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The Five Stages: a short play for one woman and the creative process

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The Five Stages: a short play for one woman and the creative process

by

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Thesis

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Dedication

To all the men and women who have ever been stuck with Him in an elevator.

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Molly Giles, who told me this tiny piece of fiction should be a tiny play.

To all the women who provided inspiration and were promised anonymity.

And to Daniel Hanna, who has workshopped this play in all its forms and
who loves me even though I am clearly insane.

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Abstract

The Five Stages: a short play for one woman and the creative process

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This comedic short theatre piece follows the main character as she applies the five stages of mourning a death (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) to her recent break-up. The process section then details the writing, development, and performance of the piece for the first time, as well as plans for its future iterations.

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The Play

(All of the text, including the title, is spoken by the actor unless it is in parenthesis. While influenced by the emotional life of the scene, the stages are announced separately, as though in banners.)

(The actor, wearing black leggings and a tank top, begins onstage, rummaging through an old box full of relationship memorabilia - stuffed animals, artwork, and clothes. She is on a couch, surrounded by take-out boxes and Kleenex. A laptop, cell phone, and photo box sit on a coffee table, which is surrounded by loose CDs. Behind the couch represents the porch, which is littered with magazines. As the lights come up she pulls out an eggbeater, followed by a greeting card.)

(To the audience.)

THE FIVE STAGES

(She slowly pulls the card from its envelope, clutching the eggbeater.)

From Him: Lucky

You're one of a kind and I've got you. You really are. Now think about this please. Let's say for a modest estimate, I've probably met several thousand girls in my life, and probably known several hundred, and probably known around a hundred well. And you are one of those several thousand. But you are the best. I shit you not. And I'm the only one that gets to love you. I guess the rest of them can and some of them do, but they don't get to call you 'mine.'

Happy anniversary,

Him

p.s. Hope you like the eggbeater. Breakfast with you is my favorite time of the day.

STAGE ONE: DENIAL

Stop crying. Put down the Kleenex with lotion. Step away from the eggbeater. Think He didn't mean any of this, He was just confused. Maybe He was sleep talking. See the place where He last sat and hear Him saying, saying, saying those words and and try to make yourself believe it, but fail. You can't believe it. Of course He's yours. He's always been yours. There is no such thing as not yours.

Maybe you should just call him. No. Call your boss and tell him the reason you haven't been in is that you're taking a sabbatical. When he asks what's that supposed to mean, you're a hostess, hang up on him. We're getting back together. My future is going to have a context that doesn't involve the cat. Where is the cat? He's been hiding ever since the crying.

Ooh by now your *New Yorker* magazine and other junk mail have started spilling out the mailbox. (*Find a stack of New Yorkers three years thick behind the couch and try to bring them all to the front of the stage. They are impossible to carry, slipping all around, maybe even off the front of the stage. Be satisfied with having even moved them and leave them where they fall. They will prove a nuisance during the piece.*) Drag your ass outside and get them, in case burglars will think you aren't home and try to rob you.

See your perfect neighbor outside and give her a wave. Ignore her perfect stare. Wish you were wearing a bra. Wish He never got you this goddamn subscription.

Having accomplished a task for the day, let yourself go through the pictures. You haven't been allowed to look at the pictures. But it's okay, because they prove He loves you. Oh, look, here we are in the car (we liked being in the car), kayaking, New Year's, making faces like Jack Nicholson, at a friend's wedding— (*losing it*) It can't be over, not before you got the wedding with friends crowded around and you radiant in a Vera Wang gown. Make a mental note to put the Vera Wang on eBay. Shouldn't have bought the damn thing before you were engaged anyway. We're getting back together. (*This has gotten out of hand.*)

What you need, what you need, what you *need* is a drink, but that might lead to drunken dialing so what you *really* need is old school Celine. Look for it, look for it (*Find the right CD amongst the many, stick it in the player, choose the number, press play, and the dramatic overture begins of a dramatic love ballad begins, let's say it's "It's All Coming Back to Me Now" by Celine Dion. Stand with eyes closed and scream over the crashing.*) SCREAM THE LYRICS WHILE JUMPING UP AND DOWN. MULTITASK BY CRYING AS WELL!

