

Copyright
by
Meghan Elizabeth Kennedy
2011

**The Thesis Committee for Meghan Elizabeth Kennedy
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:**

**The Distance of Intimacy: An Exploration of Love and Loss in Two
Plays**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Suzan Zeder

Steven Dietz

Kirk Lynn

**The Distance of Intimacy: An Exploration of Love and Loss in Two
Plays**

by

Meghan Elizabeth Kennedy, BFA

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2011

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Suzan Zeder, Steven Dietz and Kirk Lynn. You have my deepest respect and gratitude.

Abstract

The Distance of Intimacy: An Exploration of Love and Loss in Two Plays

Meghan Elizabeth Kennedy, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Suzan Zeder

The following thesis is an exploration of the themes of love and loss, and an examination of the concept of distance as a form of intimacy in my plays, *Yours* and *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*.

Table of Contents

Thesis Essay	1
<i>Yours</i>	30
<i>Too Much, Too Much, Too Many</i>	65

THE DISTANCE OF INTIMACY:
AN EXPLORATION OF LOVE AND LOSS IN TWO PLAYS

If you have ever fallen in love you know the dizzying haze that comes with it. You know the float, the spin, and the swell that comes with your own transformation from person into planet, as you orbit the hot sun of another. And when love leaves; you know the slow ache that takes it place.

I don't just want to write *about* that experience. I want to capture it, grab hold of it and write through it. The attempt to do so has been both intoxicating and frightening and has left me in complete awe of the human heart. As a theater artist, I sincerely hope to pass that feeling on.

In my three years in the playwriting program at The James A. Michener Center for Writers, I have written four full-length plays: An adaptation of *The Trojan Women*, co-written with fellow playwright Kimber Lee, *A Bright Wind Over A Bent World*, *Yours* and *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*. Each of them has touched on my interests in the power of love and the weight of loss. But it is the last two plays, *Yours and Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*, which embody these interests most fully.

Yours began in my second year at the University of Texas in Professor Steven Dietz's playwriting workshop. It received a production in October of 2010 as a part of UTNT, The University of Texas New Theater Season. Directed by Kimber Lee, it featured Alexis Scott and Gabriel Dean. After three weeks of rehearsal, *Yours* opened on Friday, October 1st in The Lab Theatre. *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* is in much

earlier stages of development. I began it in the Fall Semester of 2010 as part of an Independent Study with Professor Suzan Zeder. I had one small reading of it at the end of March and am currently in the process of revising it.

One of the reasons I want to look at these two plays in this thesis is to articulate the emotional journey I went through in writing both of them. They are the most private plays I have ever written, the most intimate. Which is fine for the seclusion of my own home, at my own desk, but when the time came to share them, I was filled with the fear of being uncovered. I wanted to lean into love as I wrote, but I was terrified that people would somehow look through the pages, see the flawed outline of my own heart, and laugh.

Luckily in the cases of both *Yours* and *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* the characters who inhabit these plays showed up, took control, and overpowered my fear. They burst forward with demands, unapologetically. And during the course of my last year here, I have come to honor those characters, own them, and thank them. It is through them that I have learned to embrace the fact that I write with my heart in my hand. It is through them that I have learned that showing my heart, openly and honestly, is worth the risk of being laughed at every time.

Writing a love story presents very particular dramaturgical challenges. I wanted to write with earnestness, but avoid the sentimental. I wanted to be sincere, but not saccharine. It was difficult to find recent play models that deal with love without a heavy dose of irony. The more I looked the more I feared there was no longer room in our psyches for heartbreak without a side of sarcasm. One playwright's work, however,

became an emotional touchstone for me during both of these writing processes: Sarah Ruhl's, specifically, her play *Eurydice*. There is humor in it but there is also a clear communication of deep love, between lovers and between father and daughter. Ruhl uses beautiful language and strong visuals to express the characters' emotions, but manages never to cross the line into maudlin while doing so. As such, *Eurydice* served as a very effective model for me while writing both *Yours* and *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*.

TWO PLAYS IN CONVERSATION

There are obvious cross currents that run between *Yours* and *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*. They are both shorter pieces set in the south. They both explore the boundaries of language: in *Yours*, through larger blocks of text, in *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*, through a very spare use of words. In both plays, I examine the concept of distance as a form of intimacy. I use different distancing techniques to do so in each play. In *Yours*, I primarily use letters. In *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*, I use a door.

There is not a lot of conventional action in either play. Instead, dramatic action is chronicled in the way relationships change over time. In *Yours*, time operates in four movements, all paced and shaped by the relationship of the main characters: Billy and Inch. In *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* there is a much slower reveal of information but relationships are used to mark time in the intertwining past, present and future.

These two plays are in conversation on a character level as well. *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* scratches an itch that started in *Yours*. The red, hot passion between Billy and Inch is in some way prescient to the abiding love between James and Rose. The

audience doesn't ever get to see what happens to Billy and Inch, but we know for sure that Rose and James remain united in life and death. One play asks, when does love begin? And the other answers with, when does love end?

SYNOPSIS OF *YOURS*

Yours is a love story told through letters, set in Savannah, Georgia. The letters track the tumultuous, ill fated relationship of Billy and Inch from the time they are teenagers in the 1960s up through the time when their daughter Violet is a teenager in the 1980s.

Inch and Billy fall in love but are separated by class. Inch's father is wealthy, but he is also abusive to Inch. After witnessing this abuse at a public event, Billy punches Inch's father. With so much violence already in her life, Inch cannot forgive Billy for his action and they separate. Both are heartbroken. Billy volunteers for the war and heads overseas in attempt to escape his pain. Inch stays in town and marries a more appropriate match for her social status, Wallace. Wallace is a kind man and loves Inch unconditionally, but fails to strike any passion in her.

When Billy finally returns home after five years, the two have grown into their adult names: William and Imogen. But they soon discover they have not grown out of their old feelings for one another. They eventually share one night of passion together and from it, Inch becomes pregnant. After Inch gives birth to a girl, Violet, Wallace discovers the baby is not his. He confronts Inch, then leaves town and takes the baby with him, claiming that Inch never wanted a child the way he did and that she and Billy

would never be able to provide for her as he would. Inch is devastated by this loss and locks herself in her room. Billy knocks repeatedly on Inch's door but she does not open it, she only slides a note under it. As the stage goes to black, we are left wondering if their love will survive.

In the final scene we jump forward thirteen years in time. Violet writes to Billy asking to meet him after learning about her mother's death. She also sends him the only letter Wallace ever allowed her to keep from Inch. It was written on the day Violet was born, before everything went wrong. As Violet speaks that letter out loud, both Billy and Inch reappear. Violet is young and full of hope, just as they once were. *Yours* follows Billy and Inch's extreme passion and extreme loss, but having new life at the end suggests the possibility for hope and renewal.

THE BEGINNING OF YOURS

Yours began with an exercise in Professor Steven Dietz's playwriting seminar about time and motion. We were asked to write three letters that spanned at least twenty years. Writing in letter form sparked something in me. I liked that the characters had to express a great deal of emotion without being able to actually see the person to whom they were writing. This restriction heightened the intent and the urgency to clarify feelings and wants. The more letters I wrote, the more I started believing letters between Billy and Inch could contain a sense of forward motion.

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

In *Yours*, Billy and Inch show their love through language. I chose each of their manners of speaking very carefully, with an ear to the cadence of the play's geographical location: the southern city of Savannah, Georgia. I spent a lot of time on accents and different rhythms of speech, because *how* the characters speak is just as important to me as *what* they say.

Billy and Inch are from different socioeconomic classes. Billy does not come from money and he does not have the means for expensive gifts. But he is generous with the gifts of his wild heart and rich imagination. His letters are infused with intense emotion. His thoughts charge out, often faster than he can write them, desperate to connect. Inch falls in love with his writing.

In the following letter, I use repetition in Billy's sentences for increased velocity of emotion. I also show his need to describe everything, even pain, in a way that will make the world prettier for Inch:

I would fight for you again and again and again and again and again and you would never see me complain. What are bruises if not keepers, ledgers, marking us like maps... If all the bruises we accumulated in a whole life showed themselves at once we would no longer look like us, but human shaped tropical oceans. You could wring us out and taste our sorrow. How lucky that we show our pain with color. Our blood rising up to our defense. Evidence that we are here and we have hurt. I breathe in and I can feel my ribs are shattered and I am in love. (P.15)

Inch comes from a wealthier but unstable home. She has a need for a sense of order as she struggles to cope with her environment. As such, she is more grounded in her speech. She makes lists, in the effort to maintain control of her emotions. She hides behind these lists when trying to express her feelings.

Early on in the play, the best way she can think of to show her love for Billy is to send him a list of everything that reminds her of him:

Pencil shavings
Cloth handkerchiefs
Wax paper (sandwiches taste better)
Bad posture
Bare feet
Baseball games
Stamps
Open windows
Girls' Bathrooms (*you* picked the place!)
Trousers with useful pockets
Covered trains
Tackle boxes
Dogeared pages
Twinkly lights
Warm Hands
Chuck Berry
Cherry pop
(to be continued...as we continue...) (P.14)

She might not have Billy's flair for language but she knows there is the power of memory behind each of those objects.

Later in the play when we see her as a grown woman, married to another man, she writes a letter to herself and still uses a list to make sense of what she is experiencing:

Dear Imogen, Dear self, Dear stupid, stupid self-
You've got to stop this.
Sometimes things don't happen the way you think they will...
You're holding on too tight.
You're going to pop a blood vessel.
And get wrinkles.
And gain weight.
(*breath*)
You made a choice...
You have hours to make something out of nothing

You have hours
And hours
And hours (P.20)

I use repetition here too, but not for velocity. Inch's thoughts don't burst forward as Billy's do. It is just the opposite for her: with each repetition, she turns more and more inward.

In *Yours*, letters are the only means of communication. Billy and Inch do not have the luxury of touch, so they must wrap themselves around one another with phrases. They pass notes back and forth in the classroom, write love letters from a hospital bed, and scratch words onto the backs of photographs - this is how they connect and commit. This is their ritual.

Written words have an inherent distance but it is a type of distance that increases desire. We only see Billy and Inch touch once during the course of the play. After passing notes under the door of the girls' bathroom when they are teenagers, they finally kiss. It is an incredibly charged kiss not only because it is their first kiss, but because of the distance that has been between them for the entire play leading up to this moment. There is a literal barrier between them in the moment right before the kiss happens: a door. But there is also a self-imposed barrier of not speaking through the door: they *choose* to pass notes underneath it instead. This small barrier ignites huge passion, finally causing Billy to burst through the door and kiss Inch.

