

WINDOWS

A New Play

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Scene One: Being Seen

The Wife

Scene Two: The Man Who Couldn't Google

The Writer

Scene Three: Windows

The Fledgling

The Neighbor

Scene Four: Second Thoughts

The Drinker

Scene Five: Working From Home

The Mommy

Scene Six: National Pastime

The Protestor

The Owner

Scene Seven: Nurse #5

The Grandmother

Scene Eight: Thank You For Your Service

The Performer

The Soldier

The stage is softly lit with ambient lighting that suggests something is off and out of the norm. The scenic elements are abstract. As the house lights dim we hear snippets of news reports and narrative that overlap and transport us back to the dawn of the Pandemic. These sounds will begin quietly then build to a frenzy. Lights and sound disappear suddenly. Hold for a beat then lights come up on THE WIFE alone DOWN CENTER. She wears a man's button down shirt and a pair of slippers.

Scene One: Being Seen

THE WIFE: I'm thinking about not brushing my teeth this morning. I know all about the perils of gum disease, but I wonder if I even need teeth anymore? For the past two months the only person who's seen them has been Graham and he saw them rarely. Our most recent conversations didn't lend themselves to a lot of smiling.

I hear my son's voice in my head. If Zane were here he'd affectionately scold me, call me frivolous and vain, and remind me I need my teeth for reasons other than flashing them at society page photographers. I need them to eat. And, boy, have I been eating. Why not? There's been nothing else to do and no one's going to see me. But when I say eating; I mean, eating. I don't care what the life style experts say about how we have to take care of ourselves. Salads and lean protein don't cut it during a pandemic that's going to destroy your life even if you escape it with your life. I've eaten things this past week that I've never had in my house before. I've

eaten things I never knew existed before. Flamin' Hot Cheetos. Reese's Pieces ice cream. An Entenmann's funfetti cake. There might be a shortage of skinless chicken breasts and low-fat milk but there's still junk food galore. God bless America.

I was the first one to text a picture of my flab to my girlfriends. I don't know what came over me. Loneliness. Desperation. The need for someone to tell me I can be imperfect and still be loved even though no one could ever convince me this is true. Corona bellies, we called them: the pictures we sent back and forth to each other of our expanding midsections. I was stunned by their openness, this group of women I've known for years who are ruled by vanity and deception. Here they were visually documenting their muffin tops. Their raw honesty about gaining a few pounds frightened me more than all the doomsday talk from doctors and politicians combined. We were terrified, of course, but knew it would be in bad taste to talk about it. When this all started we tried to make light of it. We still gossiped, and laughed, and made plans for travel and galas in our future. Then things became more serious. We began to worry about our children. And our parents. And yes, our wealth. We never thought about ourselves, though. We never stopped to wonder about how all of this was going to affect us, we women whose entire identities revolve around being seen.

I'm a trophy wife. I say this proudly. I'm not ashamed of how I've made my way through life. I'm no different than an athlete or dancer or anyone who's been bestowed with a God-given gift and then honed it, perfected it, enhanced it, and used

it to their best advantage. My gift is beauty but if you think I haven't worked as hard and sacrificed as much as any football player or prima ballerina to climb to the top of my field and stay there, think again. My career is every bit as brutal and fleeting as theirs. In some ways they have it better because their knowledge can be used long after they can no longer perform as they did in their youth. A dancer can retire and become a choreographer. A football player can do endorsements or be a color commentator. No one's going to pay me to do play by plays at cocktail parties.

She examines the roots of her hair.

I'm horrified by my roots. I hear Zane again. "Horrified, Mom? Really? Horrified? That's a word you should use for melting polar ice caps and pictures of starving puppies before they're rescued by the SPCA." There's nothing I can do. The salons are closed. I went online and tried to order something I could use at home. Everything was sold out. It didn't upset me. I applaud the women out there who thought to hoard boxes of hair dye.

I'm not going to wash my face today. I'm not going to moisturize. No hyaluronic acid. No retinol. No brightening eye cream. I quit wearing makeup weeks ago when the reality of self isolation finally took hold. Graham and I were actually not going to see anyone. Not anyone. I kept wearing a little mascara up until the end. Purely for his sake. He still had to look at me. But I've stopped now. I look a hundred years old. I'm

sorry but whoever invented mascara deserves a Nobel Prize. Screw science and world peace; this stuff is really important.

Once my roots went to hell, I stopped getting dressed, too. By getting dressed I mean putting on an outfit. It didn't happen all at once. The decline began when I downgraded to lounge wear. But I still made sure everything was color coordinated or at least the shades complimented each other. Neutrals saved me on my worst days. I've always believed neutrals can get you through any crisis. (*Beat.*) I was wrong.

After I got the call from the hospital last night, I opened a bottle of white burgundy and ventured into the deepest, darkest depths of my closets where I found some clothes from thirty years ago that still fit me. I knew that should have made me feel good. Instead, it made me feel sad. It made me stop and wonder if it was true that my greatest accomplishment in life has been staying a size two.

I thought about putting on one of my old college sweatshirts but changed my mind and put on one of Graham's shirts. And no pants. Who needs pants? Who needs teeth? Who needs an eight-bedroom house? I can't believe I'm the one standing here asking these questions to a mirror. I can't believe I'm the one who's going to survive all this: me and not Graham. Fortune 500 Graham. Master of the universe Graham who spent day after day in bed buried under a three thousand dollar comforter not able to talk about what was happening. To the economy. To his companies. To our

holdings. To our investments. To us. We stopped being intimate a while ago. I lost track of the days. Graham was older than me and had a heart condition. He was considered high risk. When he looked at me, I think all he saw was a big germ. But it turned out I was never a threat to him. I did everything I was supposed to do to keep him safe. I gave up being seen. He was the one who finally couldn't take it. He was the one who went into the city on business. He said he had no choice. I still don't know where he went or why. If he did it to save us or was he only thinking of me? Did he see this coming? It was part of his special genius to see things coming that others didn't.

She reaches down and gently squeezes her belly beneath the shirt.

I have a corona belly now. It reminds me of when I was pregnant with Zane. How all my angles softened into curves and all my conceitedness melted into concern for my unborn child. It was ironic. My whole life I'd been told I was the epitome of female beauty yet I'd never really felt very feminine. Maybe because all my enviable womanly assets were just that. Assets. Bankable assets. Having a child made me appreciate the power my body naturally possessed. I could grow a life. Maybe that was more impressive than looking good in leather pants.

The feeling didn't last long though. I began to panic almost as soon as Zane was born. Would Graham replace me? Would he get tired of waiting for me to get back to my pre-baby weight, to get back to being the flashy bauble on his arm that made

other men look jealously from me to him and say, “that guy must be really rich.”

(Beat.) It never occurred to me that maybe Graham saw something different when he looked at me than others did. Maybe he saw something more while also seeing something less.

I guess I should put on some makeup. Maybe cover my hair with the Hermes scarf I bought a month ago and never got a chance to wear. I need to look good. I have a lot of Zoom calls to make. The first will be to my son to tell him his father has died of complications from COVID-19.

My greatest accomplishment hasn't been keeping my looks, Graham would tell me if he was here. It was our marriage. Against all odds, the trophy wife and the rich husband loved each other. I don't think I knew how much until I heard that first cough two weeks ago and my heart stopped.

Zane will cry. Against all odds, the son of a rich man loved his father. And I will try to make him feel better by joking about how bad I look. And he will wipe away his tears and say to me as he has so many times before, “Mom, it doesn't matter.”

THE WIFE exits as THE WRITER enters. The lights are a cross fade never going to black. THE WRITER is dressed in some sort of “pajamas” and looks like someone who hasn’t left the house in a month. He wears A PAIR OF GLASSES and has a CELL PHONE in the pocket of his robe.

**SAM is the offstage voice of his ex-wife heard on the phone*

Scene Two: The Man Who Couldn’t Google

THE WRITER: I’m going to be okay. Sometimes when this thought crosses my mind, I feel a little giddy. I feel superior. But other times I feel guilty. I know a lot of people are going crazy. This is all new for them. The isolation. The depression. The anxiety. Going for days, weeks, months without seeing another person. Without leaving your home. Without putting on pants. Drinking too much. Surviving on junk food. Worrying you won’t be able to pay your rent. Not knowing when or if you’ll ever be paid for the work you just did and wondering if you’ll ever get another job again.

This was my life before the pandemic; I’m a writer.

This whole lockdown thing has been great for my writing. I have absolutely no excuses not to write now except for the excuse that was the main reason I had

trouble writing before: I don't feel like writing. Don't get me wrong, though. I may be having trouble concentrating on my latest novel, but I am managing to get some writing done. I've written multiple scathing emails to all the liars out there: banks, credit card companies, online retailers, Disney, insurance companies, *The Today Show*, my agent, toilet paper distributors, the New York state unemployment office, my landlord, Instacart. (*aside*) If you promise someone snack crackers, you should give them snack crackers. They don't have to be Cheez-Its. I checked the substitution box.

