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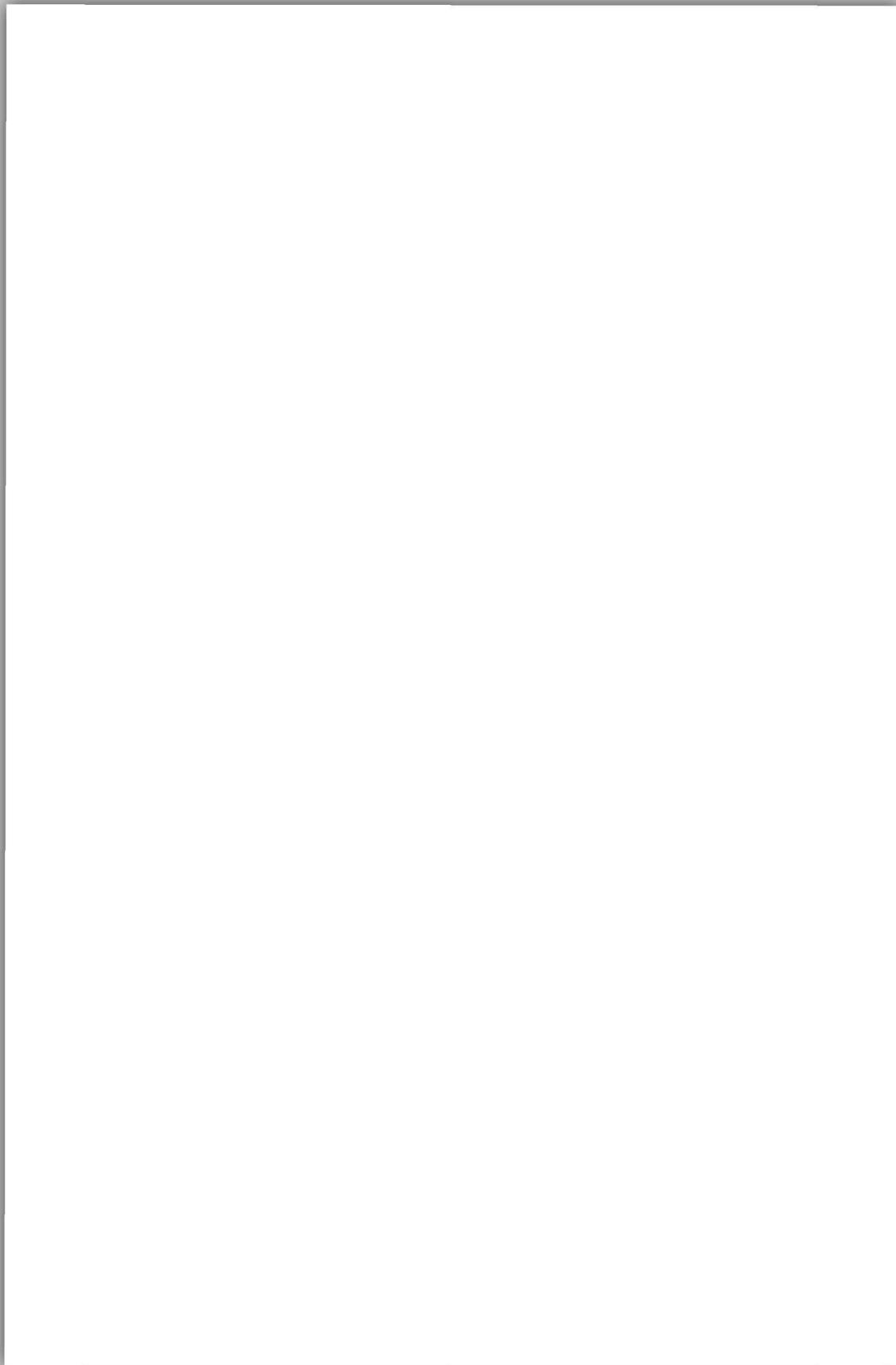
INTERNATIONAL

39:3



CONTEMPORARY WRITING
FROM CANADA AND
AROUND THE WORLD

SPRING 2001



PRISM

INTERNATIONAL

UBC's Creative Writing

RESIDENCY

PRIZE in

STAGEPLAY

PRISM international *would like to congratulate*

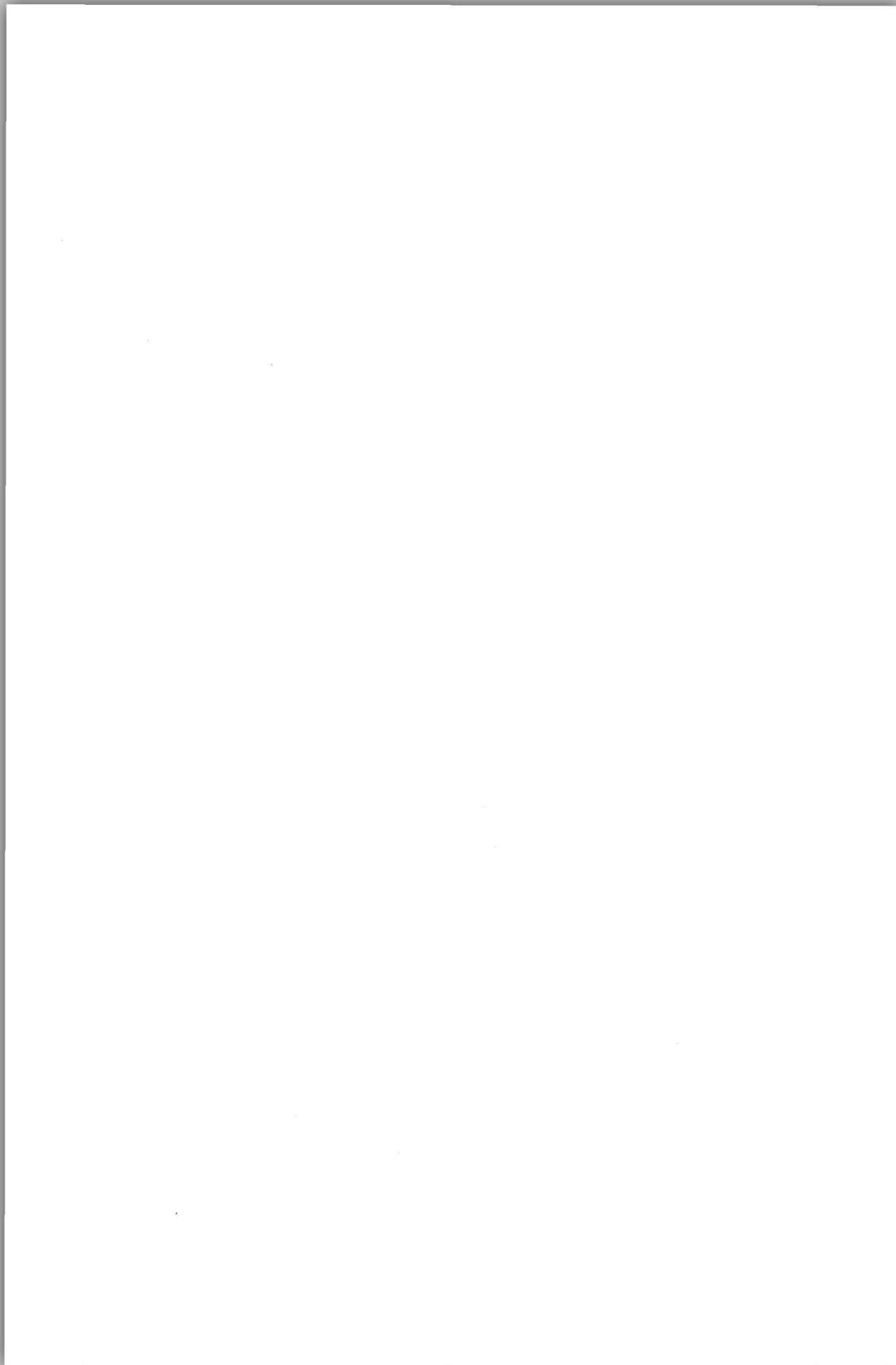
Damien Atkins

winner of the \$25,000

2000 Residency Prize in Stageplay

for his play

Good Mother



PRISM

INTERNATIONAL

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UBC's Creative Writing
RESIDENCY
PRIZE in
STAGEPLAY **2000**

PRISM international *presents*

Good Mother

a play by

Damien Atkins

Foreword by Bryan Wade
PRISM international *Advisory Editor*
& *Residency Prize Co-ordinator*

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At the Well

we photographed the old well
just off the dirt road leading out of Târgoviste
one eye shut out the heat the other through the lens leaned
to Tatiana idle on the low white-wash of the well
they say a king's severed head was thrown there

if we pull water and drink
we will drink his bones

nearby a prayer-hut melts in the sun
the red of the poppy blinds
we count bones
mistake a pebble for a tooth
on the road
nothing
but cows and a man in a dusty business suit

Târgoviste (târg pârâsit)

Târgoviste, the name of the city, roughly translates to "abandoned market"

In this park, layers of ruins have gathered.

Behind the foliage aged zoo animals vanish.
The pond stagnates.

Protected by an empty watchtower
a howl sinks
in the metre-thick lumps of walls,
fourteenth century survivors.

Swamped-in willows mourn.

Below the fortress
I sit in weeds
in the park of a childhood.

Here there is a silence fed
by centuries' hush,

but if I press my ear
to the flat stones of the footpath
I might hear

a forfotâ of merchants
trading cows, hens, hay, cheese and fabrics

or simply a war

with the Turks
or an earthquake

that turns houses and churches
into wrecks and wrecks
into castle walls and walls into
crumbled rock and rock into streets...

Until a man with a wheelbarrow stops
by a curb, fills it with chunks
of sidewalk dislodged, all
the while glancing behind him
with a nervous crease on his brow.

The Dream

Beneath the house a river floats.
Old wood rots. Inert.
Black with water.

Mothers baptise their infants
plunge them in, head first.
A sea-plane lands, stumbling in the current

and on the fields, beyond
pregnant with wheat,
a threshing machine combs the sun-flesh.

On the porch a woman.
Fashions eyelids out of myths
her face, a gasp.

The threshing machine lurches then stops
before a blind man spinning
in a circle, taking pictures of the site.

Antonia Banyard

Car Broken Down

So many contradictions. So much
potential, given the right supervision.
A territory for greased and eager hands
to explore. Such opportunity for the advancement
of rust and mushrooms, hatching
stink bugs, tufts of grass.

Car
junkie
rattle trap. Or suddenly,

the spark that starts
the argument by the roadside.
An appointment missed. A destination
unreachable. Our lives fall apart
so unexpectedly. Going
nowhere, a door
off its hinges.

Adam Lewis Schroeder

Flat Little Persians

He had spent so many hours caught out in the afternoon streets of Buenos Aires, his mind whirling as ever over the visions spinning past him—the woman in smeared lipstick leading a child from an alley, couldn't she be Bathsheba with the infant Solomon? Cleopatra with Caesarion? Eva Braun with the rumoured child of Hitler?—that eventually Borges saw no alternative but to wring his handkerchief in exhaustion and stumble into the familiar café where Rudolfo waited for him.

"I see it all about us," said Borges. "Circular time."

Who knows how long Rudolfo waited for him each afternoon? It was another mystery. Perhaps he came at dawn and took a seat on the patio, spread the backgammon set on their table, arranged the black pieces and the white, tilted his hat backward and forward, squared his gigantic shoulders and began his waiting then, for the café to open and, much later, for Borges to arrive. Or perhaps his spies, wriggling up and down the lamp-posts, told him of Borges' approach. Or perhaps, and this was more likely, it seemed to Borges, he put the game under his arm, ruffled his son's blonde hair and left the apartment just as Borges came round the corner from the plaza, for Rudolfo lived across the street from the café and could see Borges coming. The possibilities for this world whirled through one's mind!

Borges ordered coffee and some biscuits and took a cigarette from the peddler boy. He mopped his face once more then nodded to Rudolfo, who handed Borges his white dice and leaned back indulgently from the board.

"The flat little Persians await you," Rudolfo said.

Then Borges rolled one die, a four, and Rudolfo rolled only three, so Borges had to move first. He had to use his own roll and Rudolfo's for the first turn, so his only option was to move the two pieces that were furthest back, one three places and the next four, so that both sat unprotected and vulnerable to slaughter upon Rudolfo's roll. But what else could be done? (They played with the cursed old Spanish rule, unknown through most of the world, that a column cannot contain more than five stones.) With a three and four he could get none of his pieces to the safety of his own ranks, so if sacrifice he must it had best be pieces that would have the least amount of ground to regain. A three and a four! Terrible. As Napoleon had learned retreating from Moscow, as Xerxes had discovered, and even Pizarro in a late campaign—the cavalry is too fast and the infantry too slow.

A three and four!

The proprietor's wife set down Borges' coffee and Rudolfo smiled up at the woman, not because he was gracious to the service, though he was, but to express the joy of anticipation he felt as he rattled the dice in his left hand, preparing to kill Borges with his very first roll. She turned away, and now Rudolfo's grin fell directly on Borges, the two black dice clacking happily in his hand. Borges wafted sugar into his coffee.

"It is a labyrinth, the city, a labyrinth. It takes me all day to find you," he muttered.

"Then who am I?" asked Rudolfo. "I am Asterion the Minotaur." His dice danced along the cloth, rolling over finally as a two and four.

Borges learned backgammon from the father of a boyhood friend. Each summer for several years, when Buenos Aires grew too hot to be borne, those hideous weeks of early August when the River Plate seemed to grow fetid and sick, this friend, Bioy, would invite little Borges to the family's ranch on the plain. It was their summer home, a small ranch, and in very bad repair, though blown clean by the eternal wind of the plain. The shutters thumped against the house and the coffee cups rattled on their saucers, but after the squalid city it was Eden.

Bioy's father was a retired diplomat and military officer, a huge, Barbaric-looking man with gigantic shoulders and a long blonde beard which he would comb each morning while reading *Don Quixote*. He would gravely tell the boys, as they gobbled up one plate of eggs after another, that Cervantes was the father of all authors and the *Quixote* the father of all books, there was no disputing it, at which Bioy's mother would knock her broom against the table leg and shout, "Yes, and what about the *Holy Bible* and *Talmud* and *Canterbury Tales*? Must we throw these out and burn them? Is everything else so worthless?" They would throw the names of weighty books at each other like broken bricks, and here little Borges saw an opportunity: to defend oneself with sheer high-mindedness. (In backgammon one could attempt this, applying the French theory of *Trictrac* or some other philosophy, though one was inevitably hobbled by inferior rolls of the dice.) In comparison to Bioy's parents, Borges' were unromantic and tired, his father trapped in his office most days of the year, but at such conversations Borges often wished his father could appear through the floorboards, cite his preferences for, say, *Beowulf* and the *Popal Vu*, and drop from sight again. True, little Borges admired everything that a boy ought to—pirates, gauchos, secret agents—but he was also beginning to feel that a man with a great intellect ought to thrust it out before him as a drum major does his chest.

Bioy's father thrust out both. He took with him everywhere a backgam-

mon set in a creaking leather case, an ancient thing which Borges supposed he had stolen from a sultan by scaling a minaret to the treasure room on a moonless night. The palace Honour Guard had given chase with their axes and only an intervention by the Shah of Iran had prevented war. Borges was very keen to learn backgammon.

As the gardener's wife cleared the dishes away, the two boys would hurry to the study, reverentially taking the game from its place and waiting for Bioy's father to appear and supervise them in laying out the pieces. "The Armies of Ararat," he called them, muttering to no one.

The boys were always allowed to play white, the colour of heroes. Borges would play the first game, as the guest, then watch in frustration as Bioy played the next. Both of the boys had the same flaw in their strategy, which Bioy's father never failed to exploit, in that they would go to any length to take one of their opponent's pieces, even if it left half of their own men exposed and helpless.

"When a man tries to take in too much he risks crushing defeat, if not blindness, madness and desolation. Know the limits, you boys."

It was not rare for Bioy's father to take five or six of their pieces for every one they took of his, to the point where he would backgammon them as a regular occurrence, their stones sitting forlornly on the bar as his last piece left the board. But the boys did not care. They knew they had no hope of winning, so to them a victory was in taking one or even (Lord!) two of the great man's stones. After the second game, Bioy's father would get up to have a smoke and to look at the cattle, and Bioy and Jorge Luis would dance around the table, recounting their exploits in squeaking voices.

Everyone would lay down for siesta in the afternoon, and Borges would listen to the singing wind and imagine Bioy's father gritting his teeth as he scaled the far-away minaret. And then he would imagine further, his mind swimming through a subconscious grotto, that, that morning, as Bioy's father stood in the study and muttered, the smooth patterned stone of the tower rose up in front of him and he was climbing ever upward into the moonless sky, flecks of Arab sand on his cheeks. Bioy's father put his young hands on the leather case for the first time and in an Argentine *rancho* rolled his black dice for the thousandth.

Borges had black pepper stuck between his front teeth. He always put too much pepper on his eggs. He picked at the fragment with his fingernail, looked over at Bioy standing on the chair, and wished that he had not started the game with a three and a four. Bioy's father pondered the dice and moved a black stone.

Rudolfo took his two and four, a perfect roll to kill the first of Borges' exposed stones, and placed the taken white piece on the bar. He put his

elbows on the table and bridged his fingers in the air.

"We seem to play the same game again and again."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Borges, "in terms of my labyrinth."

"You have bested it. My game and I are at the heart of the maze."

Borges took the stone from the bar and rubbed it between thumb and forefinger. His other hand toyed with his cigarette.

"I feel that you might be another barrier in the maze, but I can't get past you. I can't win."

"Well if my game and I are a wall, what lies beyond us?" laughed Rudolfo.

"Would it be another challenge, or some treasure waiting in the center? The floating point of God, perhaps?"

"I don't know what that is," said Borges, replacing his stone on the bar. He picked up his dice and squinted at the board and its possibilities.

"Mind you don't roll them off the table," said Rudolfo.

"I know how to roll dice," said Borges.

"Just mind you don't roll them off the table."

He was a great success. As Borges flew to a lecture tour of Britain, a young associate from the Argentine National Library buckled into the seat beside him and gave a devilish grin. He was a good-looking boy, with a thick neck from playing rugby.

"Professor, there are rumours that you love to play a certain game. And not only, as I've heard, games with time and infinity."

The more well-known Borges and his works became, the more people seemed to feel obliged to speak to him in a sort of code.

Borges took off his heavy glasses and set his book down on the tray, next to his tiny can of Coca-Cola.

"What are you referring to?"

"Backgammon," said the associate, and in triumph, brushing some blonde hairs from his eyes, set a small magnetic game down on the tray. "I wonder if you'd allow me a game? I ask with a suitably grave air—the Chinese and the Hebrews codified every human eventuality, didn't they?"

Borges rubbed his eye and nodded vaguely. He wrote of a world, of epochs, which no longer existed, he was well aware of this, and it bored him terrifically to hear people paraphrase his work—which had almost no connection to the modern world—in an everyday conversation. And this saddened him somewhat, for it always led him to thinking how insubstantial the very concept of a modern world was, how what had been modern to him as a boy was now as archaic as Babylon.

"Listen," he said, "give me those dice. If I roll a three and a four, I do not have to play. Agreed?"

"Certainly."

His luck with three and four had never improved. He still played Rudolfo, or Rudolfo's son, or one of his own nephews, not at the café any more but at a bar near the library, and the old Spanish rule still caused him to clutch his head in despair. He began every game with the three and four and had done so for years.

"Here we are then," said Borges, shaking the dice.

He rolled two sixes.

"I promise you that labyrinth," said the associate, "consisting of a single line which is invisible and unceasing." He began to lay the tiny plastic pieces on the board.

"Sometimes," said Borges, "a pattern emerges only when there is a break in the pattern." He was thinking of the three and four, though of course he had recognized *that* pattern long before rolling two sixes.

"What is that from?" asked the associate.

"I made it up."

"Yes, but in which of your pieces does it appear?"

"I made it up just now!" said Borges.

The boy who sold cigarettes had been standing beside him for some time but Borges was too intent on the game to notice. It was nearly over. Borges had four stones left on the board and Rudolfo only two; only with double sixes could Borges win. The boy held his hand out, waiting for money.

He cupped the dice in his hands, quit shaking them for a moment, and whispered between his thumbs, "Double sixes. Whatever laws govern the rolling of dice, let them favour me. Bring me double sixes." Then he resumed shaking them with the same intense concentration.

"I say it will be three and four," said Rudolfo.

Borges rolled and for a moment the three of them, he, Rudolfo and the cigarette boy, gazed down at the dice. Then Rudolfo clapped his hands, because he had won the game. He needed only one and two, and it was impossible to not roll at least that. A few people from other tables clapped as well. It was a lively place in the late afternoon.

Borges leaned back in his chair to gaze at the sky. A breath of white cloud moved across. The sun itself was just out of sight behind the roofs, and from a housetop he saw the blue and white Argentine flag flutter.

"Why do you sit like that?" asked Rudolfo.

"I imagine I am a gladiator lying in the Coliseum, looking up to Caesar for salvation. The upward thumb or down."

"As though Caesar were sitting on that balcony across?"

"Exactly."

"You know," said Rudolfo, digging in his pocket for coins, "you have a genius for seeing such parallels."

"A fruitless genius," said Borges.

Rudolfo placed the coins in the boy's hand and was about to wave him away when Borges sat up straight and demanded another cigarette.

"And lay out the pieces," he said. "I want to go on playing."

* * *

Borges ceased playing backgammon only when completely blind. He would sit behind his desk at the University of Buenos Aires, in the Department of English and North American Literature, and ask for coffee in a loud voice. After a minute he would hear the clack of the secretary's heels and smell the coffee, and its aroma would make him smile in spite of himself because it was a sensation that was real and not one of the phantasms that lolled in his head.

"There are students who would like to see you," she said.

"Tell them no," said Borges.

By the time he had quit backgammon he had played the game hundreds of thousands of times, and knew immediately, as each turn was taken, all possible moves for the next turn no matter what the roll. It no longer seemed like a game of chance, or a game at all; every possibility had been realized. This was as true for his life as for backgammon.

Yet the game, or his memory of it, was still a mathematical exercise and seductive in that, comparable even to his hunt, thirty years before, for theories explaining the circumference of God. Pascal, Giordano Bruno, Allain de Lille, more, all described the higher power as having no fixed center and an infinite radius, never to be hit upon even by the largest of imagined numbers. Its calculation ended there, though his mind could wander further, to the center of the earth, the Milky Way, perhaps the Pyramids or Stonehenge, the oldest of men's attempts at the same enterprise of somehow measuring, then going blind from staring at the night sky and the sunrise. The eye opened too wide becomes vulnerable. Bioy's father had mentioned that, or something like it.

Without his sight and the possibility for distraction, Borges struggled to keep his poor mind still. He tried to concentrate on simple pictures from his memory. After the secretaries had left to catch their buses he sat at his square oak desk, a cigarette in one hand, two knuckles against the edge of an acrylic ashtray, and thought of the house on the plain, day after day of wind, and the figure riding toward them with his lance in the air. Of the bar stacked with his white stones and he so completely happy, knowing he would never win—comfort in an adversary of such interminable power.

Borges stubbed out his cigarette and bumped the coffee cup with his elbow. He heard some of the liquid splatter the desktop and felt in his pocket for a handkerchief. But he couldn't find it. The clean one was in his desk. He pulled open a drawer, rummaged through with one hand, and heard two dice fall onto the floor. Rudolfo pushed his chair back from the table and bent to pick them up.

My Father Tells Me Why I Was Born

To give birth to my sons.
He phones from Las Vegas
from his top-heavy townhouse
beside a garden of rocks,
to tell me this. He chuckles happily,
Finally I have figured it out!
In the background, his wife
shouts at him unceasingly,
something about cleaning, mites
in the walls. *Tell her how sick
you are!* she screams down the stairs.
He's had a triple bypass, anemia
Type II diabetes—optimistically,
he's got a year, probably less.
He's trying to be nice to me,
to leave me with something
now that his money is gone.
I breathe into the phone, don't say
what I'm thinking, how as a girl
alone on a gravel playground,
my bones felt like wind, hollow,
growing. In Las Vegas, even
the clouds have given up.
Outside my father's door,
round rocks curl
like hundreds of knuckles.

Anonymous Girl on Halloween, 1970

Practicing the piano, my mother
didn't see the scarlet net of flames,
torn piece of fabric flapping across
a blue lawn, or hear the shouts,
the girl, herself, briefly careening,
trying to outrun skin, her stunned,
bewildered friends, and one or two others
who caught her, hands smoking,
rolled her on the damp grass,
heaving, slapping out the fire on her limbs.
I saw it all, under purple streetlights,
half a block away, from the mullioned
bay window where I sat, eating my chocolate,
chewing my gum. I told my mother
what I had seen, not sure what I had seen.
Later, we learned it was a grass skirt,
gauzy strands set thick on the waistband
to sway voluptuously, brushed
a candle-lit pumpkin set by a door,
danced into a blaze. She died, of course.
Not then, but soon. I'll never forget it,
how I hoped I saw a joke, a prank,
and not the end of a life like mine.
My mother rose from her Schubert, her Chopin,
put on a jacket, trudged out the door—
I didn't know this was the anniversary
of her wedding. At my window,
I watched my tall mother walk slowly,
alone, toward the scene to offer
her help, good neighbour, good mother,
no stranger to pain.

Colette

translated from the French by Melanie Norman Little

Excerpts from *Le Matin*

[October 30, 1913]

The Made-up Pearl

“**D**iamonds are pretty, to be sure—but pearls, now, they...I quite can't put it into words. Well, you understand...”

I have overheard this sentence more than twenty times, suspended, and always mysteriously completed by the same gesture, a rubbing together of the fingertips, as if the speaker were grinding an odorific leaf or a pellet of balsam, the very gesture with which the jeweller is at this moment caressing and seeming to model, in front of me, a round pearl.

—Three hundred thousand...he grins. She is beautiful, don't you agree? I wish she were mine alone, but—it's so much money!

I'd wanted to get the scoop on the case of the made-up pearls, but the jeweller had nothing, at first, but disdainful monosyllables, the “pfu”s of a superior man who for his part would never allow himself to be “taken in” by the practical jokes of commoners...

But his very reticence, his offended shrugs of the shoulders, betray the part that he plays in the “scandal” of the made-up pearl. Excessive scandal, to our uninitiated senses, which tell us simply: “Someone tarted up a coarse pearl: she's a real looker!”—while the pearl aristocracy, the *vrai monde* of pearls of five thousand to a million francs, is greatly moved. A false pearl standing in for a real one, that would have been a common theft, inoffensive, quickly recognized; but a “done-up” pearl, a commoner without origins, without past, a loud, shady, and fragile upstart... Does one not feel rising against her, against her suspect sisters, the affronted murmur which greeted the wife of a common farmer, the first night that she seated herself at the side of a duchess?...

The jeweller continues to hold the round pearl, enormous, which he tenderly says he would like “all to himself...” He plays with her, he tastes the inimitable softness of her soapy “skin,” which grates under the teeth if one bites it and warms so quickly in the palm of the hand. He holds it up to the bulb, he takes satisfaction in the line of sweet light which overflows the contours of this marvel, like the margin of brightness which rings a star during an eclipse...

—She is beautiful, he says. And completely good, you see! A perfect flesh, a health!.. She eclipses everything around her. I am going to make her a little cushion of white cambric; she suffers on this too-shiny satin... She is... she is...

He searches the language of his profession for an even greater compliment, he lifts between two fingers the round bubble, intact, unpierced and pink as a breast under a white veil...

—She is, he says, the colour of love.

The Exposition of Chrysanthemums

Whites, yellows, pinks, greens, mauves: most of them are colossal, spoiled by obesity...these words I have said before: but this time I'm talking about chrysanthemums. We saw them last year. We saw them the year before that. They are the same enormous phenomena, presented—O floral grace, O genius of French gardeners!—at the end of a stalk high as a hand, a little stick without leaves, rising from a pot of earth or soaking in a bottle of water. A charitable hand decorated several of these macrocephalics with leaves of mahonia, but the remedy is worse than the sickness, and I choose to leave them be, and where they belong—in a carafe. For I see around them the simple attire, still rich, of the gardens of October, the blazing sage, the dahlia, the rose, the grape, and—the colour of embers under the surface of its biting greenness—the little pimento, delicate, curved, and pointed like the horn of an antelope.

[November 13, 1913]

The Young Poet

The young poet writes to me often; he writes freely to women of letters, to notorious actresses, to charitable and well-lettered women of the world. It isn't always the same "young poet," yet he has always hesitated to write me, and he has "twenty times" thrown his verses into the fire, and he dies of embarrassment to send me these ones, polished for me, inspired by me alone. If he does not dwell on a description of the "timidity of a twenty-year-old poet," he will mention that he feels bubbling in him "the adventurous fire of youth"; but he will never fail to insist, in finishing, upon the "respect" in which he holds me.

I turn the page—or, more likely, I unroll the foolscap tied with pink ribbon—and, from the first lines, witness myself accosted, apostrophized with the most familiar lyricisms, invited to revels of the heart and of the flesh, and led to paradises or hells which I don't care for, hand in hand with a young man whom I have never seen!

If the "young poet" dared to say, in simple prose, and directly to my face, one quarter of what he rhymes, he would immediately be rewarded by a nice pair of slaps. But what can I do? Sonnets, rondelays and ballads, he sends me nothing but poetry... He has found the most serene, the most unpunishable form of insult.

[January 15, 1914]

A Prospectus

"The price of our Shoes starts at 125 fr. per pair, exclusive of ornament or trim of any kind."

"The classical and artistic study of the foot are [*sic*] * at the expense of the House."