Writing is intimacy for them, in part due to the fact that it allows them to use their imagination. It allows for the element of fantasy. Who has not imagined themselves in scenarios with the person with whom they are falling in love? Fantasy ups the stakes. It

allows Billy and Inch to imagine that they are perfect together and through that imagining they *become* perfect together.

TIME IN *YOURS*

In *Yours*, time is organized in four movements, as in a piece of music. The first movement, the first sixteen pages of the play, capture Billy and Inch as teenagers, falling in love. The action covers only a year and half of time, the majority within the span of three months. This is the section of the play when Billy and Inch are most present.

The second movement is only two pages in the play, but those two pages span five years. Billy and Inch are far away from each other during this period but that distance amplifies their ache and accelerates time so that when they are finally both back in the same town, they can *feel* the other's presence in a room without even having to look up.

Time is most erratic in the third movement, reflecting the most fraught eleven pages of the play. Each moment until Billy and Inch come together again is a suspended dream; time waits. And in their actual moment of contact, time stops. When it begins again, Inch is pregnant. Time speeds up to match the emotions of the men around Inch. Billy is ecstatic, certain that he and Inch will now come together to raise their child and Wallace is furious that his unrequited love for Inch is not enough to hold their marriage together. When Wallace takes the baby away, time stops once more, leaving Billy and Inch divided.

The fourth and final movement jumps through darkness and years to a final scene in which a new teenager appears, bringing things full circle: Violet. She is hopeful. She is present. And through her, so are Billy and Inch.

In all of these movements the underlying melody is that of Billy and Inch's relationship. The entire piece is shaped by its tone. The changes in their relationship dictate how slow or how fast time moves.

REWRITING IN REHEARSAL

I attended every rehearsal leading up to the production of *Yours* in October of 2010. I realized almost immediately that the actors were at a disadvantage, as they never really had a scene partner to play off of. In *Yours* there are only a couple of moments where the actors share space in real time. My director, Kimber Lee, did a lot of work with each actor to make sure his or her words were coming from a true place. She encouraged them to speak each letter as though the other character were standing directly in front of them.

I learned to listen in that rehearsal room in a different way than I ever have before. A love letter, to me, is very much like music- and I had a very specific idea of what I wanted the notes to sound like. Every night I listened to the words as the actors spoke them to see if the tone and the rhythm were landing on my ear the way I wanted them to. I found myself cutting one word here, adding two words there. A gentle surgery took place with each and every line in the play.

I liked the careful listening and the meticulous revision. By the end of the rehearsal process, that manner of working settled under my skin. My approach to *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* was a direct outgrowth of it.

SYNOPSIS OF *TOO MUCH, TOO MUCH, TOO MANY*

Too Much, Too Much, Too Many follows the grieving process of a mother and daughter, Rose and Emma. After Rose's husband James dies, by walking into the lake behind their house after years of battling dementia, Rose locks herself in her room. When the play begins, Rose has not come out of that room for nearly a year. She and Emma have lived in separate worlds of grief on opposite sides of Rose's door. When a young man, Pastor Hidge, arrives from the local church to read to Rose, both women's lives are changed forever.

A friendship slowly develops between Rose and Pastor Hidge, and a romance slowly develops between Emma and the Pastor. As both of the women's relationships with the Pastor evolve, both of their relationships to the ghost of James are revealed. Emma has flashbacks of her father's decline into dementia throughout the play. Each flashback shows him at a worse stage of his illness. Finally, he disappears all over again for her.

Conversely, as Rose's relationship with Pastor Hidge grows; she is able to communicate with James more and more. First she can conjure his presence by closing her eyes, and then he appears when she speaks out loud to him. Right before the end of

the play, she is able to dance through the closed door with Pastor Hidge, who then transforms into James.

Emma finds out that Pastor Hidge has lied to them, that he is actually no longer a Pastor. Emma is inclined to condemn him immediately. If she pushes him away, she can continue on alone in the safety of her own grief. Pastor Hidge explains that he left the church because of his own grief over the death of his child and the abandonment by his wife.

It is in a final confrontation between mother and daughter that Rose urges Emma to sympathize with Pastor Hidge; they have all lost people that they love. It is also during this confrontation that Rose has an important revelation. She realizes that James walked into the lake because he thought he saw her. He was walking towards her. This realization triggers Rose's decision to leave the room and join him in the water.

In the last scene of the play, the lights come up to reveal that Rose's door has been opened. She has taken the final step towards James by drowning herself in the lake. She has left behind an obituary she wrote for herself. Emma sits in her mother's chair, and listens to Pastor Hidge read Rose's life out loud to her. She then reads the obituary that she wrote for Rose, and in doing so, opens to her own life again.

THE BEGINNING OF *TOO MUCH, TOO MUCH, TOO MANY*

Too Much, Too Much, Too Many also started because of an exercise in Professor Steven Dietz's playwriting workshop, in the Fall of 2008. We were asked to create a character and have them write their own obituary. I created the character of Rose. She

proceeded to haunt me for two years. Then, in the summer of 2010, an image entered my head that would not leave: a door dividing a stage in half. A woman divided from the rest of the world. And I knew that this woman was Rose and that this was her story.

Rose's obituary became a framing device for the whole process, it was where the idea for the play began and it is now literally where the play ends. An obituary is, in my view, the ultimate letter. And for Rose to write her own allows her to state clearly what it was that made her human, that made her feel she was alive. Dramatically, it breaks the silence that she has been holding since James's death.

Emma's obituary for Rose is more factual, but I wanted to make sure that it conveys not only love, but also a deep respect. There are hints of tension between the two women throughout the play, and if Pastor Hidge had not come along, I believe they would have kept each other captive inside their own cycles of grief. But the last line of Emma's obituary, the last line of the play, suggests they have both let go: "May the angels welcome her home". (P.57)

THE SPEED OF SLOWNESS

Yours had been such a good exercise in making use of every word and in *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* I wanted to take that one step further. I met with Professor Suzan Zeder throughout the Fall Semester of 2010 and brought small, spare scenes in each week. We consciously chose to move slowly and let the play come out at its own pace. I was very careful with each scene. Instead of allowing the characters blocks of

text to express themselves as in the letters of *Yours*, I only allowed them a few words. Every word said counts; every word not said counts. The silences count.

I am a slow reader and writer. It is something I have always hated about myself. When I was younger I used to complain to my father about it. I would tell him I couldn't let the page turn without reading every bit of every sentence. I couldn't help it. And he always corrected me, saying, "You're not slow, you're careful." I don't think his words ever truly sunk in until I started writing *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*.

I take time. But taking the time I need, feels most productive to me. And after years of resenting my pace, I can finally say that I accept it as part of me.

In working on *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many*, I also started to use slowness as a technique. The slow reveal became an important dramatic device. To accomplish it, I had to establish a barrier to create tension: the door to Rose's room. On one side is Rose; on the other is the rest of the world. There is tension pulling on either side.

Rose loved James with might. And when he died, all the air was sucked out of her life. She shut herself away in a room and let her grief fill it. It was the only way she could control it.

A door is a physical barrier but, just as a letter does, it forces a character to try harder. When divided by the door, Rose, Emma and Pastor Hidge must listen harder. Speak louder. Their senses must be working overtime.

Emma and Rose had been living divided for months, as if they were dividing their pain into separate areas of the house. Rose's pain lives inside her room, Emma's inside

the kitchen. It is the arrival of Pastor Hidge that begins the breakdown of those boundaries.

PATTERNS OF ACTION: CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS

ROSE AND PASTOR HIDGE

Little by little Pastor Hidge metaphorically pushes Rose's door open, even though it physically stays closed. He reads to Rose when she doesn't want to be read to. He shows up every day. They play cards under the door. They tell jokes. They progress from strangers to friends. Rose feels she knows the Pastor. How? She listens to the tone of his voice. She pays attention to his choice of words, his choice of bible passages. Little by little a familiarity develops.

He is the live male presence in the house. In that way, he counteracts James. He comes into the static relationship of the two women and is the catalyst for life beginning to flow again. At the climax of Rose and Pastor Hidge's relationship, Rose fuses both of her worlds with a dance. Fantasy and reality to become one through the closed door:

ROSE: Would you be him for a moment?

Pastor Hidge's swaying slows.

Silence.

After a moment, James takes Pastor Hidge's place.

The two move in time together perfectly in sync.

JAMES: Big finish

ROSE: Go on then.

He leans forward, miming a dip as she leans

backward and points her toe.
Pastor Hidge takes his place again as the
song finishes. Rose still stands there. She
hasn't opened her eyes.

ROSE: Thank you.

ROSE AND EMMA

Rose and Emma are stuck. Every night Emma tells Rose the story of how they found James's dead body through the door, over and over again:

EMMA

They pulled him out real slow. He had seaweed in his hair. His shirt was still tucked in. Belt was still tight. His face was serene. Eyes were open, as if they saw something right out ahead of him. (pause) And clutched in his hand was a small, wooden bird. Mr. Shaw said he never seen anything like it, a man passing but still holding on to something.

This story has two purposes. The first is to show their ritual, to show how static their existences have become. This stasis has become a form of intimacy. The barrier between them has become a comfort. Emma might have been resentful of it initially, but by the time we meet her, she is just as at home with her mother locked in a room as Rose is.

I also use the repetition of the story in order to build to a revelation. Rose cannot open her door until she confronts her need for the story. At the end of the play, when Emma feverishly starts telling it one more time, Rose explodes. She finally understands that James drowned because he thought he saw her in the water and was walking towards her. Sharing this revelation with Emma is the most important moment of the play. It allows for the barrier between mother and daughter to come down. Even though we don't

actually *see* the door open at the end of the play, we know that their ghost has been released.

Ironically, in *Yours*, doors are also used as a device. The bathroom door at the high school is the first point of contact that is used as a touchstone for the rest of the story. It starts out closed but then bursts open into passion and we know that this is the beginning of something. That scene is echoed near the end of the play with the door to Inch's room. Billy knocks and knocks with no response. The door remains closed and all we see is a note slid under at the last moment and we know that this is the ending of something. It is the same set-up with the opposite conclusion.

TIME IN *TOO MUCH, TOO MUCH, TOO MANY*

In *Too Much, Too Much, Too Many* time moves differently for Emma and Rose; but James is the key to how it moves for both of them. As time moves with Emma in flashback, James gradually disappears. There are four scenes between them. The first scene is a flashback to just before James lost his memory. The second scene flashes back to James at the beginning stages of dementia. The third flashes back to him deep in the throws of the illness. This happens right after Emma returns from her date with Pastor Hidge. It is perhaps the most important scene between them. Emma is on the edge of re-entering the world of the living, but after this flashback she is pushed to destroy the only thing between her and her grief: her relationship with Pastor Hidge. In their last scene together, Emma and James sit on the porch steps, and James is mentally gone. Emma

begins to weep. It is only after this full cycle of reliving his decline that she can move forward and confront her mother.

