



RANDY DOYLE HAZLETT, PHD

The Pilgrimage

A full-length play

By Randy Doyle Hazlett

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CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

LEENA	A woman of sixty with gray hair, frail appearance, and strong voice.
MR. BEAUREGARD	A well-grounded, tall, thin black man with a green thumb and little education.
POSTMAN	A friendly, dedicated public servant. Tall and lanky, dressed in unmistakable postal garb.
ADLAI	The youngest son of Leena and Jonathan Freeman. An actor extraordinaire with jet black hair, medium height, and a smooth voice.
ETHAN	The eldest son of Leena and Franklin Adams. A confident, tall, middle-aged man with brown hair and modest build.
WAITRESS	A young woman of pleasant but unkempt appearance with more problems than she can balance.
EVA	Daughter of Leena and Jonathan Freeman. A mentally-challenged woman with blonde hair and few options.
RACHEL	A slender woman glowing with natural and inner beauty.
BOYFRIEND	A tattered teen in tattered clothing.
CONSTABLE	An elderly man with an authoritative look and kind voice.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

SCENE 1	Leena's kitchen	7:45 a.m., Saturday, August 17, 1985
SCENE 2	Leena's kitchen	9:15 a.m., Saturday
SCENE 3	In front of the Adams home	10:25 a.m., Saturday
SCENE 4	Mabel's Dinner	11:30 p.m., Saturday
SCENE 5	Eva's Greenville residence	noon, Saturday
SCENE 6	Ethan's truck / Mabel's	4:30 p.m., Saturday
SCENE 7	Leena's kitchen / den	4:45 p.m., Saturday
SCENE 8	Leena's kitchen	6:05 p.m., Saturday
SCENE 9	Adlai's apartment	8:55 p.m., Saturday
SCENE 10	In front of the Adams home	9:45 a.m., Sunday
SCENE 11	Leena's den	8:55 p.m., Saturday, August 24, 1985

SCENE ONE

(The home of Leena Adams - a small wood-frame house in Waltham City, Missouri, a forgotten rural town of caliche streets interrupted by patches of St. Augustine, frozen in time. It is 7:45 Saturday morning, August 12, 1985. The Adams home hasn't seen a coat of exterior paint in over two decades. Peeling honeydew melon paint, ragamuffin shingles, and rotting baseboards on the home's exterior scream neglect. However, the inside is quite homey, with high ceilings throughout, though overly crowded. There is brushed oak flooring in the den and bedrooms, sparkling yellow tile in the single bathroom, and suffering speckled linoleum in the kitchen. Indoor lights are bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling.)

Leena, a southern woman of sixty with enough accent to charm, donning a tight hair bun and wearing a red checkered jumper dress with white apron, is in the kitchen - a functional space with nonfunctional, vintage appliances. Mr. Beauregard, a thin, black man with ample wrinkles and thickened skin from a life of manual labor, sits at the oak kitchen table in a high-back, wicker chair on the opposite side of the room facing the door. He is wearing dirt-stained overalls, over a clean and pressed blue cotton shirt, and vintage high-top work boots. The décor is antique white, appropriately aged. The back door by the kitchen hangs wide open - propped so by a cast iron pig. Only an old screen door with less screen than door separates Leena from the world. The latch is purposefully broken. As the lights come up, Leena pulls open the screen door and flicks her wrist. The rickety screen door slams shut, expelling a small cloud of dust, as Leena pulls back a scroll of newsprint while failing to restrain the old door springs from doing their job.)

LEENA

(emphatically to the expelled cricket)

Not in my house, and especially not today! I might just bake me a cake, and if I do, I'm not sharin' it with the likes of you. Birthdays are special - birthdays and family. And you are not family!

MR. BEAUREGARD

(chastisingly)

Leave the chirpin' to dem crickets, Miss Leena. Ya doz know yur voice cun be heard by any neighbor ov ours with a bent to listen? I know. Ma house iz just cross da way. Iz heard bushels ov chirpin' in ma time.

LEENA

(pleasantly surprised)

Mr. Beauregard, so you were listening! I had hoped so.

