

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
Conductor
Ruth
Lotta
Shop Woman
Rita Hayworth
Jake
The Last of the Dodo Birds
Helen Burns

Time

10,000 BC – 2010 AD

Setting

Manhattan; Mauritius; memories

Notes towards casting

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.

Prologue.

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 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.

Once I was next to her, she drew me down to her face, and she creaked open her mouth, and she whispered:

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 knelt down to get closer, and I cupped my hand to my ear. Joan let out this wheezing sound. And then she said: *(slowly, deliberately)* "My skin—is on fire"

JOAN laughs.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I hate that I'm named after her.

Act 1.

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.

In these major mass extinctions, all species, fit and unfit alike, are wiped out. A cleaning of the slate and a starting over. Afterwards, the population of the earth is restarted, and the world is reborn. We are now, in this very moment, as we speak, living through a sixth mass extinction.

This 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 human behavior, is estimated to be anywhere between two hundred and twenty thousand species a year. Even the lower end of that spectrum would mean a rate of extinction ten times greater than that of any of the previous five mass extinctions. And a rate a thousand times greater than the normal rate of extinction.

The modern behaviors that have exacerbated this problem—global warming, deforestation, pollution—are obvious, but what first set this extinction in motion, roughly around 10,000 BC, has been debated for some time. Natural climate change? A global hyper-disease? People will tell you we can't know for certain.

For *me*, it's hard to ignore the fact that species around the world started going extinct just as humans were first pushing out into the world. When humans arrive in Australia from Southeast Asia, tortoises as big as cars, wombats the size of hippos, ten-foot tall kangaroos disappear. When people cross the Bering Bridge into South America, the elephant-sized sloths and giant rhinos all die out. And when, eleven thousand years ago, humans 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? 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. And extinction is not a rare event. More than ninety-nine percent of the fifty billion species that have ever existed have gone extinct. We that are left are the one percent. We amount to little more than a rounding error.

Death is a perfectly normal experience. One that is more present in the world now than it has been at any other point in history. So, I'm not afraid of 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, 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.

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. It could take hundreds or thousands of years, but once the process has begun, it is essentially irreversible. Aside from human 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, predestined. A fish can see that if her parents' scales had more closely resembled their surroundings the way another fish's scales did, they might have lived. But that fish cannot change the color of her scales nor tell her children to do so either. She cannot learn from her parents' mistakes. She is doomed to repeat their failures.

PHILIP LARKIN

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

JOAN

And 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...

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 illnesses we were predisposed to, not just what foods not to eat—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 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.

What did I mean to my grandmother, as she looked at me, newly born and anonymous? Joan showed such little interest in me after that—until the day she died. Or, perhaps 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 1947.

ARTHUR appears onstage holding the coat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I've only worn the coat once. After it was sent to me, my mother put it in a 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, crawled to the back of my mother's closet, ripped open the box, and:

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.

GLORIA appears, wielding a camera.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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

JOAN looks at the picture.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I don't remember ever seeing them smiling like that when they were older. Well, Arthur, yes. 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?*

I don't know much about Joan beyond how my mother spoke of her and the stories Joan told—always the same ones. All I have of Joan is the coat. And these:

JOAN produces stacks of black journals.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Her diaries. They start when Joan left home at 18. Updated with impressive frequency, they stop abruptly in 1961—the year Joan was diagnosed with breast cancer. And even though Joan would go on to live almost another 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 Joan, seems to have made her lose interest in her life? And will that happen to me?

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

Slides 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 was attributing cancer to an imbalance of the humors. Galen, writing 600 years later, thought cancer came from the accumulation of black bile in people's veins. 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, into 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 success. 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:

"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:

"Will I have to get it—removed?"

MALE DOCTOR sighs, takes out a cigarette, and lights it. At the same time, FEMALE DOCTOR appears and takes JOAN's hands.

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

Yes. And the left one too.

JOAN

I—

Sorry. 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, embittered, she turned away from the world? Or was the diagnosis merely a catalyst for reactants established in the 34 years prior?

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

JOAN reads from one of the diaries:

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. Arthur drove out to Long Island this morning to get Ruth who has been with his parents since I got the news from Dr. Bosch on Tuesday. I was so restless by midday that 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 was in one of her moods and hardly noticed me when I came in:"

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? She had little more to offer than the hollow bromides I expect I will 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 she must know a visit from my family—to know I was being thought of—could not have felt like an intrusion."

GLORIA

You'll get through this. Arthur and Ruth will help.

JOAN

"How little she understands. But Arthur and Ruth will be home in a few hours, and I will do my best to savor these last few hours of peace."

JOAN closes the diary.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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

6.

A new slide. The photo of JOAN and ARTHUR, titled: "Joan: A History."

JOAN

Joan was born on 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 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. Just 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.

The first diary begins in June 1944. 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! Every part of my body seemed to tingle as I stepped onto the platform at Penn Station. I walked all the way up to the Barbizon—I couldn’t help myself. A place of my own and a job to fill my days! I feel on the verge of something—if not greatness, than the life I’ve always dreamed of. I won’t go back.”

Very Scarlett O’Hara. (*holding up a fist*) Very “I’ll never go hungry again!”

JOAN flips through a few pages.

JOAN (CONT’D)

“June 6, 1944. I’m settling in quite nicely. My room here has one bed, one nightstand, two chairs, a sink with taps for hot *and* cold water, two mirrors, one full-length and one hung on my wall. My closet has just enough room to hang five dresses and three coats. For lunch, Mrs. O’Leary serves—”

JOAN gives the audience an apologetic smile and flips through even more pages.

