their *souls.*

RACHEL: *Night of the Living Dead.* Ughhh.

SYLVIA: Their *souls* will rise. And then Jesus will come with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, and the living will rise to the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

NELSON: Cool. Count me in Mrs. S.

RACHEL: We have school.

NELSON: But we have school every day. This seems like a once-in-a-lifetime event. What time does it all start?

SYLVIA: We'll begin our vigil at midnight on Tuesday.

NELSON: Should I bring anything?

RACHEL: That's it? You're in? She says the world is ending, and you start packing your bags?

NELSON: Do we need to pack?

RACHEL: What are you going to tell your stepparents? Won't they think it's weird if you leave the house at midnight?

NELSON: They're still kind of in that honeymoon phase. So . . . they don't keep all that good track. Should I bring something? I make a really nice dip with onion soup mix and water chestnuts.

ARTHUR: I'll pick up some chips. Maybe a veggie platter.

SYLVIA: We're going to be praying. And repenting.

NELSON: Definitely.

ARTHUR: And I'll make everybody waffles for breakfast.

SYLVIA: We're going to be reading the Bible.

ARTHUR: Nelson, I'll finally get to teach you gin. Or, wait! There are four of us! We could play hearts.

SYLVIA: No cards, Arthur. What is wrong with you today?

ARTHUR: *(Over this.)* Your mother used to be a killer hearts player. Remember, hon? Our third year at NYU? We called her the shark.

RACHEL: Really?

ARTHUR: We used to wager copying fees at the student center, and your mother and I . . .

SYLVIA: We're not going to have time to play games, Arthur.

ARTHUR: But it's the whole day, right? We'll all be here a long time together.

NELSON: Unless Jesus comes like, right after midnight.

ARTHUR: It'll be great. Nelson, bring your guitar.

SYLVIA: This isn't a party! This is your last chance to repent. To be saved. And when he comes, you won't need to play games. You'll be free. You'll feel joyful and loved.

ARTHUR: I do feel loved.

(He goes to put his arm around her. She shrinks away from him, involuntarily, repulsed. There is a quiet moment when everyone takes this in.)

SYLVIA: Rachel? Will you stay?

RACHEL: Why?

SYLVIA: Haven't I explained this??

RACHEL: No. Why do you want me? Why do you want Dad? It doesn't seem like you can stand the sight of us here. Why do you want us there?

SYLVIA: Of course I want you here.

RACHEL: You want our souls. The rest of us you could do without.

SYLVIA: That's not true.

RACHEL: What happens when Jesus doesn't come?

SYLVIA: He's going to come.

RACHEL: But what if he doesn't?

SYLVIA: I have complete faith in him.

NELSON: Stay Rachel.

RACHEL: You think Jesus is going to come for us?

NELSON: I don't know. But we already know what happens if we go to school. Now we'll find out what happens if we don't.

RACHEL: We'll be marked absent. That's what happens.

ARTHUR: I'll make Reuben sandwiches for lunch.

RACHEL: This is wrong, Dad. You know it's all crazy.

ARTHUR: We'll all be together. All four of us. For twenty-four hours. We'll be a family.

RACHEL: And then what?

NELSON: Stay Rachel.

RACHEL: Mom. If he doesn't come — will you give it all up?

ARTHUR: Rachel. Don't do that to your mother.

RACHEL: But if she's so sure . . . once there's proof that she's wrong . . .

NELSON: Rabbi Baumbach says faith doesn't need proof. If there's proof, it isn't faith.

ARTHUR: That's very smart. He sounds very smart.

RACHEL: What are you talking about? You're an atheist.

ARTHUR: I was observant at one point in my life.

RACHEL: You were? What happened?

ARTHUR: I got busy. Working. Making money. Starting a family.

RACHEL: You gave it up for her.

ARTHUR: No.

RACHEL: You did. She wanted you to stop, and you caved.

ARTHUR: Other things became important. I made choices.

RACHEL: It always has to be her way.

SYLVIA: Rachel. If you'll stay Wednesday, if you'll really repent . . .

RACHEL: Yeah?

SYLVIA: In your heart . . .

RACHEL: Yeah?

SYLVIA: If Jesus doesn't come by midnight, I'll stop. All of it.

ARTHUR: You don't have to do that Sylvia.

SYLVIA: I know he'll come. Please wait with me, Rachel. Having you off at school when it all happens — I just won't be able to stand it. It'll be that day all over again. All the chaos and panic, and I won't know if you're all right. Please.

(Pause.)

RACHEL: *(A breath.)* Swiss cheese? On the Reuben?

ARTHUR: Of course. And pastrami. And sauerkraut.

RACHEL: I'll stay.

(Lights down. Tuesday night. Lights up on Sylvia, Rachel, and Arthur sitting at the kitchen table. They each have a Bible opened in front of them.)

RACHEL: *(Whispering to Arthur.)* What about now?

ARTHUR: *(Whispering back.)* Eighteen after.

RACHEL: That's it??

SYLVIA: Read.

RACHEL: I am. I'm reading.

ARTHUR: Maybe we should eat a little something. Anybody else hungry?

SYLVIA: Shhhh. *(Looking over at his Bible.)* Arthur. You're not even on the right book. Go to Revelations. *(She sighs deeply and goes back to her Bible.)*

ARTHUR: Oh! Sorry. *(Arthur searches for the right page. Reaches into his pocket and pulls out his glasses.)* Guess what? I found my glasses yesterday.

RACHEL: Yeah?

SYLVIA: Good. Put them on. Read.

RACHEL: Where were they?

ARTHUR: In my briefcase.

RACHEL: You hadn't looked in there? All this time?

ARTHUR: It was files of paperwork from people . . . they don't exist any more. All those names.

RACHEL: God, Dad.

ARTHUR: It was strange. It seemed completely unconnected to me. Like I was looking through someone else's things. It's hard to believe that was my life.

RACHEL: You were brave.

ARTHUR: Nah.

RACHEL: To look in there. Yes, you were.

ARTHUR: Well, I'm glad to have my glasses back. Though I think my prescription's changed.

SYLVIA: Try. Please. Just try to read.

RACHEL: OK.

ARTHUR: Sorry.

(They try for a moment.)

RACHEL: *(Whispering.)* What about now?

ARTHUR: *(Whispering.)* Almost twenty-two after.

RACHEL: *(Whispering.)* That's it???

(Nelson bursts in. He is no longer dressed as Elvis. His hair is not slicked back. He is wearing jeans and a T-shirt, carrying a paper bag, a Tupperware container of dip, and his guitar. He is a bundle of anxious, neurotic energy. He speaks breathlessly, with little pause.)

NELSON: Hi! Everybody. Rachel. Hi. Sorry I'm late. I've got some really bad news.

(He bends over to catch his breath while everyone stares at him.)

NELSON: No water chestnuts. I mix the sour cream with the soup mix, go to the cabinet — nothing. Not even a four-ounce can! So, I run to the ShopRite, which should never be closed since the sign says 24/7, and it was closed! Can you believe that? I mean, *can we count on the ShopRite or not?!* I considered going door-to-door asking for water chestnuts, but I worried that at this hour it might not be appropriate, so I went back home, got the dip as it is, and brought it anyway but it's just not going to be as good as if I'd made it with the water chestnuts so . . . sorry.

RACHEL: Where's your costume?

NELSON: It's here. In this paper bag.

RACHEL: Why?

NELSON: In case I get a little nervous. I used to get a little nervous, or *jumpy* really, loquacious, if I wasn't wearing it, but I don't think I'm going to need to wear it any more.

RACHEL: Why not?

NELSON: You said I shouldn't.

RACHEL: I don't want you to not wear it for me.

NELSON: So should I wear it?

RACHEL: You have to decide for yourself.

NELSON: Well, I did. I mean, I decided for myself to do it for you.

RACHEL: I don't want you to do it for me.

NELSON: OK. Well, I think I am doing it for myself.

RACHEL: OK.

NELSON: And my new stepfather, Ben, he's kind of having a hard time with the outfit. *(Breathless. He rocks back and forth and paces as he speaks.)* And Rabbi Baumbach was thinking the outfit might not be so great at the actual Bar Mitzvah. I mean, he doesn't have a problem with me wearing it to Hebrew school or anything, though the parents of the other kids expressed some concern that it's distracting.

ARTHUR: You seem a little jumpy.

NELSON: No, no. I'm fine. But mostly, ever since you said that I should stop wearing it, it's got me to thinking I mean, I'd leap into a burning building for you no question *so why wouldn't I just stop wearing the outfit?! What's important to me?! Make a choice!* Although, in some ways, the burning building might be a little easier. Quicker, for example?

RACHEL: *(Caught up in his panic.)* Put on the fucking outfit, for Christ's sakes!

SYLVIA: Rachel!

RACHEL: Sorry. Put on the outfit.

NELSON: Do you want me to?

RACHEL: ACHHHH!!!

ARTHUR: Maybe put on the belt. Would that help? If you put on the belt?

NELSON: It might.

RACHEL: Put on the friggin' belt!

SYLVIA: Rachel!

RACHEL: Sorry.

(Nelson scrambles through the bag and retrieves the glittery Elvis belt. He tries to put it through his jeans loops, but it's too wide. His hands are shaking, the shake of the addict off his fix as he struggles.)

NELSON: Gosh! I think you might be right, Mr. S! I think I might be just a little jumpy.

RACHEL: Oh, for Pete's sakes! *(She grabs the belt from him and buckles it around his waist.)* There.

NELSON: *(Breathes a deep sigh. A wave of relief floods his entire body until he is limp.)* Thanks. That's good. That's better. Thanks.

(Rachel studies him for a moment. Ruffles his hair a bit. Steps back to regard him.)

RACHEL: You look good. Like this. I like it.

NELSON: Yeah?

RACHEL: It's good.

NELSON: Thanks.

(There is a brief hush. The phone rings.)

ARTHUR: At this hour we're getting a call?

(Sylvia answers it.)

SYLVIA: Hello?

ARTHUR: Is somebody dead?

SYLVIA: No, Mrs. Henson. Nothing's happened. Not yet.

RACHEL: Rapture hotline.

SYLVIA: I'll let you know. As soon as I do. OK. God bless you, Mrs. Henson.

(She hangs up.)

ARTHUR: Should we crack open that dip?

SYLVIA: We should pray.

ARTHUR: And then we can have the dip after?

SYLVIA: Maybe.

ARTHUR: I bought some of those exotic chips — you know, they're made of yams and beets and unexpected things like that.

SYLVIA: All right. Everyone gather around.

RACHEL: Did you get any plain chips?

ARTHUR: Oh yeah. I got a variety.

SYLVIA: Stop talking about chips! I mean honestly. Let's pray!

RACHEL: OK. Let's pray.

NELSON: Definitely. I printed out some stuff from RaptureAlert.com. Very cool website. Have you visited it Mrs. S.?

SYLVIA: No. Thank you, Nelson. Maybe we can look at that later. *(She looks through her knapsack and pulling out several sheets of prayers.)* Here are some things Reverend Peter pieced together for me from Corinthians and Mark.

ARTHUR: And then maybe Nelson could do some of his Torah portion. It's fantastic. He sounds just like an old Jew.

NELSON: Mr. S.

ARTHUR: The dovening. The intonation. It's like I'm listening to my uncle Morty.

SYLVIA: Lord Jesus, I invite you into my heart anew today, and I ask forgiveness for all of my sins. Jesus, thank you for dying for my sins and for forgiving me of them through your shed blood on the cross. Please take away all the sinful "old things" in my heart that defile me, especially — fill in the blank.

RACHEL: Fill in the blank?

SYLVIA: You know how you've sinned, Rachel. Ask for forgiveness.

NELSON: This is tough.

SYLVIA: Think about your regrets.

NELSON: I feel really bad about the water chestnuts.

ARTHUR: I bet this boy doesn't have a thing in his life to regret.

SYLVIA: *Just ask forgiveness all right!?* Could you all just ask Jesus for forgiveness? This really doesn't have to be so complicated! If you could all just FOCUS and get your minds off dip and waffles and chips and your uncle Morty, if you could all just FOCUS, maybe you could be forgiven and saved and raptured and not left to burn in the fiery furnace of hell on earth!!! OK?

NELSON: Got it!

SYLVIA: Please take away all the sinful "old things" in my heart that defile me, especially — *(She looks around ominously. They are all silent.)* And send your Holy Spirit afresh into my life to help me, heal me, lead me, and transform me. In Jesus Christ I pray, Amen."

(They all wait for a moment, afraid to be wrong, then answer with "Amen.")

ARTHUR: So, good! So we prayed! Let's have a nosh!

SYLVIA: Let's see if anything's started happening yet.

(She turns on the TV, turns the sound down, and sits raptly watching the silent picture.)

NELSON: That static? They think some of it is electronic noise produced by the big bang over 13.7 billion years ago.

RACHEL: My parents just won't pay for cable.

(During the following, Arthur, Nelson, and Rachel pour bags of chips into bowls, get the dip ready, etc.)

NELSON: You think it'll be on the news, Mrs. S.?

RACHEL: Well if graves start getting uncovered and bodies start floating out . . .

ARTHUR: There will be that trumpet playing, right? That should be a dead giveaway, if we hear the trumpet playing.

NELSON: You know, I've got some stuff printed out from the website. Sort of a checklist.

RACHEL: These yam chips are actually very good.

ARTHUR: The dip is excellent. You know what we need?

RACHEL: Carrots.

ARTHUR: A nice piece of salami.

NELSON: Here it is. "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken."

ARTHUR: Nelson, give a look. Is the moon shining?

NELSON: *(He does.)* So far.

ARTHUR: So we're good. The moon is shining and no trumpets. Let's play cards!

SYLVIA: *(Sending him a look that could kill.)* How would everybody feel about a movie?

RACHEL: Are you kidding? I would love a movie!

NELSON: Excellent Mrs. S.

SYLVIA: Reverend Peter loaned me a couple of videos.

RACHEL: Oh.

(Sylvia pulls one out of her knapsack.)

RACHEL: Oh. Kirk Cameron.

SYLVIA: You know him?

RACHEL: He was on that sitcom.

SYLVIA: Then we'll start with this.

(Sylvia puts in Left Behind *as everyone gathers. Rachel and Arthur sit on the tiny couch. Nelson and Sylvia take the chairs.)*

RACHEL: They show those awful reruns. What was it?

NELSON: *Growing Pains.*

(The phone rings. Sylvia answers it. The following overlaps.)

SYLVIA: Hello? Oh, hi, Mr. Elmower. No, not yet. We're about to watch *Left Behind.*

NELSON: You didn't like that show?

RACHEL: Ughh.

SYLVIA: Reverend Peter says it's wonderful too. All right. I'll let you know as soon as I do. God bless you too.

NELSON: I liked all of them. *Partridge Family, Brady Bunch, Family Ties, Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best.*

RACHEL: Geek.

SYLVIA: Shhh. It's coming on.

(They watch for a few moments as the movie starts. We hear opening-credit music.)

SYLVIA: This will give you a better idea of what might happen. If you're left behind.

RACHEL: *(Yawning.)* I'm getting sleepy.

(She rests her head on Arthur. He puts his arm around her, and she snuggles in, falling asleep.)

NELSON: We should read the books. They're supposed to be real page turners.

SYLVIA: Well, if we had more time. Here it is.

(Arthur's head has fallen back, and he is nearly asleep too.)

SYLVIA: Rachel. It's starting. Arthur. Come on now. Wake up.

ARTHUR: *(Asleep.)* I'm awake.

NELSON: *(To Sylvia.)* The hour, not the company, right?

SYLVIA: I really wanted them to see this.

NELSON: We'll fill them in. I'll pay close attention. *(He leans back to watch. Though he fights it, his eyes want to close.)* Oh boy. Sorry. Just smack me. OK? If I start to doze.

(But little by little he gives in to sleep. Sylvia remains rapt on the screen. Taut. On alert. Lights fade.)

(Lights back up. Hours later. There is the fuzzy static of the TV. Sylvia sits staring off. The other three are asleep.)

NELSON: *(Murmuring in his sleep.)* Mom . . . Mommy. *(A shout that wakens him.)* Mom! *(Looking around, startled and disoriented. Realizing.)* Oh. Hey. Mrs. S. I must have dozed off. Did I miss anything?

(Sylvia shakes her head, no.)

NELSON: Wow. Four-thirty-six. Sorry. How was the movie?

(Sylvia just nods.)

NELSON: Really wish I'd seen it. Maybe I can borrow it some time. Or . . . oh. Right. Well, maybe we could watch it again later.

(Sylvia just stares off.)

NELSON: Are you OK, Mrs. S.? The waiting is hard. I know. I hate waiting. Do you want to take a little nap? I'll stay up. I'll wake you the second something happens. You want to be nice and rested when he comes, right? Mrs. S.?

SYLVIA: Nelson. Do you think Rachel really repented in church Sunday?

NELSON: Well, she asked for forgiveness. You heard her.

SYLVIA: But did she mean it in her heart?

NELSON: I kind of think she said it so you'd let her go back to school.

SYLVIA: Do you think she'll be saved?

NELSON: Jesus has to know for someone like Rachel, just saying it counts for more.

SYLVIA: I think she's going to be left behind, Nelson. I don't think she and Arthur will be saved.

NELSON: Really?

SYLVIA: Don't tell her that.

NELSON: No. Of course not.

SYLVIA: I'm so afraid. If they're left behind, I don't know. I don't know what I'll do.

NELSON: That's tough. I know for sure I'm not going if Rachel's not going.

SYLVIA: You know that?

NELSON: It just wouldn't be Heaven for me without her.

SYLVIA: You've only known Rachel a couple of weeks. Right?

NELSON: Yeah. How long have you known Jesus?

SYLVIA: Three months. And seventeen days.

NELSON: I guess sometimes you just know, huh?

SYLVIA: He's completely changed my life. If you'd known me before, Nelson. I was such a different person.

NELSON: Yeah?

SYLVIA: I questioned everything. I was really angry and competitive and judgmental and controlling. I never want to be like that again.

NELSON: Yeah.

SYLVIA: And then after what happened — you know?

NELSON: Yeah.

SYLVIA: That whole day I thought Arthur was dead. I couldn't find him. All the people he worked with gone. People I'd just seen a week before. Gone. I thought he was gone too.

NELSON: Yeah.

SYLVIA: I just don't trust the world any more, Nelson. I don't want to be here any more.

NELSON: You mean . . . earth?

SYLVIA: I want to be somewhere safe.

NELSON: I don't know. I really like it here.

SYLVIA: You're not afraid of death?

NELSON: Rabbi Baumbach says that knowing death is inevitable gives every moment of life meaning.

SYLVIA: He said that?

NELSON: Well, I don't think he was the first to say it. But I like it. Life isn't too bad. And even the bad stuff is interesting.

SYLVIA: But if you weren't saved, you'd be eternally damned on earth. Satan will take away all your joy anyway.

NELSON: I think if I'm with Rachel, I'll still be happy. And with Mr. S. And you too. It seems like an awful sacrifice to lose any of you. And Rabbi Baumbach. He's, you know, he's a really good guy. I could never imagine that guy doing anything mean to anybody. So, it really seems wrong that he wouldn't get to go.

SYLVIA: Maybe he'll repent. At the final hour. Maybe they'll all repent when they see it's true.

NELSON: But if they didn't, I'd have to tell Jesus that I was sorry, but I wasn't sorry. That I needed to stay here. Wouldn't you?

SYLVIA: I love him so much.

NELSON: I hope it doesn't come to that. I hope you don't have to make that choice.

(Lights shift. Morning. Sylvia is still staring off. Rachel and Nelson are asleep.)

ARTHUR: Morning hon. My arm — Ow ow ow. *(He tries to move it without waking Rachel.)* Guess we kind of petered out on you last night, huh. Whoa. It's almost lunchtime. You feel like waffles?

(Arthur extricates himself from the sleeping Rachel and sees that there is white makeup on his shirt where Rachel lay.)

ARTHUR: It's nice to know that white stuff comes off. *(Shaking his arm out.)* Oh, hey. Did anything happen last night?

SYLVIA: Are you mocking me?

ARTHUR: I'm sorry. I don't mean to do that.

SYLVIA: But you don't believe in any of it, do you?

ARTHUR: I believe in you.

(She's silent.)

ARTHUR: So, if I make them will you eat some? Or should I wait for the kids?

SYLVIA: What?

ARTHUR: Waffles.

SYLVIA: I'm not hungry.

ARTHUR: *(Studies her for a moment.)* It's going to be OK.

SYLVIA: What is?

ARTHUR: Us. Rachel. I know I've really let you down. For a long time. But I'm going to make it up to you. If you let me. If it's not too late.

(Sylvia is silent.)

ARTHUR: I'll go make the waffles. And if you get hungry, you can have some.

(Lights shift — hours later. Everyone is sitting around the living room, snacking. Sylvia is sitting with her Bible in her lap, reading.)

NELSON: Well, because light takes so long to travel, when we're observing something billions of miles away, we really are seeing events that happened billions of years ago. So actually we *are* looking into the distant past.

ARTHUR: This is unbelievable. Do you hear this, hon? We can see to billions of years ago.

RACHEL: Mom doesn't believe there was a billions of years ago any more. She thinks God created it all six thousand years ago and before that bubkes; all that dinosaur carbon sampling is a lot of crazy voodoo.

ARTHUR: Yeah?

SYLVIA: You know what I think, Arthur. Don't play stupid.

ARTHUR: I'm not playing.

RACHEL: Tell him about LISA.

ARTHUR: Who's Lisa?

NELSON: The laser interferometer space antenna.

ARTHUR: The who?

RACHEL: This is amazing. I don't even understand it really, but it blows my mind.

NELSON: It's these three hockey-puck-shaped spacecraft connected by laser beams that will be released about three million miles apart. And they'll search for gravitational waves.

ARTHUR: And why would they do that? It sounds very expensive.

NELSON: It'll answer a lot of mind-blowing questions, Mr. S. Like, how did the universe begin? Does space have edges? Does time have a beginning and an end?

ARTHUR: I never even knew I had those questions, right honey?

RACHEL: Well, soon, you'll have answers.

NELSON: They're hoping to launch it in 2015.

RACHEL: Soon, every question we've ever asked will have observable answers. Empirical proof. And then we'll have a whole new slew of questions. I mean, it's limitless -- how much we could learn. Why would you believe in God, when believing in science is thoroughly awe inspiring.

SYLVIA: You do everything you can think of to hurt me, Rachel — but, it's not about me. It's about *your* relationship to Jesus. It's about *your* salvation. It's about *your* soul.

RACHEL: Mom, can't you give up on my soul? It would be such a relief if you could just believe what you believe — I'll try not to be such a total ass about it, if you could just give up on my soul. Just let me not get saved.

SYLVIA: I can't do that, Rachel.

RACHEL: Why?

SYLVIA: That's like asking me to watch you run in front of a speeding bus and not rush out to save you. I'm your mother. I love you. I need to save you.

(There is a flash of lightning and, close after, a crack of thunder. The lights go out.)

RACHEL: *(In the dark.)* Holy shit! What was that?

NELSON: Was that the trumpet?

ARTHUR: I think we're having a little electrical storm.

SYLVIA: No. This is it. It's happening.

(The lights flicker. Another flash and thunder clap.)

RACHEL: Jesus! That's close.

SYLVIA: Rachel, watch your mouth!

NELSON: You think this is the beginning of the end, Mrs. S.?

SYLVIA: I know it. It's starting.

(The lights flicker back on. The phone rings. Sylvia answers it.)

SYLVIA: Hello? Carla?

RACHEL: Yikes. See if the TV is working.

SYLVIA: *(On the phone.)* I think so too. All right, Carla. God bless. See you soon.

ARTHUR: They say it's a tornado.

SYLVIA: They don't know.

RACHEL: Wow. Was this in the forecast?

NELSON: I don't think so.

SYLVIA: This is it. I can feel it. It's starting.

ARTHUR: Where are the flashlights? In case the power goes out again.

RACHEL: Second drawer. I'll get some candles.

(Another flash and crack. The following overlaps.)

SYLVIA: Rachel. Do you accept Jesus as your personal lord and savior?

RACHEL: Come on, Mom. We've been through this and through this.

ARTHUR: *(The flashlights.)* They're not here.

SYLVIA: *(Growing urgency.)* Just say it. Please.

RACHEL: I said it. Try the first drawer, Dad. I know they're in one of them.

SYLVIA: Say it again.

RACHEL: Mom, it's pointless. You know who I am.

ARTHUR: Huh. Not here either.

SYLVIA: *(In a panic.)* You agreed to stay here with me. To wait for him.

RACHEL: Well, I've got the candles. Just get some matches.

ARTHUR: And they would be . . .

RACHEL: Next to the stove.

SYLVIA: It's all meaningless if you don't repent.

RACHEL: I'm not going to say it again.

SYLVIA: *(Getting more and more frantic.)* Rachel. I don't want to go without you. Tell Jesus that you really mean it in your heart.

RACHEL: Mom.

ARTHUR: Got 'em.

SYLVIA: *(Sobbing.)* It's not too late. Please Rachel.

RACHEL: Oh God, Mom.

SYLVIA: Honey, I can't lose you. Please.

RACHEL: OK, OK! I mean it in my heart!

SYLVIA: Thank you. Thank you Rachel. Pray, everyone. This is it. Let's all pray.

(Sylvia falls to her knees and begins praying. Nelson joins her on the floor.)

ARTHUR: *(Still watching the TV.)* Power's out down county. But they say it should move through fast.

(Another flash of lightning and clap of thunder. The sound of pelting hail.)

RACHEL: Oh my God, is that hail? In September?

NELSON: Sounds like stars falling, right?

SYLVIA: Rachel join us. Come pray.

(Lightning and thunder.)

RACHEL: Come on Dad.

(She gets down beside Nelson and Sylvia. The phone starts ringing, then the lights go out and the phone stops.)

SYLVIA: Jesus. We're ready for you.

(Arthur is trying to light the match.)

ARTHUR: Ow!

SYLVIA: Please come for us Jesus. We all repent our wicked, sinful ways.

(Arthur lights a candle. Everyone is lit by the glow.)

SYLVIA: We're all grateful for the sacrifices you made for us, Jesus. We're ready to be saved. We're ready to join you.

(The lights come back up. The hail is replaced by a gentle rain. The TV is back on. Arthur blows out the candle.)

ARTHUR: Looks like it's blown over. They say it's moving north.

RACHEL: *(Very unnerved and bewildered.)* Wasn't that wild? Hail in September?

NELSON: Yeah.

RACHEL: That sudden storm like that? It was so close. Wasn't that weird?

ARTHUR: Global warming. It's serious. I mean, have we ever had a summer like this past one?

NELSON: The polar ice caps are melting.

RACHEL: But, I mean, had they predicted that storm? In the forecast?

NELSON: I don't think so.

RACHEL: That hail was like golf balls. I was afraid it was going to crack a window.

ARTHUR: Very scary.

RACHEL: It was weird.

(There is a pause.)

ARTHUR: Anybody up for a Reuben sandwich?

(Sylvia looks at him with hatred.)

RACHEL: Excellent.

NELSON: Sounds great, Mr. S.

(They go to join him in the kitchen. Sylvia remains on her knees, seething.)

RACHEL: You got the Swiss cheese?

ARTHUR: I got everything. And brownies for dessert.

RACHEL: No way. *(Realizing Sylvia is not with them.)* Mom? You want a Reuben?

(Sylvia does not answer. She remains kneeling, furious.)

NELSON: Mrs. S.?

ARTHUR: *(To Rachel and Nelson.)* Get out the bread and the fixings, and I'll help assemble, all right? We should heat up the sauerkraut separately.

(They get busy. Arthur goes to Sylvia.)

ARTHUR: Sylvia?

SYLVIA: Good for you, Arthur.

ARTHUR: What?

SYLVIA: You think I don't see it?

ARTHUR: What, honey?

SYLVIA: That superior smirk.

ARTHUR: I didn't . . .

SYLVIA: Well, just wait. See how superior you are when we're gone. When you're left here alone.

ARTHUR: I don't want to be left alone, Sylvia. I want to be with you.

SYLVIA: It's fine to do that in front of me. Make fun of it. But don't ruin it for Rachel.

ARTHUR: Honey. It was an electrical storm. I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't . . . But I knew. That it was a storm. That it would pass over.

SYLVIA: You'll see.

ARTHUR: I love you, Sylvia. Can I ask for *your* forgiveness? Can I repent for *you*?

SYLVIA: *(Brokenhearted.)* It won't get you saved.

ARTHUR: I feel like I am saved.

SYLVIA: You're not.

ARTHUR: I feel like I'm waking up. All these years. I know I kind of checked out. You needed me and . . . I wasn't there. For a long time. I know. It's crazy, but I forgot why I was here. Even before the attacks, even before that. I'd forgotten. What I really cared about. But I remember now.

(Rachel and Nelson have stopped their Reuben preparations to listen. Arthur searches for the right words.)

ARTHUR: I don't have faith like you have, Sylvia. I'm concrete. You know that. I like proof. I like facts. Even when I used to go to temple, it was never about faith or God. It was about my father, my grandfather. There was only one time in my life I had real faith. It was when I fell in love with you. When we got married — we didn't even know each other that well — but I knew. I knew that whatever happened I could take it. We could take it. If we were together. That I wanted to face whatever happened with you. I know I let you down, Sylvia. Please forgive me. Please take me back.

SYLVIA: I'm going to lose you again.

ARTHUR: But could we be together now? Whatever time I have left with you? Even if it's only a few more hours. Could we just give up on me for eternity — I'm a lost cause for eternity. But could I be with you now?

(She looks at him. A rush of memories comes back. She goes to him. He wraps his arms around her.)

ARTHUR: Thank you. This could last me. I love you honey.

(Pause. Arthur looks up and sees Rachel and Nelson waiting, quietly.)

ARTHUR: Should we get moving on those Reubens?

SYLVIA: *(Gives him a kiss.)* I want mine first so I can have my brownie.

NELSON: Yes!

(Lights shift. Rachel, Nelson, Arthur, and Sylvia are all playing hearts. Nelson throws a card.)

SYLVIA: OK. Now see why that wasn't a good choice, Nelson? If you're going to keep the queen, you should have kept the other high spades. You see? So that if someone throws low spades, you won't get stuck with the queen.

RACHEL: Unless you're planning on taking them all.

NELSON: I love this game.

RACHEL: You've lost every time! You're terrible.

SYLVIA: He's learning. Do you want to take that card back?

RACHEL: No! We already know what he has then. No take backsies.

SYLVIA: Oh my gosh. I remember that. No take backsies.

ARTHUR: They're ferocious chess players, Nelson. You don't want to step in the chess ring with them.

RACHEL: *(To Nelson.)* Do you play?

NELSON: I never tried.

RACHEL: I'll teach you. Where's the board, Mom?

SYLVIA: We probably never unpacked it. All the boxes are in the cellar.

RACHEL: Let's unpack!

SYLVIA: Well . . . there's really no sense to it. I mean . . . we're not going to be here much longer.

RACHEL: I want to unpack.

