

# **The Holocene Extinction**

by Daniel Irving Rattner

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**Characters**

Joan  
Joan  
Arthur  
Gloria  
Paul  
Georges Cuvier  
Translator  
Philip Larkin  
Male Doctor  
Female Doctor  
Ruth  
Lotta  
Shop Woman  
Rita Hayworth  
Jake  
Teacher  
The Last of the Dodo Birds  
Helen Burns

**Time**

10,000 BC – 2020 AD

**Setting**

Manhattan; Mauritius; memories—  
among others

### **Notes towards staging**

The play is written for two women and two men. One woman should play both Joans, and one man should play Paul. The remaining roles should be played by the other two actors. All four actors should be in their mid-30s.

Though they are played by the same actor, the Joans are assigned lines like they are different characters. Occasionally, then, you might see something like:

JOAN

Oh thank goodness! Oh thank goodness, Arthur...

JOAN

Was this all Joan wanted? Was she happy now?

or

JOAN (CONT'D)

Oh thank goodness! Oh thank goodness, Arthur...

JOAN

Was this all Joan wanted? Was she happy now?

Which Joan is speaking at a given moment is not marked, though in most cases it should be evident.

It could help an audience distinguish between the two Joans by having the actress wear the fur coat when she is portraying Older Joan—at least at first.

Not every entrance and exit of characters is specifically noted. If a character has lines, unless otherwise noted, that character should appear onstage to say those lines. Paul can often be onstage even where it is not explicitly stated—except for in scenes 14 and 16 and in scene 17, after his exit.

No specific set is required, though a college lecture hall would serve the function of the play well. The locations (Mauritius; Manhattan; memories) should be not only distinct spaces, whether distinguished by light or physical location on the stage, but also easily recognizable from one another so the audience can track where scenes are taking place.

1.

*JOAN steps into a pool of light. She looks out at the audience and smiles.*

JOAN

I was 12 the first time I saw someone die—the only time I saw someone die.

It was my grandmother. Joan. We had gone to visit her in the hospital. She was lying in her bed with tubes and wires... A blue itchy-looking gown... Fluorescent lights and yellow walls.

The whole afternoon I stood in the corners of the room while my mother tried to talk with Joan. I didn't want to—see her. But Joan, she saw me, and she beckoned me towards her. When I was next to her, she drew me down to her face and creaked open her mouth and whispered to me:

*JOAN moves her lips, but we can't make out the words.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

So I leaned in closer, and she tried again:

*JOAN mouths the words again, a faint whisper:  
"muhskisonfi."*

JOAN (CONT'D)

This yellow crust was forming at the corners of her mouth. I didn't know what to do. I knelt down to get closer to her, and I cupped my hand to my ear. She let out this wheezing sound as she opened her mouth again, and then she said: (slowly, deliberately) "My skin—is on fire"

*JOAN laughs.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I hate that I'm named after her.

## 2.

*A new pool of light comes up. JOAN steps into it. Behind her, a slide appears. It reads: "The Holocene Extinction"*

### JOAN

There have been five major mass extinctions in the earth's history. The first was nearly four hundred and fifty million years ago during the Ordovician Period. The fifth, and most recent, was at the end of the Cretaceous Period sixty-five million years ago: the extinction of the dinosaurs. We are now in the sixth.

In addition to these six major mass extinctions, there have been at least twenty other smaller mass extinctions. The difference between those minor extinctions and ones like this—the one we are currently living through at this moment, as we speak—is that in the case of major mass extinctions, all species, fit and unfit alike, are wiped out. Think of them as a cleaning of the slate and a starting over. Afterwards, the population of the earth is restarted. A new kind of creature takes over. The world is reborn—reincarnated.

The sixth extinction—the Holocene extinction—from the Greek words meaning “whole” and “new”—the “entirely recent” extinction began no more than fifteen thousand years ago. The current rate of extinction, accelerated in recent decades by climate change and human behavior, is estimated to be anywhere between two hundred and twenty thousand species a year. Even at the lower end of this spectrum, it would mean a rate of extinction ten times greater than that of any previous mass extinction and a thousand times greater than the normal background rate of extinction.

The modern actions that have exacerbated the rapidly rising rate of extinction—global warming, deforestation—are obvious, but what first set this extinction in motion, roughly around 10,000 BC, has been debated for some time: Was it natural climate change? A global hyper-disease? But for me, it's hard to ignore the fact that nearly twelve thousand years ago, as species around the world were going extinct, humans were first pushing out into the world. And as they immigrated and reached new lands, the local fauna in those areas began to die out. Rapidly.

When humans arrive in Australia from Southeast Asia, the indigenous giant animals—tortoises as big as cars, wombats the size of hippos, ten-foot tall kangaroos—disappear. When humans move into South America, crossing the Bering Bridge, the elephant-sized sloths and giant rhinos (toxodons) all die out. And when, eleven thousand years ago, people arrive in North America? The continent's largest animals—mastodons, mammoths, sabre-tooth tigers—begin to go extinct.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I mean... come on!

Now, extinction, as an idea, seems intuitive to us today, but it did not emerge as a scientific theory until the end of the 18th century. Many of the great thinkers of the time, from Thomas Jefferson to Carl Linneaus, disputed the very notion of it. After all, why would God create a species that was not fit to survive, to last? So, when the bones of mastodons, mammoths, and sabre-tooth tigers were found in the New World, they assumed those creatures must exist—roaming—out there—somewhere. And yet... as Georges Cuvier, the first naturalist to posit the theory of extinction, put it:

GEORGES CUVIER

Comment croire, après cela, que les immenses mastodontes, les gigantesques mégathériums, dont on a trouvé les os sous la terre dans les deux Amériques, vivent encore sur ce continent?

TRANSLATOR

(a second behind GEORGES)

How can one believe, after all this, that the immense mastodons, the gigantic megatheriums, whose bones have been found in the earth in the two Americas, still live on this continent?

JOAN

No, God created us—if He did create us—to die. Indeed, extinction is not a rare occurrence or strange thing. More than ninety-nine percent of the fifty billion species that have ever existed have gone extinct. We are the one percent. We amount to little more than a rounding error.

So my point is this: death is a perfectly normal experience. And one that is more present in the world now than it has been at essentially any other point in history. I'm not afraid of it. It seems silly to me to be afraid of something every single person before me has experienced. I am ready for it. I welcome it.

And now I have another extinction to study: My family's.

GEORGES CUVIER

Il est mon objet, dans l'ouvrage suivant, de se rendre sur un terrain qui a encore été peu exploré et de faire mon lecteur connaissance avec une espèce de Restes, qui, bien que absolument nécessaire pour comprendre l'histoire de la planète, ont été jusqu'à présent presque uniformément négligé.

TRANSLATOR

(a second behind GEORGES)

It is my object, in the following work, to travel over ground which has as yet been little explored and to make my reader acquainted with a species of Remains, which, though absolutely necessary for understanding the history of the globe, have been hitherto almost uniformly neglected.

JOAN

Yes. Thank you, Georges.

3.

*A new slide. A family tree. It is titled: "Death: A Family History"*

JOAN

My family tree. Most of this, frankly, is irrelevant, but if you'll notice the pink ribbons: My grandmother had breast cancer.

Her aunt, Phyllis, had breast cancer.

Her first cousin once-removed, Abby, had breast cancer.

My mother, Ruth, miraculously, was spared—though it's possible that that gene would have caught up with her if she had lived long enough.

And who knows how many of my other relatives, probably several going back generations.

And now me.

Joan the Second.

I hate that I'm named after her.

In theory, once a species begins to go extinct, there is nothing that can stop it. Now, it could take hundreds or thousands of years—many, many lifetimes—but once the process has begun, it is essentially irreversible. Taking out man-made causes, a species goes extinct when there is another better adapted, more highly evolved species to take its place. But evolution and adaptation—they're not learned behaviors. They're genetic, they're predestined. A fish can see that if its parents' scales had more closely resembled the surrounding rocks and sand the way that another fish's scales did, they might have lived. But that fish cannot learn from her parents' mistakes. She cannot change the color of her scales or tell her children to do so either. She is doomed to repeat their failures.

And I wonder if that's true of us as well. I don't know many people who are happier than their parents. And I know many who are as unhappy as their parents, and often in the same way.

PHILIP LARKIN

"They fuck you up your mom and dad..."

JOAN

Further, nothing suggests that people today are any happier than people were ten, fifty, a hundred—a thousand!—years ago.

PHILIP LARKIN

"Man hands on misery to man. It deepens like a coastal shelf."

## JOAN

Someone should tell Philip Larkin the coastal shelf is eroding...

So what, precisely, do our parents pass down to us? No, we can't change the color of our scales, but if we learned from earlier generations—not just what diseases or illnesses we were predisposed to, not just what foods to eat and what foods not to, not just what predators to avoid—but if we learned the real truths—if we—

What if I can learn from Joan—Joan the First?

I hate that I'm named after her.



### 3., a footnote.

JOAN

I should say—I should mention—that it is actually quite against Jewish tradition to name your children after a living relative. To do so is seen, at best, as disrespectful and, at worst, as wishing the older relative were dead.

My grandmother Joan never had much use for tradition. What did *they* know, after all, that she didn't? So, when I was born, she dared, goaded, taunted my mother into naming me after her.

At least that's how the story was always told to me... Of course it's possible it was my mother's idea to name me Joan and, years later, when I was older and asked about it, was too ashamed to admit it.

Or—no, maybe my mother *was* telling the truth. But maybe Joan asked me to be named after her not out of a proud or spiteful desire to flout centuries-old tradition but because, at that moment, she wished she were already dead.

What did I mean to my grandmother, as she looked at me in my mother's arms, newly born and anonymous? Joan showed such little interest in me after that—until the day she died. Or, actually, until the months before she died. Because, as it turned out, when Joan wrote her will, she left me exactly one item.

A fur coat that Arthur, her husband, my grandfather, gave her in 1949.

*ARTHUR appears onstage holding the coat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The coat is now in a storage unit in Queens. I've only worn it once. After the coat was sent to me, my mother put the box in the back of her closet and told me I would have to wait to wear it until I was older. But, the night of my thirteenth birthday—greedy for presents, I suppose—I crept out of bed and crawled to the back of my mother's closet and ripped open the box and pulled out the coat.

*ARTHUR mimes the actions JOAN describes.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I stuck my face in the fur—I was surprised at how prickly it was. I inhaled the scent so deeply I got light-headed. I slipped my arms into the sleeves. I went to stand—it was heavier than I expected. I put my hands in the pockets and, in the left, I found a picture of Joan and Arthur. Smiling. At the beach. His arm around her shoulders. His fingers brushing the strap of her bathing suit.

It's clear—maybe only to me, knowing where this moment sits in the sequence of their lives—that they are in the midst of falling for one another. There is, in the corners of their smiles, the promise of a beginning, the expectation of happiness, the giddy wish for first love.

On the back of the photo was written, in my grandmother's tight, cramped style:  
"Arthur and me. Rockaway Beach. 1945."  
Below that, in big looping cursive:  
"Photo courtesy of Gloria Cohen."  
(Gloria—Gloria was Arthur's sister).

They were together for just over fifty years, Joan and Arthur. They loved each other. When Arthur passed, Joan was in the hospital a week later. Her aortic valve had begun to leak. She died within days of a broken heart.

*JOAN looks at the picture.*

#### JOAN (CONT'D)

I didn't see them often as a child, but I certainly don't remember ever seeing them smiling like that when they were older. Well, Arthur, yes. Arthur, who always told the same joke about the Hasidic man and the parrot in Williamsburg. Arthur, who described fat people by the number of seats they would take up on a bus in a way that only he could make charming and not cruel. Arthur, who put whipped cream on graham crackers and slipped them to me under the table when no one was looking—*he* smiled like that when he was older. But Joan?

4.

JOAN

I say all this because in that moment on her deathbed; in that decision to leave me her coat, in that insistence that I be named after her, did Joan *recognize something in me?*

Did she believe I would be like her? Am I like her now? I don't know much about her beyond how my mother spoke of her and the stories Joan told—always the same ones—the few times I saw her. All I have of Joan is the coat. And these:

*JOAN takes out a box and places it on top of a table. She begins removing stacks of black journals.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Her diaries, which she left to my mother, and which my mother left to me.

I haven't read through them yet, but I've glanced at them. They seem to cover the years between when Joan left home at 18 and her diagnosis at 34. Updated with impressive frequency, they stop abruptly in 1961. And even though Joan would go on to get better, to live another almost forty years, she never went back to writing in her journals. What was it about the diagnosis that, even once the disease was far behind her, seems to have made Joan cut her life short?

And will that happen to me?

Well, Joan's understanding of cancer would have been very different from mine. After all, it was a death sentence back then. And Joan especially, a housewife in Queens, when Joan was diagnosed in the spring of 1961, what could she have known of cancer?

*Slides over the following sequence illustrate JOAN's lecture, beginning with one that reads: "Cancer: A History"*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Accounts of breast cancer go as far back as 3,000 BC, starting with the Egyptians. By 400 BC, Hippocrates has attributed cancer to an imbalance of the humor. Galen, writing 600 years later, thought cancer came from the accumulation of black bile in people's veins. Therefore, when he performed surgery, he let blood pour freely from the wounds. This idea lasted until it was challenged by physicians in the 17th century. In the early 18th century, an Italian doctor blamed a spate of breast cancer diagnoses in nuns on their virginity. It wasn't until the 1750s that surgical removal of the tumor was deemed the only proper treatment. This would then be developed, a hundred years later, as the radical mastectomy. Even then, some surgeons included removing a woman's ovaries

as part of the treatment. By 1961, when Joan was diagnosed, chemotherapy had been around for twenty years, though survival rates for cancer were still low and treatment was no guarantee of survival. And so Joan must have been confused and scared, since the science then fell so short of what we know today to be true. Though of course, at the time, they would have been as certain of their knowledge as we are of ours now... Still, Joan could only understand the disease with the little information she had in 1961, so when the doctor told Joan:

MALE DOCTOR

You have a disease, ma'am, in your breast.

JOAN

You can't exactly blame her if she asked something like:

JOAN

"I didn't breastfeed my daughter.  
Could it be her fault?  
Could it be because of my wasted milk?  
Could it have stayed and clotted and curdled inside of me and turned into this, this—  
tumor?"

MALE DOCTOR

We can't rule that out.

JOAN

And:

JOAN

"Will I have to get it—removed?"

*The MALE DOCTOR sighs, takes a cigarette out of a pack, and lights it. At the same time, a FEMALE DOCTOR appears and takes JOAN's hands in hers.*

FEMALE DOCTOR

Most likely not. We'll have to do another biopsy and see how far it's spread. But nowadays we tend to consider a full mastectomy a bit—overzealous.

MALE DOCTOR

(after a deep drag on his cigarette, while the other doctor is talking)  
Yes. And the left one too.

*Lights go out on the MALE DOCTOR.*

*JOAN turns and looks at the FEMALE DOCTOR. Lights go out on her too.*

*JOAN turns back to the audience.*

JOAN

Sorry I—

I've noticed lately how many sentences I start with "I."

I'm trying not to do that so much because I think it makes me seem self-absorbed.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

One should try not to do that so much because it might make one seem self-absorbed.

5.

JOAN

Could the diagnosis alone have done it? Could whatever misinformation the doctor may have fed Joan metastasized in her until she turned away from the world? Or was there something more—was the diagnosis merely a catalyst for reactants that had been established in the 34 years before then? Can the diaries tell me about *that* half of the chemical equation?

*JOAN holds up one of the diaries.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Whenever I read a book, I always read the last page first. I like knowing how it ends.

*JOAN flips open the diary and begins to read.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

“May 6, 1961.

I have hardly slept this week and eaten even less. I do little more than sit at the window in my bedroom and watch people and cars pass by. This morning, Arthur drove out to Long Island to get Ruth, who has been staying with his parents since I got the news from Dr. Bosch on Tuesday. I was so restless by midday that after my lunch I went to see Gloria—

Gloria, who has not called or visited once since Tuesday. I found her in her bathroom, dressing for the day even though it was already well into the afternoon. She sat there, fussing with her makeup throughout the entirety of my visit. She hardly noticed me when I came in. She was in one of her moods and when she saw me she said:”

*GLORIA appears, sitting, as if at a vanity.*

GLORIA

I know, Joan, I know we're not supposed to admit these things but I have these moments when I catch sight of myself in a mirror

Or a shop window

Or a spoon

And I don't recognize myself for how beautiful I am.