"The first Order will consist of: fifty pairs of shoes; fifty pairs of shoe trees; two storage trunks for boots and shoes; six pairs of socks for each pair of shoes, in corresponding shades; buckles, shoe-tree, button-hooks, and all accessories necessary for upkeep."

"Deposit of 25,000 francs required on the account as a guarantee of the order", etc., etc.

Yes, you've read correctly: twenty-five thousand francs. Yet in these few lines of literature, if I may venture to say so, dear cobbler, it is not the sum which strikes me the most, but the tone of the...prospectus...

...Or, should I say, note? No such thing. The above entitles itself a Regulation. The words House, Shoes, Order, are each endowed with a florid majuscule, but the customer, the wretch of a customer, merits nothing more than the tiniest c, minuscule, minuscule... Nor does the bootmaker waste his time on a "by kind request" or a "we would be obliged"—he knows his time and his mileu, he knows how to speak to "fashionable" people.

I remember having known this professional of the "classical and artistic study of the foot"—either him or another like him—when he started out, he imposed no more than an order of twelve pairs, and a deposit of 3,000 francs; he grew, encouraged, abetted, excited by us. His well-earned impudence is our doing.

For an ambiguous word, a small taunt, a moment of temper, we banish a friend of twenty years: yet we tolerate the insolent caprices of neuropathic couturiers, the intransigence of bootmakers; we accept that our entry into the Houses of certain purveyors of fashion should become an outrageous once-over by twin hedges of immobile salesgirls who in one look appraise the fur coats on our backs, weigh the chains around our necks, and search under our gloves for the swelling of rings...

*This is Colette's "sic"

[April 30, 1914]

A Dialogue in the Métro

They've just met up in the train: they are both of them young, made-up, poor, pretty, and thin as skeletons. They display a confidence which comes less from a native effrontery than from the habit of living in public from the day they were born: first, in the street, then, in the music-hall... One of them speaks very loudly, too loudly; I can hear almost nothing of the replies, feeble and hoarse, of the second.

"Me? I play a Chauffeur, a Tax-evader and a Rainbow in their new revue. And you?"

— ...

— Yes, I know. Something like a gas jet in the distance, nothing at all to speak of. What I find the most sickening are the hairstyles they've been giving the *corps* these past few years. I hear it's the fault of the Russian ballet.

— ...?

— I mean in other years, for the *corps*, it was mostly wigs, or even shepherdess-caps, or hair hanging down the back; but now, we've got these monuments glued to our heads, and these sequined things, and these cabochons, and paper hats, and helmets, worse than a fireman. It kills me with migraines and I'm not the only one. It's like having a heater on your head...

— ...?

— Yes, we're baking with heat, where I am, and the concierge, who sells the drinks, doesn't let anything up if it doesn't come from her. We're not all stars that we can afford to revive ourselves with peppermint water at four *sous* a glass! We all wanted to bring things in from outside, but the old horse of a concierge said she would bar all "veiled packages," as she put it. I don't drink a thing till I'm at home, on my own property.

— ...?

— Yes, we've set ourselves up so it would be cheaper. A hundred and forty francs per year, for one bedroom and a closet, it's not bad, although, at that price, you'd think we'd have the right for it not to rain in our room. The author of the Christmas revue came by once—as a tourist—and he said: "You live in a historic house, my girls, a relic of the old Montmartre, a marvel!" A marvel like that, he wouldn't have wanted it for three francs to put in his revue..Anyway, I am all alone in the marvel. Alice is in the hospital.

— ...?

— Happily no, it wasn't contagious...You make me laugh...She was pregnant for six months, and she worked all the same. You remember, she was

Nude-female in the orgy? ... When *it* could be seen a little, she waited to be politely shown the door, of course, but the director had the heart to keep her... He changed her place in the orgy—moved her back a row—gave her a big red veil to tie around her waist, and since she has a very pretty throat, she would have been able to continue like that right up till her labour, if she hadn't fallen, and fallen badly, down our staircase... She's in the hospital, and she's not doing too well...

—...?

— Oh! yes, go, that would be nice of you. If you'd seen her, the poor kid, when they took her away... And the dog, the one she'd been picking up and cuddling for a month, who didn't know anyone but her... it clung to their legs as they carried her down, making these cries as if it were a person... I've never seen it again, that dog... You're getting off at the next stop?

— ...?

— No, I'm going on to Oberkampf. Well, make sure you come up and see me. And look, about the kid, if you want to see her again, don't wait too long...

[October 20, 1923]

Cinema

An American film haunts the big screens, those of our boulevards and our *Champs-Élysées*. We find there a newly familiar story, that of the Far-West, its ravines and its hills, with wild animals superimposed upon made-up backgrounds: here, all alone, the terrified heroine; there, likewise all alone, the snake, the jackal, and the little puma who are the cause of her terror. Boots, scarves, deerskin culottes, flounced calico shifts à l'indienne, beads of glass: the business of cinema has given over to the business of merchandising, in all but those matters which concern the main attraction—the disaster. A river rises, wipes out an iron bridge which, if it really were of iron, would certainly not cave in like a box of spillikins; the train arrives and its garland of coaches plunges down, with the terrifying grace of a metallic tropical creeper, to the bottom of the river. After which—and this is what I've been coming to—we witness the rescue of the survivors through crumbling and submerged doors. The torrential water leaps, it eddies, it assaults the rocks of its bed and stops up the howling mouths of the courageous actors. Nearby, amid a group benevolently risking their lives for a reward, a gorgeous baby of ten or twelve months, half-naked, pulled from the water, sucked back down, pulled out once more, cries and struggles with a sincerity which cannot be questioned and with tears to which even drops of glycerine could add nothing.

And it gets better. Floating on the wreck of a train, a little girl of three calls for help, and holds her head in her hands, and squeezes shut her eyes, and plugs her ears.

The water climbs: the child is no more than a helpless torso with flailing arms. Suddenly, a large dog slices valiantly through the eddy and the little one, knotting her arms around its neck, disappears with the dog into the foam...

It is magnificent. We will never know whether the “rescued” baby actually died of bronchitis in the end or if the little girl, on subsequent nights, awoke in convulsions. The question is not raised. It's magnificent! A few more films in this educational genre, and our good French public will be thoroughly trained. As yet, they understand nothing of this lucrative land of imperiled children and they even—if you can believe it, madame!—protest.

[December 22, 1923]

Mata-Hari

People are talking of her again, because of a serious study, well documented, which tells of her end. I saw her right from her first appearance in Paris, when she danced at Emma Calvé's in a sort of temple, between columns as svelté and as naked as herself. She could hardly dance, but she knew how to unclothe herself slowly, how to move a body that was swarthy, thin and proud. A Hindu celebration soon after found her in a garden, still nude against the heavy sun of June, mounted upon a white horse whose caparison and harness were encrusted with real turquoise stones. Of amber in the evening, her skin became almost mauve in the light of day, unevenly and as if artificially tinted. Paris, enthralled, extolled her chaste nudity, recording anecdotes which Mata-Hari spun of a past full of asiatic dramas.

"My husband," she would say, "was so jealous that he cut up almost my entire chest. I show all of my body which is pure, but I hide my mutilated breasts under a bustier of jewels..."

Invited everywhere, always paid for, she would arrive naked, dancing vaguely, eyes lowered, disappearing rolled up in sombre veils. One day, a party placed me in the bend of a path, face to face with a tall, clumsy woman in a two-piece, black-and-white-checked suit who shook my hand and had to, in order for me to recognize her, say her name. For the breadth of her shoulders, the jacket buttoned too high, the yellow shoes, the white veil with its gaudy print and the unfortunate hat: all of this took on, on the pseudo-Hindu, a significance such that Lady W., unsuspecting divinatrix, asked me carelessly: "Who's that woman from Berlin?"

Egyptian Frieze

Two boys step their bare blue
heron legs high, write hieroglyphs
with shank and thigh, step low,
form a sharp el with flank
and ankle, acute angle of heel
and toe, lanky boys who stride by
then men who row Hatsepshut down
the Nile's wet road, the boys who bear
her palm wine and dates, fresh fish
for the cat at her feet. Boys ring their eyes
with kohl, fling their feet higher
than their hips, lift them breast-bone
high, smile with wry lips, keep pace,
roll their faces to the sky, stone.

La Meduse

Our sixth day in exile, you found
a jellyfish on the beach, flipped it over
to show me the gaping serrated mouth,
the stomach, a green stone
masquerading as its heart. Medusa
with her wave of hair, a nest of sea-snakes,
a sting, a love-bite. She tore when you tried
to lift her back to the water, her gelatinous
body rippled and was gone into that great salt flap
we crossed, that stretch of blue that keeps us
begging on this island. Fools for this
shallow ground, this short breath.

Marcello Di Cintio

Leaving Mauritania

Nobody knew how long we'd be stranded in Choum. One man said it would take a week for the rails to be repaired. Another predicted five days. One optimistic man was certain the train would arrive before sundown. The ambiguity made me ill tempered.

To make matters worse, my insides had started to rebel against some toxin or another—perhaps I should have avoided the goat head stew—and I was spending much of my time making urgent dashes out of the village. There were no toilets in Choum. As far as I could tell, the wasteland that surrounded the village acted as its vast latrine and its dumping ground for dead livestock. The ground was littered with the decomposing bodies of goats and camels. When nature bid, everyone simply wandered out into the field of corpses and thorns to find a convenient squatting place. For the locals, privacy was not an issue—long robes doubled as curtains for such activity. My trousers did not offer this luxury so a private shit required a long march. I would trample over animal carcasses in varying degrees of rot. Some still had sticky fly-buzzing eyes. Others were mere bones bleached white by sun and insects. Camel hides lay in heaps like dirty laundry. The nightmarish landscape matched my intestinal suffering. I blurted diarrhea over random skulls and splattered my sandals, anchored bits of pink shitty toilet paper to the ground with stones while delirious flies rioted around my feet.

I had done this repeatedly for two days, staring up at the tracks for the delayed train to rescue me and bring me to Noadibhou. I had been traveling in West Africa for ten months. In that time I had shared my breath with village chiefs and voodoo priests, dancing girls and prostitutes, Muslim traders and desert nomads, blind men, crazy men, elephants. My boots were tattered and my blood scarred with malaria, and I wondered if my eyes shone with the things I'd seen. By the time I'd reached Choum I was out of money and out of time. Noadibhou would be my last town, Choum my last village, and the train that linked them my last passage across the sands I'd fallen in love with. (The desert is a woman; how else to explain such curves.)

I don't know what I had expected from my journey's end, from my last African days. I don't know what sort of grand farewell I hoped for. Maybe I thought, foolishly, that the last few hours would sum up the months before,

like the perfect phrase that ends a poem. I don't know what I wanted, but I knew it wasn't diarrhea and derailed trains. I knew it wasn't skulls and flies. I didn't want ten months of wonder to end in a coda of misery.

I had arrived in Choum two nights earlier, fumbling out of my crammed Peugeot with a thick layer of dust inside my lungs. I had come from Chinguetti, where I had sat on amber dunes and looked over my shoulder as light winds melted away my footprints, renewing contours. Chinguetti is nearly a thousand years old; I was almost twenty-five.

In Choum, I had followed the other taxi passengers to the nearest garage. In Mauritania, rough structures called garages are found near motor parks and highways where those in transit, mostly men, can stop for the night. Garages are shelters for people, not vehicles—the Mauritanian equivalent of a roadhouse. A typical garage is a three-walled shed made with rough wood and sheets of corrugated steel. Here commuters can sleep and chat on thin mats, and take water from communal barrels or hairy water-skins made from unlucky goats. There is always a general store, or *boutique*, nearby where supplies such as sandy bread, biscuits, and tins of sardines are for sale. I had bought water, powdered milk and sugar to make *zrig*, a sort of simple liquid meal that is oddly delicious. A friendly Moor “with some English” had taught me about *zrig* at a garage in Nema. My preference, though, was for the rice and sauce sold by the quiet women who sweated endlessly over pots and fires.

Getting around Mauritania on public transport was a slow occupation, and I had spent many nights in garages waiting for a morning truck or midnight taxi. I hardly minded these pauses. The Moors offered me tea and handshakes, and often invited me to share their dinners. They didn't see many foreigners in these places and I was treated like a guest—except by one thieving goat in Kiffa who stole bread from my bag as I slept, then stepped on my head as a further insult.

The garage in Choum had been lit by a single kerosene bulb that created more shadows than light, and was attended by an enormous woman making tea for the travellers. After my pupils had opened to the darkness I could see the other men in the room. Some were sleeping. Others were gossiping over tiny cups of tea. I left my boots in the doorway and found a spot in the darkness to lay down.

But my arrival had caused a stir among the others in the garage. At first I thought they were just surprised to see a foreigner so far from the capital. I was used to this and paid little mind to their muttering and glances. But soon I realized their reaction to me was more menacing than curious. Many of the men grumbled angrily and pointed in my direction. I had no idea why.

A man approached. He frowned down at me, pointed to my feet and said something in Hassiniya. I couldn't understand. I had removed my shoes before I entered the room, according to custom, so I couldn't imagine what

sort of *faux pas* I had committed. I shrugged my shoulders. He shook his head and pointed at my feet again. Surely he didn't expect me, an obvious stranger, to understand every intricacy of Moor etiquette. Typically, my social gaffes were a source of amusement for the locals, never cause for this sort of commotion. Annoyed, I shrugged my shoulders again.

But when he waved his hand in front of his nose I understood, and I felt my face redden. He was telling me that my feet stunk. The stench must have filled the room. I hadn't broken some obscure taboo, I simply smelled bad. Looking back, I can hardly blame those men. I hadn't bathed in well over a week and had been wearing the same pair of sweat-stiff socks for almost as long. And since I had been traveling alone I had no one to tell me of my growing aroma.

Embarrassed, I smiled like a fool and mumbled a French apology. The man made me stand and follow him to the doorway of the garage then signaled me to wait. While I stood there I tried to avoid the eyes of the other men in the room. I looked down, but seeing my feet made me even more ashamed, so I stared at a wall instead. After a moment my man returned with a small plastic basin of water and a sliver of soap. I thanked him and reached for it. He shook his head and knelt in front of me. He made me lift each foot so he could tug off the offending socks, then proceeded to wash my feet. I protested, offering to do it myself but he ignored me. Perhaps he had little faith that I knew how; my stench was cause for doubt. So I stood there, feeling guilty and foolish. When he was finished, he dried my feet with a bit of rag, tucked my socks into my boots, and pointed to my spot in the garage, giving me permission to return. I whispered *merci* and went to sleep.

At three o'clock in the morning one of the younger men in the garage woke me. "Monsieur, the train is here."

"I thought the train comes in the afternoon."

"It is true. The passenger train comes tomorrow. But you can take this train, if you like. There is no car for passengers. You must sit on top of the iron ore."

"Is that safe?"

"It is very cold, and there is some risk, but the ride is free."

I sat up and reached for my bag. This was a rare opportunity to save a little money. But when I felt the chilly air, I laid back down. I was in no real rush to get to Nouadhibou, and certainly in no hurry to put those socks on again, so I opted for sleep and the relative comfort of the afternoon train.

I woke in the morning to a commotion outside the garage. The young man who woke me that night brought me news.

"The afternoon train will be delayed. Last night the train fell off the rails and they have to clean it off the tracks and repair them. It will take some time."

"Last night's train derailed?"

He nodded.

"The same train that I was going to take at three o'clock? The train where people sit on top of the iron ore?"

"Yes."

"Was anyone hurt? Was anyone on top of the train when it derailed?"

He didn't know.

"What if I had taken the train last night?"

He laughed nervously at this question. "I don't know. It would have been bad." Then he walked away.

The derailment meant the train was delayed. Indefinitely. Wreckage blocked the tracks a few kilometers away.

The wait was numbing. I had nothing to read but my worn guidebook. There wasn't much left of it. Two months prior, while hiking in Mali, I had torn out several chapters to use as toilet paper. I scribbled in my journal and watched the others, not bothered by the delay, as they shared tea and listened to scratchy radios. A group of men played *boules* in the sand with silver balls. Lacking any other amusement I made imaginary wagers on their games and ate bags of groundnuts.

Finally, someone told me the train was coming. Everybody in Choum suddenly knew this though I couldn't tell how. Squinting northward I couldn't see any train approach, no telltale plume of pollution or crying whistle. No official announcement was made, just a rumour that quickly passed through the crowd, stirring sleepers and breaking up conversations. I grabbed my bag and followed the mob out to the tracks.

There was no train station in Choum. Not even a platform. Not even a sign. The passengers simply gathered beside the tracks at a seemingly arbitrary spot of sand. There, an uniformed man collected money and handed out tiny paper tickets. I tucked mine into my pocket.

A few minutes later, the train appeared on the northern horizon, clunking lazily toward us. When it came within five hundred meters of the crowd, everyone began sprinting towards it. Sitting comfortably on my pack, I wasn't ready for this race; I thought the train would be coming to us. The majority of the passengers were elderly men and women weighed down with bags and tanks of kerosene, so I was able to catch up. Everyone raced for a specific car near the end of the train and nobody waited for the train to stop before grabbing onto a ladder and pulling themselves aboard. I guessed, correctly, that seating was limited. When I reached the car one of the younger passengers who was already aboard beckoned me to toss him my bag, then reached his hand out to help me up.

The passenger car was essentially a long empty box. Two long wooden benches that ran along both lengths of the car provided its only seating, and there were no windows save for two portholes on either side, each about the size of a paperback novel. I managed to secure a spot on one of the

wooden benches. I was lucky because these filled quickly and the majority of the passengers, and certainly all of the women, was destined to sit on the bare floor. Once the car filled we began our slow clunk coastward. Nobody collected our tickets.

After about an hour, a man stood to watch the sun out of the west-facing porthole. The other men in the car stared up at him, quiet, waiting for his signal. When he turned and nodded it meant it was time for prayer. All of the men tried to stand at once, but the car was too crammed for synchronous devotions. They quickly agreed that half of the men would pray first while the others would wait for them to finish. I watched as men who scarcely had room to sit, found space for the standing, kneeling, and bowing movements that animate Muslim prayer. I watched them search for a spot of bare floor to touch with their foreheads, all the while whispering Allah's praises, their eyes closed. Then I watched again as the second group, getting impatient, took their turn.

Bowing. Kneeling. Standing. Hands to legs. Fingertips to temples. Forehead to floor. Arabic whispers floated in the air like moths. Or angels. My body felt calm for the first time in days.

After prayers, about a dozen of the travellers lit small gas burners to prepare tea. The air in the train quickly thickened with the aroma of mint. Tobacco smoke ascended in thick ribbons from little pipes that all the men in the country seemed to smoke. Tiny cups passed around the car, to both friends and strangers. Excited, I burnt my lips on the first one. With the sun gone, the only lights in the car were jagged circles of blue flames from gas burners, and red glowing pipe tips. Between the rattle and taps of the teapot lids, Hassiniya conversation mumbled in the train.

A young woman in light blue robes giggled at some whispered joke. When I looked at her, she looked away, shyly tucking strands of her black hair into her headscarf, and anchoring the cloth around her ears to prevent such immodesty. I watched her for a little while, wondering if she would look back at me. She never did.

Eventually it was time to sleep. The burners and pipes were extinguished and somehow everyone found room to recline. Each passenger made sure his neighbor had enough space to be comfortable. Such a spatial miracle could never occur at home, where physical closeness is a strict and senseless taboo. A man near me touched my shoulder and pointed to a tiny piece of floor where I could lay my head, and I became a part of a marvelous flesh jigsaw puzzle. We laid so close we breathed each other's breath. I slept this way until dawn, when I stepped off the train and made my way to the airport.

On my plane home, as Africa sped beneath me, I felt that night etched on my bones, the shy girl, the tobacco smoke, the warm breath of strangers, the vibrations of the tracks beneath us thumping through our bodies like a second, shared heartbeat, carrying us to morning destinations.

Terrance Cox

Melons

Down in Dahab, you
rent a palm-branch hut
off beach of Red Sea
dollar a day from the Bedu
sleep in fits & wake at
chill desert's dawn to
trio of Bedouin girls—
age ten or so & wrapped
head-to-toe in black—
toting ware in baskets
hawking same with shouts:
“May-loan, may-loan
frayish, frayish may-loan!”

Shooing doorstep goats, you
inhale coffee, smoke with
time-warp hippies & squat
on heels in froned shade
to glom as all but naked
European women take
to gentle Red Sea swells
splash, cavort & bounce—
as neo-pagans, worship
beauties of ingenue flesh
glistening in glorious
sprawl under Sinai sun

From base nearby, helicopters
like clockwork overfly
four low-level passes
so far per hour over
securest beach on earth
as once more sashays by
black-wrapped, gamine trio
with burden & alto shouts
“May-loan, may-loan
frayish, frayish may-loan!”

Cirillo F. Bautista

two poems

translated from the Tagalog by Paolo Javier

Song I

Neither the sea or the sky
can hold me now
in this compartment whose hands
are your hands

They will piece through the evening
you and I were wed
I'm not musing on the candles in that church
though some were present

The priest the Word although
present then
I simply recall your sunless
beautiful face that gazed

on the Nothingness present the Nothingness
that set up our life
and by God's mercy shall witness
on its branches
the arrival of birds with nests

A study of the imagination: white woman beneath a white umbrella

umbrella umbrellum umbrellas
a myriad possibilities
I'm not seeing what I'm seeing
my voice is upside-down

reflect first on who it is
umbrella or woman
white woman in the shade of a white umbrella
hopeless chastity

white umbrella over the white woman's head
white woman white umbrella
if their mirror is the sun
names alone won't help

umbrella-woman woman-umbrella
sun-umbrella sun-woman
the world is bewildering
like a tarantula

Federico Licsi Espino Jr.
translated from the Tagalog by Paolo Javier

two poems

Casualty of War

The soldier steadies his rifle, aims
by cat-light.
The night explodes like gunpowder.

The porcelain moon trembles
and the smell of blood
hops onto the breeze.

By the light of the moon,
someone collapses in the forest
where a dew of sadness gathers.

I am not his brother, nor are you at all related.
I say forget him already.

Open Letter to Jean Genet

a neurosis so brilliant that it almost makes one doubt the efficacy of health

—Henry Miller

You are in search of a sex as high as the Eiffel Tower.
You will discover nothing but rusty
bats of steel
or the verdigris of brass birds
in a prison cell: bar: shroud of night.
You persist in your search
and the banks of the Seine
turn into the coast of the Dead Sea
in your reveries
under scarlet covers.
Coverlet: flesh-intimate: rust: catafalque: coffin...
Your love is a wager made
among Jacks of Knives—
shuffled ecstasy, gamble of mirth.
And the trees on the rim of the briney graveyard
of cities on the plain
teem with ripened ashes.
They bend and sway from such weight
while the buggers exchange whispers
in Paris: London: Madrid: Manila: Pasay!

Simon Fanning

Chicago vs. Chicago

As Ellen's giving Lucy a bath, I flip through some old records in the basement, in search of the perfect tune. It's ridiculous, but I'm nervous about putting my kid to bed. She's in a phase—she wants to be sung to sleep—and my efforts so far have been catastrophic. It's not that I've got a bad voice—I actually sang in a semi-professional choir when I was in college. It's the *way* I sing. Ellen's badgered me about it for years. She says I can turn even the happiest song into a funeral dirge. She likes to imitate me doing "You Are My Sunshine" as a mournful ballad. Her routine is funny, but the truth is I'm a Cole Porter man. I can run through practically the entire songbook in a single month, usually in the shower or when I'm cooking. And Ellen's right. I do "Let's Fall in Love" with the same sobriety as "Every Time We Say Goodbye." I always laughed it off until this thing with Lucy. It's getting to be a problem.

I'm in the basement for half an hour—it's like I'm cramming for a quiz on pop tunes of the sixties and seventies—and I'm getting increasingly anxious, because I know that any second Ellen's going to beckon me upstairs. It's her night to bathe Lucy, my night to put her down. I finally find what I'm looking for in tiny white lettering on the back cover of *Abbey Road*. I figure "Octopus' Garden" can't miss.

Lucy's under the covers, her head propped on a pillow, her arms crossed outside the blankets. The purple sleeves of her pajamas. I turn off the light so that just the nightlight is glowing and the light from the hall through the open door. I sit softly on the bed and delicately pinch her bony elbow.

*I'd like to be under the sea
In an octopus' garden in the shade*

Now one thing is you have to slow the songs down. This isn't just me—Ellen does the same thing. She's on a very successful string of putting children's stories to the melodies of Christmas carols, and when she does "Sheep in a Shop" to the tune of "Deck the Halls," she takes it right down to an adagio, because anything faster gets Lucy too excited. We're trying to put her to sleep, after all. Of course when *I* try to sing a story, Lucy always flips out and cries. I refuse to do carols—maybe that's the problem—and my improvisations always end up in a minor key. So I've resolved to leave

out the books altogether and just sing songs to her, plain and simple. I tried Cole Porter a few times, but the wordplay of "Begin the Beguine" was pretty much lost on her, and I got a couple lines into "Miss Otis Regrets" before remembering that Miss Otis kills her lover and gets hung for it. On both occasions, Lucy tore away the covers and darted off in tears. This is why I find myself resorting to The Beatles.

It doesn't take long for me to figure out that "Octopus' Garden" isn't going to do the trick. I want to believe that it just doesn't take well to a slowing down, but while Lucy was brushing her teeth, I told Ellen I was going to sing it and she tested it out herself. It was lovely, cute, a "Puff the Magic Dragon" type of affair. The problem is, I just can't pull it off without any lament. I find myself swinging it a little, struggling to conceal the implicit sadness in my rendering. I start to get nervous because I can sense it's going badly. Sure enough, Lucy starts tensing up.

"Daddy," she says to me, already crying, "I told you no more scary songs."

What am I supposed to say to her? Should I tell her it's not scary? That it's all in her imagination? There are so many reasons I can't do that, the main one being she's right. The way I'm singing it, "Octopus' Garden" is terrifying.

Lucy is running down the stairs, howling for her mother. I follow her. Ellen's already picked her up and she's making her way across the kitchen. She says to me exhaustedly, defeatedly, "Can you tape my show for me?"

I hear her speaking softly to Lucy as she carries her up the stairs. "You have to let Daddy read to you, sweetie. He's never going to sing anything right."

After I get the VCR going, I sit down with a beer and think about it as my computer cranks up.

I'd *like* to be under the sea.

It is a lament.

He's not there. He wants to be. He's grieving.

Ellen's in there for awhile—Lucy's really wailing tonight—and I know this is the only free time I'm going to get since Ellen will undoubtedly recruit me to join her in the living room when she's done. I'll be obliged to watch *Ally McBeal* or any number of mundane shows. So I switch on the radio to the Tigers game and start putzing around on the internet.

I do something I used to do in college. At the library, on an idle break from studying, I'd type a word like "boob" into the catalogue to see what would come up. Tonight, with the faint sounds of Ellen singing "Make Way for Ducklings" to the tune of "Good King Wenceslas" trailing down from upstairs, I log on to a search engine, punch in the question "Why are happy songs so sad when I sing them?" and hit "Find."

I'm amazed at the results. Right at the top is "HiSSS: Happy Songs Sung Sad." The blurb under the header says it's an international organization. I click on it. I'm figuring it's a joke. Years ago, when we were in high school, my brother created an organization called The Michigan Society for the Preservation of the Integrity of the Hawaiian Donut. It's not worth explaining—it was a silly thing he did. He even recruited some of his friends to be members, had a set of cheap business cards made up, and initiated an amusing correspondence about candy sprinkles with the Governor of Hawaii. If the internet had been around at the time, he surely would have set up a website. This is what I'm thinking—some joker out there whose wife gets on his case about singing songs mournfully has drawn up this webpage as a little joke to share with his friends, not unlike Dave's thing with the donuts.

It's a hell of an effort this guy's made. They've got a handsome looking logo, group photographs, links to all kinds of things, and a section of sound bytes in Real Audio. This month features "Hits of the Fifties Transposed into Minor Keys" and you can click on any of eight or ten selections. I choose "Rock Around the Clock in B flat Minor" and get a guy with an acoustic guitar and a well-rounded baritone voice actually singing it—"Rock Around the Clock" in B flat Minor, slow as molasses, the melody hauntingly transformed.

I surf around a bit more on the site—I'm fascinated and I want to figure out how much irony there is in all of this—and I find myself at the page advertising the HiSSS annual convention. There's moving text running across the bottom of the screen announcing things like "Barry Lepworth is coming again from Auckland, New Zealand, and he's bringing his dulcimer!"... "This is shaping up to be the biggest convention yet!"... "Spaces still available!" It's next weekend in Chicago, scheduled to coincide with an interleague series between the White Sox and the Cubs. "What better activity for the HiSSS conventioners?" a blurb asks. "Chicago vs. Chicago: a game the city's guaranteed to lose!"

Of course I'm wondering if all of this is for real. The truth is, something deep inside me wants to check it out. It says \$375 covers two nights in the hotel, a gala dinner on Saturday night, and a ticket to the ballgame on Sunday. They actually give a 1-800 number for the hotel, and I cut my connection to the internet and give them a call. They confirm that it's actually happening; the guy even mentions something about a HiSSS shuttle bus to Wrigley Field. I make a booking and shut down the computer to think about how I'm going to explain this all to Ellen.

When she finally starts down the stairs, I'm sitting in the living room with the TV on, pretending to read from the sports page. I call out to her, "Hon?

The West Wing is on."

"Is it?" she says, so beat she could be sleepwalking. She flops down next to me with her feet up and her head in my lap.

I put the paper down on her stomach and start to stroke her hair a bit. She's not even watching the TV, so I fish around under her for the remote, find it and press mute. I've got to act fast, I realize, because she's already falling asleep.

