

REDEMPTION

a play by
Ron Talarico

A dysfunctional family implodes under the weight of forbidden desire, devastating secrets, and corrosive anger. When emotionally neglected wife Lena turns to her obsessive-compulsive son Seth for the intimacy her husband Adam won't provide, the resulting web of dysfunction ensnares the entire family, including their daughter Billie, who has been hiding her own painful secret about her sexuality, and eldest son George, who witnesses it all. After Lena abandons them for the red light district, and Seth viciously exposes Billie's identity, tragedy strikes with Lena's suicide, sending Seth into a complete breakdown. In the aftermath, the family faces a stark choice: embrace George's path toward forgiveness and healing, or remain imprisoned by their anger and resentment. They choose destruction over redemption, sealing themselves inside their shared prison as George exits, defeated, and the dead-bolt of the entrance door clicks shut with the noise of terrible finality. This is a raw, unflinching exploration of how damaged people damage each other, and how the refusal to forgive can be the ultimate act of self-destruction.

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Dramatis personae

Adam

60, distant emotionally

Lena

49, Adam's wife, sensuous, aging nicely

George

30, their son, doctoral student, living on his
own

Billie

22, their daughter, social work student, living
at home

Seth

18, their son, high-strung, complex, living
at home

County Coroner [could be an unseen and unheard character;
no lines]

Setting

A modest home in a mid-size American city, late twentieth
century

Set Requirements:

All action takes place in the living quarters of the fam-
ily's dwelling.

ACT I

SCENE ONE

Setting: Living room in modest home in mid size American city, late twentieth century.

At rise: Married couple LENA and ADAM are in the living room. ADAM is on the sofa, engrossed in reading, and LENA is arranging flowers on a nearby table.

LENA

(Reminisces while staying focused on arranging the flowers. She does not look at Adam.)

(nostalgically and with some tenderness)

Do you remember our first date, Adam?

ADAM

(His face is hidden behind what he is reading. He acknowledges but is not listening attentively or with much interest.)

Yes, I do.

LENA

It was a beautiful summer day. You asked if we could hold hands. We strolled along the river, not a care in the world. Remember?

ADAM

(His head is still behind what he is reading, and he still is not much interested in what his wife is saying.)

Mm-hum.

LENA

People filled the boardwalk. Children were skipping about. Speedboats jumped among the waves. A skier here and there. What a day!—

ADAM

(Interrupts without interest.)

—Mm-hum. It really was.

LENA

We had our first kiss. So in love we—

ADAM

(Interrupts again without interest.)

—Mm-hum.

LENA

(Glances over at him with a puzzled look, then turns and faces him.)

(patiently, but starting to doubt his sincerity)

Adam! Are you listening?

ADAM

(Looks at her over his eyeglasses and reading material.)

(feigning interest)

Of course I am, dear. That was a really special day!

(LENA approaches him from behind, slowly and affectionately sliding her arms around him and hugging him passionately. Gradually she smothers him with kisses. ADAM resists her moves gently but coldly and with indifference.)

ADAM

Come on now Lena...we shouldn't right now.

LENA

(She insists, throwing off his resistance and getting more physical.)

(playfully)

Oh come on, Adam! I need a little loving from you! Gimme a kiss! Come on, now! A big sexy kiss!

(LENA attempts to turn his head and force a kiss but ADAM resists more forcefully than before. Finally, he jerks her arms away from him and turns away attempting to resume reading.)

ADAM

(insistent, irritated but not angry)

Stop, Lena! Stop, now! I need to finish what I'm doing or I'll be late for my meeting.

LENA

(her frustration and irritation with his rejection of her turn to anger)

You give me so little loving anymore, Adam! So little marital anything. Just chains and suffocation: I'm stuck with you for the vows and I can't breathe for the lack of air surrounding you!

And love? Do you remember that? Can you tell me even what love is anymore?

(He does not respond.)

No! Of course not! You reject me at every turn. Refuse me at each advance. You show no interest in me, the woman.

I need touch, Adam! Do you remember at least that? Remember years ago? I need strong arms around me like before. Someone next to me at night whose heat I can feel there. I need the weight of your flesh against me!

I need a husband!

(screaming)

God-damn I need a man!

(She storms into their bedroom slamming the door behind her.)

LENA (O.S.)

(screaming)

A man!

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT I

SCENE TWO - ANOTHER DAY

Setting: Kitchen. And Lena and Adam's bedroom, whose entrance door contains translucent glass.

At rise: SETH, son of Lena and Adam, is in the kitchen smoking and making coffee. The cigarette is hanging from his lips, and the rising smoke makes him squint. LENA calls to him from the bedroom. Rather sensuous music can be heard coming from her room. Throughout the bedroom scene Lena, and Seth once he enters the bedroom, can be seen in shadow caused by the lighting. No one else is home.

LENA (O.S.)

(softly, and vaguely seductively)

Seth, could you come and help me for a minute, dear? Your father and sister are gone or I'd ask them.

SETH

(somewhat irritated)

I'm busy right now!

LENA (O.S.)

(imploring and whining)

Please, baby...come 'n help Mama. I'm stuck!

SETH

(Pounds his fists down hard on the kitchen counter and swears, causing his cup and other items on the counter to rattle, none of which Lena hears.)

(angry, to himself)

Damn!...Damn!

(He responds immediately and sweetly to Lena.)

All right! All right, Mama! Gimme a second.

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CONTINUED:

(He slams down the package of coffee, snuffs out the cigarette, immediately lighting another, and storms off to Lena's room. As he flings open the door to her room he stands in shock at the threshold, though what he sees he has seen before. We see LENA, scantily clad and holding a dress. Upon seeing her and despite knowing no one else is home, SETH turns around quickly to scan outside the room.)

LENA

(Looks over at Seth.)

(warmly, lightheartedly, coaxing him)

Well now, honey, don't just stand there! Come on in and help Mama!

SETH

(Closes the door.)

[Note: From this point until Seth leaves the bedroom, and thanks to the translucent glass of the bedroom door and the lighting behind Lena and Seth, both audience, and soon George, gain a sense of what is going on in the bedroom.]

(Approaches Lena.)

LENA

(She begins to slip on the dress.)

Now I need you to straighten it in the back, hon', then zip it up. But be careful!...the zipper's tricky. Keep pressing in against me on the one side, at the bottom, while zipping up slowly and carefully...otherwise we'll be in a mess! When you're done, straighten the whole back side, ironing it out all the way down so there's no wrinkles, so it'll look nice.

(At that moment, a key can be heard turning in the lock at the front door, which Seth and Lena don't hear.)

GEORGE

(George, eldest son of Lena and Adam, enters. En route to the kitchen, he hears the music and sees movement in the bedroom through the door's translucent glass. Curious, he stops to observe, without the other two aware he is there.)

SETH & LENA

Standing behind Lena, SETH extinguishes the cigarette while LENA finishes slipping on the dress. He begins working away at the stubborn zipper, all while LENA is making suggestive movements slowly with her body, more or less keeping in time with the music. When finished with the zipper, he begins using the palms of both hands to press out the dress all the way down.)

LENA

(softly)

How's it coming, hon'?

SETH

(Does not respond.)

GEORGE

(He has been watching it all but is too disgusted to continue looking. As he proceeds to the kitchen, the scene inside the bedroom fades. He slams his fist into his palm, which Seth and Lena do not hear.)

(loudly but not enough for Lena and Seth to hear)

Jesus!...again! What the hell?!

(He briefly ponders what he has just witnessed, then slams his fist again into his palm.)

Jesus!

(He begins to prepare himself a sandwich. At a certain point he looks toward the bedroom, from which the music can still be heard. Reminded of what he has just observed, he angrily and deliberately makes a couple of very loud bangs by

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CONTINUED:

slamming together a metal pan and ladle, or similar, in order to frustrate and stop Lena and Seth from continuing. The music stops.)

SETH

(After a bit, he slowly pokes his head out from the bedroom door, looking in both directions to assure himself that he sees no one. He exits the room quietly. Proceeding to the kitchen to finish making the coffee he is surprised to encounter George there.)

(nonchalantly as a cover-up, as though nothing happened in the bedroom)

Hey bro!

GEORGE

(He is eating his sandwich for the remainder of the scene.)

(unemotionally)

Hey.

SETH

(Lights a cigarette, letting it hang from his lips, then finishes setting up the coffee maker, inhaling constantly and nervously on the cigarette while moving his head to prevent the smoke from getting into his eyes.)

So whatcha been up to, Brother? *(then mildly sarcastic)*
Still tryin' to figure out your crazy family in that psychology department of yours?

(Puts out the cigarette.)

GEORGE

(Quickly, evading the question.)

Oh...just studying and working...not much.

(uninterested)

You?

SETH

Looking for work, naturally.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

(Lights another cigarette, taking drags on it almost constantly.)

Nothing really out there to match what I want.

GEORGE

(irritation and sarcasm mounting in his voice)

Yeah! Sure! What you want! Got it!

But are you really trying? Do you actually want to work or would you rather just stay here at home all day, living off Father and Mother, waiting for your next invitation to—

SETH

(Quickly interrupts in order to change the subject and sidetrack George from bringing up what he might have seen going on in the bedroom.)

(louder than George, feigning excitement)

—Hey!...Father got the company's employee of the year award last week! Pretty impressive don't you think?