I've also written a dozen different suicide notes in various fonts even though I have no intention of killing myself. I'm too afraid of death and too excited about Michael Bay's upcoming pandemic-themed thriller where the actors are never going to be together in the same room. (*aside*) If only they could've used that device when filming *Ocean's 8*.

All the morning talk shows agree we need to establish a daily routine for ourselves while we're in isolation or we'll lose our minds. I have mine. I begin by drinking three cups of coffee and eating two Pop-Tarts. This morning I ate the last brown sugar cinnamon ones; tomorrow I'm starting on the box of frosted blueberry that I'm very excited about. Then I gaze at the ceiling and think about how much weight I'm going to gain if we're under lock down for another couple months then I measure out a space next to my desk where I'll put the Peloton I'll finally be able to afford if the novel -- I'm avoiding writing -- sells well. Next I watch four hours of

Armageddon news peppered with uplifting selfie videos of people modeling face masks they've made out of pillow cases and children standing outside their grandparents' windows holding signs that say, "We love you," with the grandparents holding signs that say, "We love you, too. Stay away from us." Then I feed my cat Dan Brown. I wanted to name him after a writer but not a particularly good one because I was afraid I'd become bitter having him around.

Then I take a nap.

THE WRITER takes off his glasses and puts them in the pocket of his bathrobe. He closes his eyes briefly then yawns as if waking from a nap.

Where are my glasses? They should be here. (*starting to panic*) I have to find my glasses. I'm practically blind without them. One of the more frustrating aspects of my life is I need my glasses in order to look for my glasses. Whenever I lose them my first instinct is to call out for my ex-wife, Samantha. She could always find them but afterwards I'd have to endure hours of her telling me I was an irresponsible, absent-minded idiot and watch her smirk at me. As if being able to discover an object that's been misplaced within a small finite area is such an amazing feat. Yes, yes, Sam, you're good at finding glasses and keys and wallets, but what about finding a job or a credit card with a lower interest rate?

I need to stay calm. Of course I'm going to find my glasses. I know they have to be here in this apartment. I'll relax. I'll watch a little TV. But, wait! I can't. I can't see the TV. I can't make out the buttons on the remote. I won't be able to make out anything on my computer either. Or my phone. Or my iPod. The internet no longer exists for me. I can't Google. I can't surf. I can't post or Tweet or follow Joe Exotic's coronavirus quarantine. I know I have another pair of glasses somewhere, but I've forgotten where I put them. Why can't I put them somewhere obvious like a desk drawer or on top of the night stand? They're not precious. They're not dangerous. Who hides their spare glasses from themselves? I hear Sam laughing in my head. I wonder how she's doing? I wonder if she's okay? I'm sure she is. She was great at social distancing. She could even do it lying in the same bed with me.

Dan Brown? Where are you? I could really use some moral support right now. Here kitty, kitty. I can't remember if I fed him this morning. What about feeding myself? Am I going to be able to cook? How long can I live on Pop-Tarts and bagel chips? Should I risk cooking with a gas stove when I can't see clearly? (*becoming increasingly agitated*) What if I turn on a burner but I can't get it to light right away so I turn the knob too far and the flame ignites too quickly and I singe off my eyebrows? What if I turn the knob and the burner fails to light and I forget to turn it off so gas keeps coming out and when I finally realize I left it on and turn it off, there's gas everywhere and I know if I were to light a match, the whole apartment would blow up but since I don't have any matches, I know that's not going to happen but just the idea that it could have happened, really stresses me out?

Should I just open Dan Brown's entire bag of cat food and set it out for him in case I starve to death and can't feed him? I don't want him to starve to death, too. But will he try and eat all of it all at once and will it make him sick? I've heard if you don't stop sheep from eating, they'll eat until their stomachs burst and they die. Do cats and sheep have similar digestive systems? I should Google that. Wait. I can't Google. I'm the man who can't Google!

I really need to calm down. What's the worst case scenario if I can't find my glasses? I'll have to call or text a friend and have him come over and find them for me. But no one can come over since we're not allowed to leave our homes. What about the police? Would the police come and look for my glasses? Or would it be a job for the fire department? Either way, it would be embarrassing. What about faking an injury? Then the EMTs would come and in the midst of helping me I could tell them I can't find my glasses. But they'd be able to tell right away that I wasn't injured unless I actually injured myself. How would I do that? Am I capable of breaking my own arm just so I don't have to admit to a health care professional that I can't find my glasses? How about faking a heart attack? That can't be too hard? What are the symptoms again? Dizziness? Shortness of breath? Pain in your left side or is it your right? I should Google it. Dammit!!

A cell phone rings.

What's that? My phone? My phone is ringing!

THE WRITER takes his phone out of his bathrobe pocket and answers it.

THE WRITER: Hello! Hello!

SAM: *(offstage)* Hey! What's going on? Are you okay? You sound a little crazy.

Although that wouldn't be anything new.

THE WRITER: Sam?

SAM: *(offstage)* Yeah, it's me. I know it's been a while . . .

THE WRITER: That's what we agreed upon. Let's never see each other again. Or talk to each other. Or breathe the same air.

SAM: *(offstage)* All air flows together.

THE WRITER: It's a figure of speech.

SAM: *(offstage)* Really? Thank you for explaining. Seriously. Are you okay?

THE WRITER: I'm great.

SAM: (*offstage*) That's interesting because you've never been close to great even in the best of times and now we're in the middle of a global pandemic.

THE WRITER: Maybe I'm a pandemic kind of guy.

SAM: (*offstage*) I highly doubt that. I just wanted to make sure you're okay.

THE WRITER: Are you implying I can't take care of myself?

SAM: (*offstage*) Never. It's just . . . these are extraordinary times. They make you rethink your priorities. Things like a closet full of expensive clothes and always being right don't seem so important anymore.

THE WRITER: I know what you mean. I'm fine. Really. I mean, I'm healthy. But I lost my glasses. I had them on my face before I laid down to take a nap. I don't know where they could be. I kind of hate to admit it but my first thought was I wished you were here.

SAM: (*offstage*) That's because I know you better than anyone else does. About your glasses. Do you remember the time you fell asleep with them on top of your head and they slipped off behind the pillows and got wedged in the gap between the bed frame and the headboard?

THE WRITER takes his glasses out of his bathrobe pocket and puts them on.

SAM: (*offstage*) You found them, didn't you?

THE WRITER: I'll never tell.

THE WRITER exits listening to SAM on the other end of the phone. THE FLEDGLING enters animatedly talking on her phone. She's in her early twenties. Throughout the scene stage left will represent the front of her house and stage right will represent the back of her house.

Scene Three: Windows

THE FLEDGLING: *(on her phone talking to a friend)* Be serious. You're not actually thinking about going. A coronapocalypse party? I know the virus isn't killing people our age, but it still seems irresponsible. Besides they're a bunch of undergrads. So immature. Half the time I can't even understand what they're saying. Of course I'm bored. I've even started looking out my windows. I know, insane, right? Although I guess that's kind of what windows are for. Oh, so get this. There's this crazy old lady who lives across the street from me . . . sorry. My bad. There's this *(searching for the right words)* emotionally unusual . . . age challenged . . . person . . . who lives across the street from me and something really weird is going on with her. *(Beat)* Of course I don't *know* her. She's a neighbor.

THE FLEDGLING peers out her front window.

THE FLEDGLING: *(on her phone)* The past couple days I've seen her at her own window and she seems freaked out like she might be afraid of something outside her house or she's frantically trying to escape from something *inside* her house?

Then the other day I saw her in her yard in her nightgown pacing around, staring up at the trees with her lips moving like she was talking to someone, but there was no one there. Oh. Okay. Sure. Text me later. Stay safe.

THE FLEDGLING ends her call and becomes instantly absorbed in her phone. Eventually she walks toward the back of her house while still staring at her phone. She glances up and notices something outside her window.

THE FLEDGLING: Oh my God. Is that? It can't be. *(moving closer to the window)* I think it is.

THE FLEDGLING calls her grandmother while continuing to peer out the window.

