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**The Noise in My Head**

**Note to Self: The Only Way to Tell This Story Is to Tell Many**

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**The Noise in My Head**

**Note to Self: The Only Way to Tell This Story Is to Tell Many**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## Abstract

### The Noise in My Head

#### Note to Self: The Only Way to Tell This Story Is to Tell Many

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This thesis document discusses my development as a playwright and theater artist over the course of my three years in the MFA Playwriting Program at the University of Texas at Austin. As a framework for inquiry, I will focus primarily on how the practice of making my plays *instructions for tuesday*, *The Caregiving Project*, and *381 Bleecker* helped me discover the compositional crisis of navigating my own consciousness in the present moment as my writing process. I hope to illuminate how the practice of making these three plays helped me discover writing as an act of increasing my own range of motion—of widening the parameters of the self I allow into my consciousness and my work.

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## Beginnings

Just recently, I've been going to physical therapy for a disk I herniated ten years ago. I've been meaning to do something about it since the injury, but it's taken me until now to begin. First I didn't have the insurance. Then seven years later, I got the insurance, but I didn't have the time. I've been meaning to deal with it. I have. It hurts most days, and sometimes severely restricts my range of motion. It really has been on my to-do list this whole time. There's just always been someone or something more important to take care of first.

Adrienne, my PT, has me doing these boring little motions over and over. The muscles they engage are so internal that from the outside it looks like I'm doing nothing at all. What drives me crazy is that the work isn't just invisible; it's invisible *and* hard. She explains:

When a spinal injury occurs—  
as a protective mechanism,  
your core system shuts off.  
And all your big muscles—  
those big outer muscles—  
start taking over to stabilize you.  
But the problem . . .  
is that you get stuck moving that way.  
Right?  
*(She demonstrates making a clunky attempt to bend, like a robot.)*  
Your whole body goes rigid  
cuz you're just using those big guys who take extreme measures during the  
emergency.  
And what happens is  
those muscles that shut down  
stay weak.  
And you lose your full range of motion.

Now that I've finally committed to showing up for our sessions twice a week—no matter what else is going on in my life—I've started to notice the art in what she's doing. Adrienne doesn't just give me exercises. It's her job to sense how far is too far: the point at which movement that re-builds the muscles around my disk and increases my range of motion turns into movement that keeps the muscles destroyed, or destroys

them more than they already are. Her job is to find that furthest edge and then ask me to work right there.

When I tell my thesis advisor, Kirk, that I see my writing practice as the spiritual equivalent of the work I've started doing with my back, he asks if I've ever heard of Gramsci's theory of the parameters of discourse. He says—

The parameters of discourse is this idea  
that at any given time  
the parameters of an intellectual debate get set within particular confines—  
*(He holds up his hands, shaping them into a set of parentheses in the air)*  
So say that right now  
the parameters of discourse are set here and here.  
The debate is set within these confines  
and any discourse that's happening on the outside of that—  
*(He gestures to the space just outside one of his hand-parentheses)*  
Anything that lives outside those parameters is seen as fringe—  
And radical and unreasonable . . .  
But what happens is that  
because of the conversation that's happening out *here*  
*(He gestures again to the space just outside the parameter)*  
After awhile,  
that conversation causes the parameter to shift  
*(He slides his hand-parenthesis in the direction of the discourse that was happening  
outside it so that the space within the parameters now includes that space where the  
outside discourse was taking place)*  
So over time  
the work that's happening along the edges  
is actually moving the edge outward.

Hearing this, I realize he's describing what I've spent the past three years trying to do through my writing practice—only in my case, I'm attempting to widen the parameters of the self. During my first year at UT, my boyfriend and I broke up. In the wake of our separation, and the way it shattered some of my most fundamental beliefs about the world and myself, I felt incapable of forming a coherent narrative about anything or anyone. I couldn't form one on the page. I couldn't even form one in my own head. It was too painful even to begin to form a narrative about what had happened between him and me, and what it meant about who each of us was. It was

too painful even to begin to form a narrative about the world in which we lived, or give myself any advice about how to inhabit that world. I was frozen, the way I'd been when I first hurt my back ten years ago, and I couldn't even bend to pick up my shoes. In that extended moment of crisis, my consciousness responded to the spiritual injury much as my body had responded when I hurt my spine: it went rigid to stabilize me. In the vacuum left by my inability to perform the most basic gestures of meaning-making, I clutched at self-punishing, absolute truths to hold me together. Meanwhile, the memories bound up in the injury just kept firing over and over, like a frayed nerve.

Like the big, outer muscles that took over to keep my body from breaking apart entirely when I herniated my disk, the stories I forged in that moment of emergency were perhaps necessary measures at the time. However, they dominated the airwaves of my consciousness so aggressively that it made me incapable of considering the possibility of any other truths. They kept me trapped in a cycle where the harder I tried to use those harsh, invented truths to squash the obsessive firing of all those painful memories, the more relentlessly those memories would fire. Over time, the mechanism I had invoked to protect me became the obstacle to healing in any way. Writing became impossible, because I couldn't inhabit the noise in my own head.

The personal crisis left me in a compositional crisis. If I let go of the attempt to shut out my thoughts of the present moment as I was writing, they would flood in and pull me down an obsessive tunnel of regret and self-hatred; I would sit there, touching a painful image over and over again, unable to interrogate it, play with it, or put it into language. Instead of getting words on the page, I would spend all of my writing time staring into space. If I doubled down on the effort to repress all thoughts of the present moment, that task required me to shut my interior monologues up altogether, leaving me staring at a blank document.

Over time, I came to recognize the compositional crisis of navigating my own consciousness as my writing process itself. Just as the erosion of the cushions in my spine forced me to develop a new awareness of my body, the erosion of my sanity in the wake of my break-up forced me to develop a new awareness of how the practice of writing asks me to engage with the noise in my own head.

In this thesis, I reflect on how the practice of making my plays *instructions for tuesday*, *The Caregiving Project*, and *381 Bleecker* helped me discover the crisis of navigating my own consciousness in the present moment as my writing process. I will investigate how, in writing each of these plays, I attempted to perform the spiritual equivalent of what my physical therapist asks me to do with my back: I tried to locate the outer parameter of the parts of myself that I felt capable of engaging in the present moment, and then asked myself to work along that edge. I will try to deepen my own understanding of how this practice helped me begin to disrupt rigid narratives to which I'd been clinging in the wake of injury, and which had limited my ability to engage with myself and with the people around me. I will try to illuminate how the practice of making these three plays helped me discover writing as an act of increasing my own range of motion—of widening the parameters of the self I allow into my consciousness, my work, and my life. I will try to tell a story about how writing these plays became an act of reconfiguring spiritual tissue.

*[Note to self: Try to write this thesis like you wrote those plays.  
Try to write it from the present moment of yourself.  
Try to write it along the furthest edge of what you're able to write right now.  
Make this thesis help you.*

*Try to make this thesis a space where you take parts of the stories you've been telling  
yourself  
that have gone rigid,  
that aren't serving you,  
that maybe served you once,  
that maybe never served you at all,  
and use this as a chance to engage them,  
interrogate them,  
connect with other people through them,  
find a way to live with them,  
and/or  
move through them.*

*Try to look at as much of yourself as you can stand to look at in this moment,  
and then look a tiny bit more.*

*The same way you used those three plays*

*to invite the voices of your friends and collaborators into your head,  
use this thesis to invite in the voices of the people who are helping you make it—*

*Kirk & Liz & Steven & Andrew & Megan—*

*invite those voices into your head where you need them most.]*

During the many months it took for things to fall apart—and for many months after—I was afraid to let myself think, talk, or write about anything connected to what had happened. I dreaded the lies that I feared I'd invent to make myself feel better, and so I refused to consider any interpretation of events that allowed me to forgive myself for anything. I couldn't bear the thought of forgetting a single thing. Even worse, I felt horrified by the inevitability that I'd begin to revise my own memories. I didn't trust myself to let anything connected to our relationship bleed into my writing, because I couldn't bear to allow my understanding of that experience to change over time.

Looking back, I now realize that even while I was making that promise to myself, I was already breaking it. I was already writing about everything that had happened, at the very same time that I swore I never would.

## instructions for tuesday

When I first got back to school, the second semester of my first year, I couldn't focus on anything. I was in this state where my mind kept telling me I was in the middle of an emergency that I needed to turn my attention to right away so I could think my way to an escape.

My mind kept returning, over and over, to the attempt to find a solution to the situation that involved me staying in school without having to end the relationship. No matter how many times that train of thought hit the same brick wall, it wanted to go back and rethink everything from the beginning. It was like when a detective tells herself that there has to be a missing piece of the puzzle that will save the day, if she can just find it. The only way to stop those thoughts was to shove them behind some door in my mind, each time they tried to break out. Moving through time felt like forcing the door shut for this moment, and then the next moment, and then the next one, until it all suddenly burst out, and I'd have to shove it all back in there, and get my weight back against the door.

That first week of the second semester, I owed Kirk five pages of new writing. I remember feeling utterly incapable of writing anything at all. I remember thinking that I had to make myself write *something*, because if I didn't, my mentors would kindly suggest that I needed to drop out of the program. I remember thinking that the only thing I felt capable of doing in the present moment was to sit down at my desk and type the alphabet—

*[Note to self: If the most you feel capable of in the present moment is  
sitting down to type the alphabet,  
then sit down and do that.  
Right now.  
Sit down.  
Get out of bed  
and walk to the chair  
and sit in the chair  
and open the computer  
and type out the alphabet.  
You don't have to do anything more,*

*but you do have to do that.]*

I don't remember what was going through my head when I sat down and opened the computer. I only remember that as soon as I admitted that all I could do in the present moment was type the alphabet, and just asked myself to do that, I felt like I could write. I sat down, and started writing a piece called *instructions for tuesday*, where the self is split into multiple voices/actors. One voice tries to muscle the self through the actions of daily living—the things the self must find a way to do—as the fragmented voice of catastrophe, memory and longing—intrudes and intrudes and intrudes. I couldn't find my own language to evoke the intrusion of those images, so I borrowed text from *Romeo and Juliet*—the only play whose language made any sense to me at the time—

instructions for saturday.

B.  
*O, pale!*

A.  
When you reach the sudden waking,  
keep eyelids closed.

B.  
*I do remember*

A.  
Rotate body 180 degrees, until stomach is flush with mattress,  
and bury face in bottom left corner of pillow.  
Slide face down corner of pillow until mouth is exposed.  
Press upper-half of face into pillow corner and mattress.  
Reach both hands behind head, grasp sheet,  
and pull sheet forward to fully cover head.

B.  
*If I departed not*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed.

B.  
*Myself condemned and myself excused*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

B.  
*My true heart with treacherous revolt*

A.  
Press upper-half of face

B.  
*I beseech thee*

A.  
60  
59  
58  
57  
56  
55  
54  
53  
52  
51  
50  
49  
48  
47  
46  
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19  
18  
17  
16  
15  
14  
13  
12  
11  
10  
9  
8

B.  
*Miscarried by my fault*

A.  
60  
50

B.  
*Miscarried by*

A.  
50  
49

B.  
*It strains me past the compass of my wits*

A.  
60  
59  
58  
57  
56  
55  
54  
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52  
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B.  
*I dreamt my lady came and found me dead  
(Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think)  
And breathed such life with kisses in my lips*

*That I revived and was an emperor*

A.  
60

B.  
*I must hear from thee every day in the hour*

A.  
59  
60

B.  
*If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy*

A.  
60

B.  
*Myself condemned*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

B.  
*Things that, to hear them told*

A.  
Press upper-half of face  
60

B.  
*Miscarried by my fault*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

B.  
*And bear this work of heaven with patience*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

The practice of transcribing an abstracted version of the war between my interior monologues allowed me to stay in school. It allowed me to begin inviting my

thoughts and feelings of the present moment into my writing. It allowed writing to feel like a relief. I brought the first few pages of *instructions for tuesday* into my playwriting workshop, assuming that no one in the room would understand them or have any desire to engage with them. I had written them so utterly to serve my own needs; I assumed that meant they would be incoherent to everyone else. I felt sure that they would resonate with no one, and that they couldn't possibly serve as a prism through which other people could reckon with their own human experience. How could they be of use to someone else? I was only thinking of me when I wrote them.

But then, we read the pages aloud, and the other artists in the workshop not only got excited about the formal experiment I was exploring—they also talked about how the piece evoked their own experiences of being so paralyzed by anxiety and depression that all they could focus on was muscling themselves through the next sixty seconds. It's not that I walked into that room believing that one else had ever felt the way I did; I just couldn't find a way to connect with them through it until I wrote those pages.

## The Caregiving Project

Writing *instructions for tuesday* helped me discover a practice of dictating the noise in my head as a means of generating dramatic text. It made me realize that asking myself to locate the furthest edge of what I felt capable of engaging within my own consciousness could yield resonant material—even if all I could manage in the present moment was narrating each finite step of brushing my teeth. What mattered was that I sat down to write anyway, and attempted to push myself just beyond the narrow parameters of that basic narration.

*[Note to self: If in this moment,  
you can't find any of your own language outside of the narration of basic tasks: fine.  
Borrow someone else's.  
Take Shakespeare's language.  
Do whatever you have to do to push just beyond that edge.]*

Furthermore, the reaction of the other artists in my cohort suggested the possibility that plays I wrote for myself could offer other people a prism through which to process their own experience. The practice of writing *instructions for tuesday*, and the revelations of sharing it with other people widened my internal parameters. After making that play, I found myself wanting to push beyond the act of just performing the transcript of my internal voice. I now wanted to explore how the practice of directly questioning others—and inviting them to question me—could help me reconfigure my relationship to the noise in my own head. I wanted to explore how this act could become a performance event. This desire led me to create an interview play called *The Caregiving Project*.

The spring of my first year, Steven asked me if I had any interview-based projects that the faculty could use to nominate me for a research fellowship. The moment I got Steven's email, I wrote up a proposal for an interview-based play "about how we, as a society, deal (and don't deal) with the labor of caretaking." I said I was interested in constructing an issue-based dramatic narrative from the verbatim text of interviews. I wrote that I wanted to experiment with structuring the interview process

as “an interconnected series of storytelling exchanges” that allowed me to bring my own stories into the room and invited participants to talk with each other.

My curiosity about queering the traditional interview process grew out of my pre-grad school experience making a documentary about HIV stigma with six young adults I’d been working with in Rwanda for years. They had all become friends through their jobs as peer leaders in the arts program we’d created together. After our first summer, they’d formed a social action/discussion group devoted to supporting each other through the difficult ways that stigma continued to shape their lives. When they approached me about helping them create a public art project that would give them a platform to share their stories, we decided to structure our process so that the making of the film would also provide opportunities for the storytellers to connect more deeply with each other.

I had a lot of questions in the back of my mind about what it meant for me—the only white, American, HIV-negative person in the group—to be involved in the project without including any of my own stories. However, the group expressed a strong desire for the film to focus on their narratives—even if we decided to include my questions/presence in some way. Given that the film was specifically about HIV stigma in Rwanda—a trauma I’ve spent a lot of time witnessing, but never experienced personally—it was a creative choice that made sense to me. We made it our mission to make the interview process as much about the live experience of the six of them sharing stories with each other as it was about gathering sound clips for the film.

We started playing around with what it meant “to interview someone.” We tried turning on the sound recorder and letting one person speak for as long as she wanted to, which was sometimes well over an hour. We tried having the storytellers interview each other. We tried using prepared questions. We tried just listening to a person speak and asking him the questions his story had brought to mind as we were listening. We tried asking questions we thought might lead to theatrically vibrant answers. We tried asking questions that we hoped might give our friend something it seemed she needed in that moment, following a story she’d just told: catharsis,

analysis, distraction, laughter, anything. We tried letting the stories and questions turn the interview into a bunch of people just talking to each other on a porch.

It was such a gift to sit there and hear people I'd known for years paint vivid pictures of some of the most precious and difficult moments of their lives. There were lots of things they said that I already knew, but also many that I didn't. As far as I could tell, some of the stories they told were familiar to other folks in the group, and others, they were telling their friend for the first time. It was such an extraordinary act to create an artistic premise under which I got to listen to them like that and they got to listen to each other. I was so struck, each time I sat there—

*[Note to self: This is what I want theater to feel like.]*

Fast-forward to the spring of my first year of school, and the moment of crisis that had left me with painful doubts about my relationship to the giving and receiving of care. In my proposal to Steven, I intentionally chose a topic that would allow me to continue experimenting with personal story-exchange as a method of making theater—but this time, also allow me to bring my own experiences into the piece more fully. However, the abstract I sent him still kept the subject at a distance from myself. Although I mentioned personal connections to the material—such as the seven years I worked as a childcare provider and the complexities of growing up with a grandparent in the house—I very clearly identified the macrocosmic socio-economic structures of caregiving as my area of inquiry, and the presentation of verbatim text from the interviews as the ultimate form of the performance.

As soon as I drafted that pitch, I realized I wanted to do the project whether or not I got the fellowship (which, in fact, I did not get). I put it aside for the summer. In the fall, Kirk assigned us his question play, *How Much Is Enough?* in his Devising class. When I sat down to read it, I suddenly remembered the day he'd visited Megan's Research Methods class my very first semester of school. He told us about how he'd discovered the radical democracy and theatricality of interview while working on an adaptation of another play. He talked about how he then turned a traditional speaking

engagement at a conference into an attempt to include all of the people in the room in his own public prayer for things he needed at that moment in his life. He talked about how his friend, Melanie Joseph, was in the audience for this prayer, and how the two of them decided to create a script made up of questions and prayers that performers ask the audience. He told us about how he developed the play by writing suites of questions and asking them to groups of people. The part I remembered like a movie was when he told the story of asking a woman—

*What's the hardest thing you've ever had to do?*

and she said:

*My divorce.*

and he said:

*What did money have to do with it?*

and she cried for a moment,  
and she said:

*Everything. Everything.*

There was something so extraordinary about the structure of Kirk's questions in that anecdote and the theatrical space in which he'd asked them. In the act of retelling that moment of making the play, he allowed me—as it seems he had allowed that woman—to feel like one of the most painful, private parts of my life was visible in a way I needed it to be, without making me feel undesirably exposed. I had felt so unable to hold any of the experience I was having in common with other people. But then: here was this theatrical interview that asked so few details, but somehow allowed the weight of the whole story to be felt, and held by the whole room—

*[Note to self: That's the kind of play I wanna make.]*

So when I encountered the full text of this play in the fall of my second year—as the proposal for the caregiving piece was baking somewhere in my mind—I

suddenly realized I could make a theatrical event out of the act of asking real people real questions about my real life. In that moment, the need to make a play that would serve *me* was too urgent to deny; I couldn't do anything else. What's more, the experience of writing *instructions for tuesday* and the hours I'd spent sitting in Kirk's lectures, as the teaching assistant for his "Performance of Prayer" class had complicated my understanding of how generosity can operate in performance. Sitting in those lectures twice a week, and listening to Kirk talk about his own life—about the people he loved and the things he was wrestling with in the present moment—gave me a space where I could inhabit my grief and confusion over my break-up without punishing myself. His lectures were a church that let me welcome it all into the room, just to sit with it. It was like that monologue in Sarah's Ruhl's play, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*—

*The music stops.*

*A woman comes to a podium.*

*Mrs. Gottlieb begins her eulogy.*

MRS. GOTTLIEB.

I'm not sure what to say. There is, thank God, a vaulted ceiling here. I am relieved to find that there is stained glass and the sensation of height. Even though I am not a religious woman I am glad there are still churches. Thank God there are still people who build churches for the rest of us so that when someone dies – or gets married – we have a place to —. I could not put all of this – (*she thinks the word grief*) – in a low-ceilinged room – no – it requires height.

I realized that when Kirk stood up and talked about himself—his own life—and asked the students questions that grew out of those stories—*that* was the act that built me a church for my own experience.