(*The jumping becomes singing and screaming and crying and head-banging with your stuffed animal until you are exhausted and collapse on the couch. Pull the photo box to your lap and the music screeches to a halt.*)

Stop when you find a note you've never seen before.

From Him:

Good morning – didn't want to wake you. I ate some of your famous Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Why *is* that all you have in the house?

Love you,

Him

p.s. I ran into your friend from Lambda Chi last night and she asked if I could go to Date Dash with her b/c she didn't have anyone else, so I told her I would. I hope you don't mind. I know you won't. You're wonderful

p.s.s. just because you're wonderful doesn't mean you get to keep my Sublime CD.

(Crumple the note.)

STAGE TWO: ANGER

(Collecting CDs and pitching them at the back wall.)

HURL the Sublime CD over your perfect neighbor's perfect fence. Add in all the Celine Dion for good measure. Hope they knocked the heads off her perfect gardenias.

(Pull around a metal trash can.) Stomp around the house collecting the used and crumpled Kleenex with lotion. Find the cat hiding under the couch and don't care because he was a present from Him.

Grab the photos and cut His face from every one. Sprinkle all the disembodied heads in the trash can. *(Pulling items from the box.)* Add the dried flowers and movie ticket stubs and the program from that film festival He took you to with all those people

who don't shower. Put the trashcan on the front porch and light it on fire (*take it behind the couch.*) When it doesn't burn high enough, add nail polish remover. Pow!

Take a break by making a list of all the horrible traits that ex-best-friend-whore has, especially ones that prove she is superficial. Number one: Her nose job. Maybe you should drive to his house and punch her in the face. Don't, but do make another list: of ways that you are better - like having real body parts.

When there's a knock on the door, freeze. Brush away crumbs and cat hair and can't believe you still don't have on a bra. Wonder if the trash can is still burning. Breathe. Look through the peephole. (*Disappointed.*) It's your mother. She's here to see if you are dead. Yell through the front door that you'd rather be, and she should divorce your father because men aren't worth the effort. Tell her yes, you've eaten, and no thanks, you don't want the casserole she made. Even if it's your favorite.

Tell her to leave it on the front porch, by the trashcan.

Commando to the computer to hack into His email account and find evidence that he still loves you and is just too much of an asshole to admit it. Curse when the motherfucking case-sensitive security questions foil you. His LinkedUpFaceTwit account is the same. Make a mental note to call your cousin to get into it later. She is who the CIA would call if they had relationship problems. (*Slam the lid. Have an idea.*) No - log into his utilities account and disable automatic bill pay. Muse that you're doing him a favor, because surely even without that punch in the face, Nose Job will look better in the dark. (*Slam lid, grab phone.*)

Call your best friend to see if she thinks maybe his whiskey dick is really just good old fashioned erectile dysfunction. Ask if she thinks it's legal to take out a full page

ad in the local paper saying as much. Oh, she seems tired to hear about him again. *Oh yeah, well maybe I should throw up all that ice cream you brought over earlier. I am not being irrational,* tell her. *I don't need your pity because I'm single.* She hangs up on you. Single, like a slice of cheese. *(Drop phone on the floor.)*

STAGE THREE: BARGAINING

Go to church, even though you haven't been in years. *(Leave by going around the couch and coming extreme DSC. A new spotlight comes up at the front of the stage.)* Hope no one sees you. Kneel at the front and promise God that if He will just put this all back together, you will say three Our Fathers a day, or week, or DAY. Put in two quarters instead of one, light a candle, and ask if Nose Job could please suffer in a furnace of firey damnation. Realize you just spent two quarters on firey damnation. Wish you could take it back. Especially the quarters. They're good for doing laundry. This isn't working – go home. *(Light returns to normal as you reenter the living room.)*

See your neighbor outside. Wonder if she knew it was you who dumped the Celine on her flowers. Maybe if you had been the type to keep a flower garden He would not have gotten tired of you.