Oppositely, as time moves with Rose and James, James reappears- he comes back to her. Their connection begins as a glimmer, she closes her eyes and he appears leaning against her wall. There are no words spoken between them, just shared silence. His presence increases as she speaks to him, first about being his wife and then later about their love of the water. As the play grows, so does his presence for her. It crescendos when she dances through the door, first with Pastor Hidge and then with him. At this point, she speaks to him and he speaks back. They move together. They are in sync. The final and inevitable step is for her to join him in the water, but we do not see her do this.

The gesture I have been building to throughout the entire play happens in the darkness. The audience never gets to *see* Rose leave; they never get to *see* her enter the water, which in some way passes her ache onto them.

THE ACHE THAT STAYS

At the heart of both of these plays is deep, deep love. But as I continue to work on both of them, I have begun to wonder if the most powerful part of each love is the ache that comes when it is lost. Because even the greatest loves, the longest loves, eventually come to some end. But the ache, tender and throbbing, stays.

Maybe it is the ache that truly connects the heated passion of Billy and Inch and the overwhelming love of Rose and James. Maybe it is my own ache that connects me to

all these characters. Hopefully more like them will keep showing up at my door,
knocking as hard they can, their hearts full and fearless.

YOURS

CHARACTERS

BILLY. 17 years old in 1961.

INCH. 17 years old in 1961.

WALLACE. 17 years old in 1961.

VIOLET. 16 years old.

SETTING

1960s. Savannah, Georgia.

BILLY and INCH sit behind school desks on either side of the stage, facing the audience.

As each note is passed between them, the words will travel across the wall behind them. They will not speak.

18th January. 1961.

Inch folds a piece of paper and discreetly tosses it at Billy. He unfolds it.

INCH

Did you throw somethin at my window last night?

Billy scribbles on the back of the note and tosses it back.

BILLY

I can't be held responsible for what I do when it's rainin.

She smooths the paper out, writes something and passes it back.

INCH

You know that Ray took the heat for that? Daddy let him have it. And you just howled like a wolf and ran away. I'll hold you responsible for that particular item.

He RIPS out a new piece of notebook paper, writes and lobs it at her. She catches it.

BILLY

The only *item* in question at the moment is your heart.

She returns it. He catches it.

INCH

When did my heart become an *item*?

Back at her.

BILLY

When you threw it at Wallace Strog.

She fumes as she writes. He turns away for a moment and she hits him in the back of the head.

INCH

I think the rain soaked straight through to your brain!

He chuckles and shoots the paper at her. It goes right down her dress. He puts his hands up in celebration as if he has just scored the winning point.

BILLY

Froggy Stroggy, Inch? Really?

She goes back to folding it neatly and slides it along the floor with her foot.

INCH

Wallace Strog has promise.

He slides it back to her with a straight face.

BILLY

Promise to give you frog-faced babies!

The rest of the exchange will be in quick tosses.

INCH

I don't see you runnin over here the minute the school bell rings!

BILLY
Maybe I'm busy.

INCH
Maybe I don't believe you.

BILLY
Maybe I don't give a care.

INCH
I hope you die.

BILLY
I hope I do die and you feel guilty as all heck for the rest of time.

...

A bell rings.

Billy packs up his things in a huff
and walks out.

Inch sees that Billy has left a book
behind.

She speaks, with her pencil in hand.

INCH
I can't believe how wretched I can be. The truth is I liked that you threw something at my window and ran off. Ray says it's 'cause you care but you're not cocky. I like that. Wallace Strog was assigned my partner for the square dance and there's nothing neither of us can do about it. *(pause)* I don't hope you die. I hope you live a long time and let me say a whole bucket full of wretched things to you.

She puts the note in his book and
exits.

The Dance.

A single window is lowered onto the stage. Billy stacks milk crates and looks through it as Inch twirls into warm light.

Twangs of pedal-steel guitar echo out.

Inch will move on her own until Billy mentions Froggy. At that point FROGGY will join her.

28th February. 1961.

BILLY

Dear Inch,

How dare you look like that tonight? You know how that color heats me up. That bright purple...all lush and clingy on you. It's like lust in a can. Shake me up and let me e.x.p.l.o.d.e! And there I am all scratchy in my old, tired trousers- I stacked some milk crates so I could look inside the window. Watched you walk into that place and change it's temperature. Every set of eyeballs in that barn turned green with envy. Including mine. Froggy Stroggy was stuffed into that suit tighter than a breakfast sausage and I don't mind sayin he looked awful lop-sided next to your lean sprig of a frame. I saw you lookin around all night and I prayed you were lookin for me. But all that lookin didn't stop you from movin. Hoooo, the way you move!

He jumps off the stack.

So free it's like you're swimmin, not dancin. Like that whole place should fill up with water so you can float right through, twirlin and tossin until your feet turn to fins. Then again, we don't want you to be any more appealin to FROGGY than you already are- he's likely to see another water creature in the place, make you kiss him and turn him into a prince! And that just won't do. See the thing is Inch, maybe you haven't kissed me yet but I already feel like a king when I'm next to you. And maybe that means if you ever do allow me to kiss you we'll just Flash! Flam! Disappear! And rule over our very own kingdom. A beautiful place where everything's purple. And I can twirl you around on those little fins of yours- I'll turn you and turn you until that square dance is a little

polka dot in our memories. And we won't have to be quiet. I can open my mouth and talk to you in a howl. How would that be, Inch? How bout it?

-Billy

Inch will repeat the same motions as before but this time she will talk through them.
Billy will move back into his starting position and watch her in silence.

INCH

Dear Billy,

You bet I was lookin for you. I thought you were at least gonna show up. Instead you just watched, like always. Did you ever think a girl could get a little self-conscious knowin she's bein *looked over* like that? Good thing I didn't know. Instead all I could do was count. I was countin the seconds until you arrived. I got to five hundred and sixty-seven before I even agreed to give Wallace one dance. And then I was countin the steps but eventually I lost my place 'cause I just imagined it was you holdin my hand and promenadin me.

Come and take that kiss, Billy. When you see me next and I'm yammerin away about the moon or somethin I just want you to grab me before I ruin it.

Be brave for the both of us and shut me up good.

-Inch

Under the door of the Girls'
Bathroom.

A door is lowered down and
separates them.

They pass notes underneath it.

1st March. 1961.

BILLY
I know you're in there.

INCH
So is Nadine Yalrue. She's about to come out of the stall, clear out!

A girl walks out through the door
and Billy hides.

BILLY
Smooth as an ironed tie, I am.
Okay, now you're alone.

INCH
So what?

BILLY
Should I come in?

INCH

I don't know Billy, I'm havin a lot of feelins.

BILLY

Whatdya mean?

INCH

I mean I'm nervous and scared and a little nauseous-

BILLY

I'm comin in!

INCH

Wait!

...

They both freeze. Inch puts down her pencil, leans against the door and talks through it.

INCH

It's just that I think about this and it's somethin' I've been thinkin about a lot. I mean a lot. And really when I said the next time I see you I didn't mean before first period the very next mornin at school! I mean I haven't even taken my history exam yet and I wonder if it's just-

In the middle of this, Billy bursts through the door, grabs her, and shuts her up.

A school bell rings.

Lights fade as they continue to kiss.

Inch appears on stage against a background of flowered wallpaper. One side of her face is swollen and bruised. Its shape and color almost blends in with the pattern behind her.

2nd March. 1961.

INCH

Billy,

I'm giving this note to Ray to give to you today. He's in your corner and everything but he's still awful nosy. I taped it up so he couldn't read it, but let me know if it looks messed with.

I don't want you to think that I didn't come to school because of...well, the girl's bathroom. That's not it. The girl's bathroom was the best thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life. And I was so happy at the supper table when I got home last night that I couldn't stop singin. Even when my mouth was full! Daddy told me stop. He said he was in no mood. But I couldn't. I just had so much sound in me.

I told you I count when I'm nervous. Used to be I'd count daddy's footsteps comin up the stairs when I was in trouble. There's not as much warnin lately. He just... (*gestures a backhanded smack*) right across the table.

I've taken to countin the flowers on the wallpaper. So far there's still more flowers on it than bruises on me, so I'm fine.

(*pause*)

I don't know... if he knows why he does it...

But let the record show that I am not avoidin you by not comin to school. I just know better than to make a scene.

See you after the weekend

- Inch

A telephone rings.

10th March. 1961.

INCH
Billy-

BILLY
I don't want to hear it. Any of it-

INCH
I had to-

BILLY
Lying doesn't suit you. If you're ashamed-

INCH
I haven't heard from you in a week!

BILLY
...

INCH
You give me my first kiss and then you disappear?

BILLY

Didn't take you too long to find your second.

INCH

Billy Young, you're a jerk, you know that? I've waited for a note from you all day every day like a fool. Where have you been?? I told you about somethin I've never told anyone about and you didn't even bother to write me back.

So YES I agreed to go to the movies with Wallace. My daddy made me. YES I let him kiss me *on the cheek*. He's sweet on me and I am polite. He knows I don't feel like that about him, he just hasn't been able to let go of the idea yet. But you know what, *jerk*? At least he telephones me and shows up when he says he will and asks me on real dates. You've never once done that. Not once. What am I supposed to think, Billy? Cause as far as I can tell I'm not the one who's ashamed.

12th March. 1961.

BILLY

Dear Inch,

I think you're brave. For telling me like that.
I apologize.

I know you don't like Froggy.

And I guess a kiss on the cheek doesn't count.

I just hate that he gets to be near you so much.

Looks like I better ask you out proper before I miss my chance all together.

But can we not talk on the telephone? I hate havin that piece of junk up to my ear.

When I'm holdin a pencil I feel like I can just press down and let it all push out through my hand. There's no pauses or ummms or people listenin in on your conversation.

Letters are private. And the things I say to you are for you and you only.

Can I come see you tonight? Can I come to your window?

If it's yes, just nod once at me in the hall when I see you at school.

If it's no- well, please just don't even look up. I don't think I could bare seein your eyes if they weren't for me.

-Billy

Blue light falls over the stage.
Inch appears upstage carrying her books. She takes a deep breath in and it echoes through the theater. She starts to walk forward with her head down.
Billy enters from downstage. They move as if in slow motion. He doesn't take his eyes off her. Just as they are about to pass she lifts her head ever so slightly and winks at him.

Inch's window.
A window is lowered down. Inch and Billy lie on their backs on either side of it. Stars appear in the sky on Billy's side.
As in the first scene, the words of the notes they pass back and forth are displayed on the wall behind them. They do not speak. All we hear is their breathing and crickets.

12th March. 1961.

INCH
I. Am still. Panting.

BILLY
Your mouth tastes like cherry pop.