GEORGE

(Irritated by Seth's abrupt and disingenuous move.)

(laughing derisively)

Seriously?! Are you kidding me?! You wanna play a little game of hide-'n'-go-seek here, do you? Is that it? And maybe a round of "what's been going on around here" while we're at it?!

(accusingly)

And by the way, why haven't you been going to your therapy appointments, anyway? Mother told me you haven't been showing up for them lately. You and I know looking for work hasn't exactly gotten in the way!

SETH

(pretending not to understand)

Hide-'n'-go-seek?—

GEORGE

(Interrupts, irritated and angered even more by Seth's attempted decoy.)

—You know what I'm talking about, Seth! You know what I mean!

(Shakes his head, insulted by Seth's attempted camouflage, looks quickly at his sandwich, then goes immediately to throw it in the trash.)

(furious)

Jesus!

(Heads for the front door.)

I'm outta here!

(Stomps out, slamming the door behind him.)

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

Act ISCENE THREE - MID AFTERNOON A
FEW DAYS LATER

*Setting: Living room, bathroom,
and front door. The front door's
lock is a deadbolt with a very
noisy thumb turner on the in-
side.*

*(Note: The noisy door lock will
be significant at the very end
of the play.)*

*SETH is home alone and is the
sole character in Scene Three
except for someone unseen who
makes noise at the door at the
very end of the scene and could
be played by one of the play's
stagehands.*

*At rise: SETH is sitting in a
chair in the living room. He is
reading and just finishing a
cigarette.*

*(Note: SETH conveys visibly nervous inner tur-
moil throughout this scene.)*

*(He quickly and nervously extinguishes the cig-
arette in a large ashtray that is overflowing
with cigarette butts and is on the coffee table
near him. He then walks with short hurried
steps to the front door.*

*With deliberate quiet he slowly opens the door,
gives a perfunctory look out, then quickly and
quietly closes the door, slowly engaging the
deadbolt with its thumb turner in order to min-
imize its noise.*

*Quickly he enters the bathroom, washes his
hands whipping up an unusually large mound of*

(CONTINUED)

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lather, rinses and dries them and returns to his chair. As he nervously grabs for his pack of cigarettes on the coffee table the pack falls to the floor. He very gingerly picks it up and removes a cigarette. Upon returning the pack to the table, he lights the cigarette, and, with it dangling from his lips and the smoke obviously irritating his eyes, he rubs his hands obsessively on his pants in an effort to clean them from the cigarette retrieval process.

After resuming reading but only very briefly, he hurriedly extinguishes the cigarette and repeats the door ritual, including re-engaging the deadbolt. Obsessed with safety, he conveys putting pressure at length on the thumb turner to assure himself the deadbolt is still engaged.

Next, he heads for the bathroom to repeat the hand-washing ritual, but before reaching the bathroom he stops and returns to the front door where he quite visibly conveys applying lingering pressure on the thumb turner again to once again assure himself the door is locked. He repeats again this back and forth ritual between bathroom and front door, walking always with short, quick steps, as if he must get through it all before anyone interrupts him. Finally he enters the bathroom and repeats the hand-washing ritual.

After drying his hands he returns quickly to the chair, bringing with him the towel he used for drying. He sits and takes a cigarette from the pack, again gingerly. He lights the cigarette and lets it hang from his lips as he balances the reading material on his lap. He then wipes his hands with the towel over and over in an exaggerated fashion as though quite intent on cleansing them thoroughly.

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CONTINUED:

He resumes reading for a bit while smoking. He then hurriedly snuffs out the cigarette and rushes to the front door intending to begin the thumb-turner ritual yet again. But just before arriving he hears someone making noise at the door [the stagehand or whomever was appointed for this task]. Assuming it's a family member returning, he makes a mad dash back to the chair and gets into a relaxed position in an effort to appear as though none of the above ritualistic activity has taken place and he has simply been reading and smoking for the entire scene.

With noise heard again at the door, the black-out occurs before anyone enters.)

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT I

SCENE FOUR - MORNING OF ANOTHER DAY

Setting: Lena and Adam's bedroom, and the door to the bedroom of Billie, Lena and Adam's daughter. The doors to both rooms are ajar, but only the parents' room is in profile and visible to the audience.

At rise: LENA and ADAM are in their bedroom getting dressed for the day.

LENA

Adam, I wish you would discipline Billie a little more.

Adam

(as though this is news to him)

Oh...? How so? What has she done?

LENA

Well, for one thing she stays out too late.

ADAM

What do you mean?

LENA

(genuinely surprised but not angry)

Oh for heaven's sake! Where have you been?! Don't tell me you haven't noticed!

ADAM

I can't say that I have. What are you talking about? Honestly, sometimes I think you exaggerate just to get my attention or annoy me.

LENA

(irritated and loud)

Exaggerate?! She's been getting in after midnight or one, night after night. Don't you hear her for God's sake?

BILLIE

(She exits her room, curious about what her parents are arguing about. Cautiously she sneaks up close to their door to hear better without their seeing her.)

ADAM

Not at all. You know I sleep like a log.

LENA

You can say that again, Adam! A big log!

The point is...God only knows where she's been or what she's been doing. Or who she's been with.

Obviously she's not a child anymore...but she does still live under our roof and she should be more considerate because of it.

Plus, the other morning I swear I smelled alcohol on her breath.

This is too much! She's going too far!

ADAM

(calmly and with curiosity)

What do you think's going on?

LENA

I don't know. Maybe she hangs out at bars or dance places. How would I know? She never shares with me...hardly even talks to me!

And another thing, Adam: Have you ever seen Billie with a man? Never a man! Always with girls...just girls. No man-energy. It's not normal. It can't be good. It's not right!

And wouldn't it be nice to see her dressed a little more like a woman sometimes? Instead of always those baggy pants and tops of hers? A dress now and then wouldn't hurt her...a touch of makeup...a little more stylish hairstyle...something feminine!

ADAM

(without emotion, matter-of-factly)

Well have you tried saying anything to her?

LENA

(furious)

Me?! No I haven't said anything for Christ's sake! She's undisciplined thanks to you! You know how she doesn't get along with me...only listens to you! In fact, the last time I tried to say anything to her she snapped back. "You can't tell me what to do!," she said, and walked off.

Truth is she has always run from me to jump into your cozy warm lap or ever-ready arms! Your "*there, there now, Sweetie, tell daddy all about it*" crap.

(Shrugs her shoulders and spreads out her arms and hands in frustration.)

Do something, Adam! She's your damn daddy's girl, so you take care of it!

ADAM

(conciliatory)

Come on, honey, don't worry about it. I'm sure Billie will change on her own in time. She'll mature more, you'll see. And it'll all turn out for the better—

LENA

(Interrupts him.)

(incredulous and loudly)

—for the better?!

Seriously?!

(calmly and sincerely, hoping that Adam might re-consider her point or at least offer some kind of workable solution)

Better?

(She gives him time to reply, but he does not.)

(MORE)

LENA (cont'd)

*(quite surprised and disappointed that he
has said nothing)*

Really?!

(disgusted and with sarcasm)

Brother! What the hell planet have you been living on? Or
escaping to?

*(She aims her finger squarely at him, menacing-
ly, from the core of her guts)*

You just listen to me, mister! If you hadn't come at me
that once-in-a-blue-moon night, all honey-horney and
handsy, she wouldn't even be here and we wouldn't be hav-
ing this discussion! You got your tasty little split sec-
ond of a moment with me, all right, and I got stuck for a
lifetime with the result!

And as if that disastrous night wasn't enough of a blow
from fate, just remember that if I could have had my way
and you had had a decent paying job, you know very well
what I would have done!

BILLIE

*(Covers her mouth with both hands, shocked,
horrificed, devastated.)*

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT ISCENE FIVE - A COUPLE OF MONTHS
LATER

Setting: The family living and dining rooms.

At rise: The ENTIRE FAMILY has just finished dinner, and all are rising from table to proceed to the living room.

GEORGE (to Lena)

Thanks for inviting me over. Everything was really nice, Mother.

LENA

You're welcome, son. It's always good to hear you're doing well at school. And just think: soon you'll be a professor!

PhD in psychology! That will be a real accomplishment, won't it now! And then with Billie almost done with her social work studies, I guess your father and I will have done all right as parents!

GEORGE

(Smiles at Lena, but unconvincingly.)

(The characters disperse to the living room as follows:

LENA proceeds to a chair, where she begins to leaf through various magazines.

GEORGE goes to another chair, where he becomes engrossed in reading.

ADAM settles himself on the sofa, using the nearby coffee table as a workspace. He begins busily writing, and making computations on a noisy calculator, recording the results.

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CONTINUED:

SETH and BILLIE seat themselves at a nearby card table and begin working on an in-progress jigsaw puzzle. SETH lights a cigarette and begins smoking it.)

LENA

Well look here! Adam, there's a play at the Westgate Playhouse Thursday evening. The drama department at George's university is putting it on.

(enthusiastically)

Why don't we go?

ADAM

(Remains focused on his work and doesn't look at Lena.)

Oh...I don't know if that's such a good idea. I'm pretty busy at work these days. What's it about, anyway?

LENA

It's a comedy and it sounds entertaining! God knows we could use a few laughs, what with all the unpleasant things going on in the world these days, don't you think?