(Leena returns the grocery store flier, rubber band and all, back atop the sixties-vintage refrigerator.)

LEENA

(convincingly to the roll of paper)

You stay right here next to the flyswatter where I can reach you next time I draft you into service.

(She leaves the end protruding so as to provide a handle for easy access.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(eager to mediate)

Miss Leena, ya know da wait ain't gonna be long wit thozе gapin' holes in da screen. Why doncha juz let me gives ya anudder door? Got one ain't been used in a spell cross da way.

LEENA

(adamantly)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, I have a certain attachment to this door just the way it is. It suits me. Age is not rightful cause for tossin' out the old.

(Mr. Beauregard stands and walks toward the Cold-Spot refrigerator where Leena

placed the newsprint. Leena puts on a set of large lens, horn-rimmed glasses, picks up a can of Lysol, and begins cleaning the spot on the floor where she scooped up the cricket.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(critiquing)

Um-umm, Miss Leena. Sure nuf is a good thing yur a might lo in stature, cuz any tall nuf cud see this here combo top ain't seen a rag in a heap of Sundays. You an' yur can o' Lysol[®] sanitizin' way down lo an' only vapors makin' der way up top wherez needed. Dem vapors gives me a case of the dizzies, Miss Leena.

LEENA

(sternly)

Can never be too clean ... too safe. Each surface requires its due attention.

(Leena stands then returns to the exact same spot to clean.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(crabby)

Miss Leena, yuz about to swab dat speckle right off da linoleum. Dem glasses sho nuf double yo trouble. Jus cuz all is twice az big don't mean ya gotta scrub twice az much. And dem fumes!

LEENA

(unyielding)

The upkeep of a home is a lady's callin', on the inside, that is. Now the outside - outside is a man's responsibility.

(rudely)

Don't you have some flowers to tend?

(Mr. Beauregard gets up to leave.)

LEENA

(harshly)

Where are you going? I'm not ready for you to leave.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(confused)

But youz said ...

LEENA

(lecturing)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, have you forgotten the finer points of a marriage. When a woman wants you to do somethin', she'll tell ya twice. The first time is just for sympathy ... or for spite.

(Mr. Beauregard reseats himself.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(obediently)

Yes, Ma'am.

LEENA

(perplexed)

Now, Mr. Beauregard, if you were a cake pan, where would you hide?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(honestly)

Don't rightly know, Miss Leena,

(smiling, showing his white teeth)

but jus thinkin' ov it brings back da notion of yur honey ham, yams, and angel food cake.

LEENA

(firmly)

I don't recall ever cookin' those for you, Mr. Beauregard.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(retracting)

I s'pose youz right, Miss Leena. Dem weren't for me,

(smiling again)

but Iz got a nose-full jus da same. Ma house iz jus cross da way.

(Leena continues to look for the cake pan through the cupboards.)

LEENA

(frustrated)

Where is that pan? I don't make it a habit to lose things, but lately, I need a bit of help on manly things like pots and pans.

(reflective)

Now the *recipe* is another matter entirely. One simply cannot bake an angel food cake from scratch and misplace the art. The ingredients are secondary to the love invested in the process. All those egg whites have to be whipped just so.

(affectionately)

However, if there were a hint of doubt concernin' the blueprint, a deep breath from the recesses of the mind is enough to fill in the gaps. Angel food cake leaves an unshakeable imprint.

(upset)

The kitchen just doesn't want to cooperate today to make it a reality.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(blissfully)

Miss Leena, recollectin' da smell iz good nuf fo dis blacky.

LEENA

(offended)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, I'll not have that language in my house. If that's how you want to talk when you're out there diggin' in the dirt, I'll leave that to you and the Lord, but here you will properly address yourself as a negro - nothin' more, nothin' less. I should ask you to leave.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(acquiescing)

Yes, Ma'am.

(Mr. Beauregard gets up to leave.)

LEENA

(annoyed)

Where are you goin'? It's very rude to simply take a woman at her word. Must I keep repeatin' myself. You are not allowed to leave, even if I say so.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(submissive)

Yes'em, Miss Leena. Not like I got stuff a waitin'. I favor bein' here, Miss Leena.