JOAN (CONT’D)

“July 18, 1944. There is a new girl on my floor. Jane—she’s from Long Island and works at Woolworths. I think we will get on well—certainly much better than Midge. I took her to lunch yesterday, where we ate—”

JOAN flips through an even larger chunk of pages.

JOAN (CONT’D)

“October 3, 1944. There was a nasty chill in the air this morning; I’ll need at least two new pairs of stockings before winter begins. At work this morning, Mrs. McLaren told me my typing has greatly improved. For lunch, I had—”

JOAN slams the book shut and puts it down. She picks up another diary and skims the first few pages. She stops flipping. She smiles.

JOAN (CONT’D)

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, whom I have decided to find charming. We spent almost every evening together this week. He has promised to take me to dinner with his family on Sunday—”

And then: “It is all very strange. 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, 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?). 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 her shoulders.
She turns to face him—but he’s gone.*

JOAN slips the coat off and looks at it.

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 wouldn’t need a written record to remember it? Or, rather, did she worry words would only fail to capture the moment because its quotidian surface belied 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 on the table.

ARTHUR storms past brandishing 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 thrusts the half-eaten egg roll towards JOAN.

Egg roll?
ARTHUR

No... Thank you.
JOAN

I apologize if I disturbed your meal.
ARTHUR

Not at all. I was just about to—
JOAN

JOAN stands. ARTHUR sits.

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

JOAN
It's rude to talk with your mouth full.

ARTHUR
She was the girl—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)?*

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.

ARTHUR
What do you like?

JOAN
Chocolate...

ARTHUR
Chocolate?

JOAN
Chocolate.

ARTHUR
Let me get you a Brandy Alexander.

JOAN
I'm fine. Thank you.

ARTHUR
Who dumped you?

JOAN
How do you know I got dumped?

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

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

ARTHUR
Your mascara is running.

JOAN
Oh.

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

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
So do lightning bugs and fireflies.

JOAN concedes with a laugh.

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

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
But maybe they were just making fun of me.

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?"

ARTHUR
Hurts, doesn't it?

JOAN
Yes.

ARTHUR

You want that drink now?

JOAN

Yes.

ARTHUR stands; JOAN follows suit.

ARTHUR

Look at us. In death there is life.

JOAN

I suppose so.

ARTHUR

You don't have a coat?

JOAN shakes her head.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

It's almost January. You'll need one.

ARTHUR extends a hand. JOAN takes it. They start to walk out. ARTHUR stops, takes a bill out of his pocket, and holds it towards JOAN.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

(nodding in the direction of the piano player)

Give it to the guy.

JOAN puts the bill in a jar on top of the piano. The musician looks up at her and smiles. It's PAUL. JOAN freezes as he goes into the monologue from the song:

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 impatiently.

ARTHUR

Arthur took Joan dancing afterward.

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 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

The wedding is exquisitely documented. Gloria took photographs—

GLORIA appears, wielding her camera.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I saw them as a child once.

ARTHUR comes up behind JOAN. GLORIA holds up her camera. FLASH.

Suddenly, there is PAUL, standing behind GLORIA.

PAUL

What would our wedding have been like?

JOAN gasps and pulls ARTHUR away.

Pose. FLASH. PAUL is gone.

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 to go to City Hall.

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

JOAN

Arthur wore his army uniform.

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—

FLASH. PAUL is there.

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— 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. 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 army uniform.

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.

JOAN

Shit.

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

Like the chicken pox. JOAN

JOAN turns to the audience. PAUL drifts away.

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. By then, I had seen him for months during my commute. Nearly every morning, when I got on the train at 168th, if I picked the right car, he would be there. Leaning against a pole.

PAUL appears.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Reading a book. I swear to God, a different one each day.

I got off at 116th. For 52 blocks I watched him. After a few weeks, I started making up things about him—based on whatever I could observe.

His bookmark was a schedule for Film Forum: he loved old movies. One January, he wore the same pink sweater at least a dozen times: a Christmas present from his mother? He was her favorite. I noticed the soles of his sneakers looked slightly chewed: he had a dog. No, he had two. He had gone to adopt one, but saw them sharing a cage, huddled together in the corner and took them both home.

He... captured me. 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— And the train began to pull away from the station. The conductor made his announcement:

CONDUCTOR

“Next stop, one hundred and tenth street!”

JOAN

I looked up and...

PAUL

(almost a whisper)

I think you missed your stop.

JOAN smiles at PAUL. 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.

JOAN

Where were we?

She cracks open one of the diaries and glances through it.

JOAN (CONT'D)

September 12, 1946. Joan and Arthur live in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn now. He toils away at law school, day in and day out. She builds their home and their life together. Domestic bliss. Except for one noticeable absence. How would Arthur 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

Did Joan ever tell him "No"? Did she ever tell him that as a child of the depression, she craved a life that her salary as a switchboard operator couldn't sustain if a baby were thrown into the mix? If she told him "No" did he respond:

ARTHUR

It's not only your decision to make.

PAUL appears.

ARTHUR

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

PAUL

You know what you said to me
when I asked you about having kid

JOAN

I don't remember

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

Oh right...

PAUL

We got in a fight.

JOAN

A big fight.

PAUL

About?

It doesn't— Were you offended? JOAN

No! PAUL

I was always so nervous... JOAN

Is that why you—? PAUL

No! Of course not! It was just... Bad timing. JOAN

Sure. I got that. PAUL

JOAN laughs.

What? PAUL (CONT'D)

You're a terrible liar! JOAN

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

I'm sorry. JOAN

PAUL steps towards her.

I have to keep going... JOAN

PAUL leans in to kiss her.

JOAN doesn't move.
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.

PAUL
Come here. Come to bed. I've missed—

ARTHUR stops, seeing the look of disappointment on JOAN's face when she realizes it's only him.