SYLVIA: I have no idea where you'd find it. There are a lot of boxes. *(Putting down her last card.)* Tada!

RACHEL: Oh my God, Mom.

NELSON: You're an awesome, unstoppable, winning machine, Mrs. S. It's like you *are* the cards.

RACHEL: Deal again! I'm going to destroy you this time.

NELSON: I wish I were good at games. The only thing I know how to play is the guitar.

ARTHUR: I wish I could play guitar.

NELSON: I'll teach you if you guys teach me chess.

SYLVIA: Well. Chess takes years to learn. And we don't have . . . Let's find the chess set.

RACHEL: Excellent! This is so excellent.

(She runs out to go to the cellar.)

NELSON: You want me to show you a few chords, Mr. S.? While we're waiting?

ARTHUR: Why don't you do your Torah portion for Sylvia.

NELSON: Nah.

ARTHUR: Come on. Just do that part we worked on. Show off a little.

SYLVIA: If he doesn't want to . . .

NELSON: Well, I do want to. I mean, if you want to hear.

ARTHUR: Good. Do it.

(Nelson does the piece he was working on. It's now perfected and very beautiful.)

NELSON: *Vayomer Elohim le-Noach ket kol-basarba lefanay ki-male'al ha'arets chamasmipeneyhem vehineni mashchitam et-ha'arets.*

(Rachel comes up during this with an enormous box, still sealed with packing tape. The words "games and toys" are written across it. Nelson finishes. They all stand silent for a moment.)

RACHEL: That was incredible.

ARTHUR: He's good, right?

NELSON: That's the only part I do well. Your dad helped a ton. The rest of it kind of stinks.

RACHEL: You worked on that with him?

ARTHUR: Nah. I did nothing. We really have to get moving, bub. You've only got another month.

NELSON: Yeah. *(Remembering, to Sylvia.)* I mean, not that we're going to be here. But if we were . . .

ARTHUR: I can't tell you, Nelson. I'm looking forward to your Bar Mitzvah like I haven't looked forward . . . in years. I have to find my good suit. It's going to swim on me. I'll have to have it taken in.

RACHEL: Doesn't he have a great voice? Mom?

SYLVIA: He does. That was beautiful.

NELSON: You're invited too, of course, Mrs. S. I mean, if we're still here.

SYLVIA: *(Pause.)* I would like that. I would be proud to come.

RACHEL: *(The box.)* Let's rip this open. It's a miracle I found it. I mean, did we unpack anything when we moved? I'm surprised we're not all naked and shoeless.

SYLVIA: It was all pretty fast. I guess we never really got to everything.

RACHEL: *(Opening the box.)* Hello time capsule from our murky past.

(She begins taking out board games and some dolls and a princess dress.)

NELSON: You played with dolls, Rachel? I can't picture it.

RACHEL: Twister!

NELSON: *(Referring to princess dress.)* You wore this?

SYLVIA: You were so sweet in that.

RACHEL: Cinderella was my Elvis.

NELSON: I would love to see you in this dress.

RACHEL: Yeah, I bet you would. *(Taking things out.)* God. Who were these people?

ARTHUR: I don't know.

RACHEL: Chess! Yay! *(She pulls it out.)* Come on Mom. I'll take you first. Here. Sit with me Nelson. I'll show you how the master plays.

(They move around the table.)

ARTHUR: I'm going to get some snacks together.

RACHEL *(Noticing the time.)* Wow. School was over hours ago. We missed our social studies quiz. *(Pause.)* Oh well. This is really fun. I'm glad we're doing this.

(She gives her mom a hug. Sylvia is stunned.)

RACHEL Come on. Don't be chicken, Mom. I'll make it short and painless.

(They sit down to chess.)

(Lights shift. Night. Rachel and Sylvia are back at the chessboard. Arthur sits reading the Times.*)*

SYLVIA: You've got to look ahead.

RACHEL: I did look ahead.

SYLVIA: You have to look further ahead.

RACHEL: I looked further ahead.

SYLVIA: Checkmate!

RACHEL: Nooo! That's it! My head hurts from losing. Your turn, Dad.

ARTHUR: You know I'll lose. I always lose.

RACHEL: Good. I'll play you after. Hey where's Nelson?

SYLVIA: He was just here.

ARTHUR: Must be in the loo.

(Arthur goes to the table with Sylvia, and they begin setting up for another game.)

ARTHUR: Go easy on me, hon.

(Rachel flops down on the sofa. Stephen Hawking rolls in beside her.)

RACHEL: Jesus Christ! You scared the hell out of me!

STEPHEN: Your house is not very wheelchair accessible.

RACHEL: What are you doing here? I'm not smoking any more.

STEPHEN: Maybe I'm a flashback.

RACHEL: It's very freaky having you here in my living room.

STEPHEN: Imagine what it's like for me.

RACHEL: Yeah. *(Pause.)* Listen. Stephen. We need to talk.

STEPHEN: Uh-oh.

RACHEL: I've learned so much from you, you know? I think you're just great and brilliant and inspiring and your book has basically changed my life.

STEPHEN: Are you dumping me?

RACHEL: No, no. But Nelson's helping me learn about the universe now, and I have a lot of reading to do — I mean, I should see some other astrophysicists' and cosmologists' work.

STEPHEN: You're seeing other astrophysicists?

RACHEL: Just to get a broad scope, you know? And really, you must have better things to do than hang out in the suburbs with a sixteen-year-old girl.

STEPHEN: Here it is — the bum's rush.

RACHEL: No. You saved me. You really did.

STEPHEN: But don't let the door hit you on the way out.

RACHEL: I feel like I know what I want now. What I want to do. I think if I work like crazy on the math, really keep at it for the next twenty years or so, I'll probably never come up with the groundbreaking, wild ideas, but I might at least be able to understand them. That's worth living for, right?

STEPHEN: No. I think you should come up with the groundbreaking, wild ideas.

RACHEL: Yeah?

STEPHEN: And then prove it with the math.

RACHEL: OK.

STEPHEN: *(He begins wheeling out.)* And work on the chess. Your endgame stinks. You're embarrassing yourself.

RACHEL: OK. Thanks. *(He's gone.)* Nelson!!!

ARTHUR: Your mother is killing me, Rachel. Brings back old times.

RACHEL: Where is he? *(Calling out.)* Yo! Steinberg! Hurry it up. I need to play someone I can beat.

SYLVIA: Take that move back. I'm three moves from mate.

ARTHUR: Ohhh.

RACHEL: He was just here playing guitar. Wasn't he?

(She goes offstage. We hear her calling to him in different areas of the house. She reenters.)

RACHEL: He's not here.

SYLVIA: What?

ARTHUR: You checked both bathrooms?

RACHEL: I looked all over.

SYLVIA: *(Calling.)* Nelson?

ARTHUR: That's strange.

RACHEL: His guitar is still here, so he can't be far.

ARTHUR: Maybe he ran home for something.

RACHEL: *(Looking out the window.)* The lights are off across the street.

ARTHUR: Maybe you should call.

RACHEL: It's late Dad.

SYLVIA: Oh no. What time is it?

RACHEL: It's almost twelve.

SYLVIA: Oh my God. The day's almost over. How did I lose track? We should have been praying — preparing.

RACHEL: *(Calling outside.)* Nelson! Where could he be? I've never seen him go anywhere without his guitar.

SYLVIA: It's happened. He's been taken.

ARTHUR: He'll be right back.

RACHEL: Wouldn't he say? If he were going out?

SYLVIA: *(Turning on the TV to check.)* Oh Lord. It's happening. Nelson's been taken.

ARTHUR: Maybe we should call him. Try information.

RACHEL: I hate to wake them up. They don't sound all that friendly.

SYLVIA: Jesus. It's time isn't it?

RACHEL: This is so weird. *(Into the phone.)* Steinberg. Ummm . . . Do you remember his stepdad's name?

ARTHUR: It started with a B. Bob?

RACHEL: *(Back to the phone.)* I don't know. But they're on Travis Street. Number eighty-one.

SYLVIA: I love you, Jesus. But please take us all. Don't leave Rachel and Arthur.

RACHEL: Mom, it's not the Rapture. *(Referring to the TV.)* Look, the news is all about the war. Nothing about people disappearing. *(Into the phone.)* That would be great, thanks.

SYLVIA: Or was Nelson the only one of us good enough to be taken?

RACHEL *(The phone.)* There's no answer. It's the machine.

SYLVIA: *(Falling apart.)* Jesus, help me.

RACHEL: His stepfather is Ben. Ben and Crystal Steinberg.

SYLVIA: Without you here, I don't know. I don't understand.

RACHEL: They don't even mention Nelson on the machine.

(She hangs up. Sylvia grabs the phone.)

SYLVIA: I'll call Justine Knox. She was there at the start of Blessed Name. If anything happened . . . It's the machine. She's been taken. She and Michael.

ARTHUR: It's very late. Maybe they're asleep.

(Sylvia is madly dialing again.)

SYLVIA: They were all taken. We weren't chosen.

RACHEL: Mom, nothing has happened. We haven't heard anything.

ARTHUR: No trumpets, honey. The stars are still in the sky.

SYLVIA: Reverend Peter isn't answering. He's gone. They're all gone.

(Sylvia sits distraught. Rachel goes to her. Puts her arms around her.)

RACHEL: It's all right, Mom. It's going to be all right.

SYLVIA: I couldn't save any of us. I couldn't do it. I'm not strong enough.

ARTHUR: Sylvia. You are strong. You're a good person. You do good in the world.

SYLVIA: I do?

ARTHUR: And I'll help you. From now on I will. You kept asking me, and I wouldn't come. But I will. I'll come to the shelter with you, and I'll do all the good . . . works with you. The soup kitchen. Whatever you do. I'll help.

SYLVIA: It's almost midnight. Two minutes.

RACHEL: It's going to be OK, Mom. I'm sorry — I'm really sorry I was such a shit to you. And I'll stop saying shit. I'll stop saying all the terrible things I say. It's going to be OK now. It is.

(They all three hold onto each other. The church bell begins chiming twelve times. There is a loud crash outside.)

RACHEL: Holy . . . What was that?

SYLVIA: Jesus? Are you coming for us?

(Pause. They all listen for a response.)

SYLVIA: Jesus. I'm sorry. But I'm not sorry. I can't go unless you take us all. I need to be here with my family. I need to stay here — even if it's hell on earth.

ARTHUR: I love you so much. Both of you.

(Nelson bursts in.)

NELSON: I got the water chestnuts!

(They all stare at him dumbfounded.)

NELSON: The ShopRite was open. I thought I'd surprise you. It really is better with the water chestnuts. It was kind of amazing going out without my outfit. Nobody verbally or physically abused me. In fact, one woman complimented me on my handsome belt. Is everything OK?

RACHEL: DON'T YOU EVER DO THAT AGAIN!

NELSON: What?

RACHEL: Don't you ever go anywhere without telling me again. You hear me? You scared the life out of all of us. Don't you ever do that again.

NELSON: OK.

(She goes to him and throws her arms around him. He hugs her tight. Then he takes her face in his hands and kisses her.)

ARTHUR: Huh. I was almost convinced. I couldn't imagine never seeing him again.

SYLVIA: Wednesday is over. He didn't come.

NELSON: Maybe it wasn't supposed to be this Wednesday.

RACHEL: Don't, Nelson.

SYLVIA: I'm going to miss him. So much.

NELSON: Maybe we should wait next Wednesday, just in case.

ARTHUR: I would do that.

SYLVIA: How could I have been wrong? Was I crazy?

NELSON: I don't think you were crazy, Mrs. S.

RACHEL: Mom. Is this so bad? If this is all there is? Even if there is no eternity. No one in charge. If all we have is this. Us. And one short lifetime. It's not so bad.

SYLVIA: I don't know how to do this any more. I've been preparing for the end . . . I don't know . . .

RACHEL: We'll have to figure it out.

NELSON: Maybe he'll still come. I think we should keep waiting. Every Wednesday. Maybe he'll still come.

(They sit together, contemplating this, as lights slowly fade.)

(Lights down.)

END OF PLAY

FARRAGUT NORTH

Beau Willimon

For Mom, Pop, Chas and Michele.
Special thanks to Jay Carson, Chris Durang, Doug Hughes, Joe Kraemer, Marsha Norman, Christian Parker, Neil Pepe, Jeff Richards, Chris Till, the wonderful casts, designers, and crew in New York, California, and West Virginia, everyone at the Atlantic Theater and the Dayton Playhouse, and Stephen Willems at MCC.

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Beau Willimon writes for theater, television, and film. Full-length plays, in addition to *Farragut North,* include *Baby Blue, Nobody's Child, Breathing Time,* and *Lower Ninth,* as well as numerous one-acts. His plays have been developed or performed at MCC Theater, the Cherry Lane Theatre, HERE Arts Center, New Dramatists, Daryl Roth 2 Theatre, Arthur Seelen Theatre, Flea Theater (all in New York), the Dayton Playhouse in Ohio, and the Battersea Arts Center in London. *Farragut North* was nominated for two 2008 Outer Critics Circle Awards (Best New Play, John Gassner Award). Willimon's screen adaption of the play is currently in development at Warner Brothers. Willimon is a recipient of the Yale/Norfolk Arts Fellowship, the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, the Eesti Fellowship, and the Lila Acheson Wallace Juilliard Playwriting Fellowship. He is the winner of the Seymour Brick Memorial Playwrighting Prize and the 2005 Dayton Playhouse FutureFest and two-time winner of the Lincoln Center Le Compte du Nouy Award. He was a 2008 playwright-in-residence at the Donmar Warehouse in London. Willimon is currently working on commissions for Manhattan Theatre Club and the National Theatre of Great Britain. He is a member of the WGA-East and the Dramatists Guild. A resident of Brooklyn, New York, Willimon holds an MFA in playwriting from Columbia University's School of the Arts.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS

Farragut North had its world premiere at the Atlantic Theater Company (Neil Pepe, artistic director), by special arrangement with Stephen Pevner, Inc., New York City, November 2008, with set design was by David Korins; costume design by Catherine Zuber; lighting design by Paul Gallo; sound design by Walter Trarbach and David Van Tieghem; and original music composed by David Van Tiegham. The production stage manager was Michael Wade. It was directed by Doug Hughes with following cast:

CAST

STEPHEN ..... John Gallagher, Jr.
IDA ..... Kate Blumberg
PAUL ..... Chris Noth
BEN ..... Dan Bittner
MOLLY ..... Olivia Thirlby
TOM ..... Isiah Whitlock, Jr.
WAITER/FRANK ..... Otto Sanchez

Farragut North had its West Coast premiere at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles in June 2009 and was included in the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

CHARACTERS

STEPHEN BELLAMY: Twenty-five, press secretary for Governor Morris, presidential candidate.

PAUL ZARA: Late forties, campaign manager for Governor Morris.

MOLLY: Nineteen, an intern on the Morris campaign.

BEN: Early twenties, deputy press secretary for the Morris campaign.

TOM DUFFY: Late forties to early fifties, campaign manager for the rival Pullman campaign.

IDA HOROWICZ: Midthirties, a traveling political reporter for the *New York Times.*

FRANK: A reporter for the *LA Times.*

WAITER

Note: Frank and Waiter may be played by the same actor.

SETTING

ACT ONE

SCENE 1: January. The bar of the Hotel Fort Des Moines, Des Moines, Iowa.

SCENE 2: Later that evening at a small, dingy restaurant in East Des Moines.

SCENE 3: Early the next morning in Stephen's hotel room.

SCENE 4: Later that morning, the Des Moines airport.

ACT TWO

SCENE 1: Later that afternoon at a campaign event in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

SCENE 2: A few hours later, Molly's office at the headquarters in Des Moines.

SCENE 3: Later that evening, Paul's room at the Hotel Fort Des Moines

SCENE 4: An hour later at the same dingy restaurant as Act I.

SCENE 5: Late that night, Stephen's room at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.

TIME

January, the present.

Note: A backslash (/) indicates where the following line is meant to begin by overlapping the current one.

FARRAGUT NORTH

ACT I
SCENE 1

January. Early evening. The bar of the Hotel Fort Des Moines. The décor is faux opulent. Paul, Ida, Ben, and Stephen sit at a table, drinking. Paul has a roll-away suitcase beside him.

STEPHEN: I played you. Like a fucking fiddle.
IDA: Now Stevie . . .
STEPHEN: It's true.
IDA: You didn't / *play* me.
STEPHEN: Like a well-tuned fiddle.
IDA: *(To Paul.)* It was the first race I ever covered.
STEPHEN: She was gullible.
IDA: *(Flicking him off.)* You see this?
STEPHEN: Putty in / my —
IDA: *(To Stephen.)* You didn't play me, you *convinced* me. You *persuaded* me. There's a difference. I knew exactly / what I was doing.
PAUL: *(To Stephen.)* Come on, come on. Back to the story.
STEPHEN: Right. So this was what — oh-four?
BEN: Oh-two.
STEPHEN: Oh-two. Thank you Ben.
BEN: We studied Cabrisi versus Goldman in one of our poli sci classes.
STEPHEN: No shit?
BEN: Yeah. I even wrote a paper on it.
STEPHEN: There ya go — I'm already a footnote in history.
BEN: Well it's not like the paper was published or anything. I mean the only person who read it was / the —
STEPHEN: *(Cutting him off.)* So right, this was oh-two.
PAUL: You were . . . Jesus . . . .you were twenty. I keep forgetting that.
STEPHEN: Just turned twenty. My third — no — my fourth campaign.
PAUL: Twenty fucking years old.
IDA: We couldn't even buy him drinks.
STEPHEN: I managed to sneak my fair share.
IDA: You managed to sneak *more* than your fair share.

PAUL: So the race . . .

STEPHEN: The race. Tight, tight fucking race. And this was New York politics — *nasty.* Just as rough and tumble as anything you see out here in Des Moines.

IDA: But not as cold.

STEPHEN: Fuckin' Iowa.

IDA: I can't wait until Florida.

PAUL: Come on, come on.

STEPHEN: OK . . . so ten days out our internals show the suburbs are slipping. Point and a half, two points a day. Now this slides out of the margin, and we're fucked. Papers will show Cabrisi with the momentum. On top of it all, the press is pounding the shit out of us. Hit after hit after hit. Including you, Ida. You were the worst of 'em.

IDA: I was just being a responsible journalist.

STEPHEN: You were being a bitch.

IDA: I was being a little bit of a bitch. Not as bad as Gordon, or Judy, at the *Post.* Judy was the *real* bitch.

STEPHEN: You were better than Judy, that's true.

PAUL: So . . .

STEPHEN: So yeah. I'm thinking — OK, it's over. Chalk this one up and move on. Can't win 'em all. *Then* — Then a miracle drops in our lap.

IDA: Cabrisi's people should have just locked him up in a padded room. He had it in the bag.

STEPHEN: The fucking bag. It was his to lose.

BEN: You're talking about that comment right — that thing Cabrisi / called —

STEPHEN: Who's telling this story Ben?

BEN: I'm sorry, I . . .

PAUL: So the miracle.

STEPHEN: Like manna from the heavens. Cabrisi's at this fundraiser out in Flatbush, raising cash from all the conservative Jews that hate Goldman. Starts ripping on Goldman, joking around, playing the crowd. At one point he calls Goldman a *putzhead.* Gets a laugh, moves on. Nobody thinks twice about it.

IDA: But there's this AP reporter there.

STEPHEN: Total lightweight.

IDA: Josh Carlin, local beat guy.

STEPHEN: He's a big shot now. Covering the West Bank or some shit like that . . .

PAUL: Keep going; I wanna get to the good part.

STEPHEN: Well Josh, right, he throws this blurb on the wire. Little thing. Headline was something like "Cabrisi gives remarks at Flatbush Fundraiser." Doesn't make a ripple. But our oppo guys, they read this blurb, and they rush over to my office. "Look! Look! Carbrisi called Goldman a putzhead!" And I'm like "So what? Who cares? So he called him a putzhead — he's called us worse." And they're like — no, this is big. Apparently putzhead is Yiddish for dickhead. Meaning Cabrisi publicly called Goldman a *dickhead* in Yiddish.

PAUL: *(Laughing.)* I love it.

STEPHEN: Beautiful, right?

PAUL: You have your silver bullet.

STEPHEN: Exactly. So now I gotta figure out how to spin this. Problem is *we* can't send out a release. It'll look like some desperate attack. So what I *do* / is —

IDA: This was brilliant, I have to admit.

STEPHEN: What I do is I call up the president of the Democratic Jewish League — big supporter — threw us lots of money — and I read this AP story to him. Name was Mencken . . .

PAUL: Harvey Mencken — I know him.

STEPHEN: Right. So I say *Harvey* — we've got a great opportunity to fuck Cabrisi here. I want you to send out a release quoting this putzhead comment and accusing Cabrisi of anti-Semitism. He jumps at it. I dictate the whole release to him over the phone, it's out in fifteen minutes. Then I have Harvey organize a press conference with prominent Jewish leaders all denouncing Cabrisi as an anti-Semite, which he does.

PAUL: Gorgeous.

STEPHEN: That's what I thought, but it doesn't stick. I make a few calls but the reporters aren't biting, and I don't want to seem aggressive or it would look like I orchestrated it all.

IDA: Which you did.

STEPHEN: But that's not what I want them to think. So I'm like — fuck — how do I get this out there? What's the one place where — if I can get this to land — the one place that will force everyone else to jump on board?

PAUL: The *Times.*

STEPHEN: Bingo. So I give *Ida* a call.

IDA: And he used this sweet little innocent voice, like all of this was news to him.

STEPHEN: She didn't want to print it. Thought the story "unworthy" of the *Times.*

PAUL: So of course you worked your magic.

IDA: He made me a wager.

STEPHEN: What I say is — "Ida, off the record, let's be straight here. You've been fucking us over for the past two weeks and giving Cabrisi a total pass. You owe us. And if you write this story I guarantee you — I fucking *guarantee* you that your editors will put it on the front page."

IDA: To which I said, "Bullshit."

STEPHEN: So I say "Look — if your editors don't put this story on the front page not only will I buy you dinner at any restaurant of your choice in the city, but I will quit my job and never work in politics again. If it *does* make it on the front page you've got your first front page byline, and I'll still by you dinner."

PAUL: *(To Ida.)* So you wrote the story.

IDA: I did.

STEPHEN: And not only did it make it on the front page of the *Times*, it got two columns *above* the fucking fold.

IDA: "Cabrisi Accused of Anti-Semitism" by Ida Horowicz.

STEPHEN: It was an avalanche. Cabrisi's on the defensive, first denying the remark, then admitting to it, then refusing to apologize, then *forced* to apologize. Within one news cycle, the story was being covered by every TV, radio station, and newspaper in New York state. It's running nonstop on all the twenty-four-hour news channels. Overnight Cabrisi drops ten points. His message gets drowned out. Four days later, we win by twelve. Total blowout.

PAUL: Beautiful. *(To Ben.)* You should keep an eye on Stevie, you'll learn everything you need to know.

STEPHEN: Ben's twice as smart as I'll ever be.

BEN: Yeah, right.

STEPHEN: I'm getting old, I'll have to pass the torch eventually.

IDA: A wizened twenty-five. You'll need a wheelchair before too long.

PAUL: I still can't believe Goldman hired a fucking twenty-year-old for his press secretary.

IDA: I can't believe that Morris hired a *twenty-five-year-old.* A Senate race is one thing, but a presidential . . . ?

STEPHEN: Hey — I'm keepin' my head above the water.

PAUL: *(To Stephen.)* You're doing more than that. *(To Ida.)* When I told the governor I wanted to hire Stevie, he said to me, "Paul — hire that fuckin' kid before somebody else does."

IDA: And look where he is now.

PAUL: Doing *my* dirty work.
IDA: God help us.
BEN: Does anyone else need a refill?
IDA: I'm good.
STEPHEN: Come on Ida, have another.
IDA: Tempting, but no.
BEN: Paul?
PAUL: *(Looking at his watch.)* I'd love another, but I gotta get going in a few. Goddamn security at the airport. Speaking of which, I should call a cab.
IDA: You want me to drive you?
PAUL: You have a car?
IDA: A rental. Yeah. A Suburban no less.
PAUL: Four-wheel drive?
IDA: Antilock breaks, airbags, — the works.
PAUL: Well then hell — sure — I'll take a lift. *(To Ben.)* And I'll take another Jack and Coke. *(Looking at his watch.)* Still got a few minutes.
BEN: Steve?
STEVE: I'll take a —
PAUL: No more for Stevie. *(To Stephen.)* You've got that press conference.
STEPHEN: *(To Ben.)* I'm fine.
BEN: One Jack and Coke then.
(Ben exits.)
PAUL: He's a good kid. Got a lot to learn, but a good kid.
STEPHEN: Definitely worth keeping an eye on.
IDA: So Paul . . . .
PAUL: Yes, Ida?
IDA: Paul, Paul, Paul . . . .
PAUL: Here it comes *(To Stephen.)* When she gets that shit-eating grin on her face, I know she wants something. *(To Ida.)* Hit me.
IDA: You're going to the airport.
PAUL: Yes?
IDA: You're getting on a plane.
PAUL: Mm-hmm.
IDA: Where is that plane going?
PAUL: *(To Stephen.)* You see?
IDA: Out with it.
PAUL: Three guesses.
IDA: You're not going back to headquarters.
PAUL: Correct.

IDA: You're not going to New Hampshire.
PAUL: *(To Stephen.)* Look at these deductive skills we got goin' on here.
IDA: What if I said South Carolina?
PAUL: That's your final answer?
IDA: Final answer. You're going to South Carolina.
PAUL: I will neither confirm nor deny that statement.
IDA: I knew it.
STEPHEN: She's on fire.
IDA: Now tell me why.
PAUL: That I cannot do.
IDA: Pretty please?
PAUL: No.
IDA: A hint.
PAUL: Not a chance.
IDA: Nothing?
PAUL: Nada.
IDA: I hate you.
PAUL: You love me.
IDA: I love Stevie. You I hate.
STEPHEN: You only love me because I give you all the scoops.
IDA: Well I deserve to be wooed.
STEPHEN: And because I got Paul to agree to your profile.
PAUL: Which wasn't easy, by the way.
IDA: You don't relish spending every living moment together?
PAUL: Maybe if you weren't constantly trying to bait me.
IDA: Wouldn't be a very good profile then, would it?
PAUL: Probably won't be anyway.
STEPHEN: She'll make it nice, won't you Ida?
IDA: No promises, my dear.
PAUL: It better be good. I've given you great stuff.
IDA: Heavy drinking, chewing tobacco, lewd comments . . . yeah — I'd say so.
PAUL: You drink more than I do.
IDA: But the profile's not about me. And I don't chew tobacco.
PAUL: "Paul Zara Has Flaws" — there's your headline.
IDA: Or maybe something like: "Morris's Campaign Manager: Barbarian at the Gate."
PAUL: You should do a profile on Stevie here. He's more interesting than I am.
IDA: But he doesn't have any flaws.
STEPHEN: Flattery won't get you shit.

IDA: Sexual favors?

STEPHEN: You're engaged.

IDA: If it meant a good story, my fiancé would understand.

PAUL: So it's gonna be one of those marriages, huh?

IDA: You think I'd let any husband of *mine* wear the pants?

STEPHEN: Let me see that rock again.

(Ida shows him a ring.)

STEPHEN: Unbelievable.

IDA: Nice, huh?

PAUL: At least you're marrying rich.

IDA: Is there any other way?

STEPHEN: Let's go to a pawn shop and hock this thing. We'll get tickets to Vegas and get hitched at some tacky twenty-four-hour chapel.

IDA: In your dreams.

STEPHEN: You're breaking my heart.

IDA: You two are breaking my heart by not telling me what this South Carolina thing is about.

PAUL: Poor baby.

IDA: *(To Paul.)* How's Mrs. Zara by the way?

PAUL: Mrs. Zara? She's miserable. Just like she always is. Other than that, she's great.

IDA: *(To Stephen.)* And Steve — how's Helen?

PAUL: Kaput.

IDA: What?

PAUL: Bye-bye Helen.

IDA: Really?!

STEPHEN: Not kaput necessarily, just . . .

PAUL: It's over.

IDA: No!

PAUL: Done. Finis.

STEPHEN: It's really not a big deal.

IDA: It's over between you guys?

STEPHEN: Kind of — for now — yes.

IDA: When?!

STEPHEN: Week or two ago.

PAUL: Stevie's a free man.

IDA: I'm so sorry.

STEPHEN: Really, it's not a big deal. We're just . . . just taking a break, you know?

PAUL: Sure you are.

IDA: A little sensitivity is in order here Paul.

PAUL: It's for the best. *(To Stephen.)* You wouldn't have time for her once you got to the White House anyway.

IDA: *(To Stephen.)* So what happened?

STEPHEN: It's not even worth getting into. Really. Let's change the subject. We're having drinks. We're ahead in the polls. These are happy times right?

PAUL: Don't worry about him Ida. This boy is bulletproof.

(Ben returns with Paul's drink.)

BEN: Here you go.

PAUL: How much do I owe you?

BEN: I got it.

PAUL: Fuck off. You don't get paid well enough to buy me a drink. How much?

BEN: Really. I got it.

PAUL: *(To Stephen.)* I'm telling you — he's a good kid. *(Raising his glass.)* To happy times.

STEPHEN: To happy times.

(They all clink glasses, except for Ben.)

IDA: So changing the subject. Paul — tell me something I don't know.

PAUL: You know everything.

IDA: I don't know why you're going to South Carolina.

PAUL: That wasn't changing the subject.

IDA: Fine. Tell me what's gonna happen on the nineteenth.

PAUL: Haha.

IDA: What?

PAUL: What do you think Stevie?

STEPHEN: It's ours for the taking.

PAUL: Ben?

BEN: We'll win.

PAUL: What do you think, Ida?

IDA: I'm asking *you.*

PAUL: You tell me and I'll tell you.

IDA: If I had to say, I'd say it'll be close, but you'll eke it out.

PAUL: Eke? We'll *eke* it out? *(To Stephen.)* You see, she's trying to get under my skin.

IDA: So what's gonna happen?

PAUL: Us by nine.

IDA: *Nine?* There's no way you'll win by nine.

STEPHEN: At least. Maybe more.

IDA: Sounds pretty optimistic to me.

PAUL: You don't get into this game if you're a pessimist.

IDA: You don't *win* unless you're a realist.

STEPHEN: We'll win Iowa by nine. Ogelby drops because he tanks here. Even if Pullman picks up his people, we'll take New Hampshire by double digits. Morris jumps out on the twenty-seventh with enough momentum to take no less than five of seven on Super Tuesday, maybe even a clean sweep.

IDA: South Carolina?

STEPHEN: We can take it.

IDA: Doubtful.

STEPHEN: Even if we don't — we take five or six of the seven, and it's over. Pullman runs dry on cash, the party rallies behind us, we got three weeks to hammer Pullman into the dust before the next big round.

IDA: You got it all planned out.

PAUL: Listen to the boy — he knows what he's talking about.

IDA: *(To Paul.)* So you're certain you're gonna win here?

PAUL: *Certain?* No. Confident? Yes.

IDA: You just said you'll win by nine.

