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2010
In The Waiting Room
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by

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Thesis
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to any and all who have been denied their rights because of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Lucien Douglas and Pamela Christian. Also, many thanks to my parents for encouraging me to seek an education and a career in acting. And Egan, for being necessary in my life.

May 3, 2010
Abstract

In The Waiting Room

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisor: Lucien Douglas

This thesis consists of two major sections. The first is the text of the play In The Waiting Room that I wrote and performed on April 16, 2010 in the Lab Theater on the campus of The University of Texas at Austin. The second section is a paper on the process of writing and performing the piece, including script development and the rehearsal process, as well as final reflections on my work and the time I spent here in the MFA in Acting program.
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IN THE WAITING ROOM

Part One: The Script

(In the black, a profoundly loud sound: a door slamming.

Sudden lights up on ANNA, holding a ring. She’s obviously exhausted.)

ANNA

This is my wedding ring.

I’ve been married one year, three months, two weeks, and five days. I’ve been in this waiting room for seventy-five of those days.

(Lights expand to reveal a hospital waiting room. It’s the ICU waiting room. Decorations attempt to make the space feel “homey.” They fail. There is a plant or two. It (or they) looks sad. Chairs. On one, there is a worn jean jacket and a hunting hat. Against another leans a pair of crutches. Next to a third is a copy of When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chodron. Nearby sits a handbag and several used Kleenexes.)

I’ve been waiting. And imploding with rage and exploding with loneliness and talking. Talking about her disease and talking about how much I miss her and asking, over and over again, why I can’t see her. (Pause.) Talking to my fellows in purgatory. Asking them my question, a question they can’t answer.

Imogen (When Things Fall Apart chair.) doesn’t say much, but sometimes I’ll come back from the vending machine and know that she’s had something to say and
she’ll clam up. I don’t think she likes me. I don’t think she “approves” of my “lifestyle.” But she’s given me the occasional Kleenex when I’m crying. She thinks it’s . . . she thinks I’m wrong, but she understands my sadness. It’s her father who’s back there, and she knows.

Carla (*Crutches.*) was driving back from her son’s little league game at four o’clock in the afternoon when a drunk driver ran a red light and put them both in the hospital. Carla recovered enough to go home after thirteen days, but Daniel has been in an induced coma for forty. If there’s anything worse than losing your spouse, it’s got to be losing your child. I don’t envy Carla anything.

This is Bill’s place (*Jacket, hat.*). He’s been here all this week. His wife is back there, and he comes out to the waiting room to sit while other family members need to go see her. At every other moment, he’s back there with her. He sleeps in there. They’ve been married thirty years. He likes to talk to me. He said that we have a lot in common. He misses her even when they’re apart for only twenty minutes. I know what he means. The distance is so short, but the sense of being *apart from* is tangible. Another thing he said to me, though, it helps. It does, it helps, is that he can still feel that she’s alive. He said he’s sure he’ll know the exact moment that she passes. That his body will recognize when her body stops being full of her. I believe him. I feel the same way. It’s been so long since I’ve touched her hair, or her hands, but I can feel that she’s beyond those doors. I can feel her, and that helps. If I stopped feeling her . . . Then I would know.

(*Overcome.*) Man, you know, I just . . .

THE VOICE
“Welcome back to our continuing election coverage. It’s a big night tonight, with two ballot initiatives on the line that could have major impact on the people of this state. First, we’ll look at the results for Proposition 280, which might raise the state speed limits to 80 miles per hour during the day. Next, the very controversial Proposition 290, which would make it legal for homosexuals to marry, and would recognize the gay marriage licenses issued by other states.

“The polls have closed on this foggy November day, and we’re just getting the first of the results. On Prop 280, it seems that the “yeas” have it so far: a majority of voters are in favor of raising the speed limit. Keep in mind that these results are preliminary and we will check back throughout the evening with updates. As far as Prop 290 goes, the early figures are not as clear. It seems that, as of now, the movement will be defeated, with fifty-three percent of the votes indicating that they do not want homosexual marriage to be made legal. But we’re still waiting for crucial counties to report results, and the results from those counties could be crucial to the decision. (Pause.) A brief look at the weather for the week is next, followed by our continuing election coverage.”