INCH
I don't know how you do what it is you do but please *don't. ever. stop.*

BILLY
My sweet girl-

INCH
Ever.

BILLY
I won't stop.
That's a promise.

INCH
Can you stay out there until I fall asleep?

BILLY
I'm sleeping right here next to your window tonight.

INCH
But what if you fall off the roof?!

BILLY
I haven't stopped fallin since I met you, inchworm.
Now close your eyes and dream of me.

Inch appears in a dress in front of the wallpaper again, but this time the flowers are magnified. As she starts listing, the flowers begin to dissolve one by one.

By the time she reaches the end, her face is the only bloom left, beaming in a small pool of light.

20th May. 1962.

INCH

Dearest Billy,

Promise me. If we're going to do this, if you're going to come with me, you have to promise me that you won't cause any trouble. This is a big night for my father- the whole town's comin, they got that band to come out from the city, and we're gonna be sittin at the same table as the mayor and his wife- I wonder if her hair is really that yellow in person. I've never been more excited for anything in my whole entire life...but I know how you can get. If someone says something, just squeeze my hand. Squeeze it and I will calm you. And make sure you wear that tie. And shine your shoes. And remember to talk slow, daddy hates mumblers.

There are many things I wish for us on this night. But right now I am just gonna write down a small list of things that I promise will always remind me of you just in case I end up yellin at you so hard you turn around and leave me. But I don't care how many years go by or how many times I yell. These are they.

Pencil shavings
Cloth handkerchiefs
Wax paper (sandwiches taste better)
Bad posture
Bare feet
Baseball games
Stamps
Open windows
Girls' Bathrooms (*you* picked the place!)
Trousers with useful pockets
Covered trains
Tackle boxes
Dogeared pages
Twinkly lights
Warm Hands
Chuck Berry
Cherry pop
(to be continued....as we continue...)

Billy appears in a cot with a cast on his arm, a bandaged head and a beat up face. He struggles to keep hold of his pencil as he writes.

23rd May. 1962.

Am I sorry? I am not. I know that your father is a respected man. But I will never allow you to be treated like that; not by him, not by anyone. I wish you were standing here so I could show you my heart beating through this hospital gown. I would fight for you again and again and again and again and again and you would never see me complain. What are bruises if not keepers, ledgers, marking us like maps... If all the bruises we accumulated in a whole life showed themselves at once we would no longer look like us, but human shaped tropical oceans. You could wring us out and taste our sorrow. How lucky that we show our pain with color. Our blood rising up to our defense. Evidence that we are here and we have hurt. I breathe in and I can feel my ribs are shattered and I am in love. My knuckles won't stop bleeding, like the line of his jaw was just the edge of a big piece of paper. They keep bandaging me but I still see the blood. I see you in it, the way it

appears all at once. I want you to know that I didn't turn around when you let the sheet fall. I won't ever turn around if you don't want me to. But I've touched every part of you in the dark so don't think I don't know how pretty you are. That little hollow space in your collarbone, I'd like to claim there. Shrink down and sleep there. Ray picked up a couple of my teeth from the street and brought them wrapped in a tissue. Tokens, he said. He said you haven't come out of your room. Come out, Inch. You're almost eighteen years old. He can't keep us apart for long.

First time my breath touched you it wanted to stay there. I'm certain that you were made for me and I'm gonna prove it if you'll let me. We'll show him. We'll show all of them. We'll be the happiest people in this town, in this STATE. Come on, inchworm. This springishsummer time has our names in it. I'm black and blue and I like it. I like you. I like you so much I think I might just have to keep you forever.

Yours,
Billy

Outside Inch's window. Billy has a stack of envelopes in his hand.

27th May. 1962.

BILLY

Ray says he won't take these to you anymore- he says you told him to stop.

He folds the piece of paper in his hand and takes a bottle of cherry pop out of his back pocket. He sets them down next to the window along with the rest of the envelopes.

He rearranges everything, takes a few steps back and looks at it, then puts it back the way it was.
He stares out into the darkness.

28th May. 1962.

Billy stands outside staring up at Inch's window. It is late and still. The items he left there have not moved.

The following dates pass behind Billy as he stands there, silent.

29th May. 1962.

30th May. 1962.

31st May. 1962.

1st June. 1962

He leaves the stage.

2nd June. 1962.

3rd June. 1962.

Wallace appears downstage left. He wears a nicely tailored suit.

2nd July. 1962.

WALLACE

Dear Imogen,

I know you've never quite taken to me the way I have to you.

But I am a good man. An honest man.

Inch appears downstage right. She is in a nightgown with a bathrobe over it.

INCH

Dear Billy,

I know you've never agreed with how my father disciplines me and Ray. But what you did makes you a hypocrite.

WALLACE

I'm taking up my father's business in the fall and I plan to make him proud.

INCH

What you did makes you no better than him. I wanted you to be.

WALLACE

I don't expect you to understand why I keep after you the way I do. But I've always seen something special in you.

INCH

You're right, our bruises do tell our stories.

And that purple stain underneath my father's eye has the end of us stretched across it.

WALLACE

I hope you'll do me the honor of receiving me in your home tomorrow when I come to ask you in person... what I'm going to ask you... but I wanted to give you a day to think things over.

INCH

The moment you raised your fist
you lost me.

WALLACE

I know I don't make your heart race. But I promise that I would keep it safe.

Keep you safe.

Respectfully and humbly,

Wallace Strog

Billy appears in uniform.

12th September. 1963.

BILLY

Dear Inch,

I've been overseas for a while now. Turns out they find me pretty useful behind a desk, which I am thankful for. But that doesn't stop me from seeing all this recklessness around me.

He looks down for a long moment.

I knew better.

My father sent me the clipping of your wedding.
There are many things I've wished to say to you up until now.
People always say a picture's worth a thousand words.
I've never believed that. But holding this piece of newspaper in my hand, seeing you smiling, I've got to.

Congratulations.

-Corporal William J. Young

22nd May. 1964.

INCH

Dear Imogen, Dear self, Dear stupid, stupid self-
You've got to stop this.
Sometimes things don't happen the way you think they will.

You cannot get mad at Wallace for bringing you cherry pop.
You cannot get mad at him period.
You're holding on too tight.
You're going to pop a blood vessel.
And get wrinkles.
And gain weight.
(breath)
You made a choice.
You are lucky.
You have a home.
You are comfortable.
You have a man who adores you.
You learned to take photographs and they're not half bad.
You have your very own darkroom made special for you.
You have hours that you can spend in that dark space
You have hours to make something out of nothing
You have hours
And hours
And hours

Inch appears with a drink in her
hand. Music and the sound of voices
surround her.

18th June. 1967.

INCH

Billy,

I'm the one at the end of the room- sitting, standing, lifting a drink—counting. I look good, I look pretty maybe- no. All I could do was put on the only jeans I ever wear. I won't look good when I see you. I won't look new or changed and I'll still look away. I'm the one who arrived late hoping you would already be here so I wouldn't have to count- but you aren't- and then it hits me that you may not come at all. But no, this is a Welcome Home Brave Soldier party. And these people, they know you, they love you and they've probably said it to you (I never said it). My husband is out of town and I am a stupid woman. All these people, when did you know all these people? Who is that redhead and why is she cackling like that? Where did she- and now it's ten past and you're not coming. What the heck did I get in the car for? What was I thinking? What would I even say if I had the chance? Shit. And I start to move, I put my drink down and open my mouth to say goodbye and I hear your name. Before I can even look up my stomach cramps. My throat lumps. I am sick. This is not good. And I turn and I see you shaking a hand at the door. You are wet. Is it raining? Great now it's raining? You look incredible. Not because you look different or cleaned up but- you look so much like you. You look more like yourself than you ever have. And all at once, they're all gone, the hand at the door, the redhead, *all these people*- disappear

Billy appears.

because we look up

The voices stop.

we see each other

The music stops.

and we fill up the room...

I will not send this

27th June. 1967.

INCH

Dear William,

I don't blame you for staying at the other end of the room last week.

But it was nice to see you all the same.

I heard you got a job at the library and I hope you don't mind- I left something for you there.

You'll find it at the beginning of the 'T' section of the art books.

Welcome home

-I. Strog

The Library.

A tall stack of shelves is lowered
down.

Billy enters and begins to look
through it.
He pulls out a photograph from the
darkness.
It slowly develops behind him as he
looks at it.
He turns it over.
There is something written on the
back.

INCH

I caught a bluebird losing a feather as it left the grass. I wondered; did it feel a piece of
itself going?

-I

The full image appears of a bird with
a streak of blue behind it.

11th August. 1967.

Late at night. Inch sits on the floor of the library leaning against the library stack, crying. She looks a mess. She holds a crumpled photograph in her hands. After a moment she smooths it out and writes on the back of it. As she speaks, different sets of lights turn out to indicate rows of the library being shut down for the night.

INCH

Dear Billy,

Please forgive the emotional state you saw me in coming out of the doctor's office this morning. I overheard one of the nurses sayin that people who lose...their babies...probably didn't deserve them in the first place.

A section of lights go out.
Billy enters from the opposite side of the stage carrying a pile of books.
He pauses.

I keep thinking, maybe if I could just love Wallace a little more-

Another section. Billy moves through the stacks quietly.

I try. I hold my hand out to him. I lift my head to meet his gaze but instead I look at his chin, his nose, his forehead- not his eyes. I am going through the motions but they aren't working. He wants a child more than anything but I hardly feel able to wash and dress myself most of the time.

I can't help thinking this isn't on accident.

Another section. He kneels down behind the stack she is leaning on.

The only thing that gives me any peace is taking these pictures and being in the dark room. When I'm in there, things don't matter so much.

The photograph she is writing on
develops in back of them.
It is of a clothesline, with
photographs pinned up along it.
You can just barely see them because
they are blown upwards by the wind.

I like to hang my photographs on the clothesline instead of the sheets. I like them a little ruined. They make more sense to me that way.

Billy watches her as she kisses the
photograph.

Little histories flapping around in the breeze.

She places it inside a large book and
pauses.

I can be quiet as a mouse in the dark with them.
Or I can hang them outside and let them scream.

Does she know he is there?

I can open my mouth and talk to you in a howl.

The last section of lights goes down.
Darkness.

Billy lets out a deep, wild howl.

Inch appears downstage in a coat, hat
and mittens. She is shivering.
Billy sits on a stool upstage in the
warm light.

30th November. 1967.

INCH
I wait outside the library.

BILLY
I work late.

INCH
It is cold.

BILLY
I need the distraction.

INCH
I've waited out here every night this week. But you haven't come out.

BILLY
Sometimes I fall asleep at the desk.

INCH
I am counting...

BILLY
But tonight-

INCH
Tonight I won't count.

BILLY
I'll go home.

INCH
I'll go home.

Inch starts to move. Snow begins to fall. She looks up.