"I could make popcorn," I say. "Do you want some popcorn?"

"No," she mumbles back.

I pick up the sports section, but I realize there's no way for me to open it without brushing her face with the paper, so I just rustle it a bit and put it back down.

"The Cubbies are playing the White Sox this weekend," I say. "It's this new interleague business. Wrigley Field." I consider saying something like "Christ, I'd really love to catch those games," but I decide to lay off and see if she takes the bait.

"Yeah?" she says in a narcotic whisper. "You should go."

I guess it's old news that when you've been married long enough you can pretty much predict what your spouse is going to say. Sometimes they surprise you, but it doesn't happen often. At the rate we're going, I'd imagine I have no more than ten surprises left from Ellen, and she can probably expect even fewer from me. I was so sure of these results that I didn't even entertain thoughts of an alternate plan. The next morning at breakfast I tell her I bought tickets and made a hotel reservation after she'd gone to bed.

We live as close to Ann Arbor as we do to Detroit, so once you get on the I94 you can make it to Chicago in four hours if you're willing to risk a ticket and the traffic's good. I'm willing to risk a ticket and the traffic's good. I've brought along a stack of CD's to entertain me on the drive, but it occurs to me shortly after I hit the highway that I might be asked to sing at the convention. I mean, what else goes on at these events? So I practice all the way there. I have a blast. A family travelling in the lane beside me starts howling when they catch me belting one out, and I ham it up for them, making Al Jolson style hand gestures and pointing at them like a Vegas lounge singer until the father decides to zoom away. Before I know it I'm at my exit, the El is chugging along beside me, and I'm inching my way along dense, dirty streets into the heart of the windy city.

Before the opening ceremonies, I mingle with some of the HiSSS conventioners in the hotel conference room. There is a lot of forced irony in their talk. Everyone, myself included, is compelled to laugh at the strange affliction that has brought us together. Even amongst each other, convened to celebrate ourselves, our way of singing, we are embarrassed. But

behind the veil of irony there lurks a conviction, mostly unspoken. No one comes closer to articulating it than Mel Rebbinger, HISSS President, in his opening address. "It's a sad and beautiful world," he says. "Sad first, beautiful second, and the beauty is inseparable from the sadness." Then he picks up his guitar and does a brooding rendition of "Chicago, Chicago." I recognize his voice as the one on that version of "Rock Around the Clock" on the internet. Never has the word "toddlin'" been delivered with such pathos.

During cocktails, I get into a conversation with a woman named Kate who's working on a Master's degree in music history at Northern Illinois University. Her thesis is about traces of Gregorian Chant in contemporary song, and she's come in hope of finding some interesting case studies.

It seems she also wants to find someone to go to bed with her. Not even five minutes into our conversation, she tries to illustrate something to me about internal vibrations caused by singing. I don't quite follow it, I have to admit, but she takes my hand and places it firmly below her sizeable breasts so that I feel the weight of them on my index finger. Then she sings a few notes and I'm supposed to feel a difference between each one. A few of the other men in the room see what she's doing and come over for an illustration of their own, but she blows them off and keeps talking to me.

"You try it," she says, and she actually slips her fingers between two buttons of my shirt and gets me to sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" as her fingertips gratify my nipple.

As I'm standing there, having already drunk a few beers, I convince myself that having sex with this woman is the right thing to do. This is what men do at conferences. They have sex with women who are not their wives. I tell myself that Ellen will never know, that this has nothing at all to do with Lucy, that sleeping with Kate will be pure pleasure—it'll have no consequence or significance of any kind.

We agree to sit with each other at dinner, but when I return from making a run up to my room to get my Lactaid caplets, several men have gotten in ahead of me and she has failed to fight them off. She gives me an apologetic shrug, and I sit down at the only seat left at her table—the only seat left in the room—between Marvin and Estelle Katz of Sun Valley, Florida. They're the oldest people there by far, and I quickly discover why the seat was left open.

"I've always been drawn to depressing things," Estelle says to me. "It used to worry me but I don't let it anymore."

"Do you read literature?" Marvin pipes in. "Ever looked at a list of the best hundred books of the century?" He's gesticulating so forcefully that I start to worry he's going to topple several people's wine glasses, never mind his own. I push my chair back and wrap my fist around the stem of my glass. "It's not exactly rose coloured spectacles, let me tell you."

I look over at Kate and she smiles at me suggestively from across the table.

"When we got married," Estelle begins, but her husband interrupts her.

"We decided we didn't want to walk down the aisle to Mendelsohn's wedding march like everybody else. So we went with something else by Mendelsohn. Do you know the incidental music to *Oedipus at Colonus*?"

"Give me your address," Estelle says. "We'll send you a recording."

"Who wants to get married to the same tune everyone else does?" Marvin says. "You have to be a little different in life."

They go on like this for the whole meal, and I find myself tuning the Katz's out and engaging in sexual fantasies about Kate. At one point, I concentrate on the conversation she's involved in. It's one of those desert island talks—what book, what record, what movie would you bring? Kate has a man on either side of her and they're using any excuse they can think of to put their hands on her. She says Toni Morrison, Tom Waits, and Ingmar Bergman, and one of the men wraps his arm around her to celebrate the incredible consistency of their tastes. She laughs as he does it, but Kate is looking at me.

After the meal, people perform songs on a platform stage at the front of the room. Some have brought their own instruments to accompany themselves, but there is a pianist in attendance—Steve is his name—with several fake books, a reasonably authentic sounding synthesizer, and an incredible ear. He isn't hired; he's one of the HiSSS conventioners. Not everybody performs—Kate only listens—but most who do are consummately musical. Marvin and Estelle Katz's duet version of "Embraceable You" is a low point.

Earlier in the evening, Mel Rebbinger had circled around with a sign up sheet, and, feeling confident because of Kate's advances and buzzed because of the beer, I put myself down for "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." On the drive up, a guy with Oklahoma plates had pulled in front of me, and this got me going on some of the tunes from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical—"People Will Say We're in Love;" "The Farmer and the Cowman;" and the title song, "Oklahoma!" I guess it's called, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain.

Now these are some of the most jovial songs I know, but as I was cutting across the state, past Battle Creek and Kalamazoo and down the coast into Illinois, I found in them a latent sadness. That image of the wind sweeping down the plain—there is an eerie hollowness there—and what about these lines from "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top"?

*I can feel the day gettin' older
Feel a sleepy head on my shoulder
Noddin', droopin' close to my shoulder
Till it falls kerplop*

Is death not the subject here? Can these words be sung with anything other than profound sorrow at the relentless passage of time?

I begin to regret volunteering as my turn draws closer. Mel announces my name and the song I'm going to perform, and any hope I had of withdrawing is crushed by the insistent team of cheerleaders at my table. Seeing my reluctance, Marvin actually gets behind me and starts yanking me up by the collar. Kate scrunches her features into a pleading dog face. I go up.

The song isn't in any of Steve's books, but he picks up the chords without any trouble. He does a little tinkling introduction and gives me a cue to start singing. I do. By the first chorus, I've taken my hands out of my pockets and I'm feeling quite confident. It's going well. I toy with the tempo, speeding up and slowing down as I am inclined, and it's as if my voice is controlling Steve's hands; he is a remarkably sensitive accompanist. He throws in a few touches of his own, laying off for the line "But a little brown mav'rick is winkin' her eye," letting me sing it *a cappella*, which makes the return to the chorus all the more dramatic. My goal is to inject the song with an incredible sense of loss. As I did in the car, I think of Ellen and Lucy as I sing. I think of losing them. I sing from the unbelievable void of their absence. I forget about the audience and think only of my wife and daughter, and I actually get quite choked up. By the time Steve hits that final chord, I'm on a planet of my own, and the applause really startles me. Like the four or five other "newbies" as Marvin Katz calls us, I get a rousing hand from the audience. As I'm walking slowly off the stage and back to the table, I realize I can't go through with it, that I'll be going to sleep alone tonight under the starched sheets of my hotel bed. When I get to my seat, Estelle puts her bulbous, arthritic hand on my shoulder and says the word "tremendous" three times in my ear. I avoid looking at Kate.

As the culminating event of the evening—the moment, Estelle tells me, she's been looking forward to all year—the conventioners cast a ballot for their favorite number, and for the third year in a row this guy, Barry Lepworth, from New Zealand takes the prize. This year it's for his arrangement of "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" for voice and dulcimer. It *was* outstanding. The trophy is a reproduction of one of those toothpick-thin Giacometti sculptures of a walking man. The Katz's make no attempt to conceal their anger.

"Every year with the fucking dulcimer," Marvin says. "Trust me, it's all smoke and mirrors. Take a look at how he guards that instrument—because he knows that anyone else gets a hold of it, *they're* going home with the statue."

"I voted for you," Estelle whispers to me with her cold hand on the back of my neck.

I have to admit that I'm flattered.

It's reversible T-shirt day at the ballpark. One side is a Cubs logo, the other

is a White Sox logo. We all put them on. Marvin and Estelle treat me to a hot dog and a beer, but I still manage to sit apart from them. The game is an unbelievable pitchers' duel. Both sides carry a no hitter into the fifth inning and both see it ruined on an infield hit that could have gone either way. Sammy Sosa strikes out miserably every time he goes to the plate.

It starts pouring during the seventh inning stretch—incredible sheets of rain, so constant and so forceful that the individual drops are barely discernible. We're in the covered stands, so we remain seated as we wait for it to let up. Behind me, Marvin starts arguing about the balk rule with someone. Somehow, he confuses it with the fact that the hitter's allowed to overrun first base. A few rows in front of me, I see Kate getting cuddly with Barry Lepworth. The rain stops and the grounds crew begins to peel the tarp off the field. As they do, the organist plays "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

When I'm in the mood for a serious listen, usually when Ellen's at work and Lucy's at daycare, I'll sometimes throw on the headphones and give a Charles Mingus record a spin. These are some of the most improvisational recordings ever made. When the Mingus bands are at their best, it all works like a finely tuned machine—all of the musicians feeling what the others feel, sensing what they sense, communicating almost telepathically, and translating it all into divinely inspired jazz music.

This is what happens to us as the organist lights into "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." We all stand up and start singing, and together, instantaneously, we confront the problems posed by the song. There's nothing we can do about the tempo—he's playing it at the speed the song is normally played at, perhaps even a little faster—but we collectively offset the tempo and counteract the apparent mirth in the lyrics. The song is a plea, and we sing it as if the speaker is being denied his plea.

No. That is wrong. We approach the tune as a kind of hymn. The ballgame is a metaphor—is it such a stretch to think of it as a metaphor for heaven?—and we are solemnly, Protestantly pleading with God. I notice that some of the HiSSS conventioners in front of me have their hands behind their backs; others are stoically holding their hot dogs in front of them, like hymn books in their motionless palms. I hear the Katz's voices behind me, Steve the accompanist beside me, Mel Rebbinger in front, and beside him Barry Lepworth, sans dulcimer, with his arm around Kate's waist. Together, we sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" as if it were "Abide With Me" and we were in church, not Wrigley Field, at a funeral not a ballgame.

It's Sunday afternoon, and if it has also been raining in South-Eastern Michigan. Ellen has taken Lucy to the Children's Own Museum. My darling wife, my beautiful daughter. It is not a museum; it's a series of giant playrooms. Imagine ten of those McDonald's Kiddie Korner's, grossly enlarged. Lucy always darts for the room full of coloured Nerf balls. There are slides and climbing ropes and plastic tunnels, and no matter where the

children go, they are surrounded by balls of coloured foam. Parents are not permitted inside the individual playrooms, which is fine with me, though Ellen complains that it's too isolationist. Anyway, if it's been raining they're there. I picture them—Lucy and several other children buried neck deep in balls, and Ellen, my love, looking on through the transparent wall. She sees her reflection in the plexiglass, and beyond it our laughing child. This is what I think of as I sing—an image so beautiful, so heartwarming, so immeasurably and unspeakably sad.

I listen to the rest of the game on the radio as I drive home.

Laura Lush

Peach Tree

At thirty-eight, there is something my mother wants to show me.
(She thinks I think I am past learning.)
Look, she says, pointing to the small crab-stubby tree—
the one with the branches that scrabble skyward
like the small green fireworks of spring.
And my mother is smiling, smiling into my doubt-filled eyes.
For the first time in twenty years, it's borne fruit.
For the first time, it has given me peaches.
I examine their small Pygmy-heads,
their exquisite cherub roundness, the warm gosling flesh.
Not yet, they seem to say. Not yet.
They want to cling a little longer.

Sue Sinclair

American Windows

(stained glass by Chagall)

Blue multiplied by itself. A world
that doesn't exist

but that we recognize: gravity
capsized, faces floating like candles

on water, birds, a violin—
what we could say if we lost

our voices. A blue so dark
in places it's almost forgotten

about us, leaves us behind
as we have left so much,

windows, doorways, an alley,
a street we knew well:

it all comes back to you
in this place where the sky

falls apart, pieces
itself back together

Contributors

Oana Avasilichioaei lives and works in Montreal. She is currently finishing her Masters in Creative Writing at Concordia University and has most recently been published in *Headlight Anthology*, *Matrix* and *Slingshot*. Some of her work is also in an anthology of young poets, *Running with Scissors*, by Cumulus Press.

Antonia Banyard, South African by birth, emigrated to Canada in 1974. She holds a BA from the University of Victoria, and has had work appear in *Vintage 99*, *Grain* and *Seven Sisters*. She was a member of the Banff Centre for the Arts Writing Studio in 1999.

Cirilo F. Bautista is the current Writer-in-Residence of De La Salle University, from which he received a D.A. in Language and Literature. A multi-awarded poet, he has published more than eight books of poetry, fiction, and criticism including *Boneyard Breaking*, *Sugat ng Salita*, *The Archipelago*, *Telex Moon*, *Summer Suns*, *Charts*, *The Cave and Other Poems*, and *Kirot ng Kataga*. His poetry has appeared in major literary journals, papers, and magazines in the Philippines, and in anthologies published in the US, Japan, the Netherlands, China, Romania, Hong Kong, Germany, and Malaysia.

Colette (1873-1954) was one of France's best-loved writers, and the first woman in France to ever receive a state funeral. Famous for such works as *Gigi*, *Sido*, *Chéri*, *The Pure and the Impure*, and the best-selling *Claudine* novels, (for which her first husband, "Willy," initially took both the royalties and the credit) she was also a prolific journalist. From 1910 to 1924, she wrote, with few interruptions, a regular column for the Paris newspaper *Le Matin*. Many of those columns, like the ones which appear in this issue, remain uncollected and heretofore untranslated into English.

Terrance Cox writes poetry and non-fiction in St Catharines, Ontario, where he also teaches at Brock University. His published collections include a "spoken word with music" CD, *Local Scores* (Cyclops Press, 2000) and *Radio & Other Miracles* (The Muses' Company, 2001).

Marcello Di Cintio won the 2000 *Event* Creative Non-Fiction contest. As well, he placed second in the 2000 *Prairie Fire* Personal Journalism contest and was short-listed for the 2000 Writer's Union of Canada Short Prose competition. He is working on his first book of travel stories entitled *Harmattan: Letters from West Africa*.

Cory Dutcyvich's paintings are included in several private and corporate collections and he has exhibited at several shows throughout British Columbia. He was a feature artist at Kelowna's Art Walk in 1996. He currently resides in Nova Scotia with his fiancée, where he continues to paint, sculpt, carve, design, and create new and innovative imagery.

Federico Licsi Espino Jr. is a poet, author, and editor of several collections of poetry in English, Tagalog and Spanish. These include *Percussive Blood: Selected Stories*, *In Three Tongues: A folio of Poems in English, Tagalog and Spanish*, and *The Transparent Heart: New Poems*. He is currently based in Manila, the Philippines.

Simon Fanning's fiction has appeared in *The Atlantic Online* (www.theatlantic.com) and *The Woolly Mammoth* (www.woollymag.com). Another story is forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead*. He teaches English at Dawson College in Montreal.

Paolo Javier's poems are forthcoming in *The Asian Pacific American Journal*, *Meritage Press* and *Tinfish 11*. He is currently an MFA candidate in the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, and teaches at NYU's Asian Pacific American Studies Department.

Melanie Norman Little is originally from Timmins, Ontario but currently writes, teaches, and lives (though she lives very little while she's teaching) in Vancouver. She has won the Writers' Union of Canada's Short Prose Competition, The Periodical Writers' Association's Magazine Writing competition, and has appeared in *Scribner's Best of the Fiction Workshops*. She holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia's Creative Writing Program. She is working on a full-length book of translations of Colette's uncollected journalism.

Laura Lush has two poetry collections, *Hometown*, which was short listed for a Governor General's Award, and *Fault Line*. She was short-listed for the CBC Radio/*Saturday Night* Literary Award in poetry in 1993. Her work can be found in *Blues & True Concussions: Six New Toronto Poets*, and *A Discord of Flags: Canadian Poets Write About the Persian Gulf War*.

Tanis MacDonald is a prairie refugee living in Victoria, where she is a doctoral candidate in the English department of the University of British Columbia. A book of poetry, *Holding Ground*, was published in the spring of 2000.

Sharon McCartney's first poetry collection, *Under the Abdominal Wall*, was published by Anvil in January 2000. She has had poetry in journals including *The Malahat Review*, *Grain* and *The Fiddlehead*. She was a runner-up in the 1999 National Poetry Contest.

Adam Lewis Schroeder grew up in Vernon, British Columbia, and now lives in Vancouver with his wife and dog. He has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. Raincoast Books published his fiction collection, *Kingdom of Monkeys*, in April 2001.

Sue Sinclair has had poetry published in *The Malahat Review*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain* and *Event*. Her first book of poetry, *Secrets of Weather & Hope*, will be published by Brick Books in Spring 2001.



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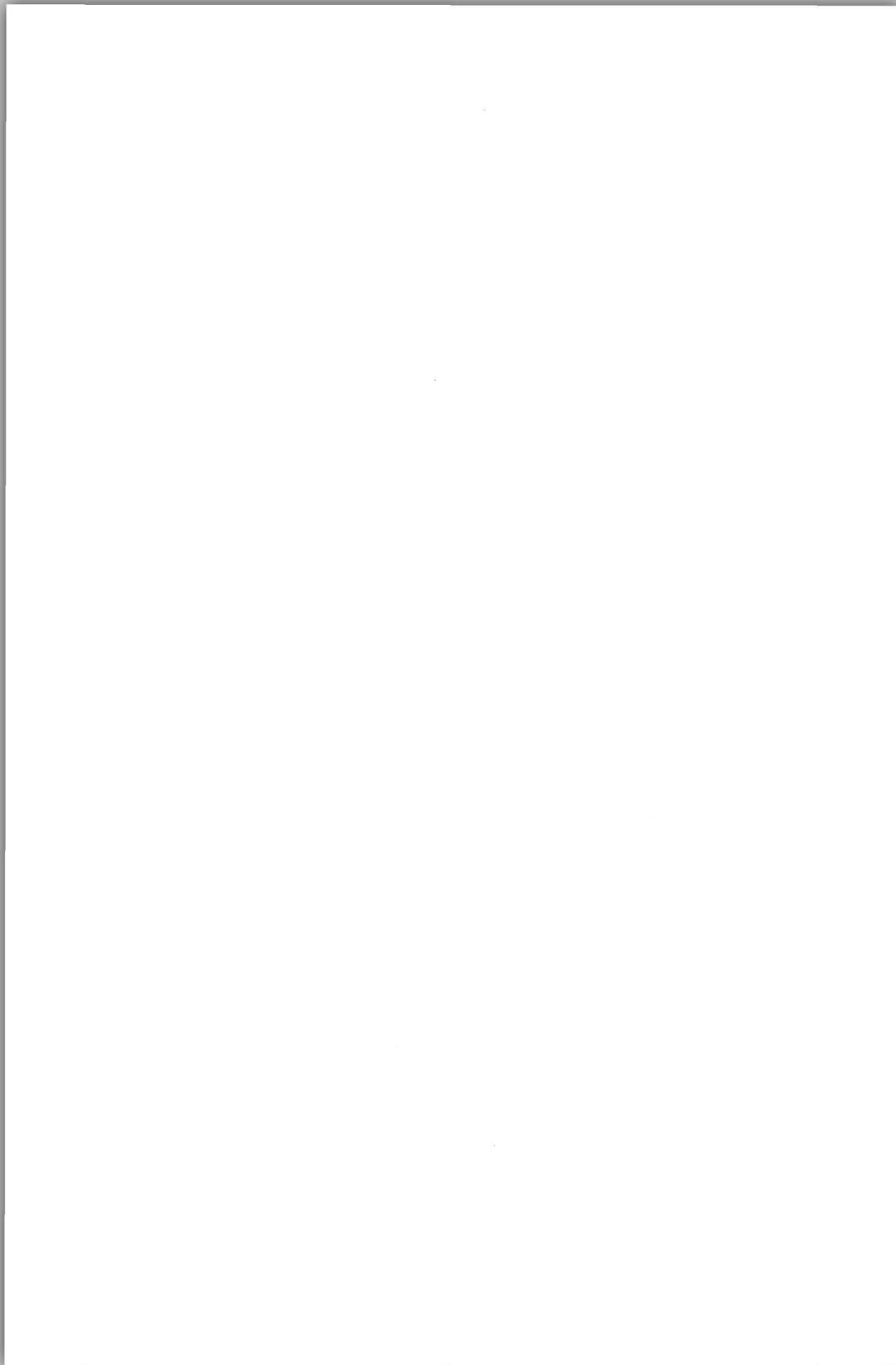
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Good Mother

a play by Damien Atkins

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*for my parents, who inspired this
and
for M.*

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FOREWORD

by Bryan Wade

PRISM international Advisory Editor & Residency Prize Co-ordinator

My assignment: write a few words about the first ever competition of the UBC Creative Writing Residency Prize in Stage Play. At first, I thought to myself, I'll write about the process itself, and how every play submitted had at least two readers, as well as myself and the Prize Co-ordinator, Steve Galloway, before a short list was formed, and how, after that, all the judges (Ron Fedoruk, Steve Galloway, Chappelle Jaffe, and Jennica Harper) read all the plays on it. Then I realized that writing about a platoon of people sitting around reading a lot of plays wouldn't be that exciting. No way, no how. But what if I talked about the original impulse to establish a competition for writers for the stage? I mean, it's not every day you set up a competition where a writer can win \$25,000, plus have the opportunity for his or her stage play to be produced, as well as having it published by *PRISM international* and on top of it, be a writer-in-residence in the UBC Creative Writing Program for four weeks.

No, it's not every day that something like this happens. I guess almost never. What would bring it about? Who would, in their right mind, ever dream up something like this?

The long and short of it all is that by the fall of 1995 Creative Writing at UBC had become partnered with the Department of Theatre and Film. We were now the Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing, a perfect dovetail for interdisciplinary endeavours? Of course, there were a few long-standing crossover programs such as BRAVE NEW PLAY RITES, an annual festival for student playwrights whose plays are directed and acted by Theatre students, and run by Theatre's technical students, but there was nothing that linked our consolidated resources to a complete process of writing, publishing and producing a new play from the whole wide world of theatre outside the University of British Columbia.

It wasn't until my colleague, George McWhirter—who still does the drama of his dialectic in a Belfast dialect, after thirty years in Canada—cornered me one rainy day (it's always raining here):

"Bryan," he said, "we should have a competition for stage play fellas. Every other eejit of a poet or novelist has a dozen competitions to enter. What about them poor playwrights?"

"Something has to be done. They're considered neither fish in the sea of literature, nor fowl in the theatre barnyard. Playwrights are betwixt and between.

"Then let's give them a whack of money to be writers-in-residence here in the Creative Writing and Theatre Program can produce their play as part of their season."

"A truly fine idea," I replied. "Let's do it."

(And then the sun came out.)

A year later? Or was it two? Anyhow. After one heck of a long time (I don't think we would have ever done this if we knew how long it would take to write the rules for the competition. Rules take a long, long time to figure out.) we finally had everything we could think of down on paper, we finally had everyone on the same side, we finally had a competition. (Not to forget a real nifty website.)

And now we have a winner in Damien Atkins with his play, *Good Mother*. Like all good dramas, *Good Mother* screams with vitality, pirouettes with grace and trembles with originality. It's the real thing and I'm pleased that it ended up being the first winner of UBC's Creative Writing Residency Prize in Stage Play.

I'm also pleased that *Good Mother* will receive its premiere in this summer of 2001 at the Stratford Festival, which will coincide with the launch of its publication in *PRISM international*.

I'm also pleased that the Theatre Program will be producing *Good Mother* in its season, opening November 1, 2001, at the Telus Studio, directed by Stephen Heatley.

By the way, the second competition starts October 31, 2001.

You have till April 30, 2002, to enter.

Start sharpening those pencils.

Start polishing up those keyboards.

Start visioning.

And remember, stay with your original impulse.

CHARACTERS

ANNE DRIVER: *ages from 42 to 44.*

BEN DRIVER: *ages from 40 to 42. Anne's husband.*

NANCY DRIVER: *ages from 18 to 20. Anne and Ben's daughter.*

BOO (Benjamin Junior) DRIVER: *ages from 11 to 13. Nancy's brother.*

LOUISE NORTON: *ages from 40 to 42. Anne's sister.*

RICHARD MILLER: *ages from 21 to 23. Nancy's boyfriend.*

YVONNE GESY: *Anne's home health aide.*

DR. KATHRYN OMER: *Anne's neuropsychologist.*

DR. MAURY VAN DOOT: *a resident at Anne's hospital.*

NOTE: *Good Mother* is written for between seven and nine actors. It is possible for the three health care workers (Yvonne, Dr. Omer, and Dr. Van Doot) to be played by the same actress, with Dr. Van Doot as either a man or a woman. It is also possible for the same actress to play Yvonne and Dr. Omer, and the same actor to play Richard and Dr. Van Doot.

SETTING

TIME: The two year span between Nancy's 18th and 20th birthdays.

PLACE: The Driver family home and neighbourhood and the hospital.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE. *A woman is having a stroke. She is ANNE DRIVER, forty-two. She is standing in the middle of the kitchen. There is a cake sitting on the counter, a shopping bag slung over a chair, and some wrapped and unwrapped presents. A sign, half-hung, that reads "Happy 18th Birthday Nancy!" Anne clutches at her head. She stumbles back against the counter, gasping. She reaches for the phone but misses, and it comes off the cradle and flops off the counter. She slips as she reaches for it, and smacks her head violently on the counter and on the floor behind the counter. We hear a dial tone as she lays on the ground, bleeding from a wound to her head.*

SLIDE #1: ANNE is standing, holding a bowling trophy. She has a big smile, she looks triumphant. She looks healthy and competitive and pleased with herself. The shot looks improvised, full of laughter. It glows for a second and then starts to fade.

SCENE TWO. *A few hours later at the hospital. A man is sitting quietly in a waiting room. He is BEN, forty, ANNE's husband. He sits in silence for a long moment. LITTLE BOO (Benjamin), eleven, enters, carrying a bag of chips. He hands it to his father.*

BOO: Here.

BEN: Yeah.

Pause.

BOO: Aren't you going to have any?

BEN: Sure.

He puts a chip into his mouth, listlessly.

BOO: Can I get myself a bag too?

BEN *does not respond.*

BOO: Dad?

BEN: Oh. Sure.

Pause.

BOO: Can I have some money for the chips?

BEN: Chips? Oh. Yeah. Here.

He takes out his wallet and starts slowly counting out change. Hands some to BOO.

BOO: That's not enough. It's more now. For chips.

BEN: Oh. OK. *(looking for more)* I don't have enough. Um. Later?

BOO: OK. We'll just share these for now.

BEN: Right.

They munch in silence for a bit.

BOO: Did you talk to the doctor yet?

BEN: Nope.

Pause.

BOO: Am I going to school tomorrow?

BEN: Yep.

Pause.

BOO: Did you call Nancy yet?

BEN: Yes I did.

BOO: She wasn't there.

BEN: No. Amy's mother didn't know where they went.

BOO: Maybe she was out with Richard for her birthday. She was gonna be home later for cake and all that though, right?

BEN: Um. I guess.

BOO: So you left her a message.

BEN: Yeah.

BOO: What did you say?

BEN: I said for her to come to the hospital.

BOO: Because Mom had an accident.

BEN: Because Mom had an accident.

BOO: Where was Mom when you found her?

BEN: She was in the kitchen. Um, on the floor.

BOO: Did you check the windows?

BEN: What?

BOO: Maybe someone broke in.

BEN: That didn't happen, Boo.

BOO: Did you check the windows?

BEN: I didn't have time, Boo.

BOO: Oh. You were probably really scared. *(pause)* Are you sure you shouldn't have phoned the police? Maybe it was a robbery and maybe there's fingerprints. I bet that's how Mom got hit on the head.

BEN: That's not what happened. I found her on the floor, Boo, and she wasn't bruised anywhere else, she just hit her head, that's all. It's just an accident.

BOO: But the phone was off the hook. It could have been a home invasion thing.

BEN: It's bad enough without you making up things, OK? You don't need to do that.

BOO: I just mean—

BEN: *(sharply)* IT'S BAD ENOUGH!

Pause.

BEN: Um. Sorry.

BOO: I know. But I didn't mean it that way.

BEN: I know.

Pause.

BOO: Can I have that change for gum instead? (BEN *nods, gives him the change*. BOO *gets up, starts to go, turns back*) I'll just be a second. If the doctor comes.

BEN: You're not going to be long.

BOO: I don't want to miss it. Tell him to wait. I want to hear.

BEN: I'll try.

He scampers off. BEN waits another moment. A harried, distracted-looking young resident, DR. VAN DOOT, comes on.

BEN: Are you a doctor?

DR. VAN DOOT: Not quite. Kind of. Soon. Why?