ANNA

Breathe. Start over. I’ve been married for one year, three months, two weeks, and five days. I’ve been in this waiting room for seventy-five of those days. I’ve been waiting to see my wife. Ellie. I’m a lesbian. Were you surprised? Sometimes people are surprised. They say things like, “But you don’t look like a lesbian.” But I am, so Ellie is my wife to me, but not to the people who make the rules in this hospital. She’s not my wife enough.
She’s just behind those doors, dreaming unspeakable dreams. Tended to by nurses and whispered about by doctors, she is mostly unconscious. There’s one nurse, Teresa, who’s sympathetic to our situation and she tells me that my wife asks for me. What she doesn’t tell me, but what I know is that Ellie doesn’t know why I’m not there. She’s confused because of the drugs and the pain and she feels abandoned.

(Pause. Change.)

You grow up, and you think you know yourself well enough to subject yourself onto another person and you make a vow to be there forever and to take care of one another and you are married. And you think that if you’re married you won’t have to die alone. That the person you love will love you and that at the moment of your death you will be holding that person’s hand. We’re no safer with a partner, but at least we’re not alone. We won’t be alone. We shouldn’t be alone. I am supposed to be there with her: I promised her that I would be there so she wouldn’t have to suffer alone, so she wouldn’t have to die alone . . .

But. Today is different than other days I’ve spent here in the waiting room. Today there is an election, and on the ballot is . . . A lot. If it passes, then I can go through that door and see Ellie. If it doesn’t . . .

(ANNA stops. She apologizes in some way; she can’t continue. Lights change.

Time passes. ANNA gets a new idea.)

ANNA

When I was thirteen, I nearly drowned while swimming in the Pacific Ocean on a family vacation. I was a good swimmer, and ambitious, and my thirteen-year-old self
wanted every challenge she could take. I swam out too far; I got caught in the undertow. I nearly drowned. The lifeguard swam out and dragged me back in and performed mouth-to-mouth and my parents were incandescently furious with me.

When the grief of being without Ellie comes, it comes like those waves punishing my head; it comes and I have no control and I drown in it, no matter how hard I kick and pull for the surface. Sometimes, it’s as if I’ve already lost her. The rest of the time . . . I balance on a tightrope above the surface of the water. I breathe very carefully; I try to be invisible to the waves. I am very still, and I am very afraid of the wind and what it might carry. You see, balanced on a tightrope, you are safe if absolutely nothing happens. But the wind could blow too hard and knock you into the water at any moment. And right now, this (Indicating television and election) . . . this could really knock me under. Or it could calm the waves, and I could wake up, back on the beach. Mouth full of sand, ears full of water, and sputtering, but on the beach, alive. Because she’ll still be sick, right? But there’s a part of me that feels like if I can be with her, I can somehow make her better . . . ? Or maybe it would only make me feel better to be with her. But I would. I’d feel better.

This I also know: I love her and I miss her.

Oh, E.

Ellie is . . . Well, smart and beautiful and funny, yes, the smartest person I know. The life in her mind is staggering. You give her an intense intellectual debate and she’s there, with just the smartest perspective, but at the same time I watch her with her friends, figuring out these very complex emotional and family situations and she always hits the
nail on the head but . . . But . . . Well, she looks like what I always imagine Rosalind should look like in *As You Like It*. Too vague? She looks like a female Van Gogh in the self-portraits when he was feeling really good about himself. Are there any like that or have I imagined them? Anyway, no, she looks like Cate Blanchett playing Bob Dylan in that movie. Rangy and gorgeous and . . . Well, She looks like no one else.

But, yes, Bob Dylan. There’s a lyric that he wrote: “Whatever colors you have, in your mind, I’ll show them to you, and you’ll see them shine.” Ellie is a painter. And looking at her paintings, you’d swear she was Dylan and you were whoever he’s singing to in that song. *(Sings:)* “Whatever colors you have, in your mind, I’ll show them to you, and you’ll see them shine.”