THE FLEDGLING: *(on her phone, brightening at the sound of her grandmother's voice)* Hi, Gram. I'm fine. How are you? Yes, I'm doing what I'm supposed to. I'm not going out. I'm not seeing anyone. I know it's a terrible virus. I know I don't want to get it. I know I'm alone. Gram, you're really bumming me out. Listen, I'm calling you for a specific reason. There's a bird in a tree in my back yard and it's purple! The most brilliant shade of purple I've ever seen. At first I thought it was a piece of tissue paper -- the kind you put in a gift bag -- and it blew away and got stuck in the branches. But it's a bird! Mm hm. That's what I was thinking, too; it has to be someone's pet. There aren't any wild birds this color. A parakeet? Maybe. This is

terrible. It's bad enough we're not allowed to be around other humans anymore. What happens if your only companion in the world is an animal and you lose it? What can I do? Yes, there are cats in my neighborhood. Oh, God. But it's a bird. Wouldn't it know how to get away from a cat? It's tame? Righ. It doesn't know how to survive in the outside world. Just like Millenials. That's a good one, Gram. You're a riot. Uh huh. That makes sense, but where would I get a cage? All the pet stores are closed and if I order one online it won't arrive for days. Do you think the bird will live that long? Let me think about this. Yes, that means I'm going to Google it. I'll call you back later. Love you.

THE FLEDGLING types on her phone as she wanders toward her front window. THE NEIGHBOR enters looking skyward dressed in a nightgown. THE FLEDGLING glances up and notices THE NEIGHBOR outside.

THE FLEDGLING: *(to herself)* That's it. I can't stand it anymore.

THE FLEDGLING joins THE NEIGHBOR in the street but keeps a safe distance away. The two of them eye each other cautiously.

THE FLEDGLING: *(loudly, overly friendly)* Hi! I'm your neighbor from across the street. I don't mean to pry, but I've noticed you seem upset. *(gesturing in the direction of The Neighbor's house.)* Is everything okay in there?

THE NEIGHBOR: Why are you talking so loudly?

THE FLEDGLING: Am I? I didn't realize . . .

THE NEIGHBOR: You think I'm old.

THE FLEDGLING: Well . . .

THE NEIGHBOR: I can hear just fine.

THE FLEDGLING: (*lowering her voice*) I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . .

THE NEIGHBOR: What?

THE FLEDGLING is at a loss for how to proceed with the conversation.

THE NEIGHBOR: Why are you spying on me?

THE FLEDGLING: I'm not spying on you. I just happened to look out . . .

THE NEIGHBOR: Stay away.

THE FLEDGLING: Are you worried about the virus? I understand if you are. I don't have to worry about it. (*beaming*) I'm young.

THE NEIGHBOR: You don't have to worry about it? Where does your generation get their news from? The Cartoon Network?

THE FLEDGLING: I just mean, I know it's dangerous, but it's probably not going to kill me.

THE NEIGHBOR: Well, isn't that a lovely attitude? You're going to make a wonderful mother someday. Don't you care if your parents die? Or your grandparents? Or just people in general?

THE FLEDGLING: I care. I really do. But a lot of people my age aren't buying into it. They feel like even if this thing is real, it's not our fault. It's yours.

THE NEIGHBOR: How is a virus our fault?

THE FLEDGLING: The way your generation is using it to destroy the economy and all that stuff. Why should we suffer and have to stay home and have our lives screwed up?

THE NEIGHBOR: Wait until you see how your generation is going to screw up.

THE FLEDGLING gets distracted by her phone.

THE FLEDGLING: *(without looking up from her phone)* There's nothing wrong with my generation.

THE FLEDGLING becomes completely absorbed by her phone and oblivious to THE NEIGHBOR who tries to get her attention by waving at her, making faces, doing a dance, but nothing works. THE FLEDGLING finally puts her phone away.

THE FLEDGLING: Why are you looking up at the trees? What's going on? There! You did it again.

THE NEIGHBOR: *(suddenly overcome with emotion)* I've lost my bird. Last week I propped open one of my windows but I forgot I didn't have the screens in yet. He must've flown out while we were watching *America's Got Talent*. It always puts me to sleep.

THE FLEDGLING: Oh my God! Is he purple?

THE NEIGHBOR: Yes!!!

THE FLEDGLING: Oh my God! I think he's in my back yard!

THE NEIGHBOR: I can't believe it!

THE FLEDGLING: I'm serious! There's a purple parakeet in a tree in my back yard.
I'm pretty sure there can't be more than one of them loose in the neighborhood.

THE NEIGHBOR: I can't believe you've found my Prince.

THE FLEDGLING: His name's Prince? Cool. You named him after Prince because he's purple. *Purple Rain* was one of my mom's favorite albums when she was in college. She used to play the CD all the time when I was growing up. (*singing "I Would Die 4 U"*) You. I would die for you. Darlin' if you want me to. You . . .

THE NEIGHBOR: I named him Prince because purple is a royal color.

THE FLEDGLING: Oh. Sure. I get that.

THE NEIGHBOR starts coughing causing THE FLEDGLING to take a few steps farther away from her as she realizes she might have the virus.

THE FLEDGLING: Hey, I'm sorry about what I said about the virus. Maybe you should go to a hospital.

THE NEIGHBOR: I need to get Prince back.

THE FLEDGLING: How long have you been sick? Have you been putting off going to a doctor until you found him?

THE NEIGHBOR: Will you help me?

THE FLEDGLING: *(after a moment of hesitation)* Yes. I'll help.

THE NEIGHBOR returns to her home and reappears immediately. She wears a bright yellow latex cleaning glove on one hand and references a BIRD CAGE as if she's actually carrying one. She sets it down.

THE NEIGHBOR: Here's his cage. There's a piece of mango in there. He loves mango. Just set it down where he can see it and open the door. He should go back in on his own. You can call him, too. Here, Prince. Pretty Prince. Pretty Prince. It's mango time.

THE FLEDGLING hesitates.

THE NEIGHBOR: What's the matter? Are you worried about the virus, after all?

THE FLEDGLING: I was thinking about my grandma. She loves birds. She has a ton of feeders in her back yard. Because of her I know the difference between an Eastern Towhee and a Dark-eyed Junco. This information doesn't come in handy very often, but I like that I know it. She doesn't approve of keeping birds in cages. Or goldfish in bowls. Or granddaughters in their hometowns when they want to go to school thousands of miles away. I remember how excited I was to leave my family. Now I'd do anything to be back there. To see them again even if it has to be through a window.

THE FLEDGLING reaches for the cage and moves away. Lighting and staging reflects that THE FLEDGLING and THE NEIGHBOR are not adjacent or in close proximity. They are each looking for PRINCE in a different place.

THE FLEDGLING and THE NEIGHBOR: *(in unison, calling for Prince)* Here Prince! Here birdie, birdie! Here pretty Prince!

A flash of light represents PRINCE has returned. THE FLEDGLING brings back the birdcage and excitedly sets it down next to THE NEIGHBOR. Both women are thrilled.

THE NEIGHBOR: You found him! Thank you! Thank you! *(her words trail off into coughing)*

THE FLEDGLING: You should go to a hospital. Prince is safe now. I'll take care of him.
If you have to stay for a day or two, it's no problem.

THE NEIGHBOR: I'm not sure you can handle the responsibility. Exactly how old are you?

THE FLEDGLING: Twenty-three.

THE NEIGHBOR: I have a bunion that age. It appeared suddenly in '97 and to my astonishment has shown no signs of going away. Sort of like *The Bachelor*. Do you live alone?

THE FLEDGLING: Yes.

THE NEIGHBOR: Do you have any other pets?

THE FLEDGLING: No.

THE NEIGHBOR: Do you have a vacuum cleaner?

THE FLEDGLING: Well, yes. What does that have to do ...?

THE NEIGHBOR: Prince is messy. He's also destructive. When he's out of his cage, you have to keep an eye on him or he'll chew up all the wood in your house: windowsills, picture frames, kitchen cabinets.

THE FLEDGLING: Wow. Good to know.

THE NEIGHBOR: Hide your candles.

THE FLEDGLING: *(skeptically)* Okay.

THE NEIGHBOR: He's an early riser, and he's very loud about it.

THE FLEDGLING: That sucks.

THE NEIGHBOR: His favorite treats besides mango are peas in a pod. You have to leave the peas in the pod. He won't eat individual peas. He loves grapes, but he can't have more than four at a time. And carrots but don't peel them. The skin is the healthiest part. And acorn squash. It's the only squash he likes. I let him spend at least three hours a day outside his cage. We watch TV together and dance.

THE FLEDGLING: Dance?

THE NEIGHBOR: He especially likes Sly and the Family Stone and anything Bossa Nova. *(blowing her bird a kiss)* Goodbye, Prince. Be nice to this nice girl. *(to THE FLEDGLING)* You are a nice girl.

THE NEIGHBOR returns to her home. THE FLEDGLING returns to her home. Half light holds on THE NEIGHBOR and will gradually fade to black as THE FLEDGLING talks to PRINCE.