I think:

“God that woman's beautiful. Who is she?”

Do you ever do that?

JOAN

“I told her that I don't like looking at myself in the mirror.”

GLORIA

Silly. I mean: do you ever think I'm beautiful?

JOAN

"And when I told her how hurt I was that she had not come to see me since the news? I suppose I should not be surprised, but she had little more to offer than the hollow bromides I expect I shall come to hear endlessly in the coming weeks and months."

GLORIA

I haven't known what to say.

JOAN

"Though I only needed to hear *something!*"

GLORIA

I didn't want to intrude.

JOAN

"But a visit from my family—to know I was being thought of—could not have felt like an intrusion. She must know that."

GLORIA

"I'm sorry if I've let you down. But you'll get through this. You will. Arthur and Ruth will help. You'll all be fine."

JOAN

"How little she understands! I am alone in this. At any rate, Arthur and Ruth will be home in a few hours, and I shall go and do my best to savor these last few hours of peace."

*JOAN closes the diary. She looks at it: a strange, foreign, useless object.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And then that's it. So how did it start?

## 6.

*A slide appears on the back wall. The photo of JOAN and ARTHUR, with ARTHUR cropped out. A title underneath says: "Joan: A History."*

### JOAN

Joan was born in the fall of 1926: September 19, 1926. Late in the afternoon as the light was dying from the sky. 42 hours earlier and thirteen-hundred miles away, a hurricane had hit Miami, killing 373 people, injuring 6,000 more, incurring 1.32 billion dollars in damages and pushing the city into the Great Depression three years before the rest of the country.

I don't know if any of this matters—it certainly didn't to baby Joan mewling in the crib—but I think context is important.

I don't know much about her childhood. I imagine she kept diaries as a girl, but those seem to have vanished—perhaps in one of my great-grandmother's notorious cleaning fits. All I know about those early years are the stories Joan told of her youth—of Brandy Alexanders at hotel bars and of summer cottages; of fur coats and of houses overlooking the Hudson River. But there are also the facts: the Catholic school she attended; six people living in a three-room bungalow; foreclosures; and winter nights without heat. *This* part of the story was left out when my grandmother talked about her life, and so now, looking back, I have to fill in the gaps, the holes, the lacunae.

*JOAN picks up a diary. She cracks it open to the first page and reads to herself.*

### JOAN (CONT'D)

But this first diary—the first one spared my great-grandmother's OCD habits—begins in June 1944. That would have been right after Joan graduated high school, right when she moved to New York—crossing the river into Manhattan and never looking back:

“June 4, 1944. I have arrived in Manhattan! I walked all the way from Penn Station to the Barbizon, where I have arranged to stay. My room here has one bed, two nightstands, two chairs, a table, a sink with taps for hot *and* cold water, two mirrors, one full-length and one hung on my wall. The one on my wall has a long crack running through it, but it is still mostly functional. My closet has just enough room to hang five dresses and three coats, and I can fit all of my shoes along the floor. It is all pleasant enough, even though the room was very dirty when I first arrived and there is a strict ten p.m. curfew and they serve steamed cabbage with dinner most nights. I threw away the sheets they gave me and convinced the woman at the store down the street to give me a pair on lay away. There are five other girls on my floor: Left of me is Jane, who is from Long Island and works at Woolworths. On my right is Midge, who is training at the New York Public Library on 42nd and 5th. On the other side of Jane there is an Irish girl



named Patricia, though I have not actually met her as she spends most of her time with her nose between a book. Next to Midge is—”

*JOAN looks at the book in disbelief. She flips through a few more pages and begins to read:*

JOAN (CONT'D)

“October 3, 1944. There was a nasty chill in the air this morning on my walk to work. I don't know how I'll last as we get closer to the winter months. I'll need at least two new pairs of stockings. When I arrived at work this morning, Mrs. McLaren told me I had improved greatly in the last few weeks. I was glad to hear she's noticed I've gotten better, especially as Beth has been giving me extra hours of training at the call board. For lunch today—”

*JOAN slams the book shut and puts it down.*

*She picks up another diary and skims the first few pages. She stops flipping. She reads. She smiles. She flips a few more page and smiles some more. She goes back a few pages.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Here we go: It's December 1944. In Europe, Allied troops have been caught off guard during the Battle of the Bulge, and in New York:

“I met a young man named Arthur last Friday. He seemed boorish at first, but I have decided I find him charming. We spent almost every evening together this week. He has promised to take me to dinner with his family on Sunday—”

*She flips a few pages.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And then:

“It is all very strange but I suddenly feel as if the world and I have been made out of tissue paper. As I walked home the other night after dinner with Arthur, I passed a Christmas tree laid out on the sidewalk for the garbage man to collect, and I burst into tears.”

I can't imagine the Joan I knew bursting into tears at all, let alone at the sight of a Christmas tree—(I mean a *Christmas* tree? What could that possibly mean to her?)—laid out on the sidewalk. Joan, an imperious figure in that fur coat. That coat... Arthur had given Joan that coat.

*ARTHUR is behind JOAN, holding the fur coat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

He would come to give her so much...

*ARTHUR slips the coat onto JOAN's shoulders, and she turns around to face him—startled.*

JOAN  
(indicating the coat)

What's this?

ARTHUR

It's for you.

JOAN

No kidding.

ARTHUR

What do you want?  
I'll give it to you  
What do you want?  
It's yours for the getting  
What do you want?  
Just tell me

JOAN  
(now performing the actions herself)

I stuck my face in the fur – I was surprised at how prickly it was. I inhaled the scent so deeply I got light-headed. I slipped my arms into the sleeves. I went to stand—it was heavier than I expected. I put my hands in the pockets and, in the left I put a picture of us. Smiling. At the beach. His arm around my shoulders. His fingers brushing the – well, my chest.

On the back of the photo I wrote as neatly as I could:  
“Arthur and me. Rockaway Beach. 1945”

*JOAN takes off the coat and looks at it in her hands before putting it down.*

JOAN

How *had* they met? Joan and Arthur? And why doesn't she record *that* in the diary? Was it so memorable an event that she knew even at the time that she would never

forget it, and so there was no reason to write it down? Or, rather, did she worry words would only fail to capture the moment because its quotidian surface belied such indescribable depths?

I heard the story once. I remember something about: Egg rolls. Chinese lanterns. Sweet and sour sauce...

*JOAN is now standing next to a table with two chairs in a Chinese restaurant.*

*PAUL sweeps by and places a candle and a drink on the table, but JOAN doesn't notice him because at that moment:*

*ARTHUR storms past holding an egg roll.*

ARTHUR

Well FUCK you and the horse you rode in on!

JOAN

Of course it may all have been from a movie...

*ARTHUR takes a bite out of his egg roll. He turns around and sees JOAN. He brandishes the half-eaten egg roll at her.*

ARTHUR

Egg roll?

*JOAN looks around her. Is he talking to someone else?*

JOAN

No... Thank you.

ARTHUR

I apologize if I disturbed your meal.

JOAN

Not at all. I was just about to—

*JOAN stands. ARTHUR sits. And inserts the rest of the egg roll in his mouth.*

ARTHUR  
(chewing)

My uh—my whatever-you-call-it—my girlfriend just dumped me. I'm real beaten up about it.

*Beat.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You look like you just got dumped too.

JOAN

It's rude to talk with your mouth full.

ARTHUR

I'm real beaten up about... She was the girl— You ever have that? You ever meet the person you're gonna spend the rest of your life with, but it turns out they're gonna spend theirs with someone else, so (*he makes a popping noise with his mouth*)? I'm real beaten up about it.

JOAN

Are you... having a conversation with me?

ARTHUR

I'm trying. Sit. What are you drinking?

JOAN

Frozen daiquiri.

ARTHUR

No. No no no no no

JOAN

It's what my mother always orders—

ARTHUR

Exactly. It's a drink for—exactly!

JOAN

I don't like liquor: the taste. I don't much see the point in it.

ARTHUR

What do you like?

Chocolate... JOAN

Chocolate? ARTHUR

Chocolate. JOAN

Let me get you a Brandy Alexander. ARTHUR

I'm fine. Thank you. JOAN

Who dumped you? ARTHUR

*ARTHUR turns to look for a waiter while JOAN answers.*

Some... no one. It doesn't matter. JOAN

Stinks, doesn't it? ARTHUR

How do you know I got dumped? JOAN

Table for two. Candle. Nice dress. But you're alone. ARTHUR

How do you know I didn't do the dumping? JOAN

Your mascara is running. ARTHUR

Oh. JOAN

*She reaches up and touches the makeup under her eye. ARTHUR dips a napkin in a glass of water—*

ARTHUR

Here.

*—and begins wiping the streaked mascara off her face. As he does:*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Do you know what the sorority girls used to call me? In college?

JOAN

How could I possibly—

ARTHUR

You have to promise not to laugh.

JOAN

I don't promise.

ARTHUR

I'll tell you anyways:  
Kung Pao Cohen.

*JOAN laughs.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You wanna know why?

JOAN

I'm really not sure I do.

ARTHUR

I'll tell you anyways:  
Because I'm sweet and sour.

*JOAN laughs again.*

JOAN

That doesn't make any sense!

*ARTHUR pulls his hand away from her face.*

ARTHUR

Why not?

JOAN

Because Kung Pao Chicken isn't sweet and sour...

ARTHUR

Then what is?

JOAN

Sweet and sour chicken!

ARTHUR

They're the same thing!

JOAN

No they're not.

ARTHUR

How do you know?

JOAN

They have different names!

ARTHUR

Lightning bugs and fireflies have different names, but they're the same thing!

*JOAN can't figure out how to explain he's wrong. She gives up and laughs.*

*ARTHUR reaches forward and wipes off the last bit of makeup.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

But maybe they were just making fun of me.

*He sits back.*

JOAN

Thank you.

*In another part of the stage, a man enters in the dark and sits at a piano and begins playing and singing: "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"*





PAUL

*You know someone said that the world's a stage  
And each must play a part.  
Fate had me playing in love, with you as my sweetheart.  
Act One was when we met, I loved you at first glance...*

*ARTHUR watches JOAN, puzzled, impatient.*

ARTHUR

Arthur took Joan dancing afterwards.

*JOAN turns to ARTHUR, and they begin to  
dance. PAUL exits, but the music continues.*

JOAN

I remember hearing that. So close and so late into the night she swore she could feel the thick, coarse stubble growing on his face as they danced, cheek-to-cheek.

ARTHUR

She told him about growing up in New Jersey and about her childhood, the pain of which seemed to melt away in his arms.

JOAN

And he told her what the world would have in store for the two of them.

ARTHUR

They were engaged within the year.

JOAN

And married soon after.

ARTHUR

February 6, 1946.

JOAN

In a ceremony that those in attendance would describe, years later, in whispered conversations around the Thanksgiving table, as “creepy.”

*The music ends.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The wedding is exquisitely documented. Gloria took photographs—

*GLORIA appears, wielding a camera.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I saw them as a child once.

*ARTHUR comes up behind JOAN and kisses her on the neck. GLORIA holds up her camera. FLASH.*

*Suddenly, there is PAUL, standing behind GLORIA.*

PAUL

What would our wedding have been like?

*JOAN gasps. She pulls ARTHUR to face in the opposite direction, away from PAUL.*

*Pose. FLASH. PAUL is gone.*

*JOAN and ARTHUR stand next to each other, beaming.*

JOAN

The wedding took place in Arthur's parents' basement.

*JOAN and ARTHUR change poses. FLASH.*

*PAUL is there, in a different part of the stage.*

PAUL

You would have wanted us go down to City Hall.

*JOAN changes poses, again turning away from PAUL. FLASH. PAUL is gone.*

JOAN

Arthur wore his military uniform, from before the honorable discharge.

ARTHUR

Joan wore his mother's dress.

*Pose. FLASH. PAUL is there.*

PAUL

I wouldn't have made you wear my mother's dress.

*Pose. FLASH. PAUL is gone.*

JOAN

The faint sound of—

*FLASH. PAUL appears over GLORIA's shoulder.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The faint sound—

*FLASH. PAUL is gone.*

*Pose. FLASH. PAUL appears in a different part of the stage, behind JOAN. She whips around to look for him, but before she can find him—*

*FLASH. He's gone.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The faint—

*FLASH. PAUL reappears.*

*JOAN makes a violent gesture.*

***Blackout.***

**6. (cont'd)**

JOAN

The wedding is exquisitely documented. Gloria took photographs—

*GLORIA appears, wielding a camera.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I saw them as a child once.

*ARTHUR comes up behind JOAN and kisses her on the neck. GLORIA holds up her camera. FLASH.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The wedding took place in Arthur's parents' basement.

*JOAN and ARTHUR pose. FLASH.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Arthur wore his military uniform, from before the honorable discharge.

ARTHUR

Joan wore his mother's dress.

*Pose. FLASH.*

JOAN

The faint sound of the neighbors' dogs barking was heard throughout.

*Pose. FLASH! And the lights slowly fade out.*

7.

*Lights up. GLORIA and ARTHUR are gone. In their place is PAUL.*

Shit. JOAN

Are you avoiding me? PAUL

Yes. JOAN

Why? PAUL

Because I don't have any right to think about you as much as I do. JOAN

I like that you think about me. I like that you think things like: PAUL

“How are you?  
Are you being fed?  
Are you happy?  
Are you warm?” JOAN

I like that you wonder: PAUL

“Why suddenly after all this time I can't stop thinking about you” JOAN

Do you remember when it started? PAUL

Not exactly. One day you weren't there and the next you were... JOAN

Like summer PAUL

JOAN

Like the chicken pox.

*JOAN turns out to the audience. PAUL drifts offstage.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

We're in the present now. I don't know if you got that. Well, not exactly the present, but less of the past than we were in before. A distant present, a recent past. Paul is of the now, the here, the current moment. That was always one of his best qualities.

I met him on a sticky, sweaty late September day. One of those days where summer has reappeared out of nowhere, rearing its head in one last, dying gasp for immortality.

We met on the subway, the 1 train going downtown. I had seen him for months at that point during my commute. Nearly every morning, when I got on the train at 168th street, if I picked the right car, he would be there. Leaning against a pole.

*PAUL appears, leaning against a pole.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Reading a book.

*PAUL takes out a book: Jane Eyre.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I swear to God, a different one each day.

*Jane Eyre becomes Twelfth Night becomes Orlando.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I got off at 116th street. He got off, as it turned out, on 79th. For 52 blocks I watched him. After a few weeks, I starting making up things about him—stories and tidbits, based on whatever he was reading or wearing or anything else I could observe.

His bookmark, the week he was reading *Sons and Lovers*, was a schedule for Film Forum: he loved old movies. I noticed the soles of his sneakers looked slightly chewed: he had a dog. Maybe two. He had gone to adopt one, but saw two sharing a cage, huddled together in the corner and took them both home. One January, he wore the same pink sweater at least a dozen times: a Christmas present from his mother? He was her favorite, and probably his father's too. He had five or six siblings and was the youngest. The baby of the family. They're always the sweet ones.

He... captured me. What was it about him that made him stand out more than the other people I saw day-in and day-out on my commute? It was how expressive he was while he read. The way his eyes grew and narrowed as they scanned the page. The way a smile tickled the corners of his mouth. Sometimes, I swear to God, I even heard him gasp. He seemed good. I longed to be that good.

One morning, as I was trying to decide what could have been responsible for a large scar he had running from the base of his thumb down to his wrist, I didn't notice we had stopped at 116th street and as the doors shut—

*The noise of the doors shutting.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And the train began to pull away from the station—

*The sound of the train pulling away from the station.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The conductor made his announcement:

*Over the loudspeaker: "NEXT STOP, ONE HUNDRED AND TENTH STREET!"*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I looked up

*JOAN looks up, startled.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

and...

*PAUL leans forward, calmly.*

PAUL

(almost a whisper)

I think you missed your stop.

*JOAN smiles at PAUL. They linger. He goes back to his book. She turns back to the audience.*

JOAN

And that was how I met Paul.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I'm starting my sentences with "I" again.



8.

*Lights up. JOAN is alone on stage. She hesitates. Then starts.*

JOAN

Where were we?