Billy puts on his coat and scarf.
Lights shift to a cool blue.

INCH /

It hasn't snowed in...

BILLY
(looking out)
It hasn't snowed in...
Has it ever snowed here?

Billy begins to walk downstage.
Inch begins to cross.
They both have their heads down.

They almost pass each other but as they do their hands touch.

They both freeze.

INCH
It's just a moment.

BILLY
An instant, but I know it is you without looking up.

INCH
Look up.

BILLY
I could.

INCH
I can feel the heat in your hand through your glove.

BILLY
Your hands are cold.

INCH
It's always been that way.

BILLY
Look up.

INCH
I can feel it. That heat.

BILLY
I could look up.

INCH
I can see it.

BILLY
I could warm you

INCH
You

BILLY
In an instant

INCH
with your

BILLY
One

INCH
white hot

BILLY
Two

INCH
tropical heart...

Billy's heartbeat begins to echo
through the theater.
Faster.
Louder.
He looks up.
Blackout.

Wallace appears in a crisp, white shirt with his tie undone. He will tie it as he speaks, finishing with a perfect knot.

15th March. 1968.

WALLACE

Dear Mother,

Thank you for your gift. Imogen and I couldn't be happier about the news. We would've told you sooner but we wanted to be sure this time. You know more than anyone how I've wanted this. And Imogen is happier than I've ever seen her. Every time her belly gets the slightest bit bigger she starts laughing and laughing. To be honest, I've never seen her laugh like this before. I knew it was what we needed. And when this baby comes, I think she'll see the best in me. I'm going to love our son (or daughter) with every bit of strength I've got. Mother I know you've had your doubts about Imogen, but if you could see her now I think they would be put to rest for good. You've always said I was born to be a family man. I know father thought so too. If I could say anything to him right now, it would be that I am happy. I am happy.

With love,
Wallace

6th June. 1968.

BILLY

Inch,

You're so plump at the moment I'm gonna have to call you Inch and a half. Each time I see you on the street you're smiling and I don't think you'd be smiling like that if you didn't know that particular half was ours. You know it and I know it.

He jumps around the stage with joy.

The thing I can't get over is that I was prepared. I was ready to devote myself to the distance between us. To see you being helped out of a car by another man for the rest of my life. I got to know that ache- it sat with me in my house at the end of every day. How comfortable I got. Lazy, even. I can't get over how accustomed one can become to pain. It ages you and you don't even notice.

Now I run laps around the library every break I get because I can't contain myself!

He breaks into a sprint and circles the stage and then stops suddenly, out of breath.

I haven't forgotten how complicated this is for you.

I respect Wallace. From what I hear he's a very fair man and he treats you well. I know you said that this would be a dream come true for him- but it won't be true.

The doctor told you you couldn't and you *did*- if that isn't a sign I don't know what is! This baby is gonna be the feistiest little bug the world has ever seen- because it's you and me.

How we've waited.

We are older but we're not old. Yet.

No more hiding in the dark. Gather your feathers for take off. It's time. It's time. It's time.

Yours,
Billy

Wallace walks directly to the edge of the stage, furious.

1st December. 1968.

WALLACE

Did you think I would just accept this as I've accepted everything else? I refuse to believe it. You have no proof. You have NO PROOF.

You never wanted a child as I did. And I am taking her with me. You and Billy can be as you wish. As you have wished. I'm taking her up north where she will remain with my mother and me.

You have no income to speak of, Imogen. And neither does Billy. You know this is what is best for her.

I have treated you with love and respect since the day I met you. Until now I had thought you had at least returned the latter.

I have accepted more about you than your selfish heart will ever know. You will accept this.

-Wallace

1st December. 1968.

A door is lowered down.
Billy sits holding his head with one
hand and knocking with the other.
The lights are out on the other side of
the door but we know that Inch is in
there.

He stops knocking and rubs his eyes.

After a moment, he starts knocking
again.

He knocks louder.

He stands up and knocks.

He kicks hard at the door.

Nothing.

He sits back down.

After a moment, he starts knocking again.

A note slips under the door.
He looks down at it.

Lights fade.

A teenage girl appears holding a stack of papers.

September 6th. 1984.

Dear Mr. Young,
Hello. My name is Violet.

Billy appears stage left looking down at the letter as she speaks.

I got a package in the mail when my mother died with no return address. All that was inside was letters and pictures.

She hesitates, nervous.

I'd like to meet you if you'd like to meet me.

I've included something for you. My mother wrote it to me the day I was born. It's the only thing my father ever let me keep from her and I've kept it close always.

Maybe you can return it to me sometime.

Sincerely,

Violet Strog

PS. I like cherry pop too

She begins putting the letters into a backpack. As the following is read, dozens of Inch's photographs will flash on the wall behind them. Inch appears stage right.

INCH

29th August. 1968.

You came into the world today. We had a little trouble with your breathing at first. Everyone was worried but I knew you just needed a moment. It's a big place and it's only natural that it knocked the wind out of you. Just tells me that you are a sensitive creature. Which brings me to my first bit of motherly advice; allow yourself. You will feel things strongly- good and bad- and I say, allow yourself to feel it all. Don't push it down. Don't choose something because it's easy. You entered this world the color of a flower and why not give you a name that follows suit; why should we not be called after colors? It seems to me that's all we are in this life, passing colors. Flush with gasps of time. Babygirl, if I could prevent any kind of pain from coming to you I would. But pain is a part of life and I'm here to say don't let it rule you. When you get hurt- if you fall and scrape your knee or bump into a door and a bruise rises to the surface- look down at it and say hello. Smile and welcome it.

VIOLET

Your father once said that bruises
are there as reminders...

INCH

Your father once said that bruises
are there as reminders.

INCH

They testify that we are here and we have hurt.
Your name... is the color of flowers and vegetables, swimsuits and sunsets. And bruises.
All things that you will live and learn.

Some day you will probably read this and think your mother was off her rocker. Well maybe I am.
All I'm really saying is
Dear Violet, you are my favorite color.

Mama

The screen goes black. As lights fade on Billy and Inch, Violet closes the backpack, puts on a jacket and looks out, a smile forming on her face.

End of play.

Too Much, Too Much, Too Many

“We were together. I forget the rest.”

-Walt Whitman

CHARACTERS

ROSE. 78

EMMA. 35

PASTOR HIDGE. 30

JAMES. 65 and on

NOTE:

The play takes place over four months. Within each month are a series of short scenes. Characters should move simply between the scenes. Lighting and small costume changes should mark the passage of time.

MAY

One

Knocking in the dark.
Lights up on half of the stage.
ROSE sits in a rocking chair reading.
This is her bedroom.
She ignores the knocking.

Lights up on the other half of the stage.
EMMA knocks on her door with
PASTOR HIDGE a safe distance behind
her.

EMMA
Mama?

No response.

EMMA
How you feeling this morning?

No response.

EMMA
I brought someone to visit with you. The new pastor from church, Pastor Hidge,
he's come to read to you. Isn't that nice?

No response.

EMMA
I've set a chair out here and I'm just gonna head into the kitchen so you and he can
get acquainted.

Emma looks at Pastor Hidge.

EMMA
He's young, mama. Be sweet now.

She exits.
Pastor Hidge approaches the door.

PASTOR HIDGE

Good morning, Rose. Is it okay if I call you Rose?

No response.

PASTOR HIDGE

I'm just going to take your silence as a yes.

In fact I'm going to take all of them as a yes until you tell me otherwise.

He listens, smiling.

PASTOR HIDGE

I come down from Illinois. Everybody's been very welcoming considering.

(pause) Nice people. They say hello, Rose. They're thinking of you. (pause)

Emma tells me you've been shut up in there for months now. Can't be too much fun in there all alone.

He sits down and pulls a worn copy of the bible out of his pocket.

Rose looks bothered, but does not look up.

PASTOR HIDGE

If you don't mind I'm going to give you some company for a little while.

If you don't like it, you just let me know.

He opens the book and clears his throat.

PASTOR HIDGE

"...I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit..."

He listens.

PASTOR HIDGE

"...That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered. I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Je-ru'sa-lem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived

that this also is vexation of spirit.”

She looks up.

Two

Rose sits in her chair with a blanket over her. Emma sits outside the door in her bathrobe.

ROSE
Again.

Emma rubs her eyes and shifts in her chair.

EMMA
They pulled him out real slow. He had seaweed in his hair. His shirt was still tucked in. Belt was still tight. His face was serene. Eyes were open, as if they saw something right out ahead of him. (pause) And clutched in his hand was a small, wooden bird. Mr. Shaw said he never seen anything like it, a man passing but still holding on to something.

Three

Pastor Hidge sits at the kitchen table. He is on his last bite of a blackberry scone

and simultaneously reaching for another.
Emma pours him coffee.

EMMA

Silence isn't too bad. She threw a shoe at the door when Mr. Shaw came around...least I think it was a shoe.

He smiles.

PASTOR HIDGE

This is the best scone I've ever had.

EMMA

She's been making them for forty years.

PASTOR HIDGE

She made these?

EMMA

Well, no. She gave me the recipe. (pause) I've almost got it right.

He takes another bite.

PASTOR HIDGE

The blackberries....

EMMA

Out back.

She sits down at the table and looks at him.

EMMA

You have much experience with something like this?

He takes a moment to answer.

PASTOR HIDGE
No.

Emma stares at him.

PASTOR HIDGE
Is it just you, taking care of her?

EMMA
Yes.

PASTOR HIDGE
But you have brothers and sis-

EMMA
Yes. (pause) They have families.

Four

Rose's chair is close to the door. She leans forward, excited.

Emma is on the other side with a notebook and a pencil.

ROSE
3 cups cooked, mashed sweet potatoes
¼ cup butter
1 ¼ cups sugar
2 large eggs
¼ cup evaporated milk
1 teaspoon nutmeg

1 ½ teaspoons cinnamon

Combine the sweet potatoes and butter in the big blue bowl and mix it up good.
Real good.

EMMA

Hang on.

She writes quickly.

EMMA

Okay.

ROSE

Add the sugar and THEN the eggs. In that order. Mix THAT up real good until it's as smooth as you can make it. As smooth as you can make it. I mean smoo-

EMMA

Got it. Smooth.

ROSE

Scoop it into the pastry- 9-inches- and bake it at 350 degrees for 45 minutes—if you do it for 50 in that oven it'll be wrong.
And in the last 8 minutes, add those tiny marshmallows.

EMMA

Mama's Sweet Potato Pie.

ROSE

I only use 20 of the marshmallows but I'll leave that to your discretion.

EMMA

(smiling)

All right.

I'm exhausted, Mama. I'm going to bed.

She gets up.

ROSE
What does he look like?

Pause.

EMMA
Who?

ROSE
Don't get smart.