I decided to steal the formal experiment of *How Much Is Enough?* and create a play about caregiving, made up of stories, questions and prayers that I would perform/facilitate myself. The live interviews wouldn't be a means to gather material *for* the play; they would *be* the play. The moment that I started telling friends about my desire to do this, I was struck by how little I needed to say for my conversation partner to leap at the chance to share something about their own desires and anxieties in relation to these questions about care. It seemed that no matter whom I approached,

one small mention of my own struggle to understand my relationship to caregiving would invite an immediate personal response from the listener. It was like this abundance of need burst forth: the need to pose the questions they felt too ashamed to ask, to confront the fear of letting themselves think about it at all, to find out what other people thought compared to them, and to permit themselves the hope that maybe someone else had some advice about how to navigate any of it. I realized that all of that was just sitting under the surface of every person and sprang out the second I invited it into the room.

In the spring of my second year, in pursuit of this desire to create a live-interview piece about caregiving, I began to create a practice by which I shaped spontaneous interaction into a repeatable performance event. That practice began when I told my friend Tamara about my impulse to create the play. It's hard to describe how our partnership on *The Caregiving Project* began without lending it the romance of a "how we met" story—but our decision to collaborate was, in fact, marked by a torrent of sudden confessions, a kind of immediate mutual clarity, and the irrational decision to take a big leap together. Even from that first conversation, talking with Tamara about *The Caregiving Project* gave me a way to begin piecing through the fears with which my break-up had left me. I remember telling her about each of the things I used to believe about myself, before things fell apart. I told her that now I wasn't sure if any of it was true. I wasn't sure if any of it had ever been true. And I wasn't sure if I wanted any of it to be true in the future.

I realize now that in that first conversation with Tamara, making *The Caregiving Project* was already helping me create a liminal space that lay somewhere between writing directly about what had happened and keeping it out of my writing entirely. Instead of sitting at my desk, trying to write about something unrelated, or trying to write about it directly and falling down a tunnel of obsessive, self-punishing thoughts, I began to feed some of those fears and memories through an aesthetic filter. Writing material for the play forced me to take some of those absolute statements that I'd been using to punish myself and translate them into questions that I could ask another human. Converting my amorphous fear, confusion and guilt into question form

required me to rework them into a syntactical structure that by its very nature held up little shards of those feelings as matters to be investigated. As elementary as it sounds, writing suites of questions became a practice of considering the possibility that other people might have insights on this subject that could assist me. It became a practice of asking for help.

Writing a play with the central intent of asking the audience for help made me extremely uncomfortable. It felt selfish and narcissistic. The thought of performing the show for anyone felt weird and embarrassing. I wasn't totally sure if my discomfort meant I was doing something destructive or locating my work right where it needed to be. As Tamara and I read through the questions I brought to our first few meetings, we kept asking, "Is this for me or for them? And what do we even mean when we say the play is for me? What do we mean when we say it's for them?" I realized I didn't have an answer to any of those questions. I had been describing theater as a "gift" for years, but I'd never managed to describe how so, or for whom. I became curious about how the structure of the play could ask me to try to clock the audience's needs as well as my own in the live moment of performing the show. How could the challenge of negotiating both of those things become part of the performative act?

Borrowing from Kirk's model of workshopping early suites of questions with different groups of people, as well as Steven's advice to treat each "developmental sharing" as an actual performance of the piece, I began doing the play for audiences of 3-5 people every Friday. (Tamara and I had originally intended to work with larger audiences, but scaring up even just ten people on a regular basis proved harder than we'd anticipated. Like many obstacles in art-making, the small groups turned out to be a gift. I'll return to this in a moment).

I fell into a routine of sitting alone to write questions (and any stream-of-consciousness writing they inspired), meeting with Tamara to talk through what I'd sent her, and performing the material that she and I had culled and re-worked for that week's audience. I wasn't entirely conscious of it at the time, but as I moved through this practice, I began to develop different circles of private and public sharing.

The first circle was the totally uncensored, for-my-eyes-only writing that I would do alone. In that space, I gave myself permission only to concern myself with the questions and ramblings that were interesting or helpful for me to put down on paper—

*[Note to self: It might help clarify things if you share an example of that writing here.*

*But I don't want to share any of that writing. It's private.*

*The whole point is that I gave myself a structured space for something completely private.*

*I want it to stay that way.]*

I won't share an example here. I'll just acknowledge the existence of that structured, private space—that necessary, innermost circle of my writing.

The second circle of private/public sharing was the material I pulled from my private ramblings and question-writing to share with Tamara. In this pass, I would push myself to include everything I'd written down that I felt comfortable sharing. I gave myself permission to keep private anything that felt too raw, but I pushed myself to share everything else—even the stuff I thought might be useless or weird or a little embarrassing. I'd never let someone that far into my creative thought-process before. It was such a revelation to find that instead of just getting stuck all alone and spending the whole night staring at the computer, hating myself, I could just write as far as I could go, and then sit outside with my friend and try to figure out how to move forward together.

The third circle of private/public sharing—which I hadn't even planned to create—were the tiny groups of friends who showed up to our weekly performances. My original plan had been to share whatever version of the piece existed with an audience of ten to thirty people, every Friday. Tamara and I expected that our entire Professional Development Workshop would show up to the first performance. Instead, nearly everyone canceled, and the only people who showed up besides Tamara were two of my good friends. I considered calling the whole thing off, but decided to perform the piece anyway.

On that first day, all I had were the questions of a “quiz show” that challenged audiences to test their knowledge about the macrocosmic caregiving structures within which our society and our individual lives operate—

*(Rapid fire)*

What percentage of people in this country bring at least one parent to live with them at some point in their lifetime?

What is the average income of a U.S. household?

What percentage of people who stay at home full-time as a caregiver in the U.S. are men?

I had stolen the device from *How Much Is Enough?* I wanted to see what it would be like to pressure people to answer the questions in a frantic theatrical simulation of a game-show, and then to ask them the same questions again in a more spacious sit-down interview.

The afternoon was full of discoveries. To name a few: the language of the questions was too convoluted, this section of the piece went on for too long, and the power relationship of the game-show dynamic was at odds with the kind of mutual vulnerability I was trying to let into the room. However, the much larger discovery was that starting out by sharing the piece with an audience of close friends gave me a stronger impulse to begin by talking about myself, and a more radical ability to find the outer edge of what I was willing to reveal publicly. As we returned to the quiz-show questions in the form of a sit-down interview, I allowed my questions and my friends’ answers to evolve into a conversation that moved far beyond what was written on the papers in my hand. Pretty soon, the performance turned into four friends sitting in a room, having a regular conversation—only the questions and answers were braver and more intimate than the things we’d ordinarily say. It was that front porch in Rwanda that I’d been trying to recreate—only this time, I was talking about me, too.

I began confessing some of the rigid assumptions I’d drawn up about what my life could look like—because telling myself a negative story that felt certain was less

frightening than finding a way to inhabit the uncertainty of the future. Because I was improvising the show for my friends, I let myself say aloud some of the ridiculous things I usually just said inside my own head.

I could feel almost immediately that these questions brought up feelings that made me lose control of myself more than I wanted to in front of an audience of strangers. They crossed the emotional equivalent of that threshold my physical therapist is so good at identifying with my back: where I begin to force myself through movement that pushes too far and keeps the injured tissue destroyed, instead of helping to rebuild it. In the process of making *The Caregiving Project*, finding that edge wasn't a science; it was only intuitive. I didn't realize it at the time, but the thing I started doing in that first sharing—and in the conversation I had with Tamara afterward—was hearing and trusting my own instincts about what was and was not helpful to me.

The other radical discovery of the afternoon was that—just as the totally private first circle of my writing practice had allowed me to locate my own outer parameter by giving me a space where I could risk going too far—sharing the piece with a small group of friends had permitted me that same freedom in performance. I realized that *crossing* the edge of what I was willing to examine publicly was the only way to *find* that edge. And in order to cross it, I needed to begin my process in spaces like that room, where the cost of exposing too much was bearable afterward.

As I write this, I realize how deeply that afternoon and the performances that I shared with other small groups of friends in the weeks that followed have informed the process of all of the plays I've made since. That third circle, where I reach beyond the privacy of my desk at home and beyond my conversations with a close collaborator to share with a small gathering of smart writers who love me has become one of the most integral steps of making a play. I've never really thought about it this way until just now, but part of what shifted for me in developing *The Caregiving Project* was that play-making became a practice of inviting other people's voices into my head so that they might remain there to help me free myself when I start to take myself hostage. It

became an act of inviting other people to take up residence inside me where I need them most.

As the play developed, the scaffolded circles of private and public sharing that structured my own process became part of the architecture of the performance. Stealing from Kirk, there were questions I asked the audience to answer only by raising their hands while everyone's eyes were closed—

So let's try this:

If everyone could close their eyes... I'm gonna say some sentences about how I sometimes feel, and if you ever feel that way too, I want you to raise your hand.

Raise your hand if you sometimes feel like: I'm not sure how to do all the things I feel I have to do.

Raise your hand if you sometimes feel: I wish someone were here to help me with this right now.

Raise your hand if you just need everyone to leave you alone for a minute so you can take care of your own self.

Raise your hand if you know someone who is too young, or too old, or too sick, or too broke, or too sad, or too confused, or too in love to take good care of themselves right now.

Raise your hand if, on some days, that person is you.

There were questions I asked people to answer yes or no just by raising a card of a certain color, stories I invited them to tell in only six words, and questions I asked volunteers to answer as fully as they wanted to, seated in the chair beside me onstage—

Alright, we can put our hands down.

Who here has ever taken care of someone when they were really drunk? // Would you mind coming up here and answering some questions?

What's your name?

How drunk was your friend?

What did you have to do to care of your drunk friend?

What's the least you felt obligated to do at that moment? // What could you have done better?

I realized the first time I performed this show that I don't know as much about taking care of drunk people as I thought I did. Can you give me 3 pieces of advice on how to take good care of someone who's smashed?

If you suddenly realized that you were too drunk to make it home by yourself, who is the person in your life you would most want to show up at that moment to take care of you? // How come?

So puke is one thing, but what about if it came out the other end? Is that still the person you'd choose?  
(If the answer is "no": Who would you choose instead?)

How old do you imagine you'll be when you stop being able to wipe your own butt yourself? // What kind of haircut do you think you'll have at the time?

By scaffolding the prompts for audience members to engage with the questions in *The Caregiving Project*, I invited them to work along the outer parameters of what they felt capable of acknowledging in their own heads and sharing with other people. I tried to build the show so that their experience of working along that edge—together with a roomful of other people doing the same thing—might push it out a little further as the show progressed, and make it possible to hold more in common in that public space of performance than in our everyday lives.

I made it about three-quarters of the way through my PDW performance before stopping abruptly, and saying that I didn't want to go any further that day. I felt that intuitive alarm signal that told me I'd reached the place where I was engaging with something so raw that it started making me feel *more* isolated from the other people in the room—rather than helping me connect with them. I put the script aside. It's been waiting in a drawer since then, as I've turned my attention to other projects. Yet the act of performing it has continued to work on me, even as I've taken a hiatus from making the play. In my everyday life, a greater range of motion has opened up in my ability to engage with all the parts of myself that the piece interrogated. It's

transformed my ability to connect with other people. It's allowed me to invite their voices to take up residence inside my head and help disrupt the narratives that lock me up and keep me from living my life.

### 381 Bleecker

The spring of my second year, I also began writing *381 Bleecker*. By that time, the practice of writing *instructions for tuesday* had helped me develop an awareness of my interior monologues and invite them into my work. Through my early explorations of *The Caregiving Project*, I had begun to invite others to re-frame and critique some of my interior monologues with their own experiences and questions. This practice had already helped me escape from the trap of being wholly contained within that interiority. I found myself in a place where I could bring my full self to a writing practice where I was neither trapped within an interior monologue, nor wholly reliant on others to frame and critique my experience. Instead, I could allow fictional characters to embody a wide range of emotions and actions that flowed from the memories, feeling and questions I was reckoning with in the present moment. I could use the practice of writing fictional dramatic narrative as a means to interrogate stories I'd made up about myself and about the real people in my life. I could use that practice to create a prism through which collaborators and audiences could refract their own experiences, and connect with each other. I could use it to disrupt some of the stories I still clung to in the wake of things falling apart, which were no longer serving me. I could use it to help me learn to live with the contradictions of my own experience.

From that moment of myself emerged the story of Meg, an avant-garde choreographer who is losing the rent-stabilized New York apartment where she's spent her entire adult life. When her sister, Ellen shows up with her son, David, to help Meg pack, the two women finally begin to reckon with a complicated snarl of old wounds caused by a devastating series of letters that their brother Henry wrote to them during his battle with AIDS in the 1980s.

The practice of writing *381 Bleecker* involved a radical shift in my work habits. Throughout the fall of my second year, I threw all my energy toward trying to make my writing something that I could minimize and control. I tried to make my writing happen faster. I tried to make it demand less of me. I tried to prohibit it strictly from taking over my life. I would give myself short periods of time to write, and try to bang out a concrete number of polished, coherent pages without letting my mind wander. It

was a total failure. The harder I tried to shut all thoughts of the present moment behind that door in my mind so that I could “concentrate,” the more aggressively they would burst through and pull me out of the play. I would sit down to write for two hours and spend all but ten minutes of that time staring off into space. The more I used the impending end of the hour as a way to pressure myself to churn out pages, the more I would freak out about how little I’d done, and how impossible it felt to drop into any kind of intuitive impulse. What’s more, there was nothing helpful about the *kind* of staring into space that I was doing. I wasn’t engaging with the painful thoughts; I was just touching them over and over without moving through them. The act of writing didn’t offer me any escape from the mental tug-of-war between ignoring the noise in my head and using it to punish myself. I got to the end of the fall semester barely having written anything at all.

Liz, Steven and Kirk sat me down—

We want to talk to you about priorities.

This might sound crazy, but the conversation that the four of us had in my end-of-semester chat that fall was the first time I’d ever considered the possibility that choosing *not* to try to do absolutely everything at one-hundred percent all the time was an acceptable option. They pointed out what a hard time I had prioritizing my obligations to myself over my obligations to other people. I remember Kirk saying—

You could go your whole life  
doing everything you possibly can  
to keep from dropping the ball on other people  
and then realize that  
the whole time . . .  
the person you were dropping the ball on  
was yourself.

I remember Steven saying—

The way you’ve written about your craft goals in your end-of-semester

reflection—  
even there—  
I feel like you're trying to care-take my pedagogy,  
rather than figure out what parts of it are useful to you.  
You don't owe me that.

And Liz—

You can write out all the things in your life,  
in order of what's most important to you right now,  
and say that those are your priorities—  
but if you don't spend your time and energy accordingly,  
those aren't priorities.  
It's just a list on a piece of paper.

And Kirk—

It should cost you something.  
Making yourself prioritize what's most important to you  
means you don't invest as much in the things at the bottom of the list.  
If it doesn't cost you,  
it means you're not actually doing it.

As we talked, I realized how unwilling I'd always been to let go of the expectation that I could manage to do absolutely everything as well as I wanted to do it. I saw, suddenly, how often that approach had historically resulted in the things I cared about most—especially things that were just for me, such as my writing practice—getting thrown under the bus. I spent the last week of the semester asking myself what *I* wanted most right now—

*[Note to self: I want to write the play  
that I most need to sit in the theater and watch.]*

I told Kirk I'd bring at least thirty new pages to our first day of workshop in January, and then promised myself I'd bring sixty.

*[Note to self: What's the greatest number of pages you think  
you can write in the first two weeks of the new year?  
What do you need to do to push yourself past that edge?]*

I returned to Austin two weeks before the new semester started to begin the play—

*[Note to self: Make some rules.  
For the next seventeen days,  
I'm going to spend all day, every day, working on this play.  
I'm going to keep my phone off for the entire day.  
I'm not going to respond to anything anyone wants or needs from me until I finish work at 8 or 9pm.  
I'm gonna be in bed every night by midnight.  
My bills are overdue,  
and I don't have enough money in my account to pay them,  
but I'm just going to let them all be a month late,  
so I don't have to spend my writing time babysitting.  
I'm not gonna run any errands,  
or do any housework besides food shopping  
and washing a minimal amount of laundry and dishes.  
I'm not gonna do anything in the morning before I sit down to write,  
besides eat breakfast and take a walk.]*

I said I was going to follow all those rules, and then I followed them. The moment I started writing *381 Bleecker* was the moment I started to honor the conscious priorities I'd made.

The rules I made were extreme. It was so hard to prioritize *myself* even a little: I had to do it radically in order to do it at all. In all honesty, I have very little insight into why it was easier to practice prioritizing my own needs in such an extreme fashion, rather than to introduce those habits gently. I just remember it feeling like that was what I needed to do. I decided to give up on trying to be the person I wanted to be, and just try to be the writer I wanted to be.

Inside my radically new rules and my radically new life, my writing changed radically. I was newly rigid about what time I sat down at my desk every morning, but I gave myself permission to take as long as I needed for my focus to arrive in the world of the play I wanted to write. Instead of trying to write a polished scene as quickly as possible, I started opening a new document each day that was just a place to let my mind wander on paper, within the world of the play. I knew I wanted to write a story

about two sisters whose relationship is destroyed by a series of letters that their brother writes as he's dying of AIDS, and that I wanted at least part of the play to unfold in the present day. But other than following that instinct, I let go of any attempt to answer questions about the larger story. I stopped trying to write the way I felt I should, and began writing in whatever way I needed to write, in order for writing to be possible. I started writing however I needed to write, in order for writing to be pleasurable. I allowed myself to spend whole days asking questions on paper about who these people were. I let myself suggest various answers to my own questions until one of them would strike some kind of tuning fork inside my chest, and I'd let that suggestion flow into little exchanges of dialogue, and back to questions again. The impulses didn't have to make sense to deserve my trust.

These shifts allowed writing to become a subconscious practice of allowing my experience of the present moment into the play without having to think directly about that experience in the literal context of my life. By asking my thoughts to remain within the lives of these characters for as long as I sat at my desk—but allowing myself time to show up, and letting my mind wander anywhere it was hungry to travel within those lives—I formed a different relationship to the noise in my head. I freed myself from the tug-of-war between trying to shut my thoughts about the present moment out of my writing and letting those thoughts pull me down a tunnel of obsessive self-punishing. Instead of ruminating on all of those feelings of anger and disappointment that I described earlier, I allowed them to become an essential part of Henry.

*Henry stands, holding a letter.*

[...]

Ellen:

For years now, I've used the word "selfless" to describe the sacrifices you make for your work. Recently, it dawned on me that your commitment to the alleviation of suffering is limited sharply to the public sphere. If there is a soul out there in need, you will stop at nothing to answer its cry—so long as doing so is likely to earn you public recognition for your intellect, your tenacity, and your virtue. But when confronted with the dependence of someone who has loved you your whole life through—and, I dare say, loved you well—you cannot, in practice, deem him a worthy use of your time.

I let the present moment bleed into the imagined past. I let each inform my understanding of the other. I didn't realize it at the time, but permitting myself that kind of fluidity as I made the play began to change the rigid divisions I'd created between the past and the present in the stories I told myself about my own life.

The play changed me. I can't pinpoint how it happened exactly, but something about allowing the past and the present to infiltrate each other as I wrote Henry's letters helped me work through a rigidity that had formed in my mind in the wake of injury. In conversations with others, and inside my own head, I began to allow the experiences of the recent past—which I'd isolated from my narratives about the rest of my life—to start working their way into the fabric of the distant past and the future. In doing so, the present moment became more bearable. I began to gain a greater range of motion in my ability to engage with the noise in my head and with the people around me. I began to reconfigure spiritual tissue.

The practice of allowing myself into my writing in a new way—through the prism of a fictional narrative—also allowed me to develop a more productive approach to engaging my anxiety that telling this story was an act of appropriation. My fear and confusion about the ownership of experience remained. However, my work on *The Caregiving Project* had begun to show me that I could use my writing practice to turn those fears into questions.

My writing practice offered me a liminal space, beyond the binary of whether this story was or wasn't mine to tell. It allowed me to locate those fraught questions about ownership in the conflicts between the characters themselves. In 381 *Bleecker*, Meg is struggling with the isolation of being a straight woman in a predominantly gay male community, at a moment where the contagion patterns of the epidemic have created newly sharp distinctions between those identities. She's simultaneously at the epicenter and on the outside of the crisis. Henry—who is experiencing the epidemic in his own body—feels that his existence is being erased, and that the world around him is refusing to admit the connection between his identity and his annihilation.