Grab a New Yorker. He liked those. Try to read a political article, don't know who they are talking about, try to read a science article and don't know *what* they're talking about. Realize there's nothing more you *can* do. You were never quite smart enough for him, somehow. You were too silly, you called too much, you didn't understand when he needed to go out with his "boys," *you* didn't get out enough, you

couldn't be without him, you were ambiguous about kids, you didn't know what you wanted to do in life, you didn't - (*grab the eggbeater and wave it at the audience*) - *YOU NEVER EVEN LEARNED TO COOK HIM BREAKFAST.*

Pull your phone from under the wreckage, find it dead. Now you *have* to call Him just in case He tried to call you. When She answers, end the call. Call until He answers and when He asks you not to call again, hang up the phone.

(*Receive a text. Show them the screen.*)

A Text: From Her:

“Stop freaking out, ok? I meant to tell you before. He's with me now.”

(*Close phone.*)

STAGE FOUR: DEPRESSION

Wake up to not. having. him.

Reach under the couch for the cat. Beg him to come out so they don't find you *face down on the floor reaching for your cat*. When he hisses at you, hiss back! Oookay. You are the kind of person who hisses at cats and can't cook or read the *New Yorker*. You are pathetic. You are alone. It must be for a reason.

Remember him touching your back. Your arms. His hands were so soft. Those are my eyebrows, my eyes, my nose, they belonged to me. He was perfect and I blew it. They say he's going to marry her. I bet she makes really good omelettes with things like *goat cheese!*

Think about calling him. Just to tell him. Just to tell him that you hate how you became a habit and he never told you that he felt that way and how ambushed you were, and how tired from the missed calls and the no calls and the excuses and the confessions and the re-up and the break-down and the break which became the call-off and the break-up and the fall-out and the post-break-up-hook-up and the wreckage. All of the things he would never understand.

Put on his t-shirt because it smells like him. (*Grab it from the box and pull it over your head.*) Search in the cushions for Kleenex with lotion that you may have missed. Note that there are none, and blow your nose on your sleeve.

(Reach for the computer, and hit a button. The love ballad from the first stage begins playing and you start to crawl back on the couch, but somehow the absurdity of the song makes you stop. Really? This is what I was listening to? Start to laugh. And laugh. And LAUGH. But then the lyrics get you. Go to the computer and stop the song. That phase is OVER. Make a choice. You're tired of being sad. Put on, instead, something upbeat. Perhaps "Jeremy Kay's "Have it All." Start to sing along, cleaning the disaster area that is your life: the take out, the wrappers, the cores, something you don't know what it is, grab the trash can, smell the contents, grimace, but the music comes to a grinding halt as you slip on a New Yorker.)

STAGE FIVE: ACCEPTANCE

Recycle the *NEW YORKERS*. (*Shove them off the edge of the stage.*) Everyone just pretends they read them anyway.

And throw out those last little things you're holding onto (*Pick up the teddy bear.*) Even if they're cute. (*Put it in the trashcan. The t-shirt too. Stop at the eggbeater.*) Well, some things are useful, right? (*Place on the coffee table.*)

(*Putting trash on the porch.*) Tell God you're sorry the whole prayer thing didn't work out, but you'll start going to church. On Christmas {and we'll talk about Easter.} Apologize mother, father, best friend, neighbor, and cat. (*Have a moment with the cat.*)

(*Sit down to begin putting on some makeup.*) Be glad for the things that you can do now because you live alone, like walking around in your underwear after applying sunless tanner, trying not to touch the furniture while avoiding the cat. And clipping your toenails in bed. And tweezing your chin hair.

Find a stray disembodied head on the floor. (*Pick it up. It's a curiosity.*) His face looks thin and wan - not at all the way you remembered it.

(*Toss it aside and slip on some high heels and a new top, which was draped over the back of the couch.*) Say yes to a date with the brown-haired boy from work. It kind of makes you want to throw up, and you're not really looking for another one of these, but it feels like a grand adventure. He's cute. And he *plays the guitar*. But it might be awkward, because you're quitting your job and have an interview this afternoon.

(*Pick up keys from coffee table and see the eggbeater. Pick it up.*) Tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning, you might wake up to brown haired boy, you might not, but what you're definitely going to wake up to is a big bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Guilt. Free. (*Pitch the eggbeater into the trash can with a satisfying crash. Start to leave.*)

Oh, oh right.

STAGE “POST ACCEPTANCE” (or whatever you want to call it)

(Referencing from the laptop.)