JOAN
Sorry. Go on.

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

JOAN
My mother.

ARTHUR
Ruth.

JOAN
And if I don't know how the conversations between Joan and Arthur about having children began, I do know how they ended: January 12, 1947.

JOAN
I came to your class today.

ARTHUR
Joanie...

JOAN

I came to see how you were doing— I came— I thought I must have gone to the wrong classroom. 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.

JOAN

For *you*? What about us?

ARTHUR

I'll find something...

JOAN

I'm pregnant.

ARTHUR

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

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

JOAN

But my mother isn't born for years... Instead:

JOAN flips through the diary.

JOAN

What will I tell Arthur?

GLORIA

You'll tell him the truth: You lost the baby. He'll understand.

JOAN

Not if we don't have any other chances—

GLORIA

The doctor said you'd be able to.

JOAN looks back at the diary. Then back up.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You'll tell him the truth.

JOAN closes the diary. And GLORIA links arms with her, conspiratorially.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Well, at least facts that are true. You went to the doctor. There was bleeding. You're not pregnant anymore.

JOAN

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

GLORIA

Come inside. I'll make you some tea.

GLORIA disappears.

JOAN

(flipping through the diary)

The following months must have been fraught. Joan working; 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 tells him:

JOAN

Not until we have the money.

JOAN

Their own private Cold War of 1947, built on evasion and competing desires. With Gloria, Arthur's sister, playing a Third World country. Until:

ARTHUR appears, holding a fur coat, and slips it onto JOAN's shoulders.

JOAN

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

A buddy from law school knows the manufacturer. Got it for a fraction of the cost.

JOAN

You *bought* it?

ARTHUR

I bought three dozen of them.

JOAN

You mean you're—

ARTHUR

Selling them.

JOAN

Oh god.

ARTHUR

You won't believe the mark-up we can get away with on these, and people have money to burn right now, and I can—

JOAN

What?

ARTHUR

Pay for you—

JOAN

(handing the coat back to ARTHUR)

I cost more than a fur coat.

ARTHUR

Don't I know it.

ARTHUR comes behind JOAN and places the coat on her shoulders.

*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. ARTHUR
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.*

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Gloria thought you'd like it.

JOAN

This was her idea?

ARTHUR

She approved of it.

GLORIA appears as ARTHUR leaves.

GLORIA
(luxuriating in the fur)

My God – this coat!

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

GLORIA (CONT'D)

I need a cigarette.

JOAN

I can't believe you encouraged him.

GLORIA

He wasn't really asking...

JOAN

What does he know about the fur coat business?

GLORIA

Arthur never lets ignorance or inexperience get in the way of a good idea. Oh! I found this.

She hands JOAN a photograph.

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

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

JOAN

Thank you.

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. A few months before you and Arthur got married.

GLORIA takes the pen out of her hand and writes something herself. JOAN picks the photo up off the table and reads:

JOAN (CONT'D)

"Photo courtesy of Gloria Cohen."

GLORIA

I was there too, you'll remember.

JOAN

He's so confident.

GLORIA

He's never had any question his life would turn out exactly how 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?

His daring? PAUL

JOAN turns around, trying to place PAUL's voice.

What do you mean? JOAN

Flying off to Mauritius? PAUL

That was different. That was— JOAN

What? PAUL

Work. JOAN

Beat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I'm should have left—so suddenly.

I wish I knew what happened there. PAUL

JOAN shakes her head.

Please. PAUL

JOAN crosses to the diaries and opens one of them. And she pulls out of its pages:

11.

Strings and strings of origami birds that she hangs across the stage.

JOAN

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

They were so ubiquitous on the island that they had become a symbol of prosperity and good luck. Into the '90s, 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.

Specimen were shipped around the world to be studied and so that, at the very least, some members of the population could be preserved. Researchers in zoos and laboratories took in dozens of the birds, like 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 other diaries on the table whose pages have also been replaced by collapsed origami birds.

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

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

JOAN (CONT'D)

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 the lucky few survivors, hidden among 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)

And we began to notice something on many of the dead birds: tiny black marks that appeared around their beaks, like tattoos inked at the corners of their mouths.

Was this somehow connected to what killed them? 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, something genetic? Something passed down, generation to generation?

12.

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

My little bird. With her little birds. PAUL

Ew. What? JOAN

Jane Eyre... PAUL

I never read it JOAN

Still?! PAUL

I'm sorry! JOAN

PAUL hands JOAN the birds.

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

People grow apart. JOAN

Beat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I never understood what you saw in me.

PAUL

I saw the world.

JOAN
(laughs)

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

PAUL

I wasn't perfect.

JOAN

No...

PAUL

But I'll let you remember me that way for a little while longer if that will help.

JOAN

Maybe...

PAUL

Maybe...

JOAN

Maybe Maybe Maybe

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

PAUL

What's next?

JOAN cocks her head.

PAUL (CONT'D)

With Joan and Arthur.

JOAN

You were never very interested in my research before.

PAUL

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

JOAN shoves PAUL playfully. They laugh. And then, faintly at first, the sound of knocking.

13.

Oh god. JOAN

What? PAUL

JOAN
I don't need the diary. Do you know how much of my life I spent listening to my mother tell me about Arthur and his coats? Yes, Joan has my mother, Ruth. My family staves off extinction for one more generation at least. And Arthur and his coats: he hits the pavement. Knocks on every door in Rego Park to give my mother—to give Joan—the certain kind of life she'd imagined.

He was good at it? PAUL

JOAN
By the time he was done there wasn't a Greenberg or a Schwartz on Long Island that didn't have a mink coat. Or two.

PAUL
"November 4, 1949. Arthur came home empty handed again today."