*She crosses to the diaries and picks one up. She cracks it open and glances through it, chewing on her lip as she flips the pages but not lingering very long to read.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

They're married now—Joan and Arthur. They live in a tiny apartment in the Bronx with no heat. Arthur still has a year of law school left, and so Joan keeps her job as a switchboard operator during the days. Domestic bliss:

*ARTHUR enters, and JOAN crosses to him.*

JOAN

I put up new wallpaper in our bedroom. I hope you like it! It's blue stripes with a yellow trim and little roses in the corners. I think it looks lovely. I think it opens the whole room right up. And for the bathroom, I want to buy—

*ARTHUR takes JOAN in his arms and kisses the top of her forehead.*

ARTHUR

I'm sure it's perfect.

JOAN

And:

*They break apart, and Arthur sits at the table. He pulls a stack of papers and some open books out of his bag and stares at them, anxiously tugging at his hair.*

*JOAN comes up behind him and places her hands on his shoulders.*

JOAN

It's late...

Finals. ARTHUR

Can I help? JOAN

Not unless you know anything about torts. ARTHUR

*JOAN picks up one of the books and looks at it.*

Maybe we could talk about it—what you're learning—and I could help... JOAN

ARTHUR  
Joanie, I barely understand any of this (*gesturing at the books*). There's no point in letting it make both of us crazy.

I just want to be useful. JOAN

You're a doll. ARTHUR

*ARTHUR grabs JOAN by her behind and pulls her towards him.*

You're very, very lucky. JOAN

Don't I know it. ARTHUR

And: JOAN

*Lights shift. As ARTHUR gleefully sweeps the books off the table, JOAN places a plate of food in front of him.*

You made french fries? ARTHUR

JOAN  
(beaming)

They're frozen french fries! They just started selling them at Macy's. Isn't it something? Don't you feel like you're eating out at a restaurant?

*ARTHUR laughs and goes to kiss JOAN. She turns to the audience. He freezes, inches from her face.*

JOAN

And yet something is missing. After their marriage should have come children, but my mom isn't born for years. Arthur wanted a child—Joan says as much—but she seems ambivalent. No, a child of the depression, who saw her family's financial stability collapse, Joan would have craved comfort above all else—and a child would have threatened that. But, how had she avoided getting pregnant? Did she understand what it took to conceive? I mean, she knew what sex was, right? But did she and Arthur discuss it ever?

*ARTHUR unfreezes and pulls on a bathrobe.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

It's hard to imagine because how would he put it exactly?

ARTHUR

Come here  
Come to bed  
I've missed you all day

JOAN

Or the more direct approach:

ARTHUR

I want a son  
Or even a daughter  
But someone for us

JOAN

And if she ever told him, directly, "No"?

ARTHUR

It's not only your decision to make.

*PAUL appears.*

ARTHUR  
The first night we met  
while we were dancing you said...

PAUL  
Do you remember what you said to me  
when I asked you about having kids?

JOAN  
I don't remember what I said

ARTHUR  
You must

PAUL  
You must

JOAN  
I don't

ARTHUR  
You said—  
You wanted two—two boys

PAUL  
You said...  
Come on!

JOAN  
I said a lot of things.

ARTHUR  
You said...

PAUL  
You said...

JOAN  
Our kids...

PAUL  
Our kids...

JOAN  
would be totally fucked. They'd be black Jews. So many people would hate them!

*ARTHUR disappears.*

PAUL  
And I said: We should have a little lesbian. A little black lesbian Jew. I didn't realize at  
the time how carefully you avoided the answer because after that...

JOAN  
(with a laugh)

Oh right...

PAUL  
After that...

I had forgotten. JOAN

We got in a fight. PAUL

A big fight. JOAN

What was it about? PAUL

Who had it worse. JOAN

Right! Who had it worse— PAUL

Or no— *which* was worse JOAN

Slavery... PAUL

Or the Holocaust. JOAN

Right. PAUL

Were you offended? JOAN

No! PAUL

When I made that joke about people hating our kids? JOAN

Not really... PAUL

JOAN

I don't believe you. I was always so nervous—I just never wanted to cross a line. I never minded making jokes about myself but I didn't always know how you would—

PAUL

Is that why you—?  
Is that why things didn't—?

JOAN

No! Of course not!  
Did you think—it had anything to do with—*that*?  
It was just...  
Bad timing.  
The wrong timing.  
Unfortunate—timing.

PAUL

Sure. I got that.

JOAN

Did you?

PAUL

Sure

*JOAN laughs.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

What?

JOAN

You're a terrible liar!

*PAUL laughs too.*

PAUL

Maybe I've gotten better? How would you know?

*Beat.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

Are you happy to see me?

I feel guilty.  
I'm sorry for—  
I'm sorry I couldn't—

JOAN

*PAUL smiles.*

Shh....

PAUL

*He steps towards her.*

Paul...

JOAN

Do you want me to stop?

PAUL

*PAUL leans in to kiss her. JOAN doesn't move away.*

*He is inches away from her—*

***Blackout.***

**9.**

*Lights up. Joan is alone on stage.*

Paul?

JOAN

*Silence.*



10.

*ARTHUR appears behind JOAN, mouthing the next few lines as PAUL says them offstage so that PAUL's voice seems to come out of ARTHUR's body.*

ARTHUR

Come here  
Come to bed  
I've missed—

*JOAN whips around but sees it is only ARTHUR.*

JOAN

Joan and Arthur would of course eventually have a child—a daughter—my mother.

ARTHUR

Ruth, like from the Bible—it means “friend.”

JOAN

And if I don't know how the conversations between Joan and Arthur about having children began, I do know how they ended. Joan writes in her diary about the night she told Arthur she was pregnant:

JOAN

I came to your class today.

ARTHUR

Joanie...

JOAN

I came to see how you were doing— I came to see what your lectures were like—I came—

*ARTHUR drops his bags on the floor and goes to her.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I thought I must have gone to the wrong classroom. And so I went to the registrar. Imagine my surprise to learn that they were relieved—*relieved*—when I told them you had not, in fact, *died*.

ARTHUR

Law school... Joan... it's not for me.

For *you*? What about us? JOAN

We'll be fine. ARTHUR

We have no money and now— JOAN

I'll find something... ARTHUR

I'm pregnant. JOAN

Oh, Joanie... I'm so sorry. ARTHUR

*But then a grin creeps across his face, and he moves towards her, gets on his knees, and kisses her stomach.*

Joan was pregnant, but— JOAN

*JOAN frowns.*

JOAN (CONT'D)  
It's 1947. So not with Ruth, not with my mother.

*JOAN flips through the pages of the diary.*

JOAN (CONT'D)  
She miscarries. How awful to describe it this way but—a stroke of good luck? Joan doesn't seem distraught exactly. Her biggest concern, when Gloria takes her home from the doctor's office is:

What will I tell Arthur? JOAN

You'll tell him the truth. GLORIA

*JOAN shakes her head.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You'll tell him you're not pregnant anymore and he'll understand. You'll have other chances.

JOAN

Will I?

GLORIA

The doctor said you'd be able to.

*JOAN pauses. She looks back at the diary.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You'll tell him the truth.

*Beat. JOAN looks up at GLORIA. She looks back at the diary.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You'll tell him the truth.

*Beat. JOAN chews her lip. She closes the diary.*

*She turns to GLORIA. GLORIA links arms with her conspiratorially.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Well, not the *truth* exactly. But facts that are true. You went to the doctor. There was bleeding. You're not pregnant anymore. He'll understand. You'll have other chances.

*Beat.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You didn't have a choice.

JOAN

I couldn't have raised a child on our—I couldn't have.

*GLORIA takes JOAN's coat off.*

GLORIA

Come inside. I'll make you some tea.

*GLORIA exits.*

JOAN

(paging through the diary)

These months must have been fraught ones for them. Joan working and Arthur not— They only see each other at night, when Arthur crawls in bed next to her—his breath hot and ripe—and wraps his arms around her, and she says:

JOAN

Not yet, Arthur. Not until we have the money to pay for her.

ARTHUR

Or him...

JOAN

Their own private Cold War of 1947, built on evasion and competing desires. Eventually Arthur gets a job at a nearby paint factory. And so soon, there must be—yes, Joan must have known she was pregnant by February of 1948.

*JOAN flips through the pages.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She was.

ARTHUR

What will we name him?

JOAN

She doesn't miscarry this time.

ARTHUR

George?

JOAN

Arthur tells Joan that the job at the factory is only temporary.

ARTHUR

Ian?

JOAN

That soon he'll find something better.

ARTHUR

Aaron?

JOAN

And so he takes a later shift—working half as many hours, but keeping his days free to search for an alternative.

ARTHUR

Jacob?

JOAN

Joan has to keep her job as a dispatcher

ARTHUR

Nathan?

JOAN

And on weekends she clerks for the butcher down the street

ARTHUR

Isaac?

JOAN

Working right up until the day

ARTHUR

Ben?

JOAN

She gives birth.

ARTHUR

Ruth.

JOAN

September 15, 1948.

*JOAN cradles the baby, bundled in blankets, in her arms. ARTHUR walks over and tickles its nose.*

ARTHUR

Ruth Cohen.

*GLORIA enters.*

GLORIA

She's beautiful.

*ARTHUR disappears.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

I wish you could have named her after me.

*JOAN laughs.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Or at least something that started with a G. I'll call her Gail or—Gabby. My little Gabby.

*GLORIA looks up at JOAN.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Are you happy?

JOAN

Was she happy?

*GLORIA takes RUTH out of JOAN's arms and cradles her, playing with and cooing at her.*

GLORIA

How do we look together?

JOAN

Like a painting.

GLORIA

I'm worried she might have Arthur's chin.

JOAN

Oh, she's Arthur to the bone.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She doesn't like me.

GLORIA

Already?

JOAN

She practically clawed her way out. You've never heard such screaming.

GLORIA

Maybe she was just excited to meet you.

JOAN

(smiling)

Well, I was excited to meet her. I think it'll be nice, I suppose, to have a little friend. To keep me company during the days.

GLORIA

I'm not enough?

JOAN

You know what I mean: someone to grow up with.

GLORIA

Does she need anything?

JOAN

How do you mean?

GLORIA

Clothes or toys or—anything! I want to spoil her rotten.

*JOAN takes the baby out of GLORIA's hands.*

JOAN

No, Arthur's spent the weekend in the city getting everything we could possibly need.

GLORIA

(with a tinkling laugh)

I'll just have to wait until her birthday then.

*GLORIA kisses the baby and hands it back to JOAN. JOAN realizes there is something stuck underneath the blankets. It's a twenty-dollar bill.*

*JOAN stares at it in disbelief and then looks up at GLORIA. But she is gone.*

*JOAN turns to ARTHUR, who is now standing next to her. She brandishes the bill in his face.*

JOAN

I hate you telling people our business.

ARTHUR

She's family.

JOAN

I hate thinking Gloria feels sorry for us.

(snapping)

And it's not as if David makes so very much that she can be going around, doling out money whenever it pleases her.

ARTHUR

Joan...

JOAN

Just because she can't have children doesn't mean she should pity *me*.

*ARTHUR sighs and kisses JOAN on the top of her head.*

ARTHUR

She means well. She's our family.

*ARTHUR leaves.*

JOAN

And so whatever ambivalence Joan felt towards Ruth, there she was. And for one more generation at least, my family had staved off extinction.

*JOAN stares at the baby in her arms. She sets down on the table in front of her and slowly begins to peel away the layers of blankets, revealing:*



11.

*A pile of origami birds.*

JOAN

I've spent the last few years studying one endangered species in particular: the Mauritius white-eye.

*JOAN pulls the origami birds, which have been strung together, out of the pile of blankets and hangs them across the stage.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

They were so ubiquitous on the island that they had become a symbol of prosperity and good fortune. Into the 1990s, their population numbered in the hundreds of thousands. But by the start of the new millennium, they were nearly extinct. Local conservation efforts made no difference—the indigenous population was dying out, disappearing.

Specimens were shipped around the world to be studied and, at the very least, so that some members of the population could be preserved. Researchers in zoos and laboratories took in dozens of the birds, like they were refugees fleeing a war-torn country. So, even as their demise in their local habitat continued apace, the Mauritius white-eyes' reach extended across the planet.

*JOAN opens a few of the diaries on the table. Their pages have been replaced by collapsed origami birds. JOAN pulls strings of the birds out from those diaries and continues hanging them around the stage.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Until those birds too, the ones in zoos and labs in America and Europe also began to die off. Out of nowhere, they would stop eating. They would develop difficulty breathing. They seemed, if a bird can seem to be such a thing, depressed. And then they would die. Had they lost the will to live? Or was the hand of God itself reaching down and snuffing out each bird, one-by-one?

*JOAN runs her hand along the string, plucking off every couple birds as she goes and letting them fall to the ground.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

There is no other way to account for so specific and so universal an extinction.

It was decided I would go to Mauritius to see if I couldn't find there the origins of this sudden and strange extinction. I, and a few other colleagues from around the world, arrived on the island in December, the hottest month of the year. We set to work right away, tracking and labelling and sending away those lucky few who had managed to live. And as we searched for survivors, we would find the unlucky ones. Their broken little bodies littered the forest floor, like crumpled up pieces of paper.

*JOAN picks one of the birds off the floor and holds it in her hand.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

But we began to notice something on many of the dead birds: tiny, almost microscopic black marks that appeared around their beaks, like a tattoo drawn at the corners of its mouth.

*JOAN points the markings out on the bird in her hand.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Was this somehow connected to what killed them? Did it come from an illness, a virus the birds were contracting? We had tested for everything we could think of. And the isolated birds, the ones in zoos and labs back home—were they dying of the same thing? If so, how could they have contracted the same disease as their counterparts in the wild, thousands of miles away? Was it, then, was it something genetic? Something passed down, generation to generation?

12.

*PAUL emerges and picks up a few off the birds off the floor. He holds them out to JOAN. JOAN crosses to him tentatively.*

PAUL

You didn't think about me much while you were there.

JOAN

Does that make me cruel?

*PAUL shakes his head.*

PAUL

I wish I could forget people as easily as you can.

JOAN

That's not fair. I didn't *forget* you. But people grow apart. Things fade.

*JOAN takes the birds from PAUL and lays them out a table in front of her.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I never understood what you saw in me.

PAUL

I saw the world.

JOAN

(laughs)

The world. The world is too big. And I am too small. But you... you were just right.

PAUL

I wasn't perfect.

JOAN

You weren't?

*PAUL laughs and shakes his head.*

PAUL

No, but I'll let you remember me that way for a little while longer if that will help.

Maybe... JOAN

Maybe... PAUL

Maybe Maybe Maybe JOAN

*They sing the last few bars of "Maybe" by Janis Joplin, with Paul covering her final "ooo."*

*They laugh.*

Okay. What's next? PAUL

*JOAN cocks her head.*

With Joan and Arthur—with your grandparents... PAUL (CONT'D)

*JOAN smiles.*

I'm curious! PAUL (CONT'D)

You were never very interested in my research before. JOAN

Well, when it was birds and *science* and— PAUL

*JOAN shoves PAUL playfully. They laugh. And then, faintly at first, a baby starts crying.*

13.

*JOAN crosses to the table, picks up a new diary, cracks it open, and begins reading.*

JOAN

“January 10, 1949. So far, I much prefer Rego Park to the Bronx, and I think Arthur and Ruth are settling into the new home as well. It is still strange to remember that we are three now—not two. Any moment my mind begins to wander, I feel a jolt and remember I am responsible for Ruth’s well-being every second of every day.

Having Gloria down the street has helped. She keeps me company during Ruth’s naps and has shown me how to rock her to sleep and how to get her to take the bottle since I’ve had such difficulty feeding her myself.

But of course the biggest change has been in Arthur—

*ARTHUR appears, holding a fur coat.*

JOAN (CONT’D)

Arthur, who is all too aware he has three mouths to feed now, Arthur...”

*ARTHUR slips the coat onto JOAN’s shoulders, and she turns around to face him—startled.*

JOAN

(taking the coat off her shoulders)

What’s this?

ARTHUR

It’s for you.

JOAN

No kidding.

ARTHUR

I told you—the first night we met—I told you you needed a proper coat.

JOAN

Where did you get this?

ARTHUR

An old buddy from law school knows the manufacturer. I got it for a fraction of the cost.



It's yours for the getting  
What do you want?  
Just tell me.