PAUL: And I think we will, but I won't tell you it's a sure thing. Saint Gabriel could blow his fuckin' horn on election day and get his four horseman to rig the ballot boxes for Pullman, and it wouldn't surprise me. Don't get me wrong. Six presidentials I've done, and I've never felt this good. But am I gonna sit here and say, "Yes — Morris will definitely win Iowa"? Not a chance. In the last thirty years, seventy-one Democrats have run for president. How many have won? Two. That means sixty-nine people ran who thought they had a chance, and they all lost. Nobody on this planet knows how to win a presidential campaign. Not Pullman, not Ogelby, not Morris — no one.

IDA: So you're saying there's a good chance you'll lose.

PAUL: What I'm saying is that I won't *promise* we'll win. But — OK now. If we *do* win, if we *do* take Iowa —

IDA: You *have* to take Iowa.

PAUL: You're damn straight we do. Morris not only has to win Iowa — he needs to *crush* Pullman. And I think we can. And when we do — our Internet support will go through the roof. We'll hit two million supporters by July. At two million, we'll hit a boiling point. Every motherfucker that's felt

beaten and bullied and busted by the powers that be is gonna suddenly realize — hey, we can stick it to the Man here. We can take on big business, oil, drug companies. Two million will become three million, then four, then five. We have the potential to raise *half a billion dollars.* The grassroots will become the mainstream. The mainstream will water the lawn, and that lawn will stretch from Maine to New Mexico, from Alaska to Florida. I don't use the word revolution lightly, but that's what this could be. Millions of people standing up and saying, "This is *our* goddamn country — We're gonna take it back from those who have stolen it from us. We're gonna make the impossible *possible* again." And on *that* note, I'm gonna go take a shit before I get on this plane.

(Paul swigs down the rest of his drink and exits.)

IDA: He's crazy.

STEPHEN: He's a genius.

IDA: Do you really buy into all that crap? All that take-back-the-country nonsense?

STEPHEN: Buy into it? I believe that everything Paul says is *possible.* If there was ever a time a campaign like ours, that an insurgent with a real message was gonna — yeah. I guess I do. I do buy into it.

IDA: Half a billion dollars?

STEPHEN: Six months ago who would have thought we'd raised fifty by now?

IDA: That's a long ways from five hundred.

STEPHEN: Six months ago Morris was a nobody. Now we're leading the polls. You know me — I'm not naïve about this stuff. I've worked on more campaigns than most people do by the time their forty. This is the one, Ida.

IDA: You really *have* drunk the Kool-Aid.

STEPHEN: It's good. You should try some.

IDA: What about you, Ben?

BEN: Everything Steve just said.

IDA: Haha. You've trained him well.

STEPHEN: I'm not shitting you here, Ida. This is it. I've had a good dose of cynicism pumped into me with every campaign I've worked on. But this thing, it's got me starry-eyed again. It's reminded me why I got into politics in the first place. I mean look — I grew up in a shit stain by the side of the road fifty miles south of DC, but it might as well have been fifty thousand. Half the folks in my town didn't even know the word congress has two S's in it, much less who their congressman was. I made my way to DC, race by race — traded in my accent for this fucking crackberry. And why? Because I didn't want to drive a tractor for the rest of my life. I

wanted to be something. I wanted to change the world. That's what I love about my job. Every day is a chance to make a real difference.

IDA: *(To Ben.)* Get out of this business now or you'll start sounding like Steve.

STEPHEN: Don't listen to her. She gets paid to spoil the fun.

IDA: Not paid well.

STEPHEN: Better than I do.

IDA: You get power, prestige, and the chance to change history. I get my name printed in eight point on cheap news stock. I deserve a few extra bucks for my troubles.

(Paul returns and sits.)

PAUL: No dice. I'm constipated.

STEPHEN: Ouch.

PAUL: Heaved and huffed on the can but zilch — nothing came out. 'Cept some rabbit pellets. Motherload's still stuck up in there somewhere.

IDA: Thanks, Paul. I'll try to erase that image from my mind while I drive you to the airport.

PAUL: Too many carbs. Always happens. I oughtta go on one of those protein diets.

STEPHEN: You can shit properly *and* lose weight at the same time.

PAUL: You saying I'm fat? *(He stuffs a wad of chewing tobacco into his mouth.)*

STEPHEN: I wouldn't say you're skinny.

PAUL: What do you think, Ben? You think I'm fat?

BEN: No. Not at all.

PAUL: Ass-kisser. I *am* getting fat. And it looks even worse cause I'm bloated at the moment.

IDA: Stop it.

PAUL: *(To Ida.)* You know — the only reason I chew this stuff is because it's a diuretic.

IDA: Speaking of which, I'm actually gonna hit the john before we head out. Be right back.

(She exits. Paul hands Ben a few dollars.)

PAUL: Ben, go get yourself a drink. I owe you one.

BEN: That's OK, I'm not really —

PAUL: Go get yourself a drink.

BEN: Seriously, I'm fine.

PAUL: I don't think you're hearing me. I'm saying you should take this money and go get yourself a drink.

BEN: Oh. Right.

(Ben takes the money and exits.)

PAUL: Whatta ya think?

STEPHEN: I leak it to her. Nothing specific, just enough to wet her appetite.

PAUL: She'll hound me on the drive to the airport.

STEPHEN: No she won't. I leak it like you don't know, on the condition she keeps it quiet.

PAUL: You really think she will?

STEPHEN: She owes me. I got her this profile with you, and she'll owe me double if I give her this leak off the record.

PAUL: I don't know.

STEPHEN: She just wants to feel like she's in the loop. If I give her this off the record now, she'll write a terrific story once we go public. We keep it secret, she'll fuck us.

PAUL: How? There's no way you can turn this into a bad story.

STEPHEN: Ida can always find a way.

PAUL: No specifics.

STEPHEN: I'll keep it vague.

PAUL: 'Cause if it gets out, the whole thing could fold.

STEPHEN: I know what I'm doing.

PAUL: I know you know what you're doing. I just get a little, you know . . .

STEPHEN: This is the best way to go.

PAUL: All right Steve. All right. If you say this is the way to go then this is the way to go.

STEPHEN: I've never let you down, have I?

PAUL: Not yet.

STEPHEN: Come on.

PAUL: I trust you. So do your thing. Leak it. Make it nice.

STEPHEN: Done.

PAUL: Now as for this press conference tonight . . .

STEPHEN: I've got it under control.

PAUL: They're gonna try to hit us on the new poll numbers.

STEPHEN: As long as the governor keeps to my talking points, we should be fine. And this white paper Paul — it's good. Gonna nail Pullman on renewable energy with a hammer *this* big.

PAUL: Don't know what I'd do without you, Stevie.

STEPHEN: How about a raise?

PAUL: You'll get your raise once we make it to the White House.

(Ida returns.)

STEPHEN: That was quick.

IDA: I don't have the same problems Paul does.

PAUL: Watch it — I'll shit in your suburban.

IDA: That'd make a story.

PAUL: *(Looking at his watch.)* We should get going.

IDA: I'll pull up out front.

PAUL: Gimme the keys. I'll pick *you* up.

IDA: Not a chance.

PAUL: Gimme the goddamned keys. I haven't driven a car in months. And I *loooove* driving in the snow.

(Ida hands him the keys.)

IDA: It's in the garage across the street. Second floor.

PAUL: *(Taking the keys. To Stephen.)* You behave yourself.

STEPHEN: Always.

PAUL: *(To Ida.)* I'll see you out front.

(Paul exits with his suitcase. During the following conversation, Molly enters, carrying a manila envelope. Seeing that Stephen is talking to Ida, she hangs off to the side, waiting for them to finish up so as not to interrupt.)

IDA: He's gonna crash my rental, isn't he?

STEPHEN: Probably.

IDA: I should have ordered a second drink.

STEPHEN: Thompson.

IDA: What?

STEPHEN: Marcellus Thompson.

IDA: Seriously?

STEPHEN: This is off off *off* the record. You can't let Paul have the slightest idea you know or it'll be my ass. The only people who know are the governor, Paul, and me.

IDA: My lips are sealed.

STEPHEN: They have a meeting tomorrow at Thompson's house.

IDA: He's gonna endorse?

STEPHEN: After Paul's done talking with him, what do you think?

IDA: That's huge.

STEPHEN: It's more than huge. We'll lock up half the black vote in South Carolina overnight once this comes out.

IDA: He's said publicly he's not gonna endorse anyone.

STEPHEN: That's what they all say until we get them alone in a room.

IDA: So this is for real?

STEPHEN: Yup.

IDA: For *real* real?

STEPHEN: Just about in the bag.

IDA: When are you gonna announce?

STEPHEN: Nope. That's all you get for now.

IDA: You'll give me the scoop, right?

STEPHEN: Maybe. If you're nice.

IDA: I want that story.

STEPHEN: Sure you do. So you play nice and we'll play nice.

IDA: Let's talk after the press conference. I'll do my best to keep an open mind if you're trying to push anything, keeping my journalistic standards intact of course.

STEPHEN: Of course.

IDA: You're the best Stevie. I'll talk to you later.

(Ida exits. Stephen immediately grabs his phone and begins to dial. Molly approaches Stephen, standing behind him while he makes his phone call.)

STEPHEN: Paul? It's done . . . yeah . . . Easy as pie. *(Laughs.)* OK, you too. Good luck out there.

(He hangs up.)

MOLLY: Steve?

STEPHEN: *(Startled.)* Oh um . . . .uh . . . Mary?

MOLLY: Molly.

STEPHEN: Right right right — Molly.

MOLLY: I worked at headquarters.

STEPHEN: No — I remember.

MOLLY: Yeah.

STEPHEN: Scared the shit out of me.

MOLLY: Sorry . . . I . . . —

STEPHEN: What are you doing out in Iowa?

MOLLY: I volunteered to come out here a few days ago.

STEPHEN: That's great.

MOLLY: Yeah, I was getting sick of headquarters. It's so dead there now. Everybody's out here.

STEPHEN: What do they have you doing?

MOLLY: Same stuff. Blogging mostly. Filling gaps where they can use me.

STEPHEN: Very cool.

(Molly holds out the envelope.)

MOLLY: Anyway — this is for you. The folks in the press shop said you'd be here.

STEPHEN: Oh, right. Thanks. I've been waiting for this.

MOLLY: Anything interesting?

STEPHEN: *(Mock serious.)* Top secret.

MOLLY: Gotcha.

STEPHEN: Just some white paper I gotta pass out tonight.

MOLLY: White paper?

STEPHEN: Negative shit. Our oppo guys do research — we feed it to the press, hope they bite.

MOLLY: So like what sort of negative stuff?

STEPHEN: Read tomorrow's paper and you'll see.

MOLLY: Which paper?

STEPHEN: All of them.

MOLLY: So it's something big?

STEPHEN: I wish it were something bigger actually. Just some renewable energy figures. I'll have to spin this shit pretty heavy if we want it to stick.

MOLLY: Well that's what your good at, right? Spinning things . . .

STEPHEN: I guess.

MOLLY: Anyway . . . it was good seeing you. Good luck at the press conference.

(She starts to go.)

STEPHEN: Hey Molly? Sorry for getting your name wrong.

MOLLY: Oh — that's OK.

STEPHEN: No it's not. We worked in the same office for what — two, three months. I should know your name.

MOLLY: Six months. I joined the campaign in June.

STEPHEN: Six? Really?

MOLLY: Yup.

STEPHEN: Jesus. I must seem like a total asshole right now.

MOLLY: Not at all. *(Teasing.)* You're a big man on campus. I'm just a lowly intern.

STEPHEN: Come on. It's not like that.

MOLLY: Sure it is.

STEPHEN: No — it's just I meet so many people, have to remember so many names. I'm not always very good at remembering them all. But I remember faces. I always remember faces.

MOLLY: Like mine?

(Stephen stares at her, a bit taken aback, but not betraying it.)

MOLLY: Anyway . . .

STEPHEN: Why don't you sit down and have a drink with me.

MOLLY: Umm . . .

STEPHEN: One drink.

MOLLY: I should really get back to the office. I just ran out to give this envelope to you.

STEPHEN: I'll buy.

MOLLY: I don't know . . .

STEPHEN: Since you trekked all the way out here from the office.

MOLLY: It's only five blocks.

STEPHEN: In the snow.

MOLLY: Two inches.

STEPHEN: Without a jacket.

MOLLY: It wasn't very far.

STEPHEN: You're shivering.

MOLLY: No I'm not. And I'm supposed to be back already.

STEPHEN: Fine. I won't be offended in the least that you turned down a drink with me.

MOLLY: No no no — I'd love to have a drink with you. I mean — yeah. I just really oughtta . . . We're totally swamped, you know?

STEPHEN: Totally. So don't let me keep you.

MOLLY: OK. But um . . . I'll probably be done with my stuff around ten if you . . . I don't know.

STEPHEN: If I what?

MOLLY: Well I'll be done at ten or so, that's all.

STEPHEN: Why don't you meet me here at eleven. I'll be done by then too.

MOLLY: Here?

STEPHEN: Right here. Right at this table. At eleven.

MOLLY: OK. At eleven.

(She exits. Stephen gulps down the rest of his drink. He pulls out the sheaf of papers from the packet and begins to look them over. Ben returns with a drink.)

BEN: That the stuff for the press conference tonight?

STEPHEN: Yeah.

BEN: Would it be helpful if I came? You know — to like pass stuff out or something.

STEPHEN: No — I need you back at the office finishing up those press releases.

BEN: I already finished them.

STEPHEN: All of them?

BEN: Yeah.

STEPHEN: Then you should get started on next week's.

BEN: I've already got drafts of those ready.

STEPHEN: You shouldn't work yourself so hard Ben. We've got eight more months of this.

BEN: I just like staying on top of the work. So can I come to the press conference with you? It's just that I'm trying to learn everything I can and I thought —

(Stephen's cell begins to ring. Stephen puts down the papers and grabs his cell phone.)

STEPHEN: *(Not recognizing the number.)* Who the fuck is this?

BEN: I thought you could use some help and —

STEPHEN: *(Answering the phone.)* This is Steve. *(A perturbed look overtakes Stephen's face.)* How did you get this number? . . . Hold on a sec. *(Covering the phone. To Ben.)* Go get yourself another drink.

BEN: *(Holding up his drink.)* But I —

STEPHEN: Do it.

(Ben exits with his drink.)

STEPHEN: *(Into the phone.)* I'm back . . . What for? . . . Not unless you tell me . . . Well if it's that important shouldn't you be calling Paul? . . . Why? . . . I really shouldn't until I talk to Paul first . . . He's my boss. I can't just . . . Look, this doesn't sound right to me . . . I've gotta be at a . . . *(Stephen looks visibly torn as he listens.)* . . . Yeah, I'm here . . . *(Grabs a pen from his jacket.)* OK where? . . . *(Cradles the phone and writes on a napkin.)* . . . Uh-huh . . . Yeah, I know where that is . . . All right, see you in a few. *(He hangs up. A moment passes as he considers what just occurred. He picks up his phone again and dials.)* Hello Paul? . . . Yeah, it's me. I just got a . . . *(He changes his mind.)* . . . You know what — it's not important . . . Yeah, no. Just something stupid I really shouldn't be bothering you with. Have a great flight. I'll talk to you tomorrow . . . OK. *(He hangs up. Another moment passes. He stands, yells to Ben.)* HEY BEN — GO AHEAD AND MEET ME AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE. I MIGHT BE A FEW MINUTES LATE.

(He grabs the napkin and exits.)

SCENE 2

A rundown restaurant in East Des Moines. The furniture is shabby and the place is desolate except for Tom, who sits at a table alone, a briefcase beside him. Stephen enters. He approaches Tom's table.

STEPHEN: Tom.

TOM: Steve. Thanks for coming. Please . . . take a load off.

STEPHEN: *(Sitting.)* I've got a press conference in about twenty minutes.

TOM: I know. You want a drink?

STEPHEN: No thanks.

TOM: Let me buy you a drink.

STEPHEN: A Coke.

TOM: A *Coke?* OK, a Coke. *(He signals a waiter.)* You look tired.

STEPHEN: I am.

TOM: Me too. This whole thing, it's turned into quite a ball-buster, huh?

STEPHEN: Yeah.

TOM: Totally exhausting. Try to take care of myself though. That's one thing I've learned — gotta find the time to exercise, eat right. Hit the Stair-Master every morning. Three squares a day. It's important when you get to be an old man like me. Young guy like you can live off adrenaline for six months straight and be just fine. I was that way when I was your age. *(A Waiter approaches.)*

TOM: We'll take a Sapphire and tonic . . . and a Coke.

WAITER: I'm sorry, we don't have Sapphire.

TOM: Tanqueray?

WAITER: No, I'm uh . . .

TOM: Whatever you've got is fine.

WAITER: Yes sir.

(The Waiter exits.)

TOM: Course a little gin doesn't hurt. Gets the blood moving. Gotta drink something to keep warm. Cold as hell in this city, isn't it? And with this snow now . . . .

STEPHEN: What's this about Tom?

TOM: There's a lot of talk about you.

STEPHEN: What sort of talk?

TOM: You can stop looking around Steve. There's no one here.

STEPHEN: I wasn't, I was —

TOM: Sure you were. I understand why you'd be worried. But give me a little credit. You think I'd pick a place where there was gonna be anybody?

STEPHEN: Look Tom, you said on the phone that this was important.

TOM: Well — it's simple.

STEPHEN: What is?

TOM: You're working for the wrong man.

STEPHEN: I'm sorry?

TOM: You are working for the wrong man.

STEPHEN: *(Laughs.)* That's funny.

TOM: You're a smart guy Steve. Very smart. But there's a lot of smart guys out there. Eventually they make a wrong move or get too arrogant or get too paranoid or just plain buckle under all the pressure. You know what I'm talking about. The heels at your back. Guys twice your age jealous of you. Younger guys circling like vultures. You start making enemies you don't even know you had. That's a terrible feeling, isn't? Constantly looking over your shoulder, wondering who you can trust. Always wondering / who is going to screw you next.

STEPHEN: OK — look — I appreciate the advice, but I really don't —

TOM: You've got something the other guys don't have. You've got a special . . . what is it? Charm isn't the right word. It's more than that. You exude something. You draw people in. All the reporters love you. Even the ones that hate you love you. We both know how much work it takes, constantly being on guard, weighing every word so carefully, every move. But you make it look easy. People are scared of you because they don't understand how you do it, and they love you for it. There's nothing more valuable in this business — the ability to win people's respect by making them mistake their fear for love.

STEPHEN: If you're trying to poach me — you're wasting your time.

TOM: You are going to lose Iowa.

STEPHEN: Bullshit.

(Tom takes a folder out of his briefcase and slips it across the table to Stephen.)

TOM: Look inside.

(Stephen opens the folder. There are a few pieces of paper inside. Stephen glances at them.)

STEPHEN: This can't be real.

TOM: It's very real.

STEPHEN: So you're telling me every other poll on the planet is off?

TOM: Exactly.

STEPHEN: That's impossible.

TOM: Twenty percent of what you think is your solid support is actually our people posing as Morris supporters. Inflates your lead, makes you feel comfortable, makes us look like the underdog. Three days ago we started telling them to switch back over to us when the pollsters call. During the next week, the tracks will show us gaining steadily and finally overtaking you a day before the caucus. It'll look like we've made a come-from-behind victory, when in reality we've had the lead all along. We'll have the momentum out of Iowa and take New Hampshire on the twenty-seventh. Morris will throw in the towel by Super Tuesday.

STEPHEN: There's no way you could have organized that many people and kept it a secret.

TOM: Our field director talks to fifty organizers. Each of those organizers talk to a dozen precinct captains. The precinct captains call twenty, thirty supporters they trust. Do the math Steve. That's what — fifteen thousand voters. Over ten percent of the vote.

STEPHEN: You're lying.

TOM: What good would it do me to show you these numbers if they weren't real?

STEPHEN: And you're dumb enough to show them to me?

TOM: Take them. Have Morris hit every county in the state. You might pick up a point or two, but you don't have enough time to close the gap. I'm not showing you these numbers to try and intimidate you, Steve. I'm showing you these numbers because I want you to work for a winner.

STEPHEN: I *am* working for a winner.

TOM: Wrong. These numbers are just the tip of the iceberg. A week ago I brought three hundred more field staff to pump up the GOTV. The day before the caucus, we'll robo-call and mass mail the hell out of your supporters with wrong polling locations. On game day, I'll send vans out to your strong areas to cause traffic jams so your supporters can't get to their caucuses. And once everyone gets into the caucus room, you'll find that a third of your precinct captains are actually our people. And by the way — we've got Thompson in the bag.

STEPHEN: I know for a fact that Thompson is going with us.

TOM: We promised Thompson secretary of labor, so he'll do anything we tell him to do — like sticking a carrot in front of your noses until we tell him to yank it away. Iowa's already over, Steve. It's been over for weeks. I'm thinking way down the road now. That's why I want you. We need

the best. I'll bring you in straight at the top.

(Stephen closes the folder and slides it back across the table.)

STEPHEN: I've played dirty before. Done stuff that keeps me awake at night. But this . . .

TOM: It'll win us the nomination.

STEPHEN: It's illegal.

TOM: Of course it is.

STEPHEN: This is the sort of shit the Republicans pull.

TOM: You're right, this *is* exactly what the Republicans do, and it's about time we learned from them. They're meaner, tougher, and more disciplined than we are. I've been in this business for thirty years, and I've seen way too many Democrats bite the dust because they wouldn't get down in the mud with the elephants.

STEPHEN: If I took this to the press you'd be fucked.

TOM: Try it. There's no way to prove anything. Not a single paper trail, not a single e-mail, nothing. It would take reporters months to get something solid, and by that time we've already won the nomination. Then you'd just be screwing over the Democratic Party, and I know you don't want that.

STEPHEN: I could never work for someone like you.

TOM: People like me get keys to the White House. You want your set of keys, you better learn to work for people like me.

STEPHEN: How would it look if I jumped ship a week before the caucus and joined you guys? I'd be branded as the most disloyal, opportunistic asshole ever. My credibility would be totally shot. And the media would go apeshit.

TOM: You had irreconcilable differences with senior staff, that's all you need to say.

STEPHEN: But that's not true.

TOM: It doesn't have to be.

STEPHEN: No — Look. I shouldn't even be sitting here right now. I shouldn't even be having this conversation.

(The Waiter approaches with the drinks. Sets them down.)

WAITER: One gin and tonic. One Coke. Are you ready to order?

STEPHEN: I'm leaving.

TOM: *(To the Waiter.)* My friend's gotta be somewhere in a few minutes, what can you bring out quickly?

WAITER: The uh, the buffalo wings would probably be the fastest.

STEPHEN: I told you, I'm leaving.

TOM: Two minutes, Steve.

STEPHEN: I don't —

TOM: *(To the Waiter.)* An order of buffalo wings. *(The Waiter exits. To Stephen.)* Stay. Two more minutes.

STEPHEN: The answer is no.

TOM: The answer is maybe. If the answer was no — you wouldn't have shown up in the first place. I know you want this. Otherwise you would've told me to go fuck myself by now.

STEPHEN: Then go fuck yourself.

(Stephen stands.)

TOM: Don't flush your career down the drain. You don't give me two minutes, and I will shut you out once we win the nomination. You will work for no one. You don't have to tell me straight away. Sleep on it, think it over. But I need to know soon. I want you before the caucus, not after you've lost. At that point it just looks like you're jumping on the bandwagon.

STEPHEN: I couldn't do this to Paul.

TOM: Fuck Paul. Paul's only ever worked for insurgent wackos that never had a chance of winning, just like he is now. I'm giving you a chance to leap right over Paul and be bigger than he ever was.

STEPHEN: Paul's a friend.

TOM: The question you gotta ask yourself is whether you want friends, or whether you want to work for the president.

STEPHEN: I won't do it.

TOM: Thanks for the two minutes. You have my number.

(Stephen exits.)

SCENE 3

Early the next morning. A room in the Hotel Fort Des Moines. Clothes are scattered about the room. Stephen stands in his underwear, talking into a cell phone. As he talks, Molly enters from the bathroom and begins to get dressed.

STEPHEN: Hey Paul — it's me — trying you again. *(Looks at his watch.)* You're probably on the plane by now, but I just wanted to see how things went with Thompson. If you get this before you take off, gimme a call. *(He ends the call, immediately speed dials another.)* Hey Ben? It's Steve . . . What time does Paul's plane get in this morning? . . . OK, I need you to find out — the airline, the flight number . . . Right . . . *(Looks at his*

phone, sees another call is coming in, back into the phone.) Hey look, Ida's calling on the other line, get back to me with that info, OK? *(He switches over to the other line.)* What's up Ida? . . . Uh-huh . . . I guess we'll have to see how good the roads . . . *(Laughs.)* . . . Maybe we can have him build a fucking snowman or shovel the driveway at an orphanage . . . *(Laughs.)* . . . Come on Ida, you know and I know that's a load of bullshit, and so does everyone else, so don't try to bait me — not this early in the morning . . . *(Laughs.)* . . .

MOLLY: *(Whispers to him.)* Do you want me to go?

STEPHEN: *(Covers the phone.)* Stick around for a minute. *(Back into the phone.)* Hey — did you get the press release on the . . . Sure it's a story . . . You said you'd keep an open mind if I was trying to push anything, so here I am pushing it. We're gonna play nice with each other, right? . . . Well look, why don't we meet in the lobby. I'll be downstairs in a half hour tops . . . OK, good. See you then. *(He hangs up.)*

MOLLY: You seem busy. I don't wanna intrude or anything.

STEPHEN: No — we should talk about —

(Stephen's phone rings.)

STEPHEN: This is Steve . . . .Uh-huh . . . No no no, you gotta look at the report too Frank, that's where the real good stuff is . . . Name me one renewable energy bill that Pullman got to the floor which was halfway meaningful . . . That one doesn't count . . . The numbers Frank, that's all I'm saying. Look at the numbers and then look at his record — there's your story . . .

MOLLY: Hey Steve?

STEPHEN: *(Into the phone.)* You guys have been begging for more issue shit, so now I'm giving it to you and —

MOLLY: Steve?

STEPHEN: *(Covering the phone.)* What's up?

MOLLY: I'm gonna go.

STEPHEN: *(Into the phone, holding up a finger for Molly to wait.)* Yeah, but you're missing the point . . .

(Molly heads for the door anyway, starts to open it.)

STEPHEN: *(Into the phone.)* Hold on a sec Frank *(Covering the phone.)* Don't go yet.

MOLLY: You have work to do.

STEPHEN: Wait a minute. I wanna talk to you about something.

(During the following, Molly picks up one of the newspapers on the bed and peruses it.)

STEPHEN: *(Into the phone.)* Frank? Sorry about that . . . Nobody, just the uh, the cleaning lady. What was I saying? Oh right, I was saying you're missing the fucking point. What this is about is . . . *(Glances over at Molly.)* . . . Hey Frank? Look, I got a meeting with Paul I really got to run to. Can I call you later about this? Yeah, that's good . . . OK, talk to you soon.

(He hangs ups.)

STEPHEN: *(Referring to the phone.)* All right, I'm putting this down.

MOLLY: The cleaning lady?

STEPHEN: What?

MOLLY: You told him I was the cleaning lady.

STEPHEN: Oh, that — come on. I / was just —

MOLLY: It's fine. I don't care.

STEPHEN: Look — it was just easier to —

MOLLY: Really — I don't care.

STEPHEN: OK, I just don't want you / to think —

MOLLY: You said you wanted to talk to me about something?

STEPHEN: Yeah — I just wanna . . . how do I put this? I just want to be clear about everything so there's no confusion, to make sure we understand each other.

MOLLY: I won't tell anyone about last night.

STEPHEN: No no, it's not that. I mean, yes, I'd appreciate if we kept this . . . if you could be discreet, because, I mean, you know how people are . . .

MOLLY: Wouldn't look good that you screwed an intern.

STEPHEN: Hey now . . .

MOLLY: Yes. I know how people are.

STEPHEN: They look for every opportunity to —

MOLLY: I get it. Don't worry. Your secret is safe.

STEPHEN: OK.

MOLLY: So.

STEPHEN: So what I wanted to talk to you about was that . . . all right, the truth is I have — I *had* — I don't know, it's complicated. I *had* this girlfriend back in DC, a pretty serious girlfriend. And things have been rocky lately so we're kind of taking a break, but I'm not really looking to get into anything serious, you know? Or even want to give the hint of that, so —

MOLLY: You told me all of this last night.

STEPHEN: What?

MOLLY: Your girlfriend. How you guys have been having trouble . . .

STEPHEN: I told you about that?

MOLLY: Her name is Helen right?
STEPHEN: Yeah.
MOLLY: You told me all about her.
STEPHEN: When did I . . .
MOLLY: At the bar. You don't remember?
MOLLY: You kept telling me how much you love her. How much you miss her.
STEPHEN: I did?
MOLLY: You talked on and on about her.
STEPHEN: I must have been really fucking drunk.
MOLLY: I think we were both pretty drunk.
STEPHEN: Wait — last night — did I say anything about . . . *(Stopping himself.)*
MOLLY: About what?
STEPHEN: Besides what I said about Helen. Did I . . . I just talked about Helen right?
MOLLY: Pretty much.
STEPHEN: Not about anything else?
MOLLY: What are you getting at?
STEPHEN: You know what? Nevermind. It's not important. *(Changing the subject, laughs to himself.)* Man, you must think I'm a complete dipshit . . .
MOLLY: No — I don't.
STEPHEN: 'Cause it's not like I just got totally wasted and this thing happened because . . . I mean, I wanted to. I really like you. You're smart as fuck. You're gorgeous . . . but I just . . . well I wanted to talk to you because I don't want there to be any expectations, because I —
MOLLY: Stephen — you don't have to say anything.
STEPHEN: I just don't want you to think that I'm some sort of player.
MOLLY: Well you *are* kind of a player, but that's OK.
STEPHEN: No I'm not.
MOLLY: The way you asked me to sit down and have a drink with you.
STEPHEN: I was just being polite.
MOLLY: Bullshit.
STEPHEN: I *was.*
MOLLY: You were hitting on me.
STEPHEN: No I wasn't.
MOLLY: It was totally obvious.
STEPHEN: I was *obvious?*
MOLLY: *So* obvious.
STEPHEN: I thought I was being all smooth and subtle.
MOLLY: You were pretty forward about it.

STEPHEN: You were pretty forward yourself, telling me when you got off work.

MOLLY: Well yeah. I've been wanting to get in your pants for a long time.

STEPHEN: Really?

MOLLY: Back in headquarters, when you'd stroll into the office . . . yeah. I couldn't keep my eyes off you.

STEPHEN: I never knew.

MOLLY: Because you didn't know I existed.

STEPHEN: So when you came with the envelope . . .

MOLLY: It wasn't supposed to be me that was gonna bring it. Jerry was gonna bring it over, but I told him I'd do it 'cause I wanted to see you.

STEPHEN: So you totally planned on . . .

MOLLY: Yup.

STEPHEN: Wearing those ass-hugging jeans and that shirt . . .