From Him: Subject: Just Checkin’ In

Hey, I heard you’re doing good, I’m glad. I didn’t get a chance to say hi the other night, you left before I could come over, but I just wanted to say hi, and that... I have always regretted how I treated you. You deserved better. Anyway, you look really great and that guy you’re with now looks like he could beat the shit out of me...

No, he didn’t write that. He’d *never* have the balls. And thank God, right? There are *five* stages –Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance - someone took the time to count them, to assign a number to mourning a death because they’re not *supposed* to come back to scare the shit out of you. But sometimes they do. So you smile and nod and are glad you picked the dress you’re wearing and the man you’re with and you go on. And for God’s sake never get stuck in an elevator with them. Because there just aren’t enough stages in the *whole world* for that.

(Actor leaves the stage and lights go down.)

The Process

In spring of 2004, I received an assignment at the University of Arkansas for a Creative Writing I class. This assignment was to write a piece of flash fiction, an instructional piece in the “you” or second person form. Suggestions for the assignment included “How to Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich”, “How to Get a Job”, and “How to Mourn a Love Affair”. This last one intrigued me. I had never mourned a love affair at the time, but after searching “mourning” on the internet, I decided to follow the structure for the five stages of mourning a death as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. The main character was loosely based on my roommate at the time combined with a more stereotypical woman, one who might frequent the pages of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. The piece was called, *The Five Stages of Mourning a Love Affair*.

A note on *On Death and Dying*: While I have listed this book as a reference, it is important to say that I never actually read the book. I preferred to be inspired by the titles of the stages, and move from there. I did this because as a writer, I become very attached to structure. In just using the idea of the stages, I felt there was more freedom and room for creation based on my own experiences and those of friends I informally interviewed. Now that I have worked the piece as

far as my imagination can go, I feel comfortable doing more research and becoming better informed on the deep psychological implications of the stages.

Flash forward a year later to Spring of 2005. The six pages of fiction had been forgotten until I personally experienced a break-up of some magnitude. As a result, I chose to edit and workshop *The Five Stages* in a Creative Writing II class. This took the character from someone who was based on the personality of someone else and made her a little more like myself. Former drafts had her reading a religious devotional, but that no longer felt right. I did keep the pilgrimage to church, but based it instead on my own moving away from Catholicism. At this point in the drafting process, she was still obsessed about her weight. In the most recent iteration of the piece, however, I chose to eliminate that part due to my slight build.

The Vera Wang dress reference I kept, and it became representative of the more stereotypical *Cosmo* woman part of her personality. This aspect of her character may be slightly shallow, but I wanted her to have acted on impulse in the past, especially where her boyfriend was concerned. She is also a product of the idea perpetrated in these magazines that having a boyfriend makes her complete, which I hope to further highlight in the work. I am also still interested in pushing the boundaries of irrational behavior – how much will an audience accept before she seems to have lost her mind?

The response to the piece during this Creative Writing II class was surprising – people thought it funny, insightful, and complete. The writing still just skimmed the surface of grieving, but had identified behaviors that people recognized as if for the first time. I kept it close to me for the next couple of years, and continued to make changes as inspiration hit.

As a result, I chose in spring of 2007 to include it in my undergraduate English-Creative Writing Honors Thesis. This was a collection of short fiction and poetry entitled *Standing in Line*, which was thematically about women who had experienced relationship troubles. Most of the short fiction was sentimentalized, all of the poetry was non-specific, but *The Five Stages* again stood out as honest and funny.

One year later in spring of 2008, now at the University of Texas at Austin, I took Playwriting II with Suzan Zeder. Since we had been assigned to write one - person shows for our thesis projects, I wanted to be prepared with some playwriting technique. While I did not do any direct work on *The Five Stages*, Suzan taught the importance of surprise, inevitability, and action versus inaction in a play.

This idea of “surprising yet inevitable” is still something I am struggling with in the end of the show. I would like her decision to quit her job to come as a greater surprise and triumph, and also for the eggbeater to carry more meaning. The intent is for it to be representative of the way she blames herself for the failing

of the relationship, and for her to relieve herself of that responsibility at the end of the show. While that might not qualify as a surprise, I want the audience to realize before she does that she has to let it go. I would also like the realization that he is now in a relationship with one of her good friends to come as a greater surprise and have more impact.