BEN: I'm looking for someone who knows something about my wife's condition.

DR. VAN DOOT: (*looking at his notes*) Of course you are. Maury.

BEN: Who?

DR. VAN DOOT: Who?

BEN: Yes, who?

DR. VAN DOOT: Who? Me. Doctor Van Doot, I guess, that's my name. Bit of a surprise, eh?

BEN: Your name?

DR. VAN DOOT: (*still flipping*) No, the uh...being here like this...

BEN: Um, yes. Very much.

DR. VAN DOOT: So just, so just, how premature was she?

BEN: I'm sorry, what?

DR. VAN DOOT: Oh shit, you're not the New Dad guy. There was a lady who hit her head on an oven door and it sent her into labour. Really scary. Oh fuck I said shit. I'm not supposed to swear like that. Man! (*looking at his notes, they are very messy*) Um. Did your wife get run over by a tractor?

BEN: No, she's hurt, she, she hit her head in the kitchen—

DR. VAN DOOT: (*fishes out a paper and starts scribbling on it*) The kitchen. Right. She hit her head, she hit her head, head head head, where are my notes on the, where is my, where is my...my head—oh. You're Mr. Ben Driver. Is that correct? I hope?

BEN: Yes. My wife is Anne Driver. Are you her doctor?

DR. VAN DOOT: No.

BEN: Where can I—

DR. VAN DOOT: This is a training hospital, I'm one of—I guess, I'm one of her doctors. One of her doctor *team*.

BEN: My son wants to meet a doctor. He'll be right back. How is Anne?

DR. VAN DOOT: How is Anne. Let me see. I'm just a researcher.

BEN: I thought you said you were a doctor.

DR. VAN DOOT: Uh huh. A species of doctor. I do research.

BEN: Are you researching my wife?

DR. VAN DOOT: Well, actually, she's—. Well, she's unusual because of the severity of her—. Um we want to see how she presents. It's not often that we see someone with such massive—. Mr. Driver, are you all right? You're turning green.

BEN: How is my wife?

DR. VAN DOOT: I'm not supposed to do this, to talk to—. OK. Um, Anne had a stroke, a bad one, and a stroke is unusual for someone of her age, um, but I understand she had several risk factors against her on that one. (*reading his notes*) High stress, smoker, high cholesterol, not enough exercise, early stage menopause. She had been warned about the risk factors, you came in for a series of tests last year but we didn't hear from you for a while...that's no good. (*checking his notes*) I'm afraid she's still unconscious, so she's probably in a coma. Is that right? Yes—a coma. So she had a stroke, and it looks like she got hit, or she hit her head pretty hard while she had the stroke. So her brain's taken quite a beating today. That's our primary area of concern right now. The brain. The brain is very interesting. Can I ask you some questions? Um, so you found her, Mr. Driver, is that correct? (BEN

nods. The doctor makes a long note on his clipboard) Can you remember anything else about the way you found her that could help us? What did she hit her head on—the counter? Was there any blood on the counter?

BEN: Oh. I don't know. Yes. There was blood on the floor too.

DR. VAN DOOT: Mm hmm. OK. Very good. Was it a sharp counter, with those, with those sharp, like, edges?

BEN: I suppose.

DR. VAN DOOT *makes copious notes.*

DR. VAN DOOT: OK super good. So just to be really clear, it wasn't that kind of rounded edge, it was a sharp sort of knife edge on the counter that gashed her head when she went down?

BEN: I guess so.

DR. VAN DOOT: OK. It's a good idea to be very specific with the, the evidence.

BEN: Evidence?

DR. VAN DOOT: OK.

BEN: OK what.

DR. VAN DOOT: What.

BEN: You said OK.

DR. VAN DOOT: Yes. I did.

BEN: Were you going to say something?

DR. VAN DOOT: No. How long was your wife unconscious before someone found her?

BEN: Well, I saw her at lunch and then it was a few hours before I came back and found her. Maybe two.

DR. VAN DOOT: Oh. That's quite a while.

BEN: What are you saying.

DR. VAN DOOT: Mr. Driver, I think you should be prepared for the possibility

that your wife will have had some fairly serious brain trauma.

BEN: Fairly serious.

DR. VAN DOOT: Do you know anything about brain damage?

BEN: Um. How serious is fairly serious?

DR. VAN DOOT: Hard to say.

BEN: No, I don't know anything about brain damage.

DR. VAN DOOT: I don't know much either, to be real honest. The brain is so—. It's like we don't even know the half of—. There's like a gazillion neurons in there. You have to go to school for like forty years before you really get into it. Um. But I'm working on it. In any case, there will be some lasting effects from this injury which we'll want to go over with you at some point.

BEN: When can I see her?

DR. VAN DOOT: Oh that's a toughie, OK, because we had to do some drilling to relieve some of the pressure around her brain. But she's still in critical condition. But I don't know, but I can check on that for you.

BEN. OK—um, what is the likelihood that she has the brain damage?

DR. VAN DOOT: I can't say that. The next few hours will be critical. To be honest, Mr. Driver, your wife has sustained a very very serious injury. She's got a loculated subdural haematoma. That's brain lingo.

BEN: You mentioned something about lasting effects?

DR. VAN DOOT: I'm sorry, pardon?

BEN: The lasting effects.

DR. VAN DOOT: (*a little panicked*) Mr. Driver, I need to get to some other patients. I have a million patients, and I—

BEN: Quickly before my son gets back?

DR. VAN DOOT: I probably shouldn't be talking to you. I don't want to screw it up.

BEN: Please.

DR. VAN DOOT: Mr. Driver, please sit down. Let's both sit down. OK.

BEN *sits, with VAN DOOT beside him.*

DR. VAN DOOT: There, this is more—Mr. Driver, your wife is probably going to have some fairly serious brain damage—

BEN: I still don't know what that means, fairly serious—

DR. VAN DOOT: Sir, I'm trying to answer your question.

BEN: Sorry.

DR. VAN DOOT: Some patients have neuron damage, some have memory loss, some have areas of loss of motor control. Most have a combination of these. It's all very weird, this brain stuff. We don't know a lot about the brain. It's a totally wild organ to study, that's why I picked it. We'll give you the name of a clinical neuropsychologist and she's on her way and she'll give you some good advice, she'll lead you through it. She's a Ph. D. She's more qualified than I am in things like this—

BEN: You said she might not remember me?

DR. VAN DOOT: She's never met you.

BEN: My wife.

DR. VAN DOOT: Oh. Crap. That's hard to say. I really have some other patients.

BEN: All right then, when can I talk to someone who can give me some answers—

DR. VAN DOOT: Mr. Driver, Everybody's doing their best.

Pause.

DR. VAN DOOT: Thanks for letting me talk to you, ask you questions. This is very interesting.

BEN: OK. Can you meet my son?

DR. VAN DOOT: I'll come back later—

BOO *runs on.*

BOO: Are you my mom's doctor?

DR. VAN DOOT: (to BEN) Maybe. Is this your son?

BEN *nods*.

BOO: My mom is Anne Driver. She's not going to die, is she?

DR. VAN DOOT: No. But we're going to keep her here for a little while.

BOO: How long?

DR. VAN DOOT: I don't know.

BOO: Overnight?

DR. VAN DOOT: Definitely.

BOO: Is she going to be all right?

DR. VAN DOOT: We're doing our best.

BOO: What does that mean?

DR. VAN DOOT: Listen buddy, I have to go now. You know what? You should get your dad to take you to the cafeteria for something to eat for you both. Wouldn't that be a super good idea?

BOO: Yeah I'm pretty hungry.

DR. VAN DOOT: OK man, gotta roll.

He rushes off. BOO sits down next to BEN and offers him some gum. BEN takes it and holds it. Silence.

BOO: Did you talk to Mom's doctor?

BEN: Yes.

BOO: Auntie Louise is here. She's talking to a nurse. Is this where Grandma died?

BEN: Um. I don't remember. Yes.

BOO: Um, what about Nancy's birthday? Does she still get her birthday gifts? Is she getting a camera?

BEN: How did you know that?

BOO: I saw it on the table. Maybe she'll let me use it. I want a camera.

BEN: You'll have to ask her.

Pause.

BOO: Did the doctor say anything to you about Mom?

BEN: Not really.

SCENE THREE. *Time passes. ANNE's hospital room, the following couple of days. BEN, BOO, LOUISE, forty, (ANNE's sister), and NANCY, eighteen, ANNE's only daughter. Everyone is in their own spotlight, talking to ANNE as she lies there in a coma. They may face out, speak to the audience instead of right at her. They are mostly unaware of what each other is saying. ANNE looks pale, has a dressing or bandage on her head. There is a mobile floating above the hospital bed, turning slowly.*

NANCY: Mom? Can you hear me? Hello? Nod if you can hear me. Even just the tiniest little bit. Come on, nod. That's not fair Mom. You can't check out in the middle of an argument, that's not fair. Can you hear me? This is really stupid.

BEN: Um. The nurse said you can probably hear us. So I'm just going to talk like you can hear me, OK Anne?

LOUISE: Hi Anne. It's Louise. Remember me? Boy this place makes me nervous, ever since we were here with Mom. All this mint green. It's barely a real colour. How are you? What a stupid question. *Damn.*

BOO: Mom, it's so cool that you get to sleep so much. I wish I got to sleep in all the time. I think that would be fun, kind of.

LOUISE: Anne? Are you in there? They said you might be able to hear us.

BOO: How long do I get to miss school for, Mom? I've already missed two days. Dad keeps saying I'll be going back soon, but not if you're sick for long, I bet. I think it's so gross that they had to drill into your brain. I'm sure you couldn't feel it though. Um, but can you imagine what it must be like to do that? Your doctor having to do that to you? I had a Pepsi with your doctor, your specialist, she seems nice, but weird, she talks to herself. Um, I read somewhere about surgeries, no I saw it on TV. They were doing surgeries on a guy's head, and they said that he had swelling in his head around his brain, and I know that's what happened to you. Would you want to do that

all day, drill into people's heads? And I bet you can smell the burning of the drilling, and the friction, and see little clouds of like skull dust floating up. They'd have to be careful not to drill too far, eh? They didn't drill into your brain did they?

NANCY: How long are you going to do this, Mom?

BOO: Three days...

LOUISE: This is so strange...

BEN: Anne, come on.

BOO: Don't worry you're still my Mom. It doesn't matter what happens. I'm going to sit here for a while. No, first I'm going to get an Eat More, then I'm gonna sit.

LOUISE: Annie, I'm scared.

BOO: I had two chocolate bars already today. Dad keeps giving me money without asking what it's for. Are you mad?

NANCY: Four days...

BOO: My bum hurts from sitting so much.

BEN: Wake up.

BOO: Dad took us to the chicken place for dinner. We've been to all the places around here. I'm tired of eating out. I want you to make me macaroni with ketchup.

BEN: Anne. It's Ben. I'm here.

BOO: Do I have to miss much more school? I've missed five whole days already. I'm bored.

BEN: You're going to have to pull yourself out of this, Anne. I can't do it for you. I don't know how.

BOO: I shouldn't have said that—

BEN: I love you.

BOO: I love you.

NANCY: I hate you. Now this is how I'm always going to remember my

birthday.

BOO: I shouldn't have said that I didn't want to be here. I miss you. Can I have some of my friends visit me here at the hospital?

BEN: I wish your mother was still around. She'd know what to say. She'd have everyone organized.

BOO: Can you hear everything I say? Are you gonna be mad when you wake up? Dad told me a joke today but I promised not to say anything because it's dirty. You'd kill me. Nancy let me have her birthday camera. It's a pretty cool machine.

LOUISE: What can I talk to you about. What do you want to hear? (*thinks*) Do you remember when you dragged me onto that roller coaster? I hope you remember that—I'll never never forget that. And you talked at me while we were in line so I didn't get a chance to get scared. I didn't really know what was happening and I didn't have a chance to talk myself out of it—and then all of a sudden we were on the ride and the shoulder bar came down and locked us in, and I got so panicked, I kept swearing, "you bitch you *goddamn bitch* what the hell am I doing here." I never used to swear, ever, and I said, "I'm going to kill you, you awful, manipulative bitch..." This, this voice, this mad, brittle voice came up from inside of me, I had no idea it was there. But you were so calm and you said, "let's sing something", so I would stop being so hysterical. You said, "let's sing, what should we sing?", so I started singing 'Both Sides, Now'—by Joni Mitchell. It was on the radio all the time, and it was all I could think of... (*sings*)—"I've looked at clouds from both sides, now/from up and down/ and still somehow/it's cloud illusions I recall/I really don't know clouds/at all"—and we were getting higher and higher and my voice was getting higher and higher, and then we went over the first crest... (*the memory of it catches her breath*) And, and, and *shit*, I just felt my heart leave my body. And you kept looking over at me and I could hear you saying "are you OK? How are you?" You were so full of calm and concern, and your face is going upside down and we're bouncing around in these hard little black like seat belts, but I wasn't there, I was watching myself go through all the loops and upside down and twisting and I heard everyone screaming and I could hear my breath sliding down the back of my throat. And I got *comfortable*, watching myself go through this terror, I could just disassociate, and so near the end I started singing again—"I've looked at life from both sides, now/from give and take/and still somehow..." Do you remember that? You thought I was crazy. You thought I was going to faint when I got off, I was hyperventilating. I could barely walk. You thought I'd enjoyed it. And it's true, *I was elated*.

Elated to know that I could check out if I wanted to. Because if I had stayed in my body I would be dead. I know that. That's the difference between you and me, Anne. I don't know how to fight like you do. I don't want to. Help me out here, Anne.

Pause.

BOO: Boo! Wake up.

NANCY: Did you say something?

LOUISE: Anne? Did you say something?

Pause.

NANCY: Shit you scared me.

BOO: I'm probably not getting A's any more at school.

NANCY: Fuck.

BEN: You can't leave yet, Anne. Um. Whatever happens I need you here. The kids, they—. You know what they need. Come back.

BOO: Mom, I'm bored, I want to walk around just a little bit, is that OK? Don't speak until I get back.

NANCY: Get up, you cow. I'm giving you until the count of ten.

BEN: Come on.

NANCY: One.

LOUISE: It's so strange to see you like this, Anne, it doesn't seem right. I don't know what to do, and Mom's not here anymore—

NANCY: Two.

BOO: I'm gonna go see if Dad's around. Don't wake up yet, Mom.

NANCY: Three. Don't disappoint me, Mom. Four.

BEN: How long are we going to have to wait?

NANCY: Five.

LOUISE: Nancy reminds me of you at eighteen, Anne. That oughta piss you off.

NANCY: Six. Try harder.

BOO: I have to pee too, so I really have to get Dad—

BEN: Annie. Anne.

NANCY: Seven.

LOUISE: Come on Anne, get mad.

NANCY: Eight. Fuck.

ANNE'S eyes flutter open. One by one they notice, in silence. Then...

BOO: Mom?

NANCY: Mom?

LOUISE: Anne?

BEN: Anne?

BOO: Mom? Are you awake?

NANCY: Oh my God I said *fuck* and you woke up.

They are in the same room now, talking to each other.

BEN: *(to NANCY)* What did you say to her?

NANCY: I don't remember.

BOO: Dad, she woke up!

LOUISE: She sure did.

BEN: *(cautiously)* Anne? Can you hear us? Say something. Do you remember me? Do you remember who I am? Tell me who I am.

They stare at her. For a long moment, she looks around, afraid. She stares at BEN, moves her mouth to speak, but only a few croaks come out. She looks confused at her inability to speak. She makes a few purposeless movements, but can't seem to coordinate her muscles. She looks around. Her face is strangely vacant, some flashes of distress. BEN smooths the sheets and takes her hand, calming her down.

BEN: OK. One step at a time.

SCENE FOUR. *Two weeks later. The family is clustered around ANNE's bed. LOUISE is feeding her some Jell-O. ANNE is not using her right side. This disuse is prominent in this scene, and fades slowly as the play progresses. NANCY looks on, quiet, a little apart. BEN is talking to DR. KATHRYN OMER, forties, ANNE's neuropsychologist.*

DR. OMER: We don't need to jump to any conclusions. Most patients don't speak for a while after they emerge from a coma. We know from the CT that Anne had a serious frontal lobe injury, we'll see how it presents. The brain is very delicate. You can't rush it. Patience.

LOUISE: There you go. How's that? You're not saying much, Anne.

BOO: Mom? How are you feeling?

NANCY: Maybe you shouldn't all be clustered around her, maybe she wants some room.

BEN: OK.

DR. OMER: She'll get more specialized care now that she's here in the rehab hospital. Have you been able to find your way around all right?

BEN: It looks the same as the last hospital.

DR. OMER: Does it? All right. I'll be back. Nature calls. I won't be far.

She exits.

LOUISE: She's still weak yet, aren't you honey? She'll be able to speak in a few days. Oops, you made a mess.

LOUISE puts the Jell-O cup aside and wipes ANNE's chin. The cup is beside the bed, just out of reach. There is still some Jell-O left. ANNE has followed the cup with her eyes. Through the next section her attention keeps getting pulled back to it. She starts to get insistent. BOO goes over to the Jell-O.

LOUISE: Who was that?

BOO: Can I have this?

LOUISE: Go ahead. Ben, who was that?

BEN: Dr. Something or other. She's a neuropsychologist.

NANCY: What about her brain? It's been two weeks.

BEN: You know your mother. She's strong. She seems better today.

NANCY: Except that she's not saying anything.

BEN: She's just, um, in shock.

LOUISE: We have to be supportive. Especially when we're in the room.

ANNE *is grabbing for something, using only her left side. She is slobbering.*

BOO: She wants something.

LOUISE: What do you want, honey?

BEN: Maybe she has amnesia.

BOO: Do you have amnesia, Mom?

NANCY: That's a stupid question, buttface. How's she supposed to tell you if she has amnesia—she won't remember!

BOO: Maybe she can sense it.

BEN: Please be quiet you two. (*ANNE is struggling again.*) What is it? Louise, maybe you should, could you please get the doctor?

LOUISE *exits, looking for* DR. OMER.

BOO: She's reaching.

BEN: You want to go somewhere.

BOO: She wants to get up.

NANCY: She's not supposed to get up.

BEN: You're not supposed to leave the bed, Anne.

BOO: She wants to go for a walk.

NANCY: Don't be an idiot.

ANNE *struggles and pants. She is getting teary.* DR. OMER *enters with* LOUISE.

DR. OMER: What's going on?

BEN: She wants something, and—

DR. OMER: OK, let me see her. (*She goes to ANNE; BOO goes to the other side of the bed.*)

LOUISE: She's getting really upset. She won't speak.

NANCY: She *can't* speak.

BEN: Nancy, *please*.

DR. OMER: Anne, I want you to calm down so we can understand what it is you need.

NANCY: She's going to hurt herself.

DR. OMER: (*trying to calm ANNE*) She's got some motor function. That's good.

BEN: Anne—

BOO: It's the Jell-O! She wants the Jell-O!

LOUISE: What?

BOO: I think she wants my Jell-O!

BEN: What do you mean, Boo?

DR. OMER: Mr. Driver, give me some room and we'll figure out what's wrong.

When BEN releases her a little bit, ANNE reaches for the Jell-O cup that BOO is holding out to her. She tries to bring it to her face, but she misses. She is frustrated. BOO grabs the cup and scoops some out for her.

BOO: Here you go Mom, let me help you.

NANCY: Jesus Christ.

BOO helps guide ANNE's mouth to the Jell-O. She licks it. She seems calmed, a little embarrassed.

BOO: That's what she wanted! Good taste Mom!

He takes it from her and has another lick for himself.

Pause.

NANCY: Are you serious?

BEN: Why didn't she just tell us? Why can't she speak?

DR. OMER: How do you like that, Anne? The Jell-O? That tastes good doesn't it. Did she like Jell-O before?

BEN: I don't think so.

DR. OMER: So this is something new. Don't worry, in a little while you might be able to talk to us. Then we can find out what's going in there, right Anne? (*points at her, gently*) Anne. That's you.

NANCY: Why can't she feed herself? What's going on?

DR. OMER: (*taking him aside*) It's early days still. This is going to be very strange for you. You might not recognize her. She might not recognize you, at first. It's going to take time. The brain is very delicate and if some trauma occurs to it—

BEN: There's a possibility it might never heal properly, is that right?

DR. OMER: It's almost a certainty, Mr. Driver. Neurons don't grow back.

BEN: You don't know my wife. She's a tough lady.

DR. OMER: All I'm saying is that most of my patients will always have to deal with some kind of post-traumatic deficit.

BEN: Anne is not like most people.

DR. OMER: All right. Tell me something. Was your wife right-handed?

BEN: Yes.

DR. OMER: That's what I thought. She has a right side neglect. She'll have learn everything all over again on the other side.

BEN: Can you give me a percentage? What percentage make a full improvement?

DR. OMER: I can't give you a percentage. That would be unhelpful.

BEN: Unhelpful?

BOO is sharing the Jell-O with ANNE.

NANCY: Boo, I don't think you should be giving that to her—

BOO: She's just hungry. It's all right, right?

BEN: Leave him alone, Nancy. For the last time.

SCENE FIVE. *The hospital, a month later. NANCY and BOO are sharing a Coke in the waiting room and doing some homework.*

NANCY: You took my eraser.

BOO: Did not.

NANCY: There it is.

BOO: Whatever. *You* always take *my* things. You always—

NANCY: Screw off, shit steak.

BOO: Screw you, yeast pooch.

NANCY: Shut up so I can finish.

Pause.

BOO: (*from within his textbook*) I don't want to be here so much anymore.

NANCY: Where.

BOO: In the hospital.

NANCY: Why?

BOO: All we do is spend time here.

NANCY: Mom's here.

BOO: I know.

NANCY: So?

BOO: I'm just saying.

Pause.

NANCY: You're such a fuckhead.

BOO: Shut up.

NANCY: You're such an asshole, when Mom's here, and Dad's all upset, and you're worried about missing school and your friends.

BOO: You're just mad because you were fighting with Mom and now she's had an accident and you can't tell her you're sorry that you're such a bitch.

NANCY: That's not fair.

BOO: Shut up.

NANCY: That isn't true.

BOO: You're a bitch.

NANCY: At least I love Mom and I want to be with her.

BOO: *(suddenly screaming)* I WANT TO BE WITH HER TOO, I don't just want to go out and be with my friends like you said, I want Mom back I WANT TO GO HOME, I JUST WANT TO GO HOME—

NANCY *grabs him and hugs him. He is curled up tight.*

NANCY: OK. OK. I'm sorry.

BOO: No you're not, you bitch.

NANCY: OK. OK. I know you love Mom.

BOO: I love the Mom we used to have. I don't want that freak person to be my mother.

NANCY: Shhh. Shhh. She's still the same person, Boo.

BOO: No she's not.

NANCY: Yes she is. She is. You'll see.

SCENE SIX. *The hospital, a month later. NANCY is seated on the edge of ANNE's hospital bed talking to ANNE. A mobile is above the bed, spinning.*

NANCY: You're coming home tomorrow. Isn't that great? It's been a couple of months now. Time to go home. *(NANCY turns the mobile. ANNE smiles)*

Do you remember who you are? Are you in there somewhere?(ANNE *smiles and takes her hand*) We're best friends, remember? Yes, we are. We fight all the time because we're best friends. You're a Supermom—that's what Amy always says about you—you do everything for us. Well, you did. Do you remember that? You're going to be OK. Hey, I called you a hardass once and I was grounded for a week. I keep a pop can under my bed to put my ashes in when I smoke at the window, and a can of Lysol for the smell. You never knew. You came to every single soccer game I had. You screamed your head off. Do you remember? (ANNE *is quiet*) Well, you will soon. You're coming home. You'll get better. (NANCY *spins the mobile again*) Don't worry. Easy.

SCENE SEVEN. *The next day, morning.* ANNE *is home.* LOUISE *is going to stay with her until the home health aide arrives.* BEN *is going off to work, the kids off to school.* NANCY *and ANNE are in the kitchen.* NANCY *at the fridge,* ANNE *near the table, standing with a walker, waiting.* ANNE's *right arm and right foot want to curl in, it's hard for her to use them.*

NANCY: Mom, what do you want for breakfast? (LOUISE *is coming through the front door with her coat on, and some activity bags.*) Aunt Louise, can you help Mom? I have to get ready. (NANCY *goes off.*)

LOUISE: Oh. Sure. Annie? Come sit down.

BEN: (*from offstage*) Nancy, where are my shirts?

NANCY: (*from offstage, opposite*) In the dryer?

BEN: (*off*) Where?

LOUISE: What do you want for breakfast? Pancakes?

ANNE *shakes her head.*

LOUISE: Cereal? Oatmeal? (*starts hunting through the cupboards*)

BEN: (*off*) Where?

NANCY: (*off*) What?

BEN: (*off*) WHERE!?

NANCY: (*from off*) IN THE DRYER!

LOUISE *shows some macaroni to ANNE.* ANNE *shakes her head.* *Points to a*

bowl on the table.

LOUISE: Fruit. You want fruit in a bowl. (ANNE shakes her head.)

BOO *walks in, still in his pajamas, sleepy. He goes to the fridge, opens it and stares.*

BEN: (*from off*) I CAN'T FIND THEM! I NEED MY SHIRTS TODAY, NANCY! WHERE—

NANCY *runs across the stage to his voice, swearing under her breath. ANNE shakes her head and starts to cry. She points at the bowl. LOUISE sits down with her at the table.*

LOUISE: What else do you have in a bowl? Rice? Do you want rice? Vegetables? Jell-O? Is that it?

ANNE *yells suddenly and pounds her fists on the table. Her right side is still spastic and uncooperative. LOUISE grabs her hands and holds them down. ANNE struggles for a second, then falls silent.*

BOO: She wants cereal.

LOUISE: What?

BOO *still has the fridge door open.*

BOO: In the bowl.

LOUISE: I already asked her that.

BOO: That's what she had in the hospital. That's all she can remember.

LOUISE: Do you want cereal, in the bowl?

ANNE *nods, happy.*

LOUISE: OK. That's called cereal, OK Annie?

LOUISE *gets up, tries to manoeuvre around BOO.*

LOUISE: Will you get out of the fridge please?

He does, and shuts it, just as she's about to reach inside.

LOUISE: Ow, shit!

BOO: You told me to get out of the—

LOUISE: I need to get in there. Where's your breakfast.

BOO: I'll have what Mom's having.

LOUISE: OK. Sit down and I'll get it for you.

BOO: You don't have to.

LOUISE: OK then you do your own and help with your mother.

BOO: She's going to be able to do her own breakfasts soon, though, isn't she?

LOUISE: We think so. (NANCY hurries past) Nancy—when does the nurse arrive? (There is no answer. LOUISE goes to get the milk.) OK thanks.

BOO is getting out the cereal and bowls and putting them down on the table.

ANNE: (her voice is flat and slurred) Cereal.

LOUISE stops dead. Turns.

LOUISE: Did she just say something? Was that you?

BOO: (casual) It wasn't me.

LOUISE: Anne, did you just say something?

ANNE: Cereal.

LOUISE: BEN! ANNE JUST SPOKE! Anne just said cereal!

BEN: (entering, tucking a shirt in) What? She said something?

LOUISE: Yes. I swear. She said cereal.

BEN: I missed it.

NANCY: (entering, dressed) She comes at noon. The nurse. What happened? Boo, why aren't you ready for school?

BOO: Bug off.

LOUISE: Can you say it again, Anne?

Pause. They wait.

ANNE: Cereal.

BEN: Hey! That's great honey! Cereal! You're speaking!

ANNE: Cereal.

BEN: That's really great honey! That's really really great. Finally.

BOO: Mom, can you say "fork"? "Spoon"?

BEN: Honey, that's terrific. I'm glad to hear your voice again.

LOUISE: Me too.

BOO: This is a spoon.

BEN: Soon you'll be good as new! Listen, damn I have to go, I have to finish getting dressed. Enjoy your cereal. Good stuff.

He exits briefly.

NANCY: (*sour*) Wow, cereal, only a matter of time now.

LOUISE: Be patient, Nancy.

NANCY: Who's making your breakfast, Boo?

LOUISE: He said he could.

NANCY: I don't know. Mom always used to do it.

LOUISE: Well he's helping me make *her* breakfast.

BEN: (*coming back on*) Honey, I have to go to work now and the nurse is coming and she'll take care of you until we all get back.

NANCY: Why does the nurse only come at noon.

BEN: We can't afford a full time nurse, Nancy. It's not all covered. We can only afford the four hours a day.

NANCY: Then who takes care of her at four?

BEN: I'm only just now going back to work. Things are going to be tight, so—

NANCY: Who.

BEN: You and Boo get home at four.

NANCY: Not always.

BEN: Now you do.

NANCY: So we can take care of our mother. Fucking beautiful. (*exits off to her room*)

BOO: Who's going to take care of us?

LOUISE: Your Mom'll be better soon. I can be here every morning until the nurse arrives. I only teach in the afternoons this year, OK Boo?

BOO: I guess.

BEN: Louise, I don't know how to thank you—

LOUISE: It's the least I can do.

BEN: (*gulping some orange juice down from the carton*) It's very kind of you. (*He exits briefly; LOUISE goes to hang up her coat and put her bags away.*)

BOO *has been preparing the cereal all this time. He gives ANNE a small teaspoon of sugar.*

BOO: I'm only going to give you a little sugar. You shouldn't have too much sugar, you know what I'm saying? (*He gives himself three enormous spoonfuls.*)

BEN: Louise, have you seen my briefcase?

LOUISE: By the garbage.

BEN: Are you OK here?

LOUISE: Leave me your work number.

There is the sound of a car horn from outside.

LOUISE: Who's that?

BEN: (*as he writes*) Boo, I'm leaving in less than a minute and you have to be in the car so drop it and get dressed. (*BOO gets up and scampers out.*) Get up earlier next time!