MOLLY: I changed before I came to the hotel.

STEPHEN: I played right into your hands.

MOLLY: Exactly.

STEPHEN: Wow.

MOLLY: Pretty slutty of me, huh?

STEPHEN: No — not at all. I mean — I kind of respect it — In a weird sort of way — how you — yeah.

MOLLY: Good.

STEPHEN: So you're cool with this, you know, with where I'm at and —

MOLLY: We had fun. That's all it was.

STEPHEN: We *did* have fun, didn't we?

MOLLY: If you remember it.

STEPHEN: Of course I remember.

MOLLY: Well you seemed to have blacked out about the —

STEPHEN: I remember coming back here, OK. That I completely remember.

MOLLY: You passed out right after we had sex.

STEPHEN: No I didn't.

MOLLY: You said "I gotta get up really early, baby. Guh-night." Then you rolled over and passed out.

STEPHEN: I *did* have to get up early.

MOLLY: It was cute. I watched you sleep for a little while. You snored.

STEPHEN: Oh shit. Was it loud?

MOLLY: No, it was kind of adorable actually. Like a kitten. You didn't really snore. You purred.

STEPHEN: I *purred?*

MOLLY: It was like.

(Molly purrs. Stephen laughs.)

MOLLY: Are you gonna tell her about me?

STEPHEN: Who?

MOLLY: Your girlfriend.

STEPHEN: Um . . . I don't know. Like I said — it's complicated.

MOLLY: You said last night that you usually tell her when you hook up with someone.

STEPHEN: That's the deal we have. If one of us — you know — we tell each other.

MOLLY: Even though you're broken up?

STEPHEN: Do we have to talk about this?

MOLLY: Sorry, I —

STEPHEN: It's fine.

MOLLY: You can tell her though. I know it's none of my business, and I know I don't have to give you permission, but in case you're wondering — I don't mind if you tell her.

STEPHEN: You're incredibly mature.

MOLLY: For a teenager.

STEPHEN: That's not what I meant.

MOLLY: It *is* what you meant.

STEPHEN: Come on.

MOLLY: Did it turn you on?

STEPHEN: What?

MOLLY: That I'm so young.

STEPHEN: No. I mean — you're hot. You're smart —

MOLLY: It did — didn't it?

STEPHEN: Well sure. Not in some like, pedophile way, but yeah.

MOLLY: When's the last time you bagged a nineteen-year-old?

STEPHEN: Uh . . . shit. I don't know. A while I guess. Now you're really making me feel like an old man.

MOLLY: You *are* an old man.

STEPHEN: Twenty-five isn't old.

MOLLY: You were in college when I got my first period.

STEPHEN: Very funny.

MOLLY: When I was born you could already do basic arithmetic.

STEPHEN: Did it turn *you* on? That I'm older?

MOLLY: Maybe.

STEPHEN: Landing the older man?

MOLLY: Well you're not the first.

STEPHEN: What do you mean?

MOLLY: I've been with a lot of older guys.

STEPHEN: Really?

MOLLY: You're like the youngest I've ever been with.

STEPHEN: Bullshit.

STEPHEN: It's true. I've never dated a guy younger than twenty-five.

STEPHEN: Even in high school?

MOLLY: I had an affair with my English teacher when I was fifteen. During a year abroad in France.

STEPHEN: Holy shit.

MOLLY: He was harmless. I'm the one who seduced him. I mean it was pretty obvious he wanted me. I'd go over to his house to help him grade papers all the time. Even used to babysit his kids.

STEPHEN: And the others?

MOLLY: What others?

STEPHEN: You said you'd been with *lots* of older guys.

MOLLY: Well I guess not *lots,* but a few.

STEPHEN: Tell me, tell me.

(At some point during the following she starts flipping through one of the newspapers on the bed.)

MOLLY: All right — *so* . . . I took a year off between high school and college and moved in with this guy Peter. He was twenty-nine — a chef at this restaurant where I waited tables. He got really needy and possessive. Asked me to marry him as soon as I turned eighteen. Freaked me out. I said, "Maybe when I graduate from college," but as soon as I got to school, I never spoke to him again. And then my first semester I dated a drummer in this band. Luke. He was thirty-one. I ended it after a few months because when it came down to it, he really wasn't the sharpest knife in the rack. And when I left school to join the campaign — well, there's been a couple people on the campaign. Where's that renewable energy story? I don't see it anywhere.

STEPHEN: Who?

MOLLY: What?

STEPHEN: Who else on the campaign?

MOLLY: Just hookups, nothing serious.

STEPHEN: Like who?

MOLLY: I don't know . . . Matt Spenser on and off for a few weeks.

STEPHEN: That douche bag?

MOLLY: He's hot.

STEPHEN: Who else?
MOLLY: Nobody.
STEPHEN: You said a couple.
MOLLY: You're prying.
STEPHEN: Tell me.
MOLLY: Why should I?
STEPHEN: I spilled my guts about my girlfriend.
MOLLY: When you were wasted.
STEPHEN: You afraid I'm gonna tell somebody?
MOLLY: No . . .
STEPHEN: So what's the harm?
(Molly considers this for a moment.)
MOLLY: You promise you won't tell a soul?
STEPHEN: Scout's honor.
MOLLY: I'm not joking.
STEPHEN: Yes. I won't tell anyone.
MOLLY: Well once, a couple months ago I . . . Wow. I can't believe I'm telling you this.
STEPHEN: Come on, come on, come on.
MOLLY: Paul . . .
STEPHEN: Paul who?
MOLLY: *Paul.*
STEPHEN: Paul Zara?
MOLLY: Just once.
STEPHEN: No way.
MOLLY: Yeah.
STEPHEN: Paul fucking *Zara?*
MOLLY: You see — I shouldn't have told you.
STEPHEN: No, no. I'm just surprised.
MOLLY: You can't tell anyone.
STEPHEN: I won't. No . . . I'm just . . . Wow. How did it happen?
MOLLY: What — you want me to break it down for you . . . ?
STEPHEN: Yeah, break it down for me.
MOLLY: It's really not that interesting.
STEPHEN: This was back at headquarters?
MOLLY: I really don't want to talk about it.
STEPHEN: Did he proposition you or something?
MOLLY: Steve . . .

STEPHEN: OK, OK. It's just totally — man. You fucked my boss. Kind of working your way down the line, huh?

MOLLY: That's a nasty thing to say.

STEPHEN: I didn't mean it like that.

MOLLY: How *did* you mean it?

STEPHEN: I was joking.

MOLLY: Well it wasn't funny.

STEPHEN: I'm sorry.

MOLLY: You're the only person I've ever told.

STEPHEN: That's a good thing. You definitely don't want that to get around.

MOLLY: I don't even know why I said anything. I promised Paul I / wouldn't ever . . .

STEPHEN: Look — you can tell me anything, OK? Really. I know how to keep a secret.

MOLLY: I know, I know.

STEPHEN: Molly — I think you are — you're an amazing woman. Incredible actually. It's like —

(Stephen's phone rings.)

MOLLY: You should take that.

STEPHEN: This is Steve . . . Yeah . . . Uh-huh . . . Hey Chris, we're all gonna get together and go over that before the background briefing. I'm right in the middle of something, so let me call you back, OK? . . . All right bye.

(He hangs up.)

MOLLY: I should go.

STEPHEN: Stay. Let's mess up these sheets a little more.

MOLLY: You have to meet with Ida.

STEPHEN: Not for another fifteen minutes.

MOLLY: But I need to get to the office.

STEPHEN: Well I'm not gonna beg you to stay.

MOLLY: Begging doesn't suit you.

STEPHEN: *(Chuckles.)* You know, twenty-four hours ago I was just minding my business, doing my job, getting ready for a press conference. And in you waltz with your little envelope and your ass-hugging jeans . . . And now? Here I am —

MOLLY: With a nineteen-year-old intern lying in your bed.

STEPHEN: With a nineteen-year-old intern lying in my bed.

(Molly stands.)

MOLLY: Seriously though — we both have work to do.

STEPHEN: There's nothing I can do to convince you to stay.

MOLLY: You're starting to beg.

STEPHEN: Call me later?

MOLLY: *(She gives him a kiss.)* You call me. If you can remember . . .

(She leaves. Stephen paces for a moment. Now that Molly is gone, reality is setting in. He grabs his cell phone off the table and dials.)

STEPHEN: Hey Ben — it's me again. I'm still waiting on that fuckin' info about Paul's flight. Get it to me pronto, OK? . . . Good . . . And another thing — send an e-mail out to the press corps telling them we're gonna reschedule the background briefing for later this afternoon . . . .All right, talk to you in a few.

(He hangs up.)

SCENE 4

The main terminal at the Des Moines Airport. Stephen is waiting nervously. Paul approaches him from behind, pulling his roll-away suitcase.

PAUL: Boo!

(Stephen whips around, startled.)

STEPHEN: Paul.

PAUL: What're you doin' here?

STEPHEN: Thought I'd pick you up myself.

PAUL: *(Teasing him.)* That was sweet of you. I'm touched. Truly.

STEPHEN: Good flight?

(Paul sets his suitcase aside, pulls a tin of chewing tobacco out of his back pocket and wedges some chew in his cheek.)

PAUL: Been *dying* the last three hours. Rude to spit into a cup when someone's sittin' next to you. I need to find another addiction is what I need to do. This snow — we circled so many times I thought they were gonna re-route us to fuckin' Omaha. How long you been waiting?

STEPHEN: 'Bout an hour.

PAUL: Sorry you had to wait.

STEPHEN: Don't worry about it.

PAUL: Seriously, it was nice of you to come out here and pick me up. I coulda gotten a cab you know.

STEPHEN: Well I got a rental this morning, so . . .

PAUL: I hope not an expensive one.

STEPHEN: On my own dime.

PAUL: You shouldn't've done that. If you needed a car we could've —

STEPHEN: We need to talk.

PAUL: You're sounding way too serious.

STEPHEN: Did you get my messages?

PAUL: No — I haven't turned my phone on yet.

STEPHEN: What'd Thompson say?

PAUL: Cocksucker said he's having second thoughts.

STEPHEN: Shit.

PAUL: I know. Thought this trip was to seal it, but I get to his house this morning, and he starts throwin' up smoke right and left, says he wants to see how things pan out in Iowa. I almost rip him a new asshole, but I stop myself. I ask him — why'd you have me fly all the way out here just to tell me you're not sure? He says he needs more info — what our strategy is over the next ten days, all this shit.

STEPHEN: Did you tell him?

PAUL: Course I told him. Talked his ear off for an hour — exactly how we're gonna take Iowa, every single step. And *still* no dice.

STEPHEN: This is bad Paul.

PAUL: What is?

STEPHEN: Thompson's not gonna endorse.

PAUL: He's just playin' a little hard to get.

STEPHEN: No Paul — he's definitely not gonna endorse.

PAUL: What are you talking about?

STEPHEN: He's gonna endorse Pullman three days out. Fuck — I should have called you last night, but I was hoping it wasn't true. I should have —

PAUL: Wo wo wo — slow down.

STEPHEN: Look Paul — I met with Tom Duffy last night.

PAUL: You *what?*

STEPHEN: He called me just after you left for the airport and asked to meet. I asked what it was about, and he said it was really important. So I did. I met with him. Shit, I should've called / you. I —

PAUL: Stop. Let me get this straight. You met with Tom Duffy?

STEPHEN: Yes.

PAUL: What'd he want?

STEPHEN: Well first he — look — the gist of it is he wants to hire me. He wants me to jump ship and come work for him. This is bad, Paul. He showed me poll numbers with Pullman already ahead by four. They've been telling their supporters to pose as Morris people to the pollsters. We're in really deep fucking trouble.

PAUL: That can't be true. He was playing mind games with you.

STEPHEN: He laid out their whole plan. Robo-calls, traffic jams, fake lit, and fucking Thompson. Promised him secretary of labor and told him to lead us on. Everything you told him today's gonna go straight to Duffy's ear.

PAUL: If this is some sort of practical — I mean — my blood pressure is going through the roof right now.

STEPHEN: I'm sorry Paul. I really should have called / you.

PAUL: This happened last night?

STEPHEN: Just before the press conference.

PAUL: And you didn't *call* me?

STEPHEN: I'm sorry Paul. I — I don't know. I guess I thought — I thought maybe it wasn't true. Maybe / he was —

PAUL: Jesus Steve. I can't believe you didn't —

STEPHEN: I know I know I know. Look — I was scared. I was scared and totally confused and I thought —

PAUL: It doesn't *matter* what you thought. It matters what you did. It matters what you *didn't* do. If all this shit is true, I made an ass of myself at Thompson's place. And I gave away our whole goddamn strategy. Just handed it over.

STEPHEN: I know Paul. Believe me. But it's like — like I was paralyzed. I didn't know if it was even worth telling you about if — if you came back and said — yeah — Thompson's in the bag, but . . . fuck Paul. I don't know.

PAUL: I sure as hell hope you were gonna tell me even if I came back and —

STEPHEN: Of course! Yes. I just —

PAUL: 'Cause I mean, if you were planning on keeping this secret —

STEPHEN: No! Not at all. That's why I'm telling you now.

PAUL: After I tell you Thompson said no.

STEPHEN: Seriously Paul, that's why I'm here now. To tell you. To —

PAUL: A little late now, don't you think? After I —

STEPHEN: You know me Paul. You know I would never — I really should have called last night. I should have and I didn't.

PAUL: You're fucking right you should have. You don't meet secretly with the other guy's campaign manager and *not* fucking tell me about it. You don't get a fucking *phone call* from the other guy's manager and not tell me.

STEPHEN: This is the *first* time Paul. The first time I've ever really fucked up. And I'm sorry. I am so sorry.

PAUL: It's a pretty big goddamn fuck-up whether it's your first time or not. I mean if we lose here, if we *lose* — it's over, we're dead.

STEPHEN: We can figure this out. There has to be a way to figure this out.

PAUL: We *better* figure this the fuck out.

STEPHEN: Paul. Please. You gotta forgive me on this. I feel like absolute shit. I feel terrible. Last night, I was so — you want to know the truth? I was so wound up about this shit that I went out and got wasted. Totally wasted. Drank myself to oblivion. Slept with some girl I shouldn't have. I dealt with this completely the wrong way. So I'm coming clean now. I came out to the airport to tell you this so we can figure it out. I know if we put our heads together and we — Goddamnit! I'm sorry. I am so so so —

PAUL: Steve.

STEPHEN: I am *so* sorry. I feel like I'm — I feel like —

PAUL: Steve. Stop. It's OK.

STEPHEN: No it isn't.

PAUL: It is. It's OK. You're right. We can figure it out. You did the right thing. You told me, which means that we can do something about it.

STEPHEN: I know there's a way.

PAUL: There's always a way. So take a breath and get yourself together. I need you at your best on this.

STEPHEN: I don't want you to think — I mean — I respect the hell out of you and your respect is something I —

PAUL: You and I are still OK, all right? It's been me and you from the beginning on this thing, and I got a little upset, but that's just because all of this — it's a bit of a shock to me. You're allowed your one fuck-up. So now let's get past that and get to work. Sound good?

STEPHEN: Yeah.

PAUL: Good. Now. First thing we have to do is get to that fucking event in — where is it?

STEPHEN: Cedar Rapids.

PAUL: Cedar Rapids. We got to get to that event in Cedar Rapids so I can break this all to the governor. You can fill me in on the drive out there — everything that happened with Duffy — every detail.

STEPHEN: The governor's gonna flip.

PAUL: He'll be fine. I know how to handle him. You just do your job and deal with the press.

STEPHEN: I can do that.

PAUL: Of course you can.

STEPHEN: Thanks, Paul. Really.

PAUL: Don't thank me. Just win me this fuckin' state.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II
SCENE 1

An event in Cedar Rapids later that day. Stephen is standing outside an elementary school gym talking with Frank, a reporter from the LA Times. *Ben is waiting just off to the side. Occasionally we hear the muffled cheers of the event inside the gym.*

STEPHEN: Of course they're tightening. That's what happens a week out.

FRANK: And you're not worried?

STEPHEN: No. We've held the lead for three months. Our base is strong. Ninety-five percent of the people who are going to vote have already made their choice. You're just seeing a few undecided going the other way.

FRANK: But your numbers are sliding. This isn't just a few undecideds suddenly —

STEPHEN: Three points? That's hardly a slide Frank. Like I said, we're a week out. You've covered these things before. The race tightens. That's how it goes.

FRANK: It keeps going like this you'll be within the margin of error by Friday.

STEPHEN: So let it. We started out as the underdog and proved everyone wrong, we'll do it again. You know and I know that half of this shit is the press. You all want a tight race, so you've been slamming us, and now you're getting your tight race.

FRANK: You can't blame this on us.

STEPHEN: I sure as hell can. When's the last time you wrote an article that had anything to do with one of our events?

FRANK: I write about your events.

STEPHEN: A line. Maybe two, on a good day. Then you regurgitate Pullman's oppo for the next three columns.

FRANK: You're not being fair.

STEPHEN: Don't talk to me about fair, Frank. None of this shit is fair. If you all were being fair, I'd wake up to a much different stack of papers every morning.

FRANK: What's gotten into you Stevie?

STEPHEN: Nothing's gotten into me.

FRANK: I ask you a few questions — you blow up at me.

STEPHEN: You're missing the event Frank.

FRANK: Is something going on?

STEPHEN: The event — right through those doors.

FRANK: Off the record.

STEPHEN: Nothing. Really. Now please, go watch this event. I'd still like our line or two in tomorrow's paper.

FRANK: There's only so many ways I can cover a stump speech Stevie. It's the same speech every time.

(A massive cheer of the crowd is heard within.)

STEPHEN: You hear that? It's the same speech because it works. This guy is gonna be the next president of the United States, and you're standing out here talking to me. Go in there and do your job. You oughtta be listening to him instead of hounding my ass about the tracking polls. Don't you think the people of Los Angeles deserve to get a little accurate reportage? Or do they even read the paper?

FRANK: *(He's had enough.)* You want me to soften up on you guys — bitching me out isn't exactly the best way to go about it.

STEPHEN: Well I'm tired of sucking your cock.

FRANK: Jesus Steve — you need to get some sleep.

(Frank exits into the event. Ben approaches Stephen.)

BEN: Steve.

STEPHEN: Why the fuck are you always lurking around? *(Beat.)* Don't you have press releases to hand out?

BEN: I already did.

STEPHEN: Well go hand out some more.

(Ben holds up a few sheets of paper.)

BEN: I was wondering if you'd take a look at this.

STEPHEN: Can it wait?

BEN: I — well I just —

STEPHEN: Yes or no? We're right in the middle of an event.

BEN: It's a speech.

STEPHEN: What speech?

BEN: For the governor. A new stump speech.

STEPHEN: I didn't put out an order for a new speech.

BEN: I know. I just figured . . .

STEPHEN: Figured what?

BEN: I just figured that since the reporters we're getting a little . . . you know . . . a little bored with —

(Stephen grabs the speech and looks it over.)

STEPHEN: Who wrote this?

BEN: I did.

STEPHEN: You don't change a stump speech a week before the caucus.

BEN: Well it's more than a stump speech — it's kind of a new approach. A whole new —

STEPHEN: We spent months — *I* spent months perfecting the governor's speech. Every word. Every gesture. Every pause. You don't up and change your message seven days out.

BEN: I wasn't trying to imply that the governor's speech isn't good, it's just a matter of how effective it is at this point since all the reporters —

STEPHEN: Effective? It's put us in the lead for three months straight.

(Ida enters, coming from the event, and approaches Stephen as Ben talks.)

BEN: Look Steve — I was just hoping you'd look it over and tell me what you think, even if you don't want to use it.

STEPHEN: I don't.

BEN: You haven't read it though.

STEPHEN: I just did.

BEN: You skimmed the first page.

STEPHEN: Did you hear a word I said? We're not gonna change the —

BEN: Well maybe you could at least show it to Paul. I really think there's some good stuff in there and if we just insert a few things into his regular —

STEPHEN: Another time Ben. *(Stephen hands the speech back to Ben.)* What's up Ida?

IDA: If you two are —

STEPHEN: No — not at all. Talk to me.

BEN: Can I just slip this under your door at the hotel and —

STEPHEN: Go away Ben.

BEN: It'll be there when you get back.

STEPHEN: I said go the fuck away.

(Ben leers at him for a second — his frustration and anger seething — but he keeps his cool. His next line is delivered with confidence and dignity.)

BEN: All right. We'll talk later then. When you're a little less busy.

(Ben exits.)

IDA: Wow. Kinda harsh there.

STEPHEN: Kid wrote a . . . never mind. It's not important.

IDA: I like Ben. He's a sweetheart.

STEPHEN: He's an ambitious little fucker.

IDA: Look in a mirror darlin'.

STEPHEN: Hangs around me like a puppy.

IDA: He looks up to you. You're his idol.

STEPHEN: *(Laughs bitterly.)* Whatever.

IDA: So Stevie . . . off the record . . .

STEPHEN: No Ida. I can't tell you what happened in South Carolina.

IDA: That's not what I wanted to ask you about.

STEPHEN: No?

IDA: Well not right away. There's something else.

STEPHEN: I'm listening.

IDA: You met with Tom Duffy.

(A pause. Stephen doesn't know what to say.)

IDA: So it's true?

STEPHEN: Who told you that?

IDA: A little bird.

STEPHEN: Who?

IDA: Did you meet with him?

STEPHEN: Tell me who Ida.

IDA: Can't do that.

STEPHEN: I'm not fucking around here.

IDA: Neither am I.

STEPHEN: It's not true.

IDA: I *know* you met with him. At a little restaurant in East Des Moines, last night, just before the press conference. Duffy ordered buffalo wings.

STEPHEN: Did Duffy tell you this?

IDA: Anonymous.

STEPHEN: You don't have shit.

IDA: This is a story, Steve.

STEPHEN: The *Times* won't print anything with one uncorroborated anonymous source.

IDA: I can't get it printed at the *Times,* but I could always give Matt Drudge a call . . .

STEPHEN: You're gonna play gutter ball with me?

IDA: All I'm saying is that you've got a choice. You tell me what happened with Duffy and I bury it, *or* the story shows up in a blurb somewhere. I just wanna be in the loop.

STEPHEN: I'm not gonna let you strong-arm me.

IDA: What happened with Duffy?

STEPHEN: You're supposed to be my friend Ida. You'd stab me in the back like this? You'd ruin my reputation / just so you —

IDA: Wait wait wait — is that what you thought? That we were friends?

STEPHEN: I've given you *everything* — every fucking scoop, your profile with Paul . . .

IDA: You're right — you've given me a lot. But let's get real here Steve. The only reason you ever treated me well was because I work for the *Times.* Not because I was your *friend.* You give me what I want, I write you better stories. Don't pretend it's any more than that.

STEPHEN: So this is the shit you're willing to pull to get your story?

IDA: You'd do the same if you were me.

STEPHEN: Go fuck yourself.

IDA: OK, I'll make it easier on you. Forget Duffy. What happened at Paul and Thompson's meeting?

STEPHEN: No.

IDA: Is he gonna endorse?

STEPHEN: You're not getting a goddamn thing out of me.

IDA: Don't make things hard on yourself.

STEPHEN: This conversation's over.

(Stephen starts walking away.)

IDA: Do you really want this story getting out?

STEPHEN: *(Stopping.)* Lower your voice.

IDA: Do you?

STEPHEN: *(Coming back.)* Do you realize what a story like this could do to me?

IDA: Of course I do. That's why I'm giving you a choice here.

STEPHEN: I could get fired.

IDA: So it's not a difficult choice, is it?

(A pause as Stephen takes this in.)

IDA: I've got to file by four. You've got till then to make up your mind.

(Ida exits. Stephen pulls out his cell phone and dials. On the opposite side of the stage, lights come up on Tom sitting at a desk, his phone ringing. Tom looks at the number on his phone and answers.)

TOM: Steve.

STEPHEN: You fuckin' bastard.

TOM: Excuse me?

STEPHEN: You leaked it.

TOM: Leaked what?

STEPHEN: Don't bullshit me Tom.

TOM: Bullshit you? What the —

STEPHEN: I just spoke with Ida Horowicz.

TOM: Yeah?

STEPHEN: Why'd you do it?

TOM: Do what? What the hell are you talking about?

STEPHEN: You know exactly what I'm talking about.
TOM: No Steve. I wish I did, but I —
STEPHEN: You ambushed me.
TOM: I have no idea what / you're —
STEPHEN: Ida's threatening to let the story out.
TOM: *What* story?
STEPHEN: That we met! That I fuckin' met with you!
TOM: How did she find out?
STEPHEN: Don't play dumb here Tom.
TOM: You think *I* leaked it to her?
STEPHEN: Who else?
TOM: This isn't good Steve.
STEPHEN: You're fucking right it isn't good.
TOM: I didn't leak it to her.
STEPHEN: Well I know *I* didn't, so that leaves you.
TOM: What's she know?
STEPHEN: She knows whatever you told her.
TOM: I swear I didn't leak it to her Steve. I don't want this story out any more than you do.
STEPHEN: Too fucking late.
TOM: What did she tell you?
STEPHEN: She knows where and when we met. I don't think she knows anything else.
TOM: She has a source?
STEPHEN: Of course she has a source.
TOM: And you have no idea who it could be?
STEPHEN: Other than you?
TOM: Well it wasn't me, so it's gotta be someone else.
STEPHEN: Did you tell anyone? Anyone at all?
TOM: No. Did you?
STEPHEN: No.
TOM: Did you admit to meeting with me?
STEPHEN: No.
TOM: Then we stonewall her and she's got nothing.
STEPHEN: She's gonna take the story to *Drudge*, or *Roll Call* — shit like that.
TOM: You can't stop her?
STEPHEN: She's trying to blackmail me — wants info about Thompson.
TOM: Then tell her what she wants to know.
STEPHEN: I can't do that.

TOM: You can't let this story get out.
STEPHEN: I'm not gonna be blackmailed Tom.
TOM: You don't have much of a choice here.
STEPHEN: If I tell her about Thompson, I gotta tell her he's gonna endorse you guys.
TOM: Then tell her. I can handle it from my end if I start getting calls.
STEPHEN: No way. I told her we had Thompson in the bag. It'll make us look like fools.
TOM: You're gonna look like fools anyway when he endorses us.
STEPHEN: I can't do it Tom. I can't let her blackmail me. I give in once, she'll do it again.
TOM: You're on a sinking ship Steve. Tell her what she wants to know and jump. Come over to our side. We can control this thing. *(Pause. No answer from Stephen.)* Steve?
STEPHEN: I'm here.
TOM: Tell her about Thompson. Tell her you're coming over to us.
STEPHEN: I gotta go.
TOM: Listen to me —
STEPHEN: I really . . .
TOM: Do the right thing here Steve.
STEPHEN: I never should have met with you.
TOM: Get it together kid. You and I can *control* this.
STEPHEN: I'm fucked Tom.
TOM: No you're not.
STEPHEN: Good-bye.
(Stephen hangs up.)
TOM: Goddamnit.

SCENE 2

A small office at Morris's Iowa campaign headquarters. Molly is sitting at a desk, typing away at a laptop. Stephen enters the room abruptly.

STEPHEN: Your phone's been off.
MOLLY: No it hasn't. I / just don't —
STEPHEN: I've been trying to call you for the past three hours.
MOLLY: I don't get a good signal in this office.
STEPHEN: Did you talk to Ida Horowicz?

MOLLY: Ida? No.
STEPHEN: Don't lie to me.
MOLLY: I'm not. Why would I talk to Ida?
STEPHEN: Did you talk to anyone else?
MOLLY: Who? What are you talking about?
STEPHEN: Last night, when I was drunk, what did I tell you?
MOLLY: You told me about your girlfriend.
STEPHEN: What else?
MOLLY: Nothing. You talked about Helen. That's it.
STEPHEN: I didn't tell you about a meeting?
MOLLY: No. You didn't tell me anything about a meeting.
STEPHEN: I didn't mention Tom Duffy?
MOLLY: Tom Duffy?
STEPHEN: If you're lying to me . . .
MOLLY: Steve. *What* is going on?
STEPHEN: I'm getting screwed is what's going on.
MOLLY: What happened?
STEPHEN: *(To himself.)* Who the fuck could it have been?
MOLLY: Could *what* have been?
STEPHEN: Some one told Ida and I can't figure out who.
MOLLY: Told Ida *what?*
STEPHEN: Nothing.
MOLLY: You can trust me.
STEPHEN: You have no idea how fucked I am.
MOLLY: Will you *please* tell me what's going on?
STEPHEN: If I can just figure this out. I need to *think.*
MOLLY: I won't tell anyone Steve. Maybe I can help.
(A beat.)
STEPHEN: Tom Duffy called me yesterday, right after we talked at the hotel. I met with him. He offered me a job on Pullman's campaign. I turned him down. But somehow Ida found out about the meeting. Duffy might have leaked it, but I don't think he did. And if you didn't, then I / don't know —
MOLLY: Even if you *had* told me I'd / never —
STEPHEN: I know, I know — but someone . . . fuck . . . *somebody* told Ida.
MOLLY: Where did you meet with him?
STEPHEN: A little restaurant in East Des Moines.
MOLLY: Was there anyone else there?
STEPHEN: Just us.

MOLLY: And you didn't tell anyone?

STEPHEN: No.

MOLLY: Then it has to be Duffy, right?

STEPHEN: Yeah, but I really don't think it's him. I just . . . If this thing gets out — this thing, it's like — if I had known. If I had any clue that —

MOLLY: You only *met* with him right?

STEPHEN: That's enough, believe me.

MOLLY: I don't see what the big deal is.

STEPHEN: It looks like backroom politicking — which is what it *was* I guess. Morris's press secretary meets with Pullman's campaign manager? The press'll eat it up. Am I jumping ship? Are we brokering a deal? It'll be a fucking feeding frenzy. I'll become the headline instead of the governor. It'll drown out our message. And we can't afford it. Not with — not with all that's gonna happen in the next week. I mean — Molly — this race — it's — we're not gonna win this thing. Not Iowa at least. We're gonna have to scramble for every fucking vote in New Hampshire after we tank here, and we might / not be able to —

MOLLY: Hold on a sec. We're not gonna win Iowa?

STEPHEN: No.

MOLLY: But the polls say we're eight points —

STEPHEN: It's all a myth. We lost this state weeks ago. Everything you read, everything you hear, everything you see — it's all a myth. It's over. Iowa is fucking over already.

MOLLY: We're ahead . . .

STEPHEN: No. We're behind. The polls — they don't mean shit. And there's Thompson, and the robocalls and . . . Pullman's gonna take the state.

MOLLY: We *can't* lose.

STEPHEN: Wake the fuck up Molly! I'm telling you this state is over, and I *know.* You think you have any idea what's going on while you're sitting behind this fucking computer all day? Do you think you even have a shred of a clue?

MOLLY: Don't talk to me like that.

STEPHEN: I'm sorry. I am. It's just that —

(Stephen's phone rings. He looks at the number.)

STEPHEN: Ida. *(Stephen looks at his watch.)* It's filing time.

MOLLY: Are you gonna answer it?