That’s Ellie. She created images that were so vibrant, and so truthful, that you’d swear she was painting the inside of you, but more so. Or maybe that was just me.

But it wasn’t. That’s something I love so much about her. I was . . . I *am* so proud of her, so proud to be with this incredible artist. And to see how her work moved me, but moved me in the same way it moved just about everyone who saw it. Because, you see, she painted, really, only for herself. She just knew that if she was honest, other people would get it, and relate, and feel that truth in it too. And they did. At her shows, there were the usual *artistes* and those types, but also people off the street who’d just come in to look at the gallery and would sit in front of the canvases. Grandmothers, homeless dudes, families, couples. And there was a common denominator there, under all these people, and it was her work, and how good it was, and how true it was. She was making the colors of their minds shine.
Also, she was funny. She always knew how to be with our families, even the ones who didn’t know what to make of a woman and a woman being married. At the wedding (which was freaking beautiful, if I do say so myself) my Uncle Ed, who always had a problem with us (loved me, but couldn’t wrap his head around the “gay” thing), said to her: “I bless you, I really do, and I know that you make Anna happy, and that makes me happy, but I don’t like the thought of . . . you know . . .” And Ellie finished his sentence: “Of us having sex. Yes. Well, Ed, I don’t relish thoughts of you and the missus getting it on, either, so maybe we should both just keep intimacies out of it.” (Pause.) And I can’t say it like she did, but it was so cute and funny and he laughed too and . . . it made things okay, for that moment. Not just for us, but for him. He saw us, then, and he saw her for who she . . .

(THE VOICE interrupts ANNA. She immediately turns to the television.)

THE VOICE

“Some reactions, today, outside of polling places, as we try to gauge the temperature on the hot-button issue of Proposition 290: should same-sex marriage be made legal today? We go to Kelsey Streder, taking the pulse.

“KELSEY: And how did you vote, today, on Proposition 290? A NEW VOICE ANSWERS: ‘I voted against it, because I believe in traditional marriage. I don’t have anything against the homosexual population, but I think marriage is between one man and one woman.’ A VOICE: ‘Oh heavens yes, I voted for it. I mean, why deny people their human rights? Well, in the case of someone who’s sick: well, you can’t get in to see them in intensive care unless you’re a relative and marriage makes you a relative.’ A VOICE:
'I voted for it, you know, because it’s tough to say that everyone shouldn’t have a . . . uh . . . properly acknowledged union.’ A VOICE: ‘If we allow homosexual marriage, it opens up all kinds of different unions. Of course I voted against it. If you redefine marriage, you’re changing everything our society is based on.’ KELSEY: There you have it, reactions just outside of polling places. Back to you in the studio.”

THE VOICE

“Thank you, Kelsey. Clearly, a great debate on the issue of Proposition 290. Election results continue to come in, we will be the first to break the news.”

ANNA

For my twenty-eighth birthday, the first birthday we celebrated as a “married” couple and the last one I had before she got sick, Ellie got me this great card. (ANNA takes the card out of her pocket, holds it up.) If you can’t see, the picture is two kids making a mess with cheerios and being goofy. The card caption inside says: “Still not a morning person. Happy Birthday.” (Pause.) And Ellie wrote: “Darling, This is a silly card caption, but a fantastic photograph. (Although it’s true that you’re not really a morning person.) I love you so much. I’m so excited about celebrating your 88th birthday together, too. Yours Always, E.” And the thing about it, the reason I have it here with me, is that I got so mad at Ellie that morning. We were both stressed and it was the middle of winter and oh, I don’t know, I just wanted more fucking fanfare or something about it being my birthday, her wife’s birthday, so I picked a fight and said that it didn’t seem like she cared about me at all and huffed around making tea and ignored her while she got ready for work and shrugged her off when she tried to give me a hug before she left and
said goodbye like a petulant asshole, which is what I was being, and so she left for work and was gone all day. And I just kind of got madder and madder as the hours passed and she didn’t call me or text me or anything. And then she came home with this card for me. Because I’m not a morning person, and never have been.

