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**CONSTRAINT DIRECTED IMPROVISATION
IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW WORKS:**

**Developing a Practice in Playwriting Through Methods
In Improvisational Theater**

A thesis in partial satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

CONSTRAINT DIRECTED IMPROVISATION

IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW WORKS:

*Developing a Practice in Playwriting Through Methods In
Improvisational Theater by Giles Stuart Henderson*

This is a comprehensive account of devising a playwriting practice through techniques in improvisational and devised theater. The primary research referenced in this document consists of one full play script, *Matriarch*, and a plot outline composed in tandem with Professor James Bierman for a play entitled *The Rubber Room*; additional excerpts from various other manuscripts are meant to be included as case studies. These case studies are requisite to establish development of a style and disciplinary refinement through the Master's Program in Theater Arts at the University of California Santa Cruz between the Winter of 2014 and the Spring of 2015.

Introduction

Existing approaches to planning and constructing dramatic works in relation to improvisational theater are rigid and limiting in terms of classification. Though traditional forms of playwriting and improvised theater have an inseparable history, they are more often regarded as distinct practices. However, an analysis of modern performance would tell us that there must inherently be elements of traditional practice and improvisation in any performance. Alison Oddey describes Devised Theater as "a relationship of a group of people to their culture, the socio-political, artistic and economic climate, as well as issues or events surrounding them" (Oddey, *Devising Theater: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. 23). Devised theater¹ has its roots as much in playwriting as it does in improvisation. Its principal mode of construction centers around taking a group of performers, and, through a

¹ Devised Theater: a form of theater where the script originates not from a writer or writers, but from collaborative, usually improvisatory, work by a group of people (usually, but not necessarily, the performers). This is similar to Commedia dell'arte and street theater. It is sometimes similar to improvisational theater but by the time a devised piece presents itself to the public, it usually has a fixed form: the improvisation is confined to the creation process, and either a writer, a director, or the performers themselves, will have decided exactly what is to be included and the running sequence

combination of research, improvisational exercises, and discussion, producing a performance. The piece produced is reflective of the insights of the collective group and thus communal in ownership. Here the singular playwright that would exist in a traditional play is replaced by a collective group of performers, and, through a combination of research, improvisational exercises, and discussion, producing a performance. The piece produced is reflective of the insights of the collective group and thus communal in ownership. Here the singular playwright that would exist in a traditional play is replaced by a collective group of hybrid performer/writers involved in the construction; similarly a group of improvisers can be viewed as playwrights or devisors composing their works in real time. I argue that the existing rigidity is unsuitable for the pedagogical health of the art form, I present the following research as evidence promoting cross disciplinary educational practices in playwriting.

I composed both *Jack* and *Matriarch* in observance of the principles of narrative dictated by unities of character, relationship, action, and objective from the standardized practices of LongForm Improvisation.² With *Matriarch* specifically I used principles of Devised theater³ to shape the character's roles in

² Long Form Improvisation: Improvised performances where the narrative focus is on development of plot and character as opposed to humor.

³ Devised Theater: a form of theater where the script originates not from a writer or writers, but from collaborative, usually improvisatory, work by a group of people (usually, but not necessarily, the performers). This is similar to Commedia dell'arte and street theater. It is sometimes similar to improvisational theater but by the time a devised piece presents itself to the public, it usually has a

favor of the performers I had available, these performers being members of the student body. Inherently there is a contradiction in claiming improvisational quiddity in the construction of any written piece of theater yet the ubiquity of improvisation in life is undeniable. At a basic level any singular action is a unit of improvisation informed by pre existing knowledge. But in order to apply this principle pointedly in a way that diminishes the separation between improvised theater, devised theater, and the traditionally constructed play with a singular author, we must work towards a definition of improvisation that strays from performance and tilts towards philosophy. We generally think of improvised behavior as being a signature of ill-preparedness, but within the constraints of the theater, it requires a rigorous level of training not dissimilar to the improvisation found in Jazz music. In this respect improvisers of the theater familiarize themselves with narrative tropes, the semiotics of the performance space, and dramatic structure in the same way that Jazz improvisers are familiar with Jazz standards, performance practices, and melody. This being said, there is still a fundamental gap in the relationship between improvisation as a performance and improvisation as a mechanism for productivity.

In an

attempt to demystify improvisation and bridge the gap between performance and

fixed form: the improvisation is confined to the creation process, and either a writer, a director, or the performers themselves, will have decided exactly what is to be included and the running sequence.

mechanism, we must find a definition of improvised behavior that encompasses both the artistic and the utilitarian. To begin, we will define improvisation by its smallest unit. It is important to understand that any singular choice made by an artist is made significant by the infinite number of choices not made at that particular moment. This principle is applicable whether the decision is improvised or calculated regardless of the amount of time between the choice and its enacting.

Disregarding time allows improv to be a tool to make decisions, as illustrated by its three definitions:

1. The process of 'making do', or coping at a basic level with some activity using minimal resources. For example, temporarily replacing a broken car fan belt using nylon stockings.
2. The process of producing quality results using inferior materials: for example, turning old discarded clothing into new fashions, or producing a gourmet meal using leftovers.
3. The process of adjusting to the occurrences around oneself while working at a particular activity; of being receptive to the world around oneself, and using knowledge of that world to adjust to adapt to change.⁴

⁴ Hodgson, Richards. *Improvisation*. 209

Each of these definitions are common to improvisation, and are sometimes referred to as common senses. Their purpose is to enrich the performance of everyday activities through the malleable application of experiential knowledge to cope with a dynamic, the inference being that its dynamism is comprised mostly of mistakes. However, the third definition is anchored in a concept associated with colloquial improvisation noted by John Eric Anderson in his application of Hodgson and Richard's common senses to his exploration of Artificial Intelligence and amended their common senses to:

An agent improvises in the performance of an everyday activity when it possesses compiled knowledge describing its routine method of going about the activity, and uses associated background knowledge of the activity and the world around itself to apply its routine flexibly in varying situations, in order to accomplish the activity in a satisficing manner. Anderson 93

The individual doesn't improvise during everyday activities by simply reacting to stimuli, constantly circling the imperfection of their mistakes, rather the individual is a satisfactory end result rendered with mistakes and featuring them as strengths. These mistakes become part of our aggregate knowledge which in turn informs all other future instances of such occurrence. The "satisficing manner" or *satisfice* Anderson describes is catalyzed by the transformation of the improvised action into applicable

knowledge. This use of satisfice was the launching point of my implementing research into the intricacies of playwriting in relation to improvisation. I was able to experiment as a playwright knowing that I would have to rationalize the mistakes I made by allowing imperfection to be as much a part of the construction of the play as anything deliberate. I wanted to stay away from immediate self reflection understanding its eventual inevitability. Thinking of these inaugural scripts as small units of improvisation, I would instead give myself license to fail before engaging with the material on a structurally critical level.

The Anderson text strangely mechanized the process of improvisation. It occurred to me that this method was distancing in a way that relived the agent of responsibility for perfection. If I could apply this method liberally to improvisational theater, where the “everyday activity” I was trying to accomplish was to improvise, then I could also apply this theory to playwriting. A fundamental skill in developing a practice in any discipline is the transmutation of that discipline from a foreign task of the executer into an automatic task. This is true especially of linguistic disciplines; daily writing is prescribed in honing of any linguistic craft. It occurred to me that if I could transmute the process of writing a play into a daily activity like I had with improvisational theater, then I could apply the same thinking to dramatic literature. Thinking retroactively through my experience with Long Form Improvisational Theater, I had theoretically already applied this knowledge before in my training.

In my

study of improvisation, the most prolific of formats I practiced while studying improv was so nebulous and rare that it doesn't even have a name. It is simply referred to as "The Form." The origin of The Form traces back to the explosion of improvisational theater in Chicago in the eighties and nineties, but the iteration that I've encountered has a certain ritualistic element built into its framework that makes it a problematic thing to identify. The Rules are as follows: There are four separate types of scenes that can occur, each called a "degree of reality." In the first degree, the performers don no characters and are merely themselves living and reacting in real time. An example might look like a very normal conversation between two people on stage acknowledging that they know each other, perhaps conversing about the day's activities prior to arriving at the show. The second degree is like the first degree; the players are still themselves, except there is a degree of fiction added. This fiction can range in subtlety, it can be something as simple as a substitution of the player's last name or something as serious as an imaginary confession of guilt of an imaginary crime. However, the fiction that exists in the second degree of The Form is contained and limited to one thing and one thing only. This is what distinguishes the second degree from the third degree, which resembles a traditional improvised scene. These two realities complement each other; they are always in existence with one another. When watching the most expert executors of The Form, it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish a first degree reality scene and a second degree reality. The limitations of the second degree prevent the singular fictions from becoming fictional worlds, a privilege reserved for the third degree. At this point The Form now occupies a strange

semi-autobiographical performance, its presentation appearing like the format for most modernly produced devised theater. The fourth degree creates some challenging assumptions, but more importantly it acts as a breaker of artistic constraints. The fourth degree has only ever been described as "art," meaning that whatever is considered art to the players or to the audience can be rendered on stage. This includes elaborates soundscapes, building living sculptures, or anything else that could be theoretically classified as art. Interestingly enough, the first three rules of The Form are not only contained within the fourth rule, but so is any imaginable pre-existing art or any art form that has yet to be seen for that matter. The fourth rule allows The Form's rules to apply to nearly any performance and nearly any piece of art. What's wonderful about the fourth degree is that it mocks its own attempts at profundity while still remaining deeply liberating.

A key component in the execution of The Form is the audience. These rules aren't explained to the audience, the audience is simply informed that the format of improv they are about to see is so rare that it lacks a title. The audience is then charged with the task of coming up with the title of format of the performance, with which the improver announces "This is the (audience suggestion) form of improv" before the performance starts. Placing this agency with the audience charges them with a certain responsibility for the performance.

In its rules The Form encompasses all performance. It could be approached as a Rosetta Stone

for constructing works in the performing arts. If improvisation could so easily approach a primordial recipe for performance, a type of DNA for the construction of a show, then experimenting with both playwriting and improvisation gives us dramatically fertile material from which to base any performance.

Preliminary Research: Jack

Having had no prior experience, my first play was more of an historical exploration than a play. I was reading Shakespeare histories and I was attracted to the idea of reinventing history as narrative. I saw history as a construction of some kind, like mythology: a dominant agreed upon element or two, but details varying from interpretation to interpretation. Shakespeare did something interesting by using the recent past to make comments about the current state of politics in Elizabeth's courts. *Henry VIII* was written less than seventy years after Henry VIII's reign. The comparison of Henry VIII and Elizabeth is rather uncanny: both were patrons of the arts remembered for the reformation that they brought to their country, but while Elizabeth I brought about an era of great art, in Shakespeare's criticism of its time *Henry VIII* served as an allegory critical of the monarchy. I was attempting something similar with my first play. In a modern context the mythical element of history is magnified, and though we may think of modernity as the age of information, truth is something that grows more elusive. I thought it natural to

assume that from an American perspective, presidents would be analogous to Elizabethan royalty. When looking for a president to serve as a central figure, I was immediately drawn to John F. Kennedy. His story was so naturally shrouded in mystery that I thought he was the perfect fit for my understanding of history as narrative. Limited by our linear experience of time, we are forced to construct narratives to make sense of events.

Think here of Thales' paradigm example of water, with all its momentous consequence for the history of western thought. Discontinuous observations present us with a puzzle: how a thing can be now liquid, now solid, now steam? Has one kind of stuff, water, been removed secretly in the night and been replaced by another, ice? To do a bit of historical mythologizing, one might venture to say that that is not how a primitive man might have reacted to his discovery of ice. Perhaps he says instead, let's keep watch and see what happens. To choose that strategy is to be guided by the narrative style of explanation, to feel that one's puzzles will be resolved, to an extent at least, by seeing the change take place. It is rational to proceed in this way if we may

assume that things persist and undergo change.⁵

It occurred to me that if history could be interpreted as narrative then any adaptation of history seeks to resolve any inquiries left after a dominant narrative of history is established. As soon as I began investigating JFK's life I was immediately met with conflicting information about the details of his personal life as well as the details of his political dealings. Separately his death was undoubtedly historically important, but there was no clarity as to the motivations of his assassination or the guilty persons. I was seeking a form that would allow me to explore the disingenuity of the narrative surrounding the JFK assassination. I wanted the play to mimic the confusion that I encountered in my research and I wanted to disrupt the popular narrative of JFK's life. I used science fiction to express my distrust of the predominant narrative. Most of the evidence I had found named Lee Harvey Oswald as the obvious assassin, but upon further investigation, I found it clear that at the very least the question of who murdered Kennedy remains open. My approach to *Jack* was to create parallel the narratives of John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald. I used the nebulous presence of an evil organization called The Syndicate, capable of manipulating time to execute their will, to unite the antagonist and protagonist and make Oswald more sympathetic than he's generally portrayed in history or otherwise. The immediate problem I ran into, which in my opinion is what impacted the piece to begin with, was rendering such a large amount of history into a palatable play. The second, and maybe most difficult task for me as a playwright, was rendering that

⁵ Louch, A. R. (n.d.). History as Narrative. 55

history with a comprehensive sense of a sequence of events: The first task I sought to tackle by emulating Shakespeare. I would gather as much information as I could from varying sources, synthesize my own idea of the narrative of John F. Kennedy's life, and select the parts that best suited the intentions of my piece.

I knew there were formal elements involved in constructing a play, however I had only been introduced in your time as an undergraduate very informally to narrative structure. Drawing again from improvisation, I recalled that "an improviser must be like a man walking backwards" (Johnstone 116). Thus I walked backwards with my narrative. I started with a few elements: The Syndicates (with the ability to manipulate time and space), JFK's personal life, and disrupting the popular narrative of Lee Harvey Oswald. I began to try and derive a narrative, but as improviser and playwright Keith Johnstone warns: "Content lies in the structure, in what happens, not in what the characters say" (Johnstone 110). I got caught in a trap.

[The soundscape fades and Kennedy has fallen asleep on a couch in the oval office. Italicized lines are in voice over.]

KENNEDY: Oh, Jackie it's you. I didn't- I don't... can you feel my forehead?

JACKIE: Why? Do you think you're coming down with something.
Blisters, boils, first born sons.

KENNEDY: Uh, no. I just had a twisted dream and woke up in a pool of sweat. JACKIE: *And blood and tears.* I bet you did.

KENNEDY:
[Yawning.] I'm exhausted- jet lag.
JACKIE: Please Jack.

Look at me. Do I
appear to be fooled?
KENNEDY: Have I
missed something?

JACKIE: Don't tell me that you actually could have
underestimated my intelligence this whole time. You're
smarter than that.

KENNEDY: You are a very smart woman.

JACKIE: To everyone else, to you I'm naive, even complacent.

KENNEDY: Jackie, what are we talking about?

JACKIE: You may be the president, but you are nothing more than
hubris with a fancy title.

KENNEDY: Alright, you want to blow off some steam?!
Fine, put it on the schedule. David! Could you please
schedule a twelve o'clock reaming from my wife. I've
been busy and she's missing someone to criticize.
What's the matter, your name hasn't been in the tabloids
enough and you're craving a little special attention isn't
that right? Now Jackie, if that-JACKIE: How dare you
talk down to me.

KENNEDY: I talk down to everyone, Jackie. You
knew that when you married me. I'm better than
everyone, that's why you married me.

JACKIE: I married you because I loved you, I just
needed something more pragmatic to tell you and my
parents so they didn't think I was foolish and you hadn't
thought you'd won. Now I guess I was a little naive at
first, but soon I figured it was always a competition with
you. You front like a man with empathy, but you're just
a creature trying to satisfy his basic needs.

KENNEDY: Jackie, I would love to keep having this
fight with you- I really would, but I can't if I don't know
what we are talking about.

JACKIE: Play dumb, or dead, whatever it is that makes you feel like
you're getting away with it.

KENNEDY: If this is about me running for reelection
we've talked about this. I'm the incumbent, I'm not

taking a break. There hasn't been a president that's served non-consecutive terms since Grover Cleveland, and that's the only thing he's famous for

-- so we see how that worked out. I'm going to have to start campaigning again, that means more whistle stops. I'm going to need you by my side especially for the Southern states; they like seeing a man next to a woman he's sworn to protect. JACKIE: This is not about your reelection narcissist. I am not a prop I'm supposed to be your wife!

KENNEDY: What does that even mean? "Supposed to be" ? Huh?

JACKIE: It means there's more to me than what you put out there on the podium. Those Kennedys, in the public eye, do not make a marriage. They're just two little plastic figures on a wedding cake. None of it's real. *[She starts to pace.]* If you had just said something, opened the line of communication, I may have acted upset for a while, maybe even stopped talking to you for a bit, but that would have been better than this.

KENNEDY: Jackie, I'm right here. Look at me. And would you sit down? I don't want you on your feet this much in your current condition.

JACKIE: I know Jack.

KENNEDY: Good. Try and keep calm, all that stress isn't good for the baby.

JACKIE: Jack, I know.