JOAN
Not every day would be—

PAUL
"November 13, 1949. I went to a pawn shop in Manhattan—"

JOAN
Give me back the diary—

PAUL
"November 28, 1949—

GLORIA writes and passes ARTHUR a check.

ARTHUR
Don't tell Joan.

GLORIA
I don't have secrets with her, Arthur.

ARTHUR
Unlike me?

GLORIA
I didn't say that.

ARTHUR
We're cutting costs at the factory, Gloria. Designing a new coat—cheaper, but nice still.

JOAN
You're making these up.

PAUL
I'm not.

JOAN
They had money.

PAUL
But how?

JOAN snatches the diary from PAUL.

GLORIA
I'm sorry.

JOAN
How much have you given him?

GLORIA
Whatever he asked for—

JOAN
Gloria!

GLORIA
You have a child to feed, Joan. This isn't the time for pride.

JOAN
You're enabling him. He needs a real job and to give this up.

GLORIA
I don't think he will.

JOAN
Then—

GLORIA
What?

JOAN
He won't sell in Manhattan, right?

GLORIA
Says no one'll let him in once they find out his last name.

JOAN
But...

GLORIA
Yes?

JOAN
Who would turn me away if I showed up at their door?

GLORIA
I sure as hell wouldn't.

JOAN
Gloria, we could go into the city. Make myself up to look like I belong and knock on every door we can...

PAUL
Does she?

JOAN
Yes...

PAUL
And?

ARTHUR

You incredible, wonderful, strange, surprising creature.

JOAN

And that's just a week's worth of sales! I'll go back out there. Every day until we're done.

ARTHUR kisses JOAN and exits.

GLORIA

I expect you'll buy something pretty now.

JOAN chuckles.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

What?

JOAN

You two are so alike.

GLORIA

Charming?

JOAN

Yes... God, he's charming.

GLORIA

Not charming enough to sell coats, apparently.

JOAN

No... but Gloria, we are. And think what we could do. The department stores we could sell to... That Arnold Constable & Company store? I pass by it every day. What if I stopped in—

GLORIA disappears.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Went straight to the second floor. Marched right up to that counter. And rang the bell.

A bell rings. The SHOP WOMAN appears, a crisp, cream, cotton cardigan; swept-up hair; stylish glasses. She looks at JOAN. JOAN matches her gaze and grins.

JOAN glances down at the diary. Her face falls. She steps away from the SHOP WOMAN, who continues to stare where JOAN had just been.

JOAN turns to the audience.

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; the mark-up they could get away with, and the demand there would be.

And the shop woman smiles. Takes off her glasses. Looks at the coat. Looks at Joan. And she says:

SHOP WOMAN

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 ignores him. 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! I wish I could go and take every last one up. That's why they're so cheap?

ARTHUR nods.

JOAN (CONT'D)

You've *humiliated* me.

ARTHUR

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

JOAN

I won't sell them anymore, Arthur. I won't.

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? If you want to still have a house that you can flit around in in your furs—

JOAN

Fake furs

ARTHUR

You'll keep selling them, you selfish, spoiled brat.

He shoves the coat into her hands.

JOAN

I didn't— He never— I never saw him act like that when I was a kid. I knew their marriage wasn't—perfect. But I always thought it was—

PAUL

Joan?

What- what comes next? JOAN

Nothing. PAUL

Nothing? JOAN

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

There isn't an entry in there for months after... PAUL

ARTHUR appears, staring straight ahead.

Arthur? JOAN

Silence.

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—

Arthur? JOAN (CONT'D)

—and sits in a chair, still staring, still silent.

That's where my mother gets it from. JOAN

Not just your mother. PAUL

What does that mean? JOAN

PAUL

Seems familiar is all.

JOAN

So was no one in my family capable of being in a relationship?

PAUL

You were.

JOAN

Oh please.

PAUL

At least with me. For three years. You seemed perfectly capable of it.

JOAN

Until I left.

PAUL

Right.

JOAN

Not so capable then.

PAUL

You didn't have to end it.

JOAN

I had to go—to Mauritius.

PAUL

We could have figured something out.

JOAN

No.

PAUL

Why not?

JOAN

Because this—falls apart. And there are things more important. Things that don't end.

Love doesn't have an end
PAUL

Jesus
JOAN

Or a beginning. It's a constant—
PAUL

You sound like a fucking fortune cookie.
JOAN

A constant choice.
PAUL

And I choose not to have it.
JOAN

You're so much like her.
PAUL

Who?
JOAN

Joan!
PAUL

And *that's* why this never would have lasted.
JOAN

But you don't have to be!
PAUL

Arthur?
JOAN

GLORIA appears.

Arthur, what's next?
JOAN

Joan? Joan, I heard
GLORIA

Act 2.

15.

JOAN stands alone on stage. ARTHUR has reappeared, sitting silently and staring ahead, but now as a man in his 80s.

JOAN walks towards him, circling 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.

Lights shift.

JOAN (CONT'D)

It was just a few weeks before you would die. And before Joan would too. Mom and I came to visit. She was in the kitchen with Joan. They left me with you, Papa.

ARTHUR sits silently.

JOAN

I reached out a hand to see if you'd react. I stroked your chin. I could feel the coarse stubble growing. Your mouth turned. A smile? You looked at that moment like you must have looked as a child. And in the other room...

RUTH

Mother—

Pause.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Mother! Would you please stop referring to him as "Joan's father"?

JOAN

What else am I supposed to call him? He's not your husband.

RUTH

As you remind me every goddamn day.

JOAN

Don't swear at me. It's such an ugly habit.

Jason's fine...

RUTH

And he's still on his vacation?

JOAN

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

RUTH

Whatever he wants to call it, as long as he hasn't lost his job.