Fuck, what I would give to have that morning back. To trade that fight in for a nice morning just looking at her, just being at home where the legal status of our relationship took up no space between us.

(A plea:) This is my wedding ring.

(ANNA is distracted, once again, by the television.)

THE VOICE

“We are back, with our election coverage, to report that Prop 280, to increase daytime speed limits, has passed; along with the surprising news that Prop 290, to legalize same-sex marriage, has also passed. It is now legal for gays and lesbians to marry, and our state must recognize same-sex marriages from other states. This is clearly a major accomplishment for the gay and lesbian community, and we’re sure that there will be some celebrating this evening, along with continued debate on this major issue.

I’m Grant Steele, thanks for tuning in.”

ANNA

Thank you.

(ANNA exits, at a run, to see Ellie. Lights and sound crescendo and then fade to black and silence.)
Part 2: The Process

I wrote my thesis about the fight for gay marriage in the United States of America. I wrote it because I believe that all citizens of this country should have equal rights, and I wrote it for the people in my life who have faced discrimination. I wrote a character I wanted to embody, and I wrote a story I wanted to tell.
Chapter One: Finding a Thesis Topic

In the spring of 2009, my boyfriend, Egan, and I began to have more and more serious questions about the future. We’d been together, on-and-off, for nearly seven years, and were both going to finish graduate school in the spring of 2010. We felt more in love than ever before, and more mature than ever before, so we talked about getting married and raising a family. I was over the moon, and it was all very romantic, but I found myself up late at night asking a lot of questions.

I was thinking a lot about commitment, about really being with someone forever and entering into a life-long partnership, and about what kinds of sacrifices and compromises I’d be willing to make to stay with the man I love so much. I was also thinking about marriage as an institution. Since I can remember, I’ve “known” that I want to get married and have a family. But did I know? How did I know? What did I know? My own parents divorced, suddenly and shockingly, when I was twenty-one (ironically, about six months after Egan and I first started dating) after almost thirty years together. My younger brother and I were both eviscerated by the end of our parents’ marriage. It was an awful time. I found myself struggling to understand why such a spectacularly failed institution was, nonetheless, so appealing to me. Why did I think I could do a better job than Mom and Dad? Why did I, a fully emancipated and empowered woman of the twenty-first century, desire so much to be someone’s wife? When I was really honest with myself, I knew that I would sacrifice and compromise my
own career for Egan’s if he was my fiancé or my husband, but I wasn’t so sure that would be the case if he was my boyfriend. Why was that?

I puzzled and puzzled, and came up with this answer: marriage is important to society. It is important to people because it is the way that others recognize the commitment and the love between two people. It is important because a legal marriage is binding. Yes, people get divorced all the time, but you have to really put a lot of effort into getting un-married. Marriage makes you stick around. Marriage is for the good times and the bad, and that’s important. It’s important to commit, to give your children a stable home. And it’s important to love and be loved, and have the community around you acknowledge that love, because then you fight harder for it.

I thought: this is the topic for a thesis! Commitment in the modern age! Marriage in the generation whose parents all divorced! I have my subject!

After Egan and I actually got engaged (a beautiful proposal beside the Vltava river in Prague on August 14, 2009), I found a sudden and complete clarity: commitment and marriage are so personal, so unique to a couple, so right for Egan and me, and maybe not for countless other couples for countless reasons, that I lost interest in my thesis topic. For one minute. Then I realized what my thesis topic really was: the struggle for equal marriage rights of the gay and lesbian citizens of this country.

I realized that I have pondered on and worried over this issue (not stupidly, the subject deserves consideration) while taking it utterly for granted.
There are so many people who would love to be in my position but can’t be because their civil rights are not the same as mine.

I was floored.

In America, in this day and age, I have rights that other people do not have.