*She pulls away, slipping out of the coat.  
ARTHUR presses it back into her hands.*

*JOAN hesitates and takes it up to her face.  
She inhales deeply. She giggles. He slips the  
coat on her and puts her arms through the  
sleeves.*

*JOAN turns to look at herself in a mirror,  
admiringly. ARTHUR comes behind her and  
looks at her looking at herself in the mirror.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Gloria thought you'd like it.

JOAN

This was her idea?

ARTHUR

She approved of it.

*ARTHUR kisses her on the cheek.*

*GLORIA appears as ARTHUR walks off. She  
laughs, claps her hands, and embraces JOAN.*

GLORIA  
(luxuriating in the fur)

My God – this coat!

*GLORIA breathes in the smell of the coat and  
then steps back.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Well well well.  
I need a cigarette.

*JOAN takes a pack of cigarettes out of her  
pocket and hands one to GLORIA. GLORIA  
steps back and looks at JOAN admiringly.*

JOAN

I can't believe you encouraged him.

*GLORIA shrugs.*

GLORIA

He wasn't really asking...

JOAN

What does he know about the fur coat business?

GLORIA

Oh, Arthur never lets ignorance or inexperience get in the way of a good idea. I'll never understand what people see in him.

*She makes brief eye contact with JOAN.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)  
(covering up)

Besides the obvious, of course!

(quickly)

Oh! I found this.

*She takes a photograph from her pocket and hands it to JOAN.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)  
(with a dismissive wave)

I've been meaning to give it to you for ages.

JOAN

It's lovely.

*JOAN sets the photograph on a table and starts writing on the back of it.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

It's from—

GLORIA

The day we went to Rockaway, yes. A few months before you and Arthur got married.

*GLORIA looks over JOAN's shoulder and frowns. When JOAN is finished, GLORIA takes*



*the pen out of her hand and writes something herself.*

JOAN

What are you—

*She picks the photo off the table and reads:*

JOAN (CONT'D)

“Photo courtesy of Gloria Cohen.”

GLORIA

I was there too, you’ll remember.

*JOAN smiles. She turns the photo around so it’s facing her again.*

JOAN

He’s so confident.

*GLORIA comes next to JOAN and places her arm around her shoulder, mimicking her brother’s pose.*

GLORIA

He’s never had any question his life would turn out exactly as he imagined. Or, if not that, in some way better.

JOAN

That optimism... why wasn’t *that* passed down to me? Did I get anything from Arthur?

PAUL

His daring?

*JOAN turns around, startled, trying to place PAUL’s voice.*

JOAN

What do you mean?

PAUL

Flying off to Mauritius?

That was different. That was—

JOAN

What?

PAUL

Work.

JOAN

You didn't have to go.

PAUL

No.

JOAN

*Beat.*

I'm sorry that I did—so suddenly.

JOAN (CONT'D)

*PAUL shrugs.*

Are you mad?

JOAN (CONT'D)

*Silence.*

Would you have preferred I quit my job?

JOAN (CONT'D)

*Silence.*

Gone door-to-door selling coats? While you stayed at home? Barefoot in the kitchen, rocking the baby to sleep? I can tell you it doesn't work out brilliantly at first...

JOAN (CONT'D)

(teasing)

*JOAN goes to a bassinette that's appeared in front of her.*

Or would I have been the one taking care of the baby?

JOAN (CONT'D)

*She picks up the crying baby and tries in vain to soothe it.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I would have been even more awkward with it than Joan was.

*With one arm she rocks the baby, with the other she reads from the diary, flipping pages occasionally:*

JOAN  
(singing)

*Hush, little baby, don't say a word.  
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird*

*ARTHUR comes up next to JOAN and RUTH, a fur coat slung on his arm. He kisses JOAN on the cheek and RUTH on her head.*

ARTHUR

Have a good day, girls.

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that mockingbird won't sing,  
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring*

*ARTHUR knocks on a door. It slams shut. He continues to smile.*

GLORIA

Who around here can even afford a fur coat?

*JOAN looks up from RUTH and gazes over at ARTHUR.*

ARTHUR

Plenty of people have the money. You just have to convince them to spend it.

*RUTH's cries get louder, and JOAN turns back to her.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that diamond ring turns brass,  
Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass*

*ARTHUR knocks on the door. It slams shut.*

GLORIA

What if you went into the city?

*JOAN's gaze stays on ARTHUR as she sings and as RUTH continues to cry.*

*A door slams shut.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that looking glass gets broke,  
Mama's gonna buy you a billy goat*

ARTHUR

It's not worth the time it would take.

*A door slams shut.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that billy goat won't pull,  
Mama's gonna buy you a cart and bull*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that cart and bull turn over,  
Mama's gonna buy you a dog named  
Rover*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that dog named Rover won't bark,  
Mama's gonna buy you a horse and cart*

JOAN (CONT'D)

*And if that horse and cart fall down,  
You'll still be the sweetest little girl in  
town.*

*In JOAN's arms, RUTH's cries have  
finally turned into a whimper.*

Who came up with that song?

Post-war consumerism at its finest.

That family should have been arrested for animal abuse...

GLORIA

What about taking them to the  
department stores instead of door-to-  
door?

ARTHUR

They won't sell to me.

GLORIA

They won't sell to you?

ARTHUR

Not once they find out my last name.

*GLORIA sighs. She walks past  
ARTHUR and tucks a bill into his shirt  
pocket as she goes.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

We'll have to get the factory to start  
cutting costs.

*A door slams shut.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

A new coat. Cheaper to make. Still  
something though, isn't it?

*ARTHUR whips out a new coat, fuller  
and plusher than the last.*

*A door slams shut.*

PAUL

JOAN

PAUL

*But JOAN is distracted, sitting on the floor now,  
reading the diary. PAUL sits next to her and*

*reads over her shoulder. JOAN looks at the baby in her arms.*

JOAN

Mom, did you know what Joan did next? You never told me—you were a baby at the time of course—a little more than a year old—so you wouldn't have known, but did they never tell you?

*JOAN stands, hands the baby to ARTHUR, and takes the coat from him.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

You used to tell me how Arthur would take you each day to the factory, the one his friend Jake ran, the one Arthur bought the coats from. He would put your bassinette on top of one of those giant, rumbling machines and describe in detail how the coats were made, letting the drone of his voice and the vibrating of the machines lull you to sleep.

*ARTHUR places RUTH in a bassinette and takes her to another part of the stage.*

ARTHUR

(quietly)

The pelts get sent to us from a guy up in Maine who traps and skins the animals. They're all dried out when they arrive, so we put them into those big baths over there where they're washed in all sorts of chemicals...

JOAN

But did you know that while he talked and you slept...

*JOAN puts on the coat. GLORIA enters and takes JOAN by the arm.*

GLORIA

The first thing you have to do is find somewhere outside of Queens to sell the coats.

JOAN

I'll take the train into Manhattan then. Get off at 59th and Lex and transfer uptown.

*The sound of a subway car, rocking back and forth, loudly rattling.*

ARTHUR

Between each bath, they have to go through this spinner here, which wrings out all the liquid. The last bath they go in, this one here, has tannins that turn the skin into leather. After that, the pelts get tossed in here with sawdust and minerals for an hour.

*The machines whir and spin, making loud rattling noises.*

GLORIA

You'll pop into one of those clothing shops on Madison Avenue.

JOAN

(drawing herself up)

I'll look like I belong if I carry myself the right way.

*JOAN brushes her hair. She takes out a compact and applies make-up as GLORIA smooths out JOAN's coat. JOAN straightens herself up and examines the audience haughtily.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I'll browse the coats in the store. A look of disappointment will cross my face.

GLORIA

The clerk in the store will approach you. She'll ask if she can help.

JOAN

And I'll say something like...

*JOAN hesitates.*

GLORIA

Oh, it will come to you in the moment—you'll be much cleverer about it than I would. You'll say something like:

JOAN

I'm looking for a coat like this one—in fact, this exact one. I was hoping to get one as a Christmas gift—

GLORIA  
(smiling)

For your sister-in-law.

JOAN

I'll show her the label.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Then, the top hair is scraped from the pelts to get to the downy undercoat and oil is rubbed into the leather to lubricate it. They're put into this last machine here and—see those blocks?—they kick the pelts so that the oil penetrates deep into the skin. Finally, the pelts are stretched and run through the hot press which gives them that sheen.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Now that the fur is ready, it's brought over here and sliced into even-sized chunks. Each pelt comes from a different mink, and so before they can be laid out onto the template for the coat, they have to be matched by color and texture.

*ARTHUR flips through the pelts, frowning as he tries to match them. This goes on for some time.*

*JOAN makes a show of opening her coat and showing off the label inside.*

GLORIA

She'll tell you they don't carry that manufacturer, and you'll say:

JOAN

How disappointing.

GLORIA

You'll mention:

JOAN

It's the finest coat I've ever owned.

GLORIA

You'll add:

JOAN

They're made in New York, you know.

GLORIA

And then you'll leave.

*JOAN and GLORIA fall on each other laughing.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You'll go to as many stores as you need to. We'll keep track of each one you visit, and we'll match them up with the orders that come in. We'll see how many Arthur gets, and we'll see how many of them are because of you.

JOAN

You think it'll work?

GLORIA

I do. You're going to be wonderful.

ARTHUR

Once the pelts are sorted, they get arranged onto the pattern for the coat and then they're let out—the skin side gets sliced, up to 125 times, and then resewn slightly lower so that the pelts are elongated and can cover more of the pattern. They're wetted once more and stretched out and then nailed to the template. As soon as they're dried, they're fluffed and the stitching is checked and you're left with:

*ARTHUR stares at JOAN in disbelief.*

ARTHUR

You did this? All these orders?

Gloria helped.

JOAN

*GLORIA appears off to the side, watching and smiling.*

*ARTHUR wraps JOAN in a bear hug.*

ARTHUR

You incredible, wonderful, strange, surprising creature.

*ARTHUR kisses JOAN and exits.*

GLORIA

I try not to make him feel too badly about it—my getting both the beauty and the brains in the family.

*JOAN chuckles as she turns to GLORIA.*

GLORIA

What?

JOAN

You two are so alike.

GLORIA

Charming?

JOAN

Self-absorbed.

GLORIA

Self-absorbed *and* charming.

JOAN

Yes... God, he's charming.

GLORIA

Not charming enough to sell coats, apparently.

JOAN

No, he was wrong about that. And if he was wrong about that—Gloria, think what else he's wrong about.



*JOAN pauses and looks at the diary in her hand. GLORIA exits.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

The department stores we could sell to... That Arnold Constable & Company store? The one on 40th and 5th? I pass by it every day. What if I stopped in—

*JOAN stands, still reading from the diary.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Go straight to the second floor. March right up to that counter.

*JOAN walks downstage.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And ring the bell.

*The noise of the bell.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I'd like to speak to your buyer please.

*The SHOP WOMAN appears, a crisp, cream, cotton cardigan; swept up blonde hair; stylish glasses. She looks at JOAN. JOAN matches her gaze and smiles broadly.*

*JOAN glances down at the diary. And her face falls.*

*She steps away from the SHOP WOMAN, who continues to stare where JOAN had just been.*

*JOAN turns to the audience, addressing the following lines to them.*

JOAN

Joan sets her coat on the counter and gives the speech she had prepared: the cost to manufacture, and the convenience of the factory just across the river, in Long Island City; how much they would sell it to the store for, and what Joan recommended the store charge their customers; Joan's weekly sales, and the demand she imagined for the coat.

And the woman smiled. She took off her glasses. She looked at the coat. She looked up

at Joan. She placed her hand on Joan's arm. She squeezed her wrist reassuringly. And she said:

SHOP WOMAN

Thank you but we prefer to sell genuine furs. It's quite convincingly dyed though. What is it? Squirrel?

*The SHOP WOMAN exits. JOAN stands there, stunned. PAUL approaches her.*

PAUL

Joan?

*JOAN doesn't look at him. Her face is flushed. Suddenly, she wheels around and:*

JOAN

You've made me into a liar.

ARTHUR

It's only lying if you know.

JOAN

They're *everywhere*. Spread out across the city like some sort of—venereal disease! Oh, I wish I could go and take every last one up. That's why they're so cheap?

*ARTHUR nods.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And everyone who—the other stores that did—they didn't know?

ARTHUR

You've been selling them for months, and you didn't even notice.

JOAN

You've *humiliated* me.

ARTHUR

*Humiliated?* Come off it. You're a saleswoman, Joan, not the goddamn Queen of Sheba.

JOAN

Well I won't sell them anymore.

What? ARTHUR

I won't, Arthur. JOAN

*Pause. When Arthur finally speaks his voice is low, rumbling.*

ARTHUR  
The last six months, I've let you swan around Manhattan—

JOAN  
"Swan"?

ARTHUR  
Ignore your daughter—

JOAN  
So that she has something to eat at night!

ARTHUR  
Get up to God-knows-what with God-knows-who to sell so many coats—

JOAN  
Arthur!

ARTHUR  
And now, with a year's worth of inventory to unload, you've suddenly decided it's beneath you? Look, if you want to still have a house that you can flit around in in your furs—

JOAN  
*Fake furs*

ARTHUR  
You're going to have keep selling them—fake or not—you selfish, spoiled brat.

*He shoves the coat into her hands.*

*JOAN stands there, stunned.*

JOAN  
I didn't—

He never—  
I never saw him lose his temper like that when I was a kid.

*She regains her composure.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

But he was right, wasn't he? She was ungrateful for all he'd done for them. She wanted a certain life, and he was trying to give it to her. They were trying—to survive.

PAUL

By deceiving other people.

JOAN

She didn't know.

PAUL

But he did.

*JOAN starts to say something, but stops herself. Instead she points at the diary, now in PAUL's hand.*

JOAN

What comes next?

PAUL

Nothing.

JOAN

Nothing?

*JOAN snatches the diary from him. She flips through the pages.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

There isn't an entry in here for months after...

*ARTHUR appears, staring straight ahead, stone-faced.*

JOAN

Arthur?

*He doesn't respond.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I don't understand why *you* should get to be mad at *me*. *You* lied to me. *You* humiliated me.

*ARTHUR walks slowly across the stage without acknowledging JOAN—*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Arthur?

*—and sits in a chair, still staring straight ahead, silent.*

JOAN

So that's where my mother gets it from.

PAUL

Not just your mother.

JOAN

What does that mean?

PAUL

Seems familiar is all.

JOAN

You mean me.

*PAUL gestures "Well—yeah..."*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I was never—

PAUL

Days spent completely silent, moping around the apartment, slamming—

JOAN

I never slammed!

PAUL

Slamming doors! Refusing to make eye contact with me, like a dog who'd had an accident in the house—

JOAN  
Please, pick a more insulting metaphor.

PAUL  
It was a simile actually.

JOAN  
Oh, fuck off

PAUL  
How about I just disappear on you? On a moment's notice after three years

JOAN  
I didn't have a choice!

PAUL  
You had nothing *but* choices!

JOAN  
You don't understand—  
There are things that are bigger than—  
It had nothing to do with you

PAUL  
That's my entire point!

JOAN  
Paul, please!  
I can't—  
I don't have time for this right now!

*PAUL disappears, with the noise of a door  
slamming.*

14.

*JOAN stands alone on stage. She notices ARTHUR is still there, sitting silently and staring ahead.*

*JOAN walks towards him. She circles him, examining him, like he's a statue in a museum.*

JOAN

How strange...

This isn't exactly how I remember you

"Papa"

But it's how you were the last time I saw you.

Do you remember?

*Lights shift, suggesting a home with two spaces—a living room and a kitchen.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

It was just a few weeks before you would die. And before Joan would too. We came to visit you. Mom and Joan were in the kitchen. They left me with you, Papa. The last time I had seen you, you were laughing and joking. Our one Thanksgiving together... You put whipped cream on graham crackers and slipped them to me under the table.

And today you were—now you were—silent. In your chair. Vacant.

I reached out a hand. I wanted to see if you'd react. I stroked your chin. I could feel the coarse stubble growing. Your mouth turned. Was it a smile? You looked at that moment like you must have looked as a child. Just two dots for eyes and a curved line for a mouth. And in the other room...

RUTH  
(exasperated)

Mother

*Pause, while RUTH listens to the other half of the conversation.*

RUTH (CON'D)

Mother!

*Pause.*

RUTH (CONT'D)

Would you please stop calling him “Joan’s father”?