JOAN

Of course he hasn't—

RUTH

When your father—

JOAN

Yes, I know—

RUTH

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

JOAN

A sabbatical.

RUTH

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

JOAN

It's to write his book.

RUTH

While you look after Joan?

JOAN

We—take turns...

RUTH

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

JOAN

RUTH

Stop smirking.

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

Jesus, Mom—

JOAN

You sound like a Catholic. And don't fight with me, dear. I see you so rarely. Now, bring that food out to your father.

RUTH enters the "living room."

RUTH

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

JOAN

He's fine. He just likes to escape sometimes.

JOAN fixes ARTHUR's hair.

JOAN (CONT'D)

We have company, darling.

ARTHUR doesn't move but makes a sort of grunting noise. JOAN fusses with him.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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

(turning sharply and barking)

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. Maybe if there was not love, at first, it was something Joan and Arthur grew 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:

ARTHUR

You selfish, spoiled brat.

To: JOAN

Love of my life. JOAN

JOAN
What comes in between? 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.

16.

JOAN's lab on Mauritius. She looks through a microscope as LOTTA, her Finnish co-worker, enters.

Lotta! JOAN

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.

JOAN (CONT'D)
It's a *Candida* fungus. I've sent it out to a few labs back in the States to see if they can identify it.

Okay? LOTTA

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

And spreads to their lungs—

LOTTA

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

JOAN

Plaque, from the fungus as it made its way—

LOTTA

Exactly!

JOAN

Why now?

LOTTA

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

JOAN

Did they?

LOTTA

We'll find out soon enough.

JOAN

LOTTA chews her lip.

What?

JOAN

I have been offered a job.

LOTTA

Oh.

JOAN

This Russian man, he's building a park in Siberia that will be the same ecosystem like the planet had before the Ice Age.

LOTTA

Why?

JOAN

He says it will stop the melting of the permafrost. Slow down climate change.

LOTTA

JOAN

If there are the same plants now as there were two and a half million years ago?

LOTTA

And animals.

JOAN

Animals?!

LOTTA

Wooly Mammoths.

JOAN

You're joking.

LOTTA

That's what I'm going there for. To help with the bringing back of—

JOAN

The Wooly Mammoths.

LOTTA

Yes.

JOAN

It doesn't seem dangerous to you? Bringing the dead back to life?

LOTTA

To help the future...

JOAN

Unlike this you mean.

LOTTA

I did not say that.

JOAN

I don't believe in resurrection. Understanding, yes. But bringing back what's gone?

LOTTA shrugs. JOAN nods. LOTTA leaves.

Offstage a guitar begins to strum. JOAN looks up. Someone starts singing "ooo." And just as recognition dawns on JOAN's 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.*

JOAN

Please tell me: what happened next?

*No response. The guitar strumming starts
again as lights begin to fade up on Paul:*

PAUL

Are you lonesome tonight?

JOAN

Papa?

PAUL

Do you miss me tonight?

Lights shift.

JOAN

Lotta, come here!

PAUL

Are you sorry we drifted apart?

JOAN

Lotta!

PAUL

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

JOAN

Enough, Paul.

PAUL stops playing.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Have you come back to apologize?

PAUL

To help.

JOAN

This is what I couldn't stand about you: You never just said "I'm sorry."

PAUL

I'm sorry.

JOAN

I'm stuck.

PAUL

I'm sorry.

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, and any moment I find myself standing alone, I suddenly feel his arms around my waist. He was giddy over the sales at Arnold Constable and can't seem to help himself from—"

PAUL

Wait—Arnold Constable? The Department Store?

JOAN

How did they sell the coats to them 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 how did she...?

PAUL looks offstage, where GLORIA enters.

JOAN

Gloria?

PAUL

She would have talked to someone about all this.

GLORIA sweeps into the center of the stage.

PAUL (CONT'D)

I like her.

JOAN

I never really knew her.

PAUL

No?

JOAN

It's not as if I saw a lot of Joan and Arthur growing up. But even Gloria, I think I only met once or twice. I suppose they all must have drifted apart.

PAUL

She reminds me of one of those old actresses. A star, but one who couldn't find her niche. Who had one big role, the promise of which she never quite lived up to. And in every movie, the studio heads would make the director give her a song to try to sell her.

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 as RITA HAYWORTH
in *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI*
Please don't kiss me
But if you kiss me

PAUL

She was adored by many but was close to few. People were intimidated by her. She seemed to exist somewhere else and visited us only out of her generosity

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

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...

of spirit. She collected spoons of every city she went to, those little ones you can buy in airports—

JOAN

Too tacky. She—

PAUL

Remembered the little things. Easily. 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, there was a cloud.

JOAN

A distance.

PAUL

But she and Joan... they talked.

JOAN

When?

PAUL

Joan wouldn't have gone to her right after the fight. But soon after...

GLORIA sweeps into JOAN's kitchen.

GLORIA

I'm starving.

JOAN

The hens didn't feed you?

GLORIA

Too busy clucking away.

JOAN

About me?

GLORIA

Don't be so self-absorbed.

JOAN

I know what they think of me: Mrs. Cohen, the *schmatta* merchant. But no more!

GLORIA

Arthur's my brother, and so I have to love him. I've learned how, but...

JOAN is holding back tears.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Joan, darling, don't mope. It's unattractive.

JOAN

Gloria!

GLORIA

And you're better than that.

JOAN buries her face in GLORIA's shoulder.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

You've gotten a tear in your coat.

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

GLORIA (CONT'D)

Let me...

PAUL watches. JOAN watches.

JOAN

But how did she convince Arthur to make the coats out of genuine fur?

PAUL

Maybe she didn't.

JOAN

Gloria?

GLORIA

Joanie?