It was silly, this late revelation, as I am quite political in general and specifically have called Senators and Congress people on the subject of gay rights. I had just never thought that gay rights would be my thesis topic. But there it was, staring me in the face, and it was inspiring. I thought: if I can write and perform a piece that makes even one person reevaluate his or her stance on the Gay Marriage Debate, here in Texas, then I will have done something.
Chapter Two: Writing the Play

So I set out to write my play. A few things I knew I wanted to achieve in this play were: I wanted to play one character. I wanted to write a play with a plot and consequences; a monologue play, yes, but I wanted something to profoundly change between the beginning and the end of the story. Most important, especially with my subject matter, I wanted to write a political play but not create something that felt like a lecture. I wanted to write a human story, and find universality in the specifics of this character and her relationship. I did not want my eventual audience to feel that they were being browbeaten with my own personal politics; rather, I wanted them to feel like they were watching a play, and seeing a person with a story.

To these ends, I feel I have been pretty successful. I am not a playwright and don’t aspire to be, but I’ve set my thesis play on the day of an election in which a key question is the passage of a bill that would legalize gay marriage in an unnamed state. In this place on this day, there are definite circumstances and stakes, and the possibility of change from beginning to end. My character, Anna, waits for news of the election as she paces around the ICU waiting room at a hospital. Her wife, Ellie, is seriously ill and possibly dying, but Anna is not allowed to see her because she has no legal status as Ellie’s wife since marriages between gays and lesbians are not recognized by the state. Yet. I based these
circumstances on several real news pieces I’d read about gay couples not being granted access to hospital sick beds. It actually happens\(^1\).

Heterosexual spouses have automatic status as next-of-kin and power of attorney. A gay or lesbian couple, regardless of how long they’ve been together or what commitment ceremony they’ve had or what their wills say, has nothing but their word in every state except Iowa, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Jersey, New Hampshire, The District of Columbia, and Connecticut. I won’t go into the complexities of the marriage laws in each of these places; suffice to say, they’re all different. Some states offer only “civil unions” or “domestic partnerships” that confer some or all of the same rights as marriage without actually calling it marriage. (Interestingly, according to Wikipedia, the Coquille Indian Tribe in Oregon also grants same-sex marriage licenses, but at least one spouse must be a member of the tribe, and as of the 2000 census, 576 people identified themselves as such. So it doesn’t mean a lot to a whole lot of people, but to those few to whom it means something, it means a whole lot.) Because the marriage laws in each state are different, and because I wanted to write a dramatic text rather than spout off a lot of facts and figures, I chose not to name the location of the hospital in question. Dramaturgically, I felt that it would be too much to try to make everything in the play factual; instead I focused my energy on creating a character and a relationship that seemed real. (In my imagination, however, Anna and Ellie live in Austin, Texas and the election taking place in the play is in 2014.)

\(^1\) [www.whygaymarriage.com/newsletter.php/22](http://www.whygaymarriage.com/newsletter.php/22)
The first line of the play I wrote is the first line of the play: “This is my wedding ring.” The second line of the play I wrote is the final line: “Thank you.” I knew that I wanted my play to end with a confirmation and a triumph of gay rights, because that is what I personally want and because that is the future I envision in this country. Studies show that as more and more people know gay men and lesbians, more and more people believe that their gay children and siblings and cousins and co-workers and friends should have equal rights. In addition, a substantial majority of Americans under the age of thirty support the rights of gays and lesbians to marry\(^2\). More people come out every day, and the under-thirty population of America is large and (at least in the 2008 Presidential election) they vote. I believe, and I hope, that this thesis will be rendered obsolete (other than as a memory of darker times) in less than a decade. I hope that this is so. My need to focus this thesis on this issue came out of feeling amazed when the idea occurred, and also feeling disgusted by what I see as a great inequality.

The fact that some Americans enjoy rights that others do not have simply boggles my mind. No, felons cannot vote and, yes, I see the logic there: if one violates the laws of ones’ community so heinously as to be labeled a “felon,” one waives ones’ right to vote. But not ones’ right to due process, etc. (Also, that is a different issue.)