In spring of 2009 I began editing the piece in preparation for it to become my solo performance. I already needed to make adjustments to allow for changes in technology since 2004: landline phones that unplugged from the wall were out; cell phones that got damaged by being dropped on the floor were in; boom boxes that played CDs were out, laptops that depended on CDs for their music collections were in, although decidedly scraping the edge of acceptability.

At this point my goals with the piece became more solid. I have always been attracted to the material because it seems that no matter what kind of break-up people have endured, the rules are the same. Even if a person has not themselves been through one, they can imagine it. In fact, this piece began when I had never lost a love and also existed through such a time (during which I never even consulted it!). I was also interested in the opportunity to explore the loss of love as a kind of death, and how those processes are similar. Overall I wanted to show this time in life when a person has alienated themselves from their friends and family, and what it is like to have self be the only true salvation.

During this semester I took Developing Solo Performance with Omi Jones, and while again I did not work on this piece directly, I did write two other pieces in a similar style, even translating a different fiction story from *Standing in Line* to make it work on a stage. I found the transition from fiction to play to be a difficult one, negotiating what detail may be cut from dialogue, what works best in text form, and the interplay between dialogue and narration.

In fall of 2009 I looked again at *The Five Stages*, this time through the lens of Omi's class. The fiction pieces I had worked before were written in first person and included dialogue with other characters. Since *The Five Stages* originally involved no direct interaction with other characters, I decided to first try a more stripped down performance style that didn't involve a lot of staging. Not until later did I convert some things to real time interactions, such as her invisible mother at the door and her best friend on the phone. This transition from description to scene is still a technical issue. Future drafts will include much more doing and much less describing.

Even though staging was not going to be a huge goal with this piece, I still had two sessions with Andrea Beckham using Laban Movement Analysis to explore the emotions of the piece and possible physicalizations. I felt that no matter what physical choice I made, exploring the text in this way would assist the writing of the piece. It was this work that later informed the physicality of the Anger stage, and the physicality of dancing to the love ballad.

In spring of 2010, I mined my personal journals for material, hoping to give the piece even more specificity and increase my emotional connection to it. At this point I was still feeling that the piece was about someone else, since that is how it began. Inspired by letters I had received from a high school boyfriend, I realized that letters could be added to the piece so the audience could meet the main character's boyfriend in a non-threatening and loving way, the way she had met him. This would help them empathize with her loss, and give both the audience and the main character an escape to a happier time. The letters also gave me the opportunity to include some real sentiments I had received. In the first draft that included this new media, each stage was preceded by a different letter. Instead of working together, they existed on a parallel plane, an existence of being in love.

In light of my new material, I had a reading of the piece for feedback from three graduate colleagues: Kate deBuys and Lesley Gurule from the Acting area, and Kyle Schmidt from the Michener Center for Writers. We explored the function of the letters, which were all about his love for her, and realized that they also needed to represent the slow decline of the relationship. The point was also made that other types of media could be involved, such as text messages or emails.

The reading also revealed that the main character needed to embark on a new stage of her life at the end of the piece, where at the time she only decided to go out to a bar with her best friend. The following draft showed her taking a job opportunity that she might not have taken had she still been with her ex-boyfriend.

While that is not exactly the case in the final draft, (she decides to quit her job and go on an interview, but the audience doesn't know for what), it is an idea to which I may return. This need for triumph at the end of the piece has still not been fully realized.

Around this time I met with Suzan Zeder, my former playwriting professor and now committee member, and Smaranda Ciceu, a colleague in the Acting area. Suzan enjoyed the use of media (emails, notes, journal entries), but wanted the same tensional relationship between those pieces and the text as with the first letter, "Lucky," which leads into Denial. She also suggested I change the title from *The Five Stages of Mourning a Love Affair* to *The Five Stages of Mourning*, so as not to give away the premise too soon. I took that a step further and titled it *The Five Stages*.