LEENA

(impatiently)

And I enjoy your company, but you are pressin' me to the point of a woman's prerogative.

(perturbed, turning on a dime)

Where is that mailman? He is late. It's not proper to keep a lady waitin'. Surely, he did not venture to the front door. No one comin' to my front door has any business visitin'. I keep the formal entrance tightly shut and securely locked, you know. An old widow woman can never be too safe.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(interjecting)

Miss Leena, don't rightly think iz cud find dat door 'round dem boxes an knick-knacks.

LEENA

(resolutely)

The less need I have to venture to that door, the more room I have for things that *really* matter. I ran out of room long ago for new things, but old things are more than welcome. When somethin' significant arrives, the only place remainin' to display it *properly* is the entryway.

(agitated)

Adlai calls them "dust-hugging curios." He lacks appreciation for the more delicate things. He showed up one day with a present for me - an electronic wall clock. Says I need to be *reminded* of all the time I waste admirin' my collection.

(defiantly)

I told him if it didn't conjure memories of happier days, I had absolutely no use for it. When I refused to hang it, he took it to his place all feverish.

(calmly and passionately)

Mr. Beauregard, have I shown you my collection in depression glass? I could sit for hours admirin' each one.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(feverish)

Miss Leena, yuz showed me so much glass I gets the shakes jus lookin' outta window.

LEENA

(reminiscing)

They do so have a mesmerizing effect. Why, I believe the last time the front doorbell was used, it took me nearly five minutes to manage clearance for the door. It happened to be a young fellow from the new electric company wantin' me to switch electric providers - a monumental waste of energy. If he knew where he was, he'd have gone to the back door, and if he had known me, well, he'd have left much sooner for more fertile ground for a gent on commission. Did he come to your house, too, Mr. Beauregard?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(sadly, shaking head)

Miss Leena, I ain't got no electricity, jus gas.

LEENA

(disregarding, eager to continue)

Well, I had lots of questions, mainly centered on keepin' the conversation flowin' and the fellow properly entertained. He looked so unhappy in a job pressin' folks into decisions they never really wanted to make. The poor guy mistook social curiosity for business interest, a flaw surely to fill a day without fillin' a pocket.

(maternally)

Perhaps I reminded him of a departed loved one, his mother or grandmother. Perhaps he too needed a word more than a sandwich, but I gave him both. Most of my questions he couldn't answer, but I'd just poke and prod until I could give him cause to chime in. He left that day feelin' like a million bucks, only to realize that the rent was due next week. I made sure he jotted down my address though, in case business was slow another day. He never did come back.

(capriciously)

Those door-to-door salesmen are a fickle lot. Their bosses are probably even more high-strung.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(simply following along)

I reckon, Miss Leena, I reckon so.

LEENA

(sadly)

Despite the occasional sojourner, it does get doggedly lonesome 'round here.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(affirming)

Yep, Miss Leena, I knowz lonesome. We moved herein some thirty years back, stirrin' up da pot. Not a white folk came a welcomen, cept you'uns, Miss Leena.

LEENA

(openly)

Mr. Beauregard, you were the *first* black family in the parish. People were afraid of themselves - what feelings you exposed to show off their flaws. Folks said everything would change, others would follow, property values would plummet. They were right only on the last account, but not because of the Beauregard family. Your yard was *always* manicured to perfection, kind of like the window dressings by the fancy merchants on the plaza with foreign words in their names. You always kept a fresh-paint look on the wood frame and flowers growin' along the walk. No matter the time of year, there were flowers bloomin' of some sort.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(uneasy with the compliment)

S'what a gardener doz, Miss Leena. Most folks reckoned I jus helped others out after my piece was lookin' jus the way I fancied.

(melancholy)

Ma wife luvs honeysuckle - a mite slice of heav'n.

(Mr. Beauregard drops his head.)

LEENA

(empathetic)

I'm sorry, Mr. Beauregard, for usherin' in sadness on this, my birthday. Shame on me. I remember the day that bus accident claimed your wife and kids on the way to visit relatives in Baton Rouge like it was yesterday. Darn that bus.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(rebuking)

Miss Leena, if yuz uze such lang'age, I'm gonna have ta git. A man can let a word or two slip, but ner a lady. 'Sides, ain't no uze elevatin' yur blood pressure 'bout tings o'er which we ain't got a lick o' control.