ADAM

(Continues working without looking at Lena.)

Yes of course...but you know I don't care much for comedies. I—

LENA

(Interrupts him.)

(sarcastically)

—You prefer tragedies! Yes, yes, and how well everyone knows it! But a good laugh now and then does us all a bit of good.

Come on, Adam, what do you say?

ADAM

(Still continuing to work while not looking at her.)

I hear what you're saying, but I'm really not fond of comedies. I don't care for the silly laughing. Too

(MORE)

ADAM (cont'd)

many people laugh because they're following the example of the crowd rather than thinking what they're experiencing is actually funny. They remind me of sheep! You always know when it's time to laugh in comedies because the text and the actor set you up. That makes it too easy to get a laugh, too obvious, not challenging.

But tragedies, like, say...well take Oedipus Rex for example. Now that's a fine example of the kind of story that toughens us, makes us think. Gives us something to hold on to.

And besides, you know I'm stressed at work on this project here [points to what he's working on] and my colleagues are depending on me.

LENA

Ohhh...Adam! Don't be so academic about life, so narrow. What a dud you have become! Comedies can toughen us too...and they can help us deal with the pain that tragedies bring. Why not think about it that way?

(GEORGE, SETH, and BILLIE begin carefully observing Lena and Adam's interactions. SETH extinguishes his cigarette and immediately lights another.)

ADAM

(Turns and faces Lena.)

I could think about it that way, but I just really don't want to take the time away these days, and I—

LENA

(Fed up and irritated, she snarls at him speaking condescendingly.)

—And-you-what, Adam?!

You'll make any excuse if it means you won't have to go out into the world and enjoy it.

We never do anything fun anymore. We don't go out because ...well, just guess who is too busy. We don't have

(MORE)

LENA (cont'd)

friends over because...well, just guess again who's too tired or stressed!

We don't do anything because just guess who can't do even that! Now who would think that doing nothing at all would be a physical challenge?

My man, that's who!!

(She rises, tossing the magazine carelessly onto the chair.)

Honestly! This is all too boring for me, Adam! Godawful boring. Life here is boring! Our marriage is becoming an unbeatable model of...of...well...of guess what?...bor-ing!

(She walks over to Seth and Billie and stands a while watching them work on the puzzle. She puts a piece or two herself in place.)

ADAM

(Finally speaking up to Lena, he makes an effort to placate her, but the content and feel of his delivery ring false and insincere.)

Jim Watson paid you a nice compliment yesterday. Said how lovely you always look, and I told him I couldn't agree more! You really do justice, dear, to the clothes you wear. Always have, that's for sure! I mean, what you're wearing right now, even...it looks just swell on you, honey.

(He fishes for an additional compliment.)

And...and ...and...well!, I meant to tell you how wonderful dinner was tonight. Fantastic! First class! And that roast pork! I'm sure the children all enjoyed it as much as I did and will agree when I say—

GEORGE

(He has had enough of Adam's unconvincing compliments and the general negativity and dysfunction of the moment. He can't take anymore. Hastily and noisily he begins to gather his

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things, which turns everyone's attention to him. He stands and deliberately does not look at anyone until where indicated toward the end of the scene. Emotions that have been pent up in him for some time come to the surface and explode.)

(He interrupts Adam and paces the floor as he levels the criticisms that follow.)

(angry, yelling)

—Stop! Stop! Just stop!

All of you! Stop it! Now!

You all should have known and done something about it!

One of you...Judas by name, you know who you are. You know your deeds and the sickness and pain they've caused. Yet it goes on in one form or another. Still. Whenever whim, I guess, appears on the scene, causing you to strike again.

And you...Blind One, Missing-in-action One. Have you just been repressing what you think? All along? Watching quietly as the quicksand of this family sucks us all deeper into its darkness?

And I'm sure that one of you...

(He stops quickly and temporarily, distracted and thrown off by Seth's actions below.)

SETH

(Seth has finished his cigarette and is trying with some difficulty to light another. It is clear that the hand the match or lighter is in is shaking and requires him to use his other hand to steady it in order to light the cigarette. He is dreading hearing the continuation of what is being said.)

GEORGE (continuing)

...one of you should have noticed. You should have noticed! And you possibly would have noticed if not for your fixation on yourself and sucking all the air out of the room!

BILLIE

(Grimaces and subtly squirms, though George has not looked at her.)

GEORGE (continuing)

And believe me, I'm sure, too, that one of you could have said no a little more often, especially as time passed. Said no more convincingly now and then. Or did even you enjoy it much too much?!

(He now looks at all four of them.)

I can't take any more of this!

(Shaking his head.)

And don't you think it's about time the same was true for you?

(Finishes gathering his things while delivering the remainder of his lines.)

A sad charade of a family we have!

(with swelling anger)

Well no more for this guy! I didn't ask for it. I'm not responsible for it! I don't deserve it. And-I-won't-have-it!

I want out!

(With hot-headed rage, he exits with his things through the front door after banging his fist loudly on the door and slamming it shut.)

(ADAM, LENA, SETH, and BILLIE are left dazed and seemingly confused. LENA is looking at Adam; ADAM at Seth and Billie; BILLIE at Seth; and SETH at Lena.)

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CONTINUED:

(As the stage lighting slowly fades, each of them displays various gestures and overall body language that communicate not understanding what just happened, though none of them appears entirely convincing.)

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT I

SCENE SIX - VERY NEXT DAY

Setting: Lena and Adam's bedroom.

At rise: LENA and ADAM are in their bedroom.

(LENA is moving through the bedroom quickly and angrily, packing a suitcase, throwing items into it helter-skelter. She continues this activity and paces jerkily throughout the scene. ADAM is standing around watching her, following her moves, at times moving along with her.)

ADAM

Lena, what's wrong?! What are you doing?

LENA

What am I doing? I'm packing, that's what I'm doing! I'm moving out, Adam. I'm leaving you. Can you get at least that much right?!

ADAM

(pleadingly)

But why? Why are you doing this? I thought everything was fine between us.

Oh sure, of course we have our little differences, like all couples. But we're still together, so we must have known how to patch things up through all these years. Right?

Please don't be doing this, Lena. Please! We can fix things!

(Other than where specifically indicated, LENA looks at Adam ad lib while packing, as the moment moves her.)

LENA

(tired of her life with Adam, confident and determined)

(MORE)

LENA (cont'd)

You're not aware—you've never been aware—of what's going on around you. Even now you don't see. You don't think! Oh...you can put the pieces of a stupid goddamn puzzle together alright. But when the pieces regard your own life or your family, you let them just lie there all jumbled up, immobile, bewildered . . . nowhere!

You see Seth washing his hands over and over and over! Till he misses meals, or is late for an appointment, or he tries everyone's patience to the point of boil-over. And you say not a word.

You don't insist or even encourage him to keep the therapy appointments I make for him.

You see him sneaking around here, checking the door lock to no purpose, filling ashtrays miles high with his cigarette butts. Drinking coffee after coffee all the day long till his nerves are ready to blow us all up. But you don't connect the dots. You give it no thought. You just let the pieces lie there motionless, with no resolve, no solution. Your face, Adam, is so close to the picture that all you see is a blur and dots, not what's going on!

He paces the house day after day, week after week, jobless yet not trying to get work. You see that but pretend not to. "Nothing matches my skills," he says. And you don't push him to get out there and find work, don't even nudge him to take on any employment, anything at all that might jolt him off course, set him on a new path—push him into a new orbit for Christ's sake where things might get better!

(ADAM stands speechless and numb while LENA continues her tirade and packing. He tracks and turns to her various movements while she packs.)

(*She stops to look at him.*)
(*sincerely, softly, spirit-broken, focused*)

Don't you see, Adam?

(MORE)

LENA (cont'd)

(slowly and very painfully)

Don't you see even yet that what you're doing with our son isn't working?

Even yet?

(He does not respond. She resumes packing.)

But no! You turn instead to Billie—your little personal security blanket, your trustworthy little go-to in times of stress. Your timeout from life, Adam!

You cloud your mind and satisfy yourself with puny alibis and dead-end excuses. With pitiful pointless playtime with daddy's little girl.

But she's a grown woman for Christ's sake!

(resolute)

So you do what you have to do, Adam, and I'll do what I have to do. Because I can't take it anymore! I can't! I really have had it with you. I don't feel connected to you anymore.

(screaming)

I don't feel anything!

(She begins to cry, and continues some form of crying for remainder of scene.)

Never in years have I seen one single solitary minimum of a goddamned emotion coming out of you. Do you know what you are? You're a cold, complacent, empty, sorry specimen of a man if you're even that! You're dead, mister, is what you are! A goddamn walking dead man.

In . . . in . . . in what? . . . in more years than I can count, you never once have touched me in any way that excites even the most remote parts of my body.

(She points her finger at him.)

Years! Day after day after goddamned day. Nothing!

ADAM

Please give me another chance, Lena! I promise I'll—

LENA

(In an effort not to lose her train of thought, she interrupts him and continues.)

—When we were young and new at love, in the first years, yes. Yes! We devoured each other. We were vulnerable. And-we-were-happy, Adam!

(yearning emotionally for those times, voice breaking)

God-knows-we-were-happy!

(pause)

But now? Now?!