HENRY. I apologize if my outrage is unpalatable.

MEG. Do you know how many men in this city—that *we know*—have lost everything and everyone, and have put that outrage to *use* in forcing people to pay attention?

HENRY. What use?

MEG. You want to write a letter? Write one to the NIH! Write one to Senator Moynihan! Write one to whatever psychotic criminal is actually in charge of Health and Human Services! Write 20,000 letters and dump them on the White House lawn!

*He raises his thin arms above his head, his hands curled into loose fists.*

HENRY. That's the spirit—Miss Larry Kramer herself appears like a vision at the foot of my bed. (*The effort of raising his arms is too much—he starts to cough, and drops them abruptly.*) You want me to march down to D.C. with a banner? (*He coughs again, catches his breath*) I wish I'd thought of that sooner: I'll just tape it to the front of my walker, and creep on down.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG. When I take the subway to work in the morning, I look at all the people getting off at Penn Station, and what a rush they're in, and how insulated they are from anything that might chip the veneer off their shiny little lives . . . and I picture smashing their heads against the window, one by one. (*Half-beat.*) I get it.

HENRY. No. Meg. You don't.

MEG. I'm not saying—

HENRY. You never waited to see if you'd get it,/you don't have ulcers in your rectum, there aren't nails in the bottom of your feet, and if there were, you can be sure as fuck the whole nation would grind to a halt if this had started with nice, hetero girls dropping like flies—

MEG. Henry—

My anxieties about who owns the fragments of these stories became an entry point instead of an obstacle.

From the beginning, I wrote *381 Bleecker* for myself. Connecting more deeply with my own instincts about how to move forward with the play allowed me to engage with other people's notes differently. When the semester began, I abandoned my bad

habit of front-loading the reading of my pages in workshop with defensive information about my intentions and “where I was in my process.” For the first time, I cared more about getting feedback that could help me than proving to everyone in the room that I was smarter than my early pages might suggest. I had developed a deep enough faith in my own instincts that I wasn’t afraid that someone else’s questions or comments would fog my ability to hear myself. In losing that fear, I began to interrogate other people’s responses more actively. I remember, on the first day of Kirk’s workshop, Abbey Chung gave me a hard note that would have completely shut me down the year before. After hearing my first sixty pages, she raised her hand and said—

I mean . . .

I just feel like I’ve heard this story before.

Several of my classmates jumped in to defend me, but I interrupted them, and asked Abbey if she could tell me more specifically why she felt that way. As she began to locate her note in the particulars of the draft, it became clear that her issue was with an imagined version of the play that didn’t bring the past and the present into conversation with each other. In those early pages, I had only included one scene from 2015, and I hadn’t said anything about my ultimate intent to locate these scenes from the past as echoes in a story arc that unfolds in the present. Upon hearing the reasoning behind Abbey’s note, a number of people in the class pointed to the present-day scene, and spoke of how resonant it could be to make the play about how these scenes from the epidemic inform Ellen and Meg’s relationship later in their lives. By resisting the urge to front-load the reading with context, and pushing myself to ask more about Abbey’s note, I got to discover that my classmates could find my intentions in the text itself, not in my preamble. I got to hear them talk about the importance of what I was trying to do, based on the actual pages. I gained a wider range of motion in helping other people help me.

I also developed a deeper ability to trust myself when a note, question, or craft tool didn’t feel helpful. I stopped “care-taking” other people’s pedagogy and input, and

began making use of it on my own terms. Rather than feeling obligated to practice all of the play-making strategies from Steven’s first-year workshop all the time, I began working only with the tools I needed in the present moment. I set all the others aside for later. For example, I chose to play consciously with introducing bold turns into the earliest drafts of my scenes, but gave myself permission to hold off on thinking about the larger arc of the story. When other people asked me to consider overarching story questions, I said, without apologizing, “I don’t want to think about that yet.” The moment that I began to trust myself to reach for the tools I needed, when I needed them, they began to free and propel my writing, rather than hinder it.

Toward the end of *381 Bleecker*, there’s a moment where Meg looks around at the empty apartment where her entire life with Henry unfolded. Without knowing consciously why she begins to speak, she recounts one tiny detail about him—

My brother Henry liked cantaloupe.

Speaking aloud the little shard of memory leads her to speak another. And another, and another, until the act of beginning to speak leads her into a litany of particulars about who he was to her. When I first wrote the speech, I didn’t understand what it was about, or why it needed to be in the play. I just felt a strong instinct that it was necessary. In the wake of leaving my partner, perhaps the most destructive story I told myself was that I was a person who wasn’t worthy of anyone’s trust—least of all my own. But over time, the accumulated little motions of creating *instructions for tuesday*, *The Caregiving Project*, and *381 Bleecker* had disrupted my rigid grip on that narrative. They had widened a space inside me to tell myself other stories about who I was. In reconfiguring the muscle of that trust, and the muscle of simultaneous patience and impatience that such reconfiguring requires, I was able to hear—

*[Note to self: Just keep that speech in there for now.  
You don’t have to be able to see the work that it’s doing yet.  
Just keep working and trying to understand it.]*

I couldn't see it, and I couldn't see it—and then, a few weeks ago, I grabbed drinks with Liz, my director Jess, and the festival co-curator, Hannah, after rehearsal.

We're sitting there, and Liz asks me—

What allows Meg to say these things now?

Why hasn't she been able to say them before this moment in the play?

What is she doing?

Hannah begins to suggest how we could change the staging to clarify how the speech functions as an act of saying goodbye. As I listen to Hannah talk about Meg, I suddenly hear Kirk and Andrew's voices from our thesis conversations, talking about their own lives, and talking about me. I hear them pointing out the falsity of the stories I've still been clutching pieces of throughout the making of these plays. The one that insists that the way things ended erased anything and everything we ever were to each other before then. The one that insists that the ways I failed him and myself reveal absolute, immovable truths about who I've always been and who I can ever be. The one that prioritizes a single interpretation of what happened—and what that means—above all others. The one that cuts me off from the people around me. The one that makes me deny myself a relationship to any part of who he and I were besides the events of our rupture. I suddenly realize—

*[Note to self: I don't think that the event of this speech is that Meg is saying goodbye to each of these memories.*

*I think the event is that she's letting them back in, one by one.*

*I think each particular that she conjures is a tiny truth with which she's denied herself a relationship.*

*I think she's spent all these years, locked up in a story she's told herself about how the choices she made at the end of her relationship with Henry erased everything they ever were to each other before that.*

*I think she's told herself that in making the choices she did, she forfeited a right for anything that once belonged to her to belong to her still.*

*Or the possibility that anything she once was, she could still be.*

*It's a story that's cut her off from her own self and her own life.*

*It's a story that's isolated her from the people she most needed to let in.*

*It's denied her the ability to invite their voices into her head, where she needs them most.*

*The event of the speech is that after so many years of holding herself hostage with these rigid stories,  
they've been disrupted by the accumulated events of  
losing her apartment—  
of sorting through all the objects that she had shut away in the back closet—  
of seeing David begin his life in New York—  
of exploding into an argument with Ellen where their narratives about the past collided—  
of having her sister's refusal to abandon her in the present  
challenge a story she's been hanging on to from the past.*

*The event of the speech is that Meg allows herself to let in the fullness  
of the thousand small things that defined her relationship with Henry.  
She doesn't say anything that erases or denies how things ended between them.  
She doesn't try to explain it.  
She doesn't try to absolve or resolve it neatly.  
She just allows the thousand other truths that the painful truth of how things ended  
sits within  
to re-enter the apartment—  
to re-enter her consciousness—  
to re-enter her own speech.*

*As she speaks each tiny truth aloud,  
she widens the parameter of how much of herself and her life she can engage  
just enough to make room to speak the next truth.  
It's a speech act of repetitive little motions  
that allows her to let in more and more simultaneous truths,  
bit by bit,  
and to live with their contradictions.*

*She's me, and she isn't me, and she is.*

*She's doing what I wasn't ready to do—  
what I'm becoming ready to do by writing her—  
what it turns out I've been doing all along—  
which I knew and didn't know at the same time.]*

I wrote *381 Bleeker* along the furthest edge of what I felt capable of writing in the moment that I began it. The practice of writing moved that edge out further, and so I had to let the play expand as I expanded. I said earlier that from the beginning, I gave myself permission to let the characters lives travel wherever they wanted to go on the

page, but that's not entirely true. In the back of my mind, as I was writing those early pages, some voice said—

*[Note to self: Ellen and Meg don't get to reconcile.  
This play will have no productive exhumations of old wounds.  
Not only will this play have no resolution;  
it will have no forgiveness.  
There can be moments of grace in the past, but none in the present.  
These women will not come to see each other or themselves more fully.  
They will not break out of the rigidity in which they're trapped.  
They will not move toward each other.  
No healing will take place.  
There is no such thing.]*

But then, the practice of writing the plays that I've discussed in this thesis invited me into new conversations with myself, just as it invited other people into my life and my consciousness in new ways. That practice didn't offer me any clean or complete kind of healing—even now, I don't believe such a thing exists—but it helped to disrupt stories I'd been telling myself that weren't serving me. Through the accumulated small motions of that practice, I found myself wanting to surrender to at least some of the forgiveness and grace that I'd been so determined to bar from my own life, and from the lives of my characters.

I didn't remove the cruelest events from *381* Bleecker. But I wrote a final scene for the play that even six months earlier, I would have refused to consider. The scene doesn't allow Meg and Ellen any kind of definitive healing. There's nothing either of them could say that will repair the past. Their spoken apologies are partial, imperfect, and overdue. However, the apologies do matter, both to the giver and to the receiver. They widen the parameters of what's possible in their relationship enough that Meg can invite Ellen into the private ritual of her dance practice. She teaches her sister a warm-up that she's performed every morning of her life. Like the writing practice that I've discovered over the past three years, it's a daily attempt to increase her range of motion by making repeated little gestures along the outer limits of her movement capabilities. It's the most truthful way she knows how to pray. I think of the Rilke

quote that Kirk read us on the first day of Performance of Prayer. I realize that in the last moment of *381 Bleecker*—as in my own life—artistic practice is the means by which Meg and Ellen invite the parts of themselves and each other that they swore they’d never speak to again to “kneel down and stand up, daily, alone in [one] room, holding sacred all that befalls [them] there: even what has not happened, even disappointment, even desertion”—

ELLEN. You’re gonna have to carry the boxes. I could barely get ‘em up the stairs at Goodwill. It made me feel like a senior citizen.

MEG. You just need to stretch.

ELLEN. I can barely touch my toes.

MEG. Yes you can. *(Placing the t-shirt on the bed and standing)* Stand up.

ELLEN. Meg—you spend every/ day—

MEG. All you need is five minutes when you wake up! Stand up!

ELLEN *(standing)*. If I throw my back out—

MEG. Just put your feet like this. A little wider. Arms at your sides. Now just drop your head to your chest. *(Meg drops her head to her chest. Ellen follows)* Now drop it a little more. Now roll it back up.

*(Beginning to snap on the slow-count)* Now drop, 2, coming up, 2. Do it again. Now drop, 2, coming up, 2. We’re gonna do the whole thing. Just do it, don’t watch.

Drop the head, 2, rolling up, 2, half-way down, 2, rolling up, 2, all the way, 2, 3, 4, bend the knees, 2, lift the hips, 2, come back up, 2, 3, 4, and open, 2, 3, 4, to the left 2, back to center 2, to the right collapse, swing back up, 2 to the right 2, back to center 2, to left collapse, swing back up, 2, let them fall, breathe.

*Ellen follows clumsily, craning her neck to look at Meg on each step, and then rushing one beat behind to mimic her. Meg keeps her gaze inward. When they reach the end of the first round, Ellen turns to make a self-deprecating comment, but Meg goes right back into the count. Ellen dives back into the rhythm, this time, without sneaking looks at Meg. Her motions are still a little awkward, especially in contrast with Meg’s uncanny elegance, but she commits to it, getting a few inches closer to her toes than last time.*

Drop the head, 2, rising up, 2, half-way down, 2, rising up, 2, all the way, 2, 3, 4, bend the knees, 2, lift the hips, 2, come back up, 2, 3, 4, and open 2, 3, 4, to the left 2, back to center 2, to the right collapse, swing back up, *(snap)* to the right *(snap)*, back to center *(snap)*, to left collapse, swing back up, *(snap)*, let them fall, breathe.

*They exchange a brief glance at the top—*

*And again, (snap).*

*Meg and Ellen move through the warm-up together—  
this time, with Meg just snapping out the count—  
each, in her own way, allowing herself to make the movements beautiful—  
each letting her gaze go soft—  
Ellen, not quite touching her toes, but almost grazing the floor with her fingertips.*

*Lights fade as they move through it,  
going to black before they've reached the end.*

*End of Play.*

## Beginnings

The practice of writing *instructions for tuesday*, *The Caregiving Project*, and *381 Bleecker* allowed me to invite myself into a more authentic relationship with craft and form. It allowed writing to become a means by which I interrogate and learn to live within the contradictions of the world, my life, and the noise inside my own head. It helped me disrupt self-narratives that were cutting me off from my past, preventing me from imagining any future, and making my own consciousness a space I couldn't bear to inhabit in the present moment. It's a practice that led me to friends and collaborators I need in my life. It's a premise through which I initiated the conversations I most needed to have with them. It's a magic trick that allowed their voices to become part of the noise in my head—noise that lives inside me, that I use to free myself when I start to get locked back up in a rigidity that doesn't serve me.

My writing practice—and its project of helping me widen the parameters of myself—are an unfinished and unfinishable project. I still talk to myself in ways that don't serve me. I still cling to rigid narratives about what happened between him and me, and restrict the range of motion I allow myself in considering multiple interpretations of the past and the full spectrum of what might be possible in the future. However, by asking myself to write this thesis along the outer edges of my capacity to engage with myself in this moment, a radical shift in my ability to let go of some of those narratives has occurred. I find myself both capable of—and willing to—engage with that part of my experience in a way that was unimaginable to me four months ago. The little, repetitive motions of writing this thesis have helped me gain greater strength and flexibility in my ability to interrogate that part of my life, and to find ways to live with its contradictions.

The practice of making this thesis has invited new voices into my head where I need them most. Lately, I keep hearing pieces of a conversation that writing this document prompted me to have with Megan, earlier this spring. As I was struggling to move forward with the draft, I told her that even after all this time, I couldn't let myself create any coherent narrative about what happened between him and me. I told her I couldn't even manage to let myself out of the starting gate of trying to create a

narrative, because any version I could imagine either privileged my own perspective to the exclusion of all others, or denied me a perspective altogether. Every linear variation was so limited within one perspective that it felt like a lie.

I confessed to her that my early work on this thesis had allowed me to begin toying with the idea of trying to write one story about him and me that was composed of many. I suggested tentatively that someday, I might be capable of sitting down at my desk and letting myself write out each of the narratives that compete in my mind. I wondered aloud if maybe it would be helpful to allow them to interrupt each other, but also, to make myself follow the thread of each one, as far as it can go. When I said that, Megan's face lit up in that bright way it does. She asked—

Can you imagine if that were novel?  
Where it starts from one person's perspective,  
leaning full-throttle into remembering things through one lens,  
and then backed up and began again from another person's perspective,  
leaning as far as it can into another?  
And it keeps backing up and beginning,  
again and again?  
And all the contradictions of those stories are living alongside each other  
within the covers of that book?

I immediately back-pedaled, and insisted that I wasn't capable of writing that book. I told her I'd never be capable of writing it.

Yet ever since that conversation, I keep hearing her voice in my head. I feel myself widening to consider the possibility that I could write that book. I find myself considering the possibility that one day I'll want to write it. That maybe I'm writing it already. I don't know how to do it yet. But I do fantasize about a kind of relief I imagine I would feel if I felt like what I was writing was truthful.

## instructions for tuesday

instructions for tuesday

A.

At the sound of alarm,  
open eyelids and pull back sheets.  
Reach for phone with right hand,  
and using right thumb,  
slide gray arrow across touchscreen until there is sudden silence.  
Lie back on bed with eyes open.  
Do not close.

B.

*Some word there was that murdered me.  
I would forget it fain;  
But O, it presses to my memory  
Like damned guilty deeds to sinners' minds!*

A.

Lie back on bed

B.

*Romeo—banished.*

A.

Reach for phone with right hand,  
grasp phone,  
hold phone 8 inches from face,  
enter passcode,  
and check email.

B.

*That 'banished,' that one word 'banished'*

A.

Slide right thumb across touchscreen to the left,  
tap NPR icon,  
tap small white text that reads "NEWSCAST."

B.

*'Romeo banished'*

A.  
Rest phone on bed,  
to the left of body.  
Make effort to absorb information.

B.  
*Some word there was that murdered me*

A.  
Pull back sheet and blanket,  
and swing feet off of bed to touch floor.

B.  
*That 'banished,' that one word 'banished,'*

A.  
Stand and walk four feet to mirror.

B.  
*I would forget*

A.  
Notice shape of hair.

B.  
*But O,*

A.  
Attempt to make eye contact.

B.  
*There is no end, no limit, measure, bound*

A.  
Assess.  
Walk 7 feet to bedroom door,  
turn handle, open door, exit bedroom, cross narrow hallway, enter bathroom,  
lift right hand to door handle and close bathroom door.  
Walk 3 feet to toilet,  
untie pajama pants, pull pajama pants down to ankles, sit down on toilet,  
urinate.

B.  
*I would forget it fain*

A.

While urinating, tear several squares of toilet paper from roll to your right, fold neatly.

After urinating, wipe front to back with folded toilet paper, drop toilet paper into toilet.

Stand, pull up pajama pants, re-tie drawstring, turn to face toilet, and flush with right hand.

B.

*All this is comfort*

A.

Open right door of lower cabinet with right hand, assess kitty litter.

Open left door of lower cabinet with left hand, squat in front of open doors, pull bag of litter forward with left hand.

Reach right hand into bag, take hold of plastic take-out container inside, and scoop fresh litter into box until bottom of box is fully covered.

Replace plastic take-out container inside bag with right hand, replace bag of litter to its original position with left hand, stand, close left side of cabinet with right hand, turn, and walk 2 feet to mirror above sink.

B.

*I am not I, if there be such an 'I'*

A.

Turn on cold water with right hand.

B.

*O, break, my heart! poor bankrout, break at once!*

A.

Place hands under running water.

B.

*Wolvish-ravening lamb*

A.

Turn off cold water with right hand.

B.

*Vile earth*

A.  
Use left hand to pump liquid soap into right hand.

B.  
*Blistered be thy tongue*

A.  
Rub soap between hands

C.  
*the gentle sin is this  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss*

B.  
*Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss*

C.  
*Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?*

B.  
*Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.*

C.  
*O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!  
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.*

B.  
*Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.*

C.  
*Then move not while my prayer's effect I take  
Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged.  
[Kisses her]*

B.  
*Then have my lips the sin that they have took.*

C.  
*Sin from my lips?*

A.  
Turn on cold water with right hand.

B.  
*There is no end, no limit, measure, bound*

A.  
Place hands under running water

instructions for thursday.

A.  
Lift right hand, and place four fingers on back of computer screen.  
Pull screen forward, and push down to close.

B.  
*Either my eyesight fails, or thou lookst pale.*

A.  
Push both feet against floor to slide desk chair backward.  
Pull feet toward body to realign with knees,  
place hands on armrests of desk chair,  
lean torso forward  
push down on armrests,  
and lift body to stand.  
Walk 7 feet to door,  
place left hand on edge of partially-opened bedroom door,  
pull door open,  
and walk through doorway.

B.  
*Art thou gone so?*

A.  
Walk 4 feet to bathroom,  
push open partially-open bathroom door with left hand,  
enter bathroom,  
turn 180 degrees,  
grasp bathroom door handle with right hand,  
and push bathroom door closed.

B.  
*I have forgot why I did call thee back.*

C.  
*Let me stand here till thou remember it.*

B.  
*I shall forget, to have thee still stand there,  
Rememb'ring how I love thy company.*

C.  
*And I'll still stay, to have thee still forget,*

A.  
Press right thumb against button in center of handle to lock door.  
Turn 180 degrees,  
walk 2 feet to sink.  
Turn 90 degrees to face sink.