KENNEDY: Alright, I'm not trying to be overbearing. I know how hormonal this sort of thing is for you so-JACKIE: Don't you write me off like that. Men take every opportunity to dismiss our feelings because they're afraid

someone's going to start listening, then they wouldn't be ipso facto objective opinion anymore. *Isn't that right Arabella?* KENNEDY: Jackie, I'm going to have the physicians look at you and recommend someone for -

JACKIE: I know, Jack. And I have known for a long

time. I haven't said anything because-- because I was ok with it. And maybe that does make me the "main squeeze" and everyone thinks I'm being fooled. It just hurts that you think that it works that way. I can understand why they would, but I expected you to give me the benefit-- the courtesy of understanding my intelligence. I'm carrying your child, Jack. A lot of people would find running around on your pregnant wife disgusting, or unsuitable behavior for our country's leader. It would be a shame if this became a public scandal, especially with your reelection hanging in the balance.

KENNEDY: Are you threatening me?

JACKIE: I didn't mind it, for a long time. And I still don't. Except for her.

KENNEDY:... Monroe?

JACKIE: Try not to sound so naive. She's after something. Don't fall for her childlike innocence and wonder bit for a minute. And I knew you would because it was the same trick I used, and you fell for it hard, like a clown on a banana peel.
She's after something.

KENNEDY: Can we just slow down on this for a moment, I feel we may have skipped a few steps in this conversation. JACKIE: When we were first getting married, you told me about all of your big plans and how you would need a strong woman beside you in order for it to play out, not the most romantic dinner conversation, but I appreciated the idea that marriage could have a practical application. You said "I don't want you to feel used", well then, Jack, don't use me.
KENNEDY: Don't play victim Jackie.

JACKIE: No. I'm not the victim, I'm not victimizing myself. You're election cost us a baby. Arabella, she's the real victim. KENNEDY: Don't put that on me. To think that you would blame anyone is ridiculous, and if you were to, blaming anyone but yourself isn't fair-You say her name like I've forgotten . We were three years into my first term in the Senate . We were comfortable.

JACKIE: No. No, Jack. That's when it all started. That's when they approached you with the fancy campaign slogans and fundraisers. You didn't tell me until after you were reelected that you were going to run for president, but I knew it. There wasn't enough love waiting for her in this world, it all went to your constituents. So when she came out to face that her little heart didn't have the courage to beat.

KENNEDY: How could I-

JACKIE: I was able to save Junior and Caroline because I knew what I was getting myself into at that point, we played it safe with the Cesarean. But I'm scared now we're all scared of what's to come, and I'm not going to let you choke us out this time [*Indicating her stomach and looking up after a moment.*] I'm adding a kitchen to the residence, and expanding the children's rooms. I'm going to need to the committee to appropriate some more funds. [*Starts to exit.*]

KENNEDY: Of course.

[*Monroe's "Happy Birthday" to the president starts to play.*]

As you can see from this scene, I attempted to create drama simply by extending the scene instead of progressing it. Though a play may not typically have as much physical action and movement as an improv show, an audience must be guided through a psychological landscape either way. The more articulately the action is painted the less visible it is overall. I don't paint the scene very well. I used the metaphor of the miscarriage before to introduce a psychosis in Jackie's character that I had never intended. What does that do? It weakens my overall criticism of John F. Kennedy's personal life. We, in part, see the negative implications of JFK's actions

through how they affect Jackie. By overdramatizing the psychological strain on Jackie I made her seem irrationally upset in comparison to the reserved demeanor of the politicians she's surrounded by despite their involvement with the supernatural powers.

There seems to me to be a contradiction in criticizing dominant power structures and unintentionally reinforcing them. "If you improvise spontaneously in front of an audience you have to accept that your innermost self will be revealed. The same is true of any artist"⁶. I knew that *Jack* would need to be heavily revised at some point, but I didn't want to discourage my progress. If I was going to be able to continue to grow as a playwright, I needed to avoid heavy self criticism at this critical developmental point. This is where the distinction between playwriting and improvisation became problematic for me. The fundamental difference between spontaneously generating material in a group and composing in premeditation came into conflict with the element of premeditation. A heavy degree of editing appeared necessary in order to properly render a premeditated concept communicable. But I felt that what appeared necessary was also contradicted by a fundamental observation. When troupes like The Improvised Shakespeare Company improvise hour and a half long performances in Shakespearean iambic pentameter, or troupes like Impro Theater improvise plays in styles ranging from Tennessee Williams to

⁶ Johnstone, Keith. IMPRO: Improvisation and the Theater

Jane Austen, their performances are indistinguishable from the performances they're simulating. These performances are complete with costume, scene changes, and even improvised lighting elements., These companies had figured out a way to synthesize the essence of these stories, picking apart their reoccurring thematic elements and characters, and rearranging them to create a unique performance, in a way reminiscent of Commedia dell'arte. The precedent for the relationship between improvisation and play construction has a long history, and I felt that a careful inspection of one would inherently enhance my understanding of the other.

At this point I had been accepted into the MA program here at UCSC and was looking to center my research around a production of *Jack* or some other script that I would compose over the following Summer. Wanting to stay flexible I proposed three different ideas to the Barn student theater at the base of campus. The first was a directing proposal for Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, the second, a proposal for a staged reading of *Jack* keeping in mind that I would have to make at the very least some minor changes, and the last, a proposed full production of a play that I hadn't yet written. I immediately began working on the new play. The subject matter in my proposal was vague, but I knew I wanted to do a coming of age story with a central female character, I knew that I wanted to keep it centered around a disrupted family dynamic, and I knew that I wanted to avoid some of the mistakes that I made in *Jack*.

Matriarch

I was attracted to the idea of implementing procedures from devised theater in some way to tailor a performance or play text toward a particular audience. I was fortunate enough to have had a lot of contact with the audience that I was writing for as well as with a majority of the performers that I had in my principle roles, especially considering that "Devising begins with the interaction between the members of a group and the starting point or stimulus chosen"⁷. My initial stimulus was a vague recounting of a piece of talk radio that my grandmother had relayed to me. She couldn't remember the specific details, but during a visit to Santa Cruz over coffee she shared the story of a brother and sister who invented a fictional family for whom they babysat, as their mother was very strict toward the young girl and showed leniency toward the boy. The two of them kept up this charade for a long time and their mother never knew otherwise.

Though I didn't have the details of the story, I preferred it that way. This afforded room for development. It's common in an improvised performance to get a suggestion of a relationship and then explore that relationship in a scene. I saw no reason as to why I couldn't adapt this method to this story. Relationships were something that I had struggled to render genuinely in *Jack* so I was seeking to avoid that by limiting the number of characters that I was going to be working with. What had primarily bothered me in *Jack* was the sheer number of characters that I had attempted to represent. *Jack* ended up being about eighty pages, a length which I

⁷ Oddey, Alison. *Devising Theater: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*.24

knew was nearly impossible to render expertly let alone in a first attempt. I kept my goals simple with this new play, I wanted the script to be at least twenty pages shorter. I also wanted to keep the characters at a maximum of five onstage characters with strict limitations on the reference to offstage characters.

In addition to narrowing my focus, I wanted to create a more relatable piece. I had enjoyed practicing with a sweeping epic structure and grandiose political figures, but there was a certain inhumanity to the work that made me feel that despite any personal attachment I had developed with the characters in the process of writing was reading poorly in the preliminary draft. My first thought was to set limitations, but I still found myself growing increasingly neurotic about my audience as I was writing. To quell my fears I hosted a reading of the first act at my house. The students that I pulled from had attended and participated in numerous shows through Barnstorm. I wanted to write a piece that spoke to an audience that I could easily observe and interact with. The reading of the first act proved promising, though it was brief and had no audience. I was even able to get two actresses to read for the principal character, Norma, both of whom were helpful in finding incongruence in the character. I found that Lance, the mysterious and helpful neighbor, was the most popular character. This was strange because I had revealed the least information about him throughout the first act, and though he shares the stage almost equally with the other characters, most of the narrative is centered around the family. The majority of his interactions consisted of him trying to avoid talking about himself or his past. This reading also confirmed that concise work effectively immersed the audience.

I had

originally intended to write a script for a full production, but I was informed in the early fall that due to clerical error the production had been downgraded to a staged reading. This also meant that I would not get to pull from the main pool of the barn auditions and that my auditions would be a long time after the main stage auditions. I ended up having to ask a lot of my friends to do it, which had its advantages and disadvantages. The actress for Norma, for instance, heavily identified with her character, but the actor for Lance was less experienced and felt less connected to the character and the piece. So I made an effort to alter the behavior of the character to accommodate the naturalistic presence of the actor. But oddly I felt that there was an overall palpability to the character that was lost as a result of the alterations I made. Personally I felt an unintentional shift in character, which made me feel out of control of the script. I returned to heavy planning and I sketched out loosely the scenes that I wanted in the play, not planning however the specific action that I wanted to include. I instead treated each scene like an improvised scene, giving myself only a singular stimulus.

It was lucky that this change in direction also coincided with the rediscovery of the radio piece that was the original source for the project. Though I had already developed a majority of the story, hearing the original radio story allowed me to reinvigorate the details that had humanized the story for me in the first place. It happened at the perfect time. If I would have had access to the source material

ahead of time, I would have been too dependent on the original; any later and I may have been reaching for inspiration far too close to my deadline for the product. Luckily, I was able to complete a substantive draft before the night of the staged reading. Included below is an original draft of *Matriarch*. The first thing you'll notice is that the play was originally titled *Blighted*. I've included the original title because it reflected a theme that was central to the piece at its concept; I had initially decided to include the word "blighted" in a piece of exposition revealing a secret about Lance, one of the principal characters. This narrative information never made it into the play but I've included it in this draft to illustrate how that informed my construction of the play. Even though it was eventually discarded, the title shows me as an "improvising agent," attempting to improvise, to accomplish a task given the knowledge I have—the action improvised being the plot of a play.

There is a genuine shift in focus in the piece: in the beginning there is a large emphasis as to the effect that is cast by the presence of the characters and their unique reaction to one another as stimuli; however, early in discussion with the actress that I had portraying Renee, the matriarch of the Wagoner family, it became apparent to me that the compounding intricacy of relationships between Charley, Norma, and Lance was always in relation to how Renee was going to react. Also, granted the performative range of the actress charged with playing Renee, it seemed that I would have to shift the focus significantly. This led to changing the title of the play to *Matriarch* hoping that it would frame the scenes that I had written before discovering the full weight of Renee's character—a clumsy and unorthodox

solution. However, the more obviously errant it appeared in this draft, the easier it would be able to fix in the next. It was in this way that the discovery was entirely circumstantial and based on the group of artists with whom I was collaborating.

The reading went over incredibly well. In the talkback after the show I received a lot of positive feedback, but I felt particularly successful in producing both precision and complexity of character in the play's fraternal figure Charlie. Many of the audience members were lured in by his seeming innocence at the beginning of the play, laughing at his irrational emotional outbursts, later to discover that they signified a capacity for violence, which only emerges in the second act of the play. However, I felt that the conflict found in the piece was due to the lack of rehearsal time and the freshness of the draft rather than my attempts to devise a piece that catered more specifically to the cast.

BLIGHTED

By Giles Stuart Henderson

Characters

NORMA. And can I get another set for my mother please?

DORRIS grabs the papers from NORMA and exits through the door again. The lights become more natural. NORMA paces a while before dashing RENEE, late thirties.

CHARLEY, eighteen.

NORMA, seventeen.

LANCE, *late twenties to early thirties. Light skinned and Latino.*
DORRIS, *nineteen.*

The play begins on a hot day in Palm Springs, 1950's.
Stage Setting: the living room of a rustic-looking home just outside of town. There are partially unpacked boxes everywhere and a clock on the wall that's fixed just past midnight that stays through every scene.

Stage Left is a kitchen with an avant garde pillar in the center. At upstage right, there is a sliding glass door that leads to the pool, backyard, and driveway. The Stage Left exit leads to the bedrooms. Dinah Shore's "Sweet Violets" is playing on the radio as the lights come up.

Norma walks up to the radio, sighs, and changes the station after she hears the first chorus following the first verse. Link Wray's "Rumble" begins to play. Norma playfully bobs her head and dances as if encumbered as she peruses the boxes. After a few boxes, she is surprised to find her copy of "Stir of Echos."

Renee enters, groggy, and shuts off the radio. We hear the faint hum of Cicadas.

RENEE. Norma!

NORMA. [*dropping the book back into the box.*] Mom-- I'm sorry, did I wake you?

RENEE. No. I needed to wake up anyway, been asleep all day. Don't let me do that again.

NORMA. I thought you didn't want me --

RENEE. Oh, nonsense. You're old enough now to recognize when I'm being a little irresponsible. [*She opens the ice box, grabs a singular ice cube, and rubs her temples.*]

NORMA. I was listening to Link Wray. Do you know who that is?

RENEE. Who's this now?

NORMA. The song I was listening to when you came in, it's called "Rumble" and it's performed by Link Wray and his band the Wraymen. It didn't used to be called that, it used to be called "Oddball." You see, Link Wray is developing a unique sound-it's very exciting! [*emphatically*] There's just something so hulking and fleshy. You can feel the effortlessness. It's quite refreshing, considering today's modern easy listenings. So drull, I mean, where's the movement..? Right, mother?

RENEE. [*waking up.*] What- Uh! I don't know where you think I get all this time to listen to music. I work. Always.

NORMA. ... You didn't work today.

The tension is interrupted by a telephone ring

NORMA. *[answering the phone.]* Hello, Wagoner residence. Norma speaking... Hi grandma, how are you? How long till Lyla's due now? Wow, how many kittens do you think she's going to have? That seems like a lot.

RENEE *mouths the words "say thank you" to NORMA.*

NORMA. Thanks again for letting us live here while you're away, Grandma. Oh, my books?

[RENEE gestures to hand her the phone.]

NORMA. I'll tell you in a second -- mom wants to talk to you. *[passing her the phone]*

RENEE. Hello, mother. Nothing's wrong, I was just taking a nap. You know, not everyone is conspiring against you all the time... I don't have an attitude. Sorry... No! I haven't spoken to him.

[NORMA, sensing the disturbance, leaves the room.]

RENEE. *[sighing and restraining tears.]* I've just been so... tired. I don't understand... I suppose it is normal... *[taking a deep breath and regaining composure.]* Well yes, I am set on this decision. I'm never speaking to that man again, mother. I've got a nice job. It's a nice area; not too big not too small. Celebrities and beautiful people just roaming the streets in sheer pleasure-- hot as skunk ass, but that'll become normal soon... all of it'll be normal. Look, I was just headed to get some groceries... yes, mother, anything would help... Fifty dollars would be more than-- ah, I just can't thank you enough. *[she smiles]* Alright, I'm going to go now... You too, mother, bye bye. Love -- uh, I'll go by the post office pick up the check tomorrow, I have to go get ready now.

By this time she has wandered around the room with the phone cord. She begins to walk back to the receiver as NORMA enters.

NORMA. Wait! I wanted to speak to grandma.

RENEE. *[handing her the phone.]* Well hurry up before she's dead!

NORMA. *[over the course of the phone call NORMA begins to fan herself and continues afterward.]* Hi grandma. So as I was saying, I'm not reading that anymore, I finished it... The book you gave me! I finished it, I'm reading another book now. Well I was reading it... Momma took it away... Uhm, well you see it was Dorris's and you - she doesn't want me, uhm, you know thinking about her or writing her *[pause.]* Grandma? Could I ask you something? I found the book in one of the boxes while I was unpacking right now and well I don't really... you really? She's written

me a letter, but I haven't written back yet. I don't have any stamps. You'll send me some? [*chuckles.*] Mailing stamps, now that's awful nice, grandma, but that would be extravagant... huh-uh, yeah, I already know I always have a place to stay with you. Uh-huh, *always, yes* we'll visit soon -- ok -- I love you too, goodbye.

She hangs up the phone and walks back over to the partially unpacked box.
CHARLEY *enters.*

NORMA. [*undisturbed.*] Hey, Charley.

CHARLEY. Hi, is mom awake?

NORMA. Yeah, she just woke up. Damn it's hot.

CHARLEY. Better not let mom catch you talking like that.

NORMA. Oh, don't worry, I don't get caught.

CHARLEY. Is that right?

NORMA. Yeah, that's right.

CHARLEY. And I do?

NORMA. That's right, you do! Chuckles, you're always getting in trouble over some nonsense, or for no reason at all sometimes. Just like a stooge.

CHARLEY. What are those making that noise, or is my brain frying?

NORMA. I'm not sure. Think they're bugs, but I'm going to find out.

[RENEE *enter and* NORMA *stashes the book up her dress.*]

CHARLEY. Hey, ma.

RENEE. Did you just get back from somewhere?

CHARLEY. Yeah, I saw that you had a grocery list sittin there on the counter, and I thought to myself:

'Charley, you're getting older. It's time for you to take responsibility for yourself.'

That's what you were saying to me the other day. [*imitating her*] 'Chuckles, just be a man!' And I took it to heart. So I took my new license and I went and got the groceries.

RENEE. ... And left your sister alone...?

CHARLEY. You were upstairs.