Passion can flow strong like a river gone wild, through every artery and vein, every hill and valley of my body, searching for a similar match in you, a similar yearning, a sign of life in even the most distant frontiers of your passion.

And what do you do? What-do-you-do?! You build up a god-damn barricade that stops the flow and shrivels the passion.

A straight line and a bleep on the heart monitor is what you've become, Adam!

(She looks at him for a few seconds, keenly focused on him.)

(deeply painfully and more tearfully)

Well you know what? I found a piece of that youth. Elsewhere! Years ago. To relieve the suffocation, the disconnect, the intolerable, loathsome void I felt with you.

It was disgusting and it was vile. Miserable, and only a measly crumb, but it was something!

And I loathe myself for it! Oh God! how I have loathed myself for it. For the guilt and the disgrace and the shame of it!

(She continues packing.)

(MORE)

LENA (cont'd)

You left me an old goddamn god-forsaken dried up desert of a woman, Adam, and I'll not forgive you that. I won't!

My good looks and youth are all but gone—wasted!—and what measly, sick, mixed up part of them survives remains a pathetic uninhabited wasteland. An all but dead, dried up ditch!

(Thoroughly exhausted, she looks hard and pointedly at Adam.)

Well . . . so I may be, Adam. So-I-may-be. But I'll find it. I'll find what I'm looking for yet! I'll find it all right. I will! I-will-find-happiness!

Happiness!

(borderline desperate)

I will!

And I'll just thank God Almighty it's not with you!

(She exits, flying out of the room with her suitcase, hat, and coat in tow.)

ADAM

(Watches her leave, staring at her, his mouth agape, dumbfounded and overwhelmed at the empty doorway she has left for him.)

(BLACKOUT)

CURTAIN

END OF ACT I

<<<<<< BRIEF INTERMISSION >>>>>>

ACT II

SCENE ONE - A FEW WEEKS LATER

Setting: Kitchen table.

At rise: BILLIE and SETH are seated at the kitchen table, playing a board game. Billie's back is to the front door. Seth is smoking, and drinking from a mug of coffee.

SETH

(He makes a move on the board.)

Ha! Victory! Take that!

BILLIE

Come on, Seth...you can't make a move like that!

SETH

Yes I can...any way I please! I do it all the time.

BILLIE

(with sarcasm)

Sounds good...real good...but how would you know if the rules allow it, right? You haven't read the rules. You never read the rules. You don't read anything! You just jump right in with practically no knowledge of what you're doing, then you get all hot when you screw up.

SETH

(Raises his eyebrows a few times while smiling wryly.)

Gets me where I need to go!

BILLIE

Where you need to go?

Where you need to go is to the streets, buddy! We wouldn't even be here if you'd get off that ass of lard you own and find a job like the rest of us around here instead of quoting from your book of sorry excuses!

SETH

There's no job out there for my skills.

BILLIE

Sorry excuses!

(SETH extinguishes the cigarette, stands, and begins walking to the front door, a move which BILLIE is seemingly not paying much attention to, including while he is at the door.)

SETH

(On his way to the front door.)

Nothing appealing. You know that. I've told you that!

BILLIE

Sorry excuses!

SETH

(At the front door.)

If there was something out there I'd take it. And why wouldn't I? Who wouldn't?

(While BILLIE is delivering the lines below, SETH looks back at her sneakily - she has not turned around - then he presses at some length on the door's thumb turner to assure himself the door is still locked. He returns rather quickly to his place at the table while Billie is still speaking.)

BILLIE

Bull! You don't want to work, Seth. You'd much prefer the "royal option" you do so well. You know: stay home all day; chain smoke; drink black coffee till it makes you shake; wash your hands in the john till the lather you whip up is as big as you and one of us is waiting to get in!

(SETH is back at the table by now, and BILLIE looks at him.)

Oh and did I mention?...check multiple times a day to make sure the front door is locked just in case the big bad wolf is out there waiting to get you!

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

Do nothing, really - Your Royal Highness!

(SETH, calmly and unimpressed, lights another cigarette.)

BILLIE (continuing)

You try in sneaky ways to hide it all, but do you think we don't notice, Seth? That we don't drop hints about you to each other when you're not around? Just hints of course, 'cause God knows we can't ever say what we're really thinking in this family!

We—notice—all—right, Seth! In fact your obsessions are driving us all cuh—ray—zy!

(sarcastically)

Or maybe with all your many...[she gestures quotation marks]..."pressing activities," you've been too busy to think about this? Not to mention your insisting we keep up appearances as though [she gestures quotation marks again] "it's all good."

(continuing the sarcasm)

R—i—g—h—t! Like we're some kind of model family! Try that idea on your shrink sometime and see where it lands you in your play!:

[Note: The words "Scene 1," "Scene 2," and "Scene 3" below are to be actually a delivered part of Billie's lines.]

(mockingly and showing excitement, cupping her hand over an ear)

Scene 1...ooh, ooh, listen carefully now...

Scene 2...hark! he rings the asylum doorbell...the door opens...

Scene 3...hark hark! "Oh hello, I'm the ding-dong Seth you've been expecting. You know...the one with the model family!"

SETH

(angrily and threateningly)

You just watch it or I'll—

BILLIE

(She interrupts, ignoring him.)

(more sarcasm)

—When a person's as busy as you are - I mean in the grip of his special [she gestures quotation marks again] "agitations" - I guess he doesn't have time to think about other things, huh? Like what's churning deep inside, right? He doesn't have time to figure out that the decoys he throws at us don't really keep us from seeing what might be going on there.

(slowly, matter-of-factly and without malice, shaking her head sadly while looking at Seth in the eyes)

How-very-strange-you-are, brother. So very strange. And I wonder...I mean I just wonder sometimes what it is you really don't want to think about—

SETH

(Interrupts.)

—What's it to you, anyway?

BILLIE

What's it to me? What's it to me?! Do you think I enjoy having my friends ask, "What's wrong with Seth? Why is Seth always ready to explode? Why doesn't Seth have friends? Why no girlfriend, never a date?"

You've driven them all away, Seth! You and your anger and your sick rituals have destroyed the hope of every girl who ever tried to come near you. The interest of anyone at all who ever thought they might want to get to know you.

What's it to me? Just a major goddamned embarrassment, that's what!

You just stay home all day doing God knows what. Drinking that fancy coffee you can't hardly afford now that Mama isn't here to pay for it. Smoking those cheap coffin-

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

nails. Wishing Mama would call to you again from her room wanting you for something... [she looks at Seth suggestively]...something...or other.

Sometimes I wonder what you and Mama—

SETH

(Interrupts.)

(exploding)

—S-h-u-t—u-p! Just shut the fuck up!

(He lowers his head, pressing his hands hard against it while also shaking it, wanting not to have heard her words.)

(long pause)

(gradually raising his head, hands no longer pressing against it, his facial expression and delivery of remaining lines are full of pain and hurt.)

You-don't-know-anything!

You-don't-know.

You don't.

Nothing.

At all.

(pause)

(very quietly and mainly to himself, shaking his head)

Nothing.

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT II

SCENE TWO - MORNING A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER

Setting: Kitchen and living room.

At rise: ADAM is sitting at the kitchen table having breakfast. BILLIE is sitting on the sofa reading a newspaper.

ADAM

(Looks up from his breakfast.)

So what's today's weather gonna be, honey? Yesterday was colder than ice cubes, I swear!

BILLIE

Paper says sunny and 60s. Comfortable for a change!

(pause)

Say, Daddy...hold on a second...

(She goes over to the kitchen table, pulls up a chair, and sits very close to Adam. For the remainder of the scene he does a combination of stroking her head and face and putting his arm around her, showing fatherly affection.)

BILLIE

(somewhat uncomfortably)

So...uh...well... Mama hasn't been home for a couple of months now. You never told us, exactly, why she left...or when she's coming back.

Why did Mama leave, Daddy?

ADAM

Oh I don't know. She just did. I found her packing her suitcase one day. She said mean things to me during that encounter. Really mean. She was acting rather crazy actually...irrational, you know? Not making sense.

(MORE)

ADAM (cont'd)

I never was much good at handling your mother's irrational moments. Far less her anger. I guess she thought I was too gentle, too easy on some things.

BILLIE

What kind of things, Daddy?

ADAM

(He sidesteps the question.)

Oh...gosh...sweetie...I don't think I can answer that. She hit me with so many things, you know?...from so many angles. Reminds me of pictures you see now and then of St. Sebastian being martyred - the ones where they shot so many arrows into him, from so many different directions and angles, there was no way to tell which one killed him or which one to focus on. That's kind of how your mother came at me. From everywhere. I couldn't tell what the real problem was. It was confusing.

So you see?...there's not much use trying to figure it out or dwelling on it. A waste of time, I'm quite sure. Suffice it to say she was angry and she left.

BILLIE

Have you heard from her? When is she coming back?

ADAM

I rather think she won't be coming home again...at least not any time soon. I've heard nothing from her since the day she ran out on us.

BILLIE

Where did she go?

ADAM

I have no idea. She may even have left town by now.

I did call around...inquired of a couple of her friends. Nothing. I went several times to places I knew she used to frequent. Nothing there either. She apparently just vanished...like a wispy cloud or a puff of smoke on a windy day. Gone [snaps his fingers]...like that.