B.  
*How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?  
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb  
And the place death, considering who thou art*

A.  
Lift eyes to mirror.

B.  
*To cease thy suit*

A.  
Attempt to make eye contact.  
Observe eyes.  
Observe purple lines beneath eyes.  
Observe unusual number of blemishes on chin and forehead.

B.  
*What lady's that, which doth enrich the hand  
Of yonder knight?*

A.  
Observe eyes.

B.  
*And I'll still stay, to have thee still forget*

A.

Reach right hand toward third shelf of toiletry stand,  
turn gaze toward third shelf of toiletry stand,  
lower gaze down to fourth shelf,  
locate dental floss with gaze,  
lower right hand to fourth shelf,  
reach for dental floss container  
and grasp with fingers of right hand.  
Bring dental floss container up to meet left hand.  
Grasp dental floss container with left hand,  
and use right thumb to pop open plastic lid.  
Grip dental floss between right thumb and index finger,  
and pull 8 inches of floss from spool.  
Wrap floss around right index finger and middle finger one time,  
catch other end of floss around small metal hook in floss container,  
pull floss toward heart until far end snaps against hook.  
Close floss container with left index finger,  
twist at center of body,  
and replace floss container on edge of fourth shelf.  
Grasp floss with left hand,  
release floss with right hand,  
run end of floss between index finger, middle finger and thumb  
until fingers reach right end of floss,  
while sliding left index finger, middle finger and thumb  
until fingers reach left end of floss.  
Wrap floss around left index finger and middle finger twice.  
Wrap floss around right index finger and middle finger once.  
Brace floss against left thumb and right index finger.  
Open mouth,  
raise upper lip by scrunching nose,  
slide floss between top front teeth  
and press to gum.

instructions for saturday.

B.

*O, pale !*

A.

When you reach the sudden waking,

keep eyelids closed.

B.

*I do remember*

A.

Rotate body 180 degrees, until stomach is flush with mattress,  
and bury face in bottom left corner of pillow.

Slide face down corner of pillow until mouth is exposed.

Press upper-half of face into pillow corner and mattress.

Reach both hands behind head,

grasp sheet,

and pull sheet forward to fully cover head.

B.

*If I departed not*

A.

Keep eyelids closed.

B.

*Myself condemned and myself excused*

A.

Keep eyelids closed

B.

*My true heart with treacherous revolt*

A.

Press upper-half of face

B.

*I beseech thee*

A.

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B.  
*Miscarried by my fault*

A.  
60  
50

B.  
*Miscarried by*

A.  
50  
49

B.  
*It strains me past the compass of my wits*

A.  
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B.

*I dreamt my lady came and found me dead  
(Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think)  
And breathed such life with kisses in my lips  
That I revived and was an emperor*

A.

60

B.

*I must hear from thee every day in the hour*

A.

59

60

B.  
*If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy*

A.  
60

B.  
*Myself condemned*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

B.  
*Things that, to hear them told*

A.  
Press upper-half of face  
60

B.  
*Miscarried by my fault*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

B.  
*And bear this work of heaven with patience*

A.  
Keep eyelids closed

instructions for sunday.

A.  
With left hand,  
rest phone on left side of body.  
Fold hands in lap  
Allow spine to sink  
Allow eyes to lose focus  
Sit motionless with feet together, heels touching bed, knees one inch apart.

C.  
*But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?*

*It is the East, and Juliet is the sun !  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
Who is already sick and pale with grief  
That thou her maid art far more fair than she.  
Be not her maid, since she is envious.  
Her vestal livery is but sick and green,  
And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off.  
It is my lady ; O it is my love!*

A.  
heels touching bed

C.  
*O that she knew she were !*

A.  
Sit motionless with feet together

C.  
*She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that ?  
Her eye discourses ; I will answer it.  
I am too bold ; 'tis not to me she speaks.*

A.  
heels touching bed

C.  
*Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,  
having some business, do entreat her eyes  
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.*

A.  
one inch apart

C.  
*What if her eyes were there, they in her head ?*

A.  
Sit motionless

C.  
*The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars  
As daylight doth a lamp ; her eyes in heaven  
Would through the airy region stream so bright*

*That birds would sing and think it were not night.  
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand !  
O that I were a glove upon that hand,*

A.  
heels touching

C.  
*That I might touch that cheek !*

A.  
knees one inch

C.  
*She speaks.  
O, speak again bright angel.*

A.  
Sit motionless with feet together.

## 381 Bleecker

### A Note About Casting:

In the scenes that take place from 1978-1990, Meg, Ellen and Henry are played by actors in their mid/late 20s. In 2015, Meg and Ellen are played by actors in their mid-50s/early 60s, and David is played by an actor in his early 20s.

### An informal/in-process note about transitions:

Having just put *381 Bleecker* on its feet for the first time last month, I'm still in the process of figuring out how I want to score some of the discoveries we made about transitions in the script.

### For the moment, some general notes:

My instinct is that the transitions in this play want to be an actor-driven event (i.e. just as the members of this family help each other deal with clothing and objects during the scenes, they also do so between them).

Although some degree of stylization may be necessary, I think the play invites the simple actions of characters changing clothes and rearranging furniture in front of us to perform important storytelling work. I think some of the poetry lies in allowing the changing of a shirt to take however much time and stillness it takes to change a shirt.

There's a lot of room to play with how and when the younger and older bodies of the characters inhabit the apartment simultaneously. That said, it's essential that they do cross paths physically throughout the play at various points, without directly acknowledging each other's presence. The shifts between the past and the present are a bleed more than a jump.

Scene One.

*June, 2015. Mid-afternoon.*

*A third-floor apartment at 381 Bleecker Street.*

*At the far end of the kitchen, a brash summer light floods in through two large windows, which have been flung open and stripped of their curtains. The counter is bare, save the pile of dirty dishes beside the sink. On the kitchen table, there is an empty Kleenex box, an unplugged toaster, a pair of scissors, two permanent markers, and a nearly empty roll of packing tape. The kitchen opens up into a large living room with a beautiful, old wood floor. Four full-length mirrors hang side-by-side at one end of the room, to create a sliver of a dance studio. On one wall, an entire closet-worth of garments is strewn across a queen-sized mattress and box spring, still on their hangers. On the other, nineteen small moving boxes have been shoved together in a haphazard pile. An open doorway leads off-stage to the bathroom and the bedroom. MEG, 61, is tearing clothes off their hangers, rolling them up, and shoving them into an open moving box at a frantic rate—occasionally stopping for five seconds to waffle over whether to toss something on the Goodwill pile at her feet. When the box is full, she dashes to the kitchen table, grabs a marker, runs back, scribbles on the top flap, grabs an unfolded box, throws it down, runs to the table, grabs the packing tape, runs back to the box, shoves the bottom flaps into place, holds it between her legs, and yanks a piece of tape off the roll. A pathetic curl of cardboard comes off in her hand—the tape is finished. She looks around, makes a panicked gesture, and starts to step off the un-taped box. The buzzer rings. Meg freezes somewhere between wild determination and defeat. She grabs an empty shopping bag, and attempts to shove a small pile of odds and ends off the mattress, and into the bag. The buzzer rings again. Meg gives up, drops the bag on the floor, and runs to the buzzer.*

MEG (*into the intercom*). Hi! Is that you?

ELLEN (*through the intercom*). Yes! It's us!

*Meg presses her finger on the intercom. She turns around in a frenzy, beholds the chaos of the apartment. No time to do anything about it now. She brings her hands to her sweaty, frizzing hair, pulls out the chopstick securing her bun, smoothes everything as best she can, and twists it back up. She wipes the sweat off her face with her shirt, looks around one more time, looks back at the door, and centers herself like a seasoned performer, about to step onstage. Her ability to ground herself with one breath is a little bit remarkable to behold. She stands very still, keeping her gaze on the door. The sound of footsteps in the hallway grows louder, as we hear Ellen's muffled voice say, "It's the one at the end." The footsteps arrive at the door. There is a little pause, followed by a tentative knock. Meg takes another breath, and crosses swiftly to open the door. ELLEN, 55, and DAVID, 23, are standing side-by-side in the cramped hallway.*

MEG. Hiii!!!!

ELLEN (*overlapping*). Hiiii!!!!

*Meg and Ellen give each other an awkward, enthusiastic hug.*

ELLEN. Sorry for the bad estimate/ we—

MEG (*to David*). Hiiii!!

*Meg goes to hug David, but Ellen is in the way. The space in the hallway is too narrow for her to step aside.*

MEG. Oh it's—oh—here—why don't I let you guys come in—

*Meg tries to back up, but almost trips on two bags for Goodwill that are propped near the door.*

ELLEN. It took/ us—

MEG. Oh—here—hold on—sorry—

*She scoots back and moves the bags out of the way.*

MEG. Come on in!

ELLEN. It took us fifteen minutes to—

*Ellen stops and blanches at the sight of the moving boxes.*

MEG (*quickly*). It's not all for the car—

ELLEN. Oh! Thank God. We have room for about a third of that!

*Beat. A stricken expression grips Meg's face, but she tries to recover quickly.*

MEG. Whoa. Yeah. Wow. Ok. I guess I was over-estimating.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN (*off Meg's look*). How many were you planning to take?

MEG. I . . . honestly, I was gonna do another purge this morning, but—I've been packing since Monday, but I um . . . I got to the closet in my bedroom this morning—(*quickly*) that was all I had left—and I uh—I just—I underestimated how much stuff I had packed in there.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Well . . . um . . . do you wanna get a storage locker?

MEG. Umm . . . you know . . . . . *(She looks at the boxes, three-quarters of which are filled with things she can't bear to give away)* I . . . am just gonna do . . . another purge—*(quickly)* we're not planning to leave till tomorrow, right?

ELLEN. No . . .

MEG *(still looking at the boxes)*. Great, then . . . I am just—gonna do another purge . . . and if there's still boxes left over, um . . .

ELLEN. Why don't you just get a storage locker?

MEG. I looked at the rates, and it's . . . uh . . . it would be a stupid waste of money right now.

*Ellen represses the urge to offer to pay for it, and nods instead.*

ELLEN. Okay. Um . . . how can we help you? *(Realizing that this negotiation aborted Meg and David's greeting)* Oh! David! Say hi!

DAVID. Hi.

MEG. Hi! *(She gives him a hug. Tiny awkward beat.)* You're so—bearded!

ELLEN. He's going for Hemmingway.

DAVID *(to Meg)*. I'm not going for Hemmingway.

MEG. Too short for Hemmingway. But it looks very . . . *(Making a gesture of how much he's grown)* You're a—man-person.

DAVID. I am a man-person.

ELLEN. You're the man-person we're counting on to help us carry all this stuff down to the car.

DAVID. Yeah—tomorrow morning, right?

ELLEN. You know honey . . . I'm having second thoughts about you hanging out with Karim tonight.

DAVID. I can be up as early as you want—

ELLEN. Yeah but sweetie—we're gonna have to get all the furniture down to the curb—

MEG. No no no—the craigslist people will do that tomorrow—

ELLEN. I know, I just—if we're gonna have to make a whole other trip to Goodwill/ I—

MEG. I'm gonna plow through it tonight—

ELLEN. Yes, I—Okay. I just . . . the janitors at Children's Hospital are holding a strike vote on Monday, so I just . . . I *really* don't want the day to get away from us and get home at midnight.

DAVID. I *promise* I will be up.

MEG. I'm gonna get through it all tonight. I'm so sorry it's— . . . I really did get cracking as soon as I could, I just . . . they gave me such short notice.

ELLEN. I meant to ask you—I mean—I know it's a little late, but—Are you *sure* they have a right to kick you out?

MEG. He's allowed to do it is as long as he's "renovating it for a family member"—

ELLEN. But can't you prove that/ he's—?

MEG. As long as they stay for six months, he can sell it at market value.

ELLEN (*with authority*). But from a legal standpoint—

MEG. I know. I know. I had a friend's lawyer look at it, and—there's nothing I can do. I mean . . . unless I wanna pay more than triple. It's happening to a bunch of people. I just—got caught with my back against the wall cuz of the timing. (*Ellen gives her an empathic look. Quietly, sincerely*) I know I said it already, but . . . I appreciate this . . . So Much.

ELLEN (*Also sincerely*). Of course. (*Tiny beat.*) I still can't *believe* they don't pay adjuncts through the summer. They're certainly not the only private university that robs its employees blind, but that's just absurd.

MEG. . . . it's just the tip of the iceberg.

ELLEN. How much is the market value?

MEG. Oh—more than I would ever—

ELLEN. No, I know—I just want *him* to hear it. He wants to move here.

MEG. Oh I mean. There's places to live besides this neighborhood . . .

ELLEN. But here?

MEG. The guy next door pays pay thirty-six hundred.

ELLEN (*to David*). For this one room. (*In self-defense*) I want him to move to New York—I've just been trying to drive home how crazy it's gotten—

MEG. You'll live with roommates, though. You'll be fine!

ELLEN (*suddenly a little tense and pointed*). Yes, it's just—not a city you want to move to until you have a job.

*Meg takes the cue, and drops it.*

MEG. Yeah. (*Tiny beat.*) Are you guys hungry? I was thinking we could order a pizza or something. Or—are you gonna eat with your friend?

DAVID. No I think I'm gonna meet up with him later.

ELLEN. He knows we're counting on his brawniness.

DAVID. I will be awake and brawny at dawn.

MEG. Oh I can help the craigslist people—you should sleep! I got the bookshelf down by myself this morning.

ELLEN (*wistfully*). God—you must be in great shape . . .

MEG. I mean . . . it's part of my job.

ELLEN. Oh I know, I just. Does teaching involve as much dancing as choreography?

MEG. Oh. Definitely not. But—enough.

ELLEN. Well . . . maybe having you around this summer will get me—tapping my toes!  
. . .

*Meg forces an obliging little laugh at the joke. Tiny beat.*

MEG. . . . Can I get you guys something to drink?

ELLEN. I actually need to use your bathroom. I forgot I was holding it!

*Ellen walks off-stage to the bathroom—she knows right where it is.*

MEG. You want something? I'm a little pared down, but I've got seltzer and OJ.

DAVID. I'll have some seltzer. I can also run out and grab some stuff.

MEG. Oh—sure!—if you want . . .

*Ellen walks back into the room.*

ELLEN. You're out of toilet paper.

DAVID. I was just gonna run to the store. You/ want—

ELLEN. Oh that would be great. Let me give you some money.

*She crosses to her purse.*

DAVID. Is it cool if I get us a six-pack for dinner? I can get 312 if they have it.

*Ellen stiffens, but instantly tries to act casual.*

ELLEN. Oh. Um. Why don't you just grab a sparkling lemonade or something?

DAVID. Okay . . . I mean—I can get both. 312 was that beer you liked at Jack's house.

MEG. You saw Jack?

ELLEN. You sound shocked.

MEG. No I. I meant—how's he doing?

ELLEN. He's good. *(Tiny beat.)* We had dinner at their place the day after Christmas. With Kathy and Thomas and Dad and the whole gang. Everyone asked about you.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. His kids must be big.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Everyone's are. (*Beat.*) Why don't we order the pizza? I'm pretty sure I'll be hungry by the time it gets here.

DAVID. I can go pick it up if there's a place in the neighborhood.

MEG. Yeah there's a place called Bleecker Street Pizza down four blocks.

ELLEN (*Her face lights up with a sudden memory*). Oh is that the place with the free breadsticks?

MEG. ...free breadsticks?

ELLEN. The free breadsticks at midnight? With the statue out front. (*How do you not remember?*) We went there every night the summer I lived here.

DAVID (*what??*). When did *you* live here?

*Meg and Ellen make a half-second of eye contact. Meg looks away quickly, walks over to the couch as casually as possible, and starts sorting through the clothing. She makes a great effort to extricate herself immediately, without making her sudden departure from the conversation seem hostile or noteworthy.*

*Beat.*

*The air in the room has changed drastically.*

*Beat.*

ELLEN (*working hard to make her voice and her face casual*). So I'll go get the pizza. Is cheese alright with everyone?

DAVID. I can get it—

ELLEN (*quickly*). I just need to stretch my legs. Cheese okay with you?

DAVID. Yeah that's fine.

ELLEN (*upping the effort*). Meg, that's alright with you?

MEG (*matching the effort*). Yeah that sounds great.

ELLEN. (*still the effort*). Okay. Great. I'll be back.

*She exits.*

*Meg continues to concentrate intently on the clothes for a beat. Her body relaxes significantly as soon as Ellen's footsteps disappear down the hallway. She turns to David.*

MEG (*in a more laid-back voice than we've heard, rolling her eyes a little*). You should definitely go out with your friend. I just need to throw some stuff out. You should have fun!

DAVID. You sure? I can stay if you/ ne—

MEG. No! You should go run around! You have a friend in the city?

DAVID. Yeah, my buddy Karim lives in Ridgewood. There's a poet I really like doing a thing at—Bowery Poetry Club? We're gonna try to get in.

MEG. Who's the poet?

DAVID (*in a tone that forgives her for not knowing who it is*). Tao Lin?

MEG. Oh yeah!—I—a woman I teach with at NYU was talking about putting his stuff in a piece—

DAVID (*intrigued*). In a dance piece?

MEG. Yeah! I read one of them, it's like . . . (*intrigued by this*) taking a bath at room temperature . . .

DAVID (*surprised and delighted*). Yeah! Kind of . . .

MEG. So is poetry your thing now?

DAVID. No I'm still doing short stories . . . I like reading it, I just... (*Dryly*) The only poems I've ever written have been carefully destroyed. You know. For—posterity.

MEG. You're working on your legacy?

DAVID. Yeah well . . . so far my autobiography only has the chapter where I live at home with my mother.

MEG. That's a great place to start it! They *all* start someplace boring before the adventure begins.

DAVID. I wanna just move here and bartend or something while I figure it out, but she wants me to get . . . like (*choosing his words carefully*) some full-time thing with a retirement account before I even think about it.

MEG. Oh that's ridiculous.

DAVID (*still careful*). I mean I get that it's really expensive— . . .

*Tiny beat.*

MEG (*catching his sudden gingeriness*). I guess I'm Cautionary Tale Number One, huh?

DAVID. What?—Oh . . . No . . . I—

MEG. David, you're a terrible liar.

DAVID. I didn't mean—

MEG. It's a good thing. (*Tiny beat.*) I wouldn't get into *poker* . . . . (*With an edge*) If you didn't look so much like a McCourtney, I'd think your mom got you from the elf-people. (*Half-beat*) I didn't mean to put you on the spot, I just . . . (*Half-beat*) This apartment was four-hundred dollars a month when I moved here in 1976, and I . . . (*Meg stops talking to shove a snarl of feelings back down where they came from. Beat. With a sudden weight*) David, don't be scared to move here because I don't have a savings account or a job that pays me enough to live on. (*Sharper edge*) I am not a good example. And your mother knows that.

*Beat.*

DAVID. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—

MEG (*suddenly ashamed for being inappropriate*). No—I'm sorry—I—I'm—holding you hostage here—

DAVID. No, I—

MEG (*be free!*). You sounded like you wanted to walk around before—you should go!

DAVID. No, I'm fine! (*She looks at him skeptically.*) I actually . . . just wanted cigarettes.

MEG (*with hope*). Your Mom knows?

DAVID. NO—please don't tell her.

*Meg gives David a funny smirk. She reaches into the empty Kleenex box on the table, and pulls out a half-full pack of cigarettes.*

MEG. I hid these when you guys called from the car. (*She hands one to David and pulls one out for herself.*) Over by the window, though, or we'll get busted.

*They move over to the window.*

*David lights Meg's cigarette, then his own.*

*Inhale.*

*Exhale.*

*Inhale*

*They share a look of: Goddamn it, it's good to take the edge off.*

*They smoke.*

*After a beat:*

I made my first hundred dollars in New York sticking *beads on a chandelier*. My friend Lenny—I'd never met him—this guy who looks like Rudolph Nureyev comes up to me after a dance class, and tells me his boyfriend has promised a guy thirteen hand-beaded chandeliers by midnight on Tuesday and could I come over, they were pulling an all-nighter with twenty-five of their closest friends, there'd be free coke till dawn and a cash prize at the end, whaddya say.

DAVID. Did you get it done?