RENEE. Unconscious and equally as vulnerable.

CHARLEY. I didn't know you were asleep-

RENEE. Do you know what could have happened?!

CHARLEY. Uh- no... I just wanted to help.

RENEE. Anyone could have come in, do you understand that?

CHARLEY. Mom, I locked the door behind me.

RENEE. [*to NORMA*] What if something had happened to your sister?

NORMA. I was fine.

CHARLEY. Yeah, she was just where I left her when I came back.

RENEE. And where did you get the money to pay for all this?

CHARLEY. [*averting his gaze.*] ... on the bureau.

RENEE. Speak up.

CHARLEY. On your bureau.

RENEE. ... Creepin' into my room while I'm sleepin', now that's exactly the kind of thing that I was talking about. [*feverish*] Anyone could have come in. [*pause*] I wasn't finished with the list, there are a few things I left off it. [*pause*] Chuckles.

CHARLEY. Yes?

RENEE. Go on, do me a favor and get some cornmeal. I'm going to make catfish.

CHARLEY. Ooh, can we still have it on the fourth?

RENEE. ... And some Aspirin, I have a bit of a headache.

NORMA. Can I go too?

RENEE. Hmm, I don't know... alright, but that's one of your three.

NORMA. What?!

RENEE. Don't even start.

NORMA. [*under her breath*] But it's Sunday- the week doesn't start till tomorrow.

NORMA and CHARLEY begin to leave when RENEE notices the protruding book hidden in NORMA'S dress.

RENEE. Yeah you better keep it down, any louder and I'll smack the -- What's that?!

NORMA reveals the book.

RENEE. That's another.

NORMA. I can leave the house once more this week?! That's not fair!

RENEE. Norma, we live ten miles outside of town! It's not like it's a stroll down the street. And what's not fair is having a daughter that doesn't respect how you discipline her. I told you you weren't to read this.

CHARLEY. I don't see the harm. I mean-

RENEE. I told you and you disobeyed me! What?! A coded anagram?!

NORMA. No! Mother-

RENEE. Do you have any idea what you're toying with...? You're a child.

CHARLEY. It's a book. I mean, most parents want their kids to read.

RENEE. Charles Flazel Wagoner! When I call for a forum I'll let you know, this is not a democracy.

CHARLEY. Mother.

RENEE. What?!

CHARLEY. [*cheeky with a goofy grin on his face.*] Did I mention how radiant you look right now, in this moment?

RENEE. Charley stop that. [*fighting a smile*] You know I hate it when you do that.

CHARLEY begins to sing Frank Sinatra's "It Had to Be You" taking his mother in his arms and dancing with her while RENEE shrieks at him to stop. Eventually he does and the excitement subsides.

RENEE. Stop that, I told you my head hurts. Alright now you two go on.
CHARLEY. Ehhh, alright ma.

CHARLEY stands still staring blankly at his mother.

RENEE. Well?

CHARLEY. I'm going to need some more money, aren't I?
[RENEE walks upstairs as she mumbles disgruntledly. The siblings share a look of comradery and smile. After a moment, RENEE comes out with some money and shoves it into CHARLEY'S hand.]

RENEE. Here! And don't get in anymore trouble, or I'll call Sheriff Wilshire and have you both arrested.

NORMA. Okay, mom.

[They exit.]

RENEE. Remember! Cornmeal!

She sighs walks around, lethargically sighs again, and drops the book into another box. She collapses into the couch. When she lies down, the book falls to the floor. When she picks it up, she discovers a letter. Appalled, she tears it up and throws it in the garbage.

[Blackout.]

The lights come up on the living room. Enter NORMA and CHARLEY carrying the few items they went to retrieve and ice cream cones. NORMA walks in with ice cream in one hand and mail in the other.

NORMA. I guess I miss it. There's not a whole lot to miss. Maybe the Skinny burger. Weird to think we would get mail so soon after we moved in.

CHARLEY. You got mail a few days ago.

NORMA. That doesn't count, that was from a friend. Mom doesn't have any friends-that's not true, but none that would bother to write. *[she opens the letter.]*

CHARLEY. Check the return address. Maybe Mom would let you read that book if you didn't get so defensive every time someone brought her up.

NORMA. There's a difference between being defensive and defending yourself.

CHARLEY. No, there isn't. But there is a difference between answering the question and avoiding the subject.

NORMA. I'm not avoiding the subject. Mom attacked me and ... said some very hurtful things about Dorris.

CHARLEY. Oh she did, did she?

NORMA. If you weren't going to listen then why did you ask?!

CHARLEY. I'm sorry. Go on with your story. Really, I was just teasing. Please, come on, I bought you an ice cream cone.

NORMA. No you didn't, and that boy gave you an extra scoop 'cause he felt bad for me. Ice cream cone or not, don't expect to be hearing much from me. Why are you suddenly so interested in my life, anyway? All you've talked or cared about for the last three months is "senior year with a car" and "boy, Normal, am I gonna fix up that Pontiac. Whoop, make it sail like The Cool Guy's!" Hollering all your car-talk: nuts, cranks, and engines. Like it's cars that are so complicated. Now you're worried about my only friend in the world. Don't you have any friends of your own to worry about?

CHARLEY. Well, no, not anymore... well, none that would write. Didn't mean anything by making fun. I know it's weird for us to talk, but I don't really know anyone else around here, who's to say we can't be friends. I was just asking because I wanted to know how you were doing, that's all. Innocent intentions.

NORMA. Okay. Well, she implied some unchurchworthy things about the nature of Doris' and my relationship. She worried we were growing too dependent on each other, and that we needed to separate immediately before we withered away from the world and into one another.

CHARLEY. Poetic.

NORMA. I'm not ashamed to say it was a poetic relationship.

CHARLEY. Is. There's a great deal of shame to be taken in this world for a great many shameful acts. Keeping friends is not among them.

NORMA. My ice cream is beginning to melt. Oh, here. *[handing him the envelope.]* It's an advertisement for a magazine company, I think. There's a bunch of car stuff in there, I see, and some teen magazines.

CHARLEY. Oooh. Let me see. *[neatly removing the pamphlets from the envelope and looking over them intently.]* Yeah, this is exactly what we need, to stimulate our minds with some culture.

NORMA. I don't think dressing as a wanna-be greaser counts as getting cultured.

CHARLEY. And look at that, I was going to get you a subscription of your own, but now it looks like you'll just have to borrow some of mine when you've got nothing to read.

NORMA. Uh. Why did we have to move here in the summer, with just enough time not to make any friends and steep in the misery of losing everything we've built for our entire lives. I mean all of our, *our* friends and family are back home.

CHARLEY. You make it sound like sunshine.

NORMA. You're right. It's a fat hunk of sheep shit.

CHARLEY. Here's not so bad. Except the not knowing anybody, but that's fixable.

NORMA. How's that?

CHARLEY. Why, didn't you know, I am the Baron of Blab with the Gift of Gab.

NORMA. Likely, considering your track record.

CHARLEY. Well, that's a good point, but now I'm telling you I just know things.

NORMA. Is this clairvoyance, is it new?

CHARLEY. I don't think I know that word.

NORMA. It just means you know stuff you shouldn't.

CHARLEY. Well then yeah... Where'd you come up with these words?

NORMA. I read that word in my book.

CHARLEY. There you go with that book. I'm telling you, just let Mom think you don't give two squirts of piss about that book and she'll forget about it by tomorrow. I am curious though what you're so obsessive over.

NORMA. [*emphatic*] Ok. So it starts out in an ordinary Chicago neighborhood, or so it seems. Tom Wallace is your average working man with a beautiful wife and a young rambunctious son. He leads an ordinary life working as a lineman in a factory, drinking with his buddies once a week. Until one weekend, his wife's sister in law decides to spend her holiday visiting from the city, much to his dismay. Provoked by his drinking-buddies, she reveals that she is capable of hypnotizing people into trances and is goaded into proving her powers. Skeptical Tom throws himself on the knife and cavalierly volunteers, doubtful of the enchantments fidelity. As he closed his eyes, the sweet opiate-drone of her voice dilated the psychic abilities trapped deep in the recesses of Wallace's mind. He awakes to find his companions in an uproar of laughter. Confused, the last thing he remembers is the concave pit of a suffocating mouth sealed against plastic and the hot wet smell of soot and perspiration. And that's as far as I've gotten.

CHARLEY. Whoa. Uh well in this magazine they tell you how to do your hair interesting ways and dress to the latest fashion.

NORMA. Doris says it just gets better from there.

CHARLEY. Doris said that, huh? You know what I was saying about how I know things, I didn't mean nothing psychic, but I know how to talk to people, and Momma doesn't let you get out the house as much, so you haven't had as much practice. That boy didn't feel bad for you.

NORMA. What?

CHARLEY. For one thing that boy did not feel *bad* for you.

NORMA. Who's this now?

CHARLEY. The boy behind register at the ice cream bar.

NORMA. Then why did he give me free neapolitan?

CHARLEY. Sweet sweet child that wasn't free, that was an investment.

NORMA. Now that's just cynical. I'm sure he was just being nice. And, hypothetically speaking, if he was attempting to court me, I would be incredibly flattered and entirely uninterested.

CHARLEY. You're not interested in boys? I find that hard to believe. Not that I would expect you to be thinking about marriage and kids and all, just that I think that to some degree it's healthy to interact with the other sex.

NORMA. [*shaking her head.*] Uh-uh nope, don't like where this is going.

CHARLEY. Look, Mom's version of things is like one of those *Tales of Tomorrow* late night shows. All guts and gore. And I don't think that it has to be like that necessarily.

NORMA. Know that I love you before I say this: between the two of us, and forgive my hubris, but in the ways of problem solving skills, charm, and kinesthetic intelligence, I am clearly the gifted child. You have your merits, but I've already read or found out for myself anything that you would know.

CHARLEY. [*mortified.*] You have?

NORMA. Oh- No no no, I didn't mean that I'm not... I am, I promise. I meant there are some books written in great detail on the subject for us academics.

CHARLEY. How come I haven't heard of these books?

NORMA. Well there is no one book that's explicitly about it, but sometimes when I'm reading a story and two people are talking about one thing it makes me think in reality they're actually talking about love and love making and such.

CHARLEY. I don't buy it -- give me an example. A simple one please; I'm treading water here.

NORMA. I don't know what I'm saying, every once in a while it just feels like those guys writing those *Dick and Jane* readers are having a laugh at everyone else's expense. Right?

CHARLEY. You arriving at that conclusion concerns me.

NORMA. My angle is that there's nothing that you could tell me about love that I don't really know or couldn't figure out with the knowledge I have.

CHARLEY. Hmm. What if I told you you had a date later this week?

NORMA. Pardon?

CHARLEY. The kid at the ice cream shop wants to take you out. I said it was fine by me.

NORMA. It was fine by you?

CHARLEY. Yeah, I don't have a problem with it. You see most guys, most guys are really protective with their sisters because we know that at the core there isn't a whole lot of good that can come out of a man who's not you or your father spending time with your women kin. But I don't want to be like that. I don't want you to not know what it's like to have someone take you out, that's important for a girl, so that she knows she's worth it.

NORMA. Excuse me?! Charles, you've no right to go around under the frontage of a procurer.

CHARLEY. I don't know what the heck you're talking about. If you're nervous-

NORMA. Of course I'm nervous. I'm nervous for my future if it means my brother is going to treat me like some urchin Concubine.

CHARLEY. ... Oh! Oh-- Ok, you see it wasn't till right there that you said a word that I understand and am now coming to the realization that you are very upset with me.

NORMA. Yup.

CHARLEY *throws his hands up into the air startling* NORMA.

CHARLEY. Hallelujah!

NORMA. What the hell are you so happy about you tactless nut?

CHARLEY. I have made a mistake.

NORMA. Yeah?

CHARLEY. And I've realized it.

NORMA. So?

CHARLEY. Realizing the error in your ways is the first step to correcting them.

NORMA. Good, so how are you going to fix this?

CHARLEY. I don't know. I've just now realized that girls don't like to be told what to do, especially when it comes to their private company.

NORMA. That's right, Charles, I don't want you making my dates for me. I don't think I could trust your scrutiny.

CHARLEY. But who's going to make sure you don't end up alone? Look you're pushing me, I'm worried you're a bit too... you're my sister and I love you, but you're-- you're--

NORMA. Spit it out!

CHARLEY. Sometimes, when people stick their neck out for you to try and help you're -- uh!

NORMA. Today, please. I'm growing impatient with all your stuttering.

CHARLEY. You can be a real-- No! You're just really-- *[becoming enraged and beginning to turn red in the face.]* You just are so-- ah!

NORMA. I'm sorry, Charley. I didn't mean to be mean.

CHARLEY. *[pacing.]* Why?! Why did you do that?!

NORMA. It was a mistake, I wasn't minding my words. I'm sorry, Charley. Just calm down, ok?

CHARLEY. You're still doing it!

NORMA. *[approaching him slowly and placing her hands on his shoulders.]* Shh. Shhhhh. It's ok. I'm sorry, come on, sit down. Shh. Shh. There, there.

He relaxes.

NORMA. You want me to sing you a song?

He nods "yes." she slowly starts to sing Silhouettes by The Rays. When she gets to the chorus her brother joins her in the call-return part as the back-up singer.

NORMA. Would it make you feel better if I help you figure out that word you were stuck on?

CHARLES. Something tells me that'll defeat the point.

NORMA. Hmm. *[pause.]* Was it "condescending"?

CHARLEY. Yeah I think that's the one.

[pause.]

CHARLEY. Thanks Norma.

NORMA. You got it Chuckles. *[sighs.]* That poor boy thinks he has a date. There goes my one outing.

CHARLEY. I'm sorry.

NORMA. No. It's ok, Charley, you were trying to inject some pleasantness into all of this. Who am I kidding, it's not the worst thing that could happen. Most girls would probably go numb over the cute boy at the ice cream bar.

CHARLEY. You think he's cute?

NORMA. Not personally, but objectively I would say so.

CHARLEY. Say again?

NORMA. I don't find him attractive, but I know that he is. I think it's weird too, I can't really explain it. But regardless he seems nice enough and I should at least give him the chance.

CHARLEY. Yeah, the guy deserves at least a chance.

NORMA. What did you say his name was?

CHARLEY. Manfred. Manfred Handler. I know it's a dopey name; he prefers Manny or Freddy. But I thought that you guys could bond over not liking your names. Like you could have that as a thing in common.

NORMA. Yeah, maybe. I just don't like the "m", maybe if it was just Nora instead...

CHARLEY. Okay, well, I think I'm going to go work on the car now. There's nothing particularly concerning, just that we just made a long trip and I want to make sure everything is still going to go the way it's supposed to.

Exit CHARLEY. Re Enter CHARLEY.

CHARLEY. Hey, Norma.

NORMA. Yes?

CHARLEY. Would it make you feel better if I told you you'd be doing me a favor, because I don't really know anybody and now you're making a friend for me by going on a date with him?

NORMA. No, Charles, that doesn't help.

Exit CHARLEY. Re Enter CHARLEY.

CHARLEY. Hey, Norma.

NORMA. Yes, Charley?

CHARLEY. I can't help but feel a little thick at the moment. So I'm going to sweeten the deal. If you work extra hard and convince Mom to give you another outing, as a reward I'll buy you something nice to wear and I'll get you a magazine subscription. Any one you want.

NORMA. That's really nice, Charley. Thank you.

Exit CHARLEY. NORMA sighs and wipes the sweat from her brow. The hum of the Cicadas intensifies for a short time.]

NORMA. Mom! ... Mom, are you awake?

She gets off of the couch and walks into her mother's bedroom and hurriedly comes back to the living room with the Stir of Echoes in her hand. She opens the book, smells it, and finally notices that Doris' letter is missing. She panics, first frantically flipping through the pages of the book, then diving into the box where she had originally found the book and causing a racket.

Enter CHARLEY.

CHARLEY. What are you doing in here? I haven't heard Mom talking so that means she must be sleeping, I would keep it down. What's that in your hand?

NORMA. Where is it, what did she do with it? Or was it you?

CHARLEY. Huh?

NORMA. Try not to sound so guilty.

CHARLEY. In all honesty Norms, I don't have the foggiest as to what you're talking about.

NORMA. Where is it?

CHARLEY. What are you looking for, maybe I could help you find it.

NORMA. There's no reason I shouldn't have it. Give me one good reason. We're keeping in touch, just keeping in touch. That's perfectly normaL.

CHARLEY. Norma! You need to stop it.

NORMA. Where's my letter?!

She throws the book at him. He catches it gracefully.

CHARLEY. Whoa! What the hell is wrong with you! I have half a mind to--

NORMA. To what?! What are you going to do? You act brave, but you're just clueless.

CHARLEY. Where do you get off talking to me like that?!

NORMA. You sound like Mom!

Enter RENEE.

CHARLEY. No! How-- you do! You both sound exactly the same. Both of you whores!

RENEE. [*calmly.*] Excuse me?

The room is silent for a moment.

CHARLEY. Mother. I am so sorry. I did not mean to be so vulgar.

RENEE. What is going on here? [*gesturing to the book.*] Where did you get that?!