BILLIE

Was she mad at me, Daddy? Did she leave because of me?
Did I do something wrong?

ADAM

No, no, no, sweetheart! You mustn't think that. Nothing of the kind. You had nothing to do with it. Nothing. Your mother just left, that's all. Think of it that way.

BILLIE

But I know she didn't like me, Daddy. I know it. I know she didn't want me, not at all, even a little. You must know that. And she didn't like me being your special girl.

Maybe you and Mama would have been closer if I had never been born.

ADAM

(saddened by Billie's remark and attempting to console)

Oh, now, hush now! Don't talk that way! Nothing on earth could be farther from the truth. Your mother loved you like every mother loves her child...you must try and believe that!

BILLIE

No. I can't. I can't! I know she didn't like me, Daddy. I heard her say so. Besides, she was mean to me...always looking at me with a scowl on her face...never anything pleasant. I don't think she ever once smiled at me...certainly nothing I'd want to remember. Never made me feel special...like you do, Daddy!

(She leans into him affectionately.)

Never once said even just a few nice words to me.

And she used to pinch me when I was little, without you or anyone else knowing. I never knew why. Sometimes she'd even pull my hair while she brushed it, till I'd cry.

ADAM

(Gives her a special hug.)

(MORE)

ADAM (cont'd)

Oh...my...I am sorry to hear this, honey! I didn't know. I had no idea, or I would have done something about it, now wouldn't I have?

BILLIE

She barely even helped me when I was going through the change, when a girl is becoming a woman and needs her mother.

(She leans more into Adam, focusing her gaze upward, intently on him.)

So we're not close, Daddy, and I hope she never comes back.

Never ever!

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT II

SCENE THREE - A COUPLE OF WEEKS
OR SO LATER

*Setting: Kitchen and living
room.*

*At rise: BILLIE and SETH are
home alone. Billie is in the
living room sitting on the sofa
reading a newspaper, her face
not visible to Seth because of
the way she is holding the pa-
per. Seth is at the kitchen ta-
ble working on something. Bil-
lie's backpack, visible, is
slung across the back of one of
the chairs at the table.*

SETH

Hey Bill, can I bum a cigarette?

BILLIE

(She does not look up from the paper.)

Yeah sure...they're in my backpack.

SETH

(He searches the backpack for the cigarettes
and in the process discovers several magazines
for gay women and a couple of pornographic les-
bian action photos. He examines the material,
still inside the backpack, then angrily jerks
it out of the bag, repeatedly slapping the back
of his hand against it.)

What the hell is this??!

BILLIE

(Looks at Seth, sees the material, throws aside
the paper, jumps to her feet, and rushes over
to the table with her hands outstretched.)

Give those to me!!

(BILLIE and SETH struggle fiercely to get con-
trol of the material. SETH is prevailing.)

BILLIE

Stop it! Stop it, Seth!! Just give them to me. They're mine! You have no right!

(She sobs quietly and inconsolably to the end of the scene.)

SETH

(He wins the struggle over the material, shoving BILLIE to the floor.)

(*violently angry*)

You're a lesbo! A fucking dyke!

BILLIE

(Struggles some to get up from the floor while reaching out her hand for the material.)

(*desperate*)

Please Seth! Please give those to me!

SETH

(*mocking her viciously*)

A doughnut on the prowl for...guess what folks...another doughnut! The kind with the hole in the middle, if you get the picture. And...but ...but...

(He ingests a sigh and puts the fingers of one hand against his mouth, playfully feigning shock.)

...oh dear!...but missing the middle things. What are those called . . .the middle things? Let me see. Oh yes! The balls. Whatever happened to the balls? Where-are-the-balls?!

(He looks at Billie playfully but cruelly.)

Awww...shucks...seems they rolled away. Howling . . .no doubt!

(He raises his index finger to his lips soliciting silence.)

Shhhh now! Quiet now!

(He cups the palm of his hand in an aside to the audience, whispering loudly and playfully.)

(MORE)

SETH (cont'd)

Her not need them!

(He turns back to Billie.)

(yelling in absolute disgust)

You-turn-my-stomach, Bill! You really do!

BILLIE

(pleading)

Please Seth--

SETH

(interrupts, chuckling)

--Hey folks, listen to this!...my big sister here does it with girls! All that social work training finally turned her!

You're disgusting, Billie! Get that part of this right!

BILLIE

Stop it! Just stop, Seth!

SETH

Disgusting!

It's not enough to be Daddy's little girl. Blind him with charm. Keep him spinning inside your perverted little rat wheel till he's too dizzy to see what's really going on around him. Noooo...

(chuckling)

...ohhhh-no! No-no-no! That's not enough for my big sister! That won't do!

You see...there's more, folks. On top of neutering our father, my pervert sister here has to bring shame to the family. Daddy's all grown up little girl has to flaw and stain the family name--

BILLIE

(Interrupts.)

--Please Seth...don't do this to me--

SETH

(Interrupts, ignoring her.)

(MORE)

SETH (cont'd)

—introduce disgust and filth to the family name! Dirty, filthy, dis-gust!

(He slowly tears the magazines and photos into bits and pieces, taunting Billie while angrily throwing them to the floor as he does so.)

BILLIE

(On all fours now, she begins to frantically gather up the bits of paper, rather reminiscent of a starving dog rushing for food crumbs fallen from a table, trying to get all it can before being stopped. Utterly humiliated, she continues picking up the papers through the end of the scene.)

SETH

(He finishes throwing down the last of the papers, cruelly tossing some of them on top of Billie's head, further humiliating her.)
There!...have at it! Put 'em together. Make the mother of all pictures. Then go turn yourself on!

You've really done it this time, kid!

BILLIE

Please Seth...please don't tell anyone!

SETH

(with sarcasm)

Ohhh...r-i-g-h-t! You hit that nail on the head! Don't tell anyone, now! Shhh...quiet now...not nice now!

R-i-g-h-t!

BILLIE

(pleading while continuing to gather the bits of paper)

No Seth...really. Please don't let this get out. Don't tell anyone! Especially not Daddy! I couldn't bear it. I just could not!

SETH

Guess we'll see about that!

BILLIE

No one!

(Looks up at him.)

Please!

(Returns to picking up the papers.)

Daddy can't know...not Daddy! Not that! His new image of me would kill him...be his end! He couldn't survive first Mama, now me!

(The stage slowly darkens to blackout as BILLIE, by now utterly exhausted, continues on all fours picking up the bits of paper. She is crying. Her voice is raw and parched, delivery is slow, and her desperate pleading and moaning are moving.)

BILLIE

No more Seth...

Please...

No more...

Please Seth...

Don't do this...

You mustn't...

Not Daddy...

Please...

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

ACT II

SCENE FOUR - A WEEK LATER

Setting: Living room and entrance to Seth's bedroom.

At rise: ADAM is reading a newspaper on the sofa in the living room. BILLIE is reading a book on a nearby chair.

BILLIE

(After a bit, she gets up and goes with her book to sit on the sofa with Adam, sitting sufficiently close to support a quiet, private conversation. The privacy is important to her in case Seth comes around or surprises them or George shows up unexpectedly.)

(with cunning and manipulation)

You know, just between us, Daddy, I hope you realize by now that Seth lies all the time about not being able to find work.

ADAM

Ohhh...?

BILLIE

(still privately)

Mm-hum. When you're gone at the office all day, you think he's out there looking hard for a job, but he's not. He's lying when he tells you nothing out there matches his skills. You must know that's not true by now...or at least suspect something about his story doesn't jive.

ADAM

Well I—

BILLIE

(Interrupts.)

(still privately)

—Think about it: just about every day the TV and papers say employers can't fill the jobs they have open, even

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

when they increase the pay. So there's plenty of jobs out there and not enough takers. That's the truth, Daddy. What Seth tells you is not.

Seth doesn't want to work, Daddy! He's been lying...lying all along! I wouldn't be surprised if maybe he lies about other things too.

(continues the cunning)

He's so good at the lies he tells about looking for work that he throws off course every effort you make to question him about it. He's a liar. Every time you ask he tells another lie.

He's scared to death to work, Daddy...scared to leave the house even.

And he used to be uptight, I know, that he wouldn't be there all those times whenever Mama—

(She interrupts herself very abruptly, covers her mouth with both hands, gasping in horror at what she was about to reveal.)

ADAM

Whenever Mama what?

(At that moment GEORGE enters the home.)

GEORGE

(Interrupting the scene, and wishing he was anywhere but at home, he looks at Billie and Adam.)

Sorry to interrupt but...Father...the bank says I need your signature for next term's college loan.

(Hands the loan papers to Adam.)

They're the usual papers you've signed before. Do you think you could just sign where it says, and I'll be on my way?

ADAM

(Quickly reviews the loan papers, which by now he is used to signing for George. He runs a finger rather quickly over each new item, nodding and mumbling his assent to it. He signs the documents and hands them back to George.)

GEORGE

(unemotionally and not genuinely thankful)
Thanks. We'll be in touch.

(GEORGE starts to leave, but before he gets to the door ADAM calls out to him.)

ADAM

Say George...hold on a moment.

(GEORGE stops and turns around to face Adam.)

ADAM

Some time back when you had your blow-up with us, you said, "You all should have known." You didn't say what you meant and I didn't understand or ask. Since you were so loud and insistent about it then, I need to ask you now: what did you mean? We should have known what?