THE FLEDGLING: *(speaking to Prince in his cage as she scrolls on her phone)* We got more likes on our latest selfie of you taking a grape from between my lips. We're cray adorbs. You want to keep bingeing *The Crown* or *Bob's Burgers*? Both? I like the way you think. I still can't believe you don't like Prince's music. So ironic. Especially since you like other artists from the '80s: Bon Jovi, Madonna, Run-D.M.C. Bossa Nova's the best, though. If it weren't for you I would've never discovered it. *(singing)* Tall and tan and young and lovely the girl from Ipanema goes walking and when she passes . . . *(walking to the window and looking out at The Neighbor's house.)* It's been three weeks since the ambulance came for her. I know she's not coming back. She lived across the street from me for two years, and I never knew she existed. We probably would've liked each other. Maybe she would've helped ease the ache when I started to miss Grandma and maybe I could've helped ease her loneliness if she was lonely. I know nothing about her, or her life, or family if she had one. Did she have one? I haven't seen anyone at her house. All I know about her is she loved her bird and she sacrificed her life for him. I guess I played a role, too. My reward is you,

Prince. Now I'm not alone. (*beat*) I didn't even know her name. I never thought to ask. Next time I will. When things get back to normal, I'm going to knock on the door of every house on my street and ask, Is everything okay in there?

THE FLEDGLING exits to the sound effects of a New York Mets baseball game, the crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd. Baseball sounds fade as THE DRINKER enters carrying a bottle of vodka and a chair. He takes a seat on stage.

Scene Four: Second Thoughts

THE DRINKER: I don't like to drink alone. I think that's probably the only thing that's kept me from being a full-fledged drunk. My ex-wife would disagree. She'd tell you I'm a lush. She'd tell you I'm a lot of other things, too, and maybe half of them would be true and maybe one of them would be the reason we split up. Maybe two of them. Wasn't the drinking, though.

I never drank at home. I don't count beer. You can't be a sports fan and not drink beer. My wife understood that much. There's no way I could've kicked back and watched a Mets game without a cold one in my hand. It would've been unnatural. But I never brought a drop of hard liquor into the house. Not even when Mickey Calloway left Alonso on the bench with the bases loaded . . . in the eighth . . . against a south paw . . . against the Nats.

I don't like to drink alone but now I got no choice. All the bars and restaurants are closed. We're not supposed to leave our homes. I've been going to the same bar almost every night for the past ten years. It's not some hole in the wall where people drink just to get drunk. I've hung out at my share of those in the past, but I turned over a new leaf after the divorce. Maybe saying I turned the leaf over is kind of an exaggeration. More like I picked up the leaf, and looked under it, and put it back down again. I knew I was going to keep drinking but if I was going to stop myself from becoming the lush my wife said I was - and I wasn't - something had to change. I decided I needed to find a more pleasant drinking environment. One with windows.

The Terrace Steak House is a nice restaurant. Kind of upscale even. Serves a great Angus ribeye. And the grilled jumbo shrimp is something else, too. I've never eaten there. I can't afford it. But I've seen the food go by and watched other people eat it and send their compliments to the chef.

I had my own stool near the end farthest away from the door. Jen and Katrina did their best to hold it for me on busy nights and made sure when I was there the TV across from me had on the Mets game. If there was a Yankees game, they put it on the TV behind me.

I was friendly with all the bartenders, not just Jen and Kat, but they were my favorites and not just because they were both good-looking women. Jen's a cute redhead with a great bod. The kind of woman who gets hit on all the time once the customers get drunk enough. None of these guys would ever have the nerve otherwise. She's pushing forty and still gets lots of offers, but I've noticed lately her rejections don't sound as cocky as they used to. She's single. Never been married. She tells people she's had plenty of offers, but no one's ever rung her bell.

Kat's a little broader and a little older. I know 'cause I heard her tell Jen one night she and her husband were giving up trying to have kids now she's past forty. I didn't try to hear that. I didn't wanna hear that. It made me sad 'cause Kat's a lot of fun and I think she'd make a great mom. And she's a Mets fan. A real Mets fan. She does this hilarious rant about Cespedes not being able to get out of bed in the morning without pulling a hamstring, and she cried like a baby when we heard Jacob won his second Cy Young.

There's Colleen, and Krista, and Frank, and Rafael, the other bartenders. And there's the other regulars Jake, Ray, Mimi, Greg, Paul and Judy and the guy with the comb over we all call The Comb Over. I've been thinking about them a lot. You hear about how we're lucky to have social media. We have the internet. At least we can text and call our loved ones. We can Zoom and Face Time and all that stuff. But I don't even know their last names. I never thought to ask. I always thought I'd see them again.

I drink alone now, something I promised myself I'd never do. But I have to do everything alone now. I'm alone. Even the Mets are gone.

I think about Jen. I wonder how she's doing? She's alone too. Is she as sad as me? And scared? And freakin' bored? Is she drinking alone? It's easy to do. There might not be any food in the grocery stores, but there's still plenty of booze. And they deliver curbside. *(Pause.)* I wonder if she's wishing she'd gone ahead and married some guy even though her bell sat silent. Maybe there are things more important than all that clanging? I wonder if Kat's thinking about the kids she and her husband never had. I wonder if that loss hurts more now 'cause she can imagine having them home with her and filling their empty house with noise. Or maybe she's glad she never had kids. Maybe she's glad she doesn't have to worry about them getting sick. Maybe she's glad she doesn't have to explain to them why they can't go to school, or see their friends, or go to the mall or a movie or a football game. Maybe she's glad she doesn't have to worry about how her family is going to survive in this new world.

I've been thinking about calling my own kids. There's been a couple times this past week when I've reached that point between being drunk enough and being too drunk where you think anything is possible. Where you think your daughter might finally forgive you for whatever the hell it is you did that made her hate you so much or where your son's voice will be young and hopeful and happy to hear from you. He'll be excited to go to the game. Not the cold, condescending, grown up bullshit

you get from him now. Did it ever occur to you your mother might lie? I want to shout at him. Maybe she's not a freakin' saint? Maybe I don't deserve everything I got?

I've always blamed her, but I've been re examining things with all this time on my hands and all this vodka on my curb. I know I'm not a drunk no matter what she says. I never drank at home. That's not why it fell apart. But she'd also tell you I was selfish. And I was angry. Maybe that was true. I'm sorry. I never meant to be. Maybe that's what I should say. All I'd need to say. Hi. It's your dad. I'm sorry. I never meant to be mean to you.

I'm worried. I'm gonna be honest. I'm worried about a lot. I lost my job. I won't be getting it back. I'm too old to start over and too young to stop. I got no money in the bank. I worry about my kids. I worry about my mom. I even worry about my ex. She's got a husband, but he's a schmuck. Most of all, I'm worried about me 'cause there's no one else doing it and someone has to do it or I'm completely lost.

It's kind of like that old saying, when a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? I need to know: do you exist if no one loves you? See, I never drank alone. I never drank at home. I have no choice now.

A couple more shots and I might get up the nerve. I just want to hear my baby girl's voice. I just want to ask her, was I really that bad?

THE DRINKER exits. We hear the sweet voice of a young child singing her original composition, "The Coronavirus Song." THE MOMMY enters listening intently. When the song ends, THE MOMMY begins to speak.

Scene Five: Working From Home

THE MOMMY: Everyday we pick a new theme and build our world around it. We try to make everything relate to it: the games we play, the crafts we do, the food we eat, the movies we watch. Sometimes I let her pick silly stuff like rainbow unicorn eggs, or talking avocados, or magic golden sparkle cats. But usually we choose a topic that's educational like tree day, or alphabet day, or folding laundry day. I can usually predict what's going to be a hit with her and what isn't but there have been some surprises. I thought she was going to love enchanted forest day and instead she got bored making fairy night lights and we just curled up and watched *Moana* for the three thousandth time. While one of the best days we've had so far was soap day. I never saw that coming.

Yesterday our theme was jobs. For a four year old, she already knows a lot about jobs. She knows mommy used to have one in an office building in town that took me away from her, but now I work from home. Her grandma and grandpa used to stay

with her after I left in the morning and took her to pre-school and picked her up again in the afternoon, but she doesn't get to see them anymore.

She knows Grandpa doesn't have a job because he's retired. I explained the word to her and thought she understood then she went up to him and said, "Mommy told me you don't have a job anymore because you're tired. Is that why you sit down all the time?"

She knows her daddy has an important job that takes him far away to other countries for months at a time. He was supposed to be home for her birthday but now he's stuck in Baghdad indefinitely because of the virus. She'll be able to FaceTime with him. Thank God for modern technology although sometimes I'm afraid she's spending too much time communicating with him over a video screen and not enough time seeing him in the flesh. I asked her once what were her favorite games to play on her tablet? And she answered, "ABC Mouse, Toca Kitchen Sushi, and Daddy at the Barracks."