CHARLEY. I took it from your bureau. I crept into your bedroom, just like earlier today.

NORMA. What have you done?!

RENEE. Once, maybe, but this is shameful.

NORMA. What have you done?! What did I do to deserve such a spiteful mother?!

RENEE. What have I done? Excuse me?! I have been asleep for the last forty minutes. You have never seen spiteful. Okay! You want to learn what spiteful *feels* like?!

CHARLEY. You need to calm her down.

RENEE. Don't tell me how to discipline!

CHARLEY. What are you yelling at me for?! This is between you two!

RENEE. You were all yelling! You were all yelling long before I even entered the room! That's what woke me up in the first place!

NORMA. Boo Hoo!

RENEE. You are so close, young lady, you are so close and you don't even know it.

CHARLEY. It's the middle of the day anyway, what are you doing sleeping?! Why do you just lay around all--

RENEE. That goes double for you mister!

CHARLEY. Why double?! I'm innocent.

RENEE. You're all interrupting my beauty rest!

CHARLEY. There's no reason you should be sleeping in the middle of the day. It's not healthy.

RENEE. I'm tired and I have ... I have a big date tonight, so I needed that sleep!

NORMA. You do not! You're lying, you're always lying!

CHARLEY. There's no way I believe that for a minute. [*visibly upset.*] No! You have to be lying! You're always making up stories. And what happened to catfish night?

RENEE. If you two don't stop this barratment on your own mother right now or --

NORMA. What? You're going to call Sheriff Tippet or Judge Holmes to arrest us?

CHARLEY. Those tricks don't work on us anymore. We're older. You do not have a date tonight.

NORMA. You invent characters and stories to scare us into acting the way you want to compensate for your- for your- because you're not a good person!

There's a knock on the door.

RENEE. See there he is now!

RENEE *runs over to the door. When she opens it, Lance Greenspan is there looking concerned and dumbfounded.*

LANCE. Uh... Hello?

RENEE. Oh don't be so coy. Come on in!

LANCE. Okay. Actually I came here--

RENEE *grabs his arm yanking him inside the house and onto the couch in one swift move.*

RENEE. Here, take a seat. Can I get you something to drink?

LANCE. Uh--

RENEE. How about a smoke? I could go for a smoke, right, kids?

RENEE *runs into the kitchen and grabs two cigarettes from the drawer and a glass from the cabinet. She drops one cigarette in the glass and hands it to LANCE*

RENEE. Where are my matches? Charley, honey, have you seen my matches? Oh! How rude of me, these are my children Charles and Norma. Children say hello to--

LANCE. Uh, Lance.

NORMA + CHARLEY. Hello Lance.

LANCE. Hi.

RENEE. I'm going to go check-- did you leave them by the barbecue?

RENEE *exits.*

CHARLEY.*[angry.]* So you're our mother's date?

RENEE *enters again without matches.*

RENEE. Give me a moment, I'm not quite ready.

RENEE *exits into her bedroom.*

NORMA. I don't understand. Who are you?

LANCE. I live next door.

CHARLEY. So how did you meet my mother?

LANCE. Uh... she just seemed friendly. There was something welcoming about her.

RENEE *enters in a dress and wearing slightly unsensible heels. Her purse is bigger than any individual part of her body.*

RENEE. Alright, I'm ready to get out of here. I didn't have time to put on my make-up. I didn't realize you were coming so soon.

LANCE. Well, what I really wanted to say was--

RENEE. Alright, we'll see you two later. I should be back late, so no staying up. You're both still grounded.

NORMA . Grounded?!

CHARLE

Y. What?!

RENEE. Grounded! For the misbehavior we had earlier.

NORMA. I want to speak my piece. In my personal opinion.-

RENEE. There you go. That's your problem right there, too much of your personal opinion. I better find you here when I get back asleep in your beds.

RENEE *exits, dragging LANCE behind her.*

CHARLEY. What the hell just happened?

NORMA. I think that's what loss looks like.

CHARLEY. Okay, so now what... now that I think about it, I think this is the most trouble that I've ever been in.

NORMA. Me too. Never going to see the light of day again.

CHARLEY. Alright, so we'll become nocturnal.

NORMA. Good word, Charley.

CHARLEY. We make good delinquents. Hey lets go to the Ruben's Diner.

NORMA. Are you crazy?

CHARLEY. Come on!

NORMA. You said it yourself. We're in the most trouble we've ever been in.

CHARLEY. You're exactly right. Together. That's exactly why we should go to the diner. It's pretty clear to me.

NORMA. I'm going to bed and I'm not getting up until this place grows a lake.

CHARLEY. Funny funny little girl. But listen, we're already in as much trouble as it gets, and in a way we got what we wanted. Mom is gone and we are here...

unsupervised. So lets take the last opportunity to enjoy ourselves.

NORMA. Okay, Uncle Money bags. How are you affording all of this extravagance, tools, magazines, clothes?

CHARLEY. I'm working on it.

[Blackout.]

Ruben's Diner. It's late RENEE and LANCE are alone in a booth downstage left.

RENEE is using her finger to scrape the last of the ketchup on her tray.

RENEE. I just had to eat something, I hadn't eaten all day. Why didn't you remind me to get a large drink, I think I've sweated at least a small out of the medium I drank just sitting right here.

Pause.

RENEE. Back there, that really wasn't like me back there, at the house. You're our neighbor right? You can talk you know, we're not actually on a date.

Pause.

RENEE. Oh, look at me, I'm a monster. I've gone and scared the pants off the only *peer* that I've seen socially in weeks. You know, I work in a therapist's office. I wouldn't be able to help you personally, but I know lots of good doctors. I don't have any formal training, but I'm good with people, they seem to like the way I see them, even if the feeling isn't mutual. You could come in any day you like, they're quite discreet -- not to imply that there is something wrong with you or that you should seek medical attention for a psychiatric disorder -- Oh dear, I fear this joke has gone horribly awry.

Pause .

RENEE. I'm sorry, I haven't really given you the opportunity to speak, have I? What did you say your name was again?

Applying her lipstick. He checks his watch.

LANCE. Lance.

RENEE. And you're our neighbor?

LANCE. That's right.

RENEE. That's a nice name, what does it mean?

LANCE. To me, nothing.

RENEE. Well that's poor outlook.

LANCE. No I mean, I don't have much attachment to it.

RENEE. And why not? It's a perfectly fine name.

LANCE. I know... it's just not really mine.

RENEE. How do you mean? It's on your drivers' licence isn't it?

LANCE. Right. That's not what I meant to say. Look, I'm not great at sharing things about myself. I consider myself a guarded person.

RENEE. I understand we've just met, and I did abduct you, but humor me please.

LANCE. I'm not very funny.

RENEE. [*chuckles.*] You know that's not what I meant. Fine. Where from then?

LANCE. I grew up in Los Angeles.

RENEE. Oh, well that sounds glamorous. That explains your sense of style and your regal reserve.

LANCE. [*smirks.*] You really don't have to do that, I'm not upset with you.

RENEE. I was just making conversation.

LANCE. I understand how useful a flattery is in a woman's repertoire, and it's really not necessary, I promise you that. I'm not angry with you. I only just knocked

because I heard yelling and wanted to make sure everything was ok and I only came along with you because -- I don't know -- you were outnumbered and I like underdogs, maybe.

RENEE. Is that normal around here?

LANCE. Eh, most people in town like to keep to themselves to the best of their ability. Especially in this heat. But up where we are in Snow Creek, we got to look out for one another. In fact, I'm actually trying to start a homeowners association so we can get the city to help us maintain part of that road.

RENEE. Quite the humanitarian.

LANCE. No, I just like to keep things in order. I used to be a copy editor.

RENEE. That's impressive. Did you get a degree for that?

LANCE. No.

RENEE. Even more so, then.

LANCE. Thank you.

RENEE. I've always thought it would have been interesting to've gone to college. But they don't let in runaways. I know I shouldn't complain, I knew girls that suffered worse than I did. But still, I wouldn't wish my life on anyone. I try to make it do more good for me than bad. Which is why I think my daughter ought to go off to school. She's bright, she needs people to stimulate her intellectually. That's why I have to be careful with what she learns. Some things, when they're learned, can't be unlearned, and then you've gone and squandered that potential that was there.

LANCE. How old is she?

RENEE. What's the date today?

LANCE. June twenty first.

RENEE. Oh my goodness. She's eighteen on the fifth. I was all caught up with moving and the fourth, I haven't really planned anything for Norma. But lately she's been so nasty. I understand it's been hard on them, but sometimes they can be so dehumanizing. They don't know what they're doing to me, just look at me. I left my husband, by the way. If you were curious as to what's causing this wreck.

LANCE. I think you look great.

RENEE. That's sweet of you. I think women in ruin are in this year. You know I feel shame right? I feel shameful for the way I act in front of them sometimes. They're angry at me for taking their precious father away from them. But they don't know, it hasn't been easy for me.

LANCE. Hey, I'm pretty sure that's just kids. You're probably doing a fine job. You have a job and a house, and I can tell you love your children. Which, sad to say, isn't as common as you would think in a mother.

RENEE. I hate that you're feeling sorry for me right now. I'm not "sorry" am I?

LANCE. I wouldn't say so at all.

RENEE. That was a kind thing you just did for me, thank you. It's nice to have someone to just... get the time of day from.

LANCE. Yeah, it is.

Enter NORMA and CHARLEY looking for a seat.

LANCE. *[making the same face he did in his first appearance.]* Oh dear.

RENEE. Why do you have that look on your--

LANCE. I think that you should probably avoid turning around.

RENEE. *[turning around.]* Why, what's there?

LANCE. No!

RENEE stifles a yelp, grabs LANCE, and pulls him under the table. NORMA and CHARLEY walk to the dinner counter and sit down.

RENEE. How pathetic is this? We need to figure out a way to get out of here.

LANCE. Didn't you ground them?

RENEE. Yes, but I also said I was on a date.

LANCE. That seems a little--

RENEE. We could make it one.

LANCE. What?! I don't think you understand.

RENEE grabs his face and kisses him smearing lipstick on his mouth.

LANCE. Oh ugh. *[checks his watch.]* I'm sorry I'm going to be late.

LANCE exits to the bathroom. RENEE embarrassed slips out the back unnoticed.

NORMA. I don't know Charley, it doesn't look like there are any waiters or anything. The jukebox isn't even turned on.

CHARLEY. Someone'll come out. Hey, you know, you should try talking to Mom more reasonably. She's not that outrageous of a person. If you really communicate, I think you may eventually be able to get through to her.

NORMA. You're just saying that because you're the favorite.

CHARLEY. That is not true.

NORMA. At the very least it shares a border with truth.

CHARLEY. I'll give you that one.

NORMA. Why does she do that? Make up those characters to scare us. It doesn't work now and it didn't really when we were younger. Still, everyday it's something about 'officer soandso', or 'judge thisorthat'.

CHARLEY. I think it's about the time that our judgement is almost worth the same, and that scares her.

NORMA. That was very insightful, Charles. That doesn't make it ok.

CHARLEY. You just got to toughen your skin, that's all. I'm wondering who that guy was; there's no way she manifested a date out of thin air.

NORMA. I almost forgot about that, that was odd.

CHARLEY. Yeah, I don't like it. Dad's not going to like it either.

NORMA. You talked to him?!

CHARLEY. Yeah, just a little.

NORMA. When? *[hitting him.]* Why didn't you say anything?

CHARLEY. He asked me not to.

NORMA. Well, why?

CHARLEY. God damn it, Norma, I don't know.

NORMA. Well is he still home?

CHARLEY. I don't know if he's home, but I think he's still in New Mexico.

NORMA. When is he coming back?

CHARLEY. How likely do you think it is that I have the answer to your next question?

NORMA. ... Did he ask about us?

CHARLEY. Jesus Christ! Look, I'm sorry Norma. All I asked was why he and Mom split up and he said what he always says.

NORMA + CHARLEY. "Ask your mother."

CHARLEY: Yeah.

NORMA. Somehow in this instance it loses its slovenly charm.

CHARLEY. He said he might write though, so we should be on the lookout.

NORMA. Yeah... Where are all the servers? This looks like a nice place to work, I would love to come to work here everyday. Not all of us are afforded the luxury of a day job to occupy their time. Some people sit and rot on the couch.

CHARLEY. That's not such a bad idea. Hey, you should get a job, then Mom would have to let you out of the house.

NORMA. What job would Mom let me get?

CHARLEY. You said here was fine.

NORMA. No. You know she would say something off-handed like the skirts were too tight.

CHARLEY. You're right, she doesn't really like to leave you around men, or boys our age even, pretty much anything with -- So nothing in food service.

NORMA. Maybe babysitting?

CHARLEY. That might work, except I don't know how we'd get the family to cooperate. It's too easy for Mom to try and drive by.

NORMA. Well, shoot.

Enter LANCE, who is using a paper towel to remove whatever lipstick he thinks is still on him.

CHARLEY. No way.

NORMA. Would you look at that?

LANCE. Look, kids, I don't want to get between you and your mother. I think she had misinterpreted the events of the last few minutes. I'm sorry if I upset her.

CHARLEY. Wait. What happened?

NORMA. Where's our mother?

LANCE. She's not with you? I left her here.

NORMA. What?

CHARLEY. *[noticing the lipstick.]* What the hell is that on your face? *[stepping behind him.]*

LANCE. I'm sorry I can't see my own face.

NORMA. It looks like you've been tonguing our mother!

CHARLEY. That's her lipstick, alright.

LANCE. That is her lipstick, but I'm positive you have the wrong idea.

CHARLEY. What have you done to her?

LANCE. With no disrespect, this was done *to* me, not *by* me.

NORMA. Would you say our mother is attractive?

LANCE. Well... yes, she's a very beautiful woman.

NORMA. And Charley? Would you say that mother is a beautiful woman, as Lance here suggests?

CHARLEY. I suppose if I thought about it real hard.

NORMA. So we are all in agreeance that Renee Wagoner, our mother, is a beautiful and attractive woman?

LANCE. I see where is is headed--

NORMA. Charley. Would you say our friend Lance here is good looking or dashing?

CHARLEY. Well, I wouldn't say he was my friend, for starters.

NORMA. So, Lance, you expect me to believe two people who've been determined to be objectively attractive, despite our own familial prejudices and your unfamiliarity with our family, would have any other option than to kiss now that the great divide known as the table between them suddenly sheltered them giving them sanctuary for our forbidden love.

LANCE. I wouldn't keep her inside for much longer. I'm not having an affair with your mother.

NORMA. Well then why did we move all the way out here? If you're not our mother's lover, then why did she leave our father and--

CHARLEY grows angry once more before calming himself. Relaxed, he picks up LANCE and sets him the booth.

CHARLEY. Did you kiss our mother?

LANCE. No.

CHARLEY. ... did our mother kiss you?

LANCE. Yes.

NORMA. Feel free to start explaining yourself.

CHARLEY. Take your time though, we wouldn't want you to spare us any of the details.

LANCE. Really it's going to be a less exciting story than you expect?

CHARLEY. We'll be the judges of that.

NORMA. How did you meet our mother?

LANCE. I knocked on your door.

CHARLEY. You just knocked on our door one day?

LANCE. No. Just earlier today, when I heard screaming coming from inside. I thought that maybe someone was in trouble.

NORMA. So you're not our mother's date at all?

LANCE. Not even a little bit.

CHARLEY. That doesn't explain the lipstick.

LANCE. You're right. When you two walked into the diner, your mother pulled me under the table and kissed me.

CHARLEY. That does explain the lipstick.

NORMA. Oh, Jeez louise. I'm sorry about that.

LANCE. Really, it's ok.

NORMA. She won't bother you anymore.

LANCE. I don't really see how you could stop her, but it's alright anyway. I kind of like her. She doesn't really understand who I am yet, but that always takes people a little while. I'm sure we could become friends. I think she might need that right now.

NORMA. What would our mother do with a friend like you?

LANCE. Don't know what that supposed to mean.

NORMA. How long have you lived in the house next door?

LANCE. Uhm, just a little under a year. Why?

NORMA. Pretty large house for a bachelor, huh?

LANCE. I suppose, but it affords me lots of room for organization. I don't really like clutter, the basics are what's important to me. Like friendship, I think it's a basic--

NORMA. So you are a bachelor then?

LANCE. Yes. I live alone.

NORMA. And what do you do?

LANCE. I was a copy editor. I haven't done much else really, career-wise that is. I think it would be nice to start a local paper. But that of course would come after the homeowner's association, and I don't know how people would feel about me putting together a paper, since I don't really live in town.

NORMA. And why don't you live in town? Why did you pick Snow Creek Village?

LANCE. I thought people would ask me fewer questions about myself. That's what I get for allowing myself to get dragged into town I guess. *[he checks his watch.]*

CHARLEY. Got somewhere you need to be, maybe a wife and some runts?!

LANCE. I just told you I live alone.

CHARLEY. Yeah, but what if I had caught you in a lie?

LANCE. Look, it appears that you're mother has stranded me here and I very much need to get back home, right now. So if one of you two would kindly offer to take me home, I would gladly forget this lovely social gathering. Being how it violates your groundation.