EMMA
Well what do you mean? He looks like a pastor.

ROSE
His voice is full of something.

EMMA
You could just open your door and look.

Silence.

EMMA
He's lean.
He's tall.
He's...he always looks like he's thinking about something.

ROSE
What about his hands? Have you gotten a look at them?

EMMA
No.

ROSE
Look at them.

EMMA
And what will that tell me?

Rose is lost in thought.

Emma listens at the door.
She runs her hand along it.
She walks away.

She turns a dim light on in the kitchen and sits
at the table. She puts her head down on it and
closes her eyes.

JAMES rushes into the room.

JAMES
I'm a 4, Emma. I'm a 4.

EMMA
Daddy?

JAMES
Do you know what a 4 means?

EMMA
What are you talking about?

JAMES
Numerology. I found some of your old magazines in your room. I had NO idea how incredible they are. Why do they only share these things with adolescent girls? How could the world *allow that to happen??* I did my numerology and I am a 4, which means I am stubborn and messy, and a really good dancer. I AM stubborn! AND messy! And an EXCELLENT dancer!

EMMA
I know.

JAMES
Has your mother done this? Did you two do this together?

EMMA
Where is she?

JAMES
Asleep.

EMMA
Don't you think you should be asleep?

JAMES
I'm thinking of waking her up- I think she's a 7.

EMMA
Go back to bed, daddy.

JAMES
You are definitely a 3.

EMMA
It's 2 a.m.

JAMES
But do you know what this means?

EMMA
No.

JAMES
Now I'll know.

EMMA
What?

JAMES
When I forget. I'll just look at number 4—and I'll know that I'm stubborn, messy
and a good dancer.

Pause.

EMMA
That's a good idea.

JAMES

I know.

Pause.

JAMES
I wrote it down.

EMMA
Good.

Pause.

JAMES
Miss you, butterbean.

EMMA
I'm right here.

JUNE

One

Rose paces back and forth with a book in her hand as she listens to Pastor Hidge.

PASTOR HIDGE
“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice and to do

good in his life-

ROSE
How old are you?

Pastor Hidge stops, shocked.

PASTOR HIDGE
Hello?

ROSE
How old are you?

PASTOR HIDGE
Does it matter?

ROSE
Of course it does. Don't tell me you're one of those people who thinks age doesn't count, we're all in the same boat, my life is your life, years are years--- years ARE years. It does count.

PASTOR HIDGE
I'm thirty.

ROSE
You sound younger.

Pause.

ROSE
I'm seventy-eight.

PASTOR HIDGE
You sound younger.

She shoves the book she's been holding in her hand under the door.

Pastor Hidge picks it up and pulls out the

piece of twine holding its place.

Two

Rose sits in her rocking chair with her eyes closed, humming.

James appears, leaning up against the wall.

They stay like that for a long moment.

She stops humming and opens her eyes. He is gone. Lights fade.

Three

Rose and Pastor Hidge sit on either side of the door. Each hold cards in their hands. There's a pile of spare cards scattered under the door.

ROSE
Go fish.

PASTOR HIDGE
You have to have *one* of the cards I've asked for.

ROSE
No. I don't.

He takes another card.

ROSE
Did I just hear your eyes roll back in that adolescent head of yours?

PASTOR HIDGE
Yes.

ROSE
You want to quit?

Pause.

PASTOR HIDGE
I don't quit.

ROSE
Got any... 7s?

Pause. He takes two cards and slides them under the door with an audible sigh. Rose snaps them up. She only has one card left.

ROSE
You come down from Illinois.

PASTOR HIDGE
Yes.

ROSE
You quit up there?

PASTOR HIDGE
No.

ROSE
So what happened?

PASTOR HIDGE
I just left.

Silence.

ROSE
Got any 2s?

He slides 3 twos under the door.

ROSE
I see.

PASTOR HIDGE
See what?

ROSE
You don't quit. (pause) You lose.

Pastor Hidge gets up in a huff and walks into the kitchen, where Emma sits lost in thought at the table.

She sees him and the trance is broken.

EMMA
You've got that look.

Pastor Hidge moves to the coffee maker.

PASTOR HIDGE

May I?

EMMA

Of course. (pause) She has a way of doing that, you know.

PASTOR HIDGE

What?

EMMA

(pointing at his face)

That.

He leans back on the counter.

EMMA

The sneak attack.

He smiles.

EMMA

That's what Daddy called it.

He sits down next to her.

PASTOR HIDGE

Do you do it too?

EMMA

No, I'm pretty straightforward.

PASTOR HIDGE

(a challenge)

Is that so.

EMMA

It is.

Pause. He considers this.

PASTOR HIDGE

Why didn't you ever get married?

EMMA

Ever? I'm not ancient yet.

PASTOR HIDGE

That's not what I meant.

EMMA

What did you mean?

PASTOR HIDGE

Look at you.

Silence.

PASTOR

I apologize--

EMMA

Why didn't *you* ever get married?

PASTOR

...I did.

He walks out of the room with the cup of coffee in hand.

Four

Rose bites into a cookie. There is a plate of them in front of her. Emma sits on the other side of the door with a cookie in her hand.

ROSE
More.

EMMA
Really?

Emma takes a bite.

EMMA
(mouth full)
I put in the exact amount.

ROSE
A pinch for me is bigger than a pinch for you.

Rose puts her hands out in front of her,
inspecting them.

ROSE
Good Lord in heaven these hands are HUGE...

EMMA
Daddy used to call them The Monsters.

ROSE
Yeah he teased me about 'em, but did he mind them rubbing his big, old feet at the
end of every day? N.O.

Beat.

EMMA
I think he's divorced.

ROSE
(smiling)
Who?

EMMA
Mama.

ROSE
He's not divorced.

EMMA
Did he say that?

ROSE
No.

EMMA
Then how do you know?

ROSE
He's got loss in his voice.

EMMA
You can't tell that.

ROSE
You can.

EMMA
How?

ROSE
It's the same way *your* voice sounds.

Rose leans back in her chair.

ROSE
Just once through, tonight.

Emma looks out, eyes searching as she speaks.

EMMA
They pulled him out real slow. He had seaweed in his hair. His shirt was still tucked in. Belt was still tight. His face was serene. Eyes were open, as if they saw something right out ahead of him....

Lights fade.

Five

Darkness. Uneven breathing. Rose pulls the string to a light next to her bed. She sits up in the dimness. She puts her hand on her heart and tries to steady her breath. She closes her eyes.

ROSE

I didn't think I was meant to be a wife. I push too hard. All the time. Every minute. Give me one inch and it's mine forever. I was ravenous. Ruthless. I didn't just fall into love I cannonballed. So why not find a lover, keep another, or two, or ten- have lusty evenings and long goodbyes...I coulda done that. I had the looks for it too. I had one of those faces that opened right up, like peoples' words quaked the earth underneath me and cracked me right open letting out tiny, hot bursts of light. They could see real quick if they made an impression. Or not. (pause) When I met you, you... *listened* to my hunger. You heard it. You heard the sound inside me aching to get out and push in and gasp for more. I was always walking around *gasping*. But all you had to do was take my face in your hands and hold it there. Just hold me there. Look at me. We had hour-long conversations with my face an inch away from yours. I could write the recipe to your breath I breathed in so much of your air. You held me and I breathed.

She takes a big, deep breath and exhales.

JULY

One

That exhale begins another breath on the other side of the darkened stage.

The sound of a faucet running.
A small light comes up around Emma getting a glass of water from the kitchen sink. The water begins to overflow over the edge of the glass as she continues to breath deeply.

The lights slowly come up to reveal that she is standing bare footed in about two inches of water covering the kitchen floor.

James enters carrying a wrench.

JAMES
Look out.

He bends down to look under the sink.

EMMA
What did you DO?

JAMES
What did I do? I tried to fix the faucet! Damn thing's a hundred years old.

EMMA
We got it replaced last spring.

JAMES
Do you see this?? I don't think so.

EMMA
We've got to call the plumber.

JAMES
Don't get jumpy. I just need to...

He sticks his head deeper into the cabinet that holds the sink.
After a long moment, he comes back up looking confused.

JAMES
What did I...

He looks down at the water covering his feet.

JAMES
I don't understand.

Silence.

EMMA
It's okay.

He looks at the wrench in his hand.

JAMES
(more upset)
I don't understand.

Emma moves to him and takes the wrench from him.

JAMES
I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

She puts her hand on his cheek.

EMMA
It's just water, daddy.

He's breathing hard.
She takes his hand and places it on top of hers and holds it there.

EMMA
It's just water.

Two

Lights rise on Emma asleep at the kitchen table in the outfit she wore the night before.

Pastor Hidge enters and freezes when he sees her there.

He stares for a moment then quietly moves back into the hallway.

He stands between the two rooms. He looks back at the kitchen then at Rose's door.

Finally he sits down on the chair outside Rose's door.

Lights up on Rose with her ear up to the door.

ROSE
What are you doing out there?

Pastor Hidge is startled.

PASTOR HIDGE
I was just about to knock.

She listens.

ROSE
Why are you so quiet?

PASTOR HIDGE
I-

ROSE
Usually make a lot more noise when you first come in.

PASTOR HIDGE
She's asleep.... I didn't want to wake her.

Rose moves away from the door and sits down.

ROSE
She at the table?

PASTOR HIDGE
Yes.

Pause.

PASTOR HIDGE
Does that happen a lot?

ROSE
A lot since.

Pause.

ROSE

Be willing to bet you don't sleep much since, either.

PASTOR HIDGE
Since?

ROSE
Illinois.

She listens.

ROSE
I'm right, aren't I?

PASTOR HIDGE
You enjoy being right, don't you.

ROSE
Thoroughly.

Beat.

PASTOR HIDGE
What about you? Do you sleep?

ROSE
I do. And I dream.

PASTOR HIDGE
About what?

ROSE
Having a waist.

Pastor Hidge laughs.

ROSE
...Have you seen a photograph of me, Pastor?

PASTOR HIDGE
There's one at the church. Mrs. Thacker pointed you out of the choir.

ROSE

That's an old one. I look worse now.

PASTOR HIDGE

You looked happy.

ROSE

Because I was singing. (pause) You ever notice people look best when they're not thinking?

PASTOR HIDGE

I guess I haven't.

ROSE

When they're doing as they please. (pause)
I liked singing but I was my own beauty pageant when I was swimming....least that's what James said.

PASTOR HIDGE

It's barely 8:00 and it's already blazing. Wish I'd learned how.

ROSE

No one ever taught you how to swim??

PASTOR HIDGE

We don't have lakes like yours up north.

ROSE

That's inhuman. Everyone should know how to swim.

PASTOR HIDGE

Well-

ROSE

Everyone.

She gets up and comes to the door.

ROSE

EMMA!