At this stage the piece was still too linear; there needed to be more action and less narrative. This is where that decision was made to put more things "in scene" in the writing. I still envisioned simple staging, however. Suzan also made the point that the items in the piece, the *New Yorkers* and the Celine Dion music, should be seen in a different way each time they appear. It was at this time that I decided to give them a physical presence onstage, so I could interact with them and also see them in a new way as the character.

Smaranda Ciceu felt that she could see the character of "Him" so clearly that she almost expected him to come onstage. In the next draft I adjusted the

mother's visit so that the main character thinks it could be someone important coming to see her (maybe Him), but after the performance of the piece, I think the text could be even more implicit that she believes it could be him.

Both Suzan and Smaranda felt that the character was too articulate in Depression, so I strove to make her less so, and also found more specifics of what she was willing to do in Bargaining (this became the section about the *New Yorkers*.) Even now Bargaining is my least specific stage, and could perhaps require some additional reading and exploration of the character to discover what else that stage could offer. These two stages are the stages where the audience needs to be invited to have their own experience of the piece. Right now the writing and performance style asks them to "keep up," and I would like to explore being more in these moments. While I feel I slowed it down some in Depression, the atmosphere and tone could use even more of a shift.

Also at this stage of the draft I began looking for more physical manifestations of Acceptance, since at the time it was still linked to Depression in a way that was hard to shake. The stage was overwritten, as though I was trying to stuff every last ounce of meaning into it. The funny thing about acceptance is that it cannot be told, it has to be seen. Throwing away the last remaining items and feeling nothing about the disembodied head she finds on the floor were my main manifestations of her acceptance, but they don't have enough impact.

During these drafts, the close proximity of the stages proved to be the most challenging aspect of writing the piece. The transitions had to be organic and believable, yet fast. This led to further honing the definitions of the five stages, especially making sure there was not too much Depression in Denial and Acceptance, and paying close attention to the triggers for the stages. These triggers could still be stronger, being not only responsible for the shift in narrative to a new stage, but the signaling of a new realization that completes the arc for that stage. I will return to the idea of individual arcs for the stages.

My first read-through in the space was with Barney Hammond, my thesis supervisor, and Andrea Beckham, a professor also on my committee. I had minimal set pieces and props, and it was not as productive as it could have been, since I was still on-script with all the re-writes and still not entirely happy with the content. The piece had become labored and overwritten and I hated it. It was at this time that I decided against the choice to have a still, pared down piece. I am no Spalding Grey. I cut the pieces of media that bored me, specifically a journal entry of a depressing dream, and got to my feet.

At this point I began to have private rehearsals. I wanted to be alone with the piece, since the main character is indeed alone. I scheduled time in a space that was similarly situated to the Laboratory Theatre, where we would be performing. There, I found it easy to cut the parts I hated (don't say them), and that being memorized, no matter how happy I was with the draft, gave me the freedom I

needed to make those choices. The properties in the script - the Kleenex, the stuffed dog, the eggbeater - came alive and informed me. They had always been there, waiting to be used. Not to touch them, I realized, would be to relegate the space into a museum piece, and that was exactly the thing to avoid. I also added music, which brought motivation to the physicality and helped make the transitions more organic.

I have heard that the most challenging part of solo performance is being alone, but I found otherwise to be true. I found it easier to make hard choices when I was on my own, and enjoyed the process of meeting with advisors for individual workshops and then returning to my own time and space for the actual changes. In hindsight, a director would have been helpful in order to achieve some of the pacing modulation that this piece needs, but I do feel that at this stage in the process the challenges are more symptomatic of the writing than of potential performance choices.

Finally, after working the piece for staging, I found an ending. This was a momentous night for me, as the end had changed almost every day for a week, and had really changed every year for seven years! What I was struggling to express is that Acceptance can only go so far, and cannot solve everything. I had been trying to talk about the forever after in the last stage, but that was too much. There is now another stage, Post-Acceptance, because healing from a loss is not a linear process with a definitive endpoint. There are residual emotions.

This is where the play diverges from the five stages in *On Death and Dying*, and differentiates the break-up from a death. Death is permanent, but break-ups, oddly, are not. One can still run into that person in social situations, and may even be pursued again! So the end is about saying: “Hey, this is not a perfect model. There are problems with the fact that the person you’re mourning is still walking around, maybe even hitting on you! You can’t be responsible for that!” The way this is said, however, is still up for rewriting.