GEORGE

(brusquely)

I don't want to talk about it. Not now.

ADAM

Well I think I need to know, son.

GEORGE

Yeah...well...I think I don't want to say!

ADAM

I insist, George! For some reason, what you said that day and the way you said it, I—

SETH

(He has exited his room, smoking a cigarette, curious to know the source of the arguing.)

GEORGE

(Interrupts.)

(caustically and loudly)

—I--said--no!

SETH

Hey...what's all the noise about?

ADAM

(losing his patience with George)

George!...for the last time tell me what you meant that day when you said "You all should have known." Known what?! Tell me!

SETH

(matter-of-factly, confident and proud, with cruel and profound derision that he's about to enjoy)

Known she's a dyke of course!

BILLIE

(Lowers her head in utter shame)

ADAM

(Reacts with a look of confusion, then shock, turning to Billie.)

GEORGE

(Looks at Adam.)

(with intense anger and contemptuous ridicule)

Je-sus-Chr-IST no! Not Billie!!

Even now you are blind, Father! Even goddamn now you don't see what's been going on in this house!

(laughing derisively)

Still!

(He turns and heads for the front door with the papers in hand.)

(still laughing and incredulous)

My God!...still!

ADAM

(Turns and looks at Seth, hoping to learn the meaning of what George has been saying. Then to Billie he does the same, but suddenly changing his expression, sending her a frown, as though he might no longer know or be able to accept who she is.)

GEORGE

(Just as he reaches for the door knob the door bell rings. He answers the door, exchanging a few indistinct words with the visitor.

[The visitor need not be seen or heard, except perhaps for some unintelligible mumbling with George, and later with Adam. He has no lines and could simply be played by a stage hand.]

George turns to the others with a stunned and puzzled look.)

It's the County Coroner.

(GEORGE makes way for ADAM, who approaches the door and speaks privately with the coroner.

Meanwhile, GEORGE stands apart from his siblings and Adam, appearing visually almost as if to dissociate himself from them.

ALL THREE SIBLINGS are out of hearing range but focused intently on what is going on at the door.)

ADAM

(At a certain point he sinks into himself, standing frozen in shock from the news the coroner has delivered.

After a few moments, he and the coroner resume talking privately, briefly, and still unintelligibly.

He accepts a piece of paper the coroner has handed him, then slowly closes the door while reading the paper to himself. He gasps.)

GEORGE

*(softly, caringly, having perceived that
the moment is serious)*

What is it, Father? What's the matter?

ADAM

(Still holding the paper, he looks at his children.)

(distraught, softly)

It's your mother.

(pause)

(struggling to say the words)

She's dead!

GEORGE

(surprised)

What?!!

BILLIE

(concerned and curious)

What happened?

SETH

(calmly and without emotion in his voice)

What did she die from??

(Seth remains calm and without emotion in an unconscious effort to remain in denial and protect himself as long as possible from the unthinkable.)

ADAM

She drowned. Down by the south bridge.

SETH

(still calmly and without emotion in his voice)

Drowned? But she's afraid of water. She never goes near water. There must be a mistake.

ADAM

There's no mistake, Seth. Your mother...she...she took her own life.

(He looks at the children again, all of whom are frozen in shock.)

SETH

(still calmly and without emotion in his voice)

The paper...what's on the paper?

ADAM

It's a note.

SETH

(still calmly and without emotion in his voice)

A note? What does it say?

ADAM

They found it inside her pocket.

SETH

(He nods slowly and with a facial expression that implies he is fully ready to hear and handle whatever the note might say.)

(then still calmly and without emotion in his voice)

Read it.

ADAM

(tenderly, trying to protect Seth)

I...I can't, son. It's not something—

SETH

(Interrupts, this time demanding with diminished calm, but without anger in his voice.)

—Read it!

ADAM

(Obliges reluctantly.)

(reading quietly and slowly but audibly for all to hear)

"My dearest, dearest Seth.

(MORE)

ADAM (cont'd)

(He looks painfully at Seth, then continues, again slowly.)

My sweet, sweet baby."

(He pauses briefly.)

That's it. The rest is scribbled out. It's not legible.

That's all there is.

SETH

(Holds out his arm, palm side up. The arm is rigid. His hand quickly gestures in a way that signals he wants to see the note immediately.)

ADAM

(Hands the note to Seth.)

SETH

(He reads the note, examining it carefully up close. He turns it over, desperate to see more, to know more.

He wads up the note in a mad fit and violently throws it to the ground as if that act of dissociation might actually dissociate himself from the contents of the note.

His arms drop to his sides, dangling and limp.

He moves slowly to center stage left, clearly separating himself from the others, and begins to cry.)

(confused and intensely curious)

But how? How did she drown?

ADAM

(in a caring, fatherly tone and facial expression that indicate it would be better not to know)

You don't want to know, son...

SETH

(calmly)

I do want to know, father.

ADAM

(giving in reluctantly)

She tied a weight to her neck and—

SETH

(interrupts, exploding, covering his ears
and shrieking as loudly and tensely as
possible)

—God-damn-it!!

(He descends slowly to his knees, then onto his
heels, pounding the floor in desperation.)

(He shrieks again same as before)

God-damn-it!! No! No!

No!

(He coils gradually into some form of a fetal
position, in a state of utter breakdown, quietly
sobbing and whimpering as he continues to
process the news.)

Was it me, Mama? Was it because of me?!

(For the duration of his monologue, he moves
back and forth emotionally between being a
small child talking to himself and the adult
that he is. He cries, sobs, whimpers ad lib.)

No. No. It cannot be. How can you be gone? Don't be gone,
Mama! How can I know now why you did it? Those things.
Loved me like that. In those ways?

(long pause)

ADAM, GEORGE, BILLIE

(Perhaps never before so uncomfortable, these
three do not go to Seth to offer solace as he
writhes about on the floor in agony. In fact,
they quite noticeably back away, Billie even
more so.)

BILLIE

(Hands over her mouth in horror, she slowly backs away to down stage right, separating herself from everyone in an attempt not to be noticed, fearing the unbearable thought that her turn to self-disclose might be close at hand.)

SETH

(Having collected himself and calmed down somewhat, he resumes.)

At first it was easy...even fun. I was little. The bed... she'd hold me close...talk soft...sweet. She'd say I was a good boy - "*You're a good little boy, honey*" - as she'd run her warm fingers through my hair over and over till sometimes I'd fall asleep.

I'd climb on top...you'd pull me to you tight...all of me tight...warm... And I knew you loved me then, Mommy. I was your little boy. "*My special secret man*," you called me.

(He sneaks a glance upward toward everyone, uneasy and looking somewhat ashamed.)

A few times I forgot the door and it stayed open a little.

(*squirming, and whining apologetically*)

I didn't mean for anyone to see. I didn't!

(He looks at Adam.)

(*matter of factly*)

Daddy must have known we were in there but he never asked about it. Never asked how I was. I was just a kid but he never said anything at all.

(He's back to addressing the group but is not necessarily looking at them.)

Once or twice, maybe more, when I'd forget to close the door all the way, George would be standing there in the opening. Peeking. Hiding.

And sometimes when Mama laughed...or made her...her pleasure noises, I saw shadows go by the door, and I knew it was George sneaking around again.

George hates Mama and me for those times, for what we did, for what he had to see. He hates father too, I

think, for not figuring it out, not stopping it. George can't forgive any of us, I think.

Even till not long ago, once in a while Mama would call me in. Maybe she needed help with her dress or something else again or...or...well...

(He looks at the others furtively and barely.)
...with other things.

One time when I went in, she told me I got my nice body and good looks from her. Only her. She held out my arms and said how handsome and strong I was getting.

(pause)

Then the last few times we were together she started asking where everyone was...when you all were coming home.

If there was a noise at the front door she'd get away from me fast and start talking like we were having a conversation. But we weren't. It happened that way when George came home once. We did stop that time, but I knew he knew.

No matter what I told myself, I knew it was wrong by then but I couldn't stop...I couldn't let you down, Mama! You said you would always love me, and I knew you would. I would always be your special man.

A couple more times before she went away she called me in, but it wasn't the same. I saw tears then. No talk. Just tears. I didn't understand.

(pause)

Father never did tell us why she left or where she went. I figured it was my fault, so I tried to find her. I thought maybe I could bring her back, I don't know. I missed her!

I miss you Mommy!

Every day while you were all out, I searched. First in places I knew she liked. Then I ended up in the bad part

(MORE)

SETH (cont'd)

of town, the evil part, where women stand around waiting.

(pause)

Well...I found Mama. Her clothes were ugly, tight, cheap-looking. Her skirt was shorter than I have ever seen. She was standing like those other women down there. Her shoes had extra high heels that were big and thick. I saw straps wound around her ankles that went up high on her legs. She wore a hat that kind of hid her face. But I knew. In the light there I knew it was her. My mother. It was Mama.

(excited, briefly forgetting himself)

It was you, Mama! I found you!! I miss you!

(returning to himself)

Her face was tired...wrinkled...puffy. She smiled though. Sweet...like before when I was little. I thought maybe she might come home with me. But then the muscles on her face went to war and pulled in every direction till the smile lost the fight and was gone and her face went dead except for the tears I could see there.