(The phones continues to ring.)

STEPHEN: No. I'm not gonna answer it.

(The phone stops ringing.)

STEPHEN: Well. That's that.

MOLLY: What's gonna happen?

STEPHEN: I don't know.

MOLLY: I'm sure you can — I mean — there's got to be a way to handle it, right?

STEPHEN: Maybe. I gotta talk to Paul. I gotta let Paul know what's gonna happen. Maybe if we — I don't know . . .

(Stephen opens the door.)

MOLLY: Steve?

STEPHEN: Yeah?

MOLLY: I would never betray you like that.

STEPHEN: *(Not accusingly, but reflectively.)* I barely know you.

MOLLY: You just have to trust me.

STEPHEN: I'm not good at that. I want to trust you, but . . . It's just hard.

MOLLY: I'm not a reporter Stephen. I'm on your side.

STEPHEN: Why are you being so nice to me?

MOLLY: I don't know. Because I like you.

STEPHEN: You shouldn't like me Molly. I'm not a good person.

MOLLY: Well neither am I. So there.

(A brief pause while Stephen takes her in.)

STEPHEN: Keep your cell phone on.

(Stephen exits.)

SCENE 3

A room in the Hotel Fort Des Moines. Paul is lying on the bed, talking on his cell phone.

PAUL: Absolutely — there's no question about it . . .

(A knock. Paul goes to the door, opens it, and waves Stephen in, shutting the door behind him as he enters.)

PAUL: But we've got to think broader strokes here, rethink everything . . . uh-huh . . . Yeah, I know how to handle it . . . Look, Stevie just got here. Can I call you back in a few minutes? . . . OK, bye. *(He hangs up.)* The governor. We had a good long talk on the way back. He's up to speed with everything.

STEPHEN: How'd he take it?

PAUL: Better than I thought he would. Where've you been? I couldn't find you after the event.

STEPHEN: I left early. Drove straight back here. Wanted to start laying out a media plan for the next ten days.

PAUL: What do you have in mind?

STEPHEN: Well assuming the worst, that we're gonna lose Iowa, I figure we need to downplay the state. We gear up the notion that we're running a national campaign. We stop stumping here altogether. Lower expectations. Start doing events in Super Tuesday states. That way when Pullman wins Iowa, it's not as big of a blow. The media are prepared for it. And we've already started to shift the focus to February third.

PAUL: So you think we pull out of Iowa with just a week to go?

STEPHEN: I don't see any other choice.

PAUL: It's risky.

STEPHEN: But it'll lessen the blow. And if we come out of Iowa as the underdog, that might actually work for us. The governor's a much better underdog than he is a front-runner.

(Paul goes over to the table and picks up some papers.)

PAUL: You see this?

(He hands the papers to Stephen.)

STEPHEN: What is it?

PAUL: Speech Ben wrote.

STEPHEN: He tried to give me a copy at the event, but I didn't have time to look over it.

PAUL: I wanna use it. It's just what we need right now. The tone, the message. I think Iowans will really connect with it.

STEPHEN: Paul — I gotta tell you something.

PAUL: What's up?

STEPHEN: Ida knows I met with Duffy.

(Paul takes the speech out of Stephen's hands and places it back on the table.)

STEPHEN: I'm sorry Paul. I don't know how she found out. Tried to blackmail me. Said she was gonna let the story out if I didn't tell her what happened at your meeting with Thompson.

PAUL: Did you tell her?

STEPHEN: Of course not. You know I wouldn't do that Paul.

PAUL: So it's gonna hit the papers.

STEPHEN: Probably. Yeah. I figure she'll take it to *Drudge* or *Roll Call.* Whoever she takes it to, they'll have to call me for a comment, so I wanted to ask your advice here. I wanna know what you'd like me to say. I could just deny the whole thing, but if they call Duffy and he admits to it, that could look worse. If I say no comment, they won't let up. Or, I could

admit to it and try to spin it in a way that makes Duffy look bad. But I wanted to ask your advice first.

PAUL: I leaked it to Ida.

(Pause.)

PAUL: At the event.

STEPHEN: What?

PAUL: We made a deal. She lets me read an advance copy of her profile, I give her a juicy little piece of gossip.

STEPHEN: I don't understand. Paul — this story's gonna hit the papers tomorrow morning.

PAUL: I know.

STEPHEN: But why? Why on earth would you do that to me? Why would you do that to the campaign.

PAUL: The campaign will survive.

STEPHEN: But what about me?

PAUL: Makes it easier to let you go.

STEPHEN: What?

PAUL: To let you *go* Steve. To replace you.

STEPHEN: You're joking, right?

PAUL: No. I'm not.

STEPHEN: Don't do this Paul.

PAUL: It's already done. The governor knows. He agrees it's the right thing to do. I'm sorry Steve. Please don't take this personally.

STEPHEN: How the fuck am I not supposed to take this personally?

PAUL: Because it's politics.

STEPHEN: Paul —

PAUL: Why'd you meet with Duffy?

STEPHEN: I told you — I was confused. I wasn't thinking. I —

PAUL: Bullshit. You knew exactly what you were doing.

STEPHEN: It was a stupid mistake — OK? A very very stupid mistake.

PAUL: No Stephen. You didn't make a mistake. You made a choice. Yesterday — remember when you called me on the way to the airport? Remember that? "Hi Paul, this is Steve. I just got a . . . " What? What did you just get? A call from Duffy? No. That's not what you told me. You stopped yourself. You *chose* Stephen. You *chose* not to tell me. Why did you make that choice?

STEPHEN: I don't know . . .

PAUL: Sure you do. Because you were curious. Because you were flattered. Because it made you feel special to think Duffy wanted to speak to you in-

stead of me. Because you thought to yourself: maybe I can get something out of this. Because it made you feel *big.*

STEPHEN: That's not true Paul. I don't know why I did what I did. But if you think it's because — because I wanted to prove something to myself, or because it somehow / made me feel —

(As he talks, Paul takes out his wallet and pulls out a folded-up dollar bill.)

PAUL: *(Holding up the dollar bill.)* You know what this is? *(As he unfolds the bill.)* First campaign I ran — tiny little race in Kentucky — state senate seat. Workin' for a redneck nobody named Sam McGuthrie. Had no money, no staff, no fuckin' office. Worked out of McGuthrie's garage. Everyone thought we didn't stand a chance. But sure enough, we start to turn things around. Our numbers go up. Donations start trickling in. We hire a few people. Rent an office. Next thing you know, Sam looks like he's got a real chance. Incumbent is running scared. So what happens? State Republican Party doesn't want to lose this seat. They pour fifty grand into the other guy's coffers. Doesn't seem like a lot to us now, but in a small race like that, twenty years ago? It was a fortune. There's no way we can compete. Our party decides to abandon Sam. Didn't want to spend the money for a seat they thought they were gonna lose anyway. And about this time, a guy running a congressional campaign a few districts over gives me a call. Says, "I really like what you were able to do for poor ole' Sam. But let's face it, he's a goner, so why don't you come work for me?" What do I do? Well Stephen — this is where you and I are different. I told Sam about the call. And Sam says to me, "Paul, you think this other guy's got a shot at winning, and he can pay you more than anything I can afford, so if it's what you feel you need to do, then I won't get in your way." So I say, "Sam — you took a chance and hired me when I was even more of nobody than you are, and I'd be damned if I'm gonna jump ship just because the shit hit the fan." We froze all the staff's salaries and poured every dime we had into winning the race. By election day, I was literally down to one dollar in my pocket. This dollar. *(Beat.)* We lost the race, but three years later, when Sam decided to run for governor — who do you think he called? We *won* that race. And twenty years later — here I am. *(Beat.)* There's only one thing I value in this world Steve, and that's loyalty. Without it, you're nothing and you have no one. And in politics it's the only currency that you can count on. That's why I'm letting you go. Not because you're not good enough. Hell, you're the best. But I value trust over talent. And I don't trust you anymore.

STEPHEN: What am I supposed to do?

PAUL: *(Placing the dollar bill back in his wallet.)* If I were you? I'd get a good night's sleep. You're gonna get pounded by calls from the press in the morning.

STEPHEN: Who the fuck's gonna replace me?

PAUL: Ben.

STEPHEN: *Ben?*

PAUL: He's a smart kid. Not as good as you, but smart. And I trust him.

STEPHEN: He's a child.

PAUL: So are you.

STEPHEN: I built the press shop. From the ground up. No one knows the reporters better than I do. No one can run this thing like me. You can't just hand it over to Ben.

PAUL: Sure I can.

STEPHEN: I've worked my ass off for you Paul. I've fucking — I lost my girlfriend because of this campaign. I gave up a good job with Senator Callahan to do this. I —

PAUL: Wait wait wait. Am I supposed to feel *sorry* for you? Because you left Callahan? Because you got dumped by your *girlfriend?* You made your own bed Stephen. You *made* those choices. If your girlfriend left you, it's because you wanted this job more than you wanted her. And even *her* you tried to spin, with that whole "open relationship" bullshit. And do you expect to be *rewarded* because you fucked up your personal life to come work for me?

(There's a knock on the door.)

PAUL: IT'S OPEN.

(Ben enters, holding a few sheets of paper. He's surprised to see Stephen.)

BEN: Steve. I didn't know you'd —

PAUL: Whattaya got Ben?

BEN: That release you asked me to . . . The release you wanted to look over.

(Stephen grabs the release out of Ben's hands and looks at it.)

STEPHEN: Irreconcilable differences? *(To Ben.)* Is that the best you could come up with?

PAUL: I told him to write that. And I suggest you say the same when the press calls you about it.

STEPHEN: You can go fuck yourself if you think that's what I'm gonna say.

PAUL: You can make this a soft landing, or make it hard on all of us. If I were you, I'd think down the road here. There will be other campaigns.

STEPHEN: This was the one Paul.

PAUL: What do you want me to say?

STEPHEN: *(Turning on Ben.)* You little cunt. You've been waiting for this moment, haven't you? Writing your little speeches, schmoozing with the big boys.

BEN: No Steve. It's not like that.

STEPHEN: You must be loving this.

PAUL: Get out Steve.

STEPHEN: *(To Ben.)* I will take *so* much pleasure in watching you getting eaten alive.

PAUL: Leave Stephen.

(Stephen hands Ben the crumpled-up dollar bill.)

STEPHEN: *(To Ben.)* Ask Paul to tell you the story about his buddy the redneck. It's a real tearjerker. *(He begins to go. Stops and turns.)* And Paul — just so you know. Molly told me everything. I know you fucked her.

PAUL: Get the hell out of my room.

(Stephen exits, slamming the door behind him.)

SCENE 4

Later that evening. The same rundown restaurant where Stephen and Duffy met in Act I. Stephen is sitting at a table, nervously looking over a menu. Duffy enters.

STEPHEN: Tom. Thanks for meeting with me.

TOM: I've only got a few minutes.

STEPHEN: I know. I'll keep it short. You want anything? A drink?

TOM: No. I'm fine.

STEPHEN: I'm gonna order a drink if you don't mind.

TOM: Course not.

(Stephen signals a waiter.)

TOM: So what's this about?

STEPHEN: I wanna come work for you.

TOM: I see.

STEPHEN: Is the offer still open?

TOM: A reporter at *Roll Call* phoned me this afternoon.

STEPHEN: I know who leaked it.

TOM: Who?

STEPHEN: Paul.

TOM: You told Paul?

STEPHEN: Yeah. I told him we met. He leaked it.

TOM: Why?

STEPHEN: He fired me Tom. A few hours ago.

TOM: I'm sorry to hear that.

STEPHEN: Don't be. He's a . . . He's not who I thought he was.

(The Waiter approaches.)

WAITER: Anything to drink?

STEPHEN: I'll take a Dewars on the rocks.

TOM: Just water for me.

(The Waiter exits.)

TOM: You shouldn't have told him we met.

STEPHEN: I felt I had to.

TOM: So he fired you and now you wanna come work for me.

STEPHEN: It's not like that. I was seriously thinking about working for you before any of this shit went down.

TOM: No you weren't.

STEPHEN: I was. Believe me. What you said yesterday. You're right. I wanna work for a winner.

TOM: You're saying that if Paul hadn't fired, you we'd still be sitting here right now?

STEPHEN: Yes.

TOM: You're lying.

STEPHEN: I'm not. I swear to God. I'll work my ass off for you Tom.

TOM: I'm sure you would.

STEPHEN: And I can give you everything on Morris. *Everything.* I can lay out his whole strategy for you.

TOM: I already know his strategy. Paul gave it all to Thompson.

STEPHEN: I can give you the details. I can give you numbers. I can give your everything Thompson didn't.

TOM: You'd do that to the governor? To Paul?

STEPHEN: They *dropped* me Tom. They dropped my ass like I was yesterday's news. Yeah. I would.

TOM: Revenge makes people unpredictable Steve. I can't have someone who's unpredictable. Who's unstable.

STEPHEN: *(Calmly.)* I'm not unstable.

TOM: It's not just that / Steve.

STEPHEN: I'm in control here. I'm on top / of things. I'm —

TOM: Steve. Listen to me. This story in *Roll Call*, it's not good. I'm gonna

start getting calls left and right. So are you. Then the networks will pick it up — the dailies . . .

STEPHEN: It'll blow over. I can make that happen.

TOM: I don't know if you can.

STEPHEN: That's what I do. I make things blow over. I'm a pro at it. I can handle this story.

TOM: If it had been a clean break — if you'd left Morris before this story broke, that'd be one thing. *That* we could control. But the way it'd look now — Paul fires you and *then* you come work for us. Looks like we're picking up the scraps. Puts Morris in the driver's seat. I can't have that.

STEPHEN: You gotta hire me Tom.

TOM: I wish I could.

STEPHEN: The party needs me this cycle.

TOM: Then go work for the DNC.

STEPHEN: The *candidate* needs me.

TOM: I think we'll be all right.

STEPHEN: You practically begged me to work for you yesterday.

TOM: Things have changed.

STEPHEN: I'll work for next to nothing.

TOM: It's not a matter of money.

STEPHEN: Don't make me get on my knees here.

TOM: Steve — it's not gonna happen. I'm sorry. Go take a nice long vacation. You could use some time off. And maybe this thing is really a blessing in disguise. You're twenty-five. There's so many other things you could do besides this horseshit. Think about it. You make it to the White House. You do your four years, if you last that long, and then what? You get off the train every morning at Farragut North and trudge to some consulting firm with all the other political has-beens. Next thing you know, you're forty, then fifty, so many races under your belt you can't remember which you won and which you lost. Do yourself a favor. Get out now. You stay in this business long enough, you'll turn into nothing but a stone-hearted hack.

STEPHEN: Like you?

TOM: Yeah. Just like me.

STEPHEN: You played me, didn't you?

TOM: Played you? No. I tried to hire you.

STEPHEN: You knew I'd tell Paul.

TOM: I didn't *know*. I thought you *might*, but I didn't *know*.

STEPHEN: You knew if I told him he'd fire me.

TOM: Thing you gotta know about Paul — he's big on loyalty. *(Beat.)* Put yourself in my shoes, Steve. Your opponent has the best media mind in the country working on his team. What do you try to do? You either try to hire him yourself, or work it so if you can't have him, the other team can't either. This was a win-win situation for me. You work for us — great. Paul doesn't have you. Then again, if Paul fires you and I don't take you — fine — Paul still doesn't have you. The moment I got you to sit down in that chair yesterday, I knew I'd won. *(Tom stands.)* It's not *easy* for me to do this sort of thing Steve. Don't think I take any pleasure in it. I'm sorry for you. I really am. Take care of yourself.

(Tom leaves. The Waiter approaches with the drinks and sets them down on the table.)

WAITER: Is your friend . . . Is he . . .

STEPHEN: He left.

WAITER: Just you then?

STEPHEN: Yeah.

WAITER: Ready to order?

(Stephen gulps down his drink.)

STEPHEN: I'm not eating.

WAITER: Oh. Well maybe just an appetizer or something? The chicken quesadilla is really good.

STEPHEN: No. I'm not hungry.

WAITER: How about another drink?

STEPHEN: Just the check.

(The Waiter clears his empty glass from the table. Starts to go. Stops and returns.)

WAITER: I'm sorry to bother you, but you're that guy, right? From the Morris campaign? I've seen you on TV. Stephen Bentley, right?

STEPHEN: Bellamy.

WAITER: Right! Bellamy! Stephen Bellamy. I gotta say, I'm a big Morris supporter. Gonna caucus for him next week.

STEPHEN: Good for you.

WAITER: All these other guys, you can see right through them, but Morris, he's the real thing. I saw him speak when he came out here to East Des Moines a couple months ago.

STEPHEN: Yeah?

WAITER: Man — he really blew me away. That speech. Wow. That's really cool that you work for him. I'd give anything to work on a campaign like that.

STEPHEN: It's not as exciting as it looks.

WAITER: Still — to be right in there, right in the action. Making a real goddamn difference. You guys gotta win, you know. This country . . . *(He shakes his head.)* I mean don't get me wrong. My family — they made their way here a long time ago — just before I was born. And it's been good to us . . . but the last few years? It's like — my folks — they worked hard — saved up to open this place. They pay their taxes like everybody else — and what they got to show for it?

STEPHEN: You just said — they got this place.

WAITER: No — the *bank's* got this place. My brother — Miguel? Joins the marines a few years back. They send him overseas. A couple of weeks before he's supposed to come home . . . BAM. Right by the side of his truck. They wheel this vegetable off the plane. Can't speak, can't barely move — just sits there and blinks his eyes all day. We gotta mortgage this place to pay for his medical. I gotta work double shifts six days a week cuz my mama gotta be home takin' care of Miguel all the time. Just me and Pops keepin' this place open, and I don't know how much longer we can do that. *(Gestures around.)* Nobody ever here, even though we're cheap. We make it to next Christmas, it'll be a miracle.

STEPHEN: I'm sorry.

WAITER: Don't be sorry man. You just gotta win this election and set things straight. Hear what I'm sayin'?

(Stephen just stares at him. The Waiter smiles broadly.)

WAITER: Let me get you another Dewars. On the house.

(The Waiter exits.)

SCENE 5

Stephen's room at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, later that night. Stephen is sitting in a chair, absently watching a basketball game on TV. He's got a gash on his head and dried blood on his face. A knock. He puts the game on mute, listens. Another knock. Stephen goes to answer the door. He wobbles slightly as he walks. The muted TV continues to flicker throughout the scene.

MOLLY: Oh my God, what happened to you?

STEPHEN: Nothing.

MOLLY: You're bleeding.

STEPHEN: I crashed my car.

MOLLY: Jesus. Are you OK?
STEPHEN: Where've you been?
MOLLY: Let me see.
STEPHEN: I'm *fine.*
(Molly takes a closer look at the gash.)
MOLLY: You need to see a doctor.
STEPHEN: I'm not gonna see a doctor.
MOLLY: You need stitches.
STEPHEN: I've been calling you.
MOLLY: Listen to me — you need —
STEPHEN: No. I don't need stitches.
MOLLY: *(Reaching toward his forehead.)* At least let me clean it out.
STEPHEN: Leave it the fuck alone, OK?
MOLLY: I'm just trying to help.
STEPHEN: I don't want any help.
MOLLY: What happened Steve? How'd you crash your car?
STEPHEN: Telephone pole.
MOLLY: You crashed into a telephone pole?
STEPHEN: Some kind of pole. I don't know. It was dark. And the snow. I don't know how I crashed it.
MOLLY: And they didn't take you to the hospital?
STEPHEN: Who?
MOLLY: The police?
STEPHEN: There were no police. I got out of the car and walked.
MOLLY: You just left the car there?
STEPHEN: Yeah. It had a pole in its engine.
MOLLY: Did you get knocked out?
STEPHEN: I don't remember.
MOLLY: You might have a concussion.
STEPHEN: It's just a little cut.
MOLLY: I really think we should go to the hospital.
STEPHEN: I'm not going anywhere.
MOLLY: You're drunk, aren't you?
STEPHEN: That would explain the pole, wouldn't it?
MOLLY: I'm calling an ambulance.
(She heads for the phone. Stephen knocks the phone off the nightstand before she can get to it.)
STEPHEN: No you're not.
MOLLY: All right look. You need to calm down and let me —

STEPHEN: Tell me where you've been.
MOLLY: I came as soon as I listened to your messages.
STEPHEN: I've been trying to reach you all night.
MOLLY: I was at dinner.
STEPHEN: With who?
MOLLY: No one.
STEPHEN: Who?
MOLLY: No one I said.
STEPHEN: I don't believe you.
MOLLY: Paul. I was having dinner with Paul.
(Stephen laughs.)
STEPHEN: That's just fucking fantastic.
MOLLY: You shouldn't have told him Steve.
STEPHEN: The cocksucker deserved it.
MOLLY: You promised.
STEPHEN: Did you fuck him? After dinner?
MOLLY: Come on.
STEPHEN: Did you?
MOLLY: No!
STEPHEN: Did you want to?
MOLLY: I'm leaving.
(She starts to go.)
STEPHEN: Molly . . .
MOLLY: I don't want to be around you when you're like this.
STEPHEN: All right, all right . . .
MOLLY: You're being an asshole.
STEPHEN: You're right. I'm sorry.
MOLLY: That's not good enough.
STEPHEN: Please Molly . . .
(She eyes him.)
STEPHEN: *(With complete humility and need.)* Please . . . Don't go . . . I'm asking . . .
(She takes a step closer.)
MOLLY: Why'd you tell him?
STEPHEN: I was angry.
MOLLY: But I trusted you.
STEPHEN: You shouldn't have.
MOLLY: He fired me Steve.
STEPHEN: No . . .

MOLLY: He did. Right after he paid the check. He told me he never wanted to see me in the office again.

STEPHEN: That fucking prick.

MOLLY: You got me fired.

STEPHEN: Well I got fired too. So I guess that makes two of us.

MOLLY: Are you hearing me? I got fired because of *you.*

STEPHEN: All right. Here's the plan. You go to Paul and you tell 'im that if he doesn't give your job back you're gonna call every newspaper in the country and say that —

MOLLY: Are you crazy?

STEPHEN: It'll work. Believe me.

MOLLY: No. I'm not gonna do that.

STEPHEN: You gotta hit this fucker back.

MOLLY: No I don't.

STEPHEN: Why are you protecting him?

MOLLY: I'm not. I'm protecting myself.

STEPHEN: If you want your job back this is what you gotta do.

MOLLY: I *don't* want my job back.

STEPHEN: Molly.

MOLLY: You don't care about me getting my job back. You just want to use me to get back at Paul.

STEPHEN: That's not true.

MOLLY: You're just like him . . .

STEPHEN: Who? Paul?

MOLLY: This isn't some *game* Stephen.

STEPHEN: You don't know me.

MOLLY: You know what. This is pointless . . .

STEPHEN: I'll tell you about me. Do you want to hear?

MOLLY: Look . . .

STEPHEN: You wanna feel sorry for yourself?

MOLLY: No. I —

STEPHEN: You didn't lose a job. You lost an *internship.* A fucking *internship.* I'm the one who lost the job, OK? I'm the one who —

MOLLY: Steve . . .

STEPHEN: Guess what I've been doing for the last five hours . . .

MOLLY: Stop it . . .

STEPHEN: I met with Duffy again. I practically begged him to hire me. But he said no. Straight to my face, like I was nothing. Then I listened to some waiter tell me how his brother's brain got chopped into mince-

meat overseas. How his family was gonna lose their restaurant, have to go back to Mexico, on and on and on. That's what I was doing while you were having dinner with Paul. Listening to this guy's sob story for an hour while he forced drinks down my throat.

MOLLY: You were *probably* thinking what a good story this waiter's brother would make if you got him up on the stage with Morris. All the great articles flashed / before your eyes. You probably didn't even —

STEPHEN: It *would* have made a great story. Yes. If I could get him onstage with Morris it'd be fucking golden. Dude in a wheelchair drooling onto his shirt while the governor placed a hand on his shoulder and told the world he was gonna fix everything. But you know what? I don't *work* for the governor anymore, so it doesn't matter how good this guy's story was. His story doesn't mean shit. Because it'll never see the light of day.

MOLLY: You know what? Getting fired is probably the best thing that'll ever happen to you.

STEPHEN: I'm getting pretty fuckin' tired of people saying what's good for me.

MOLLY: You're like a — I don't what you are . . .

STEPHEN: You want me to say I'm a monster? That I have no soul? That I —

MOLLY: All I'm saying is —

STEPHEN: Fine. I'm a monster. I'm a fucking horror show. A fucking loser and a fucking idiot and a fucking —

MOLLY: Stop it Steve.

STEPHEN: Why? Why should I stop? I've come this far in ruining my life. Why stop now?

MOLLY: You haven't ruined your life . . .

STEPHEN: What do I have to fall back on? My girlfriend who dumped me because I'm never home? Some bullshit consulting job in DC? I'd suffocate. I've been working in politics since I was fifteen years old. Ten years. Without it I don't —

MOLLY: Sit down.

STEPHEN: I don't wanna sit —

MOLLY: SIT THE FUCK DOWN.

(Stephen is taken aback by her forcefulness. He stops.)

MOLLY: *(Quieter now.)* Come on. Sit right here.

(Stephen sits on the edge of the bed. Molly grabs a pillow and pulls the casing off.)

STEPHEN: What are you doing?

MOLLY: Be quiet.

(She starts to dab at the cut on Stephen's forehead. He winces and pulls back.)

STEPHEN: Oww.

MOLLY: Let me do this.

(She continues to clean the wound as Stephen grimaces. A moment passes.)

STEPHEN: Why did you sleep with Paul?

MOLLY: I don't wanna talk about it.

STEPHEN: Please?

MOLLY: Be still.

STEPHEN: How did it happen?

MOLLY: Enough talking, OK?

STEPHEN: I need to know.

(Molly takes a tired sigh. Decides to give in and tell him if it will keep him calm.)

MOLLY: Because I was stupid. Because it made me feel special and I fell for it. He kept telling me how smart I was. How *mature* I was. How talented. And it felt good to hear that. To get that kind of attention. Half of me knew he was lying, but the other half wanted to believe him. So I decided to let myself. To believe him. Then one night, we were in his office and he shut the door and he . . . anyway . . .

STEPHEN: Was it the same with me?

MOLLY: Was what?

STEPHEN: Did you think I was lying to you? The things I said?

MOLLY: I didn't care. *(She finishes cleaning the wound.)* There. That's a little better.

STEPHEN: I wasn't lying to you.

MOLLY: It doesn't matter now anyway.

STEPHEN: But I wasn't.

MOLLY: Fine.

STEPHEN: It's important to me that you know that.

MOLLY: Well now I know. Let's get you to a doctor.

STEPHEN: Can we just stay here?

MOLLY: You really need stitches.

STEPHEN: What's wrong with me?

MOLLY: You have a bad cut, that's all.

STEPHEN: No — I mean what's *wrong* with me?

MOLLY: Nothing's wrong with you. Come on. Let's get outta here.

STEPHEN: There has to be something wrong. Otherwise this wouldn't have

happened. I wouldn't be sitting here right now bleeding like this — I'd still have my job. I'd be —

MOLLY: Will you forget about your job for a second?

STEPHEN: What am I gonna do Molly?

MOLLY: I don't know. You can figure that out tomorrow.

STEPHEN: I'm nothing without this job.

MOLLY: There are other things in the world besides politics.

STEPHEN: Not to me.

MOLLY: Well that's what's wrong with you then.

STEPHEN: But I don't . . . I don't know anything else. I don't even know where to begin.

MOLLY: It's OK Steve. You're gonna be fine.

STEPHEN: Can you describe it to me?

MOLLY: No I can't. You get to start over.

STEPHEN: How? How do I do that?

MOLLY: I can't answer all these questions for you.

STEPHEN: You're making me ask them — so help me answer them.

MOLLY: I'm not making you do anything. I'm just trying to get you to a hospital.

STEPHEN: You think you're some kind of saint, don't you?

MOLLY: *What?*

STEPHEN: You get to come to the rescue . . . pick up all the pieces. *(Suddenly cold.)* You know what? Fuck this.

MOLLY: Steve.

STEPHEN: No. Fuck all of this. This is bullshit is what it is. This is . . . I don't deserve this. This isn't who I am . . . Feeling sorry for myself. Acting like a goddamn pussy. I don't lose — I win. Even when I lose I win. I'm not gonna let Paul or Duffy or you, or *anyone* — no way — not a chance . . .

MOLLY: Grow up Stephen!

STEPHEN: *Grow up?* And how the fuck old are you are?

MOLLY: It has nothing to do with —

STEPHEN: The fact that you're a teenager? That you're fucking *nineteen?* Yeah. I think it does. What fucking right do you have telling me to grow up?

MOLLY: Jesus Christ . . .

STEPHEN: You don't know who I am. But you wanna know who *you* are? Because I can tell you . . . You're that cute little girl, the one with a couple more brain cells than all the others, prancing around, sniffing out the big dogs like a bitch in heat. Because it makes you feel good that somebody

with actual power will take ten minutes out of their schedule to bend you over in a closet.

MOLLY: Good-bye Steve.

(She makes for the door. Stephen grabs her handbag. Heads to the other side of the room.)

MOLLY: Give it back.

STEPHEN: *(Rooting around in the bag.)* Where's your phone?

MOLLY: I said give it back.

(Stephen finds the phone.)

MOLLY: Use your own fucking phone.

STEPHEN: I think this might be better coming from yours.

(Stephen starts to dial, holds the phone to his ear.)

MOLLY: *(Getting alarmed.)* Who're you calling?

STEPHEN: Who do you think?

MOLLY: I'm gonna go get someone.

(She heads for the door again. As she opens it.)

STEPHEN: Hello Ida? It's Steve. I've got a story for you . . .

(Molly stops dead in her tracks.)

MOLLY: Don't . . . .

STEPHEN: No — It's about Paul.

(Molly lunges for the phone.)

STEPHEN: Hold on a sec . . . .

(He throws her to the bed. Puts the phone to his chest with one hand, warns Molly with the other.)

STEPHEN: Calm down.

MOLLY: Please don't do this . . .

(She realizes there's no use fighting him. He puts the phone back to his ear.)

STEPHEN: Sorry about that — it was the *cleaning lady.*

(Molly watches him, paralyzed.)

STEPHEN: So the story — this is a good one Ida. And if I give you this story, you're gonna do a feature on me — my version of the last couple days — and you're gonna find a way to get it in the *Times.* You ready?

(Stephen stares right at her as he says the following.)

STEPHEN: Paul had an affair with a nineteen-year-old intern . . . That's right — nineteen years old. Her name is Molly Pearson. P-E-A-R-S-O-N. This phone I'm calling you from? It's hers. Call her. And if she won't talk, you can cite me as a source. I'll tell you everything . . . Right now if you want. I'll meet you at the bar downstairs in ten.

(He flips the phone shut. Stares icily at Molly. She's frozen, clearly devastated. Stephen puts on his sports coat. Straightens his tie, smoothes his hair.)

STEPHEN: You should come down with me. You can give her your side of the story.

MOLLY: How could you do that?

STEPHEN: How could I not?