Maddie is my miracle baby. I'd tried all the fertility drugs over the years. Ones that made me sweaty, and bloated, and my face look like a pizza. Dustin and I used to joke about the irony of me being at my most unattractive during a time when he was supposed to be constantly horny for me. We gave up on getting pregnant. I quit the drugs and returned to my porcelain skinned, desirable self. We got a puppy we named Bear. We had a lot of sex before he was deployed to Syria: sex because we

wanted to have sex; not because we were trying to make a baby. Nine months later, we had a baby.

That was four years ago today. It's hard to believe. We had grand plans for Maddie's birthday. A party at her favorite park with a dozen of her friends from school. A family party later with aunts and uncles and cousins, and tons of presents, and a rainbow unicorn cake. Both parties had to be cancelled. She's still getting the Minnie Mouse big girl bike with training wheels she asked for but I know the first thing she's going to want to do with it is pedal the two blocks to Grandma and Grandpa's house. Now they'll have to watch her through a window, part of our new reality I can't seem to make her accept. I think it might be easier on her to not see them at all. I know it would be easier on me. The last time we went to their house she begged me to let her go inside and promised, "I'll hold my breath, Mommy. I'll only hug their legs."

What am I supposed to tell her? How do you make a four year old understand things like high-risk patients and social distancing? Is it even necessary to make her understand? Some people think it isn't. They say it's no big deal for children this age. They're resilient. They're not fully formed yet. They can't possibly understand what's going on. It makes no difference to them if there's a pandemic raging while they're coloring with sidewalk chalk or playing Hoot Owl Hoot.

I disagree. She might not be old enough to understand why or how but she's old enough to understand her life has been turned upside down. That makes it somehow harder for her than it does for older children who can be reasoned with. This is such an important time in her life, one of exploration and socialization. Now it's been put on pause indefinitely. And it makes me angry. And I don't want to be angry. I can't be angry. Because I'm all she has. I'm her entire world. But the pressure is so great. I have to work from home. And take care of my child by myself, every day, over and over again, without any breaks. I'm afraid about what the future holds for us. I worry about my husband and my parents and all my loved ones. But I can't be angry in front of her. Even though I am. I'm angry she can't sit on her grandma's lap. I'm angry she can't go to school. I'm angry she's not going to have anyone here but me to sing happy birthday to her while she blows out the candles on her cake. And don't tell me we can just use Zoom!!

It was job day yesterday. She set up her own little office in the corner of the living room. I could see her from where I sat at my home office at the dining room table doing real work but was it actually any more real or any more important than the work she was doing, copying Bear's name over and over again on a yellow legal pad?

I took a break and went to check on her.

"Hey, Peanut," I said, bending down to nuzzle my face in her dark curls. "How's the new job going?"

“Good,” she said.

“I thought we might talk about some other jobs. Who do you think has the most important job? Do you think farmers because they grow food for us?”

“Maybe,” she said.

“How about teachers?” I asked.

“I wish I could see Miss Kayla,” she told me and I felt the familiar ache in my heart.

“I know, sweetie. You’ll see her again soon. How about soldiers like Daddy because they protect us or doctors because they make us feel better?”

She finished carefully crafting a capital B then looked up at me with her daddy’s eyes.

“I think mommies have the most important job,” she said, “because mommies fix everything.”

I turned away before she could see me get emotional and walked over to our living room windows. I couldn't fix everything. I couldn't even give her a birthday party. She joined me and took my hand. We gazed at the empty street.

"Where did all the people go?" she asked.

This morning she woke me holding up four fingers and squealing, "I'm almost a whole hand." We had cupcakes with rainbow sprinkles for breakfast! Something that's never allowed! I had my first glass of wine before three o'clock, something that's also never allowed! She had presents to open and a new bike to ride. We put a party hat on Bear. We talked to Daddy on FaceTime. At the end of the day as the sun began to set, I put her in a special pair of birthday jammies and we settled on the couch to watch *Peppa Pig* and *Wallykazam*.

Bear starts barking at the window. We get up and hurry to the glass, and I can't believe my eyes. I can't believe how many people showed up. Not just Grandma and Grandpa. Not just our close friends, my co-workers, and the mommies and daddies of Maddie's friends but people I haven't seen for ages. People I barely know. The power of social media: I scoff at it from time to time but never again. They stand alone or in pairs with plenty of distance between each other. All of them hold lit candles of different shapes and sizes that glitter in the dusk. Because there are so many and they have to stand so far apart, the winking gold dots stretch as far as we

can see. "Mommy," Maddie says breathlessly, "is the street sparkling for me?" (*Beat*)
Maybe mommies can fix everything, after all, but they can't do it alone.

THE MOMMY exits. Simultaneously we hear the angry sounds of a riot raging and filling the theater: shouting, glass breaking, gunshots. THE OWNER enters carrying a GUITAR she sets off to one side in a stand. As she takes in the damage done to her store, THE PROTESTOR runs in from the audience escaping the chaos outside. He's wearing a bandana that doubles as a mask. He strips it off and begins to speak.

Scene Six: National Past Time

THE PROTESTOR: *(out of breath, exhilarated)* Wow! My God! What a rush!

THE OWNER: Get out of here!

THE PROTESTOR: Whoa, whoa! Calm down. What are you going to do? Hit me with a saxophone? I'm unarmed. *(Beat)* I hope your horn's not loaded.

THE OWNER: It's a woodwind. Get out of my store.

THE PROTESTOR: Can I rest here for a minute?

THE OWNER: Are you crazy? I said get out of here!

THE PROTESTOR: Can't you give me a second to catch my breath? I was running from the po-po.

THE OWNER: (*disgusted*) You were running from the what?

THE PROTESTOR: You know. The police.

THE OWNER: I know what po-po means. *You* were running from the police? What's wrong with you? Get out of my store!

THE PROTESTOR: Okay, okay. I'll leave. (*Pause.*) Why am I making you so nervous?

THE OWNER: A black man may take your purse and may even have to shoot you in the process but whenever you hear about some random woman getting chopped up into little bits, it's always a white man.

THE PROTESTOR walks around aimlessly as if taking in the contents of the store that haven't been looted.

THE PROTESTOR: Wow. Look at this. A Junior Wells poster.

THE OWNER: You know who Junior Wells is?

THE PROTESTOR: I met him once in Chicago years ago, back in the nineties.

THE OWNER: Junior Wells? You met Junior Wells? Were you running from the po-po that night?

THE PROTESTOR: Far from it. I was in Chicago visiting an old college buddy. His family was incredibly loaded. He invited me to this big to-do at someone's McMansion up in Lake Forest. Once we were completely blotto and bored out of our skulls, we went into the city and he took me to this hole in the wall club that probably wasn't even as big as this store. It was packed with people. Black people. My friend and I were the only white people. I'm sure we glowed. Onstage was this wizened up old guy in a fedora and a red tuxedo jacket playing a harmonica in a way that I never knew was possible. He played for over an hour and never even looked slightly tired while I was drenched in sweat just from listening to him. He was the most badass person I'd ever seen in my life. When we left the bar, he was standing on the sidewalk with a couple other guys from the band having a smoke. I strolled over to him all puffed up with my liberal white goodness because I'd just rubbed elbows and asses with a bunch of black people and told him that before tonight I had no idea who he was but now I was going to tell everyone I knew that I had the privilege of listening to one of the greatest blues musicians of all time. And you know what he said to me? *(Beat.)* Fuck you, man. Fuck . . . you.

THE OWNER and THE PROTESTOR share a laugh together.

THE PROTESTOR: I'll never forget those words as long as I live.

THE OWNER: I hope you took them to heart. Now, you need to go.

THE PROTESTOR: You got another broom? Let me help you clean up.

THE OWNER: No thank you. I want you to leave.

THE PROTESTOR: What happened here?

THE OWNER: That out there happened in here.

THE PROTESTOR: Don't you have insurance?

THE OWNER: What a white thing to say.

THE PROTESTOR: What do you mean?

THE OWNER: You think that's all it's going to take to get my business back up and running? As long as I get a nice fat check I'll be fine. I'll put in some new windows and restock a couple dozen guitars? I've put thirty years into this store. This place has a soul. It's part of the community. People don't come here only to buy

instruments. They come here to hang out, and play music, and talk about music . . .

This isn't just about property damage. Who's going to fix our broken spirits?

THE PROTESTOR: I think Geico has a policy for that. You can bundle it with your home and auto. Sorry. Trying to lighten the mood.

THE OWNER: Again, I'm asking . . . what's wrong with you? *(Pause)* I was already going out of business because of the lockdown. I don't know what I'm going to do now. They stole probably \$150,000 in inventory and they don't even know the value of what they got. Those beautiful instruments. And the memorabilia. All of it priceless to me. Money can't replace any of it. *(looking at a spot on a wall)* My son's first guitar was up on that wall.

THE PROTESTOR: Is he a musician? Someone famous?

THE OWNER: No, he's not famous. He was good, though. He could've been famous.