NORMA. How rude.

CHARLEY. You drive a pretty hard bargain. And you're lucky our family has recently invested in our very own top-of-the-line Ford Edsel. Meaning I got the Studebaker, the only vehicle here. So I guess we're saying 'uncle,' sis.

NORMA. [*nearly inaudible.*] Hmm, doesn't sound like Charley.

LANCE. I don't mean to bust your hump, just call me a stickler for the preservation of a healthy domestic environment.

CHARLEY. Funny?

LANCE. What?

NORMA. There we go.

CHARLEY. Does that sound right to you Norms? A bachelor who talks like married man?

LANCE. I haven-- I don't--

CHARLEY. Hey, that reminds me of an actual married man. Our father. Wouldn't it be nice if he found out about this?

NORMA. I'm sure he shares your enthusiasm for -- what'd you say, "the preservation of a healthy family dynamic?"

LANCE. Please don't tell your father. [*wild.*] I'll do anything.

NORMA. [*startled.*] I don't know. What do you say, Charley?

CHARLEY. I think... you should come over for tea tomorrow.

LANCE. Is that all?

NORMA. ... and bring chocolate-- no ice cream! Rocky Road.

[*Blackout.*]

Wagoner Residence. The house is dark. After a moment a car pulls into the driveway. NORMA, and CHARLEY enter the living room through the sliding glass door.

CHARLEY. [*whispering.*] I didn't see mom's car in the driveway.

NORMA. Then why are you whispering.

CHARLEY. The off chance that she pulls up right now.

NORMA. That's terribly unlikely, we probably won't see her until tomorrow morning. You know that.

CHARLEY. Of course, but that's why it's called an "off chance." Mom staying out all night that would be the "on chance," we're in the "on chance," I believe in the "on chance." But I'm keeping my voice down, because I don't like the off chance enough to let it get the best of me. Which is why I arranged for our friend to join us for tea tomorrow. I think he might be able to help us with your situation.

NORMA. I'm not sure, Charley, he kind of just seems like a small scared man.

CHARLEY. Well, we can't trust him, that's for sure. We got to get our hooks into him before mom does. [*pause.*] I wonder where she got off to?

The sound of another car pulling into a near by driveway is heard. CHARLEY hits the floor as if in an earthquake drill.

CHARLEY. Quick, Norma! Hit the deck!

NORMA. Charley, that's not mom.

CHARLEY. *[getting up.]* Well, then who the heck is it?

NORMA. It's pulling into Lance's driveway.

CHARLEY. *[peering through the window.]* Must be what he was so eager to get home to. You thinking hot date?

NORMA. *[joining him.]* What else? Looking at the guy, you wouldn't have thought he had it in him, but you know what they say about packages and size .

CHARLEY. Who's that old guy?

NORMA. I don't know... you know about a month ago when we very first got here and Mom was working almost everyday?

CHARLEY. Yeah, that was nice. She was out of the house most of the time, and when she got back, she had so much of her day that she wanted to share that you didn't have to share back.

NORMA. Yeah, but remember she was always talking about one doctor in particular, because he was rumored to have, in addition to his family's home, a home on the outskirts of town for his extramarital affair.

CHARLEY. Yeah, but I thought that guy was from Los Angeles and commuted into work or something-- they all hated him because he never really comes in, carpools in, buys a house, but never shows up.

NORMA. Yeah, but does that sound right to you? Hating a man cause he throws a few extra bucks at the gasoline pump? There's got to be something else there. And besides, Snow Creek village is the only thing between the mountain pass and the town. Might make for a good love nest.

CHARLEY. Oh come on, maybe the guy's a little uncomfortable around children, but I wouldn't say he's a degenerate. Look, whatever you're cooking in your brain there is bad news. And I don't even want to know how you're connecting it to this.

NORMA. No, listen, if we sneak over there right now we'll find out his secret--

CHARLEY. *[walking toward the magazine brochure.]* No way. I am no longer going to allow you to lead me down the path of unrighteousness. *[he picks up the brochure.]* Owe you one! *[he hurls it at her.]*

NORMA throws her arms up to defender face, trips into a heap of boxes, and lets out a sound similar to that of a dromedary camel.

NORMA. Ah, what the heck, Charley.

CHARLEY. Remember earlier when you hit me with your book and I hadn't done anything?

NORMA. Well, sorry!

CHARLEY. I don't want your apology, irrational behaviour will not be tolerated.

And when it is, it will be met with retaliation.

NORMA. *[pause.]* So you going to clean this up?

CHARLEY. Yeah, I was just about to...

NORMA. Okay, well, I'm going to find out what he's hiding.

CHARLEY. In most cases I would say that you shouldn't go poking around a man's private business, but since we're already blackmailing him, I don't see the harm. Just don't get caught in the neighbor's yard, you hear?

NORMA. Well then, keep a lookout!

CHARLEY. I can't be two places at once!

NORMA leaves through the sliding glass door. CHARLEY begins to pick up the boxes that were knocked over uncovering a small pile of papers. Confused he opens and begins reading.

CHARLEY. The Black Skeleton-

The sound of RENEE's Ford Edsel is heard coming up the driveway and parking sloppily. Frantic, CHARLEY fumbles the papers into the air and makes a desperate attempt to make the scene appear normal. RENEE walks in invisibly drunk and turns on the lights.

CHARLEY. Hello.

RENEE. Hello.

CHARLEY. How was your date?

RENEE. It went swell.

CHARLEY. Do you think you'll see him again? Lance?

RENEE. Oh I don't know honey, I don't think it's like that.

CHARLEY. Like what?

RENEE. Charley, you're going to have to stop that. You're father and I have decided to part ways. So I'm going to be seeing other people.

CHARLEY. I know that. I've known you my whole life, mother.

RENEE. What happened here?

CHARLEY. I was trying to put away a few things .

RENEE. You've been working real hard, Charley. On the car and trying to take care. I'm impressed, is all.

She sits down on the couch.

RENEE. When I was your age I wasn't as good at taking care of myself and it got me into a lot of trouble. *[She pulls two full pint bottles of beer out of her purse, leaving one empty bottle concealed. She places them on the table.]* I shouldn't do this, but I haven't shared a drink with someone else in a long time. And I thought that tonight

would be as good a night as any. And why not my hard working son? Have you ever had a drink before, Charley? You can be honest.

CHARLEY. Yeah. Once dad and I were fishing, out by Bottomless lake. We didn't catch anything. But the sun was coming up and he fell asleep. So I snuck a sip of his flask.

RENEE. You did? Hm. Well it makes sense you would have at least have some rascal in you. But don't make that kind of behavior a habit.

CHARLEY. I don't intend to.

RENEE. Did you like it?

CHARLEY. Not really.

RENEE. That's a good boy.

CHARLEY. How are we going to open these bottles?

RENEE. We didn't bring the can opener?

CHARLEY. Do you feel like searching for it?

RENEE. Alright! Well, watch this?

RENEE goes over to the stack of papers, picks up the one CHARLEY was reading, sits down, and folds it into a dense square. Using the square, she pops the cap off of both of the bottles and hands CHARLEY one of them.

CHARLEY. You can do that?

RENEE. Yeah. Well, if you really think about it, all paper is is tree that's been cut up and mashed up and separated and squished back together. So if you fold it back up, it's almost like it's a little bigger part of a tree than it was before.

CHARLEY. I see. I'll have to remember that.

The splash of a pool. NORMA burst in, short of breath and wide eyed and wet. Leaning against the inside of the door she slumps to the floor and tries to catch her breath by inhaling once hugely and standing erect as possible. This causes a the blood to rush to her head and she lapses consciousness without losing it completely. She almost falls, but is steadied by CHARLEY's hand.

CHARLEY. Norma! Hey, you alright?

RENEE. Norma. What happened?

NORMA. I think I got wet. *[tears welling in her eyes.]* I'm sorry --

RENEE. Aw, it's ok, sweetie. Come here.

RENEE pulls a kitchen towel off of a hook and begins dabbing NORMA's forehead.

RENEE. *[tenderly.]* Shhh. It's only water. What were doing around the pool this time of night anyway?

NORMA. I didn't know where you were so I went to look for you at Lance's, but you weren't there. When I heard you pull up, I thought that you were going to be upset

with me for violating the articles of groundation we agreed upon last year. Because I said you were unjustly implementing ex post facto law, because I didn't know that I couldn't ask Charley to act as my stand and you punished me anyway.

RENEE. No, honey. I don't remember that.

NORMA. Well it happened, I filed the paperwork out in triplicate.

RENEE. I'm sorry, honey. Why don't I draw you up a bath.

NORMA. Okay.

RENEE exits.

CHARLEY. What was that? You spy like geese.

NORMA. But I milked ma for all she's worth.

CHARLEY. What?

NORMA. I faked it. Look, no tears, just water.

CHARLEY. You jumped in our pool to make it look like you were crying.

NORMA. It worked, and it wasn't our pool. I couldn't see into Lance's bedroom.

CHARLEY. Rightfully so.

NORMA. I know it's amoral behaviour, but it's in our best interest. So get off of your high horse, you're going to miss the good stuff.

CHARLEY. Alright what?

NORMA. You were right, he is a degenerate.

CHARLEY. What'd you see?

NORMA. *[shaking her head.]* Words are the wrong way of going about it. I'll see you in the morning, Charles. Goodnight.

[She stands up and walks toward her bedroom exiting stage right. CHARLEY returns to cleaning the room. He recollects the stack of papers he was reading. He sits on RENEE's purse, perks up, reaches inside the bag to finds the empty pint bottle. He begins to grow red in the face, tries to throw the bottle several times, but ends up sobbing.]

[Lights up as NORMA wakes a groggy CHARLEY from the couch. She removes the now empty bottles from the coffee table and begins setting two places for tea and puts water on to boil. LANCE knocks at the door.]

LANCE. *[from behind the door.]* Hello?

NORMA. *[answering the door.]* Welcome, the water should be boiling soon. Come in, take a seat.

LANCE. Where's your mother?

NORMA. I'm pretty sure she's actually working today.

LANCE. Oh, that's real good.

NORMA. Yeah it is.

LANCE. She mentioned work a little, but I don't think I really understand what she does exactly.

NORMA. Neither do I. She cleans the place some, finds new patients for the doctors to take care of. Some patients she takes more care of than others, not because she plays favorites, But sometimes they really like her, people like talking to my mother. She's not a very good listener, talks a lot. But I think the crazies liker because she talks so much about her own problems that no matter what yours are they get kind of buried.

LANCE. But she's not a nurse?

NORMA. Yeah, I don't know really. The Chief of Medicine came over for dinner a few times. That was right when we got here, and then... then she started working there almost everyday for a while. Then less often, don't know why though. She's complains about money a lot.

LANCE. There gets more to complain about for everyone as you get on.

NORMA. I know. And I know she's trying, things are just harder for her than most people. Like she spent all her patience a long time ago.

LANCE. ... So it's a therapist's office.

NORMA. Sort of. Equal parts celebrity motel and a facility where they can get better when they've borrowed too many late nights. I like to think of alcohol that way, borrowing happiness from tomorrow. Not that I've partaken.

LANCE. Uh, good.

NORMA. She cleans there and occasionally goes to therapy sessions herself. More when we first got here, but before we got the Edsel, Charley used to drop her off for sessions. He said the nurse at the front was funny, they loved her so much they would always ask Charley if he wanted her committed. [*LANCE chuckles.*] Grandma has an old friend that worked there, that's how I think she got the job. Don't tell my mom this, but I don't think she would have done it in the first place if she didn't need the doctor's help.

LANCE. Everyone needs help, your mother has a lot on her plate right now.

NORMA. I hate precociousness, but Lance, I know my mother better than anyone. I know what kind of pressure she's under. She's actually pretty resourceful, she's just bad at keeping her head. She's not a bad person, she's a really good person. She just goes about it poorly.

LANCE. My mother, too.

The water begins to boil.

NORMA. You didn't get along with her?

LANCE. ... No. I did not.

NORMA. What's that look on your face?

LANCE. What are you talking about?

NORMA. That look like you don't know what you're talking about when you do. But also like you're in pain. It makes you very hard to read.

LANCE. I've been told.

NORMA. What is that?

LANCE. You'll get ahold of it, one day. You'll have to.

NORMA. It makes you a good liar.

LANCE. I've had a lot of practice. That was a nice thing you said. Flattery looks nice on you, a budding young woman.

NORMA. Oh? You know I hear there are a few men that take to flattery to secure what they want. And some even more interesting men who take flattery to secure what they want. Do you take flattery very well, Lance? Or do you prefer to give it?

LANCE. *[pause.]* No. I don't take flattery very well.

NORMA. Interesting.

The water now begins to whistle loudly.

NORMA. What kind of tea would you like?

LANCE. I'm not particular.

NORMA. Again, interesting.

LANCE. You know if you say that word that way, it sounds like you mean the opposite, at the very least something unpleasant.

NORMA. I don't.

LANCE Well then--

NORMA. I'll go get the tea then.

She exits to get two cups of tea.

NORMA retrieves the tea.

NORMA. Are you feeling alright?

LANCE. I'm fine, why?

NORMA. Well, I was trying to figure out why you left the diner in such a hurry.

LANCE. Ah. Yes, you see I have a few perennials that are unusually temperamental for the species-- they needed some tending to. Silly, fickle things really.

NORMA. My grandmother places a high value on gardening.

LANCE. It's quite relaxing. Keeps me sane.

NORMA. A necessity. Oh! Did you bring the ice cream?

LANCE. I'm sorry, I haven't had a chance to get it yet.

NORMA. *[looking puzzled.]* That's too bad...

LANCE. As soon as I do, I'll let you know. *[winking.]* I swear it.

NORMA. Mhm... I was worried that you weren't going to show up.

LANCE. Why wouldn't I?

NORMA. *[feining shy.]* Oh I don't know. I thought you wouldn't want to spend your time with someone like me.

LANCE. Now why do you say-

NORMA. And I heard your car leave early this morning, but I didn't hear it come back. I thought you had left and forgot about me.

LANCE. Oh, yes, I did go out to get some groceries very early this morning.

NORMA. So you must have forgotten the ice cream, then.

LANCE. Yes. It must have slipped my mind. I apologize.

NORMA. I like that. I think you should make a distinction between when you're "sorry" and when you "apologize." The admission of sorrow isn't always really what's called for. I used to say "I'm sorry" a lot. My grandmother said if I didn't stop she was going to have to start pinching me every time I said it.

LANCE. Right.

NORMA. Did you misplace your car?

LANCE. No. Why do you ask?

NORMA. I said I didn't hear your car come back this morning. I thought you had left.

LANCE. Well maybe you didn't listen as close as you had originally thought. Because I'm here, aren't I?

NORMA. Are you really all here?

LANCE. What?

NORMA. I wish you would stop it Lance. It's got to be lonely.

LANCE. *[pointing at his head.]* There's a lot going on up here, isn't there?

NORMA. You're really good at hiding it. But I saw you.

LANCE. What are you talking about? Poking around other people's business won't make you very popular around here.

NORMA. Is that what you want to be? Popular?

LANCE. No. I-- I--

NORMA. It'd be awful hard to start a homeowner's association if people knew even just a few of the things I know.

LANCE. Pardon?

NORMA. I really feel a lot for you. Leaving your home in Los Angeles, only to be with your lover of course. To find him rarely in your company, at home in the real world, with his wife and kids. The dream home she thinks is convenient for work is really your love palace. But it's emptier than you thought, isn't it?

LANCE. Where are you getting all of this, child?

NORMA. Ooh. I don't like that.

LANCE. What, being called a child? Well, you're forward for someone your age, rudeness shows a lack of maturity. Don't poke in my business or spy on my ... grammer. I think your mother might like to know that you've been trespassing on the neighbor's property.

NORMA. I think she'd like to know a lot more about your longstanding romance with the chief of medicine.

[pause.]

NORMA. Lance... Lance.

LANCE. You're right, it isn't easy, Norma. But it's a little easier with friends. Remember that. It takes more practice than you think.

NORMA. Uh-- I Uh--

LANCE. But I don't need your pity, especially passive aggressive pity. It's the worst of the false pities, behind sadistic and self-pity. No one really feels bad for themselves; rather they mourn the lack of pity taken out on them by others. What do you want?

NORMA. What?

LANCE. I'm sure you were very proud of yourself when you thought of blackmailing me, but don't be arrogant enough to think you invented blackmail. Tell me what you want so I can save us all some time.

NORMA. Have you no sentimentality for syntax?

LANCE. You really got to cut that out. People don't like that. I don't like that.

NORMA. Why?

LANCE. People don't like it when you ask them to figure out why something bothers them.

NORMA. I guess that makes sense.

LANCE. Most would rather be scared and just get rid of the problem. Not have to think about it beyond that.

NORMA. Okay. I'm sorry.

LANCE. That's alright. Now what do you want? Why did you go through all of this trouble?

NORMA. Really? I can just have whatever I want? That seemed easier than it should have been.

LANCE. See-- you can't be doing that to yourself.

NORMA. What?

LANCE. That thing where you win and keep on talking, it's terrible.