NANCY: (*walks into the room*) I'm leaving.

BEN: I'm taking you.

NANCY: Why?

BEN: Because, Nancy, I'm taking you to school. It's on my way.

NANCY Richard's here to take me.

BEN: How long has he had his license?

NANCY: Let's wring our hands about it later. *(exits)*

BEN: Boo! Come on! Put some clothes on.

BOO *emerges from his room, wearing dirty sweats and no socks.*

BEN: Nope, go back and put some real clothes on. *(BOO exits again)* You wore all of those things yesterday!

BOO: *(from offstage)* I can't find where half my clothes are!

BEN *swears under his breath and rushes into BOO's room. LOUISE turns to look at ANNE, who is having trouble trying to use her left hand.*

LOUISE: Here, let me help you. OK we have to do your exercises today and then the nurse is going to be here. Is there something you'd like to do today?

ANNE: ?

LOUISE: Do you want to go for a walk?

ANNE *thinks hard, gets angry.*

LOUISE: Oh Anne, don't get mad. Don't. Listen, I won't ask you hard questions anymore. I'll just keep it simple, I promise.

BEN *walks in, pushing BOO in front of him.*

BEN: Everything OK here? Can you handle this Louise?

LOUISE: Of course I can, don't be silly.

BEN: Have a good day. *(he exits)*

BOO: *(going over to Louise)* Good luck, Auntie Louise. Bye Mom. *(He kisses ANNE and exits.)*

A second later BEN rushes back in, goes to ANNE.

BEN: Shit, sorry honey. Goodbye. Have a good day. Enjoy your cereal.

ANNE: Cereal.

BEN rushes out. LOUISE watches him go. Turns to look at ANNE, who continues to eat, oblivious.

LOUISE: Cereal.

SLIDE #2: ANNE and NANCY are posing for a shot outdoors, some time in the summer. They are both soaking wet: they've had an impromptu water fight. They have their arms around each other like old friends. Big, naughty smiles on their faces, water pistols or hoses in their hands. There are a few more slides of the same sequence, like stop motion, they flash by in quick succession.

SCENE EIGHT. The kitchen, a month later. BEN and DR. OMER are running over some tests with ANNE. There is paper and some crayons on the table.

DR. OMER: Remember me, Anne? I'm Doctor Kathryn Omer, Anne. I'm one of your doctors. I'm a brain specialist. This is a nice home you have here. Very nice. Every once in a while I'm going to see you here, sometimes at the hospital. And of course you have a new nurse, Yvonne, who comes during the day time to help out, right? OK. I have a few questions for you. Not hard ones. Can you remember what day it is today?

ANNE: *(struggles)* No. Sorry.

DR. OMER: Ben told you earlier.

ANNE: Did he? Sorry.

DR. OMER: Don't be sorry. You're doing great.

BEN: You're doing great.

DR. OMER: OK, Anne. Let's try something. *(takes her arm and pinches her. ANNE recoils)* Oops! You didn't like that, did you?

ANNE: No.

DR. OMER: *(pinching her other arm, ANNE recoils again)* Oops, there, I did

it again. Nobody likes getting pinched.

BEN: Why are you doing that?

DR. OMER: (*pinches him, he yelps*) Just checking to see if it works. Anne, can you name three cereals for me?

ANNE: OK. (*thinks, hard*)

BEN: What cereal do you eat in the morning Anne?

DR. OMER: Give her time.

Pause.

ANNE: Cheerios.

DR. OMER: Yes! One.

ANNE: Ummmm...

DR. OMER: Two more.

ANNE: Shreddies.

DR. OMER: Good!

ANNE: Count Chocula.

DR. OMER: That's a mouthful, Anne, good for you. (*to BEN*) Does she actually eat that cereal?

BEN: No I'm sure she doesn't.

DR. OMER: Oh that's a shame, it's the best.

BEN: Maybe Boo eats it.

DR. OMER: (*rubbing ANNE's feet*) Can you feel this?

ANNE: Yes.

DR. OMER: (*to BEN*) Did you used to rub her feet?

BEN: No.

DR. OMER: Oh that's a crime, it should be in the marriage license. Does

that feel good, Anne?

ANNE: Kind of.

DR. OMER: OK Anne. Stare at my nose and tell me when you see my finger. (DR. OMER *checks ANNE's peripheral vision. It is fine on the left side, very bad on the right.*) Hmm. OK. Squeeze my hand, Anne. Good, now with the right hand. (*this is difficult for her*) Good! Hey, do you remember this? (*She starts the tape recorder: Stevie Wonder.*)

ANNE: (*listens a moment*) No. (*listens a moment longer*) YES! YES!

DR. OMER: Good! Can you sing the words?

ANNE: (*tries*) No. Sorry.

DR. OMER: You're going to have some trouble remembering things, Anne. But you're speaking now. That's great. You're great. (*she makes some notes*)

ANNE: Oh?

BEN: Yep honey.

DR. OMER: (*to herself, mumbling in a flurry of note taking and planning*) Yep yep yep good, that was really good, good good, Stevie Wonder, good taste Anne, yep yep yep, try that and that and that and, oh man I have to go home to let the dog out and set the tape. Did I call the roofer? (*she continues mumbling*)

ANNE: What is she saying?

BEN: I don't think she's speaking to us.

DR. OMER: Anne? I want you to take this piece of paper and these crayons and draw me something, OK? How about a flower?

ANNE: OK.

ANNE *gets to work.* DR. OMER *draws BEN aside.*

BEN: What do you think?

DR. OMER: She's only been home for a few weeks, we can't, I can't say for sure—

BEN: Um do you know what it's like to have people ask you how your wife is doing and you have to say well she's conscious but she acts like a three-

year-old, we're not sure how much better she's going to get?

DR. OMER: No, to be honest. But I understand your predicament.

BEN: You do?

DR. OMER: You don't know anything about me.

BEN: I'm sorry. Um. I know you can't say for sure. Um, I'm asking for your opinion, your medical opinion.

DR. OMER: She's functioning. She's speaking. That's more than I can say for a lot of my patients.

BEN: She's my wife. I married her.

DR. OMER: With therapy she will improve.

ANNE: *(she is having trouble finishing the picture)* Anne needs help.

DR. OMER: Who needs help?

ANNE: Me needs help.

DR. OMER: No, Anne. *I* need help. *I*.

ANNE: You? Who? Ben?

BEN: What, honey?

ANNE: *(flustered)* Who is that? Go away.

BEN: We'll be done soon, OK Anne?

DR. OMER: How are the kids responding to her?

BEN: She's their mother.

DR. OMER: Mr. Driver, whatever it is she used to do for you all, you have to take over. Anne, can I see the picture now? Show me what you drew. You're in charge now.

ANNE *holds up the picture. It's a flower. The entire left side of the flower is drawn. The right half is missing.*

ANNE: Flower.

DR. OMER: That's good Anne. That's a good flower. Do you notice something, though? Half of that flower is missing.

ANNE: Is it?

DR. OMER: Yep. The right half.

ANNE: Oh.

DR. OMER: Forgot it was there, did you?

ANNE: No. Here. (*she gives it to BEN*)

BEN: Thanks honey. I like it. I'll keep it.

ANNE *goes back to the table.*

BEN: Is this normal?

DR. OMER: Yes and no.

BEN: Where's the other half?

DR. OMER: That's what we're trying to find out.

Short pause.

BEN: Will she ever be the woman I married again?

DR. OMER: I don't know.

BEN: Please give me an answer.

DR. OMER: There are several answers, Mr. Driver.

BEN: Give me a *straight answer.*

DR. OMER: No.

BEN: No, you won't give me a straight answer?

DR. OMER: No. *No she won't be.*

Short pause.

BEN: You don't know my wife like I do.

DR. OMER: Of course not. But I would love to be wrong. Prove me wrong.

SCENE NINE. *A few weeks later. RICHARD, twenty-one, NANCY's boyfriend, and BEN are seated on the couch in the living room. They are silent, obviously uncomfortable.*

BEN: Um. What was your last name, Richard?

RICHARD: Miller.

BEN: Right. I knew that, didn't I?

Pause.

BEN: Sorry, how long have you and Nancy been going steady?

RICHARD: Umm, a few months. Six. Since before the accident.

BEN: The accident?

RICHARD: Sorry, your wife's accident.

BEN: Um.

Pause.

BEN: Can I get you a drink?

RICHARD: No thanks.

Pause.

BEN: A beer?

RICHARD: Oh, yeah, sure. Thank you.

BEN *gets up, sits down suddenly.*

BEN: Oh I forgot, we don't have any, sorry. I keep forgetting to pick some up, all of our schedules have gone so crazy.

RICHARD: No biggie.

Pause. ANNE walks in. She has a three point cane now. She sits down on the couch.

RICHARD: Oh, hi Mrs. Driver.

ANNE: *(her speech is still a little slurred)* Hi.

BEN: Hi Anne, how are you?

ANNE: I'm fine, I'm fine.

She stares at RICHARD.

BEN: Do you need anything?

RICHARD: *(at the same time)* Did I do something?

ANNE: No. I have to put on the shirt.

RICHARD: Sorry?

BEN: Oh the shirt, where's the practice shirt?

He gets up and goes out briefly. ANNE and RICHARD stare at each other.

ANNE: Are you staring at me?

RICHARD: No! No.

BEN walks in.

BEN: Here we go. Try that on, honey.

ANNE starts to put on the shirt and do up the buttons. She has great difficulty.

BEN: You're doing well, Anne.

ANNE: Uh huh.

BEN: Oh sorry, Richard, you must be wondering where Nancy is. *(calling to her upstairs)* Nancy! Richard's waiting. It's part of her exercises, practicing with buttons and stuff.

RICHARD: Oh.

BEN: That's good, honey.

ANNE: I can't do it! I can't even do up the buttons, I can't do it.

BEN: Yes you can.

ANNE: YOU DO IT!!

BEN: Anne—

ANNE: ASSHOLE!

BEN: (*embarrassed, to RICHARD*) Um. Sometimes she does that. She doesn't mean it. We're not supposed to react to it.

RICHARD: OK. I get it.

ANNE: What are you talking about?

BEN: Anne, come on. Stay calm. Do your buttons.

ANNE: Can I go to the bathroom? I have to go.

BEN: No you don't. Do your buttons.

ANNE: I do. I really do. What if I have an accident?

BEN: Don't be silly. You just went. Do up your buttons.

ANNE: I don't want to, I don't want to—

RICHARD: Should I leave?

ANNE: Yes.

BEN: No. Just one more.

ANNE *tries again. Does one up.*

ANNE: Yay! I got it!

BEN: OK, work on the others now.

ANNE: I am, I am.

BEN: Nancy! Come on! This is rude!

RICHARD: Really, it's OK, Mr. Driver.

BEN: Where are you taking Nancy tonight?

RICHARD: Just to a friend's house, I guess. We haven't really decided.

BEN: Will you be drinking?

RICHARD: No.

BEN: OK. Have a good time.

RICHARD: Thanks.

BEN: Take care of my daughter.

RICHARD: I will. I do.

ANNE: *(to RICHARD)* Who are you?

BEN: This is Richard.

ANNE: Oh. Hi. Ben? I'm tired.

BEN: I know honey. You did good. Now undo them.

SCENETEN. A few days later. The home health aide, YVONNE, has come over, and is trying to do ANNE's exercises with her. They are practicing sitting and standing from the couch. YVONNE is trying to encourage ANNE to use her right side for support and balance. They repeat the exercise over and over through this scene, sometimes they are more successful than others.

YVONNE: Good. January, February, what comes next.

ANNE: February.

YVONNE: No, you already said February. Come on.

ANNE: Ummm...

YVONNE: Come on, time passes and after February comes...

ANNE: *(suddenly)* I DON'T KNOW, YVONNE!

YVONNE: Take a deep breath, Anne.

ANNE *does*.

YVONNE: OK, what comes after February.

ANNE: May.

YVONNE: Nope and I'm not going to give you the answer either. So don't

think that I'm going to. Now let's try sitting down. Come on. After February.

ANNE: I don't know. Please?

YVONNE: You have good manners, but no.

ANNE: Mayonnaise.

YVONNE: That sounds like a month, but it's not.

ANNE: Oh.

YVONNE: This is one of my first real nursing jobs, you know. I mean at-home nursing. I'm not a nurse anymore anyway. I'm in home care. That's why I get to come over. I worked at the hospital but some of those doctors are real over aggressive, you know, if you get caught alone in a room with one of them? Bunch of pervs. How late am I here until?

ANNE: What? Um.

YVONNE: Am I here until three or four? *Young and the Restless* is on at four. Do you watch *Young and the Restless*? Am I here until four? I can never seem to remember. Can you remember?

ANNE: No.

YVONNE: Oh that's OK, try to remember. Let's try standing up again. Use your stomach muscles. Hey, is there any pop in the fridge? Am I allowed?

ANNE: Milk.

YVONNE: Yep there's milk in there. Is there pop?

ANNE: I don't know.

YVONNE: Well it's three already. If you finish your exercises we can have something to drink and watch *Days of Our Lives*. It's like *Young and the Restless* only less classy and weirder. And there's no perfume company to consolidate all the action you know?

ANNE: OK.

YVONNE: January, February...

ANNE: October?

YVONNE: Close, but actually the next one is March. March is spring. Can

you remember that? Think spring in March, with flowers and grass and warm weather.

ANNE: Lawn mower.

YVONNE: Yes that's good, lawn mowers happen in March. Now let's sit down but let's not fall into the couch like last time. Use your muscles. What's after March?

ANNE: May.

YVONNE: OK I'm going to give you the first letter. A.

ANNE: Anne.

YVONNE: Yes, A is for Anne, and...April.

ANNE: I didn't know.

YVONNE: That's OK. You're working hard! Good for you! High five!

ANNE looks over at her right arm. It scares her and she yelps.

ANNE: Who's that?

YVONNE: That's your right arm, Anne. That's you.

ANNE: No it's not.

YVONNE: Uh huh, yes it is. Your right arm.

ANNE: I didn't see it there.

YVONNE: You just forgot it. You'll get used to it.

ANNE: *(unsure)* OK.

YVONNE: Listen, that was hard, I think we should watch *Days of Our Lives* and turn our brains off. OK?

She flops down on the couch next to ANNE.

ANNE: OK.

SCENE ELEVEN. *A month later.* RICHARD is coming on from the kitchen to join NANCY in the living room.

RICHARD: There is exactly nothing in the fridge.

NANCY: Oh shit, Louise was supposed to do the shopping.

RICHARD: There's no Coke left.

NANCY: Well you can have water, can't you?

RICHARD: I guess.

NANCY: This is weird, you being here. We never hang out here.

RICHARD: Why are you so nervous? I've been here before. Where's your mom?

NANCY: She's having her nap. Boo is at his friend's.

RICHARD: So we're alone.

NANCY: In a manner of speaking, don't get any ideas, bub.

RICHARD: Why does Louise do the shopping?

NANCY: *Aunt* Louise—she does it because the rest of us are so busy.

RICHARD: Doesn't she have her own life?

NANCY: I suppose she does, but she's generous. She's divorced.

RICHARD: Come here.

NANCY: No.

RICHARD: C'mon.

NANCY: No.

RICHARD: Frigid.

NANCY: Fag.

RICHARD: Come and fix me then.

NANCY: Not in my kitchen.

RICHARD: Come over here, please, please, kitten?

NANCY: My dad will be home any minute.

RICHARD: Did you tell your dad?

NANCY: What.

RICHARD: About our engagement. About the ring that I gave you. That you refuse to wear. The expensive ring.

NANCY: I'm not giving my dad yet another thing to worry about.

RICHARD: I'm pretty sure I find that insulting.

NANCY: We are not engaged.

RICHARD: Yes we are.

NANCY: No we are not. You said "I want you to marry me." And I said "I want to marry you too" but that doesn't mean I can. It doesn't mean right now.

RICHARD: Oh fuck, Nan.

NANCY: What.

RICHARD: You took the ring.

NANCY: Do you think your ring means that I, at eighteen years old, have my whole life figured out enough to be able to say to you, yes let's get married next Saturday and let's have a bridal shower and we'll announce the engagement tomorrow during my spare?

RICHARD: That's not what I meant. I just meant that you took my ring and you got my hopes up and I'm gonna explode all over the next person who comes up to me and asks me hey how's life, if I don't get to tell him that I told you I wanted to marry you and you actually took my ring, you didn't throw up, you said YES. You just got my hopes up, is all.

NANCY: *(walks up to him at the counter and kisses him)* Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

ANNE *walks into the room, and stands there, shocked and then embarrassed as NANCY and RICHARD kiss.*

ANNE: Sorry...

NANCY: Oh God, Mom. Richard and I were just, this is my friend Richard,

do you remember him? This is Richard.

ANNE: Hi Richard.

RICHARD: I've met you, Mrs. Driver.

ANNE: Oh.

NANCY: She can't remember, Richard.

RICHARD: Oh man, sorry, Mrs. Driver. I know you don't remember all that well these days.

ANNE: No.

RICHARD: Well you made a pretty vivid first impression on me. You're the scariest mom in town. You can't remember any of that?

ANNE: Nope.

RICHARD: That's OK.

ANNE: (*giggles*) You're tall.

NANCY: That's right Mom. Richard is tall. Don't you think Richard is good looking?

ANNE: I guess.

RICHARD: That's embarrassing, Nan. Don't embarrass me.

NANCY: Who cares?

ANNE: Do you want to go out with me?

RICHARD: What's she talking about?

ANNE: Sexy.

NANCY: Mom!

ANNE: What.

NANCY: Nothing.

ANNE: You have dirty pants! (*laughs*)

NANCY: Mom.

ANNE: (*stopping, embarrassed*) I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

NANCY: That's OK Mom. I'm used to it by now.

RICHARD: I should probably go.

NANCY: Where are you going?

RICHARD: I have to go to work.

NANCY: Oh, back to the hammer and nails.

RICHARD: Yeah, and I'm taking my truck, so you've lost your wheels. Do you need anything?

NANCY: No. Thank you.

RICHARD: Kiss me goodbye.

NANCY: Not in front of Mom.

RICHARD: Coward.

NANCY: Thalidomide baby.

RICHARD: (*walks up to her and whispers in her ear*) Love you.

He exits.

NANCY: You see, Mom? Richard is nice.

ANNE: Yes he is.

NANCY: I always told you you'd learn to like him.

ANNE: I know. He's so sexy. He drives me wild.

NANCY: Mom, don't.

ANNE: What. What.

NANCY: That's weird. It's not right. It's not appropriate.

ANNE: Sorry.

NANCY: Where did you learn to talk like that Mom? Yvonne?

ANNE: Maybe.

SCENE TWELVE. *A month later, in ANNE and BEN's bedroom. ANNE is lying in bed as BEN gets undressed. She watches him. He strips down to just his underwear and slips into bed. He has a magazine.*

ANNE: Naked.

BEN: What?

ANNE: Naked.

BEN: No, not really. I still have my underwear on. I'm not naked. Naked means no clothes.

ANNE: Underwear.

BEN: Yep.

ANNE *stares at him and giggles. He looks at her.*

BEN: You're in a good mood.

ANNE: I guess.

BEN: You used to like seeing me in my underwear. Do you remember that?

ANNE: Maybe.

BEN: Maybe?

ANNE *nods.*

BEN: Are you still, um, attracted to me?

ANNE: You're tall and pretty.

BEN: Pretty. Um, you never used to call me pretty.

ANNE: Oh sorry. *(cries)* I didn't mean to.

BEN *goes to hold her, feels guilty.*

BEN: No no no, honey, don't feel bad, it's not your fault. Shh. Shhh. You don't have to remember everything. You remember little things every day,

right? A little more every day and soon it'll all come back. Right? (*she nods a little*) There. That's good. (*she settles*) Do you like the feeling of me holding you? (ANNE *nods*) Do you remember making love?

ANNE: I don't know.

BEN: You don't know. It's what you do when you love someone. When you're married to someone.

ANNE: Course I remember.

BEN: Do you want to try?

ANNE: I don't know. Why?

BEN: Because I love you. Because we're in love.

ANNE: OK.

BEN: It means I have to touch you. Does that frighten you? (*she shakes her head*) Do you trust me?

ANNE: Course I do.

BEN *leans in and kisses her*.

BEN: Are you OK with that? Are you ready for that?

ANNE: That was nice. Just like Nancy and her friend.

BEN: What friend? Where.

ANNE: In the kitchen.

BEN: Oh. Um. Yeah, a little like that. (*he goes to kiss her again, starts rubbing her shoulders and kissing them*) I've missed you, I've missed you so much, Anne...

ANNE: Ben—

BEN: It's so strange to be asleep next to you every night and not be able to touch you—

ANNE: Ben—

BEN: Do you like this? Is this OK?

ANNE: Yes.

BEN: Oh Anne. Anne...

ANNE: Ben. Ben... (ANNE starts to laugh, it builds. She laughs, hard.)

BEN: What.

ANNE: Nothing. It's just...I don't know why. (she laughs again) You're so funny.

BEN: Jesus Christ. Couldn't you be...I mean, it's been a little while.

ANNE: I know.

BEN: Forgive me if I'm a little excited—

ANNE: Don't be mad. I don't know why I'm—

BEN: This isn't like you.

Pause.

ANNE: What?

BEN: You always...you were always the one—

ANNE: I can't help it. (she cries) I can't help it.

BEN: Oh man. Anne. I'm sorry. (he kisses her) I love you so much. I want to try again. Do you want to try again? It used to be great.

ANNE: I know. I know.

BEN: We can find it again. Let me show you.

They start to kiss again. BEN pulls himself on top of her.

ANNE: Ben! No! (She recoils, pulling away from him, very scared.)

BEN: Oh God, Anne, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be impatient, I thought maybe you, I thought you might, I'm so sorry...

ANNE looks away from him, cries quietly. For a long moment he does not know what to do.

BEN: We don't have to make each other uncomfortable, we can just sleep. I

don't need to make you feel strange, OK, Anne? (*She does not respond.*) OK, Anne? (*still no response from her*) This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to sleep in the study tonight. And then you don't have to feel weird. Um. With me. OK?

They sit in silence for a moment. She sniffs, nods.

SCENE THIRTEEN. *Six weeks later, at the hospital. BEN and DR. OMER are talking. DR. OMER has some X-Rays and charts.*

DR. OMER: The scan showed that Anne's brain activity is picking up, but I warn you, that might not mean anything. Or it might mean everything.

BEN: She's getting better though, right? She'll get better.

DR. OMER: In some ways, yes.

BEN: Are you telling me not to hope?

DR. OMER: No, I'm telling you to be practical. Work. Work with her.

Pause. BEN starts to go, turns back.

BEN: Can I ask you something?

DR. OMER: What is it.

BEN: Is she... Um. I'm wondering how long it will take... Um.

DR. OMER: You want to know about sex.

BEN: What?

DR. OMER: Of course you do.

BEN: What's that supposed to mean.

DR. OMER: I meant no subtext, Mr. Driver. What do you want to know?

BEN: Um.

DR. OMER: Don't be shy.

BEN: Will she ever want to have sex? With me? Again?

DR. OMER: Did you ask her?

BEN: Yes. Kind of.

DR. OMER: And?

BEN *is silent.*

DR. OMER: I see. I'm sure she still has urges. She might not know what to do with them. Probably they confuse her. You might have to give it some more time.

BEN: It's been—well, it's been a long time.

DR. OMER: That must be difficult. You could probably use the release.

BEN: You talk about it like it's a drain that needs unclogging.

DR. OMER. Uh huh.

Pause.

BEN: She's so different. Her personality. She used to be the excitable one.

DR. OMER: Your personality lives in your brain. Learned behaviours, attitudes, eccentricities. It's just biology. Anne has had a mind altering event.

BEN: But she looks the same. It's like she's in there somewhere and she just can't get out.

DR. OMER: Really.

BEN: I keep waiting for it to happen.

DR. OMER: Maybe that's the problem.

BEN: What?

DR. OMER: So much of someone's personality is in how we remember them, what we grow to expect of them. It has more to do with us than with them. And then you start to think you own someone, you have little pieces of them you won't part with, you want to keep them safe.

BEN: What are you saying.

DR. OMER: I'm saying that what you're articulating is your problem. Not hers.

Pause.

DR. OMER: Maybe you need to start over. Who is she now? Do you know?

BEN: How do you start over after twenty years?

DR. OMER: I don't know. But that's a good question. Maybe you need to make an appointment to see a therapist, Mr. Driver.

BEN: She's my wife. She's not dead.

DR. OMER: Don't misunderstand me. I appreciate your tenacity.

Pause.

BEN: Are you this clinical with everyone?

DR. OMER: Yes. But I have a dog. He gets to see the other side.

BEN: I see.

SCENE FOURTEEN. *A month later, in the evening.* LOUISE is standing inside the doorway, BEN at the door.

LOUISE: I don't mean to just drop in without calling, I just, uh—

BEN: You don't have to have a reason to come over.

LOUISE: I know I know I know.

BEN: The kids are out tonight. Anne's having a nap. Can I get you anything? To drink, anything?

He walks over to the kitchen, starts fumbling around for drinks.

BEN: I don't know what we have left.

LOUISE: There should be some—

BEN: I don't think there is, I haven't bought anything—

LOUISE: Yeah, I took Anne out and we did some errands, we bought some vodka.

BEN: Oh, I should give you some money for that—

LOUISE: Make me a screwdriver and we'll call it even. *(He starts to make*

one for her and one for him.) It was strange, taking Anne out shopping for booze. She didn't remember any of the brand names. When we were kids, she used to buy *my* booze for me. She'd tasted every single thing in the store. She had one hell of a stomach lining. She has.

BEN: I remember. She put that spicy stuff on everything. On potatoes.

LOUISE: Gross.

BEN: I guess she was quite a drinker.

LOUISE: Don't you remember?

BEN: What.

LOUISE: You don't remember when you were dating and you'd been out at a game and she got so drunk you knew you'd never get her back in the house without waking everybody up, so you went to my bedroom window, and you, you picked up those pebbles, or whatever, and you were throwing them up—

BEN: I don't remember this.

LOUISE: (*giggling*) What you didn't know is that I slept with my window open.

BEN: No.

LOUISE: So all this dirt kept flying through my window and landing on my bed and I was so scared, I had no idea what to do. I must have been fourteen.

BEN: I do remember.

LOUISE: That's about as drunk as I've ever seen her.

BEN: Did you get in trouble?

LOUISE: Oh yeah, I couldn't get her back into bed quietly without her screaming at me, but when Mom got up she talked her way out of it, she was so clever, I could never, ever pull that stuff off.

BEN: Don't be silly. You're very smart.

LOUISE: You mean I'm nice.

BEN: What?

LOUISE: I'm nice. That's what they put in my yearbook. Nice. Even on my report cards. I always got "Louise tries very hard and she is very nice to the other children."

Pause.

LOUISE: Do you remember that T-shirt? That Grand Canyon T-shirt you used to wear after you went there for Senior Trip? It was blue.

BEN: No.

LOUISE: Oh.

BEN: Why?

LOUISE: Nothing.

BEN: No, why?

LOUISE: No.

BEN: Why?

LOUISE (*laughing*): No, I can't tell you.

BEN: Yes you can.

LOUISE: (*laughing harder*) No, no it's so stupid.

BEN: (*laughing with her*) Please. Please tell me.

LOUISE: You don't even remember it. I thought you would.

BEN: Wait a minute, wait a minute, it was that blue thing with the long sleeves, I remember that. I haven't seen it for years.

Pause.

LOUISE: I have it.

BEN: What.

LOUISE: I have it.

BEN: I don't understand.

LOUISE: I took it. I'm not sure why. It smelled nice. You left it on the couch

one day.

Pause.

BEN: Oh.

Pause.

LOUISE: I wish my parents were still alive.

BEN: Why?

LOUISE: Maybe they'd have some answers, maybe they'd help.

BEN: They wouldn't.

LOUISE: They *would* help.

BEN: No, they wouldn't have any *answers*. If the doctors don't have answers, nobody's parents are going to have answers. It's just something we're going through, and if there're going to be answers, we won't know them until it's over, I think.

LOUISE: When will it be over.

BEN *doesn't answer.*

Short pause.

BEN: Besides, we're not doing too badly, I hope. You and me.

LOUISE: Sure.

Pause.

LOUISE: I'm having another screwdriver. I'm going to get loose.

BEN: Me too.

SLIDE #3: *Louise, dressed up in a nice dress, clearly uncomfortable with having her picture taken. She has one hand up, half trying to block the shot. She has on an embarrassed half smile. She is on her way to a formal evening of some kind. It fades into another shot. She has dropped the hand, she lets the picture happen. She is still smiling.*

SCENE FIFTEEN. *Some weeks later, at night. It is just before the anniversary of ANNE's accident and NANCY's nineteenth birthday. RICHARD and NANCY stumble into the kitchen, late at night. RICHARD is laughing, they're both a little drunk.*

NANCY: Richard, shhh. If you don't shhh, you're not allowed to come over.

RICHARD: I thought you said your dad was out with Louise.

NANCY: Yes, but Boo's home, and Dad wouldn't leave him alone forever. He's probably home and in bed.

RICHARD: Ah. So stealth is the object.

NANCY: Yes, you have to be a stealth bomber. *(This makes her giggle as she opens the fridge.)* Christ no one ever thinks to get groceries if I don't make a hairy fuss.

RICHARD: Nancy, this is turning me on.

NANCY: *(from within the fridge)* What.

RICHARD: Standing here trying to be quiet, knowing that your mother and brother are upstairs sleeping, watching your magnificent ass rise out of the fridge.

NANCY: Oh shit Richard, that's really romantic.

RICHARD: *(coming up to her)* Is there any beer in there?