THE PROTESTOR: My son could've been famous, too. *(Pause)* We're both talking about our sons in the past tense.

THE OWNER: Are we? Well, mine's still around. I haven't seen him in years, though. What about yours?

THE PROTESTOR: He's still around. Do you mind if I ask why you aren't out there?

THE OWNER: As you can see I got more important things to do.

THE PROTESTOR: More important than protesting against the violent systemic racism in this country? The police brutality? The murder of young black men?

THE OWNER: Violent systemic racism? Listen to yourself. You know what you are? You're nothing but an old hippie. I bet you traded in your tie-dye for a suit a long time ago and tonight you suddenly decided to pull it out again.

THE PROTESTOR: That's exactly what happened. I'm not going to apologize. I haven't felt this good in a long time. I was idealistic in my youth. I protested against the war. I fought for civil rights. I wanted to recapture that feeling of standing up for something important. And God, it feels so right!

THE OWNER: (*heavily sarcastic*) I'm so glad that one night of protesting a few hundred years of pain and misery for the black man can make a white man so damn happy. You don't see a problem in that? You fought for civil rights? I'm sure we blacks would still be sitting at the back of the bus if it weren't for you. Please. You were all sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That was the extent of your activism.

THE PROTESTOR: (*wistfully*) I admit I smoked a lot of pot. And hash. And I spent six amazing months strung out on Crystal Serenity Moonbeams.

THE OWNER: That a drug?

THE PROTESTOR: No, a nineteen-year-old blond with her own VW van and legs up to here.

THE OWNER: Everything's a joke to you, isn't it?

THE PROTESTOR: I was sincere about all of it.

THE OWNER: Why didn't you fight in Vietnam?

THE PROTESTOR: The lottery ended before my number came up.

THE OWNER: Would you have gone if you were drafted?

THE PROTESTOR: No.

THE OWNER: So you're a coward?

THE PROTESTOR: Are you a coward? Why aren't you out there?

THE OWNER: You think what's happening out there is solving anything? Change starts with the individual, not with a mass of rioting fools. My family was poor and black. That means I grew up with very few comforts and even fewer opportunities. But I stayed on the right track. I worked hard. I married a good man. We built this business from nothing. We had children and we raised them right. (*falls into sad introspection*) Even so, my youngest son still ended up on drugs.

THE PROTESTOR: My family was well off and white. I guess that means I was destined to be an asshole. But at least I turned out to be a good-natured one. I thought I raised my son right. I gave him everything he could possibly want. He was the golden boy; All-American tight end at Notre Dame. Destined for the pros then he got injured. Didn't even happen on the field. A drunk driving accident in the sports car I bought him. I realized too late that the world and myself had prepared him to do only one thing in life and when it turned out he couldn't do it anymore, he crawled into a bottle. He really hated himself.

THE OWNER: Do you ever see your son?

THE PROTESTOR: Once a month. I visit him in jail. His last DUI someone got hurt.

THE OWNER: I'm sorry.

THE PROTESTOR: Me, too. Look, I've been doing a lot of self reflection tonight.

THE OWNER: Have you?

THE PROTESTOR: Maybe it's too late for our generation but what about the next one? If every time they see a white person they also see a black person beside him, or an Asian, a Hispanic, all kinds of people, then they'll begin to think that everyone can live in the same neighborhood, attend the same schools, shop at the same stores; that we can eat Chinese food together and get married and have babies. They can't just be told. They can't just hear the words. They have to see the words in action. Equality, fraternity, freedom. That's what's going on out there tonight.

THE OWNER: You white people do love to throw around the word freedom when it comes to us black folk. And that's all it is to you: a word.

THE PROTESTOR: Come on. It's a good word. Most of the people protesting are peaceful. They're united. There's a lot of love out there.

THE OWNER: Well, there's a lot of hate in here.

THE PROTESTOR: I'm sorry about this. It's terrible.

THE OWNER: Worse than the inventory is the memorabilia. A lot of it belonged to my father. He was a musician from Chicago who played with some of the blues greats. I had a framed cover from the Super Super Blues Band album signed by Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and Bo Diddley hanging over there. A framed copy of *Billboard* magazine's R & B singles chart for 1966 signed by Koko Taylor when "Wang Dang Doodle" hit #4. And over there was an autographed Gibson hollow body ES-345 that belonged to Otis Rush. He was lefthanded so he strung his guitar upside down from the way right-handed guitarists did it with the low E string at the bottom.

THE PROTESTOR: You're right. Those things can never be replaced.

THE OWNER: (*anger rising*) The only reason this protesting is even happening is because of the pandemic. People don't have anything to do. They're all stuck in their homes. They're bored. If it were normal times no one would've paid any attention to George Floyd. They don't really care.

THE PROTESOR: I care.

THE OWNER: Maybe you do care, whatever that means. You may sincerely think racism is bad, but you don't have to live with it so you don't even know what you're feeling bad about. It *is* just a word. You don't actually know what it feels like to have people hate you just for existing.

THE PROTESTOR: Actually, I do. I'm a lawyer.

THE OWNER: No kidding.

THE PROTESTOR: Even worse than that, I'm a personal injury lawyer.

THE OWNER: How did an idealistic protestor driving around in a van with Crystal Moonbeams end up being an ambulance chaser?

THE PROTESTOR: Being a hippie was fun for a while until I realized I liked indoor plumbing. I liked shoes that covered my toes. I went to law school still clinging to some of my ideals. I worked in the public defender's office. I represented illegal aliens on worker's comp cases and did pro bono work for abused women. Then I began to realize I liked \$3,000 suits, and Porsches, and trips to Europe with women who made Crystal look like a scarecrow.

THE OWNER: I believe that's what people call selling out.

THE PROTESTOR: One of our great American pastimes. *(Pause)* Speaking of my esteemed profession . . . you've got quite a cut on your forehead.

THE OWNER: Don't get too close. I don't want your germs.

THE PROTESTOR: COVID germs, white people germs, lawyer germs . . ?

THE OWNER: I don't want any of them.

THE PROTESTOR: You should go to an ER.

THE OWNER: In the middle of this pandemic? You couldn't get me anywhere near a hospital.

THE PROTESTOR: You might need stitches.

THE OWNER: Don't worry about me.

THE PROTESTOR: I'm going now.

THE OWNER: Hallelujah.

*THE PROTESTOR takes a business card out of his jeans pocket and extends it to
THE OWNER.*

THE OWNER: What's this?

THE PROTESTOR: I'm leaving you my card.

THE OWNER: Now I get it. You're in the middle of a riot handing out business cards.

THE PROTESTOR: It's not like that. Take it. In case you decide you want to sue.

THE OWNER: I don't know who hit me. Who would I sue?

THE PROTESTOR: Maybe we can sue America.

THE PROTESTOR exits through the audience back into the fray. THE OWNER stands still for several beats then lovingly picks up the guitar. She begins to sing the blues song, "Stormy Monday." Her vocals should be something like keening. Emotion overwhelms her.

THE OWNER: *(clearly speaking to her lost son)* I didn't let them get it, baby. Some things are worth fighting for.

THE OWNER exits leaving a bare stage for three to four beats. THE GRANDMOTHER enters with purpose and holds her ground. She's about to tell a story and demands attention.

Scene Seven: Nurse # 5

THE GRANDMOTHER: I don't like to drive. It's only been four years since I got my license. You should've seen the woman at the DMV when it was time to take my test. She gave me a look like I must be part of one of those reality TV shows that play practical jokes on people. "Why do you want to learn to drive at your age?" she asked me. I was offended. I thought about reporting her to AARP or posting about her ageist comment on my social media. I knew my tens of followers would be indignant. There'd be lots of frownie faces and comments like, "That girlie should mind her own business . . . but she has a point." Instead I simply explained that I lived my whole life in Brooklyn and never needed to drive but now I was living out here with my divorced daughter helping take care of my grandson, Eli, and my daughter insisted I be able to drive in case of an emergency.

The DMV woman seemed satisfied with that explanation. I never was. I asked Eli - who was only five at the time - what kind of emergency could happen to us that an ambulance, police car, or fire truck couldn't handle? He thought maybe his mother was concerned about end of the world calamities: alien invasions, zombie uprisings,

the escape of lethal pathogens from government research facilities. He said whenever any of these things happened in movies people always took to the roads in their cars, but these same people always ended up stuck in traffic jams and even if they managed to avoid being eaten by the undead or disintegrated by space lasers, the world always ran out of gas so cars were useless anyway. We came up with other life skills that would be more important to our survival post apocalypse than knowing how to drive. Things like foraging for food and building a fire. He said, running really fast. That one made me laugh. Then he said the most important skill would be learning how to look on the bright side. What a kid.