(sorrowfully)

I waz fixin' to join dem in Bat'n Rouge a spell later, but ner gotta chance.

(cheerily)

I go callin' on da gravesite er Wednesday n Sunday, puttin' out fresh blooms, mostly from da yard. Followin' a right cleansin' downpour, when there's extra, I wander the stones lookin' fer graves untended ta fancy up, mostly chil'ren - dem who barely started livin' 'afore the second chiseled date caught up wit dem.

(defensive)

Some say it's not healthy, spendin' so much time amongst dem dead, but whens folk see how much luv I put into dis here stretch of God's green earth, dey wants me to do da same for theirn. I try, but I ner can do der space right. Der's jus so much love in a man, an' no mo'. Dey still pay for ma tryin'. No, I'z gotta do what I'z can to add a little life to dis here patch of dreariness. Time jus' passes a right mo' slowly here fer doze not amongst the livin'. Dat's all.

LEENA

(amazed)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, I don't believe I've ever heard so many words fall from your mouth at one sittin'.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(apologetic)

Sorry, Ma'am. 'Twas ma heart speakin' an not me. I recollect da times when you ner spoke to me aloud, but Iz heard jus da same - times you'd jus cruise by in dat Dodge or promenade onto da porch to scoop up da newsprint. Iz jus workin' dem shrubs. I'd jus raise dem prunin' shears, and you'd nod yer head. We un'erstood one anudder absent from words. After dem kids took up on der own, I crossed ov'r mo often.

LEENA

(fondly reminiscent)

In my younger days, I loved to plant flowers. I'd never do it alone, though. When the boys were home, I'd make

sure at least one was within shoutin' distance. I love flowers,

(uneasy)

but I shudder every time I unearth a worm - literally shake. I'd holler for one of the boys to fish it outta the hole. I'd say, "Don't kill him. Just send him on a holiday." After the boys grew up, I would only plant flowers when you were likewise workin' outdoors. When I chanced upon a wiggler, I'd call you over to kindly dispose of it.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(nonchalantly)

Weren't no trouble 'tall.

LEENA

(genuinely thankful)

But I was ever so grateful - for the company ... and the worms. The boys used to take 'em out back to the sandpile, but you'd simply drop 'em into the front pocket of your overalls. Every so often, I could see you reachin' into that pocket while tendin' your own flowers. I didn't mind. A holiday is a holiday.

(harping back)

I remember that first instance when I invited you over. On that particularly warm summer day, I had imposed upon you so often in the garden that I felt accountable. I asked you if you'd like some lemonade. You nodded and mistook my directness for an invite to the kitchen. As I toddled in to gather the refreshments, you simply followed suit. That was the time you first ventured into my home, Mr. Beauregard.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(ashamed)

Sorry, Ma'am.

LEENA

(comforting)

Nothin' to be sorry for, but once through the doorway, I caught a whiff of the manly odor of sweat mixed with peat moss that hung to your overalls. The scent wasn't altogether displeasin'; it just wasn't a combination that I sanctioned in my kitchen.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(opinionatedly)

Well, Miss Leena, t'was my first whiff of dem fumes risin' from dem sanitized floors an' counters. I'd sooner da kitchen tote remnants ov cornbread an' bacon-season'd greens ner mealtime an' fresh-cut hibiscus in between. Dat day, yuz lookin' a might bit skittish.

LEENA

(justifyingly)

And you particularly awkward. As for me, it's understandable. I'd never entertained black folk in my home, and certainly not alone.

(insightfully)

Once I served the lemonade, there was barely a word of exchange, but then, none was needed. We understood one another. Words would have just gotten in the way and highlighted our differences.

(slight chuckle)

I remember on your way out, you tripped over a footstool in front of the divan but caught yourself on the armrest. In the process, a little too much pressure was exerted on that front pocket. You excused yourself and hurried home.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(embarrassed)

Dem worms wuz damaged goods. Didn't want dem oozin' out wherein dey shouldn't.