(He makes his way to the door. Then turns back to her.)

STEPHEN: You coming with me or staying behind?

(But she just stares at him. The scene freezes in tableau. A burst of camera flashes. Ben appears in a pin spot. Stephen and Molly remain frozen in silhouette. Ben addresses the audience as though they were a press pool. He has the confidence, polish, and self-possession we saw Stephen exhibit at the beginning of the play.)

BEN: For those of you who don't me, my name is Benjamin Fowles. I'll be taking over as the governor's new communications director. The governor has this statement to make . . . *(He reads from a piece of paper.)* "Paul Zara and Stephen Bellamy served our campaign well from day one. While we regret the circumstances under which they must leave us, we will always be grateful for the contributions both have made in getting us a few steps closer to the White House." *(Ben now looks up and addresses the audience directly. He knows this part by heart. He should — because he wrote it.).* This election is not about who and who doesn't work for *us,* but how we can work for *you* — the American people. It's *your* best interests which should be making headlines, not minor shake-ups in our organization. Rest assured that this small bump in the road will not deter us — we're strong as ever and getting stronger by the day. Because we get our strength from *you* — from *your* hard work, *your* dedication, *your* belief that we can make this country a better place for us all. And as long as you keep giving us *your* strength, we'll deliver you the stronger, safer America you all deserve. *(Beat.)* Thank you very much. I won't be taking questions.

(Blackout.)

END OF PLAY

JESUS HATES ME

Wayne Lemon

PLAYWRIGHT'S BIOGRAPHY

Wayne Lemon began his career as a music and theater critic for the *Austin Chronicle* while attending film school at the University of Texas, where he earned a master's degree in film production with a minor in Shakespeare. After having a handgun thrown at him while working with inner-city youth in East Austin, he relocated to Los Angeles, erroneously believing it to be safer. Lemon has developed screenplays for various studios as well as pilots for all the major networks. He has written for such critically acclaimed shows as *Grace Under Fire* and the Emmy-winning *The Famous Teddy Z,* as well as cult favorite *The Torkelsons.* Lemon's debut stage play, *Jesus Hates Me,* was developed in the 2005 Southern Writers' Project of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. The play was a featured reading at Hartford Stage's 2005 Brand:NEW Fall Festival of New Works; at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago; and at Horizon Theatre Company's 2006 New South PlayWorks Festival, Atlanta. South Coast Repertory will present the Chance Theatre's production of *Jesus Hates Me* in their second stage Nichols Theatre in spring 2010. Lemon has just completed his second play, *8 feet of water,* based on the true story of two African-American young men who drown while in police custody. He remains convinced Jesus only mildly dislikes him.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTIONS

Jesus Hates Me had its world premiere at the Denver Center Theatre Company (Kent Thompson, artistic director), made possible by a grant from the Steinberg Family Trust. Opening night was January 12, 2006, with set design by Robert Mark Morgan; costume design by Kevin Copenhaver; lighting design by Jane Spencer; sound design by Iæden Hovorka; and fight direction by Geoffrey Kent. The production manager was Edward Lapine, and the stage manager was Erock. It was directed by David McClendon with the following cast:

CAST

ETHAN . . . . . Justin Adams
ANNIE . . . . . Kathleen McCall
TRANE . . . . . Marlon Morrison
LIZZY . . . . . Chelsey Rives
BOONE . . . . . Craig Pattison
GEORGIE . . . . . Michael Keyloun

The Texas premiere of *Jesus Hates Me* took place November 2006 at Kitchen Dog Theater in Dallas. Emigrant Theater of Minneapolis followed with its production in fall 2007.

Jesus Hates Me was given its West Coast premiere by the Chance Theater (Oanh Nguyen, artistic director), Anaheim Hills, California, made possible by a grant from the Lear Family Foundation. Opening night was January 31, 2009, with set design by Starlet Jacobs; lighting design by K.C. Wilkerson; costume design by Erika C. Miller; sound design by Dave Mickey; and fight direction by Michael Irish. Tanae Beyer was the stage manager. It was directed by Oanh Nguyen with the following cast:

CAST

ETHAN . . . . . Chance Dean
ANNIE . . . . . Karen Webster
TRANE . . . . . Timothy Covington
LIZZY . . . . . Jennifer Ruckman
BOONE . . . . . Dimas Diaz
GEORGIE . . . . . Ben Green

CHARACTERS

ETHAN: Twenty-five.
TRANE: Twenty-five.
LIZZY: Twenty-three.
BOONE: Twenty-seven.
GEORGIE: Twenty-one.
ANNIE: Forty-three.

SETTING

Bible-themed miniature golf course and a bar in a small Texas town.

TIME

The present.

Note: The character of Georgie at all times speaks through an electrolarnyx. Jesus mannequin and electrolarnyx are available upon request from the author.

JESUS HATES ME

An empty cross overlooks the stage outlined in whimsical tiny white fairy lights along with a string of colored Christmas lights, all currently unlit. Beneath the cross lies a patch of faded AstroTurf burned through by countless cigarette butts. This is the seventeenth hole of the Blood of the Lamb Miniature Golf Course. Adjoining the course stage left is the partial exterior of a classic fifties Airstream travel trailer, silver, its screen door angled toward the audience. A lawn chair rests against it along with festive touches like angel statues. Stage right is a different space, a different mindset. An intimate, bluesy bar. Beer signs line the wall — Samuel Adams, Lone Star, Bud Light. A man's framed photo is visible over the cash register as well as the bleached-out skull of a cow. A portion of the exterior roof is visible along with a large neon sign mounted on it, also unlit. Production design should not be a literal interpretation of the world described but rather strive to evoke the universe of the play as seen through the eyes of the main character, Ethan, somewhat in the manner of an hallucinogenic dream. The spotlight on the empty cross fades, leaving the stage in darkness.

ACT I
SCENE 1

Downstage a woman walks into the welcoming embrace of a warm, dreamlike swath of filtered light, wearing only a white nightdress, her eyes closed. This is Annie, forty-three, a tarnished beauty. The tranquil smile on her face reveals inner peace and a sense of redemption. Music washes over her as her son, Ethan — ruggedly good-looking with an athlete's body clad in frayed jeans, torn T-shirt, and well-worn Nikes — enters. He carries a chair. He gazes at her a moment, then crosses to her as though wanting, yearning, somehow, to connect. She keeps her eyes closed, doesn't appear to be aware of his presence as she silently turns and walks away. Ethan watches her go, a look of regret on his face, then glances up, startled; a metal thrash — overwhelming, deafening — suddenly fills the space along with the flashing red lights of a patrol car, the rising wail of a siren drawing closer and closer. Ethan sits down in the chair as a black, uniformed deputy sheriff, Trane, wearing mirrored sunglasses, a county-issued gray felt Stetson, and a gunbelt, strides in. Intimidating, his hand on his holstered pistol, he also carries a

chair. He slams the chair down, and the flashing red lights, music, and siren abruptly cease as the stage lights come up immediately.

ETHAN: Is there a problem, officer?

TRANE: Going to have to ask you to step out of the car, sir. Need to see some ID.

ETHAN: Sure thing, officer . . . let's see now . . .

(Ethan stands, appears to cooperate as he feels for his ID, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out his extended middle finger. The deputy sheriff gets in his face.)

TRANE: Understand this. You don't have to respect me. But you *will* respect the badge. Give me a light.

(He pulls out a joint, tweaks both ends.)

ETHAN: You realize you're on duty.

TRANE: Best time to get high, baby. Anyone asks, I tell 'em I'm working a drug bust. Checking the purity of the product. Well? This buddah ain't gonna light itself.

ETHAN: Not until you take off that hat.

TRANE: Hate the motherfucker anyway.

(Trane removes the hat, sets it on his chair. He takes off his sunglasses, winces.)

TRANE: Goddamn it's bright out here. I tell you the county bills me anytime anything happens to the motherfucker? Last week got picante sauce on it, sixty-five dollars. Don't cost that much to clean a hat. Don't know why I can't wear a ball cap, mesh, visor pulled low over the eyes. Like a city cop.

ETHAN: You ain't a city cop.

TRANE: What I am is the only black deputy sheriff in the entire state of Texas. Any wonder I gotta do this shit just to function?

(Ethan lights the joint for Trane who takes a hit, offers it to Ethan who shakes his head.)

ETHAN: I have too much respect for my body to fill it full of mind-altering chemicals.

(He pulls out a hip flask, takes a long drink.)

TRANE: Haul your ass in for DWI but I just started this el. Better not get faded, total our Lexus —

ETHAN: "Our" Lexus?

TRANE: How many times I sacrifice this beautiful black body catching one of your piece-a-shit passes? Without me, no scholarship. No scholarship,

no rich white booster with a car dealership. No rich white booster with a car dealership, no Lexus. Half that ride's mine. Don't wanna see you pull a Georgie in it.

ETHAN: Georgie?

(Georgie, rail thin, glasses, rises up, specterlike, from behind the bar. He wears a high-school graduation cap and gown. Ethan alone appears to see him.)

ETHAN: You really feel it's necessary to bring him up?

TRANE: Think of him as a cautionary tale.

ETHAN: Something I could never figure out — why's he even bother showing up for graduation? Musta known what he was gonna do. Still puts on the gown, the cardboard hat. Goes through the line, gets his diploma. Like it means something. Like it's gonna have a bearing on what happens next.

(Georgie produces a pump twelve-gauge shotgun.)

TRANE: Maybe he just needs to hear somebody say his name one last time.

ETHAN: Why? A eulogy of sorts? A final acknowledgment of his existence?

TRANE: Probably just stoned.

(Georgie racks the shotgun, carefully positions the barrel beneath his chin. He stares straight ahead, his finger on the trigger.)

ETHAN: What you think was the last thing went through his mind?

TRANE: Buckshot.

(A flash of light, the percussive explosion of a violent, shockingly loud shotgun blast. Georgie plummets out of sight behind the bar. A reflective moment as Ethan and Trane consider.)

ETHAN: You believe the son of a bitch missed?

(They laugh.)

ETHAN: Ever think about death?

TRANE: Man, how you gonna be a cop and not think about it? First thing they do give you one of these, tell you go ahead and shoot, we got your back. Especially if it's a Mexican.

ETHAN: Talking about your own death.

TRANE: Get up in the morning, look in the mirror, ask myself — do I spend today living or dying? Everybody's doing one or the other, whether they realize it or not.

ETHAN: And you'd rather spend it living?

TRANE: So far.

ETHAN: I used to know what that was like, feeling of being alive. Miss it sometimes.

TRANE: Explains your skin tone.

ETHAN: Skin tone.

TRANE: I'm black. You're white. Simple, clean. Classic even. Lately you've been looking more and more gray. Not an attractive color for you.

ETHAN: The smokes. Color of ash.

TRANE: Things gonna kill your ass.

ETHAN: Something kills all our asses, eventually. We want to believe it's that spot on the X-ray, the drunk in the opposite lane, the accidental overdose. We have to believe it, couldn't go on if we knew the truth, that it's really God playing his own special brand of Whac-A-Mole. Starving kid in Darfur — whack. AIDS patient in Chicago — whack. Mercy killing in Miami Beach — whack. And don't forget the death penalty in our own beloved state — whackwhackwhackwhackwhack. We should all be ducking for cover, praying for the day his arm gets tired.

TRANE: Don't think I've ever seen you quite this drunk before.

ETHAN: You blame me? Knowing God won't be happy until he kills us all?

TRANE: Kills us 'cause he loves us.

ETHAN: Even drunk that makes no sense.

TRANE: Feels the pain we're in, the suffering. Sends death as a release, sign of his love.

ETHAN: I can think of better ways of showing his love like, hey, why not just eliminate suffering? Or buy us all a pony?

TRANE: I'd settle for that Lexus.

ETHAN: Tell you one thing, I'd been Georgie I'd of made damned sure I didn't miss. One squeeze of that trigger, no more disappointment, heartache —

TRANE: Love, joy.

ETHAN: That smoke must be kicking in 'cause in this world even a blind man can see it's all about the hurt.

TRANE: And in the next world?

ETHAN: What next world?

TRANE: Go ahead then, that gonna be your attitude. Pull a Georgie. Here, use this. *(He offers his pistol to Ethan.)* Just not in the Lexus. Don't wanna have to pay to get it detailed.

ETHAN: I'm drunk, you're stoned, that's a gun. This will not end well.

TRANE: Expect me to stand by while regret claws its way through you from the inside out? Love you too much to watch you suffer, man. Don't get blood and shit on the hat.

(Ethan studies his friend a moment then turns away, takes another drink.)

ETHAN: Put that thing away.

TRANE: Had your chance.

ETHAN: Been thinking of alternatives.

TRANE: Your problem right there. Thinking.

ETHAN: Been talking to Bobby.

TRANE: Your cousin? One who's —?

ETHAN: Gay. We have homosexuals in Texas.

TRANE: Hell, I been to Dallas. Gonna say one who's got that ranch in Colorado.

ETHAN: Turning it into a resort. Got a job for me. Wants me there by Sunday or he's gonna have to hire somebody else.

TRANE: What sorta job?

ETHAN: Ski instructor in the winter, teach horseback riding in the summer.

TRANE: You don't ski.

ETHAN: Can't be that hard.

TRANE: Never been on a horse.

ETHAN: According to Bobby it's more important that I look good in chaps.

TRANE: You have got to be fucking kidding me. A skiing cowboy at a gay resort in Colorado?

ETHAN: OK, not exactly where I thought I'd be at this point in my life, but who is?

TRANE: I am. I am exactly where I thought I'd be. Except for the motherfucking hat.

ETHAN: Dude, I'm twenty-five, OK? Knee's fucked. Can't afford to go back to college. All I'm qualified to do is play high-school football. Bobby's giving me this chance. I gotta take it.

TRANE: Uh-huh, and what's he want in return?

ETHAN: Nothing.

TRANE: Nothing?

ETHAN: Said he knows what it's like to be a stranger in your own life.

TRANE: So you gonna spend the rest of your life teaching a bunch of gay men how to ski. Good to have a dream.

ETHAN: Just until I save enough cash to go back to school. Bobby knows several junior colleges where I can take night courses. Figure I'll get a degree in PE, you know, coach and . . . shit.

TRANE: You taking Annie?

ETHAN: Not exactly her thing. Sorta hoping you might —

TRANE: Forget it, man, you know that woman scares the shit outta me. Don't know how you done it, growing up with big ol' rubber Jesus hanging outside your window.

ETHAN: He's not rubber, he's . . . I dunno, whatever mannequins are made of. Some sorta compressed material. She wasn't always like this.

TRANE: Used to be cool. Crazy in a good way, not fucked-up crazy.

ETHAN: Sometimes when I come in late, I slip in back, watch her sleep. Looks so peaceful, eyes closed, there in the moonlight.

TRANE: She my mama you just know I'm gonna give her a jump.

ETHAN: That's sick.

TRANE: Don't tell me it ain't never crossed your mind.

ETHAN: Why would it?

TRANE: Woman's a honey.

ETHAN: She's my mother.

TRANE: Just 'cause you came out that hole don't mean you can't go back for a visit every now and again.

ETHAN: You gonna let me tell this or keep fucking with me?

TRANE: Haven't decided.

ETHAN: She's got this smile on her face, like she's having the most amazing dream. I can almost believe that smile means when she wakes up she's gonna be the way she used to be. Never is though . . .

TRANE: Why don't you ask your daddy to take care of Annie?

ETHAN: Don Henley?

(They laugh.)

ETHAN: Other kids get lullabies, I get the fucking Eagles.

TRANE: Think there's a chance he could be your old man? Like I said, mama's a honey. Don mighta got him a piece of that back in the day.

ETHAN: She made it up, man. All of it. He even took that paternity thing.

TRANE: You can cheat those tests. *(Beat.)* I heard.

ETHAN: All I know is he passed. Next day Jesus was hanging outside my window.

TRANE: Lucky she ain't Catholic, woulda hung that cross over your bed. How you gonna jack off with Jesus staring down at you?

ETHAN: The blood. The cross. All that suffering and death just so mankind can get wasted, fuck our brains out, not have to burn for it. Don't remember asking him to go through that. You?

TRANE: Oh hell no. Give me a Happy Jesus.

ETHAN: Heal the sick, bless the poor, beat traffic home to the wife and Little Jesus. Fish sticks for supper, again. Catch some tube. Don't like what's on, change the channel. Doesn't even use the remote, just waves his hand. Sees one of those evangelists with the hair — strikes him dead. Right there on the air. Fuck you, you're in hell. Climbs into bed, little

cuddle with Mrs. Jesus. Next day it's back to the grind. Pain in the ass disciples bitching and moaning. Crowd wants a piece of him. Romans breathing down his neck. Sneaks off to kick it with Satan at a titty bar. Talks about walking away from it all, opening a dive shop in Cancun. I'm the Son of God, I don't need this shit.

TRANE: So take him with you. You drive, Rubber Jesus ride shotgun. Have a flat, throw his ass on there. Get you to the next station. When you gonna tell Annie you leaving?

ETHAN: Just about drunk enough. Gonna take both of us to restrain her.

TRANE: Can't now. Think I got nothing better to do than get high and bullshit with you? This is *work*, man.

ETHAN: Work?

TRANE: Stakeout. One of the Phung kids been missing since school.

ETHAN: Which one?

TRANE: Fuck if I know. Little girl. Five years old. Heard Kenny Manning was up here but it ain't happening so now I gotta go find his sorry ass.

ETHAN: Think he's involved?

TRANE: Always liked little kids too much. Showing 'em magic tricks, buying 'em cotton candy. Fits the profile. Plus he's got that Winnebago. Worth checking out, all I'm saying.

ETHAN: You the only one on it?

TRANE: Little girl's eyes be the wrong shape for the sheriff to get too worked up over it.

(He puts on his hat, carries both chairs to the side as Ethan studies him.)

ETHAN: How'd you do it, Trane?

TRANE: Do what?

ETHAN: Find something. A reason. Who you are. That hat.

(Trane puts back on his sunglasses.)

TRANE: Fear is a great motivator.

ETHAN: Fear? What could you possibly be afraid of?

TRANE: Not talking about me.

(Trane studies him a moment then exits. Ethan sees Georgie rise up from behind the bar, glasses askew, a dark scar on his neck. He looks at Ethan as though daring him to say something then places the shotgun on a gun rack over the bar and exits leaving Ethan alone as the lights transition to the next scene.)

SCENE 2

Ethan glances overhead as thunder is heard, the storm receding into the distance. Occasionally the sound of a train whistle can be heard from afar, ghostlike. He turns to the golf course as the lights come up. It's morning. Annie enters carrying an agonizingly real Jesus mannequin complete with tattered loincloth, beard, and shoulder-length hair. She's wearing a short, faux silk bathrobe over shorty pajamas as she lugs the Jesus mannequin to the cross, struggles to rehang him.

ANNIE: Jesus blew off the cross again last night. Hand me that duct tape.

(Ethan hands her a large roll of duct tape. She begins taping one of the mannequin's stigmata marred hands to the cross.)

ANNIE: I was hoping the Super Glue'd work. Said on TV it'd hold anything. Apparently they never tested it on the Son of God.

ETHAN: Try nails? Pretty effective first time they stuck him up there.

ANNIE: Why do you do that?

ETHAN: Do what?

ANNIE: Cling to your bitterness.

(Ethan pulls out a cigarette and lighter.)

ETHAN: I lose the bitterness there'll be nothing left inside. I'll be empty.

ANNIE: Don't have to be. Do what he did. Fill yourself with forgiveness and love.

ETHAN: Yeah, yeah that worked out well for him.

(He lights up as a cordless phone rings. Ethan hesitates, finally moves to answer it.)

ETHAN: *(Phone.)* Hello —

ANNIE: *Ethan.*

ETHAN: *(Phone. Mocking.)* Blood of the Lamb Miniature Golf Course, Ethan speaking. Oh hey man. Yeah, I'm working on it, kinda complicated —

ANNIE: Working on what? Who is that?

ETHAN: Bobby.

ANNIE: Bobby's a sodomite.

ETHAN: *(Phone.)* Yeah. It's her. *(To Annie.)* He's being sodomized right now.

ANNIE: Give me that! *(She takes the receiver. Into phone.)* Sweetie, it's me. You have got to fight these unnatural urges. No I will not describe them. *(To Ethan.)* He's got me on speaker phone. *(To phone.)* Listen, Jesus will give you strength — He was not. He was not, you think everyone's gay. Love you too. Come see us. Kiss kiss.

(She tosses the receiver back to Ethan.)

ANNIE: Jesus was not queer. Lots of straight men live with their mothers until they're thirty. You're past twenty, and you still live with me.

ETHAN: Yay.

ANNIE: And the whole "betrayed with a kiss" thing says way more about Judas than it does our Lord. So what if he didn't have a girlfriend, he had women dripping off him. Mary Magdalene was a whore for crying out loud. Big old sign flashing "hetero hetero." If Jesus was gay, how do you explain her?

ETHAN: Fag hag?

ANNIE: I'm going to pray for you. Not now because I don't have time but later.

ETHAN: So I'm guessing Jeezy Creezy didn't hop down off there on his own, hitchhike into town to do Jello shots.

ANNIE: Last night's storm. Looked out, saw him sailing over the concession stand like a Frisbee. He took out the Good Samaritan over on nine then punched a hole in the windmill the size of a chihuahua.

ETHAN: Musta slept through it.

ANNIE: Pretty cool. Thunder, lightning. Wind whipping around like something off the Weather Channel. Thought a tornado was gonna touch down, but it never did. Just stayed up there, like I was too insignificant to waste its precious time. I started yelling at it, trying to get its attention, a little acknowledgment. I will not be ignored!

ETHAN: I dreamed I heard you, only you weren't yelling.

ANNIE: What was I doing?

ETHAN: Screaming.

(They consider each other.)

ANNIE: Whole thing blew past like I didn't exist. Nature can be so demoralizing.

ETHAN: Always manages to leave one house, one lucky bastard and his wife and three asthmatic kids. Neighbors standing in the middle of nothing but sticks and dirt and pink insulation. Stare at his untouched, perfect house. He knows they're hating on him, doesn't care 'cause he's still got all his shit and they don't.

ANNIE: You've been reading Nietzsche again.

(Ethan looks surprised.)

ANNIE: I've seen the books, Ethan. The ones you keep under your bed. Nietzsche, Camus, Heidigger. All sodomites in case you weren't aware.

ETHAN: Scholarship paid for those books, no point letting them go to waste. Unlike me. Any other damage?

ANNIE: Wise Man blew off his camel over at the first hole, dinged the Christ Child. One of the Ungrateful Lepers lost a foot on eight. The Woman Caught in Adultery ended up facedown in the driveway next door. Harve Oglesby backed over her, sheered her head off. Claims he didn't see her but the tire track runs the entire length of her body so I don't know who he thinks he's fooling.

ETHAN: Replacement heads aren't that hard to come by.

ANNIE: I know but I particularly liked that one, eyes burning with carnal desire, lips that seemed to say "do me you bad bad boy."

ETHAN: It was a head. Off a mannequin. From Walmart. They all are, except this one.

(He holds up a red papier-mâché head with a wig attached.)

ANNIE: Where'd we get that one?

ETHAN: Spiderman piñata.

ANNIE: Doesn't look a thing like John the Baptist.

ETHAN: They're mannequins. Their range is limited.

ANNIE: We have a responsibility to the public. Why do you think people return week after week?

ETHAN: Because this whole thing is just sick enough to pass as entertainment?

ANNIE: It's all a joke to you, isn't it. Always has been. You think this is what I wanted for my life?

ETHAN: No, I know it —

ANNIE: I put aside my dreams for you —

ETHAN: And I appreciate that but maybe it's time I —

ANNIE: What? You what, Ethan?

ETHAN: Just promise you won't go into town without me.

ANNIE: Yeah whatever.

ETHAN: I'm serious.

ANNIE: You want a blood oath? I said I won't.

ETHAN: You forget what happened last time?

ANNIE: No, I didn't forget. You won't let me forget. I just . . . lately, when you're out running around with your friends, I've begun feeling more and more alone. I get this idea that you're not coming back and no matter what I do I can't seem to shake it. I call you on your cell, dial the number and everything before I remember how you smashed it that time. I have this urge to connect with someone, anyone or I'll go, I'll just . . . So I come out here and I, I find myself talking. To them.

ETHAN: The mannequins.

ANNIE: I know, sounds weird.

ETHAN: People talk to God, saints, the dead. You talk to mannequins from Walmart.

ANNIE: They don't judge. None of the whispers I hear in town, the muted laughter. They accept me as I am. Because I know them. The smile they use to hide their emotions. Protects them, keeps them from being hurt. I envy them their smile.

ETHAN: They ever talk back?

ANNIE: Of course they don't talk back, they're inanimate objects. Although they have been known to leave little Post-it notes on the refrigerator.

(Ethan looks at her, concerned.)

ANNIE: Oh my God, you think I'm serious. It was a joke, Ethan. I'm not that far gone.

ETHAN: OK, see, that's the kind of thing I don't want you saying in town. Even as a joke.

ANNIE: You so believed me.

ETHAN: What if I did? What if I did believe you? That's not a good thing, Annie.

ANNIE: No, no I guess it's not . . .

(Annie peers up at the Jesus mannequin duct taped to the cross.)

ANNIE: We may have to weld him up there.

(Ethan enters the trailer, slams the door as the lights quickly transition us to the next scene.)

SCENE 3

The neon sign on the bar's roof begins to glow, reads "LIZZY'S." The second "Z" is shorted out. The lights come up to reveal the bar — distressed wood, worn barstools, liquor bottles, shot glasses. Lizzy, intelligent, attractive, off-beat, enters from the backroom, wipes up as Boone, jeans, workboots, enters zipping up his pants while finishing off a bottle of beer, which he holds out to Lizzy. She takes it with a disgusted look.

BOONE: Take any northern band, I don't care who it is — Green Day, White Stripes, whatever. Now take any southern band — Pantera, Drive By Truckers. Put 'em side by side, and it's just so obvious, right? Right?

LIZZY: What is?

BOONE: Northern bands are pussy, southern bands are killer, the South de-

served to win the Civil War. Now I know you're wondering where the British stand in all this. Gonna side with the North and you know why? They're ass jockeys, every one of 'em! Reason they refuse to free Ireland — need the Irish to impregnate their women otherwise they'd never reproduce as a race.

LIZZY: Are you drunk?

BOONE: God I hope so. Got fired today. Everything I've worked so hard for, struggled to build for so long. A little piece of something to call my own . . . gone, over, just like that.

LIZZY: This was your first day on the job.

BOONE: It was more than a job. I was finally able to satisfy my inner yearning to create.

LIZZY: Blowing holes in the ground to put in swimming pools.

BOONE: Holy Christ I loved it. The feeling was indescribable. Like coming, only with dynamite and big chunks of dirt.

LIZZY: Why'd you get fired?

BOONE: Technically I might've blown up a dog.

LIZZY: Whose?

BOONE: Old Man Jennings'.

LIZZY: You blew up Queenie? How?

BOONE: Tossed a stick of dynamite into the pit. Golden retriever tore past me like it was after a rabbit or something. Managed to find most of him, shoveled him under a tarp in the back of my truck, planned to bury him after dark, only Jennings shows up, goes to take a leak unaware Queenie's head blew a hole in the Porta-John and is sitting there in the urinal. Son of a bitch sees it, strokes out, now everyone's acting like it's *my* fault. Talking about bringing charges. Animal cruelty. Like I'd purposefully train a dog to fetch dynamite. Never woulda happened if his tennis ball hadn't gone up on the roof.

(He notices Lizzy staring at him.)

BOONE: What?

LIZZY: Thinking of how I'm going to dispose of your body — wood chipper or feed it to the hogs.

BOONE: Hogs.

(The phone rings. Lizzy answers.)

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* Lizzy's. Hey, Maristela.

BOONE: Ask her if she wants me to come over and fuck her.

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* Hang on. *(To Boone.)* You ask her.

BOONE: Then I'll have to actually talk to her.

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* If I see Boone, you want me to give him a message? *(To Boone.)* He knows.

BOONE: Who knows?

LIZZY: Her husband.

BOONE: Kilgore? What does he know?

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* What does he know? *(To Boone.)* Something about the "communion of your blessed spirits," which sounds like you've been fucking in church.

BOONE: Just that once. How'd he find out?

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* How'd Kilgore find out about you and Boone? *(To Boone.)* A coffin. They were taking inventory at the funeral home and he found your, you know —

BOONE: My what? Keys? Sunglasses?

LIZZY: "Man fluid," which I assume means you two're having coffin sex.

BOONE: We take turns being the corpse.

LIZZY: I could have lived my entire life without that bit of visual imagery.

BOONE: Why didn't she tell Kilgore it was someone else's man fluid? Some dead guy's?

LIZZY: Said she tried, he didn't believe her.

BOONE: Why not?

LIZZY: Oh I dunno, maybe because he's aware dead guys don't have seminal emissions beyond the moment of actual death.

BOONE: It happens when you die?

LIZZY: Can.

BOONE: *Awesome.*

LIZZY: Well you have something to look forward to because Kilgore's planning to kill you.

BOONE: He's a mortician. What's he gonna do, bore me to death?

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* How's Kilgore planning to whack Boone? You sure? I dunno, something more painful, set fire to him or something.

BOONE: What? What'd she say?

LIZZY: He bought a gun.

BOONE: Jesus! A big one?

LIZZY: She had to use two hands to hold it.

BOONE: She held the gun he bought to kill me?

LIZZY: Got her kinda hot.

BOONE: How hot?

LIZZY: *(Phone.)* How hot? *(To Boone.)* Real hot.

BOONE: Give me that.

(He grabs the receiver from Lizzy.)

BOONE: *(Phone.)* Maristela, baby, it's me. I need you. Right now. I need your body next to mine. Oh I do, I need it to use as A SHIELD WHEN YOUR HUSBAND TRIES TO PUT A CAP IN MY ASS YOU CRAZY BITCH!

(Boone listens, then peers at the receiver in surprise.)

BOONE: Hung up. What am I gonna do now? You know what this is, don't you?

LIZZY: Divine retribution?

BOONE: This is *fucked.*

(Ethan enters.)

BOONE: Ethan, thank God.

ETHAN: No.

BOONE: No? I haven't asked you for anything.

ETHAN: Whatever it is we all know it's gonna end in disaster.

BOONE: Kilgore's gonna waste me.

LIZZY: What can we do to help?

BOONE: I need a place to hide.

LIZZY: Not you — Kilgore.

BOONE: Don't start. I know the man. He is not to be fucked with. He once buried this old guy on credit. Widow misses one payment — one payment — Kilgore digs the husband up, leaves him sitting in the front seat of their Ford Tempo. I was gonna buy that car.

ETHAN: Kilgore's gonna cap you just 'cause you've been nailing Maristela? Oughta work out some sort of time share, take the pressure off both you.

BOONE: Think I'm making this up? Tell him, tell him what she said.

LIZZY: Apparently Kilgore's bought a large gun, the phallic significance of which I'm sure I don't have to explain to you, and has sworn to put a bullet in Boone's walnut-sized brain thereby proving himself a marksman of Oswald-like proficiency.