I don't know what I'm going to do without him. It's funny when I look back and think about the first few years of his life and how I hardly knew him at all. I didn't like his father. That was part of the problem. The other part was they moved to New Jersey.

My best friend, Marcia, used to tell me I'd regret not seeing Eli more often and that I needed to let go of my prejudice against his father because he wasn't Jewish. She'd say things like "you're going to regret this," and "you really need to let go of your prejudice against his father." I tried but I had nothing in common with the man. All he talked about was sports and the woodworking tools he kept in his workshop. Brad. His name was Brad. My husband, Abe - God rest his soul. He passed when Eli was a toddler - he was better at dealing with Brad. Abe would sit and listen to him go on and on about this game and that game even though Abe wasn't what you'd call

athletic; his favorite sport was yelling at the TV. In his later years he also became quite good at yelling at the computer and his phone.

Every time we visited the kids, Brad would throw an arm around Abe's shoulders and take him out to his workshop. Oh, Brad loved his workshop. Abe would always glance back at me rolling his eyes and making a face. You see, Abe had an actual workshop. It was a shop. Where he worked. He was a jeweler by trade. He also repaired watches and music boxes back when there were watches and music boxes. When he came home at night – believe me – he was done working. “What’s the point of a man having a home if he has to work there, too?” he’d say. “Especially when he has a woman there to do all the work for him,” I’d add. Work shop. I never saw Brad do any work out there. The few times I popped my head in to call him for dinner he’d just be standing there drinking a beer and gazing fondly at his wood.

I can drive, but I don't like to drive. Maybe it's because I started so late in life but I'm never entirely comfortable behind the wheel. Eli knows this. He can always sense when I'm nervous. He knows I hate Route 4. Too much traffic. Too much merging. We tried to avoid it as much as possible. Like I said before, when I got my license he was only five. He was so proud of me. We spent so many evenings with me studying my rules of the road handbook while he sat next to me laboring over his ABCs. The first time he rode in a car with me, he wore his bicycle helmet. I could've taken offense at that but instead I praised his good sense and then he ran off and returned

with his mother's helmet for me to wear. It was pink and glittery. I wore the damn thing. He couldn't stop laughing.

"You can do it, Grandma!" he's always quick to encourage me any time I encounter a traffic situation that throws me off like a four-way stop when everyone arrives at the same time. Fortunately we never had to go far. Most of my driving consisted of trips back and forth to his school and to the grocery store. Up until now, that is. Now we're about to drive across the country with a U-Haul trailer hitched behind us.

Eli is going to live with his dad in Arizona.

The airports are shut down. Trains and buses aren't running. We're not even supposed to cross state lines, but we have no choice. Eli says this makes it more exciting. An adventure. We'll be fugitives. We can pretend we're in one of those "end of the world" movies he loves so much. His mother didn't like those movies so I'd always get stuck watching them with him. Hannah liked comedies and romances. She said she saw enough grief and suffering in her work without watching it on TV. She felt that way even before the pandemic.

She always worked a lot in the past but once this virus began to spread, she worked all the time. It got so we'd only see her when she came home between shifts at the hospital to eat something and get some sleep. I'd hear the garage door open and the car come to a stop then the sound of her going straight to the basement where she'd

take off her scrubs and throw everything in the washing machine then go to the bathroom and take a shower. She had to do all this before she could say hello to Eli or me and even then she wore a mask and wasn't comfortable touching us. Some nights when she'd lose a patient she'd sit at the kitchen table and cry. I'd want to hold her but she always said no. She'd talk about how they died alone. Their families weren't allowed to be with them. "It's so awful," she'd cry into her hands. Up until we ran out of crème de menthe, I'd make her a Grasshopper. It was her favorite drink. Green was her favorite color. It was her birthstone: emerald. It was the color of her high school track uniform. She loved the song, "Bein' Green," the one that muppet frog on Sesame Street used to sing. She loved it as a child and never stopped loving it. She used to sing it to Eli whenever he'd feel down on himself. (*Singing "Bein' Green".*) When green is all there is to be. It could make you wonder why. But why wonder? Why wonder? I'm green and it'll do fine. It's beautiful, and I think it's what I want to be. (*pause*) Her favorite holiday sweater was green. Every time she put it on she'd look in the mirror and say, "Who wants a tacky red sweater?" like she was supporting an underdog.

You may have heard of my daughter. She was the fifth nurse to die in the state of New Jersey from COVID-19. We got a letter of condolence signed by the governor calling her a hero. It's an actual letter with a gold seal on it. Not an email or a Tweet. It came FedEx and I had to sign for it. I suppose I should be impressed. I read it and put it back in the envelope and gave it to Eli. I told him to put it away somewhere

and to never tell me where it was. I said someday it might mean something to him so for now he had to hide it from me so I couldn't rip it up.

I've only cried twice. I made sure Eli didn't see me. The first time was when I got the call from the hospital telling me Hannah had passed, and the second was the night I called Brad to give him the news. I knew he had the right to take Eli from me, but I never thought he would. He never seemed to care about him before; why would he care about him now? It's true I'm not in a good position to take care of Eli. I only have my social security to live on and a small amount of savings. And I'm too old to care for a nine-year-old boy on my own, Brad was quick to tell me. I could die any day. "You could die any day!" I exploded at him. "Look around you! We can all die any day! Even nurses! Even beautiful young nurses with little boys to raise."

If only Abe were still here things would be different. He had a way of putting things in perspective. Nothing flustered him. Unlike me. I have a tendency to wear my emotions on my sleeve. Marcia's always telling me to calm down. She says things like, "Stop wearing your emotions on your sleeves." Abe and I were a good match. Take Eli's name for instance. When I found out Hannah and Brad had chosen that name I was thrilled. A good solid religious name: Eli, the high priest who taught the prophet Samuel. It turns out he was named after a football player. Eli Somebody. "At least tell me he's a good football player," I cried out to Abe. He said, "He won two Super Bowls." "Does that mean he's good?" I asked. He shrugged. "Meh."

The morning after I talked to Brad I told Eli he had to go live with his father. I don't know what I expected him to do. I guess I thought he might cry, but I also knew he was so numb from losing his mother that more bad news would probably roll right off him. And I was right. He was more concerned about me. What was I going to do? Where was I going to live? Was I going to come back here after I dropped him off? Would we ever see each other again? That question was like a knife in my heart. At that moment I knew I'd be willing to do anything to be near him. I'd park across the street from his father's house and live in a car if I had to and no, the irony wasn't lost on me. *(pause)* You see it's not just about losing him; he's all that's left of her now.

We're packed. I've checked the hitch at least a hundred times. I've had a recurring nightmare all week that the trailer comes loose on I-80 and I cause a twenty-car pile up. I've been sitting here for a while waiting for him. Eli told me he wanted some time alone, a very grown up thing for a little boy to say. I watch him standing in his front yard. What is he thinking? I'm struck by a memory of my own: Hannah at his age sitting cross legged on her bed with a toy doctor's kit tending to her stuffed animals. She always wanted to be a nurse. I wonder if she ever told him this. She thought she had a lifetime ahead of her to tell him things. There was no urgency. I'll tell him. We have hours and hours ahead of us locked in this damn car. I'll tell him everything. Here he comes. I start the engine. He gets in and puts on his seat belt. My mind goes completely blank. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do next. I drop my hands from the steering wheel. "You can do it, Grandma," he says to me.

I stare out the windshield. I can't bear to look at his precious face but I feel his hand take hold of mine and I squeeze it for dear life as he explains, "I think this might be the emergency Mom wanted you to be prepared for: the end of our world."

What a kid.

THE GRANDMOTHER exits. THE SOLDIER and THE PERFORMER enter from opposite sides of the stage to the sounds of footsteps, keys jangling, a jail cell door opening. THE PERFORMER is dressed casually but expensively and with some flare. THE SOLDIER and THE PERFORMER look at each other from a distance for a moment taking the measure of one another. The lighting and scenic elements should create a gap between the two actors signifying they are each in a different space – adjacent jail cells.

Scene Eight: Thank You For Your Service

THE SOLDIER: What are you in for?

THE PERFORMER: Are you talking to me?

THE SOLDIER: Yea, who else? You're the only other person here. What are you in for?

THE PERFORMER: (*smiling*) Did you just say, "What are you in for?"

THE SOLDIER: You think this is funny?

THE PERFORMER: I'm sorry. It's just that expression. I didn't know people actually used it outside of 1940s gangster films. *(Beat.)* I don't know why I'm in here. I didn't do anything wrong.

THE SOLDIER: Yea. You, me, and O.J.

THE PERFORMER: I'm serious. I was pulled over for a faulty taillight. I didn't even know it was broken. I was driving a friend's car. When I showed the police the registration and insurance card they accused me of stealing it. I'm pretty sure the reason they threw me in jail has something to do with my appearance.

THE SOLDIER: You're not that ugly.