LEENA

(distracted)

Where were we? Oh, I was lookin' for my cake pan.

(Leena is again dedicated to the search.
She straightens up with an idea.)

LEENA

(switching gears)

Maybe we should share some lemonade instead - for now ... until the pan shows up. I squeezed some fresh lemons for just such an occasion. Did I tell you it was my birthday?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(confiding)

I knows it all along, Miss Leena. S'why I'm here. A tall glass ov yer lemonade would sure hit da spot, Ma'am. Folks think workin' in da dirt ain't no hard work 'tall, but it's a mite lonesome weedin' und'r da sun. Da heat takes no rest, so a man's gotta enjoy some lemonade now un again.

(Leena pours two glasses of lemonade in tall crystal tumblers. She sits to enjoy a few sips. Mr. Beauregard just lets his drink sit in front of him. Leena abruptly jumps to her feet.)

LEENA

(relentless)

That cake pan! Where are you?

(Leena is again dedicated to the search until there is a knock on the screen door. It was a gentle tapping, as one either unsure of the door's integrity or so familiar with it that a tap was all that was necessary to achieve the desired result. Leena peers through a hole in the screen. It is the mailman dressed in light blue uniform and cap. For the first time this day, a smile breaches the daily routine of Leena Adams.)

POSTMAN

(speaking through a hole in the screen big enough to peer through)

Ms. Adams, here's your mornin' delivery. Have a blessed day.

(Leena cracks the door open two letter-lengths wide and accepts everything from his hand with anticipation.)

LEENA

(with southern charm)

Thank you so.

(The postman turns to leave.)

LEENA

(anxious)

Wait! Do you have to go so soon? I thought perhaps you could use a glass of lemonade - freshly squeezed?

POSTMAN

(congenial)

I've barely started my route, but seein' it's you doing the asking, I suppose I could spare a minute or two.

(Leena opens the screen for the postman to enter. Mr. Beauregard is gone. As he takes a seat at the table, Leena sets down the stack of letters on the counter and pours another glass of lemonade. She sets it on the kitchen table on a coaster before the postman.)

POSTMAN

(relaxing with deep breathing)

I love deliverin' mail to your house, Ms. Adams. It's always refreshin'. First, the scent of honeysuckle blowin' from across the street is unmistakable. It's a funny thing about honeysuckle; it just keeps comin' back year after year unattended.

LEENA

(eyes closed to accentuate the sense of smell)

I so love the smell - so exhilarating. What a joy on a hot summer day, honeysuckle and a perpetual cool breeze.

POSTMAN

(concerned)

I had meant to ask you about that. Every time I come to deliver the mail, your back door is open, but the air conditioner is runnin'. It feels so good on a hot summer day comin' to your door, but I meant to ask you about that.

LEENA

(frankly)

Well, I always keep the window unit air conditioner runnin' to keep the house to my likin'. If it bothers you, you can deliver to the drop box out front.

POSTMAN

(awkwardly defensive)

Not at all, Ms. Adams. I was just thinkin' of the cost on a fixed income. When I was newly assigned to this route, I rang the doorbell. It set me back a spell on my mornin' route. Since repentin' of my sin, I frequent the back door, even though there's no mailbox, nor a bell. I just lightly tap on the screen door and pause for you to come collect your mail by hand. I don't mind the wait here. The conversation is never long, but the coolness of the breeze at the back door mingles nicely with the warmth of the smile on your face. It doesn't matter if I only deliver bills and unsolicited mail. It's my pleasure to put them into your hand and collect my smile.

LEENA

(feigning embarrassment)

You make me blush. An old lady like me normally blushes only if makeup is amply applied. Silly me. I deliberated ever so briefly about invitin' you in. You see, I thought initially, if I inadvertently announced it was my birthday, it might lead to a follow-up question ladies prefer not to discuss.

POSTMAN

(unsurprised)

I speculated a birthday was imminent. I hope you don't take offense, but we in the business can recognize a birthday card a mile away. It stands out like a sore thumb among the stiff envelopes cartin' business appeals. A gem amongst slag.