BOONE: The only part of that I understood was "large gun," so can I hang at your place?

ETHAN: No.

BOONE: Lizzy, you ask him.

LIZZY: Why should I ask him?

BOONE: You had sex with him our senior year.

LIZZY: I prefer to think of it as the communion of our blessed spirits.

BOONE: You fucked him in church? Man, that place is hopping.

ETHAN: Boone, your daddy's sheriff.

BOONE: You kidding? My daddy can't wait for somebody to smoke my ass. Probably pay Kilgore to do it.

LIZZY: Then tell Trane.

BOONE: Trane's out looking for Kenny Manning. C'mon, Ethan, just for a few days. How about I pay rent? You know you can use it. How much can you be taking in at that psycho golf course?

ETHAN: Not about money. I'm pulling out. Heading north. Colorado.

BOONE: So you'll need gas money to take you to your new life.

LIZZY: He's not going anywhere.

BOONE: So he'll need liquor money to dull the pain of staying in this shithole.

ETHAN: You don't think I'll do it.

LIZZY: No I don't think you'll do it.

BOONE: Hey *hey,* we're getting off the subject, which is how to keep my ass from being ventilated by a deranged undertaker with a gun the size of my head.

ETHAN: Why don't you leave town for a few days?

BOONE: And go where? You guys are the only friends I've got.

LIZZY: We're not your friends.

BOONE: Sure you are.

ETHAN: No, we're not.

BOONE: Well shit then. No friends. No job. Kilgore'd be doing me a favor.

LIZZY: Doing us all a favor.

BOONE: Oh c'mon, Ethan, just a couple of days? Why the fuck not?

ETHAN: You know why the fuck not. This whole bleached-out skeleton of a town knows why the fuck not.

BOONE: Mean your mama? Sure she's crazy as batshit but I don't mind. Beats getting shot.

ETHAN: Does it?

(Trane enters leading Annie. She is wearing an oversized rain slicker marked Sheriff and clutching a bag to her chest.)

ANNIE: You don't really think you can intimidate me, do you, Trane? I've been illegally detained by men with much larger hats than you.

TRANE: Just doing my job. Got us a situation, E.

ETHAN: I noticed. Just let me take her home.

TRANE: Want to but I can't, not this time. Annie, mind if we check your bag?

ANNIE: What is this obsession you have with my bag? Already told you no a dozen times. This borders on harassment. My attorney is —

TRANE: Gonna have my ass, I know. Promise I'll give it right back.

ANNIE: Oh, oh I get it. You want what's in it. You want it for yourself.

TRANE: All I want is a peek inside.

ANNIE: Of course you do. All men do.

ETHAN: Just give him the damn bag.

(Ethan starts to pull the bag away from Annie. She resists then shoves it in his face with surprising strength.)

ANNIE: Take it then! Take it! Should've known you'd side with Trane! You two've always been against me! Always! Plotting and whispering behind my back, laughing oh yes I hear you, I know the things you say —

LIZZY: Come on over here, Annie. I'll pour you some coffee.

ANNIE: Coffee makes me jumpy.

LIZZY: Well we don't want that.

ANNIE: A glass of Merlot would be nice.

LIZZY: I may have some in back. You promise not to move?

ANNIE: I get in trouble when I move.

(She sits at the bar as Lizzy exits into the back.)

ETHAN: Do I need to be drunk to hear this?

TRANE: Might help. Manager at Walmart says he caught her shoplifting.

ETHAN: She wouldn't do that.

(Trane nods at the bag. Ethan pulls out an extremely lifelike female mannequin's head complete with wig.)

TRANE: Tell me that's not some creepy shit.

ETHAN: It's a replacement head, for the golf course. Woman Caught in Adultery.

TRANE: Figured it was something like that. That's not the problem. What happened next the reason I got called down there.

(Music begins to play as Annie slinks downstage, a spotlight finds her as she begins a provocative, erotically charged dance, slowly teasing her way out of the rain slicker to reveal sheer bra and panties as she shimmies, a taunting smile on her face, eyes straight ahead. Mesmerized by the light, the attention. The unseen faces. Ethan, Trane, and Boone are oblivious to her as is Lizzy who enters with a bottle of wine.)

TRANE: Manager claims he told her they don't sell individual heads, so she hops up on the cosmetics counter, starts doing this pole dance only without the pole, know what I'm saying? Her way of protesting or maybe she just wants attention, I don't know. No music, just whatever's in her head. Woman can groove. Buttons popping, off comes her top, skirt. Draws a crowd, people clapping along, guys sticking dollar bills in her underwear. Manager tries to pull her down off the counter, sinks her

teeth into him. Time I got there she was down to her bra and panties. Look, your mama's got an incredible body. Just don't think customers swinging by Walmart to pick up Dr. Pepper and dog food were expecting to see it.

ETHAN: How'd you get her down?

TRANE: Told her you were right behind me.

(The music abruptly stops, the spotlight snaps off. Annie stumbles, almost falls. She glances around, disoriented, glances at Ethan.)

TRANE: Got down by herself.

(Annie pulls the rain slicker back on, retreats to her barstool. Lizzy moves to pour her a glass of wine.)

TRANE: Manager's at the station filing on her right now. This is bad, E. Might could work it out if she just hadn't bit him. Sight of his own blood, piss a man off.

ETHAN: Can't you talk to him?

TRANE: Tried, wrong skin color. You know the type, tolerate me being deputy, but I ever run for sheriff gonna break out the sheet and hood. Big in the booster club, might not be such a hard ass you remind him you took us to state.

ETHAN: I can't leave her here alone, no telling what she might do.

BOONE: I'll watch her. Just waiting to die anyway.

ETHAN: Shut up. Lizzy?

LIZZY: Five minutes. If she starts pulling off her clothes we split any tips.

TRANE: I ain't got time for this shit, E. Kenny Manning's Winnebago spotted heading south.

ETHAN: Be careful.

TRANE: Not always possible.

(They exit together. Annie peers at Boone as Georgie enters. He speaks through an electrolarynx he holds to his scarred throat.)

ANNIE: You're Ethan's friend. The slow one.

(Lizzy and Georgie laugh.)

BOONE: Sure, laugh. Soon I'm gonna be the slow one with the sucking chest wound.

GEORGIE: We're all going to die.

BOONE: Not if you're pulling the trigger.

LIZZY: Lay off my brother.

GEORGIE: I can handle myself.

LIZZY: Christ, you sound like a duck on steroids. Do you always have to talk through that thing?

(Georgie lowers the electrolarynx, mutters something under his breath. It's unintelligible.)

LIZZY: What?

(Georgie brings up the electrolarynx.)

GEORGIE: Fuck. You.

(He exits into the back, slamming the door.)

BOONE: I should buy a gun. A big one, bigger than Kilgore's. Go over to the funeral home, slip inside, pop Kilgore while he's, like, embalming somebody. Plant the gun on the stiff. Cops do it all the time.

LIZZY: You're gonna frame a corpse? That's your plan?

BOONE: I'm still refining it.

LIZZY: Why don't you just go talk to the man, see if you can work things out?

BOONE: Are you trying to set me up? Is that what this is?

LIZZY: I just don't want to see anybody get hurt.

BOONE: You don't understand. It's a crime of passion, Lizzy. We passed the talking stage three weeks ago.

LIZZY: What happened three weeks ago?

BOONE: I started fucking Maristela, and let me tell you it ain't worth getting popped over, although there is this thing she does with her tongue and a jalapeño . . . my balls are tingling.

ANNIE: Someone's trying to kill me, too.

BOONE: Who'd want to kill you?

ANNIE: Ethan.

LIZZY: You shouldn't say that, Annie. You know it's not true. Tell her, Boone.

BOONE: How's he trying to kill ya'?

ANNIE: He comes into my room late at night. Just stands there, watching me. He thinks I'm asleep and it's all I can do to keep from laughing. But then he steals a piece of me, a piece so tiny he believes I won't miss it. He's taking me apart, you see, dismantling me one small piece at a time. Each morning I look in the mirror and I no longer recognize myself. I mean, look at me. Look at me! This is not who I am. Surely you must see that! Tell me you see that!

LIZZY: Now Annie, you know Ethan would never deliberately hurt you.

BOONE: I wouldn't be too sure.

LIZZY: Boone —

BOONE: I'm just saying it might be a good idea to have a man around the place, a third party as it were. On the couch, say. Maybe take Ethan's room, put his mama-killin' ass on the couch.

LIZZY: Boone, I know what you're doing and it's not going to work.

ANNIE: I was like you once, young, pretty, so sure of how things "worked," until I realized they don't. Life is broken beyond repair. Tell me, have they started yet?

LIZZY: What?

ANNIE: The doubts. The ones that curl up to you in the middle of the night when you're lying in the darkness all alone, rest their head between your breasts, listen to the sound of your heart beating faster, faster until you're certain it's going to explode. And then one day it does. And you're not so much surprised or angry, just relieved. Finally all of your questions answered. The doubts resolved.

LIZZY: What if they're not? What if it's just more of the same? Same doubts? Same fears?

ANNIE: Then you'd be in hell. Ethan believes this is hell. Our current state of existence. He almost made it out, you know. Came so close. Then his knee failed him. Our bodies always betray us.

(She starts to leave, turns back to Boone and smiles knowingly.)

ANNIE: That your truck?

BOONE: Yes ma'am. Ignore the, um, dog in the back there. He's . . . resting.

(Annie nods, exits.)

LIZZY: Boone, don't do this.

BOONE: I know I shouldn't, but right now I'll take getting my ass kicked by Ethan over getting shot by Kilgore.

(He grabs the bag off the bar.)

BOONE: Don't wanna forget the head.

(Lizzy reaches above the bar, pulls down the pump twelve-gauge shotgun, points it at Boone. Georgie enters behind him, watches.)

BOONE: Hey, whoa now, let's just take her easy.

LIZZY: Sit down and wait for Ethan.

BOONE: Everybody in town knows you keep that thing unloaded on account of Georgie.

(Georgie angrily throws his bar rag at Boone. Lizzy racks the shotgun.)

LIZZY: You sure?

(They stare at each other, then Boone turns his back and starts to walk away. Lizzy pulls the trigger. There is an audible click. Boone freezes, then continues out. Georgie fishes two shotguns shells out of his pocket, carefully sets them on the bar then brings up his electrolarynx.)

GEORGIE: All you had to do was ask.

(Lizzy replaces the shotgun over the bar then grabs Georgie by the ear and yanks him out as the lights transition to the next scene.)

SCENE 4

The lights come up on the golf course the following morning. Boone enters carrying a putter and eating Cap'n Crunch from the box. He is wearing white cotton briefs. He amuses himself by using the putter to noisily smash bits of the cereal into tinier pieces before sitting down. Ethan enters from the trailer in matching white cotton briefs, bed hair obvious. They stare at each other a long, awkward moment then Boone hands Ethan the putter.

ETHAN: Is that my underwear?

BOONE: Probably. Hope you don't mind I borrowed a pair, had a little leakage during the night. Too much Jim Beam celebrating my new found sanctuary. Barely managed to make it to the kitchen sink. You hungry? Saved you the prize. Cap'n Crunch spyglass. Can't hardly see out of it though. I don't think that's real glass —

(Boone yelps and hits the ground as Ethan swings the putter into the lawn chair, then uses it to pin Boone to the ground by the neck. Boone squirms, choking.)

ETHAN: Thought I told you I didn't want to see you here when I woke up.

BOONE: Are you awake?

ETHAN: Give me one good reason why I don't shove that cross up your ass.

BOONE: Um, the guy hanging on it might object?

(Ethan considers, releases Boone. Boone sits up, rubs his throat.)

BOONE: Jesus, now I'm gonna talk like Georgie. Look man, I told you I was sorry. I wasn't playin' your mama, swear. I was scared. All I could think about was getting toe tagged by Kilgore. I know you and Lizzy and Trane think I'm a retard, but don't I at least deserve to go on living?

ETHAN: Not especially. Darwin would say you should have been separated from the herd a long time ago.

BOONE: See, now you're able to joke about it. Not a particularly funny joke and frankly not one that I understand, but hey, you're not sticking that cross up my ass and that's a good thing. Look, I got the woman home safely, didn't I? She didn't yank her clothes off or leave teeth marks on anybody. Gave you time to get the charges dropped. Least you can do is let me hang for a day or two. Just 'til Kilgore gets over the hard-on he's got for me.

ETHAN: And what if he shows up out here waving his big gun around? What then?

BOONE: Well then you can turn all that inner hostility on him.

ETHAN: What inner hostility?

BOONE: See, that's another one of those jokes I don't really understand but long as my ass is clear of wood I'm cool.

ETHAN: You're cool?

BOONE: I am so cool.

(Ethan begins putting balls beneath the Jesus mannequin.)

BOONE: Listen bro, we've been friends a long time —

ETHAN: No.

BOONE: No?

ETHAN: I told you, we're not friends.

BOONE: Are you sure?

ETHAN: Yeah.

BOONE: I thought we were.

ETHAN: No.

BOONE: Well then how would you define our relationship?

ETHAN: We have no relationship.

BOONE: Oh, I get it. Reject me before I reject you. It's cool. I can take it. But I want you to know something. I've always believed a man needs just three things in life — pussy, beer . . . and pussy. But last night, after you showed up and tried to pull my arms and legs off then passed out, your mama and me sat out here talking. First it was about all the bitterness you carry around inside, then about miniature golf and its purpose in the grand scheme of creation, and gradually it got around to him.

(He gazes up at the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: A mannequin from Walmart?

BOONE: Who that mannequin represents. And I don't know, maybe it was the moonlight, maybe it was the warm sense of assurance in her voice or the fact that I was drunk off my ass, but for the first time in my life it started to make sense. What it's all about. Why we're here.

ETHAN: And why is that, Boone?

BOONE: To love one other. So let me just say . . . I love you, man . . . in a strictly heterosexual way . . . even though we're both standing here in your underwear . . . semierect. And she loves you, too. Don't ever doubt that. Doesn't mean to be the way she is.

ETHAN: None of us do. We just are.

BOONE: But people can change, right?

ETHAN: Spend our lives like deer frozen in headlights, too frightened to move. Oh we say we're gonna change. Get a better job, lose weight, go back to school, eat more vegetables, watch less television, play with the kids, work out, conserve, recycle, donate. Right up until the biggest change of all.

BOONE: Menopause.

ETHAN: *Death.* We fear the unknown. So we remain where we are. No matter how much pain we're in, it's pain we know. We embrace it, claim it as our own. Because who knows what worse horror he has waiting.

BOONE: He?

(Ethan uses the putter to point at the Jesus mannequin.)

BOONE: Well I'm not embracing my pain or anybody else's. I've changed. Or I'm trying to change. This thing with Kilgore, a wake-up call. And your mama, she showed me the path.

ETHAN: Her own special gift.

BOONE: I need this, Ethan. Please don't piss on it the way you did my music career.

ETHAN: Giving yourself a karaoke for Christmas does not constitute a career.

BOONE: Right now I could really use something to believe in.

ETHAN: Because you're scared.

BOONE: No, see, that's how I know it's real. I'm not scared, not anymore. Not since last night. All my fears, my doubts, I laid them down right there, at the foot of that cross. Or maybe it was there. Or over there. Somewhere in the general vicinity — like I said, I was beat up from the feet up. The only thing I'm sure of is I'm no longer frozen in those headlights of yours. I have found the truth, man, and now I am *free.*

ETHAN: So you'll be going home?

BOONE: *Fuck no.* Just 'cause I'm free don't mean I wanna die. I mean, let's be practical. He ain't gonna hop down off there and stop a bullet, dude.

(The phone rings inside the trailer, Boone starts toward it.)

BOONE: Probably for me.

ETHAN: You getting your calls here now?

BOONE: I have to be reachable.

(He ducks into the trailer as Ethan threatens him with the putter. Ethan glances up, notices the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: How about a little side bet? I sink this, I'm the one who's free. Free to take off, live my life. I miss, I do the right thing, stay, take care of Annie. Don't move if you agree.

(He sinks the shot. The white lights around Jesus light up as a heavenly chord sounds. Ethan glances up to find Annie has entered, grocery bags in hand. They consider each other a moment, then Boone runs out of the trailer, his clothes on, phone in hand.)

BOONE: Um, Ethan. That was Lizzy. Trane's been shot.

(The lights quickly fade to darkness.)

SCENE 5

Lizzy enters carrying a chair, crosses to a hospital bed where Trane lies on his stomach facing the audience, his discomfort obvious. Lizzy, trying not to laugh, sits beside him as Ethan and Boone rush in. They realize the situation, try to conceal their laughter.

TRANE: I better get a motherfucking medal.

BOONE: Hell you know you will — you're colored.

TRANE: Who let him in?

ETHAN: Just tell us what happened.

TRANE: Been tracking Kenny Manning nonstop, eighteen hours straight, ever since I left your mama at the bar.

BOONE: Eighteen hours? Wasn't he driving a Winnebago?

TRANE: Yeah, so?

BOONE: What were you tracking him in, a wheelchair?

TRANE: Think it's easy, you do it.

BOONE: Not my job.

TRANE: That's right, it's not. Son of a bitch kept doubling back, trying to throw me off. Get lost in traffic. Blend in. Any idea how many Winnebagos on the road this time of year? Bunch a old people from Minnesota, all blue veins and false teeth, talking about how their bones are chilled and they down here to get warm and my ain't the wildflowers pretty? I'm like I ain't got time for this, I got to find me a child molester and have they seen him? They all interested until I describe the little girl, find out she's Vietnamese then it's have another cup a coffee officer and my it must be difficult being the only Negro on the force. Patting my hand and shit as if to make sure it's really black. Finally get a call there's a Winnebago matching the description parked in the middle of that old abandoned drive-in out on the county line. Just sitting there, like they waiting for the movie to start. I roll up silent, identify myself, draw my service revolver, get ready to go in. Strictly by the book. Don't want the son of a bitch to walk 'cause I screwed the bust.

BOONE: You pulled your piece? Jesus, what if you'd shot the kid?

TRANE: Hey, I'm a professional. No way I'm gonna shoot that little girl, although you keep interrupting I may put two in you right now.

LIZZY: You'll have to get in line.

ETHAN: So you found the Winnebago at the drive-in, then what?

TRANE: I look in through a window, he's got her tied to a chair watching one

of them little black-and-white TVs. Some kinda cartoon. No sign of Manning. I try the door — locked. I force it, quiet like, slip inside. Bastard was hiding in the bathroom. Hits me from behind.

BOONE: With what?

TRANE: A tire iron. I go down, he grabs my weapon. Little girl starts screaming. He waves the gun at her — shut up, shut up. Now she's screaming something in Vietnamese, only louder. Screaming and crying. And he's screaming and crying right back, and then he pulls the trigger. Don't think he even meant to, just wanted her quiet. Either way, I throw my body over the little girl, catch the bullet.

ETHAN: In your ass.

TRANE: Not my fault little girl three feet tall.

BOONE: Mind if we take a look?

TRANE: Get away from me!

(Lizzy scans his medical chart.)

LIZZY: Appears to be a flesh wound. No sign of infection. Says they're planning to release you this afternoon. Gonna have to sit on one of those little inflatable pillows for a while.

TRANE: Ain't gonna do shit for my image.

BOONE: I'm still a little unclear on the details. Like, how'd you manage to nail Manning if you were shot?

TRANE: What?

LIZZY: Boone —

BOONE: You said he fired, you take the hit, right?

TRANE: Yeah, so?

BOONE: So now he's got your gun, little girl's still tied up, and I assume you're bleeding like a son of a bitch. Sounds to me like you're in deep shit.

TRANE: Pure adrenaline. Hit him hard and fast. He goes down, I recover my piece, cuff him. End of story.

BOONE: In-fucking-credible!

(He crouches before Trane at the foot of the bed, holds up his knuckles for a bump.)

BOONE: My nigga!

(Trane grabs Boone's fist, violently twists his arm behind his back as Boone howls in pain.)

BOONE: Your nigga?! Our nigga?!

TRANE: Top drawer. My gun!

(Trane shoves Boone into the floor. Lizzy grabs Boone.)

BOONE: What? I meant it as a compliment! When did everybody get to be so fucking sensitive?

(Lizzy throws him out.)

LIZZY: Can't help himself. Redneck Tourette's. Proud of you, Trane. Saved that little girl's life.

TRANE: Told you, pure adrenaline.

LIZZY: No, pure you.

(Lizzy kisses him on the forehead, glances up as Boone comes back in.)

BOONE: Score as many narcotics as possible —

(Lizzy cuts Boone off, pushes him back out and exits with him.)

TRANE: Do me a favor. Grab that bedpan.

(Ethan pulls out a shiny metal bedpan.)

ETHAN: OK, you're like a brother to me, but I'm not holding this or anything else so you can take a piss.

TRANE: Hit me with it. Back of the head.

(Without hesitating, Ethan slams Trane on the back of the head with the bedpan. Hard.)

TRANE: OW FUCK! FUCK THAT HURT! You coulda warned me!

ETHAN: You asked me to do it. I assumed you were ready.

TRANE: Well I wasn't! Goddamn! Is it bleeding?

ETHAN: Yeah.

TRANE: Bad?

ETHAN: Gonna need stitches.

TRANE: Cool. Thanks, man.

ETHAN: Kenny Manning didn't jump you, did he?

TRANE: Winnebago wasn't even locked. Walked right in. Motherfucker sitting there watching *Full House* on the TV. Little girl in his lap, eating a corn dog, laughing. He sees me, starts bawling 'bout how he hadn't touched her, just gave her a bubble bath, painted her toenails. Gets all hysterical, begging me not to arrest him. Scaring the shit out of the little girl. Finally hit him just to shut him up. Holstering my weapon when it went off.

ETHAN: So you shot yourself in the ass.

TRANE: No, man, Kenny Manning did it. See this cut back of my head? One that's bleeding? Son of a bitch jumped me with a tire iron. Don't know how the doctors coulda missed it.

ETHAN: And you're gonna testify to that? Even though it gets him another twenty years for assaulting an officer?

TRANE: He's a child molester, E! Can't help himself. You think he grabbed that little girl just so's he could paint her toenails? Today I found her

alive. Would I have been as lucky tomorrow? How is keeping something like that off the streets another twenty years a bad thing?

ETHAN: But he didn't jump you. I did. With a bedpan.

TRANE: Listen to me, man. I like being a cop. I intend to stay a cop. I actually do some good for people, people white folks don't give a damn about. People like that little girl. But if the truth comes out, I'm through. No way they let me do the one thing I can do. And I know you know how that feels.

ETHAN: So you're OK with putting somebody away for a crime they didn't commit. You can live with that?

TRANE: Be amazed what you can live with once you shot yourself in the ass. You sure that looks like I got hit with a tire iron? Better hit me again, just to make sure.

ETHAN: Hit yourself.

(He hands the bedpan to Trane.)

TRANE: Tried, can't get enough leverage. Listen to me, man. The world is not perfect. People are not perfect. Daddies disappear, mamas go mental, knees blow out, friends lie, but at the end of the day a five-year-old gets reunited with her family and sometimes that's enough. Sometimes it's all we got.

ETHAN: What if I need more?

TRANE: You ain't gonna find it here.

ETHAN: Why do you think I'm leaving?

TRANE: Ain't gonna find it out there, either.

ETHAN: Then where do you suggest I look?

(Trane notices the bedpan, holds it up. Ethan sees his own image reflected in it as the lights fade.)

SCENE 6

Sunset. The lights come up on the golf course as Georgie enters, places a festive party hat and a pair of cheap sunglasses on the Jesus mannequin then unfurls a hand-lettered sign that he hangs across the mannequin's body. It reads "FUCK OFF ETHAN." Lizzy and Boone watch as, with a flourish, he flips a switch and multicolored Christmas lights blaze on around the golf course. Boone whoops and applauds as they are joined by Trane. He is not in uniform and walks very deliberately with a cane. Boone stops whooping. An awkward moment.

BOONE: Man this party *sucks.* Where is he, anyway?

TRANE: Halfway to Colorado be my guess. His cousin wants him there by tomorrow night.

LIZZY: He didn't leave. He's never gonna leave. One way or another Annie'll manipulate him into staying. She's Medea, with better skin-care products.

BOONE: Least she's got a good heart. Down at the homeless shelter right now doing her part to make this a better world. Any of us say the same?

TRANE: You doing your part to reduce the unspade pet population.

BOONE: You heard about that.

TRANE: Jennings filing a lawsuit on your dog-dynamiting ass.

BOONE: Can't prove it was dynamite. Dog mighta just spontaneously combusted.

LIZZY: Confirms my belief there is no God. Otherwise Queenie would've dropped that dynamite at your feet and run like . . .

(Boone looks away quickly.)

LIZZY: Oh for chrissake, Boone.

BOONE: Well what'd you expect me to do, stand there and get blown up? Never expected him to go after it a third time.

LIZZY: *(To Trane.)* Can I borrow your cane?

BOONE: Hey hey, I didn't come here to get abused. Came to get my drink on! You know Ethan's got a bottle or two of Jack stashed inside. C'mon, Lizzy, help me find it.

LIZZY: Only if you promise to shut the hell up.

(They exit into the trailer. An awkward moment as Trane and Georgie look at each other. Georgie brings up his electrolarynx.)

GEORGIE: So what do I have to do to become a cop?

TRANE: What?

GEORGIE: Already have a basic familiarity with firearms.

TRANE: Not sure it's your thing.

GEORGIE: Why? Because of the electrolarynx?

TRANE: Tried to kill yourself, man.

GEORGIE: Cops have the highest suicide rate in the nation next to dentists. I appear qualified.

TRANE: Why would you want to be in law enforcement?

GEORGIE: Tired of the look, when people see me. Pity. Disgust. Only occasionally compassion. There goes Georgie, the fuckup. Stupid bastard couldn't even shoot himself. Women, forget it. Kids, make fun. Even

Lizzy, doesn't think I see it, but it's there, behind her eyes. You, you got the badge, the hat. Saved that little girl. I want to be you. I want to be anybody. Anybody but who I am.

(They realize Ethan has approached and is listening. He flicks a cigarette butt at the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: Wonder if he had any regrets?

TRANE: Imagine he regret letting them nail his ass up there.

ETHAN: Besides that. I mean, supposedly he was up there for a while. Couldn't have been all love and forgiveness the whole time. What else you think was going through his mind?

TRANE: Things he was gonna miss. The feel of a cool breeze in summer. Taste of an apple pulled right off the tree. The way jasmine smells in the moonlight. This miracle we call being human . . .

ETHAN: You're stoned, right?

TRANE: Oh hell yeah.

(Lizzy and Boone enter from the trailer. Boone carries a bottle of Jack Daniels. Lizzy passes out plastic cups.)

BOONE: Dude, found your stash! Let's get liquored!

LIZZY: Knew you hadn't left.

ETHAN: Just back to grab my stuff. Then I'm gone.

TRANE: While Annie's down at the shelter.

ETHAN: She's cool. Understands. You know.

TRANE: Yeah. I know.

(Boone finishes pouring everyone a splash of Jack Daniels, raises his cup.)

BOONE: Alrighty, let's toast our compadre as he moves on down the line. Who wants to go first?

(A painfully awkward silence.)

BOONE: All right, well, to Ethan. Thanks for letting me hang at your place and only stomping my ass that once. Good luck at your cousin's ranch. Think of us when you're giving your first blow job.

(He laughs. Georgie also laughs. Ethan, Lizzy and Trane just stare at him. He nods to Georgie.)

BOONE: He gets it.

(Trane raises his cup in a toast.)

TRANE: You never once looked at me and saw the color of my skin. That is a rare thing in this world. Half that Lexus still mine.

(They drink. Georgie steps forward, starts to speak, then simply holds his cup up. Ethan toasts with him. They drink. Lizzy hesitates, then raises her cup. Her voice is suddenly full of emotion.)

LIZZY: Fuck you, Ethan, you're not going.

ANNIE: Where's Ethan not going?

(They turn to find Annie approaching.)

ETHAN: Thought you were staying overnight at the shelter.

ANNIE: Warm night, homeless all decided to sleep outside. They're funny that way.

LIZZY: You know, maybe we should —

ANNIE: Oh hey, don't let me break up your party. Looks like somebody went to a lot of trouble.

GEORGIE: I'm the party planner. Let's get busy.

(He does a spastic little dance, stops as he realizes everyone is simply staring at him.)

BOONE: Ever notice how Jack goes right through ya? Hope there aren't any dishes in the sink.

(He hastily exits into the trailer.)

ANNIE: So where you going, Ethan?

ETHAN: Bobby offered me a job.

ANNIE: You got a job.

ETHAN: A real job.

ANNIE: You got a real job.

ETHAN: One that doesn't involve mannequins on crosses.

ANNIE: So that's what this is about.

ETHAN: We've talked about me leaving before.

ANNIE: We've talked about you going back to school when we could afford it. We've even talked about you getting a job in the city when you figured out what it is you want to be. What we haven't talked about is you going to work for Bobby. Ever.

ETHAN: It sort of just came up.

ANNIE: I see. Well when were you planning on leaving? Tomorrow? Next week? Were you even going to tell me? No, no I see you weren't. Afraid I'd, what, freak out? Total melt down?

ETHAN: It's been known to happen.

ANNIE: Guys, am I freaking?

LIZZY: Not yet.

ANNIE: Trane?

TRANE: You're a little too calm.

ANNIE: Why shouldn't I be? Not like we haven't been through this before, when you left for college. Wasn't easy, but I managed because I knew it

was the best thing, for both of us. And maybe, ultimately, this is the best thing. *(She suddenly grabs his face, peers at him intently.)* Just don't forget me, understand? Don't you *ever* forget me. *(She releases him, smiles sweetly.)* So, you packed?

ETHAN: Just about to.

ANNIE: I'll do it. You stay, enjoy your friends. Socialize.

(She exits into the trailer.)

LIZZY: You are so screwed.

ETHAN: Yeah.

(The door to the trailer is kicked open from within. They duck as Annie enters, slams Ethan's possessions to the ground.)

LIZZY: *Shit!*

(Jeans, shirts, socks, underwear, boots, caps. Annie tosses some of them; Boone enthusiastically slams down the rest. They spot him.)

LIZZY: Boone, you dickweed!

BOONE: Sorry, man. She threatened to evict me if I didn't help!

(He ducks back inside. Nikes, shorts, leather jacket, practice jerseys, any and everything. Annie finally appears in the doorway. She looks around, out of breath but satisfied.)

ANNIE: Think that's about it. If I forgot anything I'll be sure and send it along to Bobby's. Tell him kiss kiss when you see him. Drive safely, call me when you get there, sweetheart. Love you! Bye!

(She viciously slams the door. The entire trailer rocks. Boone smirks, flips a pair of balled-up underwear to Ethan who catches them. Boone scurries inside, also slams the door. A stunned moment. Georgie puts a consoling hand on Ethan's shoulder then together with Trane and Lizzy begins gathering Ethan's belongings. Ethan flings the folded ball of underwear angrily at the base of the cross, striking it. Jesus lights up, the heavenly chord sounds. They all turn to stare at it, spooked as the lights immediately go down, then the lights on the cross snap off leaving only darkness.)