PASTOR HIDGE
Shhhh.

ROSE
Don't shh me. Child needs to wake up.... EMMA!!!

Emma sits up.

ROSE
EMMA!

Emma rushes in. She's still half asleep.

EMMA
Mama?

ROSE
Emma honey. You need to teach the pastor how to swim.

EMMA
What?

Pastor Hidge rises.

PASTOR HIDGE
(to Emma)
I'm sorry.

ROSE
Can you believe that he's reached...how old are you again...?

PASTOR HIDGE
Thirty.

ROSE
...that he's reached the *elderly* age of *thirty* without learning how? Isn't that inhuman??

EMMA

Mama.

ROSE
Yes.

EMMA
What is wrong with you?

ROSE
There should be an inner tube out in the shed.

EMMA
Mama!

ROSE
Is it my fault someone *neglected* the boy?

EMMA
You know what-

He touches Emma's arm.

PASTOR HIDGE
Thank you. For your concern, Rose. But I don't know if I would trust someone my own age to teach such an essential, human lesson.

ROSE
Well.

PASTOR HIDGE
You want to teach me?

ROSE
She's not your own age.

EMMA
Good Lord.

ROSE
She's thirty-five.

PASTOR HIDGE
(smiling at Emma)
Older.

Rose nods.

ROSE
Mmhm.

PASTOR HIDGE
Still. Not old enough.

ROSE
Well.

PASTOR HIDGE
Guess that leaves you.

ROSE
Guess you're out of luck.

PASTOR HIDGE
Guess that makes you just like the rest of the *neglectors*.

ROSE
Guess so.

EMMA
(shaking her head)
I need coffee.

She walks back to the kitchen.
Pastor Hidge follows her.
She starts to make the coffee but he takes
the pot out of her hand.

PASTOR HIDGE
Please. Let me.

She lets him and leans back on the counter, studying him.

EMMA
Did you really think that was going to work?

PASTOR HIDGE
Not really. But that wasn't the point.

EMMA
What was the point?

PASTOR HIDGE
So she knows someone is still trying.

EMMA
Are you saying you don't think I'm trying?

He turns around.

PASTOR HIDGE
I'm saying when's the last time you left the house?

EMMA
Excuse me?

PASTOR HIDGE
When's the last time *you* stepped foot outside that door?

She goes to the coffee maker.

EMMA
You're not doing that right.

PASTOR HIDGE
I'm serious.

EMMA
I can see that.

She slams the lid shut and looks him directly in the eye.

EMMA
What gives you the right to be serious?

PASTOR HIDGE
You didn't come to the church asking for my help.

EMMA
That's right.

PASTOR HIDGE
The people at the church asked me to come see your mother-

EMMA
That's right-

PASTOR HIDGE
-AND they asked me to come see you.

Emma moves back from him, shaken.

PASTOR HIDGE
And I did. I do. I talk to your mother, I hear her through a wall, but I *see* you.

She continues to back away along the counter, holding onto it.

PASTOR HIDGE
Have dinner with me.

She stops.

EMMA
What?

PASTOR HIDGE

Would you like to-

EMMA

Did the local pastor just call me a recluse and then hit on me?

PASTOR HIDGE

I'm not hitting on you.

EMMA

No?

PASTOR HIDGE

I think it might help Rose if you tell her we're going on a date.

EMMA

What...Why?

PASTOR HIDGE

Because she likes me.

EMMA

How do you know?

PASTOR HIDGE

I know. (pause) She wants you to teach me how to swim.

Emma stares at him.

PASTOR HIDGE

She'll think she made it happen.

EMMA

And?

He takes a step towards her.

PASTOR HIDGE

And then we'll go on another date.

He takes another step.

PASTOR HIDGE
And then another.

EMMA
And what? She'll just magically open the door?

PASTOR HIDGE
Yes.

EMMA
Because we're going on dates.

He steps close to her.

PASTOR HIDGE
Because I don't think she could resist seeing her recluse daughter happy.

Pause.

EMMA
So this has nothing to do with any genuine desire to have dinner with me.

They are so close now they are almost touching.

He shakes his head slowly, 'No'.

EMMA
Well.

PASTOR HIDGE
Well.

AUGUST

One

Rose rocks in her chair.

ROSE

A night out. I always guessed those nights wrong with you. I'd put on my Sunday best and a pair of high heeled shoes and you'd be waiting with a rowboat to take me night fishing. I'd wear a white dress and you'd have a picnic set up on the hood of the old truck. After awhile I knew better than to wear nice things—but I always brought my swim cap. Because no matter what night you planned, we'd always end up in the water by the end of it. Soon as our toes touched the surface you would start in...too beautiful, Rose. Too much beauty for this lake to hold. Too much beauty for this night. Too many stars you're outshining.

She throws her hands up over her head in a dive position.

ROSE

Make way fish! Too many creatures to tell...

ROSE

(softer)

Too many ways to tell them...

She giggles.

Beat.

ROSE

She looked beautiful. I couldn't see her of course... but I could smell her through the door. I could smell the shampoo and curlers. I could smell the lavender

perfume. The color of her dress. The blush in her cheeks.

Beat.

ROSE
I'm tired, James.

Two

Outside the house. Emma wears a dress.
Pastor Hidge looks at her.

EMMA
That was nice.

PASTOR HIDGE
Not too bad.

EMMA
I guess it's late.

PASTOR HIDGE
Guess so.

He turns to go.

EMMA
Do you want to come in for a minute?

He turns back.

EMMA

So that mama hears us.

PASTOR HIDGE
She's probably asleep.

EMMA
Right.

They stare at each other for a moment.

PASTOR HIDGE
Thank you for tonight.

EMMA
Thank YOU, you paid.

PASTOR HIDGE
I'll pay next time too.

EMMA
Next time?

PASTOR HIDGE
We want her to believe something's...beginning...here, right?

EMMA
Right. Yes.

Pause.

EMMA
Next time.

He smiles at her and turns to go again.

EMMA
Why'd you let me do all the talking?

He turns again.

EMMA

At supper.

PASTOR HIDGE

Well if you get a recluse out and talking you don't want to do anything to stop her.

EMMA

I don't...know you.

PASTOR HIDGE

Do you want to?

She kisses him suddenly. Ferociously.
He kisses her back.

Three

Emma walks in, still in a haze. James stands in front of the open freezer door in a robe, shivering. She sees him and stops short.

JAMES

He's late.

EMMA

What?

JAMES

Your hot ticket.

He turns around.

JAMES

Your date?

EMMA
I told you. He's not coming. Now please, dad. Shut the door.

JAMES
I was burning up.

EMMA
Well you're not anymore.

He shuts the door.

JAMES
Did he stand you up?

EMMA
No. I canceled it.

JAMES
Why would you do that? (pause, he sees his daughter) Look at you.

EMMA
Because you're not feeling well.

He sits down at the table and motions her to sit with him. She does.

JAMES
(as if it's a new thought)
He's late.

EMMA
He's not coming.

JAMES
Did he stand you up?

EMMA
...I canceled.

JAMES
Why would you do that?

EMMA
I'd rather stay here. With you.

JAMES
Don't you worry about me, honey. I'm fit as fiddlestick.

She touches his face. He takes her hand and grabs hold of it. He closes his eyes shut tight and squeezes her hand hard.

JAMES
You feel that?

Emma nods.

JAMES
That's my whole heart.

Emma's eyes fill.

JAMES
Now you.

She smiles and closes her eyes. James watches her. As he continues to look at her, fear gradually forms in his eyes.

JAMES
Don't you let me go.

Emma's eyes snap open and see

the frightened look on her father's
face.

Four

Pastor Hidge enters with energy. Rose is
writing something.

PASTOR HIDGE
How you doing this morning, Rose?

ROSE
Hush. I'm trying to finish a thought.

PASTOR HIDGE
You writing a novel in there?

Pause.

PASTOR HIDGE
Rose?

ROSE
(without looking up)
My obituary.

Pastor Hidge is silent.

ROSE
Someone's gotta write it.

PASTOR HIDGE
Usually after someone passes.

ROSE

Well they bunk it up most of the time.

PASTOR HIDGE

Rose, you're not sick, why would-

ROSE

I'm seventy-eight. Do I need a reason?

PASTOR HIDGE

No, I guess not.

ROSE

Good. Come back later.

After a moment, Pastor Hidge walks into the kitchen. Emma is flying around, cleaning furiously.

He sees a note on the table and reads it.

PASTOR HIDGE

What's this?

EMMA

Mama's obituary. She's making me do a draft so she can approve it. Woman wants to control what's said about her even after she's dead.

He watches her.

PASTOR HIDGE

What's the hurry?

EMMA

(without looking up)

I've been cleaning all night and this place is still a mess.

PASTOR HIDGE

Looks pretty good to me.

EMMA

Do you know there are cake pans that have been shoved under the cupboard that still have ancient pieces of batter stuck to them? I mean she is one of the untidiest people on this planet.

PASTOR HIDGE

Emma-

EMMA

I can't even imagine what it must look like inside that room- all the dust in the house is probably gathering in there in celebration.

PASTOR HIDGE

Emma.

EMMA

Meanwhile I found two ancient muffins that fell behind the stove. They looked like coal. And you *know* they didn't just accidentally fall back there- two imperfect, wayward muffins, she probably dropped them behind there on purpose in punishment!

She stands up, out of breath.

EMMA

Why did you let me do all the talking at supper?

PASTOR HIDGE

I thought we covered that.

EMMA

No, you had a cute excuse.

PASTOR HIDGE

What's wrong?

EMMA

I must be insane.

PASTOR HIDGE
Why?

EMMA
I let a complete stranger come into our house- fill my mother up with bible study
and fill me up with-

PASTOR HIDGE
With what.

EMMA
Why did you come here?

PASTOR HIDGE
The congregation-

EMMA
No. Why did you come to this town?

Silence.

EMMA
What is in Illinois?

Silence.

EMMA
I called your old church up there. I talked to Pastor Redmund.

PASTOR HIDGE
You WHAT?

EMMA
And you know what he said?

Pause.

EMMA

“How is John recovering?”

You can imagine my surprise. One, that you had a first name. But two. *Two*. That you’re no longer a pastor. (pause) That you left the church. (pause) He wanted me to tell you that he hopes God has eased your grief.

Beat.

EMMA
You’re a liar.

He takes a step towards her.

EMMA
Leave. No you know what? I’m the recluse. I’ll leave.

She grabs her bag off the table and stops at the door.

EMMA
Look, Pastor, you cured me.

She walks out of the room and out of the house.

Five

Pastor Hidge follows Emma as far as the hallway but stops short at Rose’s door.

PASTOR HIDGE
Rose?

Silence.

PASTOR HIDGE

Rose.

Silence.