JOAN

What do you know about making coats?

GLORIA

I know that after the pelts have been treated...

The sound of a factory whistle.

JOAN

Jake!

GLORIA

They're sliced and then resewn lower to elongate them

JAKE appears. GLORIA keeps sewing.

JOAN

Is Arthur around?

JAKE

He's on a sales call.

GLORIA

So the fur covers more of the pattern

JOAN

Then he's told you his idea?

GLORIA

And in the letting out process, pelts from other animals—

JAKE

His idea?

GLORIA

Squirrel, for instance—

JOAN

For selling the coats.

GLORIA

Can be slipped in, hidden within the top layer of fur—

JOAN

I shouldn't...

GLORIA

The mink, as the case may be.

JOAN

Oh, but it's so clever really!

*The noise of a shop bell. JAKE disappears.
JOAN is at the department store counter.
GLORIA picks up the coat she has been
mending, walks over to JOAN, puts on the
SHOP WOMAN's glasses, looks 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:

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.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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

JOAN

Was this all Joan wanted? Was she happy now?

JOAN watches ARTHUR walk offstage.

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 in—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 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, maybe Joan needed to hear the words, "I love you." Plainly, like that.

ARTHUR stands behind JOAN. He whispers in her ear:

ARTHUR

I love you.

JOAN

Maybe she needed more.

GLORIA approaches the microphone.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Maybe she needed poetry. And art. And music.

GLORIA
(singing)

Please don't kiss me...

JOAN

To believe that she could be, that she was—

GLORIA

But if you kiss me...

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

Don't take your lips away...

JOAN

Worthy of something elevated—

GLORIA

Or your arms...

JOAN

Able to inspire passion and greatness and something bigger than herself.

GLORIA

Away...

GLORIA and ARTHUR disappear.

JOAN (CONT'D)

But no, she would never have that kind of love. And that was a fact of her life now—something permanent.

And what was 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 and over the following lines goes and straddles her.

PAUL

"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."

JOAN

Paul...

He goes to kiss her neck.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Paul... Paul! Let me just—the lights!

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.

It's dark. JOAN

That's why I'm using my fingers. PAUL

Paul! JOAN

Shh shh shush PAUL

JOAN
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
(whispering)
One, two, three, four, five...

PAUL stops counting.

Pause.

PAUL resumes counting.

Did you ever worry that? JOAN

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 beg time to slow down. 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. I wish I could gather them all up - all those seconds – and 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

Why?
PAUL

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
I think it probably releases oxytocin.

What's that?
PAUL

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

PAUL grips her hand in both of his.

What are you doing?
JOAN

Bonding with you.
PAUL

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.

My towels smell like you now.
PAUL

What?
JOAN

Smell it!
PAUL

He thrusts the towel into JOAN's face.

I'm not smelling your towel!
JOAN

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 couch. JOAN holds a suitcase.

PAUL

WHAT THE *FUCK* IS WRONG WITH—

JOAN
(gasping)

Please not this one!

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

PAUL

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

Lights come up. JOAN on the couch, alone, clutching a tape recorder, which plays:

PAUL

I love you I love you I love you

JOAN closes her eyes. The sound of running water; the sound of a watch ticking; the sound of JOAN counting (“one, two, three” etc.).

JOAN

Please not yet...

LOTTA
(offstage, calling)

Joan?

JOAN

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

LOTTA
(offstage)

Jooaaaannn?

The sounds stop.

17.

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

JOAN

You're still here.

LOTTA

I thought I'd come by for one last visit.

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

LOTTA (CONT'D)

You seem tense.

JOAN

I am tense.

LOTTA

Makes sense 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.

LOTTA

Okay?

JOAN

But then birds the doctors *hadn't* intended to expose the fungus to contracted the

disease and died as well. They 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: somehow we've been spreading it. In our attempts to track and collect and then send 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 goes to JOAN and takes her hands.

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. I don't let myself move. Sometimes it helps if you imagine you're dead.

JOAN

This is relaxing for you?

LOTTA

Sometimes I'll do it while I'm taking a hot bath.

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 disappears.

JOAN is very still. She listens to the sound of

running water and the watch ticking. She counts, whispering to herself.

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 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.

LOTTA

Sometimes it helps if you imagine you're dead.

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?

JOAN

My skin—is on fire!

Blackout.

18.

Lights up. JOAN stares 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. One of the specimen 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. I wish I could help now.

JOAN

You can't.

PAUL

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

Beat.

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's 1952...

JOAN shakes her head.

PAUL (CONT'D)

It's 1953?

JOAN

None of this 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

PAUL takes JOAN in his arms. She lets him hold her, and they sway back and forth.

JOAN

They danced. So close and so late into the night she swore she could feel the stubble

growing on his face.

PAUL

Don't you want to know what happens next?

JOAN

I can't bear—

PAUL

What?

JOAN

How *ordinary* it all is. And I've been skipping the boring parts, Paul. The endless descriptions of meals and doctors' appointments; bridge games and trips to the supermarket; movies she saw, magazine articles she read.

PAUL

Those were all her life too...

JOAN

So of course after the diagnosis she stops writing in her journal, becomes bitter. She understands: 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. She could've changed drastically.

JOAN picks up a diary and opens to a random page:

JOAN

"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. More soon."

JOAN looks at PAUL, gloatingly and tosses the diary onto the table. PAUL picks up a diary himself. Between each of the following entries, he flips a few pages in whatever diary he is

holding or picks up a new diary completely. He goes through four or five of the diaries.

PAUL

“March 13, 1954. I finally got my pictures from our visit to Albany developed. Gloria says they’re horrendous enough that the Museum of Modern Art might display them, but she’s promised to give me photography lessons this fall.”