"I'm sorry," I think she was trying to say as she looked at me. "I'm so sorry." But no words, none. Just tears. The kind that wash but never clean.

(pause)

(Addressing Lena.)

You stared so long that day. Then one last look you took, and you were gone. You ran away so fast! You looked scared when you turned back to see me. Like the eyes of a wild animal on the run look back at the hunter. Terrified.

But-it-was-me, Mama. Seth! Why did you run away? Why-did-you-run-so-fast? From me!

(cries a long scream)

Mommmmmmm...maaaa!

(More)

SETH (cont'd)

(Collecting himself, calm now, genuinely
wanting to know.)

Why did you run?

*(slowly, sobbing softly to himself, with
agony)*

You did not have to run.

S

You-did-not-have-to!

Not like that. Leaving me alone.

(pause)

(very collected and calm, resigned)

I'm alone now.

I can't say things to you now.

I know that now.

(at this point, he does a quick and unexpected emotional about-face, screaming with intense and hopeless longing as the permanence of his mother's death registers with him fully)

MOMMMMM...MYYYY!

(BLACKOUT)

CURTAIN

END OF ACT II

<<<<< **FORMAL INTERMISSION** >>>>>

ACT III

SCENE ONE - SAME DAY

Setting: Same as at the end of Act II.

At Rise: ADAM, GEORGE, SETH, and BILLIE are in the same positions they were in at the end of Act II, except that Adam and George are now facing Billie; and Seth, coming out of the position he was in, also faces Billie.

BILLIE

(Looks at her family at will, collectively or individually.)

I was eight or nine when I knew I didn't look at women the same as other women do. I didn't have a word for it but I knew I was attracted. Maybe other women appealed because Mama was so mean and they were not.

I knew I couldn't tell anyone—

(She looks pointedly at the others.)

—the club you're in makes sure of that. I was desperate to keep it a secret from Mama or she'd find some new way to hurt me. I knew she didn't want me in the first place. "I didn't want a girl," she told me more than once, "and then there you were!" One time not long before she left she even called me a big fat mistake.

I was afraid even Daddy wouldn't love me if he found out. I wouldn't be his "perfect little girl" anymore. No one would look at me the same.

I felt isolated and alone. Shame. Everything and everyone around me said it was wrong...disgusting...a sin. That was the message I got no matter where I went, which way I turned, who I saw.

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

Yet how could who I was be wrong? I asked myself.

We all start out life beautiful and good and everyone agrees—right?—everyone agrees!

Then someone, at some point, somehow, makes us feel—

(She looks at the others.)

makes even you feel—we're not good enough the way we are.

So what do we do? We spend half our lives trying to become someone we are not, for those around us, and the other half searching for who we were before we got lost, separated, from ourselves.

Yet all of you...

(Looks at the others.)

...all of you held me back from that search. You pushed me away from it. Put up roadblocks.

(Looks at Adam.)

You too, Daddy, by keeping me safe inside your little-girl image of me, guarding your status quo at all costs, keeping things the same for you and Mama.

Safe for you it was, but not for me.

Because where was I in all of that? Trapped inside the cocoon you spun around me is where! It did not protect me, Daddy; it only stopped me from figuring out who I am. And it stopped me from telling you, which would have brought us closer instead of causing the resentments I've come to feel because of my secret.

Well I don't want to be there anymore, in your trap. I don't want to live that way anymore.

(She looks at each of them carefully, painfully.)

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

I don't want to waste one day more of my life trying to be this for you Daddy, or that for you Seth, or who knows what for you George. I'm not in this world to learn how to cope with your nightmare expectations. That's-not-my-job!

I want to be who I am!

(with strong emotion)

I-AM-GAY! That's the way I was made and the way I'll always be!

(pause)

Most of us hold back from showing who we really are, because we're afraid. Some fear we're not able to name keeps a tight hold on us. Without even understanding it or naming it we long to be free of it, the weight of it. We long to be who we are, the real us.

We cling to some vague hope for freedom. An escape, a liberation. But for most of us the basic fear remains and keeps its grip on us. Keeps sucking us in. Some of us for life.

And the drawing near to others that we so desperately yearn for doesn't come—and it won't come! because it cannot come!—until we understand that what we keep holding back from the people around us for dread of seeming so shockingly different is what makes us so incredibly alike all along!

(She giggles, adamantly confident.)

Don't you see? We're all the same! Made of the same stuff. Equal! Like it or not. Believe it or not! Curse it or not!

The tides of life wash us all ashore, equal and equally, and return us to the sea the same.

(pause)

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

(very calmly)

But aren't you tired of it?...the fear?

I am.

I want to be me no matter how you see me. I want to be free, unhitched from the wagon of hopelessness [that] fear keeps us in. Untangled from it all.

(Looks at Adam.)

Even from you, Daddy, if that's what it takes to be free. Not like Mama left, to be free from you, but really free. Free inside myself!

(longer pause)

(with growing excitement, re-living the following incident, forgetting that it was all in the past and is over now)

I knew in eighth grade track I wanted to do more with a woman than just have thoughts. Track Coach Adams, she came over to me once at practice to raise me into position for the sprint. She planted her big strong hands on me, one on each side. Like giant magnets they held me firm as she pulled up on my back till I was deep inside the hollow of her chest. She held me there tighter than I had ever been held. And her warm breath against my face smothered my thoughts, blurred my focus.

"Do you feel that, Billie?" she whispered. "Can you feel the position now, hon'?" But in her arms all I felt was intense heat racing through every part of me. Protection from every hurt. And I did not want it to end!

(She pauses, leading into a let-down. The excitement has left her.)

But...nothing. Nothing at all came my way after that day. Just lonely deserts, and chasms between me and every love I ever dared to imagine.

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

(Sad, she looks at her family, directing one phrase below to each member.)

And no one saw.

And no one knew.

And nothing was.

(then harshly and self-abasing)

Just measly meaningless mock-love porn pics I buy on the sly, look at on the sly, trash on the sly. Afraid someone will see me, judge me, crush me.

(Looks at Seth.)

Like you do, Seth.

And Daddy and George would probably have done no better.

(pause)

(Looks at all.)

Do you think I haven't punished myself for the shame I've been told to feel?

I've punished myself all right. Every day. Plenty!

But the thing is, we all need physical affection and physical love. One way or another we satisfy the need or we don't stay normal. We go nuts, get screwy, weird—like you think I am sometimes. Because that need must have its day. It must come out, one way or another.

All sorts of crazy thoughts and things we do are born in the death that comes from not responding to that need. Without the physical love and affection, some of us jump frantically into dream-filled nirvana lands of our own invention. Some of us fall into self-destructive behavior that seduces us with open arms. Still others take off on flights of fancy: to new amusements we run, the latest trend, a fresh addiction, an old obsession, another partner.

(explosively, jolting the audience as well)

Then BAM!

FRAUD!

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

All those actions have been just meaningless distractions leading nowhere. Because there is no substitute for the affection and the love we need. No amount of money or fame or power or sex can fill the need.

(longer pause)

Truth is I did find a girl once. And I thought for a moment

(tearfully with strong emotion)

—for one...brief...goddamn beautiful moment—maybe she was the one. Maybe finally it could be. Could last.

But no.

And you know why? Because I—because we,

(She draws a circle horizontally with her finger, toward and to include her family.)

none of us knows a goddamn thing about getting along. About relationships. Or love. About anything that's not dysfunctional!

Yet still I keep thinking maybe some woman I'll have a chat with here or there will be the one...or someone I'll meet in a class...or sometimes she'll even be a complete stranger just saying hello on a street corner I get so desperate!

[Billie turns abruptly now and looks at the audience directly, scanning them quietly and slowly, then addresses them intimately.]

In a book I read once there was this kitten that was starving for milk because it hadn't had any for way too long. And this sorry piece of a man who owns her puts a bowl of milk on the floor in the middle of the room. And just as the very tips of the cat's whiskers al-most touch the rim of the bowl he takes her back to the corner and makes her start all over again. Over and over he does this.

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

And you wanna know something? That's what looking for love has been like for me: almost there but never quite.

(softly, movingly, with deep feeling)

I get so lonely without the love. I feel so far from life without the love. Sometimes I think I'm not even a part of life without it. Do you know what that's like?

(collected and without judgment)

No. I'll bet most of you don't.

(She nods her head a few times to affirm to herself the truth of what she is about to say.)

And it's a hell worse than hell to feel also unloved. But just try believing that you're not...even...lovable!

[There's a long pause here while she slowly turns to focus again on her family.]

I'm tired of feeling I live on the fringes of life, not in the heart of it like you all do. Oh sure...I exist in your mainstream. But I live on its fringes.

In your own ways you tell me the entrance fee to "acceptance land" [she gestures the quotation marks] is worth—a worth you convey, oh so clearly!, that I don't have.

Yet we all matter the same. Not some of us more, some of us less. The fact alone that I'm here, that I exist at all, says I have worth. Not your mainstream or your twisted judgments about me. I don't need them. They are not required.

(pause)

I cannot be part of a cosmos that is obviously of supreme grandeur—

(she giggles while extending her arms outward and upward)

just take a good look at it!