*She gives him a mischievous yes with her eyebrows as she inhales.*

*The cigarettes have slowed down all the atoms in the room, their spinning now synched to the suspension and release of the smoke.*

MEG (*getting more and more expansive as she goes*). You'll make thirty friends in your first six months here. And each of the friends will have a friend, who's gotta friend, with some weird fuckin' gig they can hook you up with. You'll be at a poetry reading! . . . and you'll meet some guy who needs help handing out flyers for . . . a salon that does cat pedicures! . . . so you'll go to hand out the thing, and right before lunch, you'll give one to a girl, and the *girl'll* ask if you can . . . fill in at her temp job so she can . . . meet up with some married man for the rest of the afternoon! . . . and when you get to the *temp job*, her boss will tell you to run this package down to Fulton Street as fast as you possibly can, run someone over, kill a pigeon if you have to, and you'll get so turned around at Fulton Street, you won't even remember your own name . . . and by the end of the day, you'll somehow end up with a steady job . . . restocking lobster at the fish market in the Bronx!

*Half-beat.*

DAVID (*suddenly brave enough to go there*). Is that what *you're* gonna do?

*Half-beat.*

*Meg makes a silent expression: touché.  
She falls inward for a brief moment, alone with her cigarette.*

MEG. At my age . . .

*Something in her face plummets.  
She takes a long, sharp drag.*

It's different at my age.

*Half-beat.*

But you . . . . . *(with a little bit of wonder)* At your age, it just—happens!

*Half-beat.*

Everything just . . . happens.

*She gives him a warm, complicated smile, holding his gaze for a second, then looks away, and pulls on her cigarette. David busies himself with his own.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Two.

*October, 1978. A bright, New-York-Autumn afternoon.*

*Meg's place.*

*Henry, 22, is all dressed up, standing on one of the chairs, putting the finishing touches on his masterpiece: a sign that says "Happy Opening Night! Break a leg Meg!" in giant, glittery letters. There is a sparkly gold tablecloth on the kitchen table, a bottle of cheap champagne, a box of pastries, and a huge bouquet of pink Alstroemerias. The cover of the record player is open. The room is filled with balloons. Henry has hung up all of the letters, except for the word "Meg," and the exclamation point. There is the sound of the key in the lock. Henry panics. The door cracks open.*

HENRY. WAIT!

*Meg, age 24, gives a terrified, startled gasp.*

HENRY. It's me!/ Don't move a muscle—!

MEG. Jesus, Henry.

HENRY. Keep the door/ closed!

MEG. You scared the shit out of me—

HENRY. Please, just give me one sec—!

*He scrambles around, realizes the moment will pass if he takes the time to hang up the remaining letters. He races to the record player, drops the needle, races back to where he was, grabs the letters, presses his back against the wall in the place where the word “Meg” is supposed to be, and holds them up in front of his chest, fanning them out like a giant deck of cards—all in less than 7 seconds. An upbeat club hit blasts into the room.*

HENRY. Okay! Come in!

*Meg opens the door, and walks in wearing her rehearsal clothes and a fall jacket. As soon as she sees the decorations, her whole face falls.*

HENRY (*like an elated MC*). Meg McCourtneeeey!!!!

*He sees her face, and abruptly drops his party mood.*

HENRY (*confused and concerned*). What?

*Meg gives a dejected sigh, and puts down her bag. Henry scrambles to turn off the music.*

HENRY. What happened?

MEG. Lenny just fucked up his ankle during the run-through.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. Can he dance?

MEG. He can't shift his weight to it. Half the piece has him on his right leg.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. What are you gonna do?

MEG. Susanna's never gonna to hire me again. *No one* is.

HENRY (*weakly*). Dancers get injured . . .

MEG. I told her I'd have understudies. But Lenny and Steve would only do it for \$300, and that was my whole stipend. I couldn't convince someone to spend 6 weeks rehearsing a piece they're never gonna perform, and not pay them.

HENRY. What if *you* did it?

MEG. It's all weight-balancing. Steve's 6'2" and fucking huge.

*She gestures to her biceps.*

HENRY (*mischievous*). Remind me where he lives?

MEG (*not amused*). Your boyfriend just moved here!

HENRY. Oh I'll be bringing him too.

MEG (*outraged at his lightheartedness*). You think this is *funny*?! I'm about to call Cynthia and tell her I don't have a piece, six hours before curtain! *Who* is gonna work with me after that?

HENRY. Honey, people fuck up—

MEG. Not when no one knows who they are! I cannot believe this is happening. (*Beat. Henry fumbles for the right thing to say.*) I just walked back here, past all the stores on West 4th . . . and I realized that every time I look in a window, I have this feeling like . . . of absolute contentment . . . Because I feel so certain that one day, I'll be on the other side of the glass, whatever it is. I don't mind at all that I can't afford anything in the stores, because one day I will, and it's romantic to sit in the audience at the Joyce, because it's so clear that one day, I will see my work on that stage . . . and when people are kissing in their houses, and they've left the light on, it's all . . . *so* enchanting to walk by—because eventually, it'll be mine.

(*Beat.*)

I could wind up living in this apartment . . . *forever*—without *once* looking at something I made, and thinking: that was what I wanted to do.

(*Beat.*)

HENRY. You're stubborn . . . You're obsessive . . . You got a pretty face and a heart 'o gold. And you're a bossy pain in my ass. If that doesn't prophesize victory, I don't know what does. (*Half-beat.*) And you're 24.

*Meg gives a heavy sigh of acceptance.*

MEG. I should call Susanna. I'm gonna kill myself after I hang up the phone.

HENRY. Bill's friend has a drag show tonight on the Bowery. I know it's a paltry substitute, but he said last time she traded underpants with an audience member . . .

MEG. I have to at least show my face at The Kitchen.

HENRY. Your show's at 8. No self-respecting queen is gonna start before 10. We'll go to The Kitchen, mingle for 20 minutes so they remember your face, then sneak out and drown our sorrows in bubbles.

MEG. Okay.

*She stands up with resolve to cross to the phone.*

*(with dread)* Fuck.

*The phone rings. Meg walks over and picks it up.*

MEG. Hello?

[...]

Hey. How's it feeling?

[...]

*(She suddenly sounds elated)* What? Have you tried?

[...]

You mean after he throws you forward?

[...]

Yes! Yes—I'll be there in 30 minutes! Just keep it elevated!

[...]

Okay! Yes!

*(overlapping with his goodbye)* Okay—Bye!

*She hangs up.*

MEG. He can do it!

HENRY. I KNEW IT! *(Faking a cheerleader routine)* WE! Are dynamite, don't mess with dynamite! *(Meg starts running around getting her stuff together.)* Cuz when you mess with dynamite it goes tick, tick, tick, tick—BOOM dynamite! Boom-boom dynamite! Hold on, wait a minute, put a little BOOM in it!

*He stops and looks at Meg.*

HENRY. The Gods have spoken.

*He crosses himself performatively—half-joking, but also with utter sincerity—turning the kiss of his hand into a kiss he blows to her—then runs over to the record player, and turns the music back on at full volume.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Three.

*April, 1979.*

*Meg's place.*

*Ellen is in jeans and a t-shirt. Her suitcase is pushed into a corner, with a spring jacket laid across the top. She is seated on the kitchen table. Henry and Meg are up in the open space, recreating a terrible dance performance. Meg, in leggings and an off-the-shoulder top, moves with noticeable technique and grace. Henry, in jeans and a bright yellow Olivia Newton-John t-shirt, moves like a melodramatic robot. They perform two ludicrous moves with poker faces when:*

MEG. No! It's—

*They continue to dance through the following:*

HENRY. Gunhilde, your face isn't bleak/ enough

MEG. No! It's—/ wait—

HENRY. You're interrupting my desolate Nordic silence—

MEG. You skipped the—don't you remember the:

*Meg performs the absurd move that Henry's left out. Henry gasps.*

HENRY. Mea culpa, mea cupla, mea maxima culpa!

*They rush back into beginning places.*

MEG (*a count that's so slow it's both excruciating and fantastic*). And 1 . . . 2 . . . and 3 . . . and weird squat. (*Very suddenly and loudly*) SIDEWAYS GLANCE!

*They collapse into giggles.*

ELLEN. What was this from?

MEG. Henry got sent to review this piece/. . . tha—

HENRY. Some undiscovered GENIUS—

MEG. Ell, if you saw this thing—

HENRY. Meg, if you only had ONE PIECE like that/ in you—

MEG. It was literally the worst thing/ I've ever seen—

HENRY (*a tease that's really an ego-booster*). You know just because they put you on the front page of *The Voice* doesn't/ mean you can just—

MEG (*To Henry*). Ellen wouldn't have stayed! *Ellen* would have had the good sense to pick up her purse and do something better with her day.

ELLEN. What was it supposed to be?

HENRY. This company downtown did a *four-hour* dance adaptation of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*—

MEG. Which you can't even sit through in the play version—

HENRY (*with great drama*). But in the abstract language of the *body*—

*He performs another move.*

MEG. It's this horribly bleak . . . Norwegian . . ./ love—

HENRY (*dropping the act abruptly*). Why are we subjecting her to this? (*plopping down next to her on the table*) Ellie, how's school? I want the dirt.

ELLEN. I got a D on my public policy mid-term.

MEG. *You?*

ELLEN. The maintenance workers at U of C went on strike the week before, and it seemed pretty bullshit to cross picket lines for an essay.

MEG. You're getting serious about that thing.

HENRY. I heard she has a cute field organizer.

ELLEN. I wouldn't get multiple charges on my permanent record to *impress* someone!

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. You got arrested?

ELLEN. Don't say anything to Kathy or Pat or anybody. I haven't told Mom and Dad.

MEG. You're talking about civil disobedience, right?

ELLEN. They added unruly conduct because I kept chanting when I was already in handcuffs. Which is ludicrous, by the way. I have a court date in June.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. You should tell them.

ELLEN. Dad'll hit the roof! I'm over 18—they don't have to know.

HENRY. Why does he get to bully you? You put your money where your mouth is. I'm serious, El—not many people do that anymore. (*Beat.*) If you tell 'em at Christmas, me and Meg'll back you up.

ELLEN. You'll come home for Christmas?

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. I'll bring Bill. Mom and Dad and Jack'll be so busy squirming—your righteous law-breaking will go in one ear and out the other.

ELLEN. You'd really do that?

HENRY. I'm already seeing it like a da Vinci painting. Dad will preside in the center, and never lift his eyes from his plate . . . Mom will don the visage of a Catholic martyr to his right . . . Jack will lurk at the end, looking . . . terrified and constipated . . . Thomas will do whatever he thinks will earn Jack's approval . . . Pat will be very polite—bewildered, but polite . . . and Kathy will be . . . Kathy will be as curious, naïve and cheery as ever!

ELLEN. What, and then someone gets crucified after dessert?

MEG. We'll just sit at the kid's table if it goes poorly.

HENRY. I've always thought the seating arrangements at family gathering should be based on who voted for Nixon anyway.  
*(He lifts his arms in a Nixon victory sign, and takes a deep, vigorous breath.)* Boys: she's back! I'm in the holiday spirit already!

MEG. What time is your thing with Bill again?

HENRY *(To Ellen)*. We're taking the puppy for his booster shots. Speaking of which, if you'd like to be his Godmother, I'm demoting Meg.

MEG. He ruined my only good piece of furniture and all of my shoes!

HENRY. On second thought, you're both disqualified. I refuse to entrust my puppy to a Bolshevnik agent who's wanted by the state.

ELLEN. There's a good chance "the state" is gonna move my court date to the time I'm home this summer. I can deal with telling Dad, but not when I'm living there . . .

HENRY. Stay here! You could live with Meg!

ELLEN. Meg, would that—?

HENRY. She won't make you sleep on the floor of the dance studio. I owe her a couch.

*Tiniest of hesitations.*

MEG. Of course! *(Tiny beat.)* He's been saying he'll replace it since Felix pulled out the stuffing—maybe you can stage a sit-in until he takes action.

HENRY. Oh please: I did you a *favor*. I've never seen someone so happy to lose a living room and gain a wall of mirrors in its place. *(The buzzer rings.)* Speak of the devil! The banished puppy has arrived! *(Into the intercom)* Babe is that you?

BILL'S VOICE *(on the intercom)*. It depends on what you look like.

HENRY *(Into the intercom)*. I'm 5'11", strawberry-blond, and on my way down the stairs. *(Winks at Meg and Ellen)* See you girls tonight.

*He shuts the door behind him.*

*Half-beat.*

MEG. So—whaddyou wanna do? There's a great used bookstore a couple blocks from here.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Is that really okay with you? Me staying here? I don't wanna—

MEG (*a genuine welcome*). Of course!

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. (*smiling*) Promise not to tell Henry?

MEG. What?

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I had sex with that field organizer on the way home from jail.

*Lights shift.*

Scene Four.

*June, 2015. Later that evening.*

*The room is in the same configuration as in Scene One, with the addition of an empty pizza box and three empty beer bottles on the kitchen table. Meg and Ellen are sifting through the remaining clothes on the mattress. Each article holds the allure of an exquisite thrift store find—culled by a discerning eye over decades of patient browsing. Ellen is holding a handful of garments up to her chest by the hangers. There is a little pile of clothes on the floor to her right, and a larger one to her left.*

*Ellen holds up an emerald silk blouse.*

MEG. Keep.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her left, revealing the beige turtleneck behind it.*

MEG (*tiny beat*). Toss it.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her right, revealing a billowy white button-down.*

MEG (*emphatically*). Keep.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her left, revealing a burgundy pashmina.*

MEG. Uhh . . . y— . . . uh . . . you can toss it.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her right, revealing a black cashmere sweater.*

MEG. Keep.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her left, revealing a flow-y dark purple shawl-of-sorts.*

MEG. Keep.

*Ellen throws it on the pile to her left, holds up a grey asymmetrical jacket.*

MEG (*emphatically*). Keep.

*Ellen heaves a sigh.*

MEG (*quickly*). I know, I know. These are the clothes I'm gonna keep. The other ones . . . These are the ones I wear all the time.

ELLEN. I don't wanna twist your arm, I just—

MEG (*Pointing to a box that is the same size as the others, but noticeably more worn, if you take a good look at it*). That whole box can go. Here—hand me/ the—

ELLEN. This one?—

MEG. Yeah. Or actually—(*There's no room for the box to go on the floor next to Meg.*) Here. Hang on. Let's just put it on the table. (*She turns to see the beer bottles.*) Oh. Wait. Lemme just move these.

*Ellen stands there holding the box, awkwardly straddling the piles of stuff on the floor, as Meg grabs the bottles. She and Ellen make eye contact as she moves out of the way with the bottles in her hands. Ellen puts the box on the table. Meg puts the bottles on the counter.*

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I'm sorry I was weird about the beer before. I just, I wasn't sure if you were drinking these days.

MEG. Oh. Yeah. I mean. Just a little bit once in awhile. It was fine though.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Good.

*Half-beat.*

MEG (*with renewed vigor*). Ok: we're gonna dump these out, I'm gonna tear through 'em. Go grab that one, we'll start an assembly line! It's happening!

*Ellen springs toward the nearest unopened box. Meg rips open the flaps of the box on the table, preparing to flip it over and dump out all the contents, but freezes suddenly as she registers what's inside it. She shoves the flaps of the box closed again quickly.*

ELLEN. What?

MEG. I need to keep this one. Sorry—

ELLEN. *Meg!*—

MEG. This is the only/ one, I'm sorry!—

ELLEN. I'm sorry I can't pay for a storage locker!/  
or—

MEG. I'm not asking you to!—

ELLEN. If I had the money right now/ I'd help you pay for an apartment!—

MEG (*sudden urgency, pleading*). We can throw everything else out! Honestly! Throw it out!

*Meg holds onto the box more protectively than she means to.*

*Beat.*

ELLEN. What is it?

MEG (*dismissive*). It's stuff I saved up. (*Half-beat. Emphatically*) I'm sorry. We can put all this stuff on the give-away pile. (*She strides over to the "keep" pile of clothes, scoops them up, and dumps them on the give-away pile.*)

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I'm sorry I can't help you more.

MEG. It's not your fault.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I don't want you to/ think—

MEG. Ellen, it's—you're already—it's fine.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I had to pay the last two years of David's tuition on my own. Otherwise, I would—

MEG. Are you serious? Michael wouldn't pay?

ELLEN. It's a long story/ I—

MEG. Can't you sue'im?

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN (*ruefully*). I let him have it.

MEG. You volunteered?

ELLEN. Things got so—fucked-up—when he moved right in with Nadja/ that

MEG. He moved right in with her?

ELLEN. Oh. From my house to hers.

MEG. Jesus, Ellen.

*Meg sits.*

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. He lost his job cuz of me.

MEG. You got'im fired?

*Ellen sits.*

ELLEN. We're in the sa—We *were* in the same department. You can't . . . run a labor negotiation with two people who can't figure out how to talk to each other. It's a little redundant.

MEG. Did your boss know about the affair?

ELLEN. He didn't give a shit about the affair. I have seniority.

MEG (*fuck him*). He lost his own job.

ELLEN. I've spent the last . . . *three decades* warning people about contracts. (*Beat.*) I know it sounds insane, but . . . . We worked together in that building for sixteen years. I walked into his office right after, and I found him . . . (*the image is still a stab in her chest*)—he was sobbing at his desk, . . . and I just remembered what it felt like to be his best friend for a second. (*Half-beat.*) I said I'd cover the tuition until he found a job. Signed it into the agreement. (*Half-beat.*) He leaves the union, turns around, has Nadja support him for a full two years so he can hold me to it.

MEG. When we get to Boston, I'm gonna break in through his bathroom window, and replace all his shampoo bottles with *Nair*. And then I'm gonna pee on every piece of his couch, and disappear.

ELLEN. I don't even know if they have a couch! For all I know, the three of them . . . cook meth when David's over there. Or they . . . study Latin. I don't want him to feel *scrutinized*, we just . . . We could live on two sides of the Berlin Wall.

MEG. Fuck everything. You raised a great kid.

ELLEN. I did everything I said I wouldn't do.

MEG. So does everyone.

*Ellen shakes her head.*

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

ELLEN (*quieter*). He needed his wisdom teeth out the spring they got married? And it's part of the agreement, Michael pays the dental. But because it's lumped in with tuition and fees, he drags me through four months of emails refusing to pay—meanwhile, I'm digging into my retirement—I'm not gonna pull him outta school his junior year—And I couldn't just *cave* on every *single thing* at the same time he's blowing—I don't even know the number, on—*table* arrangements, and refusing to look for a job . . . . And by the time he fucking agreed . . . the teeth had been in so long, it got infected. (*Her face flinches with a paroxysm of guilt at the memory*) So I watched my kid—sit there for three weeks—with his eyes welling up every time he ate yogurt—with his cheeks puffed up like this.



MEG (*quietly*). No I meant the second time.

*Meg turns her back and begins clearing the last of the clothing off the mattress.*

*Ellen stands there, trying to find something to busy herself with.*

*She folds a stray garment hanging over a chair that doesn't really need to be folded. She cleans up a used paper napkin.*

*Meg keeps clearing the clothes.*

*Ellen looks for something else to do.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Five.

*A Sunday in October 1983. Early afternoon.*

*Henry is choosing out black garments from among the clothes strewn across the mattress. He and Meg are in a women's boutique on East 7<sup>th</sup>, standing amongst the clothing racks at the back of the store. Henry is in a black suit. Meg is wearing a black pencil skirt with the tags on, and a bra.*

HENRY. Hold up the v-neck.

*Meg slips the v-neck off of its hanger with great care.*

MEG (*gently*). Who was the woman who read that Emily Dickinson poem?

HENRY. Morry's cousin. She flew in when Ron got hospitalized last month.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. How's he doing?

HENRY. Morry? We just went to Ron's funeral.

MEG. No, I—I meant how's he doing physically.

HENRY. He hasn't said anything. I mean. If there was . . . I don't think I'd be the first to know . . . but—

MEG. Lenny didn't tell me for six months. (*Half-beat.*) I mean. I'm not his best friend. (*Half-beat.*) But we see each other every week.

HENRY. Careful, Meggie. That skirt makes everything you say sound competitive.

MEG. I don't think he told *anyone!*

HENRY. Well, sweetheart—that's his prerogative.