When framing the Declaration of Independence, John Adams and his fellows fought hard for the end of slavery. They capitulated on that issue to make sure that all of the colonies would unite in the War of Independence against

\(^2\) [http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1375/gay-marriage-civil-unions-opinion](http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1375/gay-marriage-civil-unions-opinion)
Britain. The fact that slavery was a legal practice in this country for as many years as it was still galls and enrages many people, including myself. Excepting a small, bigoted minority, most people are thankful that Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War ended slavery, but they also recognize that achieving equal civil rights for African-Americans was a long and hard battle that is not yet over, even though a black man is President.

Why am I talking about the Civil War in a thesis on gay marriage? Well, because in this section of the thesis I feel free to be political. While the text of the play is, I hope, a human story about a person in a tough situation, the fact of the matter is that America has been about freedom and equality since the beginning, marred by the grievous “original sin” of slavery. Take it away, Jefferson:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

There it is, right at the top of the Declaration of Independence: we’re all created equal, we all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson thought that the point of government was to keep people safe and happy! That’s what this country is about. And I can’t think of a larger impediment to the pursuit of happiness than not being allowed to form a lifelong partnership with a loving

---

spouse. Of course, there are plenty of gay, lesbian and straight couples who are perfectly happy in partnerships without marriage. But I can’t think of a larger impediment to the pursuit of happiness than not being allowed to form a lifelong partnership with a loving spouse that is legitimized and acknowledged by the community and the nation; a marriage, for someone who wants one. And that encompasses a lot of gay and lesbian people. The debate on gay marriage is meaningful to our very national character and identity. As long as there are citizens of these United States who are not equal, who cannot exercise their right to the pursuit of happiness, we are not living up to our own ideals, our potential, our status as a leading force in the world for good.

The Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s were attempts by courageous Americans to achieve the potential Jefferson and the rest of the Founding Fathers saw in their nascent nation; and they did. We are far from post-racial, but the fact that African Americans now fully share in the American Dream means that we have improved our country. The gay rights movement is no different. When gay people can marry we will have further perfected the union.
Chapter Three: Rehearsals and Acting

As I wrote the piece, I wrestled with these big ideas of Happiness, and Rights, and Inequality. I also wrote, as much as I could, in my own voice. They say, “write what you know,” and I tried to hold to that idea. To that end, when I acted the piece, and when I thought about acting the piece, I was creating a character who spoke like me and thought like me, and most importantly, felt like me. Because of this, most of the acting that I brought to the piece was organic. I knew the moments because I had written them. In hindsight, however, I can see the techniques I used as I rehearsed.

The emotional climax of the piece is the passage when Anna reveals the birthday card from Ellie and tells the story of her terrible twenty-eighth birthday. That is (mostly) a true story, and the card I held in my hands and read onstage is the real card that Egan got me for my twenty-eighth birthday. I wrote that moment thinking of Sanford Meisner and his “as if.” I knew that I needed an emotional key into loss and regret, and so I chose a moment from my own life that resounded with what Anna experienced in the waiting room. Holding the real birthday card in my hands brought me into the circumstances of that morning completely.

Before beginning a run of my piece, I would stand and meditate and breathe deeply. At the top of a run, I always keyed into the “wringing” movement effort from the Laban work that the MFA acting class did with Andrea Beckham and Pamela Christian. I use Laban in nearly every role I prepare, as I find that keying into one of the efforts is a straightforward way to
find the core of the character, or the core of the emotional content of a moment to build from. I chose “wringing” for the thesis not because I feel that Anna is a person who wrings, but because wringing keyed me into the emotional state she’s in, in the waiting room.

In addition to the Laban, before every run I imagined my circumstances, I pictured my emotional triggers (including the birthday card), and I held the image of Egan’s face in my mind. I opened my heart to what it would feel like to be separated from him in this way, and as the grief rose from my gut to my heart, I knew I was ready to begin.