Going into dress rehearsals, the technical aspects of the show stayed small for several reasons, the largest of those being that I am not technological and I am also very picky, especially about sound cues. As a result, I edited all of the sound bites myself using a free trial of WavePad Sound Editor by NCH Software and burned them to one CD.

I wanted the general lighting plot to be warm and to suggest a living room where someone had been hibernating. The end result was less warm than I would have wanted, but resources were what they were. The only lighting cue happens when she rounds the couch to go to church. I needed something that helped the audience understand she was no longer at home, and was interested in highlighting the one time she actually leaves. Since this is the middle of the play, it serves as a physical time marker.

I was pleased with the experience of performing the piece. Having the audience there was important for me – I am very in tune with an audience during

comedy, especially a comedy with no scene partners. The audience helps me to take my time, to enjoy the material and the situations, and gives me the energy required to go from section to section. While I love the performance and writing of comedy, I do think that at times the prevalence of the comedy in this piece is at the expense of more meaningful content. While the heart is there, the audience isn't given the time for it to land. Future rewrites might (gasp!) lose a joke or two in order to create the space for that. Also, for this piece to be successful in such a short time, I feel that those emotional extremes need to be even more extreme, such as increasing the desperation in Bargaining and the loneliness in Depression.

I was pleased with the responsiveness of the audience, and learned a lot from their feedback. The Celine Dion part of the show cannot be lost, and I am right to suspect that the ending is not quite there. It isn't high energy enough for what has been a high energy show. The audience wants to laugh at the end, and I haven't quite given them the right impetus. In the original writing, I was thinking that the ending should be a little bittersweet, but that's not the right tone. I do feel like the final stage needs to be there, but how it is executed is still not solved for me.

Another adjustment I would make is to work with fewer props next time: the t-shirt, stuffed dog, eggbeater, phone, computer, and New Yorkers could be quite enough to set the scene, without the other trash, the disembodied heads,

photographs, dried flowers, and movie ticket stubs. Some trash could be better left to the imagination.

I am also not satisfied that in the current version of the piece she only leaves the living room space once. Ultimately this was due to time restraints on the length of the piece, but also because I had limited access to tech and was aware that new places would be most clear to an audience with lighting shifts. As a result she only leaves to go to church, and I believe it is too big of a move to happen only once, especially since nothing particularly life changing occurs at the church. For it to be the only time she leaves, it should have more import. In the original story she takes a field trip to Wendy's and buys five Frosties to throw at his new car. I miss this old adventurousness, and will probably bring some of it back. It contributes to that exploration of irrational behavior.

I have found through this process that I love solo performance work. There is nothing more empowering than being the only person onstage - although I admit there *was* one moment where I thought "and what, now, is next?" I love the energy the audience provides, and how the need to tell them the story has helped me in numerous writing crunches – even during the performance of the piece I ad-libbed things ("*We liked being in the car*") that have made it into the final version. I would even have preferred for the lights to be lower so I could see their faces.

My final goal for the piece is to include it in an evening of solo performance work in the romantic comedy genre. After the show I spoke with my

target audience, two single undergraduate women who are not necessarily avid theatre goers, and they loved the piece. Sometimes I think that while there's plenty of romantic comedy out there, it doesn't have the heart and soul that they (and I) crave, and it certainly isn't made into theatre, the most intimate art form of all. While it certainly needs more exploration to be called impactful, maybe this little kernel, *The Five Stages*, can be a step in the right direction.

Bibliography

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Vita

Marlane Deanne Barnes is a native of Portland, Maine and was raised in Fort Smith, Arkansas. She graduated from Southside High School and continued her education at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish. There she was a recipient of the *University of Arkansas Chancellor's Scholarship* and the *Sturgis Honors Scholars Study Abroad Grant* for the study of theatre in London, England. During her time at the University of Texas she was a recipient of the *Virginia L. Murchison Professorship in Fine Arts*, the *Leon Danielian Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Dance*, and the *James W. Moll Endowed Presidential Scholarship in Drama*, as well as receiving support from the *College of Fine Arts Excellence Fund*. Marlane is currently pursuing a career in film, television, and theatre in Los Angeles, California.

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