LEENA

(plainly)

I shall have to dig it out after you leave. Oh, I am slackin' in politeness. You do know Mr. Beauregard, don't you?

(Leena turns and extends her arm toward the third glass of lemonade as if making an introduction.)

POSTMAN

(correcting)

I *knew* Mr. Beauregard well enough. Hasn't been with us for quite a few years. I just skip his door on my route, but I do stop for a deep inhale of honeysuckle when it's

in bloom. Shameful that house stands empty - still the pick of the lane with all those volunteer flowers.

(The postman takes one last drink from his glass.)

POSTMAN

(eager to resume his route)

I've got to go now. Miss Wright down the street said she was bakin' brownies today. That is another smell to die for. Goodbye, Ms. Adams, and thanks for the lemonade.

(The postman exits the door, then turns in hindsight.)

POSTMAN

(retrospectively)

Happy birthday, Ms. Adams!

(The screen returns to its proper place, and the mailman vanishes from sight. Leena leans against the frame to catch a breath. She lifts her hands for cross-examination and rubs the still supple but age-tarnished skin.)

LEENA

(disturbed)

Am I really that old?

(turning to an empty chair)

Mr. Beauregard, are we really that old?

(reluctantly after an
embarrassingly long silence)

Pay no attention to the postman. You're here for me and me alone, though I now recall that dreadful day the truck topped with flashin' red lights stopped on our street. I lost a step. My enthusiasm for life dwindled that day when they carried you off. My call to the hospital to check on your condition was sheer well-wishin',

(slowly and sorrowfully)

for I knew the truck pulled away much too slowly from the curb.

(lightening up)

In such times, a home cooked meal is in order, for I knew you had relatives scattered all across creation - at least over the state of Louisiana. Surely, they'd be comin' to the house. Still, I was in a quandary on just

what to fix. A reheated casserole just wouldn't do. People don't know what to say to set things right. They just come bearin' gifts so that a "thank you" and "you're welcome" will suffice. Too often, the gift which supplants words is a green bean casserole. No, a bean assortment just didn't tally up to what I wanted to say, but then I came to a startlin' realization. I had no notion of what black folk liked to eat. After some thirty minutes of sifting recipes, I took a different tack. I just combed through my feelings on what I wanted to voice, then I selected food to match. I settled on a honey ham, yams, and angel food cake.

(giddy)

When the kids were young, I practically lived in the kitchen. While I was a little rusty, carvin', beatin', and blendin' gave me a nostalgic sense of belongin'.

(living in the moment)

This meal was a delight. The ham was slow cooked to perfection with ample basting along the way usin' my own special pineapple-orange-honey concoction. I wouldn't give anything less than a fully-prepared meal, so I pre-sliced the finished product. The cross-grain cuttin' of the warm, golden-brown masterpiece released a syrupy aroma that saturated the air. You didn't have to taste it to know that each bite was heavenly. Those yams were not to be outdone. I fused together twice-baked choice sweet potatoes with lenient helpin's of brown sugar. When almost done, I layered the dish with marshmallows and returned the whole thing to the oven until a toasty brunette deposit capped off just what I wanted to say. To beat all, there was my finale - a cake so light to melt in your mouth. I just didn't bake an angel food cake for anybody. I smiled, knowin' my choice of meals was *truly* eloquent.

(continuing soberly)

On that short jaunt across the way, I balanced more pans than I could reasonably carry, only to have my knock on the door fall silent. It was only while standin' on the stoop that I realized this was the first time I had come visitin' the Beaugard home. The yard looked even more beautiful from this side of the street. The fragrance was breathtakin' on the way up the walk: daffodil, hyacinth, and rose, in that order. Never before had I wanted to inhale more completely. Had I not been totin' a full load, I'd have retraced my steps just to repeat the intoxicating sequence. I knocked again more forcefully, but the Beaugard home was not entertaining

guests. I thought I'd just leave my foil-wrapped gifts on the porch for later. Surely, the family was out takin' care of arrangements.