PASTOR HIDGE

Look you don't have to talk to me but do you mind if I sit down for a minute?

ROSE

As long as you don't read to me.

Relieved, he sits down.

PASTOR HIDGE

Rose I-

ROSE

I heard it through the door.

PASTOR HIDGE

I want you to know-

ROSE

I don't need to know. (Pause) I've had plenty of my own secrets. My own reasons. I believe you have yours.

Silence.

Pastor Hidge pulls out Rose's book from his pocket, places the twine in a particular page and shoves it back under the door.

Rose picks it up and opens it to the marked page.

ROSE

"We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, impervious, We are snow, rain, cold, darkness, we are each product and influence of the globe We have circled and circled till we have arrived home again, we two, We have voided all but freedom and all but our own joy..."

Pastor Hidge leans forward in his chair
and listens.

Six

Pastor Hidge paces in the kitchen.

Emma enters. He exhales.

PASTOR HIDGE
Where did you go?

EMMA
Out.

PASTOR HIDGE
You've been gone for hours.

EMMA
What, did you think I ran away for good?

He doesn't answer.

EMMA
(laughing)
You did, didn't you. Don't worry, I wasn't that inspired by your story.

PASTOR HIDGE
You don't know my story.

EMMA
That's true.

Pastor Hidge grabs the back of one of the
kitchen chairs and leans into it.
He runs his hand over the wood.

PASTOR HIDGE
I had a chair like this that I used to sit in every night. It wasn't very comfortable

but I loved sitting there and listening to her sleep- my daughter- tiny little breaths... filling up the whole room.
I liked to sit and listen and imagine what her life might be like. It relaxed me.

He tightens his grip.

PASTOR HIDGE

One night I fell asleep in that chair and when I woke up it was quiet.
The room was quiet. (pause) Still.

She was six weeks old.

EMMA

I'm sorry.

PASTOR HIDGE

My wife couldn't—I couldn't forgive myself...so I prayed. For a year...
I prayed. To find. A way. To keep us afloat...but I couldn't and she left.
I got a letter from her not long after—all it said was...(long pause) "You tried."

I tried.

Beat.

PASTOR HIDGE

So I stopped trying. I got in my car, wrote a note to the church and kept driving.
For days. Until I stopped in this town. I stopped at this church. I finally wanted to
talk to someone but the only person in there was old Mattie, playing the organ. I
asked where the Pastor was. She said he died one week prior. I asked her why she
was there all alone and she said, "Keeping my hands moving".

Emma smiles in spite of herself.

PASTOR HIDGE

And it hit me. That's what praying is for me. What faith is. Nothing fancy about
it. Not even particularly honorable. But that's what it is. And that's when I told
her I was the new Pastor sent to your congregation.

EMMA

So mama and I—we're what? A test?

PASTOR HIDGE

Maybe.

Emma stares at him.

PASTOR HIDGE

I'm being honest. Maybe you were a test. Are a test. But I don't think that lessens the value of our interactions.

EMMA

The fact that you were a Pastor was the only reason I let you into this house. The only reason mama endured your visits.

PASTOR HIDGE

That was true at the beginning but look at what's happened.

EMMA

What's happened?? She's still locked in that room!

PASTOR HIDGE

I think she's going to come out of that room.

EMMA

You're convincing yourself that you can keep your job.

He paces again for a moment.

PASTOR HIDGE

And the kiss?

EMMA

I kissed you.

PASTOR HIDGE

I kissed you back.

EMMA

That was me convincing *myself*.

PASTOR HIDGE
Of what?

EMMA
That I could want someone.

Pause.

EMMA
Before today I'd never been to my father's grave.

PASTOR HIDGE
What about the funeral?

EMMA
I came back here and cooked for everybody instead.

Pause.

EMMA
There was this... small, stone statue that someone left on top of daddy's grave. Of a woman, kneeling. Her arms were out to the sides like she was trying to keep balanced, which struck me as strange because when you kneel, you're already so close to the earth.
I thought, maybe she knows something I don't.
So I knelt down in the grass and stretched out my arms... and I was stone like her.
Just for a moment.

PASTOR HIDGE
You're not stone.

He touches her face.

EMMA
But I want to be.

Seven

Emma walks out onto the porch and finds James sitting on the front steps. She sits down next to him. He has a blank stare on his face. She takes his hand in hers.

EMMA
Daddy.

No response.

EMMA
Daddy what are you thinkin about?

He stares straight ahead. She looks at him closely. He doesn't even know she's there. She puts his arm around her and begins to weep.

Eight

Faint music. Rose rocks in her rocking chair. The music is coming from a record player on the table next to her.

Pastor Hidge hears the music, tries to compose himself, and goes to Rose's door.

She turns the volume up.
“Good Morning Heartache” by Billie
Holiday echoes out.

PASTOR HIDGE
I gotta go, Rose.

She gets up and slowly moves toward the
door. She closes her eyes, listening.

ROSE
Would you like to dance?

He smiles, weary.

PASTOR HIDGE
How we gonna do that?

ROSE
Come close to the door.

He does.

ROSE
Bow.

He bows.
She curtsies.

ROSE
I just curtsied.

He laughs.

ROSE
Shall we?

PASTOR HIDGE
It would be my pleasure.

They both start to move.
She sways back and forth.
They do this for a verse.

PASTOR HIDGE
I'm going to twirl you, Rose.

ROSE
Good.

He lets his arm out and she twirls
backwards.

She moves with surprising ease and
grace, her eyes firmly shut.

ROSE
Would you do me a favor?

PASTOR HIDGE
Sure.

ROSE
Would you be him for a moment?

Pastor Hidge's swaying slows.

Silence.

After a moment, James takes Pastor
Hidge's place.

The two move in time together perfectly
in sync.

JAMES
Big finish.

ROSE
Go on then.

He leans forward, miming a dip as she leans backward and points her toe.

Pastor Hidge takes his place again as the song finishes. Rose still stands there. She hasn't opened her eyes.

ROSE
Thank you.

Lights fade.

Nine

Lights up on Rose, writing. Emma enters from the porch and tiptoes by Rose's door.

ROSE
Emma.

EMMA
Yes, mama.

ROSE
Sit down.

She does.

ROSE

You like that boy.

EMMA
No I don't, mama.

ROSE
(firm)
He lost his family.

Rose stands and comes to the door.

Silence.

ROSE
Did you hear me, girl? (pause)
You don't understand that?

Beat.

ROSE
Did you get a look at his hands?

EMMA
(reluctantly)
Yes.

ROSE
And?

Emma puts her head in her hands.

EMMA
They're nice.

ROSE
How about his lips?

EMMA
Mama.

Rose giggles.

ROSE
Human beings are stupid. Love stares right at them and they look away.

Emma stares at the door.

EMMA
I'm staring at a door, Mama.

Rose stares at the door.

EMMA
Do you think Daddy knew what he was doin that night?

Silence.

EMMA
Do you think he knew he was walking into the lake? Do you think he even felt the water on his skin? How cold it was? Did he even remember what cold was? Did he know it was filling up his lungs?

Rose looks towards the window.

EMMA
Do you want me to tell you the story again? Is that the only part you think about?? Fine! (*She rushes through the words, her volume growing*) They pulled him out real slow. He had seaweed in his hair. His shirt was still tucked in. *Belt was still tight-*

ROSE
(bursting)
I think he thought he saw me! Out there.
I think he was walking towards me.

Silence.
Tears run down Emma's face.

EMMA
(having trouble getting the words out)

And clutched in his hand was a small, wooden bird. Mr. Shaw said he never seen anything like it, a man passing but still holding on to something.

Emma leans against the door. She slides down it to the floor.

EMMA
Again?

Rose stares at the door, then sits down at the table.

ROSE
No.

She looks at the piece of paper in front of her.
Beat.

ROSE
I want you to bake me some muffins.

EMMA
What?

ROSE
Muffins.

Pause.

EMMA
(surrendering)
What kind?

ROSE
You choose. But make a lot. I'm starved.

Blackout.

Ten

Pastor Hidge stands in the dim light of the hallway, praying. He lifts his hand to knock on Rose's door.

Lights rise on Rose's room. The door is already slightly open. Pastor Hidge pushes the door fully open. Emma sits in Rose's rocking chair, holding a huge tray full of muffins in her lap.

They look at each other.

EMMA
Want one?

He walks towards her, reaches out, and grabs a muffin. She smiles. He takes a bite.

PASTOR HIDGE
How long have you been sitting here?

EMMA
(gesturing to the note on the table)
Will you read it to me?

He follows her gaze.

PASTOR HIDGE
You sure?

She nods.

He gently lifts a small, wooden bird off the note and picks it up.

He looks at it silently for a moment.

He reads:

PASTOR HIDGE

I pass away from this good earth on a summer night. It has to be summer- the juniper getting bold, the cool of the lake, the crickets all mean and riled- it just wouldn't work otherwise. I, Norreine Rose Henry, was born into this life on the fins of a perch and carried right into my mama's arms. She taught me the value of soap under your fingernails when you're in the dirt and to always face southerly for a good breeze. My brother taught me to stay low and lead with my left. My other brother taught me how to fish. I've learned that these are the things that stick and are worth sticking. In the course of my 78 years I've been a hired hand, a sign painter, a boat builder, a jam maker, an advisor on the weather, a choir singer and all around loudmouth. I made worthy contributions of my time and money in late fees to our fine library- and I wouldn't trade back one penny for the pure joy of those damp pages. I can dance every dance created and I danced many a night until my socks clear melted off my feet. But my best piece of business, my gold star, is my love of one James T. Henry. First day I met him he carved me a bird out of sandstone and placed it right on my shoulder. Second day we went swimming, and then every day after that. We could do a full foxtrot with turns and everything while holding our breath underwater. He understood the deepest push of my own heart and I understood the quiet of his. What bigger accomplishment can you have? To feel you've been understood in this life is to sprinkle everything you leave behind with a little bit of magic. I am survived by my strong children (remember what I told you Emma) and my sweet grandchildren, who've tickled me beyond my words.

I leave this good earth with a change of the weather, and I'm sure these summer nights won't be quite as hot without me hammering away, breathing in just as much of the air as I could swallow.

Emma puts the tray aside and pulls a folded piece of paper from her pocket.

EMMA

My mother, Norreine Rose Henry, was born on July the 7th, 1932 to Gerald and Margaret Lee. She walked into the lake late Tuesday night, August the 22nd, and never came out. Her death comes one year to the day of my father's, James T. Henry, who met his maker the very same way. He had suffered for 10 years and my mother never left his side. She is survived by 3 loving children and 7 healthy grandchildren. Special thanks to Pastor Hidge, who sat outside her door every day in the last months of her life and read to her. Even though that door stayed closed, we felt she heard you. May the angels welcome her home.

She looks up.

End of play.