*JOAN stands, turning away from ARTHUR and to face RUTH.*

JOAN

What else am I supposed to call him? I can’t call him your husband. Living in sin...

RUTH

Living in sin? You sound like a goddamn Catholic.

JOAN

Oh don’t swear at me. It’s such an ugly habit.

RUTH

Jason’s fine...

JOAN

And he’s still on his vacation?

RUTH

It’s not a vacation; it’s a sabbatical.

JOAN

Whatever he calls it, as long as he hasn’t lost his job.

RUTH

Of course he hasn’t—

JOAN

When your father—

RUTH

Yes, I know about Dad and the paint factory—

JOAN

And after that he worked every day of his life putting this family back together, just like my father did—working three jobs, all hours of the night to give me a kind of life- a certain kind of life. I hope you know how lucky you are that Jason can just take a vacation—

RUTH

A sabbatical.



JOAN  
(sighing)

A “sa-ba-ti-cal” whenever he feels like it.

RUTH

It’s to write his book.

JOAN

While you look after Joan?

RUTH

We—take turns...

JOAN

I thought the thing now was equal partnerships. Or do you have to be married for that to occur?

RUTH

I hate when you smile at me like that. It means you’re about to—

JOAN

I’m just remembering what a little radical you were in college. And yet: here you are in the kitchen with me, making food for your father and daughter

RUTH

Part of feminism is choice...

JOAN

Don’t fight with me, my love. I see you so rarely. I was only thinking: it’s funny how things work out. That’s all. Now, bring that quiche out to your father.

*RUTH enters the “living room” where ARTHUR is.*

RUTH

Dad?  
I brought some food.  
Dad, are you hungry?

*RUTH looks at JOAN with concern.*

JOAN

Oh, he’s fine. He just likes to escape sometimes.

*She combs his hair with her fingers.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

We have company, darling.

*ARTHUR doesn't move, but makes a sort of grunting noise. JOAN smooths out his shirt and generally fusses with him.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

You're all right.

*Her fingers brush his cheek.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

But you do need a shave, love of my life.  
We'll take care of it tomorrow.

*Turning sharply and barking.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Joan. Come help your grandmother bring out the tea.

JOAN

"Love of my life"

"Love"

That word does not appear with much frequency in Joan's diaries. I assumed it was there. Those early years, especially, in their tiny apartment in the Bronx—those first entries seemed so chipper and optimistic—but maybe:

*Lights shift to the Bronx apartment.*

JOAN

I put up new wallpaper in our bedroom – I hope you like it – it's blue stripes with a yellow trim and little roses in the corners. I think it looks lovely. I think it opens the whole room right up. And in the bathroom I added—

*ARTHUR peels JOAN's arms off of him.*

ARTHUR

(chilly)

I'm sure it's perfect.

And: JOAN

*They break apart and Arthur sits at the table. He pulls a stack of papers and some open books out of his bag and stares at them, anxiously tugging at his hair.*

*JOAN comes up behind him and places her hands on his shoulders.*

It's late... JOAN

Finals. ARTHUR

Can I help? JOAN

Not unless you know anything about torts. ARTHUR

*JOAN picks up one of the books and looks at it.*

Maybe we could talk about it—what you're learning—and I could help— JOAN

Joanie, I barely understand any of this (*gesturing at the books*). There's no point in letting it make both of us crazy. ARTHUR

I just want to be useful. JOAN

*ARTHUR slams a book shut.*

Enough! ARTHUR

*ARTHUR tosses the book. It just misses JOAN.*

You're very, very lucky.

JOAN

Don't I know it.

ARTHUR

And:

JOAN

*Lights shift. As ARTHUR sweeps the rest of the books off the table angrily, JOAN places a plate of food in front of him.*

You made french fries?

ARTHUR

JOAN  
(beaming)

They're frozen french fries! They just started selling them at Macy's. Isn't it something? Don't you feel like you're eating out at a restaurant?

*ARTHUR grimaces at the plate. And then freezes in place.*

JOAN  
Maybe if there was not love there at first, it was something Joan and Arthur saw the promise of in each other, something they thought they could grow into together, like a hand-me-down coat. Or maybe they slowly had to change the definition of that word—"love"—over time until it was something they had, in their own way.

So that's how they get from:

You selfish, spoiled brat.

ARTHUR

To:

JOAN

*ARTHUR sits, silent and staring off into space. JOAN strokes his cheek.*

Love of my life.

JOAN

JOAN

But what comes in between?  
What fills the hours?  
Did you forgive her?  
Or did she win you over?  
Please, tell me what comes next.

*ARTHUR is silent.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

No, your silence spreads. To my mother. To me. And to Joan and her journals. Like a disease, infecting us one-by-one...

*Behind JOAN, the birds begin to light up one-by-one.*

15.

*JOAN is in her lab on Mauritius. In front of her is a lab table with metal stools, a microscope, and bird specimens. JOAN goes towards the table and looks into the microscope.*

*LOTTA, JOAN's Finnish co-worker, enters. JOAN looks up and sees her.*

JOAN

Lotta! Come here.

*She beckons LOTTA over to the table.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I've checked fifteen of the birds so far. Each of them the same thing. Each of them:

*She steers LOTTA towards the microscope.  
LOTTA bends down to look into it.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

It's a *Candida* fungus. I'm not sure which one—I've sent it out to a few labs back in the States to see if they can identify it.

LOTTA

Okay?

*JOAN spreads out a series of photographs and x-rays on the table in front of LOTTA.*

JOAN

It was in each of them—each of the white-eyes I've looked at so far. It starts in their lower intestine and then—

LOTTA

Spreads to their lungs—

JOAN

Which is why they've all had trouble breathing. And those black marks around the beak—

LOTTA

Plaque, from the fungus as it made its way—

Exactly!

JOAN

Okay. Why now?

LOTTA

JOAN

I don't know. And how did birds ten thousand miles away die from the same thing?

LOTTA

Did they?

JOAN

I think so.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

We'll find out soon enough, anyways.

LOTTA

I have to get back to the house. Do you want to come with?

JOAN

No, I'm going to stay here and work.

LOTTA

You're sure?

*JOAN nods.*

*LOTTA leaves.*

*JOAN works alone.*

*Offstage a guitar begins to strum.*

*JOAN looks up. That song is familiar.*

*Someone starts singing "ooo."*

*JOAN is closer to remembering the song. And just as recognition dawns on her face:*

*Lights up on PAUL.*

PAUL  
(singing)

*Are you lone—*

*JOAN glares at him and immediately he stops.  
Lights go out on him and pop on:*

*ARTHUR, in another part of the stage, silent  
and stone-faced.*

Arthur?

JOAN

*She stares at him. He is silent. Then, the guitar  
strumming starts again, as do the “ooo”s as  
lights begin to fade up on Paul:*

*Are you lonesome tonight?*

PAUL

JOAN  
(speaking to ARTHUR, over PAUL)  
Please tell me: what happened next?

*Silence.*

Papa?

JOAN (CONT'D)

*Lights shift. JOAN is back on Mauritius. PAUL  
still playing continuously.*

*Do you miss me tonight?*

PAUL

Lotta, come here!

JOAN  
(desperately)

*JOAN looks towards where LOTTA should be  
arriving from—she doesn't appear.*



PAUL

*Are you sorry we drifted apart?*

*JOAN glares at him.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

*Does your memory stray to a brighter sunny day,  
When I kissed you and called you sweetheart?*

JOAN

Enough.

*PAUL stops playing.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

This is what I couldn't stand about you: your refusal to except any grievance as anything other than legitimate, as something that couldn't be waved off with a smile, or a song, or a joke. You never just said "I'm sorry."

PAUL

I'm sorry.

JOAN

I'm stuck.

PAUL

I'm sorry.

*JOAN shoots him a glare.*

JOAN

I don't know what comes next. The fight happens on March 19, 1951. And then there's nothing in the journal until December of that year:

*JOAN opens the diary and begins reading:*

JOAN (CONT'D)

"Arthur won't stop telling me how lucky he is. He dotes on me and takes care of Ruth without my even asking. Any moment I find myself standing alone in the house, suddenly I feel his arms wrapping around my waist. He was giddy over the sales at Arnold Constable and can't seem to help himself from buying whatever hat or dress he sees in a shop window on his way home—"

PAUL

Wait—Arnold Constable? The Department Store?

JOAN

(looking back at the diary)

How did that happen after all?

PAUL

Did Joan figure it out?

JOAN

Or did Arthur?

PAUL

If he had done it himself, he wouldn't have been so pleased with Joan.

JOAN

Then what made her go back to selling the coats? And how did she...

*PAUL looks offstage, and GLORIA enters from where PAUL was looking.*

JOAN

(to PAUL)

Gloria?

PAUL

She would have talked to someone about all this, and Gloria had already proven helpful...

*GLORIA sweeps into the center of the stage.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

I like her.

JOAN

I never really knew her.

PAUL

Really?

JOAN

I didn't exactly see very much of Joan and Arthur growing up. But even still, I think I only met Gloria once or twice. I suppose they all must have drifted apart after a while.

PAUL

She reminds me of one of those old actresses. A star, but one who quite never found her niche. Who played everything from femme fatales to ingénues, had a handful of hits, one signature role, the promise of which she never lived up to. The kind of actress that studio heads made directors give a song to in the movie in order to make her a little more marketable.

*GLORIA steps up to a microphone that has appeared.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

It never really made sense, the song. Always shoehorned in. But it was lovely all the same.

*GLORIA sings over JOAN and PAUL's lines immediately following.*

GLORIA as RITA HAYWORTH in *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI*

*Please don't kiss me  
But if you kiss me  
Don't take your lips away*

*Please don't hold me  
But if you hold me  
Don't take your arms away*

*Comes a change of weather  
Comes a change of heart  
And who knows when  
The rain will start*

PAUL

She was adored by many, but she was close to few. People were intimidated by her. She always felt just out of reach. She seemed to exist somewhere else. When she was with you, you imagined she had somewhere else better she could be but had, out of the generosity of her spirit, decided to spend the evening or afternoon or morning with you. She collected spoons of every city she went to, those little ones you can buy in airports or museum gift shops.

JOAN

No. Too tacky.

PAUL

Okay... Hmm. Did she collect anything?

JOAN

No, she—

PAUL

Remembered the little things. Easily. Knew tidbits about everyone and, even if you hadn't seen her in months, she would ask you about something you had mentioned in your last conversation with her.

JOAN

Maybe...

PAUL

She wrote great thank you notes and letters of condolences that made you cry.

JOAN

Yes.

PAUL

She always knew when to send flowers and what kind. When you thought of her, you thought of the sun shining on you. But when you were with her, it was different somehow. There was a cloud.

JOAN

There was a distance.

PAUL

She was cautious.

GLORIA

*So I beg you  
Please don't love me  
But if you love me  
Then don't take your lips  
Or your arms  
Or your love  
Away*

PAUL

But she and Joan... they talked.

JOAN

When?

PAUL

Joan wouldn't have gone to her right after the fight—she would have been too embarrassed. But a few weeks, or maybe a month afterwards...

*GLORIA sweeps away from the microphone and into JOAN's kitchen.*

GLORIA

I'm starving.

JOAN

The hens didn't feed you?

GLORIA

Too busy clucking away.

JOAN

About me?

GLORIA  
(teasing)

Don't be so self-absorbed.

JOAN

I know what they think of me: Mrs. Cohen, the *schmatta* merchant.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

But no more!

*GLORIA stares at JOAN.*

JOAN

I know Arthur told you.

GLORIA

Yes.

JOAN

And?

GLORIA

I have to love him, Joan; he's my brother. And so I've learned how, but...

JOAN

Oh, it's not Arthur, it's—I'm worried about Ruth. I'm worried that the stress of all this is...

GLORIA

What?

JOAN

Making her slow. Developmentally.

*GLORIA smiles.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I'm serious. I think she might be retarded.

*GLORIA laughs.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She doesn't talk, Gloria! All the other kids her age can and she just sits there, staring—

GLORIA

She's fine. She's what, two?

JOAN

Almost four...

*Beat.*

*Both women burst out laughing.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Your own niece!

GLORIA  
(shrugging)

Time... It means nothing to me. I couldn't tell you what day, what month, what year it is. I only notice the seasons.

*JOAN smiles and then begins to frown. She is holding back tears.*

GLORIA

Joan, darling, if you're so worried...

Joan, you know I won't think any less of you...

*GLORIA wraps her arms around JOAN, and JOAN buries her face in GLORIA's shoulder.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You've gotten a tear in your coat.

*PAUL, lingering and watching, now steps into the light again.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Let me...

*GLORIA sings quietly to herself ("Please don't kiss me...") as she peels JOAN's coat off and sets to work mending it.*

PAUL

Joan would fight for the family. She'd shown that already—going out into Manhattan selling the coats. She just needed that push, to do what it took.

JOAN

But the department store? How did she convince Arthur to make the coats out of genuine fur?

PAUL

Maybe she didn't.

*PAUL looks at GLORIA mending JOAN's coat.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

Arthur didn't seem like the type to be up for discussion.  
Maybe Joan had to get creative.  
Maybe Joan...

*PAUL and JOAN watch GLORIA as she sews.*

*Then: the noise of a factory whistle and the humming of the machines. JAKE, the owner, enters with a stack of boxes that he sets down. JOAN notices him and walks over.*

JOAN

(with forced cheer)

Well hello, Jake. Is Arthur around? I thought I'd surprise him for lunch.

JAKE

No, he's out on sales calls.

*PAUL is still watching GLORIA mending the coat.*

JOAN

Has he told you then?

JAKE

Has who told me what?

JOAN

Arthur. His brilliant idea—oh I should let him tell you, but it's so clever really...

*JOAN takes JAKE by the arm and talks with him animatedly, but quietly, so that we can't make out what she's saying.*

GLORIA

(as she sews)

Once sorted, the pelts are arranged onto the pattern for the coat and they're let out—the skin side gets sliced, up to 125 times, and then resewn slightly lower so that the pelts are elongated and can cover more of the pattern. But in the letting out process, pelts from other animals—squirrel, for instance—can be slipped in between those slits. Those other pelts are hidden within the top layer of fur—the mink, as the case may be—but they provide enough volume underneath that you'll need less mink. It's taxing, meticulous work, but if it's necessary...

*The noise of a shop bell. JOAN steps away from JAKE and is standing at the department store counter again. GLORIA picks up the coat she has been mending, walks over to JOAN with it, puts on the SHOP WOMAN's glasses, looks down at the coat in her hands, looks up at JOAN and says:*

SHOP WOMAN

They're stunning. We'll have an order in to you next week.

*SHOP WOMAN exits. JOAN turns around, beaming at:*

ARTHUR

I'm very, very lucky and don't I know it.

JOAN

You're speaking to me again?



*ARTHUR kisses JOAN.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Is this your way of saying thank you?

*He makes his way down her neck.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Is this your way of saying 'I love you, and I don't know what I'd do without you, and I'm sorry for not speaking to you for—'?

*He kisses her hard on the mouth. She breaks off and wraps her arms around him, clinging.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Oh thank goodness! Oh thank goodness, Arthur...

JOAN

Was this all Joan wanted? Was she happy now?

*ARTHUR walks offstage, and JOAN watches him go.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I found, in one of Joan's boxes—so unexpected, I assumed it was something of my mother's that had gotten mixed up with Joan's things—I found a small pink book: "Shakespeare on Love." It has his sonnets and lines and speeches from his plays. It seems so unlike Joan, but... maybe it was something she bought for herself—on a whim? Browsing a used bookstore, it called out to her from a shelf. She stroked its spine. She ran her fingers along the embossed lettering. She pried open its pages and smelled that deep musty smell. It was so little. It could be something just for her, something special, something secret.

Did she keep it in a drawer in the nightstand by her bed? Did she read it in the dim light while Arthur slept? Did she imagine him saying those words to her? Maybe Joan needed, even if it was only every once in a while, even if in only once in a blue moon, maybe Joan needed to hear the words, "I love you." Plainly, like that.

*ARTHUR comes out on stage and stands behind JOAN. He whispers in her ear:*

ARTHUR

I love you.

JOAN

Maybe she needed more.

*GLORIA comes out on stage and stands at the microphone.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Maybe she needed poetry. And art. And music.