(dejectedly)

Days later, I retrieved my untouched dishes and moldin' angel food cake from the Beauregard property. Red ants were the only mourners feastin' on my thoughtfulness. The sweet aroma had given way to a foul, musty-vinegar combination. I held the stuff at arms length and tried not to breathe in the direction I stepped. Glancin' downward, I noticed the flowers along the walk were already wiltin', as if they, too, were bowin' in bereavement. I just pitched the food into the rubbish bin, dishes and all, as I couldn't bring myself to clean the pans in order to start afresh on a new recipe on a more pleasant occasion. Those pans would just be a reminder of a day I wished had never happened. I didn't lament the food going to waste, but the sight of those pans *unraveled* me. Ever since that day, not a pan was replaced nor a fresh flower ever planted in my yard. How could I?

(Leena abandons her search for a pan. She pours out Mr. Beauregard's glass of lemonade into the sink.)

LEENA

(perking up)

Guess you weren't too thirsty today, Mr. Beauregard. That's okay. Save some room for cake.

(Leena melts into a kitchen chair, head down, the back of her hand to her forehead.)

LEENA

(sobbing)

Am I really that old?

(Lights fade on Leena.)

SCENE TWO

(The kitchen of Leena Adams only an hour or so later. Leena is in the kitchen cleaning the counters with her can of Lysol. Mr. Beauregard is once again at the kitchen table.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(impatiently)

Well, Miss Leena, who sentz it?

LEENA

(startled)

Pardon me? Oh, it's you Mr. Beauregard. I thought you had left, you were so quiet.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(persistent)

Dat birthday card, who sentz it?

(After a reflective moment, when vision with improper moisture content waned, Leena's disposition shifted in favor of responsibility about the parcel of letters.)

LEENA

(mindless)

I forgot all about it. Why didn't you remind me earlier?

(Leena walks over to the pile of mail and begins sifting through it. She selects one envelop and lets the others fall on the kitchen table.)

LEENA

(rewardingly)

Here it is - sandwiched between the electric bill and disguised solicitations in brown envelopes.

(Leena holds it to her nose and breathes deeply.)

And it's scented. Judgin' from the return address, it has to be from my daughter, Eva. Mr. Beauregard, you know Eva, don't you?

MR. BEAUREGARD
(matter of factly)

Yes, Ma'am. Iz do.

LEENA
(justifyingly)

It's been three years since we've actually seen one another. A mom with her busy schedule outdistances the hundred miles or so between us, but today *is* special. The postman has bridged the gap with a card on my birthday, my sixtieth.

MR. BEAUREGARD
(anxiously)

Miss Leena, are yuz gonna wait til it's all smelled out 'fore ya openz it?

(Leena's faced glows feverishly as she pulled out the butcher knife she used for a letter opener.)

MR. BEAUREGARD
(traumatized)

Land sakes, Miss Leena, are yuz gonna butcher it?

LEENA
(defensively)

Oh, no. The kids bought me a fancy silver letter opener out of concern I'd someday do bodily harm, but I much prefer my kitchen knife. It slices through paper like butter. See.

(Leena easily cuts through the envelope seal, enabling her to extract the contents, but not first without an extended whiff from the interior.)

LEENA
(vicariously)

M-mmm, chocolate mint! I wonder where you can get envelopes like these?

(Leena lifts the note to the bridge of her nose and closes her eyes to heighten the experience. She almost didn't need to extract the card. This was enough. As

the pleasure of the moment gave way to curiosity, Leena absorbs the text.)

LEENA

(instructively)

A kernel freed from its husk. Mr. Beauregard, let me read it to you. The print says, "Every day I think of you, for all you say and all you do. No gift too big, nor thought above, could 'er replace, a mother's love." And she wrote by hand, "Happy Birthday, Mama - Love Eva" using two colors of ink, mind you. See, she signed her name in red. Red is my favorite color ... next to pink. She must have searched the whole rack to find a card with just the right sayin'.

(Leena mulls over the words scribed by the Hallmark® artist time and time again, as if they truly were penned by the daughter she loves. She silently reads every word perhaps four times before placing it on the kitchen table.)

LEENA

(to the card)

I'm gonna prop you up right here to admire every time I traverse between rooms. Surely, Adlai will see you when he comes to take me out to eat today.