NORMA. I kind of just always keep talking.

LANCE. Ok. *[sighs and sits on the couch.]* I understand that you're smart Norma, but it'll make your life a little bit easier if you can retard that a little for everyone else.

NORMA. Why wouldn't I just say the first thing that I think of?

LANCE. You could do that-- but we don't really live in that world. In this one, talking like that suddenly makes someone realize, especially with people like us, that everything they know doesn't jive. Go about it in a way that makes them feel encouraged.

NORMA. *[robotic.]* Don't include me in "us," please.

LANCE. Alright.

NORMA. This seems like people are awful sensitive.

LANCE. Yes, but so are you.

NORMA. I am not.

LANCE. Really?

NORMA. Yeah, you know, in my day I've seen my fair share of things.

LANCE. Have you really seen anything?

NORMA. *[thinks for a moment.]* That's a trick question... no. We don't really see anything, light is just rearranged to make sense to our brains.

LANCE. That's right, we don't really hear or touch either.

NORMA. Sure.

LANCE. Meaning there's no such real thing as senses. Only sensation.

NORMA. I don't understand.

LANCE. The point is, if you can not truly see, because sight is an illusion, making sight in fact a sensation and not a sense. The reason you're blackmailing me is a sensation disguising itself as a sense.

NORMA. *[pondering.]* Huh... don't criticize my blackmail.

LANCE. Alright, Norma. Tell me what you need so I can go home.

NORMA. Uh. Well, I did get you, I outsmarted you.

LANCE. Yeah, you did, but you were still an asshole. You got to make people feel like they've won if you're going to trick em.

NORMA. Yeah but--

LANCE. Listen you uppity- *[regaining his composure.]* You can't trick me. I saw you in the window last night, I saw you fall out of a tree, I saw you see me.

NORMA. I thought there was no such thing as sight. So how would it then be possible to see me see you?

LANCE. I was your friend... up until about now. Now I'm going home.

NORMA. No! Wait, I need your help.

LANCE. No shit!

NORMA. Okay! Okay... I need you to do something for me. And I know that some of this is just me being selfish, but in this instance I feel it's almost expected of me.

LANCE. I'm willing to help, I know-

NORMA. I need you to become friends with my mother.

LANCE. Well you really didn't need to do all that. I told you I appreciated her company, didn't I.

NORMA. And I need you to pretend to have an imaginary boyfriend.

LANCE. Why?

NORMA. This is going to sound like a lot of petty teenybopper nonsense. But here me out. Charley roped me into going out on a date this week--

LANCE. Really?

NORMA. And I don't really know this boy--

LANCE. *[perplexed.]* Oh.

NORMA. But would feel terrible if I stood him up. And my mother doesn't really like me leaving the house. Luckily because it was summer time, all the reasons that made sense slipped, and now I can go out up to three times a week. Which is nice, really nice. That is, when I don't manage to lose most of them before the weeks end.

LANCE. What do you mean, "lose them," like for mouthing off and such?

NORMA. Well, there's that. But most of the time... I really couldn't tell you. I won't say that I've deserved none of them, but mostly... I stay in, I read. *[pause.]* Well, I haven't really for a little while.

LANCE. Why not?

NORMA. Well, I don't have a book at the moment. I love to read, all kinds of books. Right now I'm in the middle of thriller that promises much.

LANCE. I thought you didn't have a book.

NORMA. I don't. My mother has it she won't let me read it.

LANCE. And why's that?

NORMA. Because Dorris gave it to me.

LANCE... and Dorris is...

NORMA. My friend from back home.

LANCE. *[scanning the boxes.]* Uh-huh. Yeah, I'll help you.

NORMA. Wait, I didn't even finish telling you what I want. I have to get out of the house twice this week, once to go on a date and again to get a nice dress. Charley wants to make up for his oafishness. He won't, but we let him try.

LANCE. So what do you need?

NORMA. You got to tell my mom that this *[searching for the word.]* lover of yours has a family with rascals that need wrangling. I'll pretend like I put and add in the paper for babysittin, then as soon as you release this secret information who else calls to answer the add.

LANCE. And then you get to go out whenever you like? You know though I didn't really have the need, I still wish I'd thought of that one when I was a kid.

NORMA. ... Well, these are a very specific circumstances I don't find it likely that you would--

LANCE. Oh my god! Just go upstairs, I'll take you the two of you to get the dress, just stop talking.

NORMA. Well what about my mom?

LANCE. Later tonight, just go for a minute.

NORMA pauses for a moment and then goes to her room. LANCE shakes his head paces searches for the cigarette in the glass, lights it and uses the glass to ash. The hum of cicadas. Still not satisfied with the distraction, he begins milling around noseily, eventually he stumbles on RENEE's old journal. Organically the book opens to the poem. LANCE begins to read. As if summoned, RENEE enters.

RENEE. *[looking for a glass.]* Oh! I didn't see you when I first came in. What are you... Good morning, Lance.

LANCE. *[closing the book.]* I'm terribly embarrassed. This is incredibly rude, I'm not usually this nosey. I was raised better than this. My mama would feel much shame at this moment.

RENEE. I was uh-- that thing? It's old, almost like it happend to another person. I wrote in it the most when I first met the kid's father.

LANCE. I liked it. That's why I kept readin, not to snoop.

RENEE. That's quite alright, now, you don't have to worry about it. I won't-- but what is this tea? That I will bother with.

LANCE. Yes, of course. I haven't sipped from my cup if you want it.

RENEE. Lance?

LANCE. Yes.

RENEE. What are you doing in my home?

LANCE. Oh... uhm. Well the kids knocked on my door this morning, and Charley is going to get Norma a new dress with the money that he's earned.

RENEE. Doing what?

LANCE. I don't know. But they asked me to take them into town and I was headed in anyway. Low on groceries.

RENEE. Alright. Well I guess that was neighborly of you and them. If I had a little more strength at the moment I might put up a little more of a fight, but there's nothing wrong with it, I suppose.

LANCE. *[He puts out the cigarette and sits on the couch.]* Good, good. They seem like good kids, I'm thrilled to spend some time with them. Even get them out of your hair for a little while.

RENEE. Thanks I appreciate that.

LANCE. And I think that I want to make you dinner tonight. I owe you an explanation after what happened at the diner.

RENEE. Oh. Well thank you. That sounds really pleasant, actually. Yeah, come on by later tonight. I'll be here. I'm going back to bed, I'm very tired at the moment. But which one were you reading, I haven't written poetry in ages. I never really learned to write well in the first place, I doubt it's any good.

LANCE. I liked it a lot. I don't know what it was about I didn't finish it.

RENEE. Which was this.

LANCE. Something about a black skeleton.

RENEE. ... yes... that was a good one. My first... goodnight.

She exits. LANCE uncomfortably places the journal down on the coffee table. He hears CHARLEY lurch down the hall toward the living room. CHARLEY enters the room about as groggy as he left it.

CHARLEY. What?! Oh come on, I've been three places in the places in the past two days and you've been at most of them.

LANCE. I'm sorry to bother you so early. Your sister and I had scheduled for tea, remember.

CHARLEY. Oh yeah.

LANCE. And somehow I was roped into your little plan.

CHARLEY. What do you mean by that?

LANCE. I helping now. I'm on your side.

CHARLEY. Wait... wait, no, we blackmailed you .

LANCE. Call me an optimist.

CHARLEY. Okay--

LANCE. I'm taking you and Norma into town so she can get that dress you promised her. But uh, how you gonna pay for it?

CHARLEY. Oh don't worry, I can take care of us. Not that I have the option, but good thing I'm capable enough to do it.

LANCE. Alright, I believe you.

CHARLEY. I got to do one thing before we go though.

LANCE. That's fine, I needed a break from your sister for a second, so I sent her to her room.

CHARLEY. That's strange. I think God just got a little jealous of how much she must worship you.

LANCE. Well then I'm flatter-- I mean, pleased.

CHARLEY. Sure.

LANCE. What is it you have to do?

CHARLEY. I'm ordering a wrench from this catalogue.

[He picks up the magazine that he was looking through earlier.]

CHARLEY. You see it's not the best one that I want, because that one is more expensive and I don't actually think that it'll be a huge difference. I mean, I'm just working on our car it's not like-- it'd be embarrassing to try and run that thing any type of fast. So what do I got to get the best wrench for? The one will be a little bit softer, but it might save me from stripping the heads off some of those bolts. Sometimes I just lose time for a while, and then I've gone and wrenched the thing clean off. Surprises me too, every time. I don't know how, don't know a single man that's that strong, not even my dad. But if I tried to do it on purpose-- Oh no, that wouldn't work. Go figure.

LANCE. Yeah, that sounds strange.

CHARLEY. Well, thanks for helping us out.

He extends his hand.

LANCE. ... You're welcome.

LANCE accepts the handshake.

CHARLEY. I think I'll go get my sister now- and we'll get on our way?

He exits. Blackout end Act 1.

Act 2

The set is the same except many of the boxes have had things removed from them and strewn about, as if the contents of an antique store had exploded. Four days have passed. RENEE is sitting on the floor reading her diary with soft happy sniffles. Taking a deep breath.

RENEE. ‘The Black Skeleton Man, the man with the black skeleton.’ Seems kind of redundant. *[sighs.]* Stop that, take it easier on yourself. ‘Crooked was his back made by the barkeeps spear, in his shadow would his son walk.’ See, that one’s not awful. ‘Sleight of hand was this devil’s trade with a humble barkeep to lend an ear. A humble hollow would soon fill with pride. *[her voice trembles.]* ‘But dehydrated was the flesh of the man with the black skeleton. The Black Skeleton Man... and rehydrated was his soul, that would be endless. A humble hollow filled with pride.’

Enter LANCE

LANCE. Hey. Norma is drying off, then I’m going to take her over-- I didn’t mean to interrupt.

RENEE. I wasn’t in the middle of anything, so you couldn’t have.

LANCE. Oh, so you just talk to yourself reading from a page in your everyday life?

RENEE. Hmm... I used to pray quite a bit when I was smallish.

LANCE. Suppose it’s not that strange. *[gesturing toward the diary.]* King James? I’m more of a Danbar kind of guy.

RENEE. No, my family wasn’t even much for Bible talk. No, we come from a long line of heathens.

LANCE. Lucky for you.

RENEE. *[Chuckling.]* Oh? Stop, no bad seeds amongst you and yours?

LANCE. Indians couldn’t make straighter arrows.

RENEE. That makes you the black sheep.

LANCE. Aye.

RENEE. Were you the youngest?

LANCE. *[Nodding his head.]* --but the tallest.

RENEE. And bravest.

LANCE. No, that was my brother.

RENEE. He enlisted.

LANCE. Me too, actually, for a couple years anyway. I dropped out of college after two years--

RENEE. I thought you said you didn’t go?

LANCE. It’s not like it happened to another person, it was me. I just, I live differently now. I don’t really count my formal education.

RENEE. So you’re a fibber, it took me just until now. But that’s why I wasn’t able to peg you. You fib, Lance.

LANCE. *[Raising his hands into the air.]* You caught me. No, no Este- Stephen was the liar. I was better with a well placed truth.

RENEE. Is that your brother?

LANCE. One of em.

RENEE. The one that would bully you?

LANCE. No.

RENEE. The one who died, in the war.

LANCE. Right, he enlisted.

RENEE. ... so you left school to be different.

LANCE. No actually. I uh, I had a scholarship, I was very lucky to become of the apprentice of an architect. See he was very well known ensured my admittance into San--

RENEE. Oh my goodness, how did you manage that?

LANCE. It was more of my mother's doing. She ... crossed paths with him one day while he was scouting ours and the surrounding properties for... renovation.

RENEE. What a woman, you merely needed to cross her path and she'd change yours. I love the way you talk about her, the little you mention.

LANCE. You two might get along.

RENEE. So why'd you leave? I mean I don't know that many people that go in first place and less that leave when they get there.

LANCE. Uh... I don't know. I tried changing my focus, for I while I studied literature. But, honestly... I just didn't care. The way information is presented is archaic.

RENEE. [*snide.*] And copy editing was your way of rustling their jimmies then?

LANCE. Oh, they got their jimmies rustled.

RENEE. So you left, wasn't the place you needed to be. Where did you need to be?

LANCE. Well you see there. In my sophomore year I got a letter from my brother Eh-Stephan. And he-- he's saying...

RENEE walks to to serve herself a drink .

RENEE. I'm sorry. I'm just going to get myself a drink. Would you like one?

LANCE. [*checks his watch.*] No, I'm ok, thanks. Anyway, I get this letter from my brother. ' I'm alone. I don't say this often. I've never been alone in such a beautiful place. The Ravine was different, beautiful but different. We played naked in the water kicking it to the clouds.' He said it wasn't what he expected. He wanted to be a pilot - - loved eagles -- unusually patriotic. But when he got there, he couldn't read the manuals. My mother didn't push my siblings like she did me. He had to mop the deck. [*chuckling.*] He liked it, though, said ' the rain did most of the work for him some days, then thanked him with a rainbow.' I wanted to see that. Planes trying to touch the colors. Idealistic. So I enlisted in the airforce. Started training, Oceanside. Till we got, till we got the news- the eeriest thing was I got another letter from him a few days latter. He must of sent it right before the attack. 'Thank you Nestor, we'll kick water into rain together soon. Come on in, in Hawaii the water's warm. December 7th.

RENEE. None of us could have known that-
LANCE. Well at least he got to fly, right?

At some point in this speech NORMA has wandered into the room and caught the majority the speech out of sight to the audience.

NORMA. So how'd he write a letter if he was struggling with literacy?
LANCE. It was my best translation. After that I started copy editing for a small paper in Los Angeles.
NORMA. What was it called?
LANCE. Town Crier.
NORMA. So that was it for the army?
LANCE. It was the / Air Force actually, but yeah.
RENEE. Norma! Are you ready to leave yet.
NORMA. Almost.

NORMA exits.

RENEE. Sorry about that.
LANCE. Really, I hardly notice it anymore.
RENEE. Strong willed, that one.
LANCE. You won't be the last to say it.
RENEE. You fit well here. Now that you're being open.
LANCE. Uhuh... I wanted to explain myself for earlier.
RENEE. Good. Because I generally put up more of a fight when strange men insist on personally escorting my daughter to even stranger men's houses.
LANCE. There are certain degrees of... extenuating circumstances.

There is a long pause .

LANCE. That I am aware of- and are coming to think that you should be made aware of-
RENEE. Lance, this is...*[with shortened breath.]* I am terribly embarrassed. I can't really explain myself or my actions.
LANCE. ...
RENEE. This is what I was talking about. What kind of role model am I?
LANCE. I think/ you could be worse.
RENEE. If I am anywhere near as transparent to them as I am to you. How are- no wonder they're acting out.
LANCE. I told you/ their kids.
RENEE. *[tearing at her hair.]* Uh- what the fuck was I thinking!
LANCE. *[comforting her.]* There's not need to get so worked up, children are more forgiving than they seem.

RENEE. What you must be thinking of me.

LANCE. My opinion of you remains unchanged.

RENEE. Lance-

LANCE. Yes.

RENEE. Lance. My mother had asked the Chief of Medicine to give me a job.

LANCE. There's nothing wrong with getting a little help from time to-

RENEE. Lance. I slept with him.

LANCE. Renee, what are you talking about?

RENEE. My mother asked him to visit for dinner. He told me she had mentioned that I'd been having some issues and that I could get some counseling there as well as work there. But he was worried about my history of truancy. So I reassured him.

LANCE. Renee, that man is disgusting. You didn't need to do that. We need to do something about this-

RENEE. Oh stop it. Lance, it wasn't like it was a trick. He wasn't much of a smooth talker, barely even looked at me. I had a great deal of involvement and I'm trying to take some credit!

LANCE. Yeah.

RENEE. Yeah!

LANCE. Well I don't think we should just sit here, while this philandering pig preys on the vulnerable.

RENEE. I'm no wounded rabbit, and I came out with the better part of the deal anyway.

LANCE. There shouldn't have been a "deal" in the first place! And what are you talking about?!

RENEE. Lance, I never go to work and I never get fired. How do you think I pay for food around here?

LANCE. So you just sleep with this *man* whenever he wants and he provides your whole life for you.

RENEE. What? No, it was once quick. I'm *never* seeing that man again. A half memory about the-Jesus! You know I didn't even need to tell you- But I'm a forgiving person.

LANCE. I'm sorry.

RENEE. He had kind words I don't remember what they were, warm though. Cold touch frosty like a pint glass. But I'm notoriously flighty and I need that comfort. I very well can't trying to keep a job and raise these kids.

LANCE. [*Slipping.*] You're not doing either... I am really so sorry this isn't my place.

RENEE. [*Resisting tears RENEE hands LANCE the poem.*] Make sure Norma gets this- Tell her it's an apology from me- about her letter.

LANCE. Renee...

RENEE struggling to keep her composure and unable to talk makes a gracious exit.

After a moment NORMA enters.