GLORIA  
(singing)

*Blue moon...*

JOAN

To believe that she could be, that she was—

GLORIA

*You saw me standing alone...*

JOAN

*Worthy—*

*ARTHUR holds JOAN in his arms and sways to GLORIA's singing.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Of something more than physical affection and gifts.

GLORIA

*Without a dream in my heart...*

JOAN

Worthy of something elevated—

GLORIA

*Without a love of my own...*

JOAN

Able to inspire passion and greatness and something bigger than herself. Even if it was only every once in a while, even if in only once in a blue moon.

*GLORIA stops singing. She and ARTHUR exit.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

But no, she would never have that kind of love. She would never know what that felt like it. And that was a fact of her life now—something permanent.

But what had been so great about the women in Shakespeare's plays that they could inspire such passion? Viola was a liar. Juliet whined. Beatrice was difficult. Joan had tried, hadn't she? To be accommodating? To be polite? To be a good hostess? She had worked hard and provided for her family. What did Viola and Juliet and Beatrice have that she didn't?

PAUL

You cannot be loved if you yourself don't love. Viola *knew* what love was: "She sat like patience on a monument, Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?"

*A couch appears behind JOAN, and she sits.*

JOAN

This is your plan for class tomorrow?

*PAUL smiles lasciviously at JOAN:*

PAUL

*(as he crosses towards her)*

"We men may say more, swear more: but indeed Our shows are more than will; for still we prove Much in our vows, but little in our love."

*PAUL gets on top of JOAN, straddling her.*

JOAN

Paul...

*He goes to kiss her neck.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Paul... Paul. Stop. Paul! Let me just—the lights! Let me...

*The lights go out.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Okay. Now—

*JOAN lets out a surprised laugh.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

PAUL

Trying to count your eyelashes.

JOAN

It's dark.

PAUL

That's why I'm using my fingers.

JOAN

Paul!

PAUL

Shh shh shush

JOAN

(the following speech is overlapped with PAUL counting "one, two, three" etc.)

Paul, I-

I used to worry—

Ever since I was kid, really

I used to worry

that I couldn't

or wouldn't

be able to—

that I didn't have a capacity to—

love

but

Paul, I—

*PAUL stops counting.*

*Pause.*

*PAUL resumes counting.*

JOAN

Did you ever worry that?

*PAUL stops counting.*

What? PAUL

That you didn't have a capacity to love? JOAN

PAUL  
No.  
I knew I could love someone  
I wanted to  
I read about it  
I saw it around me  
I saw it exist for so many people but—  
But it was never something that was mine until:  
You, Joan.  
I never knew how much—  
Holding you in my arms—  
Did you know that sometimes I lie awake at night?  
and I watch the clock?  
I count the seconds as I hold you in my arms  
Each second that passes is more precious to me than the one before it  
Each second is one more second I can never have with you again  
I wish I could gather them all up  
all those seconds  
store them somewhere  
keep them in a drawer somewhere  
like so many paperclips  
to use again later  
whenever I wanted.  
I could spend a lifetime with you in my arms  
It feels like I have already  
I can't imagine ever wanting that to end

*Long pause.*

Sorry JOAN

Were you listening? PAUL

I'm sorry. JOAN

PAUL

Why?

JOAN

I don't know how to say back to you what you said to me.  
But I feel it  
Is that enough?

PAUL

Yes, Joan, yes  
I love you  
I love you Joanie  
I love love love love you

*Lights up on JOAN. She is alone on the couch.*

JOAN

I'm sorry. Where were we?

*JOAN stands and goes to make her way  
downstage, but before she can:*

*Lights fade to black. They come up again.  
JOAN sits on the couch reading papers. PAUL  
is on the other end, a book propped up like a  
tent on his chest. He starts to snore. After a  
moment, JOAN notices, leans over, and quietly  
picks up the book off his chest, dog-ears the  
page it was open to, sets the book down  
between them, and goes back to her papers—  
a smile playing across her lips.*

*Lights fade to black. They come up again.  
PAUL lies with his head in JOAN's lap. Their  
hands are intertwined.*

PAUL

What's, like, the biological—like the evolutionary reason for holding hands?

JOAN

Hmm... I think it probably releases oxytocin.

PAUL

What's that?

JOAN

It's the hormone that bonds people to each other.

*PAUL glances up at JOAN. He grips her hand in both of his. JOAN lets out a surprised laugh.*

JOAN

What are you doing?

PAUL

Bonding with you.

*Lights fade to black. They come up again. PAUL is sitting with the book propped on his chest as before, snoring slightly. JOAN notices, leans over, and quietly picks up the book off his chest, dog-ears the page it was open to—*

*Lights snap to black. They come up again. PAUL is standing behind the couch holding a towel. He has a goofy grin on his face.*

PAUL

My towel smells like you now.

JOAN

What?

PAUL

Smell it!

*He thrusts the towel into JOAN's face.*

JOAN

(through laughs)

I'm not smelling your towel!

*PAUL falls over the back of the couch, onto JOAN's lap.*

*Lights fade to black. They come up again. PAUL is sitting with the book propped on his chest as before, snoring slightly. JOAN notices,*

*leans over, and quietly picks up the book off his chest—*

*Lights fade to black.  
Lights snap on.*

*JOAN and PAUL stand at opposite ends of the coach. JOAN holds the handle of a suitcase.*

WHAT THE *FUCK* IS WRONG WITH—

PAUL

Please not this one!

JOAN  
(gasping)

*Lights snap to black. And then, in the darkness:*

Yes, Joan, yes  
I love you  
I love you Joanie  
I love love love love you

PAUL

*Lights come up. JOAN sits on the couch, alone, clutching a tape recorder in her hand.*

I love you I love you I love you

PAUL  
(on the tape recorder)

*JOAN glances around for PAUL but knows she won't find him. She closes her eyes.*

*The sound of running water; the sound of a watch ticking; the sound of JOAN counting ("one, two, three" etc.).*

Please not yet...

JOAN



LOTTA  
(offstage, calling)

Joan?

JOAN  
I wish you had been there, I wish you had—

LOTTA  
(offstage)

Jooaaaannn?  
Joan?

*The sounds stop.*

16.

*Lights shift to: JOAN's lab on Mauritius. JOAN goes and sits on one of the metal stools. She chews on her fingernails.*

*LOTTA enters.*

LOTTA

Here you are.

*JOAN doesn't respond. Her leg begins shaking up and down, making the whole table rattle.*

*LOTTA goes about looking at tags on the birds' feet and comparing them to notes on her clipboard. She moves systematically down the line. She watches JOAN out of one eye.*

LOTTA (CONT'D)

You seem tense.

JOAN

I am tense.

LOTTA

Guess it makes sense you'd seem that way then.

*The table rattles even louder.*

LOTTA (CONT'D)

Joan!

JOAN

The scientists back home—the ones I sent fungus to?—they exposed three birds to it, just as a test. Two of them died within a month. All the same symptoms as the birds here, except for the black markings—something in their diet on the island must mingle with the fungus to produce the plaque, but otherwise the diseases are identical.

LOTTA

Okay?

JOAN

But then birds the doctors *hadn't* intended to expose the fungus to contracted the disease and died as well. So maybe—it must be: the doctors spread it without meaning

to. And, Lotta—that would explain—wouldn't it?— how the white-eyes—ones all across the world—have died from the same disease at the same time: what if we've been spreading it? What if in our attempts to track and collect and then send the birds out to be saved, we only spread the disease further? It clung to us, it stuck to us— We don't even know if it began on Mauritius! We could've brought it here ourselves. We could have—

LOTTA

How will we know? If that's what happened?

JOAN

We'll have to go back and look at older specimens. In the States, they can test the birds that died years ago—the first ones who came to—see what caused it in them—see if we can trace the origins and—Oh god!

*LOTTA goes to JOAN and takes her hands and breathes deeply.*

LOTTA

Do you know what I do when I'm feeling stressed? I have a process.

JOAN

To relax?

LOTTA

Yes. A system.

JOAN

That doesn't sound relaxing.

LOTTA

I lie. Very still. And I count up to 100 and back to 0 until I've calmed down. Just count the seconds—back and forth. I don't even let myself move. Sometimes it helps if you imagine you're dead.

JOAN

This is relaxing for you?

LOTTA

Well, sometimes I'll do it while I'm drawing a hot bath so I feel the water creeping up my ankles.

*The sound of running water.*

LOTTA (CONT'D)

And I put my watch near my ear to help me keep the time.

*The sound of a watch ticking.*

LOTTA (CONT'D)

And I just count.

*LOTTA fades away.*

*JOAN is very still. She listens to the sound of running water and the watch ticking. She counts, whispering to herself. She doesn't get very far before she gives up.*

*She places her head in her hands and sighs.*

*Slowly she lets her hands make their way from her head to her shoulders to her—she stops at her breasts. She lingers on the right one. She feels something.*

*She hesitates.*

*She double-checks.*

*Her eyes pop open.*

FEMALE DOCTOR

You have a disease, ma'am, in your breast.

GEORGES CUVIER

(rapidly)

Comment croire, après cela, que les immenses mastodontes, les gigantesques mégathériums, dont on a trouvé les os sous la terre dans les deux Amériques, vivent encore sur ce continent?

LOTTA

Sometimes it helps if you imagine you're dead.

JOAN

My skin—is on fire!

***Blackout.***

17.

*Lights up. JOAN is staring at the audience. She straightens up, remembering where she is.*

JOAN

On my way to the airport the next day, to go back to the States, I stopped at our lab. We still hadn't gotten the results back about the fungus we were testing for in the older birds—Lotta promised she'd let me know as soon as she heard anything—but I wanted one last look. One of the specimens I had collected—one of the birds—was lying out on the table. I picked it up. I cradled its little body in my hand, and I tried to cry. I never can. Not even when I want to. I looked at its broken, bent body in my hand and I wanted to weep for it but: why should it matter to me—to anyone that it was dead?

PAUL

I wish I could have been there.

*JOAN sees him and throws her arms around him.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

I wish I could help now.

JOAN

You are!

PAUL

I want to take your mind off...

Tell me what comes next—tell me what happened next with your grandmother.

*JOAN shakes her head.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's 1952...

*JOAN shakes her head.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's 1953?

*JOAN laughs.*

JOAN

Oh, what does any of it matter now? It doesn't matter if I ever figure out what caused

the Mauritius white-eye to die out. It will still be dead. Any species I help save, it will only be a temporary solution. We can't slow down the rate at which we're dying, and once we're dead, it won't matter that we tried. None of it will matter, Paul, when—I don't know—when human-sized rats take over the world.

PAUL

Rats?

JOAN

It'll probably be rats—the species that'll survive all this. And they won't care about Georges Cuvier or Jean-Baptiste Lamarck or Charles freaking Darwin.

PAUL

Or Shakespeare or Charlotte Brontë or Philip Larkin

JOAN

Or Joan Cohen...

PAUL

Or you

JOAN

Or you

PAUL

Or us

*JOAN and PAUL hold each other and sway back and forth.*

JOAN

They danced. So close and so late into the night she swore she could feel the thick, coarse stubble growing on his face.

*They dance some more to whatever music is playing in their heads.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Please don't go again.

PAUL

I won't if you won't.

*They dance a little longer.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

Don't you want to know what happens next?

JOAN

I do know, basically. Her life goes on until it doesn't anymore.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I can't bear—

PAUL

What?

JOAN

How *ordinary* it all is. So little has happened in almost a decade. I've been skipping the boring parts, Paul. The endless descriptions of meals, doctors' appointments, renovations to the home; bridge games and trips to the supermarket; holidays, the successful ones and the disappointments; movies she saw; articles in magazines she read.

PAUL

Those were all her life too...

JOAN

Right, so of course after the diagnosis she stops writing in her journal, she stops caring about her life. Because she realizes: what could any of it mean? It wouldn't be a loss to the world if she were gone.

PAUL

That's an awful thought to have.

JOAN

I bet it's true.

PAUL

She has almost another decade before she's diagnosed. Anything could have happened.

JOAN

I bet nothing did.

PAUL

She could've changed drastically.

JOAN

I bet she didn't.

PAUL

You don't know though!

*JOAN walks over to the piles of diaries. She snatches one up, opens to a random page, and begins reading:*

JOAN

"August 9, 1953. I have been having trouble sleeping lately so I have taken to sleeping in the extra bed in Ruth's room so as not to disturb Arthur. I also have a cup each night of the herbal tea that Dr. Bosch gave me. I shall have to see if that helps."

*JOAN looks at PAUL, gloatingly.*

*She flips through the diary and finds another entry.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

"November 11, 1953. Apologies for the brief entries recently. I cut my finger the other day, and so it's been difficult to hold a pen."

*She tosses the diary on the table and picks up another one.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

"January 4, 1954. Arthur simply refuses to see it, but Jake's incompetence may run this business into the ground. Nearly a quarter of the coats we sold to Arnold Constable last month were sent back because the stitching was so poor. I have been telling Arthur and Jake for months they need to be more diligent about checking the work. I think I will have to get an office of my own at the factory."

*Between each of the following entries, JOAN flips a few pages in whatever diary she is holding or picks up a new diary completely. She goes through four or five of the diaries.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

"August 13, 1954. I finally got my pictures from our visit to Albany developed. They came out horrendously. Gloria says there are enough shadows on everyone's faces that the Museum of Modern Art would display the photos. She's promised to give me photography lessons this fall."



JOAN (CONT'D)

“March 2, 1955. We are due over at the Schwartzes tomorrow evening. I have been experimenting with different recipes this week because Sue seemed not to like the pie I brought last time. She kept insisting she did but couldn't have had more than three bites before she pushed it onto Donald's plate. As if he needed a second helping!”

“June 11, 1955. I was at the factory early on Thursday and I stood at the window in my office watching the trucks take the coats away, spreading them out across the city. I realized suddenly how strange it is that I will never know where any of those coats end up. Perhaps already I have seen someone wearing one, passed by her in the street, and not known it. I should tell Arthur to have them put a tiny logo on the sleeve or some such place.”

“September 28, 1955. I am the mother of a seven-year-old! It was still warm enough out last Sunday to have a party in the yard, which we did. Ruth doesn't talk much to others, but Gloria tells me she was shy at that age too—though I have hard time imagining it. Arthur insisted on giving Ruth a transistor radio and for the life of me I couldn't imagine why. But the two of them have been listening to it almost ceaselessly. They walk around the house with it pressed between their ears.”

*RUTH and ARTHUR appear, listening to Game 1 of the 1955 World Series.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

“February 2, 1956. I have finally found a store that can fix our vacuum cleaner, though I had to go all the way into Manhattan to do so. Between errands, I popped into a little coffee shop on Second. There was a woman sitting at the counter reading *Marjorie Morningstar*—the very book I was carrying in my purse! I suppose it is not odd we should be reading the same thing, but I was struck so suddenly with the impulse to go up to her, to ask her what page she was on and what she thought of it all. If I hadn't had to rush to get to the grocery store before it closed, I very well may have.”

*A woman sits on a stool reading Marjorie Morningstar.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

“July 15, 1956. Arthur took Ruth to the movies to see *The King and I* yesterday. I was meant to go until I remembered Ruth's tutu for her recital next week needed mending. I had to enlist Gloria's assistance as she's much better with such delicate fabrics than I am. Of course, once I told her where Ruth and Arthur were, she—

*GLORIA appears, holding a tutu like a dance partner and waltzing across the stage while singing “Shall We Dance.”*

JOAN (CONT'D)

David took her to see it with Yul Brynner in the city for her birthday years ago—I couldn't believe she remembered all the music!”

*JOAN smiles and puts down the diary to clap along with the “one, two, three”s as GLORIA sings them. PAUL picks up the diary. JOAN doesn't notice, watching transfixed as GLORIA dances across the stage. As soon as GLORIA disappears offstage, RUTH appears being chased by ARTHUR.*

PAUL

“October 4, 1956”

*RUTH falls. LIGHTS out on her.*

*JOAN gasps and runs toward the spot where RUTH fell.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

“October 5, 1956”

*LIGHTS up in a new spot. RUTH appears seated, her arm in a sling. A DOCTOR stands over her shoulder.*

DOCTOR

She should be fine in a few weeks.

PAUL

“April 19, 1957”

*JAKE walks up to JOAN.*

JAKE

Your husband's just signed the papers. The place is all yours.