Portraying grief onstage worried me. To that end, I spoke with several close friends about grief they’d experienced, and asked them to tell me what they’d felt. I kept those stories secret, but would call upon a conversation with my friend Lauren, who’d recently lost her mother, when I felt my emotional life was not truthful. I remembered Lauren’s voice as she talked about her mom, and I remembered the way I felt as she spoke about her loss: the empathy that brought tears to my eyes, and emptiness to my stomach. I tried to bring that to my performance.

Throughout all of the acting classes I took here at UT, the major through line was to make specific choices in my acting. The power of specificity was proved again and again in my own work and in the work of my colleagues. In my thesis, in both the writing and the acting, I did my best to find specific, truthful descriptors and images. Particularly in describing the way Ellie looks, I found specific images of women to create in my imagination a real person.
I almost felt as if I was cheating in acting a script I’d written. Since I was the author, I felt that I knew the best way to portray each moment. I’d portray it as it was in my mind. I did not wonder at which word might be the operative word in a sentence because I had written that sentence. But as I rehearsed, I realized that this was not always so. When other people saw the piece performed, they had incredibly insightful feedback about what they needed to hear most, and I made acting adjustments accordingly. The most transformative note came from Pamela Christian. In this passage:

> And you think that if you’re married you won’t have to die alone. That the person you love will love you and that at the moment of your death you will be holding that person’s hand. We’re no safer with a partner, but at least we’re not alone. We won’t be alone. We shouldn’t be alone. I am supposed to be there with her; I promised her that I would be there so she wouldn’t have to suffer alone, so she wouldn’t have to die alone . . .

I had been emphasizing “alone” each time the word occurred. Pamela encouraged me to instead emphasize the words around “alone.” Thus, suffer, die, shouldn’t, and won’t all took on a greater meaning, and I learned to tell this story better.

In Fran Dorn’s acting class our focus was on Shakespeare, and she likes to say that in acting she wants to see, “All the truth and all the beauty all the time.” That has really stayed with me, and I try to bring it to every audition, every scene, every performance I do. In my understanding of what Fran (and now, me) wants, truth is beauty. If every moment created onstage has a home in the real heart and soul of the actor, it will be beautiful. How does one bring truth to every
moment? By showing up fully to the moment, by opening up to one’s scene partner, by responding honestly in the moment, by honoring the intentions of the playwright through careful and thorough text analysis and then bringing that text to full human life.

For me, acting is fundamentally about moments of revelation. An actor reveals him- or herself, and the character he or she is playing to the audience. The audience, in turn, experiences revelations. An audience member might recognize herself in the character, or recognize someone she knows, or recognize a situation, or recognize something familiar and mysterious and true about the human experience. That is what I try to do as a performer: create moments of revelation. That is what I have learned to do here at The University of Texas at Austin.
Chapter Four: The Performance

I got to share this work with an audience on April 16, 2010. On April 15, 2010, the day before my thesis was to be performed, President Obama signed a mandate. In short, this mandate requires that all U.S. hospitals that use Medicare or Medicaid recognize the rights of gay and lesbian couples to see their partners in intensive care, and gives them automatic power of attorney\(^4\). This, obviously, was very big news. I was thrilled. While the mandate is a far cry from full marriage rights, at least the situation I describe in my thesis is far less likely to happen. I was surprised by the news, as nothing in the research I’d done in the past several months indicated that such a decision was imminent, or that it was at all the President’s priority to address the issue.

The evening of the performance, I was incredibly anxious. I am not normally a particularly nervous actor, but I had never before performed anything that I had written or directed, and I felt incredibly vulnerable in this performance situation. Add to that the fact that my very subject had become big news within the past 24 hours, and I was nearly paralyzed with stage fright: a paralysis I’ve never before experienced. Because of this, my memory of the performance itself is vague: I know that I had had better runs of the piece in rehearsal, but nothing went wrong. Although “stage fright,” and techniques to overcome it are a large question in the world of performance, I have not spent much time researching such techniques, as stage fright is not normally an issue I face. Ordinarily, simple deep breathing will calm me down before a show, but

before my thesis presentation I was nearly inconsolable with nerves. It was a brand-new feeling for me, and so I plan to devote some time over the summer to exploring ways to clam down, should I ever experience that type of panic before a performance.