NANCY: No.

RICHARD: I want to make love to you.

NANCY: What, here?

RICHARD: Anywhere. Here. Right now. Outside. Inside. In the mall. On the couch. I want to make love to you. I want to feel myself inside you.

NANCY: Oh God. *(he is pressing up against her, kissing her)* Come on.

RICHARD: Nancy, we *used* to do it all the time, before your Mom came home, and—

NANCY: Don't tell me that other couples are having sex and we're not.

RICHARD: But they are.

NANCY: Who is?

RICHARD: Chuck and Linda.

NANCY: Big surprise.

RICHARD: Tom and Claire.

NANCY: No they're not. Not once. She told me.

RICHARD: He says they are.

NANCY: He also said he was getting a hot tub for his birthday.

RICHARD: It's only because I love you. Of course that's why I want us to do it. Because I love you, and it's the ultimate way to show you how much.

NANCY: Richard...

RICHARD: Please, Nancy. Don't you want to know how much? (*moving in on her*) Feel me. I'm hard. You never want to do it any more.

NANCY: You know I want to, it's just, it's a big deal, and I've had a lot on my mind, it's not a good time...

RICHARD: I know. Please?

NANCY: Here? This isn't—

RICHARD: Anywhere, anywhere... (*kisses her tenderly*)

NANCY: (*she resists for a moment, then gives in, kisses him back*) Be quiet, please be quiet.

RICHARD: Are you afraid someone will hear?

NANCY: God yes.

RICHARD: Me too. (*They are stumbling backwards to the couch, obviously aroused by the idea of being caught.*)

NANCY: We have to be quick, Richard, we—

RICHARD: Not too quick, I want to—

NANCY: Shut up, shut up.

They are stretched out on the couch, furiously making out. This continues for a moment, when ANNE appears at the doorway. She has a simple cane now. She sees NANCY and RICHARD and does not know whether to go on or go back to her bedroom. She gets a little upset. Finally she decides to try to keep going. She tiptoes across the floor, her eyes on RICHARD and NANCY. She gets to the kitchen, looks back, slides across the floor to the fridge. She opens the door. It makes a whining noise loud enough to alert RICHARD and NANCY, and now the cold white light is spilling out of the kitchen, but ANNE is oblivious, looking for a drink of milk. RICHARD and NANCY freeze. RICHARD buries himself in the couch as NANCY sits up, buttoning her blouse. ANNE turns and sees her suddenly and their eyes lock. ANNE screams and drops the milk carton. RICHARD flips over in surprise. NANCY screams at ANNE's scream and then RICHARD's movement sends her flying off the couch.

NANCY: Mom! What the hell are you—

RICHARD: Jesus.

ANNE: I was just looking for a glass of milk—

RICHARD: Fuck me—

NANCY: How long have you been standing there?

ANNE: I'm sorry. (*cries*)

NANCY: Mom. Don't cry.

RICHARD: Mrs. Driver—

NANCY: Shut up Richard.

RICHARD: Hey.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

NANCY: I think you should go, Richard.

RICHARD: Mrs. Driver—

NANCY: Don't upset her, Richard—

RICHARD: Will you leave me alone, I was just going to apologize to her, Nancy, Jesus Christ.

NANCY: Fine.

RICHARD: Sorry Mrs. Driver. *(to NANCY)* See you later.

NANCY: Fine.

He leaves. ANNE is crying.

ANNE: I'm so sorry—

NANCY: Mom. Don't be sorry. You're always sorry, it's easy to be sorry. You can be embarrassed, God knows I'm embarrassed, but don't cry.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

NANCY: Stop apologizing. You didn't do anything wrong. Come here.

ANNE comes over and sits next to her on the couch.

ANNE: He was making sounds.

NANCY: Don't tell Dad.

ANNE: I can't lie.

NANCY: I'm not asking you to lie, I'm just telling you not to tell him.

ANNE: I don't know.

NANCY: *(impulsively)* Richard and I are engaged. Sort of. I took the ring, so I guess that means we are. This is a secret. A super big deal secret. I'll tell Dad some day, but after we're finished talking you should, should just try to forget it or something and then you won't be tempted to tell anyone. I mean, I'm an adult, in every sense except I still live at home. And so why shouldn't I be able to make my own decisions. I wish you could— *(stops herself)*

ANNE: What.

NANCY: I wish you could still give me advice. Do you remember giving advice?

ANNE: I guess.

NANCY: How is it that you can only remember certain things. Do you remember giving birth?

ANNE: Yes.

NANCY: Do you remember any of my birthdays?

ANNE: Some.

NANCY: Do you remember the first time you had sex?

ANNE: I think.

NANCY: Do you remember how old I am?

ANNE: No. Sorry.

NANCY: Do you remember where we went on vacation last summer?

ANNE: No. *(She laughs. This is turning into a game)*

NANCY: Do you remember the name of my old soccer team?

ANNE: No.

NANCY: Do you remember that you're my mother?

ANNE: No. *(stops, looks at NANCY)* I mean yes. Yes.

Pause.

NANCY: Do you feel like my mother? Do you have any motherly feelings for me?

Pause.

ANNE: Yes.

NANCY: You're lying.

ANNE: No I'm not.

NANCY: *(coldly)* You used to make lunches in those little beige plastic bags and then you'd tie the ends together so tight I could never open them for lunch. You used to come to every soccer game and you used to bring this big flask of coffee and stalk the sidelines swigging coffee and swearing and intimidating all the other mothers. You had a peach-coloured nightgown

you used to wear around the house on weekends. You bought me a stupid little book that had drawings of vaginas and tampons and douche bottles and the little cartoon girls talking about them. *(pause)* You don't remember any of this.

ANNE: Yes I do. I really do.

NANCY: Of course you don't, you don't remember *anything*, what was I thinking.

ANNE: What do you want me to say? Don't be mad.

NANCY: You're nothing like you used to be.

ANNE: I know. I'm doing my best. I can remember a lot of things now.

NANCY: Does it matter? Who cares if you remember? How can you remember all of these things and *still not be my mother?*

ANNE: I am, I am. *(cries)*

NANCY: *(tired)* Don't cry.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

NANCY: Will you stop apologizing like some EIGHT-YEAR-OLD. Jesus Christ, I can't say ANYTHING to you without you breaking down in tears, I don't know how to deal with someone crying all the time, what am I supposed to DO? You're supposed to be my mother! You look nothing like my mother! My mother was a tough fucking woman and she could do anything and she made me try everything, you are nothing like my mother, for all I fucking care my mother is dead!

ANNE: I am NOT DEAD!

NANCY: MY MOTHER IS DEAD!

ANNE: *(goes to her)* No I'm not, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—

NANCY: YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE!

ANNE *slaps* NANCY *across the face*. NANCY *slaps her right back*. *They are stunned into silence. Pause.*

NANCY: I can't believe I did that. *(she sits, stares at her hands)* You hit me.

ANNE: You said something mean.

NANCY: Oh my God. (*covers her face*) Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I never thought I would ever hit somebody. Hitting isn't nice Mom. Only children hit.

ANNE: Then you shouldn't have hit me either.

BOO *peeks his head into the room.*

BOO: What's happening?

NANCY: Oh, Boo—

ANNE: Boo, you were sleeping. Sorry.

NANCY: Boo, where's Dad?

ANNE: He's not home yet.

NANCY: I thought he was out with Louise.

BOO: Maybe he's never coming home.

NANCY: That's not funny.

BOO: I'm not kidding.

NANCY: I'm sorry you woke up.

BOO: I heard every word you said.

ANNE: Sorry.

NANCY: Boo, we were just talking.

BOO: How can you talk to her like that? How can you say things like that to her?

NANCY: I'm sorry Boo, I said I'm sorry, what more do you want me to do?

BOO: She's *my* mother too—

NANCY: I know that.

ANNE: I *know*.

The kitchen door rattles and BEN walks in. They all turn to him in surprise.

BEN: What are you all doing up?

NANCY: What, where were you?

BEN: I was out with Louise.

NANCY: It's really late.

BEN: I know that, Nancy.

NANCY: Boo was here alone with Mom—

BOO: That's OK! I was OK.

ANNE: I was OK.

NANCY: What were you doing?

BEN: We were just having dinner.

BOO: Nan and Mom had an argument.

NANCY: Shut up Boo.

BEN: What happened? Why are you all still up?

NANCY: Nothing happened. We had a disagreement.

BEN: What about.

NANCY: Nothing important.

ANNE: Nothing.

BEN: Let *me* decide if it was nothing.

NANCY: I'm old enough to know when something is a private issue—

BEN: Does this have to do with Richard?

NANCY: We were having a girls' conversation. It's private.

BEN: (*to ANNE*) What did you talk about?

NANCY: That's not fair. She doesn't know who to listen to.

ANNE: Yes I do.

NANCY: You don't need to tell him.

BEN: Tell me what.

ANNE: I won't tell him.

BEN: What.

NANCY: It was a private discussion.

BEN: Was it about sex?

ANNE *giggles and blushes*.

NANCY: Jesus Christ.

BEN: Was it about sex?

ANNE: No.

NANCY: No.

BEN: Was it about Richard?

NANCY: Dad, that's not fair, you're using her—

BEN: Was it?

NANCY: That's cruel.

ANNE: *(clearly torn, grasping at something)* It wasn't about sex.

BEN: Then what?

ANNE: I'm sorry Nancy.

NANCY: What are you sorry about? We're allowed to have private conversations.

ANNE: I know. *(cries)*

BEN: Nancy, you know your mother is in recovery, and until she's all the way back, it's not fair of you to use her, to make her answer questions she doesn't remember how to answer—

NANCY: So it's OK for you to *extract* information out of her? Where's the respect in that?

ANNE: Stop.

NANCY: It's pretty shitty, if you ask me.

BEN: Don't talk to me that way, when you're still living in my house. That's inappropriate.

ANNE: Please.

NANCY: Why is it that fathers always pull that "when you're still living in my house" shit all the time?

BEN: There's a reason, and it is that I have a responsibility to raise you in the most decent manner possible and that includes having a say in how you treat your mother and I, that you treat us with, with respect—

NANCY: And when do *you* start to treat *me* like an *actual* human being?

BEN: Listen when you're married and you're older and you have bigger sense of what being an adult means—

ANNE: Nancy's engaged!

They stop. NANCY freezes. Pause. She looks down, takes a breath, looks up at him, square in the eye.

NANCY: Congratulations, Nancy.

BOO: Holy. Crap.

BEN: You're engaged.

ANNE: Yes. To Richard.

NANCY: Mom.

BEN: When.

NANCY: What do you mean? When are we getting married?

BEN: Yes, and since when have you been engaged?

NANCY: Who knows, and none of your business.

BEN: What's Richard's phone number? I want you to call him.

NANCY: No.

BEN: Get me his phone number.

NANCY: No.

BEN: That's twice you've disobeyed me. I want you to call Richard.

NANCY: So you can what, so you can ream him out for falling in love with me, for wanting to be with me?

BEN: I want to talk to this young man who is using my daughter.

NANCY: Maybe I'd like to call Louise, and ask her what she's been doing out with my father, who's still married to her sister.

BEN: That is *inappropriate*.

NANCY: What's Louise's phone number?

BEN: I want you to stop talking to me this way.

NANCY: Oh forget it, I know what her phone number is. I'll just call her, I'll ask her what she was doing out late with my father—

She goes for the phone, but he intercepts her.

BEN: Nancy, that's enough!

NANCY: Goodbye.

She heads for the door.

BEN: Where are you going.

NANCY: I'm going, I'm going for a walk.

BEN: Where.

NANCY: Fuck you.

Pause.

BEN: Um. Fine. Goodnight. *(he exits, she watches him go)*

NANCY: Fine. Goodnight. *(she leaves, slams the door, hard)*

SCENE SIXTEEN. *Later that night. BOO and ANNE are on the front steps,*

wrapped in a blanket, waiting for NANCY to return.

BOO: I need a new computer with a faster modem.

ANNE: Really?

BOO: All of the kids at school have the faster modem kind now. I need to keep up.

ANNE: Are you going to get one?

BOO: I hope so. Christmas isn't far away, but Dad says we have no money.

ANNE: Oh. Yeah.

BOO: Are you going back to work soon?

ANNE: I don't think so.

BOO: No, probably not. You still have trouble remembering what day it is.

ANNE: I know.

BOO: Sometimes I have trouble remembering too.

ANNE: Really?

BOO: What day is it today?

ANNE: Friday?

Pause, while BOO thinks.

BOO: I don't think so.

Pause.

BOO: That's what you need, too. Sort of. Just a faster modem.

ANNE: Yeah.

Pause.

BOO: A group of boys stole my bus pass.

ANNE: What? Stole?

BOO: Yeah, like they took it and they were mean about it, they called me a pussy, and now I don't have a bus pass.

ANNE: They shouldn't do that.

BOO: I didn't tell anyone. I'm only telling you.

ANNE: It's a secret?

BOO *nods*.

ANNE: I'm not so good at secrets.

BOO: I'm not worried. I trust you. *(short pause)* One of them sits right behind me in Math. He always smells funny, and the other guy talks funny, I think he's from like England or something, because he has a weird way of saying things. Like really thin.

ANNE: Uh huh.

BOO: Some kids from the older grades walked by but nobody did anything.

ANNE: Oh no. Were you scared?

BOO: Yeah, it was pretty scary.

ANNE: What are you going to do?

BOO: I don't know. It doesn't much matter. I'll have a new pass in a week anyway. I took some money from Dad's wallet for this week. He never notices anyway. And I'm practicing some new evasion techniques if I spot the enemy coming again.

ANNE: You're strong.

BOO: Yep. So are you.

ANNE: I get tired. All the time.

BOO: Me too.

NANCY *appears. Stands looking at them.*

ANNE: Are you cold?

NANCY: I guess.

BOO: Are you coming back inside?

ANNE: We were worried.

NANCY: I'm going to sit on the step for a while with you.

BOO: OK I'm only staying a few minutes because I'm cold.

ANNE: Me too.

NANCY: Me too.

She sits down, gets under the blanket with them and looks out. They are all lost in their own thoughts. A moment passes, then ANNE looks up.

ANNE: Where did all the stars go?

BOO: *(looking up)* There must be low level cloud cover.

ANNE: Oh.

END of ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE. *The kitchen. It is NANCY's eighteenth birthday—the same day as ACT ONE, SCENE ONE, but a few hours earlier, before ANNE has had the stroke. The kitchen is clean but unadorned. ANNE comes through the door, carrying some packages. She throws them on the table and goes back out the door for a second. She returns, balancing a cake and a big sign and some balloons and presents. She struggles gamely into the kitchen, sets everything down with a thud. She takes a deep breath, throws off her shoes and coat, and digs in her purse. She pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lays them down on the counter next to the birthday cake. She stares at them intensely. She wants one. She looks at her watch. Stares. She turns to walk away, turns back around quickly and reaches into the pack. She pulls one out.*

ANNE: Last one. *(She lights it and takes a long deep drag, clearly needing it.)*
Last one. I swear.

With the cigarette in her mouth, she opens the "Happy 18th Birthday Nancy" sign and looks at it. She finds a stool and clambers on to hang the banner up by the cupboards, cigarette hanging out of her mouth. She hangs half of it up, as we have seen in in ACT ONE, SCENE ONE, and lets the rest dangle as she finishes her cigarette.

ANNE: OK. That's a start.

She goes into one of her bags and finds a box. There is a sweater there, very adult, very beautiful. She unfolds it, looks at it. There is the sound of a key in the lock. ANNE looks at her watch in a panic, throws the sweater back into the bag, the cigarette in the sink. She races for the door just as BEN pokes his head in.

ANNE: Oh shit, oh shit—

BEN: Hi.

ANNE: *(she's laughing in relief)* Oh shit, hi. I thought you were Nancy for a second. Nancy almost never comes home for lunch, but I thought maybe—

BEN: Have you been smoking in here?

ANNE: No, but I had the window open, maybe the neighbours—

BEN: I see—

ANNE: It was the last one, I swear.

BEN: Right.

ANNE: I have a monster headache, Ben. All I needed was one cigarette to take the edge off.

BEN: Right. *(he goes into the kitchen)*

ANNE: Well?

BEN: What? Oh—the cake. Looks good.

ANNE: No—the sign, the balloons, the everything! The room!

BEN: Oh, it looks good, Anne. Do you need help putting stuff up? *(he is going through his mail.)*

ANNE: No, I don't think so. *(BEN goes on reading.)* I don't know why I'm so excited, I just want everything to go perfectly. How often do you have an eighteenth birthday, only once, right? My mother screwed my eighteenth birthday up good. I want it to be special for Nancy.

BEN: I'm sure it will be special.

ANNE: It's a special kind of cake—it's got lemon filling inside, that you

can't see. It's her favourite.

BEN: Neat.

ANNE: Do you think she's going to bring that guy to dinner, that, what's his name, Rick? Richard? Is that his name?

BEN: I think so. Yeah. Why do you say it like that?

ANNE: Like what?

BEN: You know.

ANNE: No I don't.

BEN: You're being, um, a snob.

ANNE: A snob.

BEN: He has a job.

ANNE: Construction.

BEN: That's a job.

ANNE: I know, I know.

BEN: He gets paid for that.

ANNE: Uh huh.

BEN: He seems honest.

ANNE: What kind of future does he have?

BEN: Don't be mean.

ANNE: Ben, please look at me.

He looks up.

ANNE: Hello Ben, I'm Anne, I'm your wife, nice to meet you.

BEN: Hi Anne. I'm Ben.

ANNE: No, you're my slave.

BEN: Ah.

ANNE: And as my slave, I want you to pay attention for once.

BEN: Yes. OK.

ANNE: How is your day going?

BEN: Fine. Um. Fine.

ANNE: Wow what a life you must have, everything's fine all the time. What are you doing home?

BEN: Um because I picked up a present for Nancy and I thought I'd drop it off so you can wrap it.

ANNE: But we bought her a sweater.

BEN: I know, but I saw this thing, this camera, and it was on sale, and you know she wants one.

ANNE: Was it expensive?

BEN: Never mind that. It just fit.

ANNE: OK, I'll put it with the other stuff.

BEN: OK. Thanks.

ANNE: But now that you're home, is there something else you want?

BEN: No?

ANNE: Nothing? *(she runs her hand down her neck)*

BEN: I don't think so.

ANNE: *(going up to him, she rubs his chest)* You don't think so.

BEN: I'm just on lunch, Anne.

ANNE: I know, and I have fifteen million things to do today, only I can't do any of them because it's Nancy's birthday, and I took the day off work to do all this shit, and meanwhile they're paralyzed at the office without me, but here I am, I have a splitting headache, I'm putting aside ten volunteer meetings and soccer councils and business reports because my big fuzzy bear is home, and I feel like getting it on—

BEN: Anne, really, what if Boo comes home—

ANNE: He never comes home for lunch. It's too far.

BEN: He's got his bike. I didn't lock the door.

ANNE: Don't worry. Just a quickie. Come on, you've seen those on TV—

BEN: I didn't lock the door.

ANNE: Do you remember doing it in the closet in my bedroom at home because you were so petrified my parents would hear—

BEN: How could I forget. Anne, the door—

ANNE: Touch me.

BEN: (*struggling over to the door as she clings to him*) I just want to—

ANNE: (*she falls off him, sighs, walks over to cake*) Fine.

BEN: I'm sorry.

ANNE: I'm sorry too. We spend a great deal of time apologizing.

BEN: What's wrong.

ANNE: Nothing's wrong, I just got excited, that's all, and I just wish— (*she stops*)

BEN: You wish what.

ANNE: Nothing. Don't you get excited about being with me any more? Be honest.

BEN: I do. I am.

ANNE: "I do. I am." I hear you say this, and you know Ben, you've always been quiet and you know I love that about you, but sometimes, *God*, I want to hear, *the woman in me* wants to hear a little more passion, a little more desperation, even—than "I do. I am." You know?

BEN *doesn't answer.*

ANNE: What's wrong.

BEN: I'm just. A little embarrassed. I feel badly, I guess.

Pause.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

BEN: No, I'm sorry. You do. Um. You turn me on. I'm just.

ANNE: It's not a big deal.

BEN: OK.

ANNE: Did you see the sweater we bought for Nancy?

BEN: Nope.

ANNE: Here. Have a look at it so you can say you helped pick it out. I know it's only a sweater but it's beautiful and I'm sure... *(she holds it out to him. When he goes to look at it, she comes close to him. She kisses him, and he kisses her back. The sweater is crunched between them.)* I love you. *(she grabs his hand and puts it on her breast)*

The front door flies open and BOO runs in, runs past them.

BOO: *(on the fly)* Hi Mom, Hi Dad, what are you doing home, I just forgot something, I have to go back to school.

He disappears upstairs. ANNE and BEN look at each other.

BEN: I wish, I wish, you wouldn't do that.

ANNE: What.

BEN: Force me—

ANNE: Force you to want me? Is that what you mean?

BEN: No, I just. I'm a shy person, and I was afraid Boo would walk in, and... It always has to be on your terms, right? Um. I can't even want you when I want you.

ANNE: I didn't know—

BEN: You *did* know, you chose to ignore.

ANNE: I didn't realize it would upset you.

BEN: I have to go. Back.

ANNE: All right.

He picks up his coat to leave, says nothing to her. She watches him go. BOO comes racing down the stairs and out the door.

BOO: Hi Mom what are you doing home, Dad CAN I HAVE A RIDE?!!

ANNE goes to the door, shuts it, and sighs. She walks over to the gifts and takes one out. She pulls out some wrapping paper and lays it out. There is a rattling at the door. ANNE rushes the gift and wrapping back into the bag. NANCY and RICHARD stumble in, laughing.

NANCY: Richard, I'm sure he didn't see us, come inside! *(she turns and sees ANNE)* Oh my God.

RICHARD: Oh, hi Mrs. Driver.

NANCY: *(seeing the gifts and the sign and everything)* Oh God. I'm not supposed to be here, am I?

ANNE: No.

NANCY: I'm—oh my God mom, a sign, that is so—I'm sorry, I didn't know.

ANNE: What are you doing home, you never come home.

RICHARD: We just came home because—

NANCY: Well Mom, I'm just taking it easy. It's my birthday, so I didn't think I really needed to go to all of my classes, you know how it is, right?

ANNE: Yeah. I do.

NANCY: What are *you* doing home?

ANNE: I have a good excuse, I was setting something up for your birthday. I went to all this trouble.

NANCY: Oh Mom I know, you're the best mom in the world, I don't know anyone who would take the day off work to do this, but you're not going to give me a hard time—

ANNE: It's not everyday that your only daughter turns eighteen, I know *my* mother never cared about birthdays and—

NANCY: I know, and I just wanted to hang out with Richard a bit—

ANNE: I'll bet you did—

RICHARD: Mrs. Driver, I'm sorry if I did something—

NANCY: Richard, don't worry about it, Mommie Dearest here is not going to give me grief on my birthday—

ANNE: Nancy, I think we have a policy about having guests over when we're not home, you know, just because you're eighteen now—

NANCY: Just because I'm eighteen? I think turning eighteen qualifies me for a little more freedom, for a little more credit than you normally give me—

ANNE: Nancy, I'm not going to argue with you, not in front of someone, and you know that rules are rules.

NANCY: Yes, but—

ANNE: Yes, but you didn't expect me to be home, did you, so you didn't think the rule applied to you in this case.

RICHARD: Mrs. Driver—

NANCY: Richard, please. I don't know any other eighteen-year-olds that have to live under the same rules that I live under here, I don't know any other mothers that have such a *tight goddamn fist*—

ANNE: I am not like other mothers. You just finished saying that.

NANCY: I didn't mean that there wasn't anything about you that BUGS ME—

ANNE: Nancy, I think it would be appropriate for your friend to leave now.

NANCY: Richard.

ANNE: I think Richard should leave, I think we need to talk.

NANCY: Since when do YOU want to talk, you're always SO BUSY—

ANNE: Richard, I think it would be appropriate for you to leave now.

RICHARD: OK.

NANCY: Don't go anywhere, Richard.

ANNE: Richard, please.

NANCY: Richard, come on.

RICHARD: OK.

NANCY/ANNE: (*staring each other down*) OK what?

RICHARD: Oh man.

NANCY: Richard, don't go anywhere.

RICHARD: Mrs. Driver, don't you think you might be overreacting a little bit?

ANNE: This is an inappropriate conversation for us to have, Richard.

RICHARD: I know, it's just that it is Nan's birthday and we weren't going to do anything wrong, we were just going to hang out.

ANNE: Oh come on, Richard, give me some credit. I'm not an moron, so don't treat me like an moron, OK?

RICHARD: OK.

ANNE: I know what it's like when you come home and the parents aren't around. I used to date guys like you.

RICHARD: Excuse me?

ANNE: I think that Nancy and I need to talk, so if you will excuse us.

RICHARD: All right, I'm going, Mrs. Driver.

ANNE: Thank you.

NANCY: Mom.

ANNE: Thank you, Richard.

RICHARD: Goodbye, honey. (*kisses her*)

He leaves. Pause.

NANCY: Happy birthday, Nancy.

ANNE: Happy birthday, Nancy.

NANCY: Richard is my boyfriend.

ANNE: I don't want to ruin your birthday.

NANCY: What do you think you're doing?

ANNE: That's not fair. You were being inappropriate.

NANCY: It's my eighteenth birthday! When will someone around here treat me like a grown up? Why is it that I have to spend all my time respecting *you* when you don't have to do that for me? I'm a human being, I'm not a dog—

ANNE: You're overreacting.

NANCY: *Of course* you would say that, the Queen of Overreacting, of course that would be your response—

ANNE: Did I raise you to be so *arrogant*? Did I raise you to be disrespectful and insolent? Just because you are eighteen now doesn't mean that you are my equal, that you can talk to me like you talk to all of your *friends*—

NANCY: You raised me to speak my mind.

ANNE: Yes, but you have to be judicious, you have to wait your turn, you don't argue with your mother in front of guests.

NANCY: Is that what Grandma taught you, is that the sum total of your accumulated wisdom? Don't speak your mind?

ANNE: Why do you bring up your grandmother like that? I am nothing like my mother. My mother would have grounded you long before now. You're lucky to have a mother that cares about you, that tolerates the amount of bullshit you bring into this house.

NANCY: (*ironic*) No Mom, you're right you're nothing like Grandma.

ANNE: You don't argue with your mother when she took a day off work to come home and make sure you have a spectacular birthday—

NANCY: Why did you put all of this stuff up for, because you wanted me to have a good time, or you wanted to be able to *say that you did it*?

ANNE: (*hurt*) Of course. Of course, I did it for you.

NANCY: (*to the point*) Why do you care if I'm having sex with him or not? We're safe.

ANNE: Are you having sex?

NANCY: I didn't say we are. I said we're safe.

ANNE: Safe isn't good enough sometimes.

NANCY: Mom—

ANNE: And I don't want to think about you here doing that. With your brother always lurking about.

NANCY: For God's sake, Mom, we haven't done it yet!

Pause.

ANNE: Yet.

NANCY: That's what I said.

ANNE: When? Today? For your birthday?

NANCY: I don't know.

ANNE: Yes you do.

NANCY: I'm eighteen.

ANNE: And Boo's eleven. And I'm forty-two.

NANCY: OK forget it.

ANNE: Having sex doesn't make you an adult. Becoming a woman has more to do with how you treat yourself and other people, it has to do with respect, and responsibility. Yes, I have a responsibility to you, to raise you in the best manner I can. But you are responsible for me too, Nancy, for making sure that the faith and trust I put in you doesn't make me a fool. Just because you are now eighteen doesn't mean that you don't have to listen to me anymore. Why don't you ever talk to me about this stuff before you get involved? Do you think that I've never had sex, that I've never had boy-friends, that I don't know what it's like to have hormones going off under your skin like firecrackers, because believe me Nancy, BELIEVE ME, you are more like me when I was your age than you'll ever be able to know.

NANCY: You want me to ask you before I have sex? And you're going to teach me? How to smoke a pack a day? How to frighten all the neighbours? How to bully your husband? How to ruin your kids lives?

ANNE: I'm not a bully. I am not so different from other mothers. Do you think I do these things because I actually *hate* you?

NANCY: I can make my OWN DECISIONS.

ANNE: Not always.

NANCY: I just want you to leave me alone *right now*. Just right now. You can bother me later, but today is my birthday and I would at least like to have this one long moment that lasts until midnight where you stay out of my life.

She turns to go.

ANNE: Where are you going?

NANCY: I am going to spend my eighteenth birthday with my boyfriend.

ANNE: But I did all this for you.

NANCY: Maybe I'll see you later.

ANNE: I am telling you not to leave.

NANCY: (*still going*) I heard you.

ANNE: Nancy, talk to me. Why don't you talk to me like you used to?

NANCY: Because nothing is the same anymore, Mother. I. Am. *Eighteen*. I am a woman, or maybe you didn't notice, you spend enough time meddling in my life but you have NO IDEA who I am anymore, you don't care that I've met someone that I love, you just want me to stay the same forever, to be this fucking little girl that you can boss around and take to soccer and *dress me*, and I am TOO OLD for this SHIT!

She waits by the door for ANNE to say something. ANNE shrugs at her coldly, turns away, sits. NANCY leaves, and slams the door, hard.

ANNE: Oh Christ.

She goes over to the counter, looks at the cake and the sign. She stares at the cake sadly. She looks in the drawer for a knife to smoothe out some of the frosting. She rubs the knife over the frosting and starts to cry suddenly. She drops the knife in the sink and screams. This seems to make her feel better—she braces herself against the counter and takes some deep breaths. She sighs and stops crying. She feels a pain in her head. She puts her hand to her head, it is

getting very sore. The pain intensifies and she starts to hyperventilate. She grabs a glass of water and her pills out of her bag. She downs the pills quickly and gulps some water. The pain gets worse and she can barely breathe, barely open her eyes. She staggers, goes for the phone, and it comes off the hook. She slips and hits her head on the counter as she goes down. We hear the sound of a dial tone.