THE PERFORMER: Excuse me? I'll have you know the only reason Taye Diggs beat me out for the part of Hedwig in the revival of *Angry Inch* was because they said I was *too* good looking. *(Beat.)* I'm black.

THE SOLDIER: No shit, Sherlock.

THE PERFORMER: And I'm gay. I can see you have a problem with that.

THE SOLDIER: I don't have a problem with you being gay. I have a problem with you telling me you're gay.

THE PERFORMER: But I want you to know.

THE SOLDIER: See, there's the problem. (*Pause.*) What kind of car was it?

THE PERFORMER: A BMW.

THE SOLDIER: That's why they pulled you over.

THE PERFORMER: So it *was* about race. They saw a black man driving an expensive car and assumed I must have stolen it.

THE SOLDIER: There aren't any white people around here driving Beemers either. It wasn't about color. Unless you're talking about the color green which is what you got to have to have a car like that.

THE PERFORMER: Ah.

THE SOLDIER: They didn't have any other reason to arrest you?

THE PERFORMER: No. Well, yes. Well, I don't know. I had two cases of alcohol in my trunk. I'm on my way to visit my sister and she told me how the state closed all the liquor stores in Pennsylvania because of the lock down. That's the craziest thing I've

ever heard! Talk about an essential service. Anyway, she's going out of her mind and asked me if I could bring her some. The cops said I was transporting illegal goods across state lines to sell or something like that.

THE SOLDIER: You let them look in your trunk?

THE PERFORMER: Yes.

THE SOLDIER: Why?

THE PERFORMER: Because they asked.

THE SOLDIER: Cops can't just look in your trunk unless they have probable cause or a warrant.

THE PERFORMER: You sound like my friend, Barry. He talks about that kind of stuff all the time.

THE SOLDIER: Is he a lawyer?

THE PERFORMER: No.

THE SOLDIER: A criminal?

THE PERFORMER: In a way. He gets paid for being a writer on *Blue Bloods*.

THE SOLDIER: Your sister was conning you out of a couple cases of liquor. The state stores are open again.

THE PERFORMER: Seriously?

THE SOLDIER: Yea. And that shit the cops told you about bringing liquor across state lines. That isn't in effect anymore either.

THE PERFORMER: So there's no reason for me to be in here?

THE SOLDIER: They're messing with you. They're getting their jollies by putting you in a holding cell while they check to make sure the car's not stolen and then they'll let you go.

THE PERFORMER: Oh my God. That's such a relief. *(Beat.)* What are you in for?

THE SOLDIER: Not wearing a mask.

THE PERFORMER: So it really is an actual crime in some places? You can be arrested for it? I thought a fine, maybe.

THE SOLDIER: I don't know if you can be arrested for not wearing a mask, but I do know you can be arrested for beating up someone who tries to make you wear a mask.

THE PERFORMER: Oh. I see. Can I ask why you won't wear a mask?

THE SOLDIER: I don't like being told what to do. Especially by the government.

THE PERFORMER: Interesting. Then you also don't pay taxes or have a driver's license or send your kids to school . . .

THE SOLDIER: You know what I mean.

THE PERFORMER: Not really. You're not worried you can get sick or give the virus to someone you love?

THE SOLDIER: People die every day from all sorts of things we don't try and protect ourselves from. People also survive things they're not supposed to survive. I'm a perfect example. I've been shot. I've been stabbed. I was in a body cast for six weeks.

THE PERFORMER: Honey, you need to get a divorce.

THE SOLDIER: Iraq war, bar fight, car accident: in that order. My wife is a gentle, non-violent person. Except once she threw a chicken pot pie at me, but I had it coming. All I'm saying is when your time's up, your time's up. All the masks in the world can't stop it.

THE PERFORMER: So you're a fatalist?

THE SOLDIER: A what?

THE PERFORMER: You mentioned Iraq. Are you a soldier?

THE SOLDIER: I was.

THE PERFORMER: Yet you say you don't like being told what to do? Especially by the government? Isn't that the definition of a soldier?

THE SOLDIER: It's not the same thing.

THE PERFORMER: I kind of think it's exactly the same thing but never mind.

THE SOLDIER: What about you? What do you do?

THE PERFORMER: Me? I'm a singer, dancer, actor. I do okay. Or I should say, I did okay. Past tense. I still can't believe it. None of us can. When the pandemic started and shows began shutting down, we weren't that worried at first. We were sure our industry was bullet proof. No matter what's going on in the world people still need to be entertained. I mean, seriously, what could possibly close *The Lion King*? But it happened. Not only Broadway but the whole city's gone dark. People are moving out in droves because there are no jobs but also because there's no culture anymore. The whole point of New York City was that it was New York City: the energy, the excitement, the possibilities, the endless things to do. Now it's all gone. *(Pause.)* I've started thinking about moving, too, but I don't know where to go and I don't know what I'd do once I got there. Frankly, I'm terrified. The only thing I'm good at is performing. My whole identity is tied up in the theater.

THE SOLDIER: It's not easy. I can tell you that.

THE PERFORMER: What's not easy?

THE SOLDIER: The adjustment. I had a lot of trouble dealing with civilian life when I left the army. *(Beat.)* So you can sing?

THE PERFORMER: Well, yes.

THE SOLDIER: What shows you been in?

THE PERFORMER: Most recently? *Ain't Too Proud, Beautiful*, and a humble little production called *Hamilton*.

THE SOLDIER: Don't know them.

THE PERFORMER: Hm. I'm going to guess you don't go to a lot of Broadway shows.

THE SOLDIER: Never been to a single one. Never been to New York. But my mom loves musicals. I grew up listening to cast albums and watching movie musicals with her on TV. *The King and I, My Fair Lady, West Side Story*.

THE PERFORMER: It's hard to imagine you watching those movies. I see your taste running more toward explosions and women with face tattoos. Did you like them? The musicals?

THE SOLDIER: Some of them were all right. Yul Brynner was pretty bad ass. (*Pause.*) I suppose people are always asking you to sing for them.

THE PERFORMER: Ever since I was a kid. Everywhere I go, "Sing us a song!" People don't understand that singing for me is a vocation. I can't just belt out a tune whenever I want to without preparation. My voice is my instrument. I need to . . .

THE SOLDIER: I get it. You're like a professional athlete. It's like Big Ben at a barbecue and everyone wanting him to play a game of touch football. He's not going to risk his multi-million dollar arm goofing around with a bunch of jag offs. Or like a doctor at a party and everybody coming up to him asking for medical advice.

THE PERFORMER: I suppose that happens to soldiers, too. People probably have all kinds of questions for you. They want to hear your war stories.

THE SOLDIER: Not so much. People tend to act nervous around us. They give you all that "thank you for your service" crap but then they don't know what else to say. That's one of the reasons why military families usually only hang out with other military families. People might respect us and be happy we do our job, but they don't want to socialize with us.

THE PERFORMER: It's sort of the way people feel about the cast of *Book of Mormon*.

THE SOLDIER: I don't suppose you'd sing something now?

THE PERFORMER: Here? In jail?

THE SOLDIER: Never mind. Don't worry about it.

THE PERFORMER: No. It's okay. I can sing something. Do you have a request?

THE SOLDIER: "Tomorrow."

THE PERFORMER: (*surprised*) From Annie?

THE SOLDIER: You got a problem with that?

THE PERFORMER: No, no.

THE PERFORMER takes a moment to prepare. He begins singing somewhat mechanically, without much heart, but as he gets into the song and realizes how appropriate the lyrics are to life during the pandemic, he becomes emotionally involved and ends up delivering a powerful, moving performance.

THE PERFORMER: (*singing "Tomorrow"*)

The sun'll come out

Tomorrow

Bet your bottom dollar

That tomorrow

There'll be sun!

Just thinkin' about

Tomorrow

Clears away the cobwebs

And the sorrow
'Til there's none!
When I'm stuck with a day
That's grey
And lonely
I just stick out my chin
And grin
And say
Oh!
The sun'll come out
Tomorrow
So ya gotta hang on
'Til tomorrow
Come what may
Tomorrow, tomorrow!
I love ya tomorrow!
You're always
A day
Away!

THE SOLDIER is overwhelmed.

THE SOLDIER: (*emotional*) You sure can sing. I've never heard anyone sing like that in real life. That was really something. (*regaining his gruff demeanor*) Here comes Officer Numb Nuts. You're getting out.

THE PERFORMER: It was nice talking to you. And . . . I hope this doesn't upset you but I'm going to say it because I mean it: thank you for your service.

THE SOLDIER: Yea, well. Thank you for yours.

THE PERFORMER exits. Lights fade everywhere except an overhead beam projector on THE SOLDIER. He whistles a few bars of "Tomorrow" as the entire stage goes to dark.

Curtain.

End of play.