MEG. It's one thing if you don't want to sound an alarm over a swollen lymph node, but . . .

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. Who?

MEG. Lenny.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. But what?

*Half-beat.*

MEG. There are people who love him who would have wanted to know.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. Try the blazer.

MEG. I'm not in the mood for this.

HENRY. You've worn this schmadda to three funerals in a row.

MEG. It's *schmatta*. You sound like Al Pacino.

HENRY. Well excuse me, Belle Barth. If we set aside my inadequate Yiddish, we're still left with the fact that you've been cloaking yourself in a dishrag.

MEG. Ron is looking down on me right now, shopping thirty minutes after his/ mass.

HENRY. Ron is looking down because he wants to know if our Grandma wore that sweater to keep warm in *steerage*.

*Meg swallows the lump in her throat before it even rises.*

MEG. Nah. (*Tiny beat.*) Ron would have said something funny.

HENRY. Ouch.

*Henry throws a blazer at her. She tries it on.*

MEG. Does Morry have someone to stay with him tonight?

HENRY. He wanted to be alone. Bill and I are bringing dinner Friday if you wanna join.

*Meg buttons the last button on the blazer. To say it looks matronly is putting it mildly. Henry lets a weightless giggle escape.*

HENRY (*with immense gravity and aplomb, in an impeccable British accent*).  
“The Right Honorable Lady Thatcher approaches the coffin of Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington.”

MEG (*impersonating the Iron Lady with impressive accuracy and commitment*). The lady’s not for turning.

HENRY (*still with the accent*). The lady’s not for fitting into a bathroom *stall* in blazer that wide. (*Back to his real voice*) You look like you’re applying for employment at a Sunday school. (*Meg throws off the blazer.*) Try the asymmetrical one.

*She dons the new shirt. She looks like a tacky nightclub singer. Henry snorts.*

HENRY. There we go:  
(*with the lascivious melodrama of an American newscaster*)  
Christy Canyon and her shimmering nipples pay their collective respects to Gerard Damiano, the greatest porn director of our time.

MEG. *You* picked it out!

HENRY. Yes, well, I didn’t think it would make your tits look *bioluminescent*.

*He points to another. She holds it up on the hanger.*

HENRY. Too poofy.

*He points to another. She holds it up.*

HENRY. Too boxy.

*She holds up another without him pointing.*

HENRY. You look like the matriarch of a Lorca tragedy. (*Half-beat.*) Try the shift.

*Meg throws off the porn-star shirt, and slips on a sleeveless black silk top. She suddenly looks heartbroken and elegant and strikingly pretty.*

HENRY (*still deadpan, but with all the mischief dropped out of his voice*). Now that is some mourning garb a girl can live in.

*They look at each other for a beat.*

HENRY (*with a sudden edge*). Problem with silk is you'll have to get it dry-cleaned thirteen times before June. You should see if they're offering a punch-card.

MEG. Stop it.

HENRY. You're right—that might get pricey. I'll pull some strings to see if people are willing to call them off. I'm sure Lenny wouldn't mind, given his avoidance of the limelight thus far—

MEG (*Tearing off the shift, and trying to yank off the skirt*). Why are you doing this?

HENRY (*Coldly*). Practical planning.

MEG. I'm not lining up my outfits like it's a fucking debutante ball.

*She wrenches her original skirt up over her hips, grabs the ugly sweater and throws it back on. It really is hideous. She storms out.*

*Henry sits there for a long moment, completely deflated. He picks the shift off the ground, holds it out and looks at it, imagining something for a second. He quickly shakes the thought away.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Six.

*Henry stands, holding a letter.*

HENRY. April 2, 1988

Dear Everyone:

Or almost everyone.

I'd like to say it came as a terrible shock when Mom found a way to excuse herself and Dad from making the trip for Bill's funeral. But I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say there is nothing newsworthy about their declined invitation. I see no need to drag them in and belabor the obvious, so this letter is just for the seven of us. A back-of-the-station-wagon chat, if you will.

That said: there is another R.S.V.P. I wish to discuss.

As Meg, Thomas, Ellen, Pat and Kathy beheld two Sundays past, Jack Junior's presence at the funeral was replaced by an exquisite bouquet of Angelicas.

Jack, I don't imagine you pay much heed to the symbolism of flora and fauna, but you'll be interested to know that the Angelica represents purity of intention. The perilous magic of the Angelica is to aid the flower's recipient in perceiving the true intentions of the giver.

After the undertakers wheeled Bill's body out of his room at the hospital... and once Meg and I made our way up the stairs, into my apartment, and once we sat, until it got too dark to see without a lamp, I picked up the phone, and dialed the numbers of those I would hope to have beside me at Bill's last rites—my brothers and my sisters among them.

At the news of Bill's death, and my invitation to the service, Jack took a pause of such impenetrability—for a moment I thought it was mother herself on the other end of the line. He followed the silence with an incoherent mumble that he couldn't leave Susan alone in her third month of pregnancy, given that her blood pressure has been a tad high. Susan, as I recall, hiked the entire Appalachian Trail the year of her and Jack's engagement, and so I suggested that surely the hearty lass could brave the formidable streets of Evanston alone for 24 hours with the help of a nanny.

Jack, it was at this juncture, that you expressed—in so many words—your concern that one of the disease-ridden faggots at the funeral might sneeze in your direction, impelling you to carry home a fatal petri dish on your lapel. If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were planning to penetrate one of the mourners on the way to the bathroom. Sadly, dear sisters and brothers, we can all agree that the Night-blooming Cereus of Jack's erotic life peaked the night Sheila Duffey gave him a half-hearted blowjob in the back of Dad's car after the senior semi-formal.

The next several lines of the conversation are a blur, but I recall with crystal clarity the moment our brother finally uttered:

*You can't really expect people to pour their tax dollars into something when you people are doing everything you can to spread it.*

Jack, imagine if you did catch it at the funeral home. You fly back to Chicago, and plant a kiss on the sweet-smelling skin of your wife's neck—all the while unknowing that the virus is nestled in the cross-hairs of your cashmere sweater. Years later, on a trip to the bathroom during your daughter's piano recital, she notices a dark purple splotch at the top of her thigh. We skip over the next part. Now she does not remember your name, and an inexplicable shooting pain starts to develop in your own feet that makes you trip over them when you're carrying a glass of water to the bed. I will not tell you what happens during the part we skip over, I will not tell you the sound she makes each time you have to turn her on her side, I will not tell you which Coltrane piece we played during Bill's service, and I will not tell you why we chose it.

But I will say that you are the most cowardly, heartless, small-minded fuck I have ever known—and whatever measure of tragedy and glad tidings befall you in the years to come: do not bother to contact me with the news.

Your brother,

Henry

#### Scene Seven

*September, 1988. Late afternoon.*

*Meg's place.*

*Henry is seated at the kitchen table, pencil in hand, wearing his glasses and an old cardigan. His bag leans against the foot of his chair. There is a cane perched within arm's reach. The table is covered with a series of notes and diagrams, torn off a legal pad. Meg is standing barefoot in the open space beside the table. She has on a pair of leggings, and Henry's Olivia Newton-John t-shirt.*

HENRY. Wai-wai-wait. *Four* of the dancers are still, and there's *three* playing tag?

MEG. Yeah—it's the same exact same phrase from before—She's/ stan—

HENRY. Yeah but you said the two men exited—

MEG. Ohh sorry! . . . fuck. Uh—hang on. Uh—what does my note say?

HENRY. What does which/note say?

MEG. At the top—where it says “tag variation”—

HENRY. Uhh... “J stage left,” “like drawbridge” . . . “2M” with an arrow—?

MEG. Yeah yeah yeah! Sorry—There's a—I'll go back for that part!—At the start of the/ tag var—

HENRY (*trying to control his impatience*). It doesn't even matter! I really just . . . I need to know more . . . What was she—(*he makes an all-encompassing gesture*)—doing?

MEG. At that moment?—she's . . . (*at a loss to describe the larger concept of the piece*) I think it'll help if we just go through the basic beats of it.

HENRY. I don't need to know every de/tail—

MEG. I know but you can't write a review without a sense of the general stage picture—

HENRY (*sudden frustration*). I can't review a piece I didn't see! (*He pulls off his glasses, drops them on the table, and puts his head in his hands. He looks up. Kindly*) I'm sorry. It's not your fault. (*He returns his head to his hands.*)

*Half-beat.*

MEG. I just blanked for a sec. I honestly think it's gonna/ be—

HENRY (*pulling himself together*). Meg—. I'm gonna call Garry.

MEG. He'll understand . . .

HENRY. This is the third time I bailed on him.

MEG. Just watch me do it once. He's gonna edit it down to two paragraphs anyway.

HENRY. He's gonna know it's horseshit! Or he won't, and he'll give me another assignment, and at the last minute, I'll be too sick to go, and I'll end up sending *you!* (*Beat. Beat. Something terrible sinks in, inside Henry. Quietly*) I'm gonna tell him to find someone new.

MEG. Henry . . . you're just having a bad week.

HENRY. I can't do this.

MEG. Just give it a night.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

*Henry disappears all the way into himself.*

You want me to draw you a bath?

HENRY. It's not the stomach thing.

MEG (*quickly*). What is it?

*Henry searches for a way to describe the feeling.*

HENRY. There's a . . . (*he squints his eyes as if he's trying to see in the dark, then places his hand over the upper-half of his face for a second, like a cobweb*). It's like there's a fist on my brain. I couldn't even write it if I *had* seen it.

MEG (*refusing to believe he's that sick*). You think it's the meds?

*Henry makes a "who knows" gesture.*

HENRY. . . . It doesn't matter. (*Beat. The terrible thing sinks deeper.*) I can't do it anymore.

*Beat.*

*He starts gathering Meg's notes up like trash.  
She stands there watching him.*

MEG. You would've fuckin' *loved* the end of it.

HENRY (*still gathering the notes*). It sounds like she's just recycling earlier stuff—

MEG. Unh-unh. Maybe at the beginning—

HENRY (*doubtful*). How is that adrenalized ballet/ thing—?

MEG. No no no no—I mean *yes*: at the beginning. But she has a solo, at the end? . . . (*Meg searches for the words to describe how incredible it was*). . . I. . . I've never seen her do anything . . . *close* to that minimal . . .

HENRY (*surprised and curious*). What was she doing?

MEG. 'member I was saying there's this phrase where she's doing those fouettés, but then the music cuts out, and she's still going?

HENRY. The whole thing was silent?

MEG. Yeah so she's turning and turning—and all of a sudden, she slides onto her back so *hard*, I thought she *fell*.

HENRY (*even more curious*). She stayed down?

MEG. Yeah, she's—(*springing adeptly into a lying down position on the floor*) she's like—at first she's doing these—

*Meg's focus goes inward, as she works to find the movement in her own body. She only intends to locate the single gesture—but once she finds it, the relief of finally being able to show Henry what she saw pulls her into the next one, and the one after that—*

*The repeated curling of her torso pulls her up to her feet—*

*Her hands and arms orbit the body obsessively:  
the small articulation of a mundane activity, abstracted just beyond recognition.*

*The footwork is deceptively simple. Though neither leg ever lifts very far from the ground, there's a precariousness in her body's relationship to gravity. Her movements continue to take either more or less time than one expects them to.*

*Something impels her to take a sudden seat—  
she makes her way back to the ground.*

*The phrase repeats itself several times—  
fluctuating in its abstractions—  
the utilitarian gestures slip to reveal the essential task of the body pulling itself through anxiety,  
through space—  
regaining and losing their pragmatic nature over and over.*

*Meg performs the two-minute solo from memory—  
dancing her experience of it in the places where she does not recall the exact steps themselves.*

*She reaches the end, comes to stillness.*

*She and Henry look at each other for a long beat.*

HENRY (*a quickening*). What time is it?

MEG (*looking at her wristwatch*). Half-past five?

*Beat.*

*Henry breaks into a grin and rubs his hands together.*

HENRY (*with sudden vigor and mischief*). Make some coffee. This is gonna be like lying in confession!

*Meg bounds over to the table, unable to suppress the smile that's lit up her whole face. She plants an emphatic kiss on his forehead, and runs off-stage to start the coffee.*

*Henry reaches quickly for a notebook in the bag at the foot of his chair. The sudden collapse of his upper-body triggers a cough. He lurches back up to open his windpipe, but the movement makes it worse, so he pulls himself back down half-way.*

*He braces himself with his hands, trying to get some air.*

*He catches his breath.*

*He sits in his chair—not moving a muscle, so as not to incite the coughing again.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Eight.

*July, 1989.*

*Around 3pm on a Saturday.*

*The mattress is made up with starch-white blankets and pillowcases.*

*Henry is lying in a hospital room, wearing a snug winter hat. His eyes and cheeks are so sunken that looking at him, you can't keep from thinking how hard it would be not to avert your eyes if he took off his shirt. Ellen is sitting in the chair by his bed in a short skirt, a tank top, and a light cardigan. Her large backpack is against the wall. Henry's face is animated, but he speaks very low, with a discernible wheeze, and tries not to move his head too much.*

ELLEN. . . so I walk two blocks farther, and someone whistles out of the *next* car that passes me—

HENRY. You gotta wear that skirt more often—

ELLEN. No, but wait: so I keep walking, and when the *next* car comes by, *both* the guys on the passenger side fully lean out and start barking like dogs—

HENRY. I should have never left Chicago—

ELLEN. And I'm thinking: I have *never* gotten catcalled like this in Hyde Park. Even when I'm coming home from work at *1a.m.*, I don't get it like that. So I keep walking, and the next couple cars are driven by women—nothing.

HENRY. They were whistling on the inside—

ELLEN. And then the next car is driven by this guy who cranes his neck so far to look at me that—I am not even fucking kidding—he *crashes* into the guy in front of him.

HENRY. This happened this morning?

ELLEN. On my way to the airport! So I get on the train, and I go to O'Hare, and the first thing I do, I go straight to the bathroom. And as I'm waiting in line, in front of the mirror, I realize that my skirt is hooked up under my backpack, and both of my butt cheeks are *fully* exposed.

*Henry gives a performative gasp, forgetting himself. He immediately goes into a coughing spasm, but the cough is so painful, he has to draw air into his lungs in short, careful bursts to keep from asphyxiating.*

ELLEN (*alarmed*). Oh—are you okay?

*Henry manages to hold up a hand “just let me cough.” It takes a long time before he can breathe normally again. Ellen sits there, repressing the urge to ask him if there's something she can do.*

ELLEN. Sorry, honey. I should've warned you.

*Beat.*

HENRY. Thanks for comin'.

ELLEN. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner! Things have been fucking—relentless.

*Tiniest beat.*

HENRY (*a test*). We need you out there on the front lines.

ELLEN. I should have come this winter.

HENRY. As far as I can tell, everyone else has voted to have me ex-communicated. Was there a meeting?

*A small pause, as Ellen tries to choose exactly the right words.*

ELLEN. I think they can't . . . begin to imagine, and honestly, if they did—

HENRY (*quietly*). What do you think?

ELLEN. Of what?

HENRY. The letters.

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. I think Jack can go fuck himself.

HENRY. I meant the other ones.

*A tiny pause, like the ground opening up, but only in a circle around your feet.*

ELLEN. I think Thomas . . . is just so . . . protective of Jack—

HENRY (*on offense*). You think I'm unjustified?—

ELLEN. No!—

HENRY. He did not so much as pick up the phone—

ELLEN. I'm not defending him, I just think he has no context—

HENRY. Yes, well, I was *giving* him context—

ELLEN. I just think you hurt him, that's all.

*Beat.*

HENRY. Is that what you did at Pat's wedding? Talk about how crazy I am?

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. He should've invited you.

HENRY. He was right.

ELLEN. He was just angry.

HENRY (*sudden, intense vulnerability*). The letter to Kathy was mean.

*Beat.*

ELLEN. I think if you give her some time . . .

*Henry looks up and holds Ellen's gaze for a beat, looks away.*

*Beat.*

HENRY (*snapping back into a lighthearted tone*). Meg's been talking about this workshop like a four-year-old with a birthday coming up. Of course then my stupid luck gives me pneumonia the one week I've said I'll do fine on my own.

ELLEN (*speeding away from the danger zone as fast as he does*). I always feel like a caveman when you talk about dance people.

HENRY. Karole Armitage is like . . . if you were invited to spend six days studying with Cesar Chavez.

ELLEN. Meg's really—(*she searches for a cool phrase*)—in the scene.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY (*looking at his hands*). This is the first time she's done something since I fell in November.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Well we'll have our own dance party with my butt cheeks showing.

HENRY. You know, we could use a woman like you. I need a crafty negotiator to get me a new nurse. This one inserts needles with the accuracy of a fifteen-year-old boy finding a clitoris. And the clip on my finger is rubbing my knuckle raw. I want you to get 'em where it hurts till they bend to my will.

*Meg opens the door quickly.*

ELLEN (*what are you doing here?*) Hey . . .

MEG. Hey.

HENRY (*pointing toward the door*). Out of my office. You're supposed to be getting ready for tomorrow.

MEG (*to Ellen*). Someone named Arthur called?

ELLEN (*trying to repress her alarm*). What did he say?

MEG. He said it was really urgent./ I didn't get any details.

ELLEN. What? He didn't leave a message?

MEG (*pulling out a post-it*). He said, "C & H is coming to the table."

ELLEN. Are you serious?

MEG. He said you'd know what it means.

ELLEN. Oh my God. (*Beat*.) Meg . . . I am so . . . so sorry.

MEG. Do *not* tell me you have to leave.

ELLEN. C& H is the small parts supplier we've been picketing. Every single thing we've done for the past year and a half has been to make them do this.

*There's no way for Meg to ask Ellen out in the hall to talk about this. She tries to casually place herself as far away from the bed as possible—as if, in the small half-room, that will make Henry hear the conversation any less.*

MEG. This is the only time I have *ever* asked you to come.

ELLEN. You told me *not* to come in January!

MEG. We didn't need you then.

ELLEN. There are more than *one-thousand* people who have been on strike since March . . . .

*(Half-beat.)*

MEG. Fine. Go.

*Henry suddenly looks like he really doesn't feel well.*

HENRY. Ellen . . . is there . . . any way . . . they can do without you till next Saturday.

ELLEN. . . . . I'm the union's only lawyer on this case.

HENRY. Meg. I'm fine here alone.

MEG. I'm gonna cancel the workshop.

HENRY. Margaret. There is a team of qualified doctors to respond if something goes wrong.

ELLEN. Meg, they'll take care of it if anything—

MEG (*sharp*). Do you know the side effects of pentamidine?

ELLEN. . . . I mean I don't know what—

MEG (*pointing to the IV*). The stuff in that bag has a high frequency of causing pancreatic inflammation, kidney failure, liver toxicity, decreased white blood cell count, rashes, sudden fevers, and it can make your blood sugar plummet.

HENRY (*panicked and having trouble thinking clearly*). You said they were giving me the good one! I *told* you!

MEG (*as if she's talking to a senile old person*). You're allergic to Bactrim. You can't take the good one.

HENRY (*very quietly*). Why are you yelling at me.

MEG. I'm sorry.

*Beat.*

ELLEN. Hang on . . . Let me use the hospital phone . . . and . . . I'll see . . . if there's anything I can do.

MEG. It's okay. You should go.

ELLEN. I might be able to stay a couple days—

MEG. I need to be here even if you do. (*Beat.*) It's not— . . . Henry and I have lost six friends who were hospitalized with pneumocystis . . . and somewhere in the first three days, an infection flared up and killed them before they could medicate it properly. (*Half-beat.*) It's not cuz of your—this. I don't know what I was thinking.

*Beat.*

ELLEN. Henry . . . . I will be back as *soon* as this gets settled.

*Henry closes his eyes and nods slightly.*

Do you want us to let you sleep?

*Lights shift.*

Scene Nine.

*Henry stands, holding a letter.*

HENRY: July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

Dear Everyone,

As I sit here, looking out the window, and watching a frantic intern bustle down the street with a tray of coffee, I find myself thinking back to when I first got hired by the layout department of *Outlook NYC*. Little did they know, I have the spatial reasoning of a drunk platypus. But despite the handicap: I made incremental moves into copy-editing, blurb-writing—and finally, the coveted position of reviewing downtown dance for *Outlook's* small, but devoted readership.