SLIDE #4: *Family Portrait*. BEN, ANNE, NANCY and BOO are standing in front of the house in the sunlight. They are smiling, perfectly captured. The slide fades, disintegrates.

SCENETWO. Back to present day. It is a few months after the last scene in ACT ONE. There are changes in the look of the house: the furniture has been rearranged a little bit. There is a bank of signs hanging at the bottom of the stairs. They say: "Today is: Friday. The date is: Nov. 26th. Nancy is: 19. Nancy is in grade: 12. Boo is: 13. Boo is in grade: 7. You're doing well Mom!!" It is obvious that the signs have been much in use. They will change as NANCY and BOO age and as the days pass throughout the rest of this act. ANNE and YVONNE are doing their exercises, talking. ANNE has improved a little since the first act.

ANNE: Yvonne, are you a doctor?

YVONNE: Me? No, doctors are mean. I'm a nurse.

ANNE: Not all doctors are mean.

YVONNE: No, you're right, that's not fair, but the doctors I've slept with have all been kind of mean.

ANNE: Oh.

YVONNE: It's not like I did anything to them either, but they have eight years of medical school stored up, they have to take it out on someone. All that cutting bodies up and stuff, it must make you go kind of snaky.

ANNE: My doctor is a woman.

YVONNE: I know, I've met her. She's kind of strange.

ANNE: (*proudly*) She is.

YVONNE: Does this hurt?

ANNE: No. Yes.

YVONNE: How long has it been since someone took you shopping, Anne?

ANNE: What? Shopping?

YVONNE: For clothes, you need something new, no offense, but this track-suit is starting to make me sick.

ANNE: Me too.

YVONNE: Do you want me to take you?

ANNE: Yes please.

YVONNE: OK, we'll figure it out. I'm sure Nan will feel really confident, letting me take you out on an errand. She thinks I'm such a Chrissie.

ANNE: Who?

YVONNE: What I mean is, Nancy thinks I'm dumb.

ANNE: No she doesn't.

YVONNE: It's OK. I'm way used to that. It was like that in high school. I think partly because I never had any trouble getting boyfriends, maybe because I didn't have any shame, I used to be kind of wild when I was younger. They used to call me Wet T-Shirt Yvonne, so you can guess what I was like, a little bit. I always felt like I knew what I was doing though, you know? So I guess I dated a lot of guys, but not so many as people said of course. Beyond the sex, I mean I liked the sex OK, but mostly I liked taking care of those guys. I mean, I knew what I was doing, nobody seemed to understand that. (*ironic*) Like I didn't know I was sleeping around. None of those guys really wanted a girlfriend, I knew that. They just wanted someone to hold them tight and get them through it. So I did. I held them.

Pause.

ANNE: Where's your Mom?

YVONNE: Um, I don't know. On the coast, I think?

ANNE: Oh.

YVONNE: She's working on husband number three and I don't hear from her for a while unless they break up or something, you know?

ANNE: No.

YVONNE: So this is husband number three, I sure hope she loves him. I've never met him. I don't know how smart she is about guys and that, you know? Sometimes a daughter really does know stuff she could teach to her mom, I tell her, but she never listens. My roommate Kendra said she phoned last New Years' but I was out partying, and besides Kendra said she sounded wiggled out or coked up or something. Rude, you know? So I never called her back.

Pause.

ANNE: How is your boyfriend Kirk?

YVONNE: Oh fine, you know. A freak. He lost his job again for spitting at the customers. He's not right for retail, I don't know.

ANNE: Where's Boo?

YVONNE: Boo has karate. He'll be home in about an hour. You see the clock? Remind me how to read the clock.

ANNE: Little hand first.

YVONNE: Right. Do you want me to brush your hair? Or braid it?

ANNE: Yes please.

YVONNE: No, I have a better idea. Let's crimp it.

ANNE: Yes, Nancy will like that.

YVONNE: She'd better.

ANNE: She'd better, or you'll what?

YVONNE: I'll kick her ass. No offense.

The front door opens and NANCY walks in.

ANNE: Nancy! Hi!

NANCY: Hi.

ANNE: How was school?

NANCY: Fine. Stupid. Whatever, it was fine.

YVONNE: I loved high school. I think I was the only one.

NANCY: You probably were.

ANNE: We just finished our exercises.

YVONNE: Yah. I told Anne we'd do a make-over so I'm going to stick around for a while longer before I head out.

NANCY: Oh, I wish I'd known, I could've—

YVONNE: Oh, this isn't on the clock, honey.

NANCY: Right.

ANNE: Yvonne's going to take me shopping, Nancy. For a new tracksuit.

YVONNE: No, Anne, we're getting you something stylish instead.

NANCY: We don't have any spare money, Yvonne.

ANNE: Oh. (*cries*)

YVONNE: Take it easy, Anne. It's my treat. I'm sure I'll be able to scrounge up enough for something cool. Something synthetic that won't wrinkle on you. Don't worry, Yvonne's on the case. Right, Nancy?

She looks over at NANCY pointedly. NANCY stares back.

NANCY: Right.

SCENE THREE. *Night, some weeks later. BEN's bedroom. There is a knock on the door.*

BEN: Is that you, Anne?

LOUISE: (*outside*) No, it's actually Louise.

BEN: Oh, Louise, hi. Um. Come in?

LOUISE: (*entering*) Hi, oh sorry, you're in bed, were you sleeping?

BEN: No. I was reading.

LOUISE: Oh, you were reading.

BEN: Come in.

LOUISE: I have had the longest day. You don't mind?

BEN: You've seen me in my pajamas before, I think. Um. What are you doing here?

LOUISE: I brought over some laundry that I finished.

BEN: Thank you, thank you, you don't have to do that.

LOUISE: Who's going to do it? Yvonne?

BEN: You're not a fan of Yvonne's either.

LOUISE: She's not actually *trained* in anything special, you know. She teaches Anne whatever she happens to be learning at the gym.

BEN: Anne seems to like her.

LOUISE: Well.

BEN: Thank you for doing the laundry.

LOUISE: I left it downstairs, I thought I'd come up and see how you were doing.

BEN: I'm fine. Um. I'm tired.

LOUISE: Yeah.

BEN: In fact I'm tired of being tired. I'm tired of never having any extra energy. I'm tired of not having any interesting sparks in me. I'm a cash machine. In and out. Nancy buying a new book for school. A new pair of sneakers for Boo. I never imagine buying myself a vacation. It's always a book or four litres of milk or a bus pass. I never think about buying something whimsical, or romantic, or...

LOUISE: It's been years since I had a romantic thought.

BEN: Come on, that can't be true.

LOUISE: How would you know?

BEN: I would know.

LOUISE: Oh come on, you don't pay attention.

BEN: Yes I do, I pay attention.

LOUISE: So you've noticed that I seem to be invisible to straight, single men of any stripe?

BEN: Are you?

LOUISE: Well, I haven't had a date in the four years since my divorce was finalized.

BEN: Really? That's strange.

LOUISE: Who wants to date an English teacher? Always watching your grammar. So you didn't notice?

BEN: Yes, I mean no, I didn't notice, I mean I didn't know that it had been quite that long...

LOUISE: (*looking around*) This room seems so empty without Anne.

BEN: She likes it better sleeping in the study. I think she likes the cedar smell in there.

LOUISE: There's only a twin bed in there—makes it tricky when you feel like having a romantic evening.

BEN: What? Oh. (*he looks down, embarrassed. LOUISE immediately feels badly.*)

LOUISE: Oh my God what a thing to say. Look what I said to you.

BEN: It's OK.

Pause.

LOUISE: I guess. I guess I do...well I wonder sometimes what has become of your relationship with Anne, since...and well, I'm not sure... I don't know why I suddenly decided it was something I needed to know, but somehow, for some reason I'm not articulating very well right now, there was a knot inside me, there is...that wants. To know.

BEN: Anne and I don't...we don't *sleep* together anymore. I thought you knew.

LOUISE: Oh. No. I just assumed—

BEN: We haven't. Um. Since.

LOUISE: Oh.

BEN: I think about it a lot.

LOUISE: You miss it. You miss her.

BEN: I do. Yeah.

LOUISE: And you wish you could...again, with her.

BEN: Yeah. Well...it's weird.

LOUISE: So what do you do?

BEN: I'm her husband. I wait.

LOUISE: You *wait*.

BEN: For as long as it takes.

LOUISE: But—

BEN: I made a vow.

LOUISE: What does that mean? I met Luther, and he made a vow to me, or I should say we both made vows, and how could we know it wouldn't turn out so well, so maybe the vow isn't the most important thing—

BEN: How can you say that—

LOUISE: You grow up or you grow apart or in my case you realize you never really *knew* or *liked* each other—how are we supposed to anticipate everything that might happen when you make a vow like that? Nobody *really* knows and they do it anyway. When there are extenuating circumstances, when there are accidents, things that happen which are beyond your control—

BEN: A vow is a vow. In sickness and in health.

LOUISE: Yes, you have a responsibility, I'm not denying that, I'm just saying—

BEN: I do have a responsibility—

LOUISE: But does that mean you never get to love again, like that? You can't stop *that* from happening.

BEN: What do you mean?

LOUISE: It happens, it surprises you. It bites you in the ass. Someone makes you feel *excited* again.

BEN: Who says I want to?

LOUISE: I'm sorry.

Pause.

BEN: I married Anne.

LOUISE: I know. But.

Pause.

LOUISE: (*a leap of faith*) You want to.

Pause.

BEN: What?

LOUISE: I know.

BEN: What.

LOUISE: This may be really stupid, but I do too. *I want to.*

Pause.

BEN: I don't know what to do.

LOUISE: Me neither.

BEN: I don't know what I have to offer...

LOUISE: I don't have *anything* to offer—

He cuts her off by kissing her.

SCENE FOUR. *The kitchen. Signs: "Today is: Saturday. The date is: Jan 17. Nancy is: 19. Nancy is in grade: 12. Boo is: 13. Boo is in grade: 7. You're doing well Mom!!" BOO is sitting, staring at the phone. He sighs. He picks it up, then puts it down. He opens a cupboard and reaches into the very back, behind everything. There is a Pop Tart waiting for him there. He opens it and*

takes a bite. He goes to the phone, dials. It starts ringing.

BOO: Hello. Um, can I talk to Megan please? Yes. This Benjamin Driver, from school. Ben. *(he waits)* Um, hi Megan, this is Benjamin Driver from school. I sit behind you...oh...? Cool... Well, I'm kind of calling because...did you finish your science homework? Me neither. Do you want me to help you? I can. I'm really good at science...you can copy off me if you want. OK. Deal. Um...I know, wasn't that funny? She looked stupid...is that your Mom, do you have to go? No, my Mom isn't like that anymore. She *was* though... No, that's OK, I don't mind talking about it. She's just way different, that's all. Our Aunt sort of takes care of us...your Mom sounds really strict. Do you have to go? OK. I just...I just. Is it OK that I called? OK. I was just calling because there's this new show on TV that looks really cool, it's about a man trapped in a dog's body, it looks really cool, and I wanted to make sure you knew it was on... You're welcome... Yeah, see you tomorrow... OK. Bye.

BOO hangs up. Sighs. Takes another bite of his Pop Tart. He dials again.

BOO: Hi this is Benjamin Driver, I'm calling to make a dentist appointment for myself. *(he waits)* It has to be some time after three cause I have school. I haven't been in for a while. Um, while I'm at it, I should make appointments for my dad and my sister too, OK? OK, I'll wait.

SCENE FIVE. *Morning, a few days later. The kitchen. Signs: "Today is: Wednesday. The date is: Jan 21st. Nancy is: 19. Nancy is is grade: 12. Benjamin is: 13. Benjamin is is grade: 7. You're doing well Mom!!"* LOUISE is standing at the counter, deep in thought. BEN comes in, getting ready for work.

BEN: Good morning.

LOUISE: *(surprised)* Oh! Good morning.

BEN: What are you doing over here so early?

LOUISE: I have stuff in the car. I froze some dinners for you.

BEN: OK.

LOUISE: Did you sleep well?

BEN: Yes. You?

LOUISE: Yes.

BEN: Actually, I didn't. Um.

LOUISE: No I did not sleep well, either. I never sleep well.

BEN: Oh.

Pause.

LOUISE: Sometimes I feel like I can't turn my brain off and I sit still for a while. And then I think, "You're so stupid, why can't you just get to sleep. Just go to sleep you stupid woman."

BEN: Oh.

LOUISE: Sometimes I go over and flip on the TV and half the time it's only infomercials on. The cyclone vacuum cleaner. Fruit drier trays. Ginzu knives. Kick boxing classes. Everybody looks so confident.

BEN: Louise, I—

LOUISE: I don't know what to say.

BEN: Don't say anything.

LOUISE: I know, the kids will be getting up and nobody should know but I come over all the time, not just today, but yes today, I came over, I make work, because I just, I just...want to be. Near to you. That's all I want. (*she breathes a sigh*)

Pause.

BEN: I know we, um, were intimate a few days ago, but I'm confused, I don't—

LOUISE: (*quickly*) OK, don't bother.

BEN: No, no.

LOUISE: Don't try to make me feel better, Ben, Jesus, let's not do that. Let me put twenty years of jealousy and *whatever* behind me without you trying to make it all better, please—

BEN: No—

LOUISE: I'm embarrassed enough—

BEN: No, PLEASE, will you listen to me.

Pause.

LOUISE: I am.

He comes over to her.

BEN: I don't know how its supposed to work, and I don't know what to do, it's different, but I don't regret...what we did, making love, I don't... Um. I wanted to. I think. Um. I don't want to *think* any more.

He kisses her.

LOUISE: No, Ben, the kids, we don't want—

BEN: I don't care.

LOUISE: Ben—

BOO *walks in*. LOUISE *sees him*.

LOUISE: (*firmly*) Ben.

He stops and looks over to see BOO standing there.

BOO: Aunt Louise?

LOUISE: Boo—

BEN: Oh Jesus, Boo.

BOO: Nancy? Nancy!?

BEN: Boo?

BOO: I want Nancy.

NANCY *comes in, getting ready for school. She stands there a beat.*

NANCY: What happened.

BEN: I should explain—

NANCY: What happened, Boo?

BEN: Please, let me talk to you two.

NANCY: What did you do to Boo?

BOO: Ben. Stop calling me Boo. It's Ben.

BEN: I didn't do anything to him.

BOO: He was kissing Aunt Louise.

BEN: Young man—

BOO: You're having sex with her.

Pause.

NANCY: (*standing in front of him*) Is that true?

BEN: No. (*an impulse decision*) Yes.

LOUISE: Ben—

NANCY: *What?*

BEN: Ben walked in and saw us kissing. I don't know how he got the idea that we—

NANCY: But he was right.

BEN: (*nods*) He was right.

BOO: I was right.

Pause.

NANCY: *Why?*

BEN: Your Aunt Louise and I are close now, closer since we've been taking care of your mother, and...

LOUISE: It just happened.

NANCY: Shut up. You're making me sick to my stomach—

BEN: Don't talk like that to her.

NANCY: (*to LOUISE*) Who the HELL ARE YOU to tell me that it JUST HAPPENED?! Nothing JUST HAPPENS! You've been hanging around my Dad all this time, you waited your turn, you were patient enough, and lucky you—Mom has an accident and in you go, quick, while you can, and sleep with my father?

LOUISE: That's not fair. She's my sister.

NANCY: That makes HIM your BROTHER—

LOUISE: I know this is a difficult—

NANCY: I don't give a SHIT WHAT YOU THINK!

BEN: Go to your room, Nancy!

LOUISE: Let me talk to her. Ben. For God's sake.

NANCY: What? WHAT?

LOUISE: Let me say something.

NANCY: (*ruthless*) Go ahead. Speak.

LOUISE: Listen to me. Your mother is still alive, but she's not the same. You know that.

NANCY: So what?

LOUISE: Do you think that he doesn't care about her anymore? *Of course* he does. He'll always care about her, but that doesn't stop him from needing someone, from needing certain things that only a partner can give you. And you know what? Any woman who, who falls in love with him is going to have to contend with your mother, because he is a decent, DECENT man, and you owe him some care and some respect, Nancy. Respect. And not just the kind that you give to your dad, because God knows—and I was a teenager once too—that you respect your parents *that much less*, but the kind of respect and compassion you give to ordinary human beings, decent people who are just trying to figure something out. He's never going to forget her, he is a committed husband and I know that, every time I spend a moment with him I realize that, even when we're together alone she's in the room with us somehow, I know that, because your dad has such a big big heart that he'll never let her go. As much as anyone might want him too. But he has to think for *himself* sometimes, we have to help him do that, because since this happened, it's never been about him, Nancy, do you, *do you know what I mean?* It's all about Anne, it's all about you two, he has to be this *stone*. Don't blame him if *for once* he puts himself first.

BOO: (*to BEN*) Do you still love Mom?

BEN: Yes of course I do. It's just different.

BOO: But you didn't get a divorce.

BEN: No, we didn't.

BOO: You're not married to Aunt Louise. If you love her why didn't you marry her?

BEN: Um. It's just. (*at a loss*) Oh Ben.

BOO *runs upstairs.*

BEN: Ben? Ben?

LOUISE: Nan, try to understand, I know this is a strange...but you're old enough to—

NANCY: (*to LOUISE*) If it's not about Mom, it *should* be. And just, just because you have some massive guilt complex about what you did with him, doesn't mean I'm going to swallow all this HORSESHIT, you telling me that we have no compassion for him! She is OUR MOTHER! She is STILL ALIVE! Why don't you get lost before you fuck us up some more!

BEN: NANCY I HAVE HAD JUST ABOUT ENOUGH OUT OF YOU! I AM ORDERING YOU TO BE QUIET!

NANCY: HERE'S SOME NEWS FOR YOU, DAD: I DON'T GIVE A FUCK WHAT YOU WANT!

BEN: (*dangerously quiet*) Stop talking. Stop talking to her like that. Or to me. When your mother was around she kept you on a pretty short leash, she didn't let you say things like that. And just because she's not the same doesn't mean you get to do whatever you want to do! You are MY daughter, this is MY house, this is MY family and I am in charge. You cannot replace your mother, Nancy, none of us can. But I am IN CHARGE. Your Aunt Louise has done more for us than anybody. We didn't plan any of this, but it happens. It's something you're going to realize as you get older, Nancy, so why not start trying to get it now. Your plans won't turn out exactly like you think they will. They go sour, they change, new plans come along to save you. Believe me.

NANCY: It's not my fault this accident happened! And now it's wrecking everything I had planned and now everything sucks.

BEN: I know.

NANCY: You don't know shit. You don't know what you're doing. You're drowning. You're pathetic.

BEN: I'm pathetic.

NANCY: And what pisses you if that you know that I can see right through you.

Pause.

NANCY: I am going to school now. May I?

BEN: Yes.

NANCY: (*goes to the door*) Will you talk to Boo? Someone needs to talk to Boo.

LOUISE: I will. (*goes up the stairs*)

Pause.

NANCY: I'm not trying to replace her.

BEN: I can take care of all of us.

NANCY: No. You can't. (*starts to leave*)

BEN: (*as she goes*) I miss her too, Nancy. Nobody wishes that Anne was around more than me.

NANCY is gone. BEN turns around and ANNE is standing there, scared, confused.

ANNE: I'm here, I'm around.

SCENE SIX. *Shortly thereafter. Inside BOO's bedroom. BOO is sitting on his bed, reading a book. LOUISE comes in and stands in the doorway.*

LOUISE: Ben? May I come in?

BOO: Whatever.

LOUISE: OK. I think I will.

BOO: Whatever.

LOUISE: What are you reading?

BOO *shows her, unsmiling.*

LOUISE: Oh. *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien. I love that book. I wish I could teach that book in my classes.

BOO: What do you want?

LOUISE: I thought you might want to talk.

BOO: Nope.

LOUISE: Your father still loves your mom very much.

BOO: Bullshit.

LOUISE: How do you know he doesn't?

BOO: How do you know he does?

LOUISE: Because I can see it, Ben.

BOO: You must be glad Mom's a vegetable.

LOUISE: No, Ben, and you're not allowed to say things like that. Not even in anger.

BOO: Who gives a shit.

LOUISE: I do. She's my sister. She's my best friend. She's the strongest person I know. But your father and I. We just. I just—he was always a good friend, you know? Do you have any friends who are girls?

BOO: Yeah. Of course.

LOUISE: That was your dad and me. And you know how sometimes things happen and you didn't plan them, but then you're in the middle of it and you know that there's nothing you can do to stop it?

BOO: I guess.

LOUISE: Then you know what's going on here, Boo. You're pretty much the smart one around here anyway.

BOO: No I'm not. I'm not smart.

LOUISE: OK. You're not.

BOO: I still love Mom.

LOUISE: Me too.

BOO: I miss her. The old her.

LOUISE: Oh me too, Benjamin.

BOO: I want to be alone now, OK?

LOUISE: Fair enough. (*goes to the door*) I hope you don't hate me, Benjamin, because I was there when you were born, sweetheart. I know you from the inside out. We're friends and I love you so, so much.

Pause, she starts to leave, but hears this:

BOO: I don't hate people. That's stupid.

SCENE SEVEN. *The front porch, late at night, a few months later.* RICHARD and NANCY are sitting there together in silence.

RICHARD: Remember my uncle was going to ask about a job for me? He's going to do it this week. It's in the bag. It would be out of town for a while, but it's good money. And it's really only a two hour drive. Or so.

NANCY: Uh huh.

RICHARD: What do you think of that?

NANCY: It's fine.

RICHARD: It's a good job. It'd be a promotion.

NANCY: (*distant*) Great.

RICHARD: Is something wrong?

Pause.

RICHARD: Nancy?

NANCY *shrugs.*

RICHARD: It's just that you're so quiet.

NANCY: I just *feel* quiet.

RICHARD: Oh.

Pause.

NANCY: Jesus, aren't I allowed to be quiet?

RICHARD: That's not what I meant. It's just the past couple of weeks, you've...
It's like you're bothered by something.

NANCY: Yeah well, have you seen my family lately?

RICHARD: I know.

NANCY: No you don't.

Pause.

RICHARD: I don't know how to *help* you, Nancy, and I want to, more than anything. So tell me. What can I do?

NANCY: I don't know.

RICHARD: Do you want to talk about it?

NANCY: No.

RICHARD: Please?

NANCY: No.

Pause.

RICHARD: (*bitter*) I don't feel like sitting here in *silence* with you anymore.

He doesn't move.

Pause.

NANCY: What do you want?

RICHARD: What do *you* want?

NANCY *does not answer.*

SCENE EIGHT. *The park. A few months have passed. It is early September. ANNE and YVONNE are out for their daily walk. It is a beautiful late summer day, busy with smells. They are sitting on a park bench.*

YVONNE: What are the names.

ANNE: Grass. Squirrel.

YVONNE: Where?

ANNE *points*.

YVONNE: Oh that's cool. But they're rabid, you know, and they have mean little eyes.

ANNE: Oh. That's a tree. Wrinkled.

YVONNE: That's a maple. You can tell from the leaves.

ANNE: That's a tree. A big one.

YVONNE: That's an oak. I know that one!

ANNE: That's a tree. That's a baby one.

YVONNE: I don't know that one. Snap a picture and we'll look it up. (*she does*)

ANNE: Sneakers. There's so many colours today, it hurts my eyes a little.

YVONNE: I know. It's great. Everyone's outside. Wait. Can you smell that? What's that?

ANNE: I don't know.

YVONNE: It's a spring summer smell.

ANNE: Flowers.

YVONNE: That's ice cream. There must be ice cream somewhere.

ANNE: Hot dogs.

YVONNE: Yep, that too. Are you too hot? Do you want to sit in the shady part?

ANNE: No, I like it hot. I see red when I close my eyes and look up.

YVONNE: Do you? I love Indian summer.

They both do it. NANCY wanders on and sees them. ANNE and YVONNE open their eyes.

ANNE: Nancy!

NANCY: Hi Mom. Hi Yvonne.

YVONNE: Hi. Oh, is this the way you come home from college?

NANCY: Mostly.

YVONNE: Cool.

NANCY: I skipped my last course today.

ANNE: You shouldn't do that.

YVONNE: Oh honey, it's not like elementary, nobody's going to give her detention or anything, all the cool college kids skip some classes.

NANCY: What are you doing here?

ANNE: We're going for a walk.

NANCY: Oh.

ANNE: Did you have a good day?

NANCY: Not particularly.

ANNE: Are you lonely? Because Richard's gone?

NANCY: No. I guess.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

NANCY: There's not much you can do about it.

YVONNE: Sit with us.

Nancy sits.

YVONNE: Isn't it beautiful out, Anne?

ANNE: Yes.

YVONNE: I love it. I love it. I hope I'm tanning.

ANNE: I want you to take me on a walk, Nancy.

NANCY: Yvonne takes you on walks, doesn't she?

ANNE: Oh. (*cries*) I know.

NANCY: What did I do now?

ANNE: (*trying to stop*) Nothing, nothing.

NANCY: Fine, I'll find some time, I'll take you on a walk somewhere.

ANNE: OK. Good.

YVONNE: Anne, why don't you go over to that tree over there—the big orange one. I'll take your picture. Kind of far away.

ANNE *gets up to go over.*

YVONNE: Don't forget to smell the leaves—they smell like fall. Remember?

ANNE: OK.

She is gone. YVONNE has BOO's camera out.

YVONNE: I think she'd really like for you to take her for a walk.

NANCY: I said I would.

YVONNE: I know, I just want you to know that it takes guts for her to ask directly for stuff she wants, you know? (*to ANNE*) Move over, honey. No—that way. Good. (*aiming to take the picture*)

NANCY: Yes. I know.

Pause.

YVONNE: Your anger isn't helpful.

NANCY: What?

YVONNE: I know you heard me. You don't talk to her with much kindness

in your voice. And if you think nobody notices, then you're wrong. Anne, honey, LOOK UP, I want to see your face!

NANCY: How dare you talk to me like that.

YVONNE: You have a choice here. You can either take it like I meant it, like it'll help, or you can do the usual and get mad, but I think you should realize you don't always have to choose the same response. (*takes the picture*)

NANCY: (*flustered*) I just thought, I mean I know she likes to walk with you, I didn't think she *wanted* me to go with her—

YVONNE: You think your own mother wouldn't want to spend time with you? She talks about you all the time.

NANCY: She doesn't need me.

YVONNE: Come on back, Anne, we need to get going! (*to NANCY*) That's not really the thing, though, Nancy. You just don't *know* her anymore, and you don't want to know her. You don't really *see* her. So you just say, "well shit, she's different, she's not the mother I remember" and it's like you pretend she's *dead*. It's not that she doesn't need you, she needs you more than ever, but you're not used to that, you just *don't want her to need you*.

NANCY: (*quietly*) What are you talking about?

YVONNE: It's easier to think that way, then you don't have to put out. You don't have to grow up.

ANNE *has returned*.

ANNE: What happened?

YVONNE: Nancy and I were just having a little talk, honey.

NANCY: She doesn't need to know—

YVONNE: Why not? She knows when something's going on. She's not an idiot.

ANNE: What happened?

YVONNE: It's not serious, honey.

NANCY: You have NO IDEA what it's like to be me—you just come in for a few hours every day, you don't have to live inside that house all the time—

you don't get TIRED like I do—

ANNE: Stop it. STOP IT.

YVONNE: Anne, honey. It's OK. I've got my bag with me, I'm going to head off and catch the bus. Nancy's here, so she can take you home. You can have a little walk. I'll see you tomorrow and at three o'clock we'll see if Dr. Rogano gets rescued from the mine shaft by the midget.

ANNE: OK.

She leaves. ANNE sits. Pause.

NANCY: What are you thinking? Are you thinking about the leaves?

No answer.

NANCY: Mom? What's going on in there? Do you want to talk?

Still nothing.

NANCY: Mom?

ANNE: I'm afraid of what to say. I'm afraid of you.

Pause.

NANCY: *(deeply stung)* Oh.

ANNE *breathes deeply, looks away.* NANCY *does the same.*

SCENE NINE. *Around the same day. In a movie theatre. BEN and BOO are sitting there, eating popcorn and waiting for it to start.*

BEN: We haven't been to the movies in a long time.

BOO: We're here way early.

BEN: I know, I just got excited.

Pause.

BEN: What's this movie about?

BOO: It's about a lizard man who has sex with dead people.

BEN: Is this a PG movie?

BOO: Of course it is. I've seen all that stuff anyway.

BEN: OK. Anybody I know in this movie?

BOO: The lead is that baseball player.

BEN: Oh, great.

Pause.

BEN: We haven't been out for some father son stuff in a long time.

BOO: (*looking around*) We're here so early, there's nobody here yet.

BEN: Aren't you glad to be out with your dad again?

BOO: Yeah. Can I get Gummy Bears?

BEN: I'm not a piggy bank.

Pause.

BOO: I know.

BEN: I want to talk to you before you go off and get Gummy Bears.

BOO: Fine.

BEN: Are you still mad?

BOO: Why does everyone think I'm mad all the time? I'm not. I'm just normal.

BEN: Well you hardly tell me what's going on anymore, you just scowl, and so—

BOO: I'm just thinking, that's all.

BEN: Well, you have lots to think about.

BOO: I know.

BEN: So do I.

BOO: I know.

BEN: I'm glad you know that. It's kind of unfair, Ben, but you've had to deal with some serious stuff and now that your Aunt Louise and I are seeing more of each other, I know it's weird.

BOO: Did you like her when you were younger too?

BEN: Louise and I were always kind of friends.