NORMA. So did you tell her? Did you confess? Did you spill your beans?
LANCE. I think I just hurt her feelings.
NORMA. Get over yourself.
LANCE. I don't know.
NORMA. But it's done right. She knows-
LANCE. Yeah. I don't think she'll want to take you over there.
NORMA. Okay.
LANCE. That's all "okay."
NORMA. Yeah that's all.
LANCE. *[smiling almost proud.]* Good. Lets head out?
NORMA. Lets.
LANCE. Oh! She wanted me to give you this *[handing her the poem.]* As an apology for a letter?
NORMA. A poem?
LANCE. I guess she wrote it when she was younger.
NORMA. See. Do you see what she does. She tears up my letter and gives me an old love letter! Doesn't that seem self-
LANCE. Can we just leave?
NORMA. Please.

Exit.

Enter RENEE who's breathing deeply and deliberately. She picks up her old journal tosses it in the garbage with vigor. This action immediately causes her to have a panic attack. Mild in severity and quickly remedied by retrieving the journal.

RENEE. I guess it makes sense you can't purge yourself from yourself. Even if it's a paper version. *[wiping tears from his face.]* Alright! You need to cut that out. You don't like that version of yourself? Write a new one! *[to the audience.]* Well... what do they think of me?

Enter CHARLEY from the sliding door.

CHARLEY. Hey Mom! You talking to your imaginary friends again?
RENEE. Charles, you're home. What did you find out? Is that family a good place for her to be?
CHARLEY. *[remembering his assignment.]* Oh! Yes very much so... I waited there in the hedges like you asked.
RENEE. And they seemed nice, smart?
CHARLEY. There were a lot of books in their house if you that's what you were asking?

RENEE. Their kids. Does Norma have nice children to practice looking after, she'll have some of her own one day, and be glad I made her do this.

CHARLEY. Right mother. Okay, well I'm going to go get ready. After Norma's done she and Manny are going to the races, you know he got us the tickets in the first place-

RENEE. And you're meeting her there to keep an eye on her.

CHARLEY. [*deflated.*] Right. [*beat.*] Alright, I'm getting out of here.

He heads to his room.

RENEE. Wait Charley.

CHARLEY. Yes?

RENEE. What was... the mother like?

CHARLEY. [*timid.*] Their mother?

RENEE. Yeah, is she a kind soul.

CHARLEY. [*Amorous.*] The kindest.

RENEE. Tell me a little more about her.

CHARLEY. She's gentle. When she so much as looks at you, you feel like you could fill bucket with kitten 'purrs.' Her hair is long, wavy, and dark. And she walks with the gait of a queen and the grace of a saint. Her eyes never quiver they're always looking at you, because she's seen it all already and decided you were the most impressive anyway.

RENEE. [*beat.*] Sounds like a very special lady.

CHARLEY. [*eyes locked with RENNE's.*] That is what it sounds like.

RENEE. You speak about her very poetically.

CHARLEY. [*embarrassed.*] Yeah I don't know.

RENEE. Charles? Have you developed an affection for this woman-

CHARLEY. Spying from a bush? Not likely.

RENEE. [*smirking.*] Alright Charley.

He begins to leave again.

RENEE. Charley would you like to dance with me?

CHARLEY. Oh boy would I ma, but I'm feeling all tuckered out for some reason and I want to stay vigilant for tonight's assignment. Right ma? And I got to go back in town in an hour to meet with Manny- [*stopping himself abruptly.*]

RENEE. That's quite alright then. Go on and take a nap now Charley.

CHARLEY. Mom have you been okay? I want you to know Norma and I watch you, if you're wondering if we are paying attention. We do real close.

RENEE. Thanks Charley. Now go to bed.

CHARLEY. Yes ma'am.

He exits. RENEE begins humming 'Sweet Violets' while she dances with herself elegantly. She goes over to the radio to turn it on, weaving the movement into her dance naturally. When she turns the radio on she's met with a blaring rendition of 'Rumble'.

RENEE. Jesus Christ!

She quickly turns it off. Her fingers begin to go numb and her face becomes flush. Her breath shortens and she begins visibly shaking. Claspng her hands to her head she tries to push 'it' out to no avail. Now in a full panic she races around the room desperately looking for something to calm herself down. Manically, she grips the journal and begins scrawling away in it. The scrawling becomes so violent that it tears the page. RENEE starts dumping boxes over, all of which are filled with either copies of the poem she's given to NORMA or bottle caps. Blackout. When the lights come up RENEE is sleeping on the couch. LANCE enters headstrong and holding 'A Stir of Echoes'. RENEE wakes remaining in state of lucidity just shy dreaming.

LANCE. I'm sorry if I woke you, but I wanted to bring this back [*handing her the book.*] I don't think I can do it. I started reading, but I just felt like I was prying. From what I can tell there's nothing wrong- I don't really think I should be the one determining whether or not it's suitable for your daughter's library. [*Noticing the state of the house.*] I dropped her off and immediately felt- well like a [*foreign to the tongue.*] fibber, as you said. Renee... Is everything alright.

RENEE. So you must know some people in the publishing business- all that time- must of come across some publishers.

LANCE. Sure, but- [*obsessing over the lack of order.*] the hell is...

RENEE. I've decided. I need to be a poet. No one escapes pain.

LANCE. What?

RENEE. I've seen animals, they live in fear! [*getting in his face.*] It makes sense to live anxiously! We've always had to survive, the games they changed! I know that, I have to share that! See?! I can see through the haze-

LANCE. [*Grabbing her flailing limbs and bringing her to the couch.*] Renee what's wrong?

RENEE. [*The fog lifting.*] I'm sorry.

LANCE. Here let me help you clean up. Just lay down and tell me what's going on.

RENEE. It's happening to her.

LANCE. What's happening to her?

RENEE. My little girl.

LANCE. Norma's... fine.

RENEE. Only fourteen, running away from home like that.

LANCE. Norma's never run... [*He stops, realizing she's talking about herself.*]

Renee, why don't you tell me what's going on with Norma?

RENEE. When she was about fourteen. She ran away from our farm. You see we caught her tumbling in the hayloft. Young lovers and they were not sleeping. He was a ranch hand we had hired out for the summer of '35. We didn't see her for six years, not till she needed something. *[huffing.]* Shouldn't say "we" Jeb had died a year earlier. Those were dusty years in New Mexico, buried his lungs. Come to find out she's shackled up with some bartender outside of Roswell. *[rearing her head.]* It wasn't liked that mother. We fell in love. *[from here on she speaks alternating between the perspective of her mother and her own perspective.]* Was that before or after you figured out he was running a whore house?! Don't make me feel naive. I was I was kid for christ sakes. No wonder you raised a dyke. Don't talk about her that way. And tell them about the teacher. Sweet talking you right in front him- no wonder your husband beat him bloody to sandscab in the dust. He taught me how to read mother. I bet he taught you lots of things. Just... ju... *[sniveling.]* poetry. He just wanted to share. *[snapping at herself.]* Oh that's why he attacked you in the middle of the-No... he- and your husband had to beat him bloody- The only honorable thing that deserter did. Still I had come in pick up the pieces, sold the farm- not that it was worth anything- moved your sorry ass into a shack near the bar so you could run it while I watched the runts. Old bones. I've had old bones for too long- never scared to ask anything of me- trying to put these bones in the ground. Poet my ass. Poets create, what was the last thing you added to this world? *[Coming to.]* Lance? *[frightened.]* Lance?! Where am I?! *[Screaming.]* What did I do?
LANCE. *[Embracing her.]* Shh. Shh, I'm right here. It's ok it's ok. Just sleep I'll clean up don't- don't worry.

RENEE promptly passes out from a mixture of exhaustion and pain. LANCE lays her on the couch. LANCE goes through the sliding glass door and returns with a push broom. NORMA enters walking home along Highway 111 as LANCE pushes the paper into the shape of a lane that she lumbers through as if encumbered. LANCE exits removing the couch.

NORMA. I get it. I know that it's hard to talk to me- some people feel smothered. Which is why I think that it's important to have imaginary versions of them to practice with. I know behavior like this can lead to morbidity and antisocial behavior- but you know-both are good. Morbidity makes for good problem solving. Anticipation can prepare you in a lot of ways. Which is why I don't really blame her. It's important to keep some people in your head, other's don't deserve the time of day. It's hot for night time.

DORRIS enters slowly with a candle lit. CHARLEY's car is heard pulling onto the shoulder of the highway offstage. As CHARLEY enters he walks past DORRIS and he extinguishes her candle. Disgruntled she turns back the direction she came spilling a little hot wax on her hand.

DORRIS. [*passive.*] Ouch.

Exit.

CHARLEY. Norma! What the hell you doing walking on the side of the road in the middle... Come on I'm parked on the other side of the highway; I couldn't find a place to turn around. Norma- what are you- Norms. Why are you out here all alone, aren't you supposed to be at the races with Manny?

NORMA. I... I was for a while...

CHARLEY. Norma what happened? You don't look very-

NORMA. I shouldn't have agreed in the first place it's not your fault.

CHARLEY. I won't be angry. If you didn't like the guy it's not a huge deal. I know I made a mistake in making you / go.

NORMA. You didn't make me, I wanted to. I realized that I wasn't missing anything out of the ordinary.

CHARLEY. I'm sorry Norma. He- I'm sorry if I-

NORMA. Stop it Charley!

CHARLEY. Why are you yelling? How bad- He didn't make you do anything that you-

NORMA. No- but he asked. I appreciated that he asked- but it wasn't much of a question when he wouldn't offer me a ride home and took off to see the pit crew.

CHARLEY. Yeah his uncle's working the race. What do you mean he asked.

NORMA. He asked and... well he kissed me. I told him-

CHARLEY. I told him not to do that...

NORMA. You told him I would give him a chance.

CHARLEY. No you said that.

NORMA. Well he had a different interpretation...

CHARLEY. Don't say that like that. That makes me think things. [*growing familiarly agitated.*] You usually cant stop-why won't you say anything. Norma you got to tell me.

NORMA. It's not important Charley. And it's not about you.

CHARLEY. If he hurt you- or if he.

NORMA. It's none of your business Charley and nothing happened that hasn't happened before. I'm okay.

CHARLEY. You wanted him to kiss, right?

NORMA. NO Charley! Why does it matter?

CHARLEY. But could of- could it have been that maybe he could think that accidentally.

NORMA. Obviously Charley. Can you take me home please.

CHARLEY. No. What happened?

NORMA. I told you , he tried to kiss me. I said no- or groaned- I didn't want it and he didn't stop for sixteen seconds I counted.

CHARLEY. Maybe he didn't hear you.

NORMA. Charley what is wrong with you. This is not a good person, who kisses and can't tell whether or not the other person is enjoying it.

CHARLEY. But you said he asked.

NORMA. Asked, but didn't wait for an answer. And after I pushed him away and got out of the car he said something I didn't catch because he was acting really hurt, but it must have been about my shoes because he emphasized that I was going to walk home. So I started.

CHARLEY. *[tears welling in his eyes.]* He did that?

NORMA. Charley it's not a big deal, has nothing to do with, is none of your business. You need take me home.

CHARLEY. *[dry mouthed and raspy.]* He can't he just leave you alone. I- we're not supposed. What if something-

NORMA. Charley! Stop it!

CHARLEY. I have to tell him he's not allowed to do that to us.

CHARLEY turns away and clenches his fist. NORMA approaches and violently shrugged off by CHARLEY who runs back into his car and takes off. LANCE enters push broom in hand clearing the lane that he's made and neatly piling up the papers, dragging on the couch, and then a limp RENEE placing her gently on the couch. This is will take a long time for one person to do and that's perfectly ok. LANCE sighs heavily after piecing the room back together.

Enter NORMA and immediately starts heading towards her room. LANCE is sitting on the couch keeping company to a sickly pale RENEE.

LANCE. Whoa! *[whispering.]* What are you doing here?

NORMA. *[not whispering.]* I'm going to sleep.

LANCE. Okay? Aren't you supposed to be somewhere? *[checking to see if RENEE is awake.]* Sitting on some children?

NORMA. I don't care anymore Lance.

LANCE. You literally put all of your energy into this. Come here *[going in for a hug.]* I'm sorry it didn't work out the way you planned. You know sometimes these things to go the way/ you expect them.

NORMA. I guess you'd be the expert on all things unrequited.

LANCE. I can see that you're angry. Not at me, so stop it.

NORMA. We need to find Charley.

LANCE. Okay. I will help you find Charley.

NORMA. Just give me the keys to your car.

LANCE. No. *I will help* you find Charley ok. Now help me get your mother into her bed, I tried but I couldn't do it alone.

NORMA. I hate your fucking guts mother!

LANCE. Norma! Don't that to her.

RENEE wakes up very confused.

NORMA. I can say whatever I like.

LANCE. Of course you can, Norma. Doesn't give you the right-

RENEE. Don't talk to my daughter that way.

LANCE. Real convenient when you're feeling self righteous huh?

RENEE. I go to sleep and wake up everyday a mother.

NORMA. When you wake up.

RENEE. This doesn't concern you.

NORMA. Mom you are literally talking about me.

RENEE. But not to you, will you go to your room please.

NORMA. *[to LANCE.]* I would love to!

Exit NORMA.

RENEE. Lance, I can't have you here right now.

LANCE. That's fine by me.

RENEE. I'm sorry. You've been very helpful-

LANCE. No need to explain. Trust me I understand fully how fucked this-

He turns to leave.

RENEE. And the next time you come over, less attitude would be appreciated.

LANCE. Oh don't start that. Please, I've had enough mothering for a one lifetime.

RENEE. And that worked out real well for you didn't.

LANCE. Oh fuck you!

Enter NORMA.

NORMA. You know what?! I'm not going to my room! I'm going to / find my brother.

Unnoticed NORMA starts searching for her mother's keys.

LANCE. Renee go ahead. Say whatever you got to, but know: *[whispering condescendingly.]* you're talking to yourself.

RENEE. You don't know the first thing about me.

NORMA finds the keys after navigating RENEE's massive purse.

LANCE. It may not of been first, but somewhere along the way you became whore in your head.

NORMA exits through the sliding glass door.

RENEE. I have never- You don't talk to me that-

The phone begins to ring.

LANCE. A round heeled slut of the mind!

RENEE lunges at LANCE knocking him over.

RENEE. You think so! Who's on their back now!

NORMA is heard starting the car and peeling out of the driveway and then stalling.

RENEE. Now look!

LANCE. I'll go / get her.

RENEE. No I'll go! You stay here.

LANCE catches his breath trying to regain his composure on the couch. He doesn't notice that the phone is ringing.

RENEE and NORMA re enter.

LANCE. Rich escape attempt. Your plan fail?

RENEE. It's a manual she stalled in the driveway and hit the mailbox peeling out.

Jesus Lance would you answer the phone?

NORMA picking to phone up.

NORMA. Hello?

LANCE. You see, right there. Problem being addressed by someone much more competent than you and you can't help but say something to make yourself feel like you had something to do with fixing the problem.

RENEE. Really I've had it with this stranger in my home.

LANCE. Take a look Renee! You're the stranger!

[pause]

NORMA. Charley's a fugitive.

RENEE. What?

NORMA. Charley's beaten his friend Manny near to death. The officer said we need to turn him in.

RENEE. Who the hell is Manny?!

NORMA. Handler! His uncle owns the autobody...

LANCE. Renee he's been helping them get ready for the race. That's why he hasn't really been around for...

RENEE. *[in a stupor.]* I don't know-
LANCE. Again- Never ceases to amaze me!
RENEE. Get out! Get out!
NORMA. I'm calling Dorris.
RENEE. Don't you dare young lady.
LANCE. Renee! Her brother's missing let her talk to her fucking girl friend.
RENEE. I knew... that there...
LANCE. Grow up! That's not what I-
NORMA. Will both of you please stop talking... *[they do.]* Hi is Dorris there..?*[shaking her head.]* This is the school librarian Ms. Pickins I want to make sure that Dorris wants to come back this summer to help finishing the... cataloging- We just never get as far as we think in one summer- Oh I'll hold.
RENEE. Norma you look me in the eye. You are one slippery act away from endenup a deviant- Norma just look at me look at my home-
NORMA. Shh. Charley's alone, frightened, and he has a car. He's not here and he's wanted by the police. Where do you think he's going?
RENEE. Back home.

NORMA shakes her head.

NORMA. Of course he's going-uh... Hi Dorris... I've been- I'm sorry- I'm sorry. Dorris I'm sorry I haven't called- listen Charley's in trouble. We can't find him. Do you still have a key to the bar?

Blackout.

When the lights come back up we are in the Wagoner family bar. The set pieces of the dinner with the counter in front of the sliding glass door, should be rearranged in a slightly dilapidated manor that indicates the lack of inhabitants. The boxes from the living room can be used to emphasize this point. The couch is leaned on its end against a wall. DORRIS enters with a candle. After sitting still for a moment she grows restless and searches behind the bar. After a few moments she discovers a huge ledger she she opens and reads it scanning her fingers along the columns. CHARLEY enters at some point his wrench is in his hand encrusted with blood.