My first semester at The University of Texas at Austin, my acting class was focused on the Meisner technique: learning to stay deeply in the moment with one’s partner and to respond to the plethora of behavior that a human being may exhibit in any given moment. In a one-person show, one might think that Meisner would not be essential, but in my performance I found myself trying to tune in with the audience the way one might tune in with a scene partner: I felt myself riding the audience and responding to them. To that end, I do wish that I had performed my solo piece more than once. The audience response, and the way that it impacted the performance, was profound. I could feel, at the outset of the piece, that the audience was confused. Many members of the audience knew me, so I think that they were experiencing some cognitive dissonance at the fact that I was playing a lesbian. I felt, in those moments, that my characterization became ever more important. I upped my commitment to my circumstances and my character. Then, I felt the energy shift into the story. With that shift, I did what I would do with any scene partner, I played my actions on the audience: I seduced them, I convinced them, I opened them up, and I begged them. The audience became my scene partner. In the play, the audience consists of the potential voters on the day in question, so in performance, I was dependent on the reactions of the audience to achieve my objective, which was the passage of
the amendment to legalize gay marriage. While this performance will go down in my memory as a performer as the worst stage fright I’ve ever experienced. It will also go down in my memory as an accomplishment, because of some of the responses I received afterward.

At the end of the evening, a number of people came up to me with tears in their eyes, and I took that as a very good sign. Particularly my gay and lesbian friends in the audience seemed touched by the piece (to be expected, I suppose), but also by the fact that I chose this subject. I undertook this piece in the spirit of alliance with my friends and colleagues who are engaged in the struggle for gay rights, and I felt very proud that I was embraced as an ally after the performance. Over the course of the week following the thesis performance, I was approached again and again by people who said that they agreed, and were moved, and thanked me, a straight woman, for tackling the subject. I had expected that the content of the piece would be the most important aspect for people watching it, but in the feedback I received it seemed that the fact of a straight woman advocating in this type of setting was as important, if not more so.
In Conclusion: A Lesson

I found a subject I loved, I wrote a play that I feel proud of, for what it is. I do feel as if I’ve learned a lot through the process of creating this play, but one of the greatest lessons that I’ve taken from it is an understanding of what I love most about being an actor, and the art of making theater. This lesson is that I value collaboration above all else. I respond to the ideas and passions of others, and I am thrilled at the possibility of helping a director or a playwright or a designer achieve the fullness of his or her vision. I felt lonely in this process. I missed collaboration. I would most certainly do another one-person show, but I would want to work with a team of collaborators on said show, and add my voice as an actor. I would most certainly write another piece, but I would want someone else to direct it, and I would want to cast other actors. The theater is (almost always) inherently collaborative and that is important to me. Being in the room alone, writing and rehearsing, is lonely. And perhaps part of the reason that I’ve chosen this profession is that I don’t want to be lonely in my art, I want to share the process of making it with people.

Even though I missed the collaborative aspects in this process, I am grateful and proud to have created this piece. The homosexual population of this country is comparatively tiny, and this fight for equality is big. I feel that it is my responsibility to join in and lend my voice. And this is a tiny play, I know. But now it exists. It is a small drop in the bucket, but it’s here.
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Vita

Catherine deBuys (known as “Katie”) was born in Austin, Texas and grew up, from the age of four, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She received a Bachelor of Science in Speech as a Theater major at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois where she studied with Bud Beyer, David Downs, Paul Edwards, Mary Zimmerman, Linda Gates, and other influential teachers. After working as an actor in Chicago, Catherine further pursued her education in acting here at The University of Texas at Austin. Upon graduation, she plans to move to Washington, D.C. to pursue a career as an actor.

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This thesis was typed by Catherine deBuys