*The sound of machines whirring, rattling, and humming.*

PAUL

“December 25, 1957”

*ARTHUR drags JOAN onstage. She is wrapping her coat tight around her.*

ARTHUR

Happy Hanukkah.

JOAN  
(her face falls)

Oh Arthur...

ARTHUR

It's Ford's newest model.

JOAN

We can afford it?

ARTHUR

They're calling it the Edsel. Isn't it a beaut?

*JOAN looks at it skeptically. ARTHUR rushes offstage, excitedly, towards the car.*

*As he goes, he passes by GLORIA who is walking slowly in the opposite direction, her neck craned back as she gazes towards the sky.*

PAUL

"February 1, 1958"

GLORIA  
(still looking up)

Explorer 1. What a perfect name.

*As GLORIA passes JOAN, JOAN follows behind her and, tilting her head back, follows the direction of GLORIA's gaze as well.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

We should have been explorers, Joan.

JOAN

Pioneer women out west you mean?

Exactly.

GLORIA

JOAN  
(with a laugh)

I'm not sure I would've been cut out for it, Gloria.

GLORIA

I'd've taken care of you.

*GLORIA wanders offstage.*

PAUL

"October 15, 1958"

*JOAN sits down at a desk that has appeared in front of her. She picks up a letter sitting in front of her, folds it, stuffs it in an envelope, licks the envelope shut, places a stamp on the envelope, and adds it to a pile of other envelopes. She picks up a blank piece of paper from a stack and begins writing a new letter.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

"March 1, 1959"

*RUTH walks onstage carrying a cake caddy, which she brings over to PAUL. When she passes JOAN, JOAN stands and follows behind her. RUTH hands the cake to PAUL.*

JOAN  
(to PAUL)

Welcome. This is my daughter Ruth. We brought you some—it's—a kind of housewarming gift—a— Welcome.

*JOAN smiles tightly at PAUL and walks away. RUTH lingers, staring at PAUL. JOAN gets a few steps before noticing. She turns back to RUTH:*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Come along, dear!

*JOAN turns back around, finding herself face-to-face with:*

PAUL

“June 20, 1959”

TEACHER

Now, it's important you don't make her feel ashamed for having to repeat the fourth grade. It's nothing to do with intelligence, it's just a matter of some children not maturing as fast as others.

PAUL

“May 6, 1960”

*GLORIA sits in a chair, crying. ARTHUR stands over her, a hand resting on GLORIA's shoulder, staring sadly off into space. JOAN approaches them, kneels down next to GLORIA, and rubs her back reassuringly.*

PAUL (CONT'D)

“November 24, 1960”

*In a different part of the stage, RUTH lies on the ground next to her transistor radio listening to Elvis Presley's version of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”*

*JOAN picks up a vacuum that has appeared, turns it on, and begins vacuuming the stage.*

ELVIS PRESLEY  
(from the radio)

*Then came Act Two  
You seemed to change and you acted strange  
And why I'll never know.  
Honey, you lied when you said you loved me  
And I had no cause to doubt you.  
But I'd rather go on hearing your lies  
Than go on living without you.*

*JOAN shuts off the vacuum.*

JOAN

Ruth? Is your room clean yet?

*RUTH rolls her eyes and stomps offstage. The song keeps playing.*

ELVIS PRESLEY

*Now the stage is bare and I'm standing there  
With emptiness all around  
And if you won't come back to me  
Then they can bring the curtain down.*

*JOAN, who had been waiting for a response, finally gives up and puts away the vacuum.*

PAUL

"January 1, 1961"

*JOAN turns around and sees ARTHUR standing there, holding an arm outstretched. She takes it, and the two of them begin dancing.*

ELVIS PRESLEY

*Is your heart filled with pain?  
Shall I come back again?  
Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?*

*The song ends and fades into "Auld Lang Syne."*

JOAN

What if we went away somewhere for New Year's next year? Paris or Miami or... oh anywhere! Wouldn't a trip be a kick?

ARTHUR

It would.

JOAN

Sue and Don loved Bermuda...

*PAUL taps ARTHUR's shoulder and cuts in.*

JOAN

We're near the end.

*PAUL nods.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

They wouldn't have been able to go on that trip. In just a few months...

*PAUL nods again.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Is that what made her bitter when she was old? And hopeless after the diagnosis? That her life had felt so long, yet contained so little—and now it was ending?

PAUL

So little? She had a family.

JOAN

A husband she barely saw and a daughter who disappointed her.

PAUL

She had a career.

JOAN

Born out of necessity, not one she chose...

PAUL

She had—

JOAN

Hardly any friends, any hobbies, any passion or interest outside of keeping her corner of the world tidy—

PAUL

Maybe there was more? Maybe not everything she felt or thought or did was written down—

JOAN

Then why write?!

PAUL

Joan...

JOAN

*Decades* of doing nothing except day-in and day-out resolving the tiny crises of her life...

PAUL

She doesn't sound that different from the rest of us!

JOAN

*I'm* not like that. I think beyond myself, beyond each day. I do more than just keep things neat.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I want to do more than just—survive, Paul.

PAUL

Is that all I wanted?

JOAN

Don't do that.

PAUL

I wake up. I go to work. I feed myself. I talk to the people I love. I'm content. Was that not enough for you?

JOAN

I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about Joan— Joan and how... easily her life can be summed up.

PAUL

Oh? How?

JOAN

"Inconsequential."

PAUL  
(mockingly)

Just one word?

JOAN

That's all most of us get: one word. If you're lucky, a sentence. If you're extraordinary, a paragraph.



PAUL  
(gesturing at the diaries)

A lot more than one word....

JOAN

A series of small, boring, unextraordinary moments. Her life is just moments—

PAUL

And each moment is a life!

JOAN

But if she had no perspective on it—on those moments, on her life—what could it mean the day she was diagnosed?

*PAUL goes to the table, picks up the last diary, and holds it out to JOAN.*

PAUL

Let's find out.

*JOAN hesitates before taking the diary from him.*

JOAN

Two entries left.

PAUL

What's first?

JOAN

The diagnosis.

*MALE DOCTOR appears looking at things on a clipboard, flipping pages and scribbling things down with his pen.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Spring.

*A tree full of leaves appears.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

1961.

*Waiting room music, period appropriate, plays faintly and lights come up on a doctor's chair. JOAN goes and sits in it. Lights come up on another chair next to her. PAUL crosses.*

PAUL

Mind if I join you?

*JOAN nods. PAUL takes his hand in hers.*

PAUL (CONT'D)  
(whispering)

It'll be okay.

*He kisses her, softly on the cheek.*

*JOAN nods. She can't speak; she looks like she is nauseous.*

*MALE DOCTOR finishes his work and crosses into the "waiting room."*

MALE DOCTOR

Mrs. Cohen?

*No response.*

MALE DOCTOR (CONT'D)

Joan?

*JOAN stands.*

MALE DOCTOR (CONT'D)

I can see you now.

*MALE DOCTOR crosses into the "examination room" and lights a cigarette. JOAN lingers and glances back at PAUL.*

PAUL

I'll be here when you're done. Right here.

*JOAN nods and crosses into the "examination room."*

MALE DOCTOR

Please have a seat.

*He pauses. He puts out his cigarette.*

MALE DOCTOR (CONT'D)

There's no good way to put this. The tests came back positive, as we expected. We found a tumor. Quite large. You have a disease, ma'am, in your breast.

*JOAN nods. After a moment, she speaks:*

JOAN

I didn't breastfeed my daughter.  
Could it be her fault?  
Could it be because of my wasted milk?  
Could it have stayed and clotted and curdled inside of me and turned into this, this—  
tumor?

MALE DOCTOR

We can't rule that out.

JOAN

Will I have to get it—removed?

*The MALE DOCTOR sighs, takes another cigarette out of a pack, and lights it.*

MALE DOCTOR

(after a deep drag on his cigarette, while the other doctor is talking)  
Yes. And the left one too. We'll want to schedule for you for the surgery as soon as you can come in. After that we'll start a treatment of chemo—

*MALE DOCTOR's voice becomes a ringing noise. JOAN steps out into the waiting room. The ringing noise stops. PAUL is gone.*

*ARTHUR appears stage left.*

ARTHUR

Joanie. You're home. Dr. Bosch just called.

JOAN

I wish you had been there.

ARTHUR

Oh Joanie...

JOAN

Did he tell you—did he tell you everything?

*ARTHUR nods.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I wish he had let me...

ARTHUR

I'm glad I knew before you got home.

JOAN

It would've have been nice to have someone there. To not have to have driven myself home.

ARTHUR

He thinks it's going to be okay. Modern medicine—they know how to treat things like this now. It's not like it was even five years ago. And whatever you need—whatever I can give you—the most expensive treatments—whatever I can give you, it's yours. We're going to be okay.

*JOAN throws herself into ARTHUR's arms.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You'll stay here and you'll grow old and we'll grow old together. I've already talked to David, and he'll be able to cover your job at the factory.

JOAN

I'll be back soon, I promise.

ARTHUR

No, he's going to take over permanently.

*JOAN looks horrified.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You'll need rest, Joan.

JOAN

Not for the rest of my life!

ARTHUR

I don't want you exhausted. And the chemicals in those baths? Who knows what kind of poison they give off? Besides, Ruth will want her mother around.

JOAN

Is that what you want from me? To sit and home and rot?

*ARTHUR tries to pull JOAN back towards him.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Arthur, don't!

*At that moment, GLORIA bursts into the room, in her robe and slippers, almost weeping.*

GLORIA

Oh my poor, dear Joan! I saw your car pull up—

Oh, Joan!

*JOAN whips around to ARTHUR.*

JOAN

You told her?

ARTHUR

Of course—

GLORIA

He called me—

ARTHUR

As soon as I talked to Dr. Bosch.

JOAN

It wasn't your news to tell!

GLORIA

What are we going to do?

ARTHUR

I can take care of you, Joan. I promise.

*JOAN stands there for a moment, staring at GLORIA and ARTHUR, who stare back at her. Finally, JOAN goes towards ARTHUR, who*

*takes her in his arms and kisses her on the top of the head.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Come lie down.

*JOAN and ARTHUR exit together. GLORIA leaves as well.*

PAUL

And that's it?

*JOAN nods.*

JOAN

That's it. Arthur cuts her off from the world, and she lets him. Maybe it's what she wanted, secretly? She could have, later—she could have found a way to go back to work at the factory, she could have found something else to do. But life loses its interest for her.

*JOAN puts down the diary.*

PAUL

And what's the second entry?

JOAN

The second...?

PAUL

The entry after the diagnosis.

*PAUL takes the diary out of JOAN's hands and reads through it as JOAN talks.*

JOAN

A chat with Gloria a few days later. She goes over to complain. She- she's already given up...

PAUL

So, there was the diagnosis itself:

*Lights up on MALE DOCTOR.*

MALE DOCTOR

You have a disease, ma'am, in your breast.

PAUL

And then there was:

*MALE DOCTOR is now ARTHUR.*

ARTHUR

Joanie. You're home. Dr. Bosch just called.

JOAN

Paul?

ARTHUR

Oh, Joanie...

JOAN

Stop it, Paul.

PAUL

I'm not doing anything.

*ARTHUR comes up to JOAN.*

ARTHUR

I'm glad I knew before you got home.

JOAN

This isn't right.

You don't know these—

*JOAN snaps towards ARTHUR, like two magnets attracted, and throws her arms around him.*

ARTHUR

You'll stay here and you'll grow old and we'll grow old together.

*She pulls away.*

JOAN

Permanently?

*ARTHUR grabs at her.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Arthur, don't!

*GLORIA enters, in her robe and slippers.*

JOAN

Paul, don't!

GLORIA

Oh my poor, dear Joan!

*GLORIA bursts into tears.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

What are we going to do?

JOAN

Stop! Paul!

*ARTHUR kisses JOAN on the top of the head and leads her offstage as she yells to PAUL.*

*GLORIA sits on a chair that PAUL has brought out for her, as if at a vanity.*

GLORIA

I know, Joan, I know we're not supposed to admit these things but I have these moments when I catch sight of myself in a mirror

Or a shop window

Or a spoon

And I don't recognize myself for how beautiful I am.

I think:

"God that woman's beautiful. Who is she?"

Do you ever do that?

*JOAN has reappeared, calmer, wearing the coat. PAUL is watching.*

JOAN

No. I don't like looking at myself in the mirror.



GLORIA  
Silly. I mean: do you ever think I'm beautiful?

JOAN  
Gloria!

GLORIA  
What?

JOAN  
I didn't come here to talk about—nonsense.

GLORIA  
Then what?

JOAN  
I haven't heard from you in days.

GLORIA  
I didn't know what to say.

JOAN  
You could have said anything. Or nothing. Just to see you—

GLORIA  
I didn't want to intrude.

JOAN  
A visit from my family—to know I'm being thought of—would not have felt like an intrusion. You *must* know that.

GLORIA  
I was there an hour after you found out. I was there in my robe and slippers, and you made me feel like an intrusion.

JOAN  
Please don't start a fight with me. I don't have the energy.

GLORIA  
(her voice rising)  
I haven't thought about anything else all week.

JOAN  
Gloria...

GLORIA

I've been beyond myself. I haven't eaten or slept or done anything but think about you and cry and think about you. I feel useless. I feel worthless. I feel sick—

JOAN

*You* feel sick? Do you have any idea what I'm going through?

*JOAN begins to cry. GLORIA pulls JOAN into an embrace and comforts her.*

GLORIA

(quietly, repeatedly)

I'm sorry. Shh... I'm sorry.

*JOAN picks her head up off GLORIA's shoulder, takes a tissue out of her pocket, and wipes her eyes. She turns to the mirror.*

JOAN

Arthur's asked me—or told me I'll no longer be needed at the factory.

GLORIA

Oh, he's a fool. Give him a few weeks or months and he'll realize—

JOAN

No, I won't fight him on it. It was never—well, this way I will have time to do what I want to be doing.

GLORIA

And what's that?

JOAN

I don't know. Not just yet. I can't think about anything else besides—

GLORIA

Which one is it?

JOAN

Which? Oh...

*She gestures to her right breast.*

*GLORIA rests her hand on JOAN's breast. JOAN begins to cry again.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Arthur thinks... after the other night... The thing is: Dr. Bosch says I'll need rest to get over this. Especially after the surgery next week. And Arthur thinks you might be too emotional for me to be around you right now.

GLORIA

And you agree with him?

JOAN

I do need to focus—on my health. And on Ruth and Arthur. How would they survive without me?

GLORIA

I was scared for you.

JOAN

You embarrassed yourself.

GLORIA

If Arthur is so worried about my being around you, why isn't he—

JOAN

I wanted to do it myself.

GLORIA

Bullshit.

*Pause.*

JOAN

I should go—home. Arthur and Ruth will be back soon and—

*JOAN begins to choke up again. She starts to leave.*

GLORIA

Joan?

JOAN

Yes, Gloria?

GLORIA

We can get through this.

JOAN

This is my sickness, not ours.  
This is my pain, not ours.  
This is my death, not ours.  
There is no we.

*GLORIA disappears.*

*JOAN and PAUL stare at each other, alone together onstage.*

JOAN

Leave.

PAUL

Joan!

*Lights go out on PAUL.*

*JOAN stands alone onstage. She takes in the solitude. She looks out at the audience.*

JOAN

And so Joan goes home. She went through chemotherapy—still a relatively new treatment, it would've made her sick beyond belief and delirious—but, eventually, Joan would get better. There would be doctor's appointments and check-ups, but the disease would never return, and so her life—its daily tasks and obligations—would resume, at its usual pace.

I can imagine her late at night, lying in bed, asking herself "Where did the years go?" as she tried to fall asleep. Alone with only Arthur and his snoring. She never could get used to it, a strange rhythmless cacophony that never quite settled into something resembling a pattern. Arthur's snoring was like him, I suppose: by turns gentle and prone to violent outbursts.

And so "Where did the years go?" she would ask herself as she lay awake at night. Some nights she wondered if she was unhappy. It was hard to tell. She had been lucky, in a sense. She had had sickness and suffering, but she had seen it through. She had a family, and she was comfortable. Still, she wondered if she had at some point wanted a different life than the one she had now. But her younger selves seemed so far away, she couldn't remember what they thought. They were strangers to her. She had read somewhere that every seven years all the cells in our bodies have been completely replaced by new ones. Every seven years we're new again: new skin, new organs, new

heart. She thought about all the deaths she had died, and it seemed like too many for one lifetime.