“November 11, 1955. I’ve taken an office at the factory since Arthur seems incapable of managing Jake. This morning, I stood at the window watching the trucks take the coats away, spreading them out across the city. How strange is it 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.”

“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. Of course, once I told her where Ruth and Arthur were—

GLORIA appears, holding a tutu and waltzing across the stage, singing “Shall We Dance.”

JOAN claps along with the “one, two, three”s as GLORIA sings them. Once GLORIA exits, RUTH appears being chased by ARTHUR.

PAUL

“October 4, 1956”

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

PAUL (CONT'D)

“October 5, 1956”

RUTH appears seated, her arm in a sling. A DOCTOR stands over her shoulder.

MALE 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. Place is all yours.

The sound of machines whirring, rattling, and humming.

As JAKE goes, GLORIA passes by slowly in the opposite direction, gazing up at the sky.

PAUL

"February 1, 1958"

GLORIA

Explorer 1. What a perfect name.

JOAN

We should have been explorers.

GLORIA

Pioneer women out west?

JOAN

Though I might not have been cut out for it.

GLORIA

I'd've taken care of you.

GLORIA wanders offstage.

PAUL (CONT'D)

"March 1, 1959"

RUTH walks onstage carrying a cake caddy, which she brings to PAUL. JOAN follows behind her. RUTH hands the cake to PAUL.

JOAN

(to PAUL)

This is my daughter, Ruth. We brought you —it's—a housewarming—a— Welcome.

JOAN smiles tightly at PAUL and walks away. RUTH lingers, staring.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Come along, dear!

PAUL

"May 6, 1960"

GLORIA sits in a chair, crying. JOAN approaches, kneels down next to GLORIA, and rubs her back reassuringly.

JOAN

I'm so sorry, Gloria...

PAUL

"November 24, 1960"

RUTH lies next to her transistor radio listening to Elvis Presley's version of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"

JOAN picks up a vacuum that has appeared and turns it on.

ELVIS PRESLEY
(from the radio)

*Then came Act Two
Honey, you lied when you said you loved me
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.

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”

ELVIS PRESLEY

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

The song fades into “Auld Lang Syne.”

JOAN

Happy New Year, darling!

GLORIA

I hope it brings you all the happiness you deserve.

JOAN

We should go away somewhere this year. With Arthur and David...

GLORIA

Yes...

JOAN

We're near the end.

PAUL nods.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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

PAUL nods again.

PAUL

Two entries left.

JOAN

The diagnosis...

MALE DOCTOR appears looking at things on a clipboard.

May 2, 1961.

PAUL

Waiting room music, period appropriate, plays faintly as lights come up on a chair. JOAN goes and sits in it. Lights come up on another chair next to her. PAUL sits next to her and takes her hand.

MALE DOCTOR crosses into the “waiting room.”

Mrs. Cohen?

MALE DOCTOR

No response.

Joan?

MALE DOCTOR (CONT'D)

JOAN stands.

I can see you now.

MALE DOCTOR (CONT'D)

MALE DOCTOR crosses into the “examination room” and lights a cigarette. JOAN follows.

There's no good way to put this. The tests came back positive. You have a disease, ma'am, in your breast.

MALE DOCTOR

I didn't breastfeed my daughter. Could it be her fault?

JOAN

We can't rule that out.

MALE DOCTOR

Will I have to get it—removed?

JOAN

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

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

ARTHUR appears.

ARTHUR

Joanie. You're home.

JOAN

Did Dr. Bosch call—?

ARTHUR nods.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I wish he had let me...

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—it's yours.

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 take over for you at the factory.

JOAN

I'll be back soon, I promise.

ARTHUR

No, he's going to take over permanently. You'll need rest, Joan.

JOAN

Not for my whole life!

ARTHUR

I don't want you exhausted. And the chemicals in those baths? Who knows what kind of poison they give off?

JOAN breaks away from ARTHUR, and he 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

I saw the car— Oh my poor, dear 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. 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

That's it. So of course she became bitter. Confronted by *decades* of doing nothing day-in and day-out except resolving the tiny crises of her life.

PAUL

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

JOAN

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

PAUL

But still that doesn't it explain why she ended up the way she did.

JOAN

What else could?

PAUL

There's one more entry.

JOAN

That's nothing...

PAUL

She wrote it...

JOAN

A talk with Gloria a few days later.

PAUL

Gloria?

JOAN

She goes over to complain. She's already given up...

PAUL

So, there was the diagnosis itself:

MALE DOCTOR

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

And then there was:
PAUL

Joanie. You're home.
ARTHUR

What are you doing, Paul?
JOAN

ARTHUR comes up to JOAN.

Whatever you need—whatever I can give you—
ARTHUR

Stop it, Paul.
JOAN

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

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

She pulls away.

This isn't right. You don't know these people—
JOAN

ARTHUR grabs at her.

Arthur, don't!
JOAN (CONT'D)

GLORIA appears.

Paul, don't!
JOAN

Oh my poor, dear Joan! What are we going to do?
GLORIA

PAUL!
JOAN

ARTHUR kisses JOAN on the top of her 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

I don't like looking at myself in the mirror.

GLORIA

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

JOAN

Gloria! I haven't seen you in days.

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

I haven't thought about anything else all week.

JOAN

Gloria...

GLORIA

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?

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

GLORIA

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.

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. And Arthur thinks you might be too emotional for me to be around right now.

GLORIA

And you agree with him?

JOAN

I do need to focus—on my health. And on Ruth and Arthur.

GLORIA

I was scared for you.

JOAN

You embarrassed yourself.

GLORIA

I embarrassed *you*.

JOAN

Arthur and Ruth will be back soon. I should—

JOAN begins to choke up. She starts to leave.