DORRIS. Oh- Uh. Charley
CHARLEY. What the hell are you doing here Dorris?
DORRIS. Charley I know everyone messes with you so I'm going to be straight.
CHARLEY. *[laughs. To the sky.]* Please tell me there's another joke.
DORRIS. Charley I just want to help-
CHARLEY. No you just want to fuck my sister- which confuses the hell out me. I don't even / think I understand mechanically-
DORRIS. Charley I'm here to help.

CHARLEY. Would you stop saying my name! It's like when someone thinks I'm not listening they say my name in a different way. Then I'm not just a "Charley" anymore I'm "Charles".

DORRIS. Okay. What do you want me to call you?

CHARLEY. I want you to fffuck offffffff!

DORRIS. That's not going to happen.

CHARLEY. Please. *[he crosses closer revealing the blood on his clothes to Dorris.]* Just go.

DORRIS. This doesn't end well for me either Charley.

CHARLEY. Sad dyke gets the girl?

DORRIS. Doesn't even fit in your mouth right.

CHARLEY. That's supposed to make me feel better?

DORRIS. Yeah it's misery and it doesn't belong to you- sounds pretty great / to me.

CHARLEY. Wrong! *[holding up the bloody wrench.]* I figured out which wrench was my favorite.

DORRIS. Is that why you buried it in that boys face?

CHARLEY. *[pointing to his chest.]* Collar bone- busted right through.

DORRIS. Wow, he must of done something awful.

CHARLEY. You should change the way you're thinkin- you might agree.

DORRIS. I know I'm aggressive Charley, but I don't attack people.

CHARLEY. He kissed Norma.

[pause.]

CHARLEY. *[pleased with himself.]* Oh yeah. She was on a date. Did she forget to tell you that?

DORRIS. Yes. Doesn't change anything.

CHARLEY. No? Okay, that's a lot of devotion-

DORRIS. What are you trying to do Charley. You're a danger to yourself and others. I'm not going to run away this time.

CHARLEY. I asked you to stay away from my family. When we left the was the one thing I thought might be better. *[approaching her slowly.]*

DORRIS. *[unflinching.]* Didn't stop you from visiting the night before you left. You snuck into my room and waited for me.

CHARLEY ... That was my mother's idea.

DORRIS. The scariest part is I don't know weather or not you're lying.

CHARLEY. *[gritting his teeth in her face.]* Are you calling me a liar. *[holding up the wrench.]* I think there's a piece of bone from the last guy who did that. *[Dorris grins.]* What? You liked being talked to like a man ? Or you just happy to see me again?

DORRIS. I don't hate you Charley. I know you want me to, I won't give you the satisfaction. And it's not your fault you come from crazy stock.

CHARLEY. Watch your mouth / girl.

DORRIS. *[Indicating the book.]* Look.
CHARLEY. *[scanning the ledger.]* I don't understand.
DORRIS. You see where it says room rental?
CHARLEY. What's wrong with that. Pops kept a room upstairs like a tavern or something.
DORRIS. Who rents rooms for an hour?
CHARLEY. A well rested man.
DORRIS. This place was a brothel Charley.
CHARLEY. Like with concubines?
DORRIS. What- sort of.
CHARLEY. Nevermind.
DORRIS. That means your father was a pimp.
CHARLEY. Yeah I got it.
DORRIS. I'm sorry. This is a lot to have over your head -
CHARLEY. Don't do that.
DORRIS. What?
CHARLEY. The Norma thing.
DORRIS. Oh I didn't even realize... Look-
CHARLEY. He left us, didn't he?
DORRIS. I don't know, but did you really want a guy like that around your mother and your sister?
CHARLEY. I don't blame him, I'm not doing too great by them either.
DORRIS. I can't really argue with you. But you're probably wrestling with yourself enough.
CHARLEY. Nope. There's not a much of a debate to be had. I've done-
DORRIS. Norma and your mother are on their way-
CHARLEY. I was selling drugs...
DORRIS. I'm sorry?
CHARLEY. Manny had me selling benzedrine... There was-
DORRIS. Is Manny the boy you beat?
CHARLEY. No.
DORRIS. Alright, well then who-
CHARLEY. I'm pretty sure I killed him. I didn't really know what the stuff was, he had me try it. I didn't like it. So he said "good" gave me a bunch to sell. I wanted to get Norma something nice. Like an early birthday present.
DORRIS. That sounds real nice Charley. *[Sincere.]* Not like your father or your mother.
CHARLEY. Thanks. Would it be strange if I asked for a hug?
DORRIS. Uhm, I don't think that would be too strange.

They stand up to awkwardly embrace. Before their hug finishes CHARLEY uses the crown of his head to headbutt DORRIS knocking her unconscious and the candle is extinguished. NORMA and RENEE enter.

RENEE. Oh good you found the light switch.

NORMA. Yeah.

RENEE. I always hit my head when I first walk in.

NORMA. Oh yeah-I have good night vision.

RENEE. Alright.

NORMA. Oh my goodness.

NORMA approaches the unconscious DORRIS. NORMA falls on the floor and tries to wake her gently.

NORMA. Dorris! Dorris, can you hear me?

DORRIS begins to come to startled at first then elated. She grabs NORMA embraces her and then kisses her.

NORMA after a moment removes DORRIS from her face careful not to drop her suddenly.

NORMA. Dorris, not-

DORRIS. I could have died Norma. I don't care.

RENEE. Uhm... are you alright Dorris? Did you hit your head or...

DORRIS. Your son tried to kill me.

RENEE. Well where is?

DORRIS. I can't believe you came back for me.

NORMA. I didn't. I came back for Charley-

DORRIS. I know, but you saved / me.

NORMA. Where is my brother, Dorris?

DORRIS. ... I don't know. And my head really hurts, he attacked me.

NORMA. I'm sorry Dorris, but that's why we need to find him.

NORMA puts her hand on DORRIS's forehead.

DORRIS. I'm fine...

DORRIS takes NORMA's hand and places it over the lump on her head.

DORRIS. If you're curious.

NORMA.[tugging her hand away.] I... Dorris. I really need to-

RENEE. Dorris if you need medical attention we can help you, but please tells where Charley is.

DORRIS. I don't- God what is wrong with- You should all be committed! I don't know where your psycho-

CHARLEY appearing from behind the bar.

CHARLEY. I'm right here. I'm sorry.

RENEE goes to him prepared to coddle until she is frightened by the dried blood on his clothes and particularly his wrench.

RENEE. Are you alright, Charley?

CHARLEY. No. Look I'm all terrifying. *[choking on his words.]* You all look so scared of me.

RENEE. No Charley. We just want to get you back home.

CHARLEY shakes his head.

NORMA. Mother, he knows he can't come back home.

RENEE. Well why not.

CHARLEY. Dorris is right. I should be committed.

RENEE. Absolutely not.

NORMA. It might keep him out of prison.

RENEE. He's not going to prison...

NORMA. Mom.

CHARLEY. It wouldn't be so bad mom. You could come into work and visit me. We would actually be making a fortune... just looking after your own son.

RENEE seeks validation in the eyes of the others.

RENEE. Alright Charley. *[nodding her head.]* Come here.

The Wagoner family begin to walk together toward the exit.

DORRIS. Norma?

NORMA. Yes?

DORRIS. *[breathy.]* Did you read the book...? It was the last on the list I made for you. You read all of 'em Norma. I'm- I'm proud-

RENEE. *[hesitant.]* She didn't, get the chance/ I shouldn't... I-

NORMA. No Dorris. I didn't read the book.

They exit leaving DORRIS alone.

Blackout.

In the transition DORRIS quick changes into a nurses outfit off stage, not the sexy kind, the kind actual nurses wear. The lights become washed like hospital lighting. LANCE enters again returning the couch right side up and converting the boxes into

a coffee table that where he places Charley's catalog and A Stir of Echoes and using the remainder to construct filing cabinet behind what was formerly the bar. He clears the features that had made it look dilapidated. He exits through the sliding glass door and leaving it open.

NORMA, CHARLEY, and RENEE enter.

RENEE. Norma I'm going to go ahead and get Charley settled. Why dont you wait for... the nurse to come back so you can fill out the paper work.

RENEE and CHARLEY exit through to the other side. NORMA waits as long as it takes DORRIS to change.

NORMA. Hello?

Enter DORRIS.

DORRIS. Hello? How can I help you? Are you looking for someone, it's a little late.

NORMA. No. I uhm- I'm here to check my brother in.

DORRIS. Alright, is the patient with you?

NORMA. He went inside-

DORRIS. Well it's late he really shouldn't be roaming around.

NORMA. My my mo- Renee Wagoner, it's her son. She took him up to get him settled. I just need the paper

DORRIS. *[concerned.]* Oh. Okay... *[leaving through the door to get small pile of papers.]* Well here are some papers that you're going have to fill out.

NORMA. Thank you. *[looking at the form.]* What time is it?

DORRIS. *[looking at the clock.]* Just past midnight.

NORMA. And the date?

DORRIS. The fourth- oh not the fifth. Oh, I'm sorry- You have family and an adult to check in a patient to our psychiatric- I'm sorry sweetie you got to be over eighteen if you're going to check in your brother. And your mother should really be doing this- unless are you checking her back in as well? You know we do miss her here, one of the real nice ones to talk to.

NORMA. Did you say the fifth?

DORRIS. Yeah I'm sorry about that- you know I should really be better at that, but you'd be surprised how often I misdate papers past midnight. *[nurturing.]* But like I was saying, you need to-

NORMA. I am eighteen. Today's my birthday.

DORRIS. Today?

NORMA. I know it doesn't seem likely, but as you can see *[lifting the papers.]* I've had a lot of other things on my so I don't have any ID on me.

DORRIS. I don't know-

NORMA. Please, my family needs your help.

DORRIS. *[sighing.]* Alright, that should be alright. Just sign and date here...

NORMA does so.

to the book on the coffee table picking it up and reading it's last page. LANCE enters from the open sliding door wearing latex gloves and sunglasses closing the door behind him. NORMA looks at him blankly.

LANCE. I had to fire the pool boy. Don't think I can afford it now. But This chlorine is really unpleasant.

He tosses the gloves under the bar.

NORMA. Where are you going to live.

LANCE. Well as it looks right now if I don't have a place that means you don't have a place to stay. That doesn't sit too well with me.

NORMA. Weak stomach?

She grins.

LANCE. Don't know let's find out. *[He ducks under the bar.]* You want anything to drink ?

NORMA. Maybe just a sip of yours?

LANCE. ... Alright, but I'm not going to let you do that for much longer-No, just I'll make you a small one it's a celebration.

The hum of cicadas.

NORMA. Manny told me what those bugs were, well first he told me they were bugs. I guess they make that sound by vibrating pads on their stomach. I don't really feel like celebrating my birthday, not that way at least.

LANCE. It's not about you girl. It's for me I'm gonna own this sweet plot of land.

NORMA. You didn't before? How were you going to start a homeowners association?

LANCE. *[crossing over to the couch with two drinks.]*Uhm well you know I hadn't really thought it through a whole lot, but I don't know. Hanging out with you gives people ideas.

NORMA. Okay?

LANCE. *[relaxing into the couch.]* I threatened to tell his wife. *[checking his watch.]* He's on his way right now.

NORMA. What?! And you think he's going to give you the house to keep quiet? That's ambitious

LANCE. He'll give me the house.

NORMA. If you say so... can I watch?

LANCE. No.

NORMA. Can I listen?

LANCE. Hmm... Maybe. *[polishing his off.]* Get me another drink.

NORMA walks towards the bar setting the book down on the coffee table.

NORMA. Just take mine, I'm going to pour myself one.

LANCE. *[picking up the book and opening to a page.]* Was this any good?

NORMA. Uhm... *[pouring herself a drink and returning to the couch.]* I wasn't crazy about how it ended.

Blackout

End Show.

The Rubber Room

At this point I had produced two manuscripts ready to be edited relying only on the principles I had learned from my experience in improvisation and derived from two primary sources. I began working on a new piece with Professor James Bierman, and in order to stretch my abilities we decided that I would try to construct an entire play skeleton before attempting to write any of the scenes. This wasn't necessarily contradictory to the method I had been using before, though in my outlining of the plots of both *Matriarch* and *Jack* I hadn't decided on an ending before I began writing. I was still able to use many of the techniques that I had used in the construction of my last plays, including deriving characters from a stimulus: I had read an article about a young man who was battling his pedophilic urges and watched a documentary on corruption in the New York Five Boroughs area education system. Professor Bierman and I began to meet weekly to do what he called "querying" the plot. I would come up with a basic outline, bring it to him, and then he would ask me questions about the characters and the action to make sure that they are always in service of the conclusion. Below is the completed outline:

Scene 1:

Therapist's Office

Marcus, 38 years old, describes to his therapist his predicament: since his young adult life he's been solely attracted to the physique of children. Though he has never acted on his urges, he fears what he will become. All of this is spited by the call of upward mobility in the workplace as he accepts a new promotion putting him in charge of a Scholastic's Book Fair. They've been working together for approximately 3 years. His therapist convinces him that it's best if he confronts his fears head on and that taking the job is the best course of action.

Scene 2:

High school Library

Marcus is led through a high school library by a girl approximately fourteen years of age. Though a literature fan she's reluctantly been roped into becoming the student liaison in order to stay academically competitive and has been placed in charge of helping run the book fair. She reveals her name is Dorothy and that the former librarian has been missing for the past few days.

Scene 3:

The Teachers Union

Marcus meets with a teachers union representative seeking to fill the position of librarian. The representative is a nebulous presence of morality, slightly more omniscient than the rest of the characters but significantly more reserved. He clumsily asks her to coffee confident he's making strides towards what he imagined his adulthood to be like. She declines his offer reminding him of the severity to which repeated sexual come-ons are in violation of Union Sexual Harassment statues. She says something along the lines of "best case scenario we never see each other again." Making some obvious allusions the severity of offences.

Scene 4:

Therapist's Office

Back in the therapist's office Marcus updates his therapist on the intricacies of his new position, and how the high school has proven less dangerous than he thought, it appears that it's been a while since he's been to high school and the students are more "adult" in appearance than he was expecting. He describes Dorothy as an example. The therapist asks about Dorothy until the line of questioning leads Marcus to arousal. It appears as the therapist manufactures this fetishization for Marcus.

Scene 5:

Dorothy's Home

Dorothy asks her mother about the time around her conception. Dorothy's mother is significantly younger than her father; they struck up a relationship during Dorothy's mother's time at university where he was a professor. Currently he is teaching abroad in France and making a case to have Dorothy move there with him for a better education. Dorothy pries farther into her parents' relationship at which point it become apparent that there is little communication between parents except through Dorothy. At some moment in the mother's description the same glimmer of arousal that we see in Marcus in the therapist's office is seen in Dorothy's eye. By the end of the scene it's decided that she'll be finishing high school in France.

Scene 6:

Dorothy tells Marcus that she is leaving to go to France. He confesses his affection for her, rationalizing it as the only time he's been attracted to someone so mature. She tells him never to repeat himself, forces him to close his eyes, and he listens to her masturbate in front of him technically alleviating him from the guilt of a crime.

Scene 7:

Marcus' union representative arrives very disappointed. She explains to him that he is in the rubber room, he's been suspended, and he is awaiting trial.

Scene 8:

In the trial it's revealed the level of awareness that Dorothy is seven steps ahead of everyone. She's navigated the legal tender in a way that doesn't implicate anyone.

Scene 9:

Despite being found not guilty he awaits another trial in the Rubber Room after being informed that the jury's "not guilty" verdict is being appealed because Marcus he had mentioned Lolita was a good read at one point.

We were able to collaboratively devise the plot of the story through a series of conversations. Each of these conversations engaged us in a series of improvisations stimulated by the impetus of the story. This more or less follows suit with the process that I had used in the development of *Matriarch*, the only difference being that I

completed the structure of *The Rubber Room* before constructing any of the dialogue or scenes. I was collaborating and engaging in bouts of constraint-driven improvisations resulting in a play skeleton primed for composition. It occurred to me that any act of theater is a composition, and attributing accomplishment to any individual is complicated when considering the inherent communal nature of theater.

Conclusions

This communal aspect of theater challenges the established position of playwright. There are so many collaborators involved in bringing a play to life, attributing any singular characteristic of a performance to an individual fails to acknowledge the shared success we all have as participants of the theater, thereby challenging the degree of autonomy of the playwright. It would seem errant to develop any practice in playwriting, a sentiment communicated by the founder of modern improvisational comedy Viola Spolin. Spolin even claims that our need for an individual acknowledgment and "approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism" and is often the "predominant regulator of effort and position" (Spolin 7). The need for approval in one's art form is often the ill substitute for love, and within this approval-seeking behavior, self-criticism inhibits productivity and the exchange of intuitive knowledge. This politicizing of improvisation exalts improvisation not as a medium but as a philosophy behind productivity. Understanding this philosophy enables me to develop a practice in playwriting free of authoritarian decay, fraught with knowledge that is intuitive and mistakes which are informative to the furthering of my practice. It's important not to view each of these manuscripts as textual improvisations, but to view each of them as a play that is a collaborative piece, which requires the imaginations of many to come to life. It is only through the interdisciplinary understanding that Improvisation gives us that we as performers can escape authoritarian objectification and create uninhibited.

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