True, it wasn't close to the heights I'd imagined, but then: it's no small thing to be gainfully employed doing what one loves best. Even if *Outlook* never gave me quite the platform I'd dreamed of, they later offered something that was worth far more: a group of men who stood by each other through the agony of losing one beloved after another—to a disease that our society has murderously refused to acknowledge, who accepted my help when I was able to give it, and later, have helped me in return. Among the twelve of us, four of these men are still in good health; they drop by every few weeks with groceries and gossip. As the number of houses to visit has multiplied, their visits have gotten fewer and farther between. I cannot fault them their exhaustion.

During those years at the culture desk, I felt something close to contentment. Or whatever the word is for the mixture of gratitude, pleasure, and the nagging doubt that I had sold myself short. I had skillfully convinced myself that this was as good as it was ever going to get, and aspiring to greater heights would leave me disappointed. When really . . . I just lacked the discipline, and my hesitation was borne of the fear that trying my damndest would leave me without any other explanation for failure than my own mediocrity.

In those years, I looked to Ellen. I am not exaggerating when I say that she is one of the most courageous people I have ever met—not only in her willingness to endanger herself for the common good, but also, in her zeal to risk finding out what greatness she might or might not be capable of. I have stood in awe of her work ethic and her

political acumen. And these past years, I've valued ever deeper her understanding that the cost of prejudice so often comes down to whose lives are ended when, and how.

As the cliché goes, the angel of mortality has a way of plucking the shroud from one's vision. What's been right in front of you all along, concealed by the half-dark: visible in the blink of an eye. That moment in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when Mitch suddenly turns on the light.

Ellen:

For years now, I've used the word "selfless" to describe the sacrifices you make for your work. Recently, it dawned on me that your commitment to the alleviation of suffering is limited sharply to the public sphere. If there is a soul out there in need, you will stop at nothing to answer its cry—so long as doing so is likely to earn you public recognition for your intellect, your tenacity, and your virtue. But when confronted with the dependence of someone who has loved you your whole life through—and, I dare say, loved you well—you cannot, in practice, deem him a worthy use of your time.

Gloria Steinem would have my head if I didn't say: *of course* you should pursue your desire to be an enactor of history, and to be recognized as such. But is there not an inch to give in the tug of war between kindness and ambition? I suddenly think back on all our conversations, where you've narrated the painful, but noble struggle of "what this work demands of you" . . . each time one more friend has finally lost patience with your refusal to show up when it matters—and they've tired of hearing you propose a meaningless alternative that will fit the convenience of your busy schedule.

What it comes down to is that there is no one on earth—no matter what bond might exist between you, or what danger that person might find themselves in—who you would stand by—if doing so might threaten your professional reputation or position in any way.

This is not a petition to ask you to change. I don't think you could—and I suspect the world will be better for it. It is only to say: I was blind, but now, I see.

Your brother,

Henry

*Lights shift.*

Scene Ten.

*August, 1989. Early evening.*

*Meg's place.*

*Henry is propped up in bed, in his pajamas, with his eyes closed. He is tucked under a homemade afghan and a red duvet.*

*The couch is made up with a bed sheet and pillow.*

*Quiet.*

*There is the sound of a key in the lock. Meg comes in the door slowly, dressed in her day-job clothes. She is carrying her purse, a plastic shopping bag, and a stack of mail—mostly bills, a couple catalogues, and a magazine. At the top of the stack, she holds an opened letter.*

*Henry opens his eyes at the sound.*

*Meg puts the shopping bag and her purse down on the ground. She puts her keys and the rest of the mail on the edge of the counter. She closes the door behind her, and stands there with the letter in her hands, looking at Henry.*

HENRY. What's wrong?

MEG. I just picked up the mail.

HENRY. Any surprise checks or love letters?

*Half-beat.*

MEG. Is that what you call them?

HENRY. I take it you received my note to Ellen.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. How did you get it to the mailbox?

HENRY. I had Isaac mail them when he came by with lunch last Friday.

MEG. I asked you that morning if you had stuff to mail.

HENRY. You would have dumped them in the trashcan.

MEG. You're fuck right I would have. This so fucking unfair! She could have lost her job!

HENRY. She didn't care if I stopped breathing.

MEG. I was there!

HENRY. This isn't about you! I'm allowed to have a human interaction that isn't filtered through *you*!

MEG. *Then why did you send it to all of us?*

HENRY (*cold*). I thought everyone should know.

MEG. What? That you're a snarky, narcissistic, vindictive—*princess*?!

HENRY. *You* told me to write the first one!

MEG. I said to tell him how he made you *feel*.

HENRY. I did.

MEG. The one to *Jack* was fair.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY. You didn't say anything when I wrote to Thomas—

MEG. I didn't think you'd keep *going*—

HENRY. You knew I was right—

MEG. Ellen has called you every single week since Bill died.

HENRY. As long as it's convenient.

MEG. What do you want her to do? Quit her job so she can deal with your *laundry*? Not everybody can put their entire lives on hold—

HENRY. You're right. Not everybody. Your life is on hold. Steve's life is on hold. Kevin's life is on hold. Lenny's life was on hold. Morry's life was on hold. But from the front page of today's Wall Street Journal, it looks like the Dow Jones is up 6 points, and things are rolling right along.

*Half-beat.*

MEG (*softening*). Henry . . . there are thousands of people whose only visitors are GMHC volunteers—and who would give anything to have a family that loves them.

*Half-beat.*

HENRY (*very quietly*). They didn't even come to his funeral.

MEG. Mom and Dad?

HENRY (*even quieter*). They didn't come to his funeral . . . . . and they won't come to mine.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. I'll make them.

HENRY (*snapping*). I want *one thing* to happen that doesn't happen because of you.

MEG (*losing it again*). What do you want from me?

HENRY. You can't stand it that I mailed those letters without you.

MEG. I can't stand it that you are systematically isolating yourself by using everyone as your punching bag!

HENRY. I apologize if my outrage is unpalatable.

MEG. Do you know how many men in this city—that *we know*—have lost everything and everyone, and have put that outrage to *use* in forcing people to pay attention?

HENRY. What use?

MEG. You want to write a letter? Write one to the NIH! Write one to Senator Moynihan! Write one to whatever psychotic criminal is actually in charge of Health and Human Services! Write 20,000 letters and dump them on the White House lawn!

*He raises his thin arms above his head, his hands curled into loose fists.*

HENRY. That's the spirit—Miss Larry Kramer herself appears like a vision at the foot of my bed. (*The effort of raising his arms is too much—he starts to cough, and drops them abruptly.*) You want me to march down to D.C. with a banner? (*He coughs again, catches his breath*) I wish I'd thought of that sooner: I'll just tape it to the front of my walker, and creep on down.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG. When I take the subway to work in the morning, I look at all the people getting off at Penn Station, and what a rush they're in, and how insulated they are from anything that might chip the veneer off their shiny little lives . . . and I picture smashing their heads against the window, one by one. (*Half-beat.*) I get it.

HENRY. No. Meg. You don't.

MEG. I'm not saying—

HENRY. You never waited to see if you'd get it,/you don't have ulcers in your rectum, there aren't nails in the bottom of your feet, and if there were, you can be sure as fuck the whole nation would grind to a halt if this had started with nice, hetero girls dropping like flies—

MEG. Henry—

MEG. Henry! Did *Bill* sit down at a typewriter, and rip out everyone's insides?

HENRY (*in tears*). Bill had *me*. I wish I had died the day he did. I wish I had died the day before the first time he fell. I wish you would go, and I would die right now, and there wouldn't be any body. You'd come back, and there'd just be the blanket on the chair.

*He sobs, struggling to breathe as he does.*

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG (*taking a deep breath*). We need to . . . . . just stop this conversation.

HENRY. Just go.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. I'm gonna call Steve . . . . . If he can come spend the night . . . . . and I can stay at his place . . . . . I just . . . need a night by myself. (*She goes to the phone and dials, waits as it rings. The answering machine comes on. She hangs up.*) He's not there.

HENRY. I can be by myself for a night.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG. Just— . . . let's not talk.

*She presses her hands against her eyes. Henry looks down at the blanket.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Eleven.

*June, 2015. Around 4:30pm the next day.*

*The apartment is completely empty, with the exception of nine moving boxes, the kitchen table and chairs, and the bare mattress and box spring. Meg is seated at the table, staring off into space. A little sliver of time passes. We hear the sound of Ellen and David trudging up the stairs, and down the hall, followed by an energetic knock.*

MEG. It's open.

*Ellen doesn't hear. Another energetic knock.*

*Meg gets up and opens the door.*

MEG. Hi

ELLEN (*charging in with the energy of someone who's been running around without pause since 8am*). Hi, it was open downstairs,

MEG. I think there's another guy who's moving.

DAVID. Yeah he's got a truck out front.

ELLEN. We had to park on Morton. I think we should get everything—Wait—why's the table here?

MEG. They didn't show up.

ELLEN. Uh! After all that.

MEG. I'm gonna put it on the street.

ELLEN. I need to change my shirt first. It's about a hundred degrees.

DAVID. I can start carrying it down.

ELLEN. Thanks, honey. (*Checking her watch*) We gotta get out of here. It was—like—a zoo at Goodwill. I should have anticipated.

DAVID. I can drive if you want.

ELLEN. That would actually be great. And we can unload everything tomorrow. You've done a ton, sweetie.

DAVID. I can unload it tonight. It's fine.

ELLEN. Just do it tomorrow! Oh—are you at Dad's?

DAVID. Uhh I actually . . . I got a job last night!

ELLEN. What?

DAVID. Karim's girlfriend just got cast in a show, and she's gonna give me her day-job.

ELLEN. Doing what?

DAVID. This is gonna sound insane, but she's had it for two years, and this woman pays her twenty-five dollars an hour, just to hang out with her dog, seven hours a day. *And* she buys her a monthly metrocard.

ELLEN. Honey, we need to talk about this—

DAVID. I'll do all the driving and get everything unloaded—

ELLEN. David, we'll talk about it this week—

DAVID. She needs someone Tuesday. I'll drive back with you guys, I'll do all the stuff/ y—

ELLEN. David you cannot move here with nothing besides a dog-walk offer—

DAVID. I already said I would do it—

ELLEN. I don't care! If you get yourself into a situation where you can't come up with your rent, who's gonna bail you out?

DAVID. I'm not gonna ask you! If it doesn't work out, I'll find another job! You know how many random things I can get hired to do here?

ELLEN. David—you're white, you're male, you went to any Ivy League school—people will pay you to do anything! Twenty percent of the country can't make a living wage! You, on the other hand, can make thirty dollars an hour . . . massaging a parakeet's toes! But that is not my point!

DAVID. What *is* your point?!

ELLEN. My point is that you are standing next to the most talented person in my entire family, and she can't get enough teaching work to cover a two-month sublet in Queens! Part of being an *adult* is coming up with a *plan*!

MEG (*ugly*). *Fuck* you!

ELLEN. What do you want me to tell him?

MEG (*uglier*). No—*fuck you*.

ELLEN. Meg . . . . .

*Tiny beat*

MEG (*quiet*). I started from scratch.

*Tiny beat*

ELLEN. I know you did.

*Tiny beat*

MEG. I was almost forty.

*Tiny beat*

ELLEN. I didn't mean to minimize it.

MEG. Then why have you done *nothing* but act as if it bears no relation to what is happening right now?!

ELLEN. I've done *nothing*?!

MEG. I failed to come up with a *plan*?

ELLEN. I just drove down here—!

MEG. Seven years, Ellen! During which time, the five of you—!

ELLEN. Seven years?—of what?

MEG. Nine years of *what?!*

ELLEN. I tried to get you help

MEG. When

ELLEN. You know when

MEG. Well he was already dead, Ellen.

ELLEN. You know, Meg, part of the whole point of recovery is you stop blaming everyone around you—

MEG. I drank three of those years down the toilet, and it is nobody's fault but my own.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

Don't you ever look at me and talk to me about a plan.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

ELLEN (*with the skill of a professional negotiator*). I should have done more.

*Half-beat. Meg doesn't budge.*

I understand why you didn't want to see us.

*Half-beat. Meg doesn't budge.*

I understand how hard it was to get back on-track.

*Beat.*

*Beat. Meg doesn't budge.*

(*ramping back up*) What I don't understand is why *twenty* years later, you are *still* punishing me—

MEG. Ellen, because you *think* you can imagine—

ELLEN. I was *here*—!

MEG. You flew in and you flew out and picked up right where you left off!

ELLEN. You didn't want me here!

MEG. I *asked* you for help!

ELLEN. No, Meg—you marked off your territory! There was you, and there was him, and no one else was welcome in the club!

MEG. Well that is *very* convenient!

ELLEN. You made *damn sure* we knew it!

MEG. I *didn't write* them.

ELLEN. You might as well have been typing them up for him.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

*Meg's face looks like a window someone threw a rock at.*

MEG. You think that letter came from me?

ELLEN. I think he wrote it on *behalf* of you. He wrote each one of those letters as a gift *to you*.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG (*cutting*). He was right.

ELLEN (*dangerous*). There we go

MEG. You disagree?

ELLEN. I am so fucking tired of you blaming everything that has ever happened on one—*(she searches for the word for a second)*

MEG. One what?

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. People let themselves change over time.

MEG. It sounds like you've stuck with the same routine.

ELLEN. What is *that* supposed to mean?

*Half-beat.*

*Meg glances over at David, who has been standing frozen for this whole time.*

*Ellen follows her gaze.*

*Meg looks back at Ellen and gives a resigned little shrug.*

MEG *(quiet, cutting)*. You show up when the teeth have already rotted.

*Ellen stands there for a moment, with a near-blank expression on her face.*

*She suddenly looks about five years old.*

*Meg looks old and ugly.*

*Ellen fixes her gaze on her sister.*

*Beat.*

ELLEN *(an even quieter, deeper cut)*. You don't show up at all.

*Ellen walks to the door and leaves, almost without making a sound.*

*Meg and David remain where they are.*

*They stand there in a silence that goes on for as long as it goes on. It goes on until the point where it starts to feel stupid or unbearable to keep standing there, and then goes on longer.*

*Ellen strides back in through the door, and marches toward the kitchen table to grab her purse.*

ELLEN. Don't worry. I'm leaving. I just came back to get my purse.

DAVID. You're going back to Boston?

ELLEN. I don't know where I'm going.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. You should go with her David.

ELLEN. I'm not *driving off*.

MEG. You can if you want to.

ELLEN. No, Meg, I can't!

MEG. I don't see why not.

ELLEN (*bursting into tears*). Because you're my *sister!*

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

I'm going for a walk.

*Ellen leaves, slamming the door behind her.  
Meg and David stand there.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Twelve.

*Henry stands, holding a letter.*

HENRY. August 3, 1989.

Dear Everyone,

I have no preamble.

Meg:

At this moment, you are no doubt nestled at Steve and Pablo's apartment, having fled the scene of our odd-couple home yesterday evening. Steve snores, but other than that, he makes a fine guardian, and I think I can endure the tractor noises emanating from the couch til your return on Monday.

Before you come back to our humble abode . . . am I right that last night marked a sea-change of sorts? And from henceforth, a new honesty policy is now in effect?

There was something refreshing about the glint of truth in your pupils as you told me what you really think of me—the clear note your voice struck. I realized this morning, upon waking, I think it was the first time I've ever heard you in that key.

Because,  
Meg:  
you are many things . . .  
but perhaps the one hard-wired closest to your core is what a liar you are.

All heated up, as I was, after the words we exchanged last night—

what an expression.  
The words we exchanged.  
I'll give you mine if you give me yours.

In the residual heat of the moment, I had thought of keeping the truth-telling rolling. I had thought of writing:

Meg,  
All these years, I had truly thought of you, in my heart of hearts, as a comrade in arms.  
An honorary member of my sacred coven of queens.  
How hungry you were to be more than a tourist. To make that edgy glow rub off on you, just a smudge.

I had thought of writing:

Meg,  
Teach me your secret: how to remain so utterly unimpeachable.  
It's like watching a magician pull just the card you were picturing out from the center of his deck. Teach me.

But when I put those words on paper, they all seemed to evade the point.

Aha.  
Evasion.

Meg:  
I suddenly thought of your fear of airplanes. Your complete breakdown in functioning when a ship is being driven by anyone but you. The image popped up of your clenched

fists and your sweaty brow that time we flew to Ohio. You barfing in my empty bag of potato chips on the way down.

The truth . . . ?

You love this.

Refusing to let someone do a single thing for themselves.

The chance to force choices on other people.

The chance to resent someone for saddling you with a burden upon which you insisted.

The chance to find little, underhanded ways to make everyone around you feel inferior. To make sure we all know you are the most trustworthy, practically competent, and enlightened person in the room.

The chance to deny people any opportunity to prove or redeem themselves.

To see to it that we feel lesser in our ability to bring delight, to bring comfort, to put the puzzle pieces in order, and to keep the trains running on time.

There is nothing you seek like the power trip of someone else's vulnerability, and nowhere you excel more than in your capacity to hide.

God forbid that you ever admit what you really think, or want, or feel—because then . . . what would there be to lord over us?

I'm less and less convinced that there's any objective standard for evaluating performance—least of all dance. What I'm left with, is that . . . watching your work when I first moved to this city is the means by which I learned what I wanted art to feel like.

And so, it is with a baffled, broken heart that I've watched you shoot yourself in the foot again and again and again—always something—always some moral principal, some financial excuse, some personal crisis—your insistence on making things as hard for yourself as possible.

Always so skillfully concealed.

In lighter days gone by, I used to tease you for your prudishness, thinking your long dry spells the result of impossibly high standards.

I now see—having shared this quasi-marital arrangement with you for quite some time—that it's Meg's way or the highway.

Grown men, in the bloom of health—at least in my experience—are none too fond of those terms.

If honesty is my ambition here . . .  
truthfully,  
Meg:

I can't imagine who wouldn't leave you.

*Lights shift.*

Scene Thirteen.

*Late November, 1989. After 10 p.m.*

*Meg's place.*

*Ellen is standing in Meg's kitchen in her pajamas, looking at the phone.*

*She takes a deep breath, picks up the receiver, dials, and waits as it rings.*

*Lights come up on Meg, somewhere outside the world of the apartment, as she answers the phone.*

MEG. Hello?

ELLEN. Hi it's me. *(A pause.)* Hello?

MEG *(her heart pounding)*. I'm here.

ELLEN. Am I calling too late?

MEG. No. *(Short pause.)* Ellen.

ELLEN. I was afraid you wouldn't pick up.

MEG. Will you say it??

ELLEN. I need your advice.

MEG. Ellen!

ELLEN. One conversation, Meg. *(Tiny beat.)* He's in the hospital again.

MEG *(relief)* Jesus.

ELLEN. Meg: he's really sick.

MEG. Why didn— (*she cuts herself off, presses her fingertips against her eyelids, takes away her hand*). I thought he was dead.

ELLEN. I would have said it.

MEG. Where are you?

ELLEN. I'm still at your place.

MEG. How did you even get this number?

ELLEN. Listen—. Meg . . .

*A pause.*

MEG (*quietly*). What's his CD4 count.

ELLEN (*reassuring*). I'm not asking you to come back . . .

MEG. *I told you . . .*

ELLEN. His doctor wants me to sign a DNR.

*Half-beat.*

*Rapid-fire until the next half-beat:*

MEG. What does he have?

ELLEN. He has pneumonia again.

MEG. Since when?

ELLEN. Four days ago.

MEG. What's his temperature?

ELLEN. It was down to 99 when I left.

MEG. Is he cogent?

ELLEN. I can't tell.

MEG. What is he saying?

ELLEN. He's on a respirator. (*Half-beat.*) He has a clipboard and a pen. (*Half-beat. Again, reassuring*) I'm not asking you to come back.

MEG. What does he say?

ELLEN. He's sleeping mostly.

MEG. No—about the DNR. Did you not ask him?

ELLEN. Of course I asked him. What do you think I've been doing?

MEG. Well then what did he say?!

*Beat.*

ELLEN (*quiet*). Every time I ask him . . . . he writes your name on the paper.

*Beat.*

MEG. I assume you read it.