On the day she finally died for good did she know what was happening? Or did she think she would come out the other side new, reborn? When her skin felt like it was burning did she imagine the cells were simply regenerating themselves too rapidly—that she was shedding her old skin like a snake to emerge the other side, shiny like a new toy?

What had she wanted me to know? Why had she wanted me there at the moment she died? I was nothing more than a tiny stranger with sticky hands who had invaded her room. But she gave me her coat. When she died was she hoping to be reborn inside of me? To shed her old skin and slip into mine? These are things out of a story but they're the things that I lie awake at night thinking even if there's no one snoring next to me.

Paul didn't snore did he? Not once. When he slept, he didn't move. He didn't toss or turn or budge an inch. He simply closed his eyes and, for eight hours, died. No sign of life.

*A spotlight begins to come up somewhere onstage.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

No! why—whywhywhy—must all my thoughts come back to you?

I'm not so dense as to miss that a part of me is still in love with you.

“A part of me is still in love with you”

A “part” of me

Which part?

What an odd phrase.

What corner of my heart

Or mind

Still loves you?

Or is it—that love—is it located somewhere else?

In a part of my body?

An arm?

A leg?

A breast?

Where are you hiding?

Which part of you is a little traitor?

*She looks down her arm as if waiting for the traitor to reveal itself. She studies her hand and sees her pinky. She holds it up. She grins.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Is it you? Is it you, you little fucker?  
You know I could cut you right off.

*She stares at her pinky for a moment.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

It strikes me as odd that anyone can actually believe the human race is capable of change. Can anyone actually believe we are somehow closer to perfection, closer to God? Every generation a new illness, a new group of people to be oppressed emerges as if from some primordial swamp almost at the moment we've found the cure for a different illness or stopped hating a different group of people. Human existence is one giant game of whack-a-mole. Cure polio? Fine! Here's AIDS. Stop a genocide in Europe? Okay, time for Africa to get one.

And I'm talking about 100 years. .00000002% of the world. Or even just counting the time since the beginning of civilization: .002%. And I get what? 80 years? Maybe 90? Maybe 40... We each only get our .001%. It's why we cling to whatever happiness or whatever pain comes our way. It's we fall in love and why we fight. So that we can say: no one has ever been so happy as me, no one has ever been so sad; so in love, so tortured. Only I have experienced life as it should have been and all existence before and after mine is utterly negated. Only I have made use of my .001%. Only I mattered. We are so, so brief, and we matter so little. And what am I supposed to do with all this nothing?

What will happen to me when I die? Will I know when it happens? Will I just slip into nothingness like an unmoored boat drifting out to sea? Or will I be too much nothingness to know that I am nothingness? What will happen to me when I die, and does that matter even a little bit?

When my father died, that was the end of the line, the end of the name. He had no sons. I am all the daughters of my father's house and all the brothers too. But still there was me—in the corners. The last of the dodo birds.

*THE LAST OF THE DODO BIRDS enters.*

THE LAST OF THE DODO BIRDS

That's an easy metaphor, isn't it?

*TLOTDB takes out a cigarette and lights it. She inhales and blows out the smoke.*

TLOTDB (CONT'D)

I'm really sick of people... *invoking* me.

JOAN

Holy shit.

*TLOTDB cocks her head.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

You're beautiful...

TLOTDB

Thank you. It's always the tone of surprise I appreciate most.

JOAN

I'm sorry but—

TLOTDB

I know, Joan, I know we're not supposed to admit these things but I had these moments when I caught sight of myself  
And I didn't recognize myself for how beautiful I was.

JOAN

The paintings of you, the drawings...

TLOTDB

Never trust art to depict the truth.

JOAN

But then—what *did* happen to you?

TLOTDB

It's so tiresome that people only care about the way I died—the moment, the location, 17th century? 18th? On the beach? In a cave? Eaten by a rat? Or by a hungry sailor? Is that all that matters? How it ends?

JOAN

I would hope not...

TLOTDB

And as if we were the only species to go extinct. I mean, we lasted for millions of years—longer than humans have been on this planet. Do you know how many species have gone extinct in the last 500 years?

JOAN

130,000

Oh. That's... right. TLOTDB

I study extinctions. That's what I do. JOAN

Recent extinctions? TLOTDB

If you consider 10,000 BC recent. JOAN

I do. TLOTDB

Me too. JOAN

*Beat.*

How... JOAN (CONT'D)  
How did you die?

Breast cancer. TLOTDB

That's not— JOAN

TLOTDB  
I was eaten by a sailor in a cave. Just like they say. It was pouring out, and I had gone in there to get out of the rain. I heard him before I saw him—he was shivering, and his teeth were chattering so loudly that the sound echoed and bounced off the walls.

And then, there he was: huddled in a corner. Gaunt. Pale. Starving—you could tell just by looking at him. The light in his eyes had gone dim. He was a pile of limbs and bones loosely covered with skin. He was so contorted and strangely configured and yet, when he turned and looked at me... the way his neck curved; the jut of his chin; his skin, so pale and white it seemed to glow against the black rock behind him... he was beautiful.

And so I went towards him, like a moth to a flame. I knew what he wanted—I knew what would happen. And yet, in that moment, it seemed like the least I could do for him. He looked at me with such longing, such hope, who was I to deny that?



JOAN  
Did you know you were the last of your race?

TLOTDB  
I did.

JOAN  
Were you lonely?

TLOTDB  
I was.

*Beat.*

TLOTDB (CONT'D)  
I bet he died in that cave anyways.

JOAN  
Then... do you regret it?

TLOTDB  
I can't change what's done.

JOAN  
No, but you...

TLOTDB  
I made my choice.  
I made my choices.

I made a million little choices that brought me to that cave that day. And I made one big choice that brought me six feet closer to that man, starving, shivering in the corner. So I died maybe a little before my time? At least I can be proud of how it happened.

JOAN  
Is death—  
Does it—  
What—

*JOAN begins to tear up.*

TLOTDB  
Oh, you poor thing.

*TLOTDB wraps JOAN in her wings.*

JOAN  
I'm so scared—  
I didn't think I was but—  
I am such a coward.

TLOTDB  
You should be.

JOAN  
What?

TLOTDB  
Scared.

JOAN  
Does it hurt?!

TLOTDB  
Not unless you get eaten.

JOAN  
But then—

TLOTDB  
No, I meant: You should be scared. Death is terrifying. It's awfully permanent.

JOAN  
There is so much—so much I don't know.  
So much that I want to have done before I die.  
So—

TLOTDB  
None of that will matter very much once you're dead, will it, dear?

*TLOTDB wipes away the tears from JOAN  
face.*

JOAN  
I have so many questions for you.

TLOTDB  
I have to go.

JOAN  
Please!

TLOTDB  
One more.

JOAN  
What did you want when you died?

TLOTDB  
I wanted to be remembered.

JOAN  
You were...  
*TLOTDB shakes her head.*

TLOTDB  
I wanted to be made into a constellation. I wanted to be put into the stars like Andromeda was.

JOAN  
How could I have been so wrong about you? You're beautiful.

*TLOTDB smiles and stands. She straightens up and shakes out her hair. A few feathers drift to the ground.*

TLOTDB  
Shit. My feathers are falling out. Fucking chemo.

*TLOTDB exits, molting.*

JOAN  
What can we know of death?

I have trouble imaging Joan knowing anything about death, despite her brush with it. I have trouble imagining her sitting next to Arthur the night he died or, more likely, standing over him, looking at his newly-vacant body and appreciating the moment. I have trouble imagining her *not* making some comment or snapping at an orderly.

But no I've been—I'm being—too hard on Joan. Maybe she was more beautiful than the paintings suggest. Life didn't treat her the way it should. It's not that she was so very unhappy. She knew, after all, that every life is pockmarked with regrets. She wasn't special, and so as if to prove this to herself, she picked apart at the lives of others like a

carrion bird at a carcass. It was not out of jealousy or small meanness, but only to reassure herself that she was not so badly off. To convince herself that true happiness was unattainable, that true love was a myth. Everyone compromised, and everyone lived with it... for as long as they could.

Still, there was in her a capacity to love that had never been realized, that had never had the use to be weaponized. And it isn't fair. She deserved to grow plump in her old age. Instead, she stayed small and brittle to the end.

And so in that moment—of Arthur's death—as she stood over his lifeless body—Joan felt only one thing: release. It was as if a weight she didn't know existed—or had long since gotten used to—was at once lifted from her shoulders. She felt lighter.

Arthur's machine beeped.

*A beeping noise, quiet and regular.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She heard the nurses coming down the hall.

*Footsteps. JOAN turns to look over her shoulder.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She stepped away from him.

*JOAN takes two steps away from ARTHUR. The lights on his bed fade out.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

She put on her coat.

*JOAN takes her coat off the chair and puts it on. The lights on the chair fade out.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

And she left.

*JOAN takes two more steps downstage. The lights on the hospital room fade out.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

As she stepped onto the shiny pavement she wondered where she would go now—what she would be. She knew it was perfectly ordinary, of course, to reach the end of

your life and have regrets. Yet, for so long she had convinced herself that she had made no huge mistakes—that her unhappiness was the fault of several small and unrecognizable miscalculations along the way as if she were a boat that had not been pushed off course by a large gust of wind but had slowly, over time, drifted from its target as it tacked upwind, zigging and zagging until it had zagged more than it had zigged.

But where—now—that she could—do—where—now—would she go?

*Lights change. JOAN has stepped into a new room. GLORIA is there. She is folding sweaters and shirts from a laundry basket and placing them delicately in a box. There are several other boxes around her as well. For a beat JOAN looks surprised to see GLORIA. Then, she realizes where she is.*

JOAN

Thank you—for helping pack Arthur's things.

GLORIA

Of course.

*Beat.*

JOAN

(suddenly, effusively)

I'm so sorry!

GLORIA

He was your husband.

JOAN

But he was your brother.

GLORIA

Yes.

JOAN

It's nice to see you. It's been so—

GLORIA

Yes.

*JOAN crosses to the laundry basket, folds a sweater, and places it in the box.*

JOAN

I feel so very all-alone now. Isn't that strange?

GLORIA

You have Ruth and Joan. You have—

JOAN

Stuff. I have all these things. Mine and Arthur's. And regrets. Those too, I suppose.

GLORIA

Everyone has regrets.

JOAN

It doesn't seem possible but I don't think Arthur did... Can you imagine that? To reach the end of your life and have no regrets?

*GLORIA stops folding the clothes.*

GLORIA

What do you regret?

JOAN

I don't want to just sit around waiting to die, Gloria.

*GLORIA resumes folding.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Is that what my life will become now? Waking up each morning to wonder: will this be the last sunrise I see? And at night, the last sunset?

I don't mean to think like this, but it's the only thing that breaks up the routine—that makes each day special. When I come home, before I go inside, I think will this be the last time I feel the sun on my skin? And I linger on my doorstep. When I eat dinner every night, I think will this be the last time food passes between my lips? And I chew longer. Every little thing I do: Will this be the last time I tie my shoes? Look at a painting? Brush my teeth? Read a book? Go to the bathroom? Put on my make-up, carefully, slowly, because will this be the last time I see my reflection?

A never-ending series of rituals all counting down to zero, to nothingness.

I don't hope for anything, yet I am not at peace. I don't wish for anything, yet I feel empty. I am resigned, yet I am not ready to go.

GLORIA

This talk is so morbid.

JOAN

I want to look forward to something, Gloria. I want a reason to wake up in the morning other than to know that I didn't die in my sleep. I don't know how long it will be—I don't know if it will be years or days or months or weeks or minutes but Gloria: Gloria—

*JOAN places her hand on GLORIA's leg.  
GLORIA continues folding.*

GLORIA

Please. Not now. Not after so many years of not saying it.

*GLORIA shakes her head.*

GLORIA (CONT'D)

I can't.

I can't think—

I have to believe that we got all the happiness we were meant to. I have to believe that our lives have been enough.

JOAN  
(quietly)

I don't.

*Pause.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Gloria?

*Pause.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I love you.

*Pause.*

*GLORIA takes JOAN's hand in hers. And they count the seconds together ("one, two, three")*  
GLORIA

The leaves are beginning to change. God give me one more fall. I've said that—every year—for the last, I don't know, five or so: God give me one more fall.

*GLORIA exits.*

JOAN

Joan was in the hospital a week later. Her aortic valve had begun to leak. She died within days of a broken heart. Was it so full that it was bursting at the seams?

Of course, I can't be sure exactly how that final meeting happened—all I have to go on is a planner Joan started keeping in the days after Arthur's death—the first thing she kept since her last journal in 1961—full of the few appointments she had. And one note, on June 24, 1999, ten days before she died:

“I came home to find Gloria packing Arthur's things. We spoke briefly. She seemed well, all things considered.”

Why must we always be a secret—even to ourselves, even at the very end?

I don't know what happened to Gloria after Joan died. There is no diary, there are no letters. The scent has gone cold, there is no trail. I can guess at things, but I can't know for certain. For instance, I can't know for certain what Gloria thought every time, in the days or years following Joan's death, when she went outside, but I can guess she felt betrayed that the physical world, so largely unchanged, didn't reflect the sea-change within her. I can't know for certain that Gloria felt a new emptiness or loss in her life, but I can guess that at the very least there was a constant gnawing within her, perhaps no different from the feeling you have when you go on a trip and feel like you've forgotten to pack something important. I don't know what really made Joan withdraw from the world. I don't know what happened in that last meeting between her and Gloria. I don't know what killed off the Mauritius white-eye. I can't know for certain and I can choose to guess but even at the end, I must feel that it's nice, somehow, to know that there are still some mysteries.



18.

JOAN

Paul?

Can you come back for a minute? Just one last time?

Paul?

*He doesn't come.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I read *Jane Eyre*, Paul. I know how you—but I finally—I know maybe this isn't the time—but do you remember the scene where her friend is dying—where Helen Burns is dying? Do you remember what she says?

*HELEN BURNS enters.*

HELEN BURNS

I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day, and the illness which is removing me is not painful; it is gentle and gradual; my mind is at rest. I leave no one to regret me much.

JOAN

And then Jane says: "But where are you going to, Helen? Can you see? Do you know?"  
And Helen says:

HELEN BURNS

I believe; I have faith; I am going to God.

*HELEN exits. PAUL enters.*

JOAN

Where am I going to, Paul? Can you see? Do you know?

PAUL

"I am very happy, [Joan]; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day."

JOAN

Are you, Paul? Are you dead?

*PAUL exits.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

I wouldn't know! I wouldn't know, would I, Paul?  
Who would tell me?  
I leave no one to regret me much.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Where are you now, Paul? Can I see? Can I know? No—I don't need to know. But, can I wonder? Can I wonder what you think about when you think about me? *Do* you think about me? I suppose, even at the end, I must feel that it's nice, somehow, to know that there are still some mysteries.

*Beat.*

JOAN (CONT'D)

Well, I can dream, can't I?

*JOAN smiles slyly and sadly. PAUL walks out on stage. He begins to sing, shakily at first, half—speaking, until it becomes full throated. As ARTHUR and GLORIA join, the song becomes a round until eventually all three sing the last verse in unison.*

PAUL

*If you're travelling to the north country fair  
Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline  
Remember me to one who lives there  
For she once was a true love of mine*

ARTHUR

*If you go when the snowflakes fall  
When the rivers freeze and summer ends  
Please see for me that she's wearing a coat so warm  
To keep her from the howling wind*

GLORIA

*If you're traveling to the north country fair  
Where the winds hit heavy on the borderline  
Say hello to one who lives there  
For she once was a true love of mine*

*JOAN stands slowly and pulls the coat around her, tightly. She looks out, eyes glittering, and speaks as the song finishes.*

JOAN

Joan died in the summer when the air was hot and stale. The whole season I went through in a fog. Like one of those days you wake up late and you're you but not you. Ears stuffy, eyes cloudy. Everything just out of reach, just beyond your vision. I thought I was stuck like that, colors faded, sounds dulled, for forever.

But when fall came and the leaves fell, dying, from the branches... and the air was cool and crisp... I don't know why, but I felt new again.

And now every year I'll ask: give me one more fall. Let me live to see one more fall.

And I'll ask until all the leaves have fallen from the trees. Until all the stars have fallen from the sky, and there are constellations here on earth.

*End of play.*