GLORIA

Joan?

Pause.

GLORIA (CONT'D)

We can get through this.

JOAN

This is my sickness, not ours.

GLORIA disappears.

JOAN

There is no we, Paul.

PAUL disappears. JOAN takes in the solitude.

JOAN (CONT'D)

And so Joan goes home. She—

Beat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

She, um— I don't know. What happened. After that. Besides that she gets better. Lives another forty years. Did she lie in bed at night? And ask herself? "Where did the years go?" as she tried to fall asleep? Alone with only Arthur and his snoring, which she could never get used to.

When she died, did she know what was happening? When her skin felt like it was on fire, did she imagine the cells were simply regenerating too rapidly—that she was shedding her old skin like a snake to emerge on 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 a tiny stranger with sticky hands. 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 about even if there's no one snoring next to me.

Paul didn't snore did he? Not once. Not—

A spotlight begins to come up somewhere.

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. Which part? What corner of my heart. Or mind. Still loves you? Or is it a part of my body? An arm? A leg? A breast? Which part of you is a little traitor?

She studies her hand and sees her pinky. She holds it up.

JOAN (CONT'D)

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)

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? Does it matter? Even a little bit? I'm the end of the family line. The last of the dodo birds.

THE LAST OF THE DODO BIRDS enters.

THE LAST OF THE DODO BIRDS

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

JOAN

Holy shit.

TLOTDB cocks her head.

JOAN (CONT'D)

You're beautiful...

TLOTDB

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

JOAN

Sorry—

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. 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

TLOTDB

Oh. That's... right.

JOAN

I study extinctions. That's what I do.

TLOTDB

Recent extinctions?

JOAN

If you consider 10,000 BC recent.

TLOTDB

I do.

JOAN

Me too.

Beat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

How... How *did* you die?

TLOTDB

Breast cancer.

JOAN

That's not funny—

TLOTDB

I was eaten by a sailor in a cave. Just like they say. 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 gray 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.

JOAN
What did you want when you died?

TLOTDB
I wanted to be remembered.

JOAN
You were...

TLOTDB
No, I wanted to be made into a constellation. I wanted to be put into the stars like Andromeda was.

JOAN
Is death— Does it— What—

TLOTDB
Oh, you poor thing.

TLOTDB wraps JOAN in her wings.

JOAN
I'm so scared. I didn't think I was but—

TLOTDB
You should be. Death is terrifying.

JOAN
Does it hurt?

TLOTDB
Not unless you get eaten.

JOAN
But then—

TLOTDB
It's just that it's awfully permanent.

JOAN
I have so many questions for you.

TLOTDB
I have to go.

JOAN

Please! One last one: What happened to that sailor?

TLOTDB

Dunno. Probably died in that cave anyways.

JOAN

Then... do you regret it?

TLOTDB

No one wants to die. But at least... there was love, of a kind, at the end.

TLOTDB wipes away JOAN's tears.

JOAN

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

TLOTDB smiles and stands. She straightens up and a few feathers drift to the ground.

TLOTDB

Fucking chemo.

TLOTDB exits, molting.

JOAN

Maybe Joan was more beautiful than the paintings suggest. Maybe... there was a capacity in her to love that had never been... weaponized. And that isn't fair. She deserved to grow plump in her old age. Instead, she stayed small and brittle to the end.

And for so long she convinced herself that she had made no huge mistakes in her life—that any unhappiness was the result 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 maybe... at the end...

Lights change. JOAN is in a new room. GLORIA is there. She is folding clothes from a laundry basket and placing them delicately in a box. Boxes litter the room.

JOAN

Thank you—for helping with Arthur's things.

GLORIA

Of course.

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.

GLORIA

Yes.

JOAN

All of Arthur's things...

GLORIA

Except his regrets.

JOAN

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

GLORIA

What do you regret?

JOAN

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

Is that what my life will become now? 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. Every meal I eat, I think: Will this be the last time food passes between my lips? And I chew longer. Every little thing: 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?

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—seconds, I'll count the seconds like they're paperclips if it's seconds—but Gloria: Gloria—

JOAN places her hand on GLORIA's leg.

GLORIA

Please. Not after not— Please—don't kiss me.

Beat.

JOAN (CONT'D)

Gloria?

Pause.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I love you.

GLORIA takes JOAN's hand in hers. And, silently, they count the seconds together.

GLORIA

The leaves are beginning to change. God give me one more fall.

JOAN

Joan was in the hospital a week later. Her aortic valve had begun to leak. Was her heart so full that it was bursting at the seams?

Of course, I can't be sure how that final meeting went—all I have to go on is an entry in Joan's appointment book, 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."

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. I can guess at things, but I can't know for certain. For instance, I can't know for certain what Gloria thought, in the days or years following Joan's death, every time 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 don't know what 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, that there are still some mysteries.

19.

JOAN

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

He doesn't.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I lied before. I read *Jane Eyre*. Finally. Maybe this isn't the time—but do you remember the scene where her friend—Helen Burns—is dying? Do you remember what she says?

HELEN BURNS appears.

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; 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 disappears.

JOAN (CONT'D)

I leave no one to regret me much.

Where are you now, Paul? Can I see? Can I know? What you think about when you think about me? *If* you think about me? I suppose, even at the end, I must feel that it's nice, somehow, that there are still some mysteries.

Well, I can dream, can't I?

JOAN smiles slyly and sadly. PAUL appears. He sings, shakily at first, half-speaking, until it becomes full-throated. As ARTHUR and GLORIA join, the song becomes a round until 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 pulls the coat around her, tightly. She looks out, eyes glittering.

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 and everything is just out of reach. I thought I was stuck like that, 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.

My skin is on fire. I'm alive.

End of play.