ELLEN (*what?*). It's the only way to communicate with him.

*Beat.*

MEG. I mean the letter.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. Meg . . He's losing his mind.

MEG (*that's no an excuse for the letter*). He had it three months ago.

ELLEN. I'm not asking you to forgive him.

MEG. What do you want me to do? Tell you what he wants?

ELLEN. I never talked to him! When you guys signed that thing—. There's nothing written on the form.

MEG. You said you were gonna talk to him.

ELLEN. I assumed you would be there. Or that—. I didn't picture doing it alone.

*Beat.*

*Beat.*

MEG. He doesn't wanna die like Bill did.

ELLEN. What does that mean?

*Half-beat.*

MEG. If he's never going home.

ELLEN. Sign the DNR?

MEG. He wants the tubes out. *(She looks down at her hands.)* Take him home.

ELLEN. He said that? I mean—even if it means he'd . . .

MEG. I, um. *(She swallows.)* I promised.

*Beat.*

ELLEN. I mean, in that case . . . . . do you wanna fly home? *(Half-beat.)* I—I'm not. I just. I didn't think we were talking about just taking them out like that. And if he keeps writing "Meg," I mean—what if he's changed his mind?

*Half-beat.*

MEG. I'll come back.

ELLEN. Thank you. *(Huge exhale.)* I've been meaning to call you since this afternoon, I was just so scared you'd hang up—and I just—his doctor asked me yesterday about the form, and there was part of me—this is so shameful, I imagined the whole thing, and going back to Chicago, and going back to work, and I felt this relief at the thought, even though he's been—a sweetheart—and I just thought—Jesus—what if I sign this thing, and it's based on what *I* want, and I have no one to tell me if I'm just making it all up, or if it's really like I'm *killing* him, because I want to get on with my life, and I just— . . . can't trust my own sense of what's happening.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. Who's been a sweetheart?

ELLEN. I mean. He's sleeping, mostly.

*Half-beat.*

MEG (*a little dangerous*). He's been a sweetheart?

ELLEN. He wants to see you.

MEG. He wants to make me choose.

ELLEN. He wants to talk to you.

MEG. I'm not gonna know what he wants.

ELLEN. You have no idea!

MEG. Exactly.

ELLEN. No—I mean what he's gonna say!

MEG. I'm not doing this. I'm the wrong person.

ELLEN. There's no such thing!

MEG (*hard*). Tell him you couldn't find me. (*Half-beat.*) I didn't pick up the phone.

*Lights shift.*

Scene Fourteen.

*Late January, 1990.*

*Meg's place.*

*The apartment is so pristine, it looks almost uninhabited. Nine moving boxes are neatly stacked against the wall, to the right of the mirrors. Two suitcases, and a small carry-on stand ready beside the kitchen table.*

*Ellen is sweeping the floor in sweatpants, a t-shirt, and bare feet.*

*The sound of footsteps and the wheels of a suitcase approach the door. Ellen stops at the sound, looks around quickly to make sure everything is as it should be, then stands there, staring at the door until she hears the key in the lock. She hurries to get back to sweeping.*

*Meg opens the door, stops when she sees Ellen.*

MEG. Hey.

ELLEN. Hi. (*Tiny beat.*) Do you need help?

MEG. No I got it.

*Meg rolls in her small suitcase, and closes the door behind her.*

ELLEN. I was starting to worry. Was your flight delayed?

MEG (*taking off her scarf—she looks very pale and thin*) No, the 7's fucked up.

ELLEN. Really? My flight's at 8. (*Tiny beat.*) You think I should leave at 6?

MEG. Just to be safe. I would. (*She looks at the apartment*) You made it so clean.

ELLEN. I just . . . I was . . . done packing and I . . . just wanted it to be nice for you.

MEG. You take better care of it than I do.

ELLEN. Oh . . . I was just . . . done. (*Tiny beat.*) D'you want some coffee?

MEG. Yeah, sure.

ELLEN. Sorry if I smell.

MEG. Oh. Uhh. (*She inhales.*) I think you're good.

ELLEN. I was just rushing around before. D'you want cream and sugar?

MEG. Just black.

*She hands her the coffee.*

ELLEN. That's all you took with you?

*A small, strange pause.*

MEG (*a little bit like she's underwater*). Yeah, uh . . . I . . . uh . . . I honestly . . . don't know . . . what all my other . . . stuff is—for. I could fill a . . . truck with just the stuff in my closet, and I don't need any of it. (*With a strange little half-laugh*) It's so disgusting.

ELLEN. I guess you don't want more.

MEG. I don't wanna buy anything as long as I live.

ELLEN. I meant of Henry's.

*(Tiny beat.)*

MEG *(forcing herself to have a kind tone)*. No. Thank you. *(Beat.)* Is it all gone?

ELLEN *(indicating the boxes against the wall)*. That's what those are.

*Tiny beat.*

MEG *(avoiding eye contact)*. Thank you for doing that. *(Half-beat. Taking off her not-warm-enough jacket)* I'll pay someone to deal with it.

ELLEN. No I've got it. I just—you don't have to say yes. I just . . . in case you wanted anything. *(Beat. Meggie says nothing. She gets up, and goes to the counter for sugar.)* Steve's gonna help me bring it to Goodwill at 2.

MEG *(turns, tries to curb the edge in her voice)*. You and Steve are buddies now?

ELLEN. He offered to help . . .

MEG. I called him last week to say I was coming back. *(Tiny beat.)* Something wrong with his answering machine? *(She finds the answer in Ellen's face. Suddenly dark)* I mean . . . I don't blame him.

ELLEN. I think he probably just needs a minute.

MEG. I ran into our friend Kevin on the train platform, coming home just now. Looked right at me and kept walking.

ELLEN. That's cuz he can't imagine—. *(Tiny beat.)* Any sane person would have done the same thing. *(Meg turns her back to pour the coffee.)* Listen. The other thing I wanted to say . . . There wasn't much left over, but . . . I wanna give you some money.

MEG. Who's money?

ELLEN. Henry's.

*(Tiny beat.)*

MEG. Whaddyou mean you "wanna give me"?

ELLEN. It's only four hundred, but I think you should have it.

MEG. You're talking about money he left you?

ELLEN. We put it in my account so Blue Cross couldn't come after it. You should have it. *(Tiny beat.)* He would've wanted you to.

*(Tiny beat.)*

MEG. Okay.

ELLEN. Okay, good.

*Ellen takes the check out of her purse, and puts it on the table.*

MEG. Thank you.

ELLEN. And if you need to borrow any while you're looking for work, just lemme know.

MEG. Aren't you unemployed, too?

ELLEN. No, actually . . . uh . . . Arthur's gonna let me come back. I called him a couple weeks ago, and they have a big walk-out coming, so . . . they can use me. It sounds like something that's gonna take off pretty fast, so . . . I just really wanted to make sure everything was okay with—the apartment before things get crazy. *(Half-beat.)* It was really kind of him. *(Half-beat.)* I didn't think he would.

*(Beat.)*

*Meg reaches across the table, picks up the check, tears it in half, then in half again, walks over to the counter, and drops the pieces in the trash can under the sink.*

MEG. I don't wanna make you late for Steve.

ELLEN. Why are you doing that?

MEG. Why are you giving it to me? He didn't want me to have it.

ELLEN. Yes he did!

MEG. Did he say so?! *(Tiny beat.)* Did he say so?! Did he say anything?!

ELLEN (*exhausted*). He had a tube in his throat. (*Beat.*) I understand why you didn't come.

(*Beat.*)

*The following is very quiet:*

MEG. Was Dad there?

(*Tiny beat.*)

ELLEN. Yeah.

(*Tiny beat.*)

MEG. Was Mom?

(*Tiny beat.*)

ELLEN. Yeah.

(*Tiny beat.*)

MEG. Was Jack there?

(*Tiny beat.*)

ELLEN. Yeah.

(*Tiny beat.*)

MEG. And Thomas?

(*Tiny beat.*)

ELLEN. Yeah.

(*Tiny beat.*)

MEG. And Pat?

(*Tiny beat.*)

ELLEN. Yeah.

*(Tiny beat.)*

MEG. And Kathy?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. Yeah.

*(Tiny beat.)*

MEG. And you?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. Yeah.

*(Beat.)*

MEG. Was it open?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. It was closed.

*(Beat.)*

MEG. Did someone sing?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. Just piano.

*(Beat.)*

MEG. Did you pick the suit?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. It was way too big.

*(Beat.)*

MEG. And after?

*(Tiny beat.)*

ELLEN. We ate.

*(A long beat.)*

ELLEN *(indicating the boxes)*. Do you wanna hang on to one of 'em?

*Lights shift.*

Scene Fifteen.

*Meg stands in her pajamas, holding nothing.*

MEG.

My brother Henry liked cantaloupe. My brother Henry had a dark blue shirt. My brother Henry used to leave his cardigan draped over his chair. My brother Henry pushed his glasses up his nose with his pointer finger. My brother Henry smoked a pack of cigarettes every day until he got sick, and then he smoked two or three on the front stoop of his building . . . and then later, he smoked just one on the fire escape, while the sun was still hanging above the buildings on Second Avenue, like it didn't need to slide down on anyone's time but its own. My brother Henry always wore dark socks. My brother Henry pecked his head forward like a goose, anytime he was passing from the kitchen to the bedroom, and wanted to slip his two cents into a conversation. My brother Henry was already balding the tiniest bit in college. My brother Henry had long toes, stuck close together. My brother Henry was reading chapter books by first grade. My brother Henry and I got married in the backyard on a day Mom had left us alone with Jack, and Ellen was the priest, and we kneeled down in the grass like they do in *The Sound of Music*, with our heads bowed . . . and after, we put the game on pause, and climbed up on the kitchen counter, and ransacked the cupboards for white rice to throw above our heads during the procession. My brother Henry couldn't sit still in a theater or church without leaning in to whisper something to me, and then doing it again right after I'd told him to stop. My brother Henry ordered mussels whenever they were on the menu. My brother Henry rarely allowed himself dessert. My brother Henry carried the same wallet from the time he was twenty-five, until the last time I saw him. My brother Henry would break into a sweat in the face of mild exertion or moderate heat. My brother Henry had indecipherable handwriting. My brother Henry looked much more handsome in photographs than he ever thought he did. My brother Henry never once climbed through the window to the fire escape without offering running commentary. My brother Henry made me burst out laughing

every time I saw him walking on the other side of the street, on his way to meet me. My brother Henry looked a little glamorous in his winter scarf, the time I met him on Avenue D to go . . . where were we going? My brother Henry did not take kindly to anyone talking during movies. My brother Henry disliked all vegetarians besides me and Ellen. My brother Henry would set up shop outside the main room at parties, and by the end of the night, the party would have moved to the room he was in. My brother Henry did a terrible job at disciplining the dog. My brother Henry read with great concentration at the beach. My brother Henry actually consumed every magazine he subscribed to. My brother Henry's shoulders dropped two inches whenever Bill was around. My brother Henry slept with his mouth open, even back in high school. My brother Henry had unusually heavy silverware in his kitchen drawers. My brother Henry had a Prince t-shirt he wore even after it had a hole in the armpit the size of his armpit. My brother Henry was quiet on car rides when we were growing up. My brother Henry never shut up on car rides when we were grown. My brother Henry usually ordered the best thing on the menu, but when he guessed wrong, he would mope for the rest of the meal. My brother Henry summoned intense focus each time he made a sandwich. My brother Henry often knocked over glasses on the table with his hands when he spoke. My brother Henry was once lying on his stomach on the couch, in red-and-white striped baby pajamas, and I walked up to the edge of the couch, and put my face up close, and he looked like a space alien—although I think I'm just remembering the color of the pajamas from a picture. My brother Henry always carried a white handkerchief in the side-pocket of his pants. My brother Henry was too anxious and distracted to drive. My brother Henry was unapologetically useless with a map. My brother Henry's pants never fit quite right. My brother Henry's laugh is not a sound I can call up in my head, just the way his face looked. My brother Henry wanted an excessive amount of ice in all his iced beverages. My brother Henry handed me an empty bag of chips just in time the one time we took a plane in junior high, and I threw up as it was descending. My brother Henry wore a cologne I never knew the name of, for as long as I can remember in New York. My brother Henry liked cheese but not milk. My brother Henry always stuck his elbow out too far over my placemat at the dinner table, but I got yelled at if I complained to Mom. My brother Henry always cleaned his eyeglasses with his breath and his sweater. My brother Henry was once a lion for Halloween. My brother Henry was once a wizard. My brother Henry was once Peter Rabbit. My brother Henry was once Oliver from Oliver Twist. My brother Henry was once an alter boy—not on Halloween, though, on Sundays. My brother Henry once fainted from smelling all the incense on an empty stomach, and Mom made me sit still while Dad walked up to the alter, hoisted Henry over his shoulder, and walked past the row we were sitting in . . . and later I told Henry he looked like a sack of potatoes, and laughed, and Henry didn't cry . . . but he made a face that left me lying awake after Mom closed the door . . . and it was the first time I ever couldn't stand it that I couldn't turn back time. My brother Henry once screamed at me because I didn't bother to vote in the mayoral elections. My brother Henry always made the bathroom smell more than Ellen, but less than Jack. My brother Henry always misremembered things, and insisted his version was right. My brother

Henry's left hand was a little smaller than his right hand, but I never noticed until he was sick, our whole lives. My brother Henry always picked out much funnier birthday cards than anything I've ever found in a drugstore. My brother Henry hated the sound of people chewing gum, but until almost the very end, I chewed it anyway. My brother Henry was very concerned about the plight of the manatee for most of elementary school. My brother Henry always started talking about the show much too close to the theater. My brother Henry was more excited than anyone any time I got laid. My brother Henry walked or took cabs almost everywhere he went. My brother Henry was often running even later than me. My brother Henry gave me bronchitis and chicken pox. My brother Henry used to water down his orange juice. My brother Henry dog-eared his books. My brother Henry would tell the same story to each set of friends after something happened, and once he found a phrase that made the whole table laugh, he'd never tell the story without it.

*She walks over to the worn cardboard box, picks it up, and carries it over to the mattress. She places it on the floor, sits down on the bed. She opens the box, and sits there, looking at the objects inside it, without touching anything. She pulls out the faded yellow Olivia Newton-John t-shirt, and drapes it across her lap.*

*Lights shift.*

Scene Sixteen.

*June, 2015. The next morning. A little before 6 a.m.*

*The apartment is mostly dark, the edges of things wrapped in a thin, grey light.*

*The mattress has been made up with sheets and pillows pulled back out of the packed moving boxes. A small, vintage lamp on the floor has been switched on, illuminating the area around the bed. Meg is still seated with the t-shirt on her lap. She holds the shoulders of the shirt in her hands, staring down at the decal.*

*A very quiet moment.*

*The bathroom door opens, off-stage. Ellen comes into the room—already dressed, hair wet, a towel in her hand. She stops at the sight of Meg sitting on the bed. Meg looks up at Ellen. There is something direct and simple about her gaze, as if, rather than feeling ambushed, some part of her has been waiting for Ellen to walk in.*

ELLEN. Did I wake you?

MEG. No I was up.

*Beat. Ellen glances down at the shirt.*

ELLEN. I couldn't sleep.

*Tiny beat.*

MEG. Me neither.

*Beat. Ellen looks down at the shirt again.*

ELLEN. I forgot about that.

*Tiny beat.*

MEG. I forgot it was so yellow.

*Beat.*

ELLEN. I wish they still made t-shirts thin like that.

MEG (*feeling the fabric*). They made'm softer too.

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. Can I touch it?

MEG. Yeah.

*Ellen crosses to the bed, sits down next to Meg. Meg gently hands her the shirt. They sit looking at the decal, as Ellen feels the fabric of the shoulders.*

ELLEN. Do you think Olivia Newton-John still works out?

MEG. Probly not in those pants.

ELLEN. No one actually wore leg warmers like that.

MEG. I wore leg warmers exactly like that. I had ten pairs of them.

ELLEN. Well you were actually dancing. I don't know what everybody else was doing.

*Beat. Ellen and Meg sit looking at the shirt.*

ELLEN. This was in there? (*Meg nods. Tenderly*) I would never have made you throw it out.

MEG. I know. (*Half-beat.*) I got . . . caught off-guard.

*Ellen smells the t-shirt.*

MEG. It smells like cardboard. (*Ellen nods and hands her the shirt. Meg holds it.*) I almost threw it all out.

ELLEN. Because of the car?

MEG. Long time ago.

*Beat. Ellen looks at the box.*

ELLEN. Do you have them?

MEG. I burned 'em. (*Tiny beat.*) Do you?

ELLEN. Just the one to me.

MEG. Ellen, what I said last night—

*Ellen closes her eyes and raises her hands gently: please just drop it.*

MEG. You were right.

ELLEN. About what?

MEG. I didn't ask.

ELLEN. You shouldn't have had to.

MEG. What I said last night—

ELLEN. Meg—

MEG. No—I take it back. There's no such thing. But I take it back.

ELLEN. I didn't mean to use you—

MEG. Yeah you did.

*Half-beat.*

ELLEN. I'm sorry.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. It's not a bad life. It's just a shitty month.

ELLEN. It's a really shitty month. (*Beat.*) I'm gonna tell him to stay.

MEG. Does he have clothes?

ELLEN. He can come up next weekend. There's no reason to drag him all the way up there if he's gotta turn right around.

*Tiny beat.*

MEG. He's gonna be fine.

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. When you're sleep-training your kid, there's like . . . two-hundred-and-seven different books. Nobody writes that much about how to shut up and let them make their own mistakes.

MEG. Do you really think he's making a mistake?

ELLEN. I need to get off his back.

*Beat.*

ELLEN (*quietly*). The house feels so empty when he goes.

*Half-beat.*

MEG. You'll have *me* in the way till September . . .

*Tiny beat.*

ELLEN. You're gonna have to carry the boxes. I could barely get 'em up the stairs at Goodwill. It made me feel like a senior citizen.

MEG. You just need to stretch.

ELLEN. I can barely touch my toes.

MEG. Yes you can. (*Placing the t-shirt on the bed and standing*) Stand up.

ELLEN. Meg—you spend every/ day—

MEG. All you need is five minutes when you wake up! Stand up!

ELLEN (*standing*). If I throw my back out—

MEG. Just put your feet like this. A little wider. Arms at your sides. Now just drop your head to your chest. (*Meg drops her head to her chest. Ellen follows*) Now drop it a little more. Now roll it back up.

(*Beginning to snap on the slow-count*) Now drop, 2, coming up, 2. Do it again. Now drop, 2, coming up, 2. We're gonna do the whole thing. Just do it, don't watch.

Drop the head, 2, rolling up, 2, half-way down, 2, rolling up, 2, all the way, 2, 3, 4, bend the knees, 2, lift the hips, 2, come back up, 2, 3, 4, and open, 2, 3, 4, to the left 2, back to center 2, to the right collapse, swing back up, 2 to the right 2, back to center 2, to left collapse, swing back up, 2, let them fall, breath.

*Ellen follows clumsily, craning her neck to look at Meg on each step, and then rushing one beat behind to mimic her. Meg keeps her gaze inward. When they reach the end of the first round, Ellen turns to make a self-deprecating comment, but Meg goes right back into the count. Ellen dives back into the rhythm, this time, without sneaking looks at Meg. Her motions are still a little awkward, especially in contrast with Meg's uncanny elegance, but she commits to it, getting a few inches closer to her toes than last time.*

Drop the head, 2, rising up, 2, half-way down, 2, rising up, 2, all the way, 2, 3, 4, bend the knees, 2, lift the hips, 2, come back up, 2, 3, 4, and open 2, 3, 4, to the left 2, back to center 2, to the right collapse, swing back up, (*snap*) to the right (*snap*), back to center (*snap*), to left collapse, swing back up, (*snap*), let them fall, breath.

*They exchange a brief glance at the top—*

And again, (*snap*).

*Meg and Ellen move through the warm-up together—  
this time, with Meg just snapping out the count—  
each, in her own way, allowing herself to make the movements beautiful—  
each letting her gaze go soft—  
Ellen, not quiet touching her toes, but almost grazing the floor with her fingertips.*

*Lights fade as they move through it,  
going to black before they've reached the end.*

End of Play.

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