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II
SCENE 7

Night. The lights come up on the bar. Georgie is intently, lovingly polishing the shotgun with a bar rag. He glances up as Ethan enters, crosses to sit at the bar. He is drunk.

ETHAN: When you stuck that shotgun under your chin, what were you thinking?

(Georgie brings up his electrolarynx.)

GEORGIE: How sorry everyone would be.

ETHAN: No one was sorry.

GEORGIE: I know. Fuckers.

ETHAN: You remember anything?

GEORGIE: I was stoned. Righteous mushrooms.

ETHAN: No wonder you missed.

GEORGIE: I remember the feel of the trigger. Thin, smooth, like the edge of a nickel. And the smell of the barrel, smoke and gun oil. Felt cold against my throat. Didn't even pull the trigger, just squeezed, slight slight pressure. Surprised when the shotgun suddenly jumped . . .

ETHAN: And then?

GEORGIE: Biggest fucking headache of my life.

ETHAN: Ever try again?

GEORGIE: Think I should?

(Lizzy enters from the back, pauses as she sees Georgie with the shotgun. He frowns, surrenders it to her. She considers it, then glances at Ethan.)

LIZZY: Thought you'd be in Colorado by now.

ETHAN: Forgot my books, ones I keep under my bed. Needed a drink to face going back up there.

LIZZY: Looks like you needed several, not that I blame you. Didn't she have to be sedated when you left for college?

ETHAN: Antidepressants.

LIZZY: Still on them?

ETHAN: Why? She look depressed?

(Lizzy smiles then pulls a twenty from the register.)

LIZZY: Hey, Georgie, why don't you grab us a pizza? You're starting to look anorexic.

GEORGIE: Don't pretend you care.

(He snatches the money from her, exits.)

LIZZY: He's right you know. I don't, care I mean. Did at first, after they brought him home from the hospital. Not anymore.

ETHAN: I don't believe that.

LIZZY: Maybe you're right. Maybe it's just something I tell myself so I'll be prepared the next time some farmer stops his pickup halfway across an empty field, empty except for Georgie and this twelve gauge.

ETHAN: Why don't you get rid of that thing?

LIZZY: Daddy's, you know? Besides, Georgie'd just find some other, more creative way to off himself. Only he'd fuck that up, too. *(She places the shotgun back on its rack over the bar.)* Christ, Ethan, what happened to us? What are we still doing here?

ETHAN: Don't know about you, but I plan on getting seriously hammered.

LIZZY: Believe I'll join you. What's the point of owning a bar you don't occasionally get wrenched?

(She pulls down a bottle of the good stuff, pours them both a shot.)

LIZZY: To oblivion.

ETHAN: The darkness of the soul.

(They toast, drink. Lizzy gasps then pours them a refill.)

LIZZY: Lately I find myself going over the events of my life in a meaningless attempt to narrow down the exact day, the exact hour, the exact moment when it all turned to shit. No, it wasn't Daddy. And it wasn't Georgie either, believe it or not.

ETHAN: Us?

LIZZY: Close. I'm five years old and my daddy announces it's time we meet Santa Claus live and in the flesh, so he loads me and Georgie in that ancient El Camino and he drives for miles to some godforsaken mall down near the border and the whole way he's playing this *Dean Martin Sings the Sounds of the Season* tape he got free for trying *Readers Digest* for ten days only I don't care because I am finally going to get to whisper directly into Santa's ear exactly what I want for Christmas. No more unanswered letters, no more lying awake Christmas Eve wondering if he'll get it right, no more disappointing Christmas mornings when I realize Santa's fucked it up yet again. I'm in line, so excited I'm standing on my tiptoes. Finally it's my turn. I scramble up into Santa's lap, he's ho-ho-hoing, and I start rattling off all the cool stuff I want when I notice there's something else in his lap, under his red Santa suit. And it's growing.

ETHAN: You're making this up.

LIZZY: Do you seriously believe I would make something like this up? Santa's getting a hard-on while I'm sitting in his lap telling him all about the P.J. Sparkle doll I want for Christmas.

ETHAN: You've never shared this with me before. Sorta wish you weren't sharing it with me now.

LIZZY: Hey, you're leaving, remember? This is a time of unburdening.

ETHAN: So what'd you do?

LIZZY: What could I do? Finished my list, hopped down, being careful not to touch Santa's rapidly expanding North Pole. I was five, Ethan. And you know what, to this day, still pisses me off? For years I thought I was special because I was the only kid Santa gave a hug to. Everyone else got a pat on the head but me, big old hug. From that moment on my life has been absolute shit. Fucker didn't even bring me a P.J. Sparkle doll.

ETHAN: National Merit —

LIZZY: Shit.

ETHAN: Valedictorian —

LIZZY: Shit.

ETHAN: Scholarship to Virginia —

LIZZY: Shit.

ETHAN: You own this bar.

LIZZY: The one thing in my life I can truly call my own, and my father had to die for me to get it. How fucked up is that?

ETHAN: They ever find out what he was doing on the roof?

LIZZY: Somebody heard him say he was climbing up there to fix that sign. Kind of thing he'd had to have been totally drunk to consider important, which explains his blood alcohol level. Christ, I miss him. He had no business leaving me here alone with Georgie. I think of how different things would be if he just hadn't decided to fix that sign. Want to know the real reason I'm keeping his shotgun? Day I finally do close this place I'm taking it up on the roof and blowing that neon bitch to pieces.

ETHAN: Never talked about, you know, what happened after.

LIZZY: Nothing to say. Buried my dad, went back to your place and had sex that left us both scarred for life. At least that's the way I remember it. You?

ETHAN: Same. Death, sex, scarred.

LIZZY: I don't regret it, if that's what you're wondering. Something sweet, almost tender about it. Although the blood lent it a certain Gothic horror.

ETHAN: I thought maybe I'd punctured something.

LIZZY: You did, in a manner of speaking.

ETHAN: I meant like a vital organ, your liver maybe.

(They laugh.)

LIZZY: Don't flatter yourself.

(She studies him a long moment.)

LIZZY: I was there, the day you got hurt. At the game. I saw it happen.

ETHAN: You never told me —

LIZZY: Yeah well I never told you about Santa Claus either, but now you're leaving and maybe I just don't care anymore. Sounded like a gunshot, your knee. And I could feel the bone . . . shatter. You went down, and I didn't think you were going to get up. Ever. Longest moment of my life. I bent over and just booted, threw up right there in the stadium. People around me thought I was drunk, but I wasn't. I was scared. I'd caught a glimpse, you see, of what my life would be like without you in it. And now I'm seeing it again. Only this time you're not prone on the ground. You're up, moving away. Leaving me behind.

ETHAN: I never knew.

LIZZY: Oh fuck you, of course you knew. How could you not know? You knew. Admit it. Say it. Say you knew. Say it, Ethan.

ETHAN: All right, yeah. I knew. I've always known.

LIZZY: So what was the deal? Was I not hot enough for you?

ETHAN: No, that was never it.

(Lizzy indicates her breasts.)

LIZZY: These not big enough? What? Were you afraid I'd interfere with those sorority skanks you were banging?

ETHAN: I wasn't —

LIZZY: Now is not the time to lie.

ETHAN: OK, that might've been a part of it.

LIZZY: What else? Has to've been a reason we didn't end up together. Why we only did it that once.

ETHAN: Is it really that important?

LIZZY: Yeah, it is. I have enough unanswered questions in my life. So tell me. Why not . . . us?

ETHAN: It's too right, too perfect. We're being set up.

LIZZY: By who? Oh wait, let me guess. Your old friend, Mr. Jesus.

ETHAN: He's pushing us together, making sure we fall in love, that we're committed, happy. Then, when we're finally there, when we've made it through all the shit couples go through, when we are truly one — whack. Cervical cancer and you're gone.

LIZZY: You are fucking crazy.

ETHAN: Don't you think I know that? I've always known that. That's how this all ends, with me doomed to run that golf course for the rest of my life. That a dream you share? Watching who I am slip away, the expression on my face becoming fixed, vacant as the one on the faces of those mannequins. One day you wake up, turn over in bed, realize you can no longer tell the difference between me and that thing hanging on the cross outside. Not sure I can anymore. Used to believe I was going to make it out of here. This body was going to take me places, allow me to be someone. Someone with a future. Used to believe a lot of things. One by one I've had to let them go just to stay sane. What happens now that I've run out of beliefs? When there's nothing left to let go of?

LIZZY: Then you leave. You just go.

ETHAN: Come with me.

LIZZY: Shutting this place down would be like burying my daddy all over again.

ETHAN: Whatever you think you owe your father, you've paid it.

LIZZY: Maybe someday I'll agree with you.

ETHAN: What about what you want?

LIZZY: We're going to take care of that right now.

(She pulls him roughly into a kiss.)

LIZZY: Well that was more enjoyable than the first time around.

ETHAN: We're not standing in a graveyard.

LIZZY: That's what you think.

(They again kiss, more passionately.)

ETHAN: Was it really that bad, the first time?

LIZZY: Yeah.

(She pushes him onto a barstool, straddles him.)

LIZZY: And I swore next time I'd be on top.

ETHAN: "Next time"?

(Lizzy yanks his shirt open.)

LIZZY: I always knew we'd do it again.

(She peels off her own top.)

LIZZY: Didn't you?

(They begin to make love. Georgie returns carrying a large pizza box and a Big Gulp, freezes as he sees Ethan and Lizzy. He turns away, devastated, then runs out. The lights transition us to the next scene as Lizzy gathers her clothing, gives Ethan one last look before exiting. Ethan turns to the golf course.)

SCENE 8

Ethan crosses the golf course, hears heavy breathing from within the trailer — it could be someone crying, it could be someone moaning. Curious, he exits into the darkened trailer, flips on its interior light.

ANNIE: *(Offstage.) Ethan!*

(She comes running out, clasping a white nightshirt to her nude body. She runs across the golf course and disappears offstage. Boone stumbles out behind her, yelling. He is struggling to pull on a long burlap robe. He ducks as Ethan chases after him, kicking and punching.)

ETHAN: You son of a bitch!

BOONE: OK, look, I can tell this is a rather sensitive subject for you, and it may not be the best time to engage in a, uh, meaningful dialogue, but I want you to know that what you just saw your mama and me doing was the, um, communion of our blessed spirits and, uh —

(Ethan grabs the robe.)

BOONE: — hey, let go! Let go of the robe! *(Boone tries to pull away, picks up a putter, holds it like a club. He is near tears.)* I don't want to have to use this, Ethan! Please don't make me use this! Just let go of the robe!

(Ethan lunges at Boone who brings the putter down hard on Ethan's injured knee. Ethan grabs his knee, collapses beneath the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: You son of a bitch!

BOONE: I'm sorry, man! You left me no choice!

ETHAN: Next time I see you, I'm gonna kill you!

BOONE: Yeah, I know.

(He drops the putter and runs off. Ethan looks up at the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: You think this is funny? We exist for your amusement? She's given up everything for you, including her sanity, and now when she needs you the most, you do *nothing*. This isn't me we're talking about. My future, my life. You want to take me down, fine, be my guest. But not her. She prays. She believes. She built this, this shrine to you. And in return you abandon her, leave her to destroy herself. Where are you anyway? Two thousand years, longest disappearing act in history. The truth is you died for nothing. No? Then show me. 'Cause I don't see it, none of it. No forgiveness. No love. No mercy. No grace. Just our own special hell. Hey . . . hey — look at me when I'm talking to you!

(He wrenches the Jesus mannequin off the cross, throws it down.)

ETHAN: How's it feel to be down here with the rest of us you uncaring fuck?

(He bends to pick up the putter, limps off as the lights transition us to the next scene.)

SCENE 9

The lights come up on the bar as Lizzy enters in her bathrobe and pajamas, glances up as Boone again enters from the bathroom, again carrying a bottle of beer. He keeps peering at the door nervously.

LIZZY: Explain the robe.

BOONE: Pulled it off one of the mannequins. Brushed out my hair, let my beard grow in. Thought it'd make me look more . . . Christ-like.

LIZZY: You actually thought dressing like Jesus was a legitimate dating strategy?

BOONE: I can tell by your tone you don't approve.

LIZZY: The woman is fragile, Boone, possibly disturbed. For chrissake, she had sex with *you.* Did it even for one minute occur to you that something like this could send her over the edge?

BOONE: Of course it did! I'm not a complete idiot.

LIZZY: Then why'd you do it?

BOONE: Because she was there! Because she seemed vulnerable and sad and scared and alone and maybe I was feeling the same way. These things happen, Lizzy. You can't always explain it, they just do, and now I am in deep shit. You've gotta help me. I don't know who else to turn to. It's like there's this rope around my neck, pulling tighter and tighter, biting into my flesh, choking me so I can't breathe. I try to think, figure a way out, but I can't breathe. Please, Lizzy. I know you think I'm a moron, but you're all I've got. I'm begging you.

(Lizzy considers Boone, then pulls a wad of cash from the register, slides it across the bar to him. He quickly counts it.)

LIZZY: You gotta go. Run, now. I'm serious. Get as far from this place as possible.

BOONE: How far am I supposed to get on twenty-six dollars?

LIZZY: All I've got.

BOONE: I'm the only one who wants to stay and I gotta leave? That is fucked.

LIZZY: So much of life is.

(Boone considers the money, then slides it back across the bar.)

BOONE: Not that I don't appreciate it, but I can't. Lived here since I was born,

guess I'll die here. Just don't let Kilgore handle the funeral. He'll bury me with my head on backwards or my dick in my hand or something.

(Ethan limps in carrying the putter.)

ETHAN: You son of a bitch! Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you it was going to end bad?

(He punches Boone, slams his head against the bar. Boone cries out as he collapses onto the floor.)

LIZZY: Ethan! No!

(Ethan smashes Boone in the stomach repeatedly with the putter. Boone cries out each time.)

LIZZY: Goddamnit, Ethan! Think about what you're doing!

(Ethan uses the putter to strangle Boone.)

ETHAN: I know exactly what I'm doing!

(Trane enters.)

TRANE: Ethan.

BOONE: Trane, thank God — get him off! He's gonna kill me!

TRANE: Shut up! Ethan, *Ethan.* Better get out here.

ETHAN: Not now.

TRANE: Yeah, *now.*

(Ethan finally releases Boone, then punches him in the groin a final time as Boone yelps. Ethan follows Trane out. Lizzy moves to help Boone up. She exits, Boone agonizingly follows. The action continues directly into:)

SCENE 10

Downstage, outside the front of the bar. Night. Trane points, Ethan, Lizzy, and Boone peer up. Annie can be seen on the roof of the bar, backlit by the pale glow of the neon sign. She is turned away wearing only the white nightshirt as she gazes upward. She looks beautiful, like an angel.

TRANE: Saw her from the car.

ETHAN: You say anything to her?

TRANE: Afraid to.

ETHAN: You don't really think she'll jump?

TRANE: Not a well lady, E. You get up there, go slow, understand? Tell her whatever she needs to hear, just get her down.

ETHAN: What if I can't?

TRANE: Gonna be a long night.

LIZZY: Be careful, Ethan. I mean it.

(Ethan climbs onto the roof. Annie turns as he calls softly to her.)

ETHAN: Annie? Annie, are you all right?

ANNIE: Shhh . . . Listen. Can you hear them, Ethan?

ETHAN: Hear what?

ANNIE: The stars. People say they twinkle, but they're wrong. Stars don't twinkle. They weep. Tell me you hear them. Tell me you hear them weep.

ETHAN: Maybe if I was up there, next to you. If I came up there. Closer.

ANNIE: No, please don't. You don't hear them like I do. Nobody does. My entire life I thought it was a gift. Now I'm not so sure.

ETHAN: Let me try.

ANNIE: You've been trying, Ethan. You've been trying for so long. You must be tired.

ETHAN: We both are. Let me take you home. Let me take you home so we can rest.

ANNIE: I can't go home. I can never go home. You must know that by now.

ETHAN: Why not? Annie, why not? Why can't you go home?

ANNIE: I've sinned.

(She turns, arms outstretched to reveal deep, vertical slashes in both wrists, the red blood pouring from them. She passes out, pitches forward. Ethan instinctively moves, catches her before she plummets off the roof. He calls below.)

ETHAN: Get an ambulance!

(The lights quickly fade to darkness as Ethan, Trane, Lizzie, and Boone gently carry Annie to the hospital bed.)

SCENE 11

A spotlight comes up, again illuminating the hospital bed, the shadow of a barred window across it. Looming further back and in shadow is the now empty cross. Annie lies in the bed, eyes closed, sedated. Her wrists are bandaged, arms bound to the sides of the bed by restraints. Ethan dozes in a chair next to the bed. Trane stands on the other side of the bed, leaning on his cane. Ethan wakes with a start, glances around disoriented then peers down at his hands.

ETHAN: *Shit.*

TRANE: Dream?

ETHAN: I was looking out on this incredible view. Sun streaming down, bluebonnets. Gorgeous spring day. I could see the whole town, you, Lizzy. Felt this pain in the palm of my hands. Realized Annie and Jesus were nailing me to the cross over the seventeenth hole.

TRANE: You gonna put some therapist's kids through school, know that?

ETHAN: How long you been standing there?

TRANE: Dunno. Think I pulled a groin muscle.

ETHAN: Want to sit down?

TRANE: Can't.

ETHAN: How's your ass?

TRANE: Fucked. How's your knee?

ETHAN: Fucked.

TRANE: Need it?

(He holds up his cane. Ethan waves it off.)

ETHAN: Pain's the only way I can tell I'm alive.

(They consider Annie a moment.)

ETHAN: Scared the shit outta me, man.

TRANE: Safe now.

ETHAN: For how long?

TRANE: Hardest part's still to come.

ETHAN: Mean there's more?

TRANE: Gotta learn to forgive.

ETHAN: She's my mother. I'll find a way.

TRANE: Not you. Find a way to forgive herself.

ETHAN: Wasn't supposed to be like this.

TRANE: Never is. Only got yourself to blame.

ETHAN: *Me?*

TRANE: Wouldn't have happened you'd left when you said you was.

ETHAN: Wanted to see that smile one last time, the one where she's dreaming. One that reminds me of the way she used to be.

TRANE: And?

ETHAN: She was smiling all right, naked and —

TRANE: C'mon, man. What's the worse coulda happened? Two lonely people find a little comfort best way they know how. You're gone, never even know. Some point it ends, always ends. How long a woman like your mama gonna put up with a fool like Boone anyhow? Only you couldn't just leave it, walk away, let everyone get on with their lives. You had to go and make it a thing.

ETHAN: I can't believe you're defending her. I can't believe you're defending Boone.

TRANE: Who else going to?

ETHAN: Hey, I was on my way out of town when somebody decided they needed a second hole in their ass.

TRANE: Oh so this is my fault?

ETHAN: When you think about it, yeah. I was depending on you to save me.

TRANE: From what, her?

ETHAN: From myself.

(Trane studies him a moment, then turns as Annie softly moans. He moves to her, gently kisses her forehead. He glances at Ethan and exits. Annie opens her eyes, focuses on Ethan, smiles with relief.)

ANNIE: Ethan, I just had the worst nightmare. I was in a hospital and my arms . . . *(She starts to raise her arms, finds them bound by the restraints.)* Oh . . .

ETHAN: How you feeling?

ANNIE: My throat's a little dry.

ETHAN: Here.

(Ethan gets her a drink, holds the cup as she drinks through a straw. He gently wipes her mouth with a napkin.)

ANNIE: Thank you, sweetheart. Do you think you could loosen these straps? They really are not designed for comfort.

ETHAN: Doctors made it clear they wouldn't be cool with that.

ANNIE: Just one, then. I don't care which one, you choose. They're cutting off my circulation. It hurts, Ethan . . .

(Ethan loosens the right restraint. Annie slips her arm free, immediately removes the restraint on her left arm, slyly smiles at him.)

ANNIE: Can't imagine where they think I'm going. Did you notice, there are bars over the window. Isn't that unusual for a hospital room?

ETHAN: This isn't a normal room, Annie.

ANNIE: Well then what is it?

ETHAN: I should let them know you're awake.

ANNIE: Not yet. Please. Tell me how I got here.

ETHAN: What do you remember?

ANNIE: Listening to the stars. You, behind me. Then falling. Darkness . . .

ETHAN: I caught you. Trane already had an ambulance on the way.

ANNIE: Suppose I should feel grateful, but for some reason I'm having trouble feeling much of anything.

ETHAN: The medication. It'll wear off.

ANNIE: That's what I'm afraid of.

(She looks out the barred window.)

ANNIE: I can see our place from here. There's the cross on seventeen. Jesus must've blown off it again. So much for duct tape.

ETHAN: Never should have hung him up there.

ANNIE: It was a bad time for me, Ethan, I needed something.

ETHAN: A mannequin? You needed a mannequin you pulled out of the dumpster behind Walmart?

ANNIE: He's more than that —

ETHAN: No, see, he's not. He's a myth, a ghost story, a promise we make to ourselves because we're afraid of dying.

ANNIE: I don't believe that. I can't.

ETHAN: Not even after last night?

ANNIE: Last night made it real.

ETHAN: Suicide is not an act of faith.

ANNIE: I'm alive.

ETHAN: He didn't save you.

ANNIE: He sent you.

ETHAN: No, no you can't say that —

ANNIE: You think it was an accident, you being there? Some random cosmic coincidence?

ETHAN: You knew damn well I was in that bar. You staged it for maximum effect.

ANNIE: So this, this is all just some well-choreographed cry for help? Is that what you're saying? A way to keep you from leaving? You think so little of me, of the love I have for you —

ETHAN: The alternative is to believe. To believe someone or something out there cares about you, about me. And I don't. I can't. Not anymore. Probably not ever. I am not you.

ANNIE: You're my son.

ETHAN: That doesn't make me —

ANNIE: What, Ethan? Make you what?

ETHAN: Thought I could do this, I really did. Call Bobby, tell him you're in the hospital, I need to stay. Wait until you recover, take you home. The dutiful son. Watch as every day a little piece of my soul gets chipped away until one day it's gone completely, and I don't even notice. Too busy trying to find a new head for John the Baptist, one that's perfectly in character, just the proper amount of righteous indignation. Drinking

gets worse, of course. After awhile Trane, Lizzy both give up and then it'll just be you and me. No, you and me and Jesus. Well fuck him. And fuck you. I'm gone.

(He starts to leave. She throws her arms around him, anchoring him to her.)

ANNIE: Because I did this? This, this is nothing. It'll heal. Sure, there'll be scars but I can put make up over them. You'll never even know they're there.

ETHAN: Annie —

ANNIE: It's the golf course, isn't it? So we bulldoze the place, all of it, mannequins, everything. Bury it completely. Or or we just leave, yeah just walk away. Go anywhere you want. Colorado even, although you know I'm kinda cold natured. Maybe someplace warmer.

ETHAN: Annie, please —

ANNIE: Or we stay here, move into town. You'd like that, wouldn't you? I know Lizzy would. I've seen the way she looks at you. You two'd make such a cute —

ETHAN: That's enough!

(He yanks away from her, starts for the door.)

ANNIE: You ungrateful bastard! After I sacrificed my life for you, you think you can just toss me aside? My friends all got pregnant, didn't think twice about aborting their precious little bundles of joy, but no, I decided I wanted mine. I fought to keep you. Never mind that it meant giving up everything I'd known until that moment. I had this, this vision of the two of us. We were going to be self-contained, just me and my son, and the whole world could go fuck itself as long as we had each other. And for a while it was right and good and perfect, but then you began to change. I could see them, in your eyes, the doubts, about us. Tell me, Ethan, why am I no longer enough for you?

ETHAN: For godsake, Annie, you're my mother.

ANNIE: I know that. You think I don't know that? You think I'm crazy? Why am I even asking? One look at that barred window and the answer's obvious. *(She stands on the bed, unsteadily.)* That's the real reason I'm in here, isn't it? Has nothing to do with what happened last night.

ETHAN: Get down —

ANNIE: How long have you been planning this, Ethan? This chance to abort me from your life! Guilt-free! Poor Ethan, something had to be done. She forced him to do it, to lock her away.

ETHAN: Get down before you —

ANNIE: Before I what? Before I hurt myself?

(She holds up her wrists. They've begun to bleed through the bandages.)

ANNIE: Well it's a little late, Ethan.

(Ethan forces her to her knees on the bed as she struggles.)

ANNIE: Stop it! Let go! Let go of me!

ETHAN: Don't you understand? That's what I'm trying to do. Why won't you let me? Just let me?

(Annie surges forward, kisses Ethan desperately, her pain at once raw and furious and primal. Ethan is too stunned to react. Annie slowly sinks down, her eyes on her son, stricken by her own actions. They consider each other sadly, then Ethan simply walks out. Annie remains motionless on the bed, staring without seeing, utterly drained, the empty cross behind her as the lights slowly fade to darkness, the last image the shadow of the barred window falling across her face.)

SCENE 12

Morning beneath the empty cross on the seventeenth hole. Trane pulls duct tape off the cross. A ladder stands next to the cross along with a portable welder and gloves. Boone is in the lawn chair, bruised and battered, wearing a welding helmet, visor up, and sipping a beer while smoking a joint.

BOONE: I've had one or two women claim having sex with me made them want to kill themselves, but she's the first to actually go for it. Kinda sweet when you think about it. I oughta buy her something. A toe ring. Still, if I could go back in time, man, you know I'd make it right.

TRANE: You'd make sure you were finished before Ethan walked in.

BOONE: Woulda been, too, if I hadn't been so concerned with giving her the "ultimate pleasure." Just wanted Annie to feel less alone, even if it was just for a little while. For someone, anyone, to hold her in their arms and tell her it was going to be all right. Although one look at these mannequins, and you can tell it ain't. I mean, I been withholding comment long as I was a houseguest, but I gotta tell you, this is some seriously twisted shit. You know if you sit out here long enough they actually talk? Helps if you're stoned. Last night one of the Wise Men offered to polish my knob for a carton of Marlboro Lights. How's your ass?

TRANE: You want to live, don't ever inquire about my ass.

BOONE: Listen, back in the hospital, that word I said? Starts with an "n"?

Usually refers to people of color? Frequently found in the lyrics of today's most popular rap songs —

TRANE: I know what you said.

BOONE: Well I've since come to realize certain words can be offensive to certain people, and well, I promise in the future to be more sensitive. Just amazes me you were shot and still able to save that little gook. So are we cool?

(Trane just looks at him.)

BOONE: Yeah, I was afraid of that. Heard you had a talk with Kilgore, got him to hand over that big gun of his. Want you to know I appreciate it, man.

TRANE: My job. Personally I'd of paid him to put two in you.

BOONE: Sound just like my daddy.

(He hands the joint to Trane. Trane considers it.)

BOONE: So when're you back on duty?

TRANE: Started today.

(He hands the joint back, unsmoked.)

BOONE: You ain't in uniform.

(Trane opens his jacket, reveals an automatic and a badge clipped to his belt.)

TRANE: Plainclothes. No more motherfucking hat.

(Lizzy enters from the trailer.)

LIZZY: Stripped clean. Everything. Like he was never here. Like he never even existed. This time he's definitely gone. And he's not coming back.

TRANE: Don't sound too happy for him.

LIZZY: Happy? Why should I be happy? That we've been abandoned? It was never Annie he was leaving, or this place. Those are the obvious, no-brainers, I mean who wouldn't want to get away from that? Real question has always been us, Trane. You and me. Guess I thought it was enough, *we* were enough, to keep him here. I was wrong.

BOONE: What about me?

LIZZY: DON'T SPEAK YOU *FUCKING* RETARD!

BOONE: That time of the month, huh?

(Boone ducks as Trane threatens him with his cane, runs offstage.)

TRANE: You OK?

LIZZY: Well let's see. Shocked, that he finally did it. Hurt, that he didn't bother to say good-bye. Pissed, that he has the balls to leave and I don't. Numb even, when I realize he's no longer a part of my life, but no, most definitely not OK.

TRANE: What you think was gonna happen?

LIZZY: I don't know, Trane, I try not to think that far ahead. Guess we'd con-

tinue our little dance forever. He'd talk about leaving, starting a new life, but in the end he'd show up at the bar, we'd get wasted, make jokes about Annie . . . this place. Not gonna be the same, you realize that. Think he'll even miss us?

TRANE: Dunno, why don't you ask him?

(Ethan approaches. Boone enters carrying the Jesus mannequin, sees him.)

BOONE: Well I'm fucked!

(Boone tries to hide behind the Jesus mannequin.)

ETHAN: Hey.

LIZZY: Hey . . .

TRANE: Want to explain why you're not in Colorado?

ETHAN: She's scared, man, terrified. Doesn't understand what's happening to her, not sure I do either. I just know I can't leave her there, in that place, not the way she is. I owe her that much.

TRANE: So where's the Lexus?

ETHAN: Gone.

TRANE: Define gone.

ETHAN: Stopped off at the bar to say good-bye.

TRANE: What's that got to do with our Lexus?

ETHAN: When I came out our Lexus was pulling away.

TRANE: Meaning it was stolen.

(Ethan shrugs noncommittally.)

TRANE: Any idea who took it?

(Ethan digs in his pocket, pulls out two shotgun shells, which he hands to Lizzy. Lizzy considers them as Georgie again rises from behind the bar wearing sunglasses, a bottle of Jack in one hand, his electrolarynx in the other. He sings with the radio as he drives.)

GEORGIE: *(Singing.)* "Lord I was born a rambling man . . . "

TRANE: Want me to bring him back?

ETHAN: Let him go.

(The spotlight fades as Georgie gleefully flips them off and sinks behind the bar.)

BOONE: You're actually gonna give him your car? What about me?

ETHAN: You had sex with my mother.

BOONE: I didn't know the *Lexus* was an option.

(Trane shoves Boone toward the ladder and welding equipment.)

LIZZY: So you moving back in?

ETHAN: No, not out here. Time I found a place of my own, in town somewhere.

LIZZY: Gonna need a job to pay the rent.

ETHAN: Thought about that. Know anyone who's hiring?

LIZZY: Not off hand, though I guess maybe I could ask around . . .

TRANE: Can we please just do this?

(Ethan moves to the Jesus mannequin, studies it a long moment, then picks it up and positions it back on the cross. Boone climbs the ladder, pulls on the gloves.)

BOONE: Why do I get the feeling three days from now I am seriously going to get my ass kicked?

(Boone flips down his visor, begins to weld the Jesus mannequin to the cross. Ethan turns to look at Lizzy just as the lights go down, leaving only the white hot spark of the welding torch in the darkness.)

END OF PLAY

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

2009 The Best New Playwrights

AMERICAN HWANGAP by Lloyd Suh It's dear old Dad's 60th birthday. Although he deserted his family years ago, they are holding a traditional Korean birthday celebration, a hwangap, anyway. He comes back to the U.S. for his hwangap, and what ensues is funny and often quite poignant.

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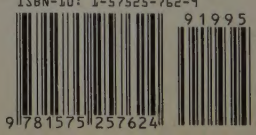

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