(MORE)

BILLIE (cont'd)

I cannot be part of that cosmos and at the same time be worth anything less than it. Like the tiniest speck of new life in a mother's sanctuary. Yet I am part of the cosmos! And that fact alone, and nothing else under the sun, is the single most undeniable testimony to my worth.

(insisting slowly, with strong and confident conviction)

So you see? There-are-no-degrees-of-worth-because-there-are-no-degrees-of-worth!

Just worth. Just that simple. Just that's all!

(BLACKOUT)

END OF SCENE

CURTAIN

<<<<<< **BRIEF INTERMISSION** >>>>>>

Act III

SCENE TWO - SAME DAY

Setting: Same as at the end of Scene One.

At Rise: All are in the same basic positions they were in at the end of Scene One.

GEORGE

(calmly)

First Mother...then Seth...now Billie.

(Looks at everyone.)

What's going on with us? What are we?

(Shakes his head.)

One big mountain of a mess of a family, that's what! We don't forgive. We're bitter and resentful...all of us! Me too.

But can we hate each other so much? Is it really possible?

I should probably say yes, but I don't think so, not way down deep.

God knows none of us is perfect; no one in the world is. And no one is all good or all bad. The whole world is a combination of good and evil, not just us.

Good and evil are opposite sides of the same coin—and we are that coin! These two enemies are inside us always, tugging constantly at our shirt sleeves to be noticed. They both want to conquer us, dominate us, same as we often try to do with each other. Or one country or system tries to do with another. It's this way because...I guess because it just is! That's the way of life, how we all developed, evolved. Take it or leave it, but we're not all one way or the other.

(MORE)

GEORGE (cont'd)

We fight for years to live up to the good, to the virtuous good, unable to imagine living with less than a hundred percent good. As we get older, many of us start to imagine the possibility—the unavoidable necessity—of living with both options, both extremes, good and evil side by side within us all the time, every second. We begin to understand that we cannot be all good only. We're not perfect and we can't measure up to a hundred percent good.

We try to come to terms with the conflict we feel over this, the contradiction and the pain and guilt of it that live hidden inside the prisons of our minds. Most of us manage most of the time to control the worst of the negative we find there. Others cave and it escapes, and you've heard of war and hate and the many other ways we humans destroy!

(pause)

Mother taught us nothing about how to manage the evil inside...how to deal with the resentment and the anger we've come to feel toward each other—how to forgive, really.

Father has done little better. And his silence has not been helpful.

Instead we've been left on our own to manage the open wounds we have with each other. Rust-filled wounds that offer us only fear and anger as a healing remedy, when what we need is to forgive and be free because of it.

But that fear and anger only keep us unable to act, unable to forgive. And sometimes I think they're even some kind of death wish, some primal, vague desire for self-destruction that hides in the scary shadows deep inside us. After all, are we not destroying ourselves? Isn't that what we're doing?

Fear and anger lead nowhere good; they only diminish us. How else can we explain the depth to which we have sunk with each other?

(MORE)

GEORGE (cont'd)

I think we might be afraid of even trying to forgive because...well let's face it...who would we be without it? What would be our anchor then, without the fear I mean?

(Pauses, then turns to Adam.)

Mother could not forgive you, Father, for not giving her what she needed. And she couldn't forgive herself for what she did to Seth or how she treated Billie.

(Turns to Seth.)

You, Seth, were not able to forgive Mother. And you can't forgive Father for not figuring out what she was up to and stopping her. Even less I bet can you forgive yourself. And you can't forgive Billie for being gay, or me for discovering your big secret and not telling.

(Turns to Billie.)

And Billie, you can't forgive anyone either, including me I know for abandoning the family and not accepting you as gay and living a life I still am uncomfortable just to think about. But maybe you, too, like Seth, can't forgive yourself, because you know you must have noticed the strange behavior between Mother and Seth over the years, but, like me, you said nothing. You kept your focus instead on whatever was the best way to suck up to Father to feed your own self-centeredness—

BILLIE

(interrupting loudly)

—You shut up!

(screaming, with hands over her ears)

Just shut the fuck up!

(GEORGE ignores Billie's outburst, and continues, looking at everyone.)

No doubt Father should have done more to hold us together. And he should have been able to figure out about Seth a long time ago and get him the help he needed. And I'm not sure I can forgive him those things—

SETH

(Interrupts.)

(with sarcasm)

—Oh great, big brother!

(He holds out his hand mockingly and as if he's a presenter at an awards ceremony.)

And the envelope p-l-e-a-s-e!

What about you, George, huh? Good boy George, huh?

huh?

(with ridicule)

Smart boy George! College boy George! Wow! The genius whose brilliant mind told him to study psychology and then turn on his own family! Can I please be first in line to forgive him that one?!

And the winner...iiiiiii...zzzzzzzz: George!!

So tell us mister-knows-it-all. Tickle our ears all about your contribution to this family crap pile?

GEORGE

(calmly)

So okay, I'm sorry. I know I should have said what I knew about Mother and you, but I was afraid. I was a coward.

(GEORGE covers his face with his hands, crying briefly in shame, then wipes the tears from his eyes.)

(forcefully and ashamed)

A chickenshit! I admit that, okay? Okay?! I was a chickenshit. I chose Father's way instead: silence. I caved, and I will never get away from that guilt—

SETH

(Interrupts again.)

(with sarcasm and mockery)

—Ooooh Brother G, soon-to-be Professor G, sounds soooo intense! Shall I close my eyes before they cross from such news?! Or maybe shall I plug my ears to keep out the shock waves?! Or...

(MORE)

SETH (cont'd)

(facetiously, while holding up his index finger to convey he has figured out the answer)

...wait!...maybe shall I keep them both open and on edge for more lecture on...

(with anger and mockery)

...for-give-ness?!!! Tell me! Tell me! I'm dying to know! You know I'm dying, can't you tell?

GEORGE

(calmly, softly, caringly)

Look...we're all in this mess the same, okay? I don't claim to be an exception. I'm no better than any of you. And I don't say I know the way out. But I do believe we all want out, want peace in the family.

(Billie begins to cry quietly and the others notice it. She continues crying, unobtrusively, to the end of the scene.)

We want release from the anger and resentment and negative feelings we hold toward each other. I can't believe we don't!

(with loud, confident insistence)

We-want-forgiveness-for-Christ's-sake!! The cure for the poison that's been eating us alive!

And that forgiveness doesn't come from nowhere! It has to come from someone else. Only you can offer me the forgiveness I need from you, and only I can offer you the same. Only you can let go of the resentment and anger you feel toward me, and only I can do the same toward you.

Don't you see? Forgiveness is what could connect us again to each other?

(with emotional longing)

Don't you see?

(transitional pause)

(MORE)

GEORGE (cont'd)

Now it seems pretty obvious we're not ready to forgive, and maybe we never will be. We're that full of the poison. But like it or not, truth is we still have *Choice*. We still have a will that is free to choose what it wants. And that will can never be taken away, never be lost.

And we still have *Time*. For as long as we live we have time.

(pause)

(*slowly*)

Choice...and Time. Both together can help get us on the road to forgiveness.

So maybe with a little time we could choose to try, just try...in some way...to consider forgiving...see how that feels. Or Christ!...even choose for now just to say we're willing to try to consider, and that's all. That would be a start. Wouldn't it? A first step that's not so hard?

Give ourselves some time—but time with a goal, an intentional goal, the goal that we come to forgive.

(*slowly*)

Choice...and Time. Together.

(*pleading, softly, gently*)

Do you see? Choosing even just to be willing to try to consider forgiving could be a first step and might open the door some day to actually forgive. And Time is what'll get us there...

...and get us to freedom.

Because forgiveness is freedom!

Forgiveness means we're free from the alienation we feel toward ourselves and each other.

And forgiveness is redemption.

(MORE)

GEORGE (cont'd)

In the end, forgiving each other is the only way to stop our cycle of destruction.

Forgiving is the only way!

Choice...

(he pauses)

...and Time.

(GEORGE pauses again, looking at each of the others for a reaction, but gets none.)

(continuing softly, with hesitation and some personal uncomfortableness with the new feeling of his own words)

I...I could be willing...to try...

(with a look of sudden optimism)

Maybe that would—

(He stops short, looking at each of them again.)

You?

(SETH, without a moment to waste, gives an immediate thumbs down and an expression of defiance, quickly looking down, disconnecting.)

(BILLIE looks at George first, searching him carefully in an effort to discern the truth or not of his words. Then slowly she searches her father for some sign of consensus but finds nothing there. Finally she shakes her head as a sign of refusal, wiping tears from her eyes in a moment that is visibly sad for her and obvious to the others. She then turns her gaze away from everyone.)

(ADAM remains silent and still.)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

(Lastly, GEORGE shakes his head and opens his hands with a gesture and look of utter disbelief and sadness. A look of how can this be, and yet it is.

Defeated, he walks slowly toward the front door. He opens the door and proceeds slowly through it.

He turns back for one long, poignant look at his family.)

GEORGE
(softly and slowly)

Choice.

And Time.

(Exhausted, he shakes his head again, closes the door slowly behind him, inserts his key into the lock, and turns the key in the lock, leaving the only thing heard at this point the harsh, distinct sound of finality produced by the heavily noisy, clanking deadbolt latching shut.)

(BLACKOUT)

CURTAIN
END OF ACT III

<<<<<< **THE END** >>>>>>