BOO: Not as much as you were friends with Mom though.

BEN: No.

Pause.

BEN: But things change, you know?

BOO: Were you liking her when Mom was around, like she used to be?

BEN: No. I loved your mom.

BOO: Uh huh. Are you going to divorce Mom?

BEN: I don't know, Boo. No.

BOO: OK.

BEN: Does any of this make sense?

Pause.

BOO: You and Aunt Louise are really a lot alike sometimes.

BEN: Yes we are.

BOO: That's neat.

BEN: Yep.

BOO: It's confusing.

BEN: Yeah. OK.

The lights start to go down. The movie is starting.

BEN: Ben...

BOO: Shhh, it's starting.

BEN: Is there anything more you want to say?

BOO: Not right now. You?

BEN: No. Do you want your Gummy Bear money?

The movie music starts up.

BOO: Yes please.

BEN *gets it for him.*

BOO: I'll get them afterwards and we'll eat them in the car.

BEN *smiles.*

BEN: Good deal.

There is a crash in the movie soundtrack and a flash across the screen.

BOO: (*cheering*) WHOA YEAH!

SCENE TEN. *The middle of the night, a few days later. NANCY is asleep in her room. ANNE comes in, healthy, like she was before the accident. She slips into the room and closes the door behind her. She stands against it for a minute, staring down at NANCY sleeping. She fishes in her pocket for cigarettes, pulls one out, then realizes she can't smoke in here. She shakes her head ruefully; she has been dying for a smoke. She puts them back. NANCY wakes with a start.*

NANCY: Mom? What are you doing in here? What's wrong?

ANNE: Nothing, nothing's wrong.

NANCY: You should go back to sleep.

ANNE doesn't move. She stands there smiling at NANCY, who is trying to go back to sleep. There is a pause. NANCY looks up at her.

NANCY: Do you need something? Do you need a glass of water?

ANNE: I'm fine.

NANCY: What?

ANNE: Go back to sleep if you want.

NANCY: What's happened?

ANNE: Nothing.

NANCY: *(still struggling to wake up and make sense of this)* You seem different. You're talking different. Do you feel different?

ANNE: Different from what?

NANCY: Different from what, different from normal, from how you—

ANNE: I've told you. I feel fine. I'm the mom. I'm supposed to ask *you* how *you* feel.

NANCY: I feel fine.

ANNE: Yeah?

NANCY: Yeah, I guess so. *(getting out of bed suddenly, and staring at ANNE.)* Wait a minute. Wait a minute. *(looks at her, looks at her bed, looks back at ANNE)* I'm still asleep.

ANNE: You're funny. Then how am I talking to you?

NANCY: I'm still asleep, that's how I'm talking to you. *(sits on her bed)*

ANNE's *expression changes. She goes to the bed and sits down. After a second she puts her hand on NANCY's shoulder.*

ANNE: I see. You're still asleep. That's very odd. Doesn't mean I can smoke, does it?

Pause.

NANCY: I miss you.

ANNE: Yeah? Why.

NANCY: I don't know why, you're my mother.

ANNE: I'm still around. Are you still playing soccer?

NANCY: No, I'm going to college. I'm not playing soccer anymore. I don't have time.

ANNE: I liked coming to your games, I wish you were still playing.

NANCY: Well I'm not.

ANNE: Something you want to tell me?

NANCY: Richard's gone.

ANNE: Ah.

Pause.

NANCY: I miss him so much. What do I do?

ANNE: How should I know?

NANCY: I don't know, I thought...I wrote him a letter weeks ago and he didn't write back.

ANNE: (*sighs*) It's been so long since I had to do any of this...I don't know. Love is very...difficult. They tell you that but you never really believe it until it happens to you.

NANCY: Are you still in love with Dad?

ANNE: Yes. I think so.

NANCY: You're so different.

ANNE: Your father is a surprising man, Nancy. You'll figure that out. He's strong.

NANCY: Did you love him when you married him?

ANNE: Oh absolutely. Desperately. It was scary, I couldn't be without him. He kept my feet on the ground. His silence was very...sexy and powerful.

NANCY: And then?

ANNE: Then when we got older and, and it happens to everyone—it changed, and it wasn't worse, it was just...different. There were times all along that I really loved him, more than I could have loved anyone else. And the other times, you just sort of...wait for it to be clear again. You have to be patient.

Pause.

NANCY: When you had your accident, did it hurt?

ANNE: I think so.

NANCY: Oh God.

ANNE: For a bit.

NANCY: When we talk to you now, can you understand us?

ANNE: Oh sure.

NANCY: Can you remember yourself?

ANNE: Not very much.

NANCY: I'm starting to forget the old you, the woman who used to take care of everything.

ANNE: Was I awful?

NANCY: I don't care, I don't *want* to forget the old you.

ANNE: What can you do about it?

NANCY: I keep trying to carve these pictures, these memories into my brain, but they keep slipping out. I lose a little more ground each day. It's exhausting trying to keep up.

ANNE: I *am* going to smoke. Come on, smoke with me. (*grabs for her cigarettes*)

NANCY: Where did you get those?

ANNE: They're very very old.

She lights one up, takes a drag, hands to NANCY, who looks at her warily for a beat, and then takes a deep drag of her own. ANNE reaches under the bed and finds a pop can, tipping her ash into it. She grins.

ANNE: Didn't think I knew? Old secret. God that's good. (*thinks for a beat*) Sometimes you'll mention something and I'll get a muddy picture of it, like a, like a water colour that's fallen into a puddle. And for a second the image is as sharp as it can be, and then the colour starts to run and the paper disintegrates and I can't even remember what the thing was in the first place. And I can never speak up quickly enough to tell you it's happened before I forget it. There's a trap door in the back of my head, it feels like, and everything, everything falls through the bottom before I really get a chance to hold onto it or catalogue it. I can't remember anything.

NANCY: Yes you do, nowadays you can remember some stuff from the past, you can remember people's names not that badly. And you can remember where you are and how to read a watch and stuff. You don't cry so much.

ANNE: Uh huh. I'm not much of a mother anymore.

NANCY: No. The more you remember the better you'll get, right? Some day you'll be back as good as new.

ANNE: I should have parceled myself out, like I used to freeze dinners in advance. I should have frozen parts of me in advance so you could warm me up like Tupperware. *(laughs)*

NANCY: That's not funny. How am I supposed to laugh at that?

ANNE: What am I supposed to do about it, Nancy?

NANCY: You're not the one who lost a mother.

ANNE: I lost a mother. You were at the funeral, remember? *She's dead.* Thank God. You didn't lose a mother. You've still got your mother.

NANCY: Where is she when I need to talk to her?

ANNE: You talk to Louise.

NANCY: Louise is all right, but we're not the same. You and me, we're the same person, you were supposed to be around to plan my wedding at least.

ANNE: I will come to your wedding. I'm not dead. Some people never get a mother. At least you had a mother for a little while, not a bad one.

NANCY: It doesn't feel like enough.

ANNE: It's gotta be, Nancy. You don't get to decide.

Pause.

ANNE: I like being out. I don't want to go back. I like having quick legs. *(pause)* I should go.

NANCY: No, don't.

ANNE: I have to.

NANCY: No you don't. I brought you here. You have to stay.

ANNE: That's just like you, Nancy. You brought me here. Like there's nothing that's beyond your control.

NANCY: What am I going to do?

ANNE: Don't ask me, Nancy, I don't know either. You just have to make it up. Don't waste too much time wishing things had turned out differently.

NANCY: I'm not trying to—

ANNE: I know. It sucks. But you've gotta work at it until it's not so bad anymore. It takes more energy than you think.

NANCY: Mom, look—

ANNE: Do you remember when Boo had his appendix out a few years ago? And when they did the surgery they discovered that he had an extra kidney? Just a little one, tucked in behind, not doing anything? They had to take it out, they thought one day it might get infected or something. But they told me it was genetic, that if he had something extra, you probably do too. There's no way of knowing, but you've got my genes, honey, chances are you've got some extra organs in there somewhere, an extra kidney or gall bladder or something. So maybe I did something right, at least I equipped you for emergencies, I gave you something in reserve in case you needed help. In case I couldn't be there.

NANCY: I'm so tired, Mom.

ANNE: Yeah. I know. I know you, Nancy. You think, "If I'm good enough, if I'm deserving enough, if I work *hard enough*, I can fix it. I can fix anything." I think you got that from me. We might've been great friends one day. I know you. You're *strong*.

NANCY: I don't feel strong.

ANNE: (*kindly*) No. Of course you don't.

NANCY: Mom—

ANNE: Let me go, Nancy. Let me go. (*she kisses her quickly on the forehead and slips out the door*)

NANCY sits on her bed staring at the door. She turns away, lays her head on the pillow. A moment passes. There is a scraping at the window. NANCY goes over and pulls the curtains aside. RICHARD is there, looking in.

NANCY: Richard! What, what are you doing at my window? Is that really you?

RICHARD: Are you glad to see me?

NANCY: What are you doing here?

RICHARD: Are you glad to see me? How long has it been since you last saw me?

NANCY: Five and a half months.

RICHARD: Five months and fifteen days.

NANCY: Thirteen. I saw you making a turn at an intersection. You didn't see me.

RICHARD: Ah.

NANCY: What are you doing here?

RICHARD: Are you seeing someone?

NANCY: No. You?

RICHARD: No.

NANCY: How's the new job?

RICHARD: Good. Hard. Far away.

NANCY: Why won't you come in?

RICHARD: I promised myself I wouldn't.

NANCY: You drove three hours to promise yourself not to come into my room?

RICHARD: Well, yeah I guess, that's not the whole deal—

NANCY: What's going on.

RICHARD: I got your letter, the one you sent me weeks ago. I'm not much for writing, you know that, but I have the answers to your questions: Yes. Yes I still love you. Yes. Yes it hurts me to be away from you. No. No I do not look at any other women. Yes. Yes I fantasize about you and play with myself late at night. Every night.

NANCY: Come in here.

RICHARD: No. No. You are a very persuasive, dominating person and I have my own way of doing things and this is it. And while I love you for being such a hardass I am going to do this my way.

NANCY: What.

RICHARD: I may be fooling myself that this is a possibility any more, but. But I went away and I thought if I could forget about you, it would be so much easier, but, but it seems that I can't, and so I am crawling back, I am here at your window, not asking to be let in unless you'll forgive me, and then if you do, I am not coming into that room until you promise to marry me. For real.

NANCY: What?

RICHARD: And it has to be a solid promise, with a schedule and a deadline.

NANCY: You gave me a ring, don't you remember? Two years ago.

RICHARD: Two years ago I was young and patient. Now I'm old and in a hurry. I can't wait any more, I'll break in half. I need a schedule. I need to know when I'm done with this job that I will get to be with you every day all day for the rest of my life.

NANCY: Every day, all day?

RICHARD: Yes.

Pause.

NANCY: Even when I'm on the toilet?

RICHARD: Especially then.

NANCY: OK. Yes, I promise. Please come in.

RICHARD: You're desperate to have me in there, eh?

NANCY: Yes.

RICHARD: How desperate?

NANCY: Tonya Harding desperate.

She grabs him and starts pulling him through the window. He falls into the

room and they start to kiss. They try to get onto the bed, but fall to the ground instead, thudding loudly.

NANCY: Shut up, shut up—

RICHARD: You're the one talking.

They make love.

SLIDE #5: A NANCY at eighteen holding her ring finger up, obviously proud of an engagement ring. Her smile is young and clear. The slide glows for a long moment, then it gets replaced...

SCENE ELEVEN. Later that same night, BEN is sitting on the couch staring at slide projections he has hooked up. He is flicking back and forth through just a few. ANNE comes in, looking for a glass of water. She stands and stares at the slides for a moment but not say anything. BEN finally notices her...

BEN: What's wrong honey.

ANNE: I want some water.

BEN: (*getting up to get it*) Don't you sleep through the night, Anne?

ANNE: No, I don't. You don't have to get it.

BEN: I know.

ANNE: I can get it.

BEN: I know.

ANNE: I'm not stupid.

BEN: I know that.

ANNE: OK.

She drinks.

BEN: Do you want some more?

ANNE: (*shakes her head*) What are you doing?

BEN: I'm looking at slides. We haven't taken any slides lately. Most of these are old. We'll have to get Ben to get his camera out again.

ANNE: Can I look?

BEN: Sure. Come sit down.

They sit on the couch.

SLIDE #6: *A wide shot of a house, nearly twenty years earlier, with ANNE standing on the lawn, looking small. She is waving and pointing to the house.*

ANNE: Is that me?

BEN: Yeah. That's when we bought this house.

ANNE: I can't see me very well.

BEN: I wanted to get the whole house in.

ANNE: Where's Boo?

BEN: He wasn't around yet. Only Nancy.

SLIDE #7: *ANNE, one Christmas morning, holding a sweater up to her chest. She isn't wearing any makeup and it is clearly early morning, but it is also clear she likes the sweater very much. Christmas ornaments and wrapping paper in the background.*

BEN: That's Christmas one year. I gave you that sweater. You liked it so much we had to take a picture.

ANNE: I wish I could remember that.

BEN: Yeah.

ANNE: I look funny!

BEN: You were pretty funny.

ANNE: I used to be funny. I remember that.

BEN: It's OK. You liked that sweater though.

ANNE: You bought it for me. I don't remember.

BEN: That's OK.

ANNE: Can you play the music?

BEN: The music? The Stevie Wonder? OK, but only quietly because everyone is sleeping.

BEN *goes over to the CD player and puts on the Stevie Wonder. ANNE sways to it. It plays softly under the rest of the scene.*

BEN: You used to like this very much.

ANNE: I *still* like it.

SLIDE #8: ANNE and LOUISE, *discovered hiding in a closet. There is a hand in the frame, of whoever opened the closet to surprise them. They are in hysterics, cramped and crouched among the shoes and hanging clothes.*

BEN: See? That's you and Louise upstairs in the closet. You thought you'd scare me but I knew what you were up to, so I brought the camera.

SLIDE #9: NANCY and BOO *are dressed somberly, posing for a picture somewhere inside. They look uncomfortable and formal.*

BEN: Who's that?

ANNE: That's Nancy and Boo.

BEN: Yeah, that's after your Mom's funeral. That was Nancy and Boo's first funeral. They never liked getting dressed up, so we just had to take a picture when we got back from the funeral home.

ANNE: I don't want to have a funeral.

BEN: Honey, don't worry, you won't be around for your own funeral.

ANNE: Yes I will, yes I will. *(she starts to get upset)*

BEN: Shhh. Shhh. Come here.

SLIDE #10: ANNE, *giving a kiss to BEN, whose eyes are all lit up. They are dressed to go out, looking happy and much in love.*

BEN: Look. There's you, giving me a kiss. You see? Look.

ANNE: Oh.

BEN: You see?

ANNE: Uh huh.

Pause.

ANNE: I remember some of these things, Ben, I really do. How can I remember things and still not feel like myself.

BEN: I don't know.

ANNE: I'm sorry.

BEN: (*holding her*) It's not your fault.

ANNE: I want to be the old me. I'm getting better, right? You recognize me.

Pause.

BEN: You'll be back to normal soon.

ANNE: I'm trying to get better.

BEN: Sure.

ANNE: You don't think so.

BEN: Of course I do. I can see you trying. Louise is helping, and Yvonne. And the kids help you. I see you doing your exercises every day. You remember people's names not all that badly now. And you don't always ask the same questions over and over so often. And you can cook some now, and you know how to dress yourself again— (*he starts to cry suddenly, for the first time, sobbing into her, holding her tight. She comes out of his arms and immediately hugs him, rocking him back and forth.*) We're so lucky you didn't die. That's what I keep reminding myself. We're so lucky you didn't die. I miss

you. I miss you Anne.

ANNE: Don't cry Ben, don't cry. I'm here.

She continues to soothe him as the last slide looms in front of them.

SCENE TWELVE. NANCY's *twentieth birthday party*. Signs: "Today is: Friday. The date is: October 9th. Nancy is: 20. She is in grade: college. Benjamin is: 13. He is in grade: 8." *Two years to the day since the accident. There is a sign hung that reads "Happy 20th Birthday, Nancy!" Presents sitting over by the couch.* LOUISE, BEN, RICHARD and ANNE are crowded around a cake.

RICHARD: It looks great, Louise. Just great.

LOUISE: Does it? I never bake.

ANNE: Where's Nancy? Show her the cake!

LOUISE: Shhhhhh.

BEN: No, it's a surprise, Anne. She's not supposed to know. I sent her upstairs with Ben and Yvonne to find the camera. I told them we need a few minutes.

LOUISE: It's lopsided. You see that? It's sloping towards you.

RICHARD: It's been a long time since I had cake. It looks delicious, Louise.

LOUISE: Thank you. You're a liar.

BEN: Anne, come and see what Louise and I picked out for Nancy.

They move over to a few bags lying by the couch.

RICHARD: Why don't I get drinks. Anybody want anything?

BEN: No, thank you Richard.

ANNE: Nope.

LOUISE: I'll have something. I'll have a beer.

RICHARD: OK. Me too.

He goes to get them two beers.

LOUISE: Richard. It's nice to have you around the Driver home again.

RICHARD: Yeah.

LOUISE: I hope it all works out for you. Both of you.

RICHARD: I'm going to take good care of her.

LOUISE: Who's going to take care of *you*?

RICHARD: She is.

LOUISE: I see.

RICHARD: Nancy appreciates everything you do for her. She probably doesn't tell you but she does appreciate it. She lets me know.

LOUISE: Thank you. That's good to know.

RICHARD: She's tough, isn't she?

LOUISE: She reminds me of her mom.

RICHARD: Yeah.

LOUISE: So I should know better than to think she hates me, but sometimes it seems like all the evidence points that way.

RICHARD: Well I'll be your man on the inside.

LOUISE: I can try to do the same for you, with your future father-in-law.

RICHARD: Good deal.

LOUISE: To be honest with you, I had a couple of drinks before I left my place with the cake. It's the anniversary of the accident and all. I'm tipsy.

RICHARD: Uh huh. So you're gonna get loaded with me?

LOUISE: Don't be silly. It's too drunk to get early.

She goes over to check on the cake.

BEN has been showing ANNE all the gifts.

ANNE: Why aren't they wrapped?

BEN: I guess I didn't have time. They're nice though, right? I helped pick them out.

ANNE: They're pretty like my tulip puzzle.

BEN: Oh good.

YVONNE: *(running on)* Are you guys ready? Hurry up!

LOUISE: Shit. Two more minutes. Two.

YVONNE: OK but you owe me. *(runs off)*

RICHARD: Let's light the cake. Quick.

LOUISE *hands a book of matches to BEN, who takes one, lights it, and hands the book back. He attempts to light the candles.*

ANNE: Whoa, that's a bright light. Like a Christmas tree light.

LOUISE: It's called a match, honey.

ANNE: I know.

BEN: Ow, ow, Louise, get me another match.

LOUISE: Hurry up, hurry up, we don't have all day.

RICHARD: We should've done the inside ones first, so we don't have to stick our hands in the fire.

ANNE: How old is Nancy?

LOUISE: She's twenty, remember?

ANNE: Yes.

BEN: Here, Richard, you do it.

RICHARD *lights the last ones quickly, shaking his hand when it passes too close to a candle. BEN goes to the foot of the stairs.*

BEN: Yvonne, Ben, did you get the camera yet? Bring Nancy down here will you?

YVONNE *skitters down the stairs and gasps as she sees the cake. She positions herself at the light switch. BOO comes down the stairs, with NANCY behind*

him. When she reaches the foot of the stairs, the lights go out.

NANCY: Oh please don't.

They start to sing "Happy Birthday" as they bring the cake to her. When the song finishes:

ANNE: Make a wish.

NANCY: I'm not going to do that. That's stupid.

LOUISE: No it's not. You only have one chance like this every year. You can have whatever you want. Right Anne?

ANNE: Sure.

BEN: Make a wish, Nancy.

RICHARD: Make it a good one.

NANCY: I feel like such a nerd.

RICHARD: Come on.

ANNE: Come on Nancy. Don't waste a wish. Everybody wishes they had more wishes.

NANCY: All right. Give me a second. Jesus. OK. Here I go.

She closes her eyes tight. Everyone closes their eyes with Nancy. There is a lighting change, everyone is suspended mid wish. A spot comes on Nancy.

NANCY: I wish...

She puts her hand on her stomach.

NANCY: I wish...

ANNE: breaks from her freeze and wanders away, towards the living room window. NANCY opens her eyes and sees her go.

NANCY: Mom.

She turns and blows out the candles. Everyone else unfreezes and claps and cheers. ANNE is staring out the window.

LOUISE: Was it a good wish?

NANCY: Uh huh.

RICHARD: Tell me.

NANCY: I'll tell you later.

RICHARD: What.

NANCY: Ask me later and I'll tell you.

BOO: Cut the cake! Cut the cake!

LOUISE: We should do the picture first, before we get cake all over ourselves.

BOO: Cake first.

BEN: No, that's a good idea, Louise. Ben, will you set it up and we'll do it real quick before we have cake.

RICHARD: You need help there, little brother?

BOO: Nope.

RICHARD: You sure?

BOO: Yep. (*punches RICHARD in the arm*) I have the strength of ten ordinary men.

BOO goes over to a tripod that was set up downstage centre. He attaches the camera to it while the family organizes itself. BOO fiddles with the camera and gets himself ready to press the timer button.

BEN: Do you need the manual?

BOO: Don't be such a gomer, Dad.

NANCY has come over to join ANNE at the window.

NANCY: Mom. What's going on? What are you doing?

ANNE: Nothing.

NANCY: Are you remembering something?

ANNE: Maybe. No. I'm sorry.

NANCY: That's all right.

ANNE: I'm looking out the window.

NANCY: Oh. At what?

ANNE: The sky. Look at it. It's so big.

Pause.

ANNE: I don't want to ruin your birthday again.

NANCY: I know. I know. You won't.

Pause.

NANCY: Look at me, Mom.

ANNE: I'm looking.

NANCY: We have to take the picture now. Do you want to sit together?

ANNE: OK.

They go back to where everyone else is standing, getting ready.

YVONNE: OK let's have a look at you Anne. We all have to look *sexy*.

BEN: Why is there a light on? Is there supposed to be a red light on?

BOO: *(looking at the camera from the lens end)* Is there a light on?

BEN: Yes.

NANCY: I'll help him. *(she goes over to him)*

BOO: I don't need help.

NANCY: I figured. Just wanted to check up on you.

Pause.

BOO: Get away from me before I get infected by your mad cow disease.

YVONNE: You smell nice, Louise.

LOUISE: Oh. Thanks. Thank you.

ANNE: (*pulling at her right arm*) I need to get my right arm ready. Yvonne, this is my right arm.

YVONNE: You're right! That's good.

BOO: OK are we ready? I don't know how long it takes after I press the timer, I've never used that before.

BEN: That's fine.

RICHARD: (*to NANCY*) What are you thinking about?

NANCY: Nothing. My wish.

RICHARD: Oh.

NANCY: I'm so glad you're here.

RICHARD: Me too.

YVONNE: You look good next to Nancy. Couple of hot chicks.

BEN: Are we ready?

ANNE: Yes.

LOUISE: Richard, put your beer down.

RICHARD: Oh. Right.

LOUISE: I probably have lipstick on my teeth.

BEN: Let's try to make this a nice one. We might use this for Christmas cards or Easter cards or something. We haven't had a good family photo in a few years. We have to get back in the swing of it, or we'll forget what everybody looked like.

BOO: Are we ready, my arm is getting tired.

ANNE: I'm ready.

BEN: Yes, we're ready.

BOO: Here goes...

He releases the timer and scurries over to stand with RICHARD. They all stare at the camera, smiling. After a second their smiles begin to tire and wilt. After a

long pause...

NANCY: Are you sure you did it right?

BOO: Yeah.

Pause.

LOUISE: How long are we going to have to wait?

BEN: *(looking back at the camera)* Just wait. Just keep still.

Pause.

NANCY: Here Mom. Hold my hand.

ANNE looks at NANCY, takes her hand, holds it, tight. ANNE smiles gratefully. The family continues to wait, only ANNE and NANCY looking at each other. Still the flash does not come.

Long pause as they hold their breath.

Slow blackout.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Damien Atkins is a playwright and actor who grew up in Edmonton and now makes his home in Toronto. His plays include the solo show *Miss Chatelaine*, which played at The Grand Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille, *Real Live Girl*, which will open at Buddies in Bad Times in 2001 and *Good Mother*, which will make its world premiere at the Stratford Festival, where he is also a company member.

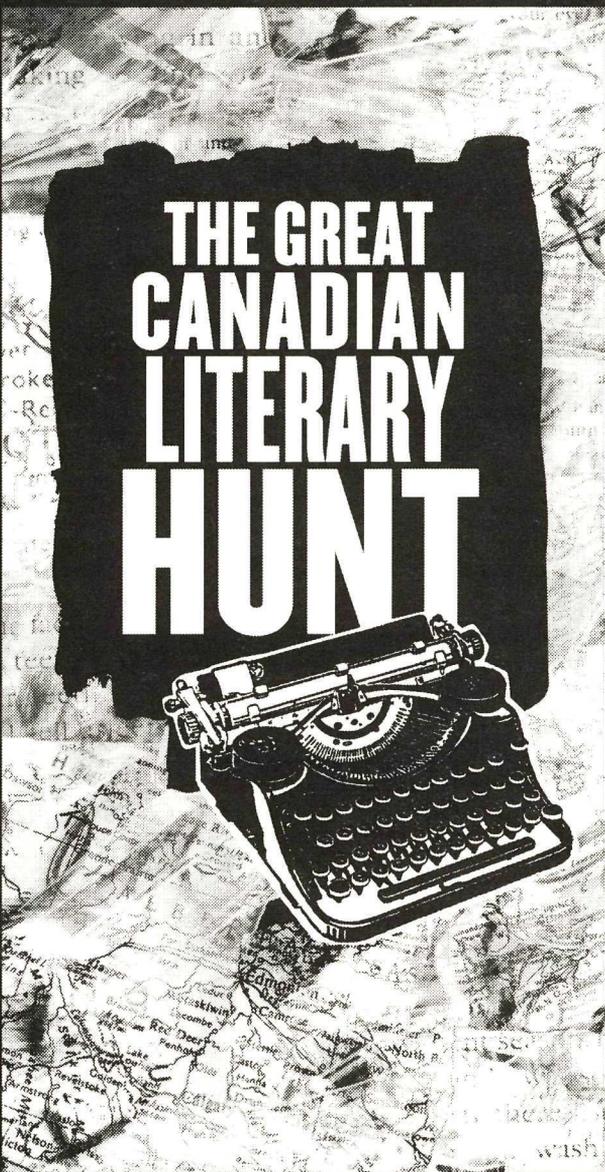
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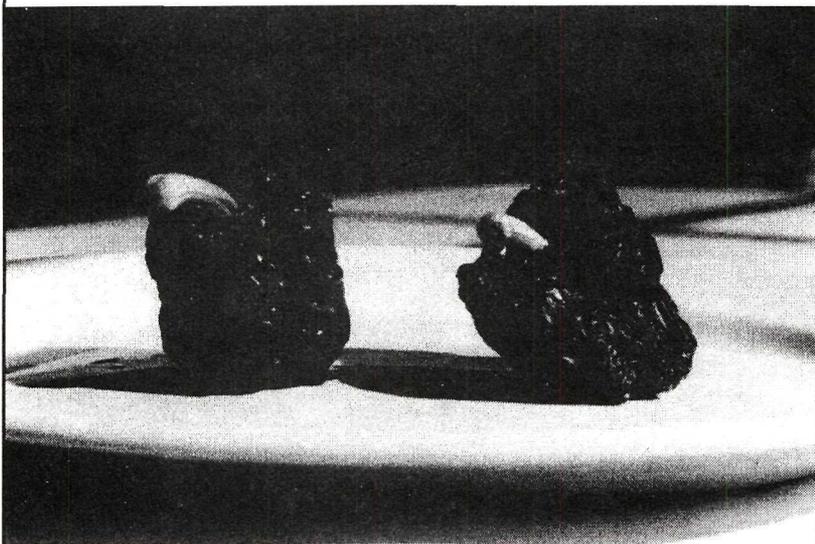


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First, a note on the term creative non-fiction. What is it? is the question often asked. What exactly do we mean? It's a story conveying not just "the facts, ma'am," but an experience, a tale complete with true events utilizing the tools of fiction if necessary to present itself—the documentary from a literary, not journalistic approach. Creative non-fiction doesn't *report* as much as *tells*. We all tell stories, and a simple account of "a day in the life" can be an extraordinary example of creative non-fiction.

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- 1) Submissions are not limited to any specific topic or subject.
- 2) Entries must be unpublished and a maximum length of 4,000 words.
- 3) Entry fee is \$15 per submission; additional entries may be submitted if accompanied by a supplementary fee of \$5 per entry.
- 4) The deadline for entries is **August 1, 2001** (postmarked).
- 5) There is a \$250 cash prize for the winner plus publication in the Winter issue of **subTERRAIN**.
- 6) All entrants receive a one-year subscription to **subTERRAIN**.
- 7) Submissions to be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope and typed on 8½ x 11 paper, double spaced (no disks, please).

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the 1990s, the number of people with diabetes has increased in all industrialized countries. In the Netherlands, the prevalence of diabetes is 6.5% (1.5% of the population aged 15 years and over) (1). The prevalence of diabetes is expected to increase to 10% by the year 2010 (2).

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*I saw her right from her first
appearance in Paris, when she danced
at Emma Calvés in a sort of temple,
between columns as svelté and as
naked as herself.*

— *Mata-Hari*, Colette, Page 27

Oana Avasilichioaei
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Cirilo F. Bautista
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