(After placing it just so, Leena can't resist picking up the card once more for a gratifying inhale.)

LEENA

(blissful)

Heavenly! Just Heavenly! The rest of the mail simply could not possibly measure up.

(Leena just piles the remaining letters up nicely on the kitchen counter.)

LEENA

(conclusively)

A woman of sixty is entitled to reserve the day for only good news. I choose to distance myself from all but pleasant thoughts this day.

(Leena exits to the adjoining den. Then returns to the doorway.)

LEENA

(bossy)

Mr. Beauregard, I hope you don't think it my intention to leave you in the kitchen by yourself. You have my permission to follow me into the den.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(acquiescing)

Yes, Ma'am.

(Both go to the den. Leena sits at one end of the table. Mr. Beauregard starts to take the opposite seat.)

LEENA

(picky)

Mr. Beauregard, you can take any seat but that one. It brings up too many unpleasant memories. Please take another. My first husband, Franklin, used to sit there. Did you know I was married more than once?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(plainly)

No, Ma'am.

LEENA

(gossipy in tone)

I married young, and Ethan came along before I really knew what bein' married was all about. Ethan's dad, Franklin, just disappeared one day - went off to work and never came back. A few noticed that the new waitress down at Mabel's Diner didn't show for the late shift either. I waited up supper that ev'nin' until it became embarrassingly late. I had fixed our favorite dish - applesauce-topped porkchops that would literally fall off the bone into spoon-sized morsels.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(attentively)

Sho sounds gud, Miss Leena.

LEENA

(forlornly)

Veiled in numbness, I cleared the table and discarded the food. From that day forward, that menu was never duplicated in my kitchen. With the intensity I once loved it, I now hate it.

(cheering up)

But I moved on in life for Ethan's sake. I substituted at the elementary school when I could find a sitter, and took in laundry when I couldn't.

(dolefully)

After a handful of months of just scraping by, I received some legal papers in the mail - special delivery. I signed where it said to sign without readin' it much. I didn't want to prolong the unavoidable. It was easier to just sign and be done with it. Withholdin' a little ink would not erase the blot on my life. The bleedin' had stopped, but the wounds were deep and unforgiving.

(perking up)

I wasn't looking for love. I was too busy for that. Sometimes things just happen out of mutual circumstance. That's the way it was with Jonathan P. Freeman. He was a strikin' young upstart who could have had his pick of the ladies.

(proudly)

He was the school superintendent for the district, a man of establishment.

(deductively)

Still, even men of his substance require occasional nourishment, so we chanced to run into one another at the local Piggly Wiggly. I couldn't reach an item off the top shelf,

(bashfully)

and he noticed my supple form in the attempt. At least, that's what he told me later, Mr. Beauregard. I don't want to come off as braggin' about my figure.

(continuing cheerfully)

His comin' to the rescue may have seemed like an innocent affair, but the attraction was both immediate and permanent. You'd think that one could simply shop from a list and get a week's worth of goods in one shot, but no, Jonathan P. Freeman and I were seen at the Piggly Wiggly at least four nights in a row. Before you knew it, weddin' bells were chimin'. We went to Birmingham for our honeymoon, but we couldn't resist one last stop at the Piggly Wiggly on our way out of town. We were so happy.

(pausing, then continuing
embarrassed)

Almost got tossed out of church one Sunday. We made the pastor's wife uneasy. She always peeked during prayer time just to make sure that Jonathan and I weren't conductin' overly affectionate exchange during times of corporate reverence. We sat so close together, sometimes it was hard to tell. When such is the matter of things, naturally more children were soon to follow. And so came Eva and Adlai.

(reminded of her hostess duties)

I'm sorry, Mr. Beauregard. I'm I borin' you?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(uncomfortable)

No, Ma'am. Was gitten a might squeamish, but Iz okay.

LEENA

(continuing)

We were such a handsome clan. The kids were always so well behaved in school, but then they had to be. Their dad was superintendent. It was good for the kids, havin' a built-in tutor in the family.

(reflective)

Years passed in a whirl. Before we knew it, the children were in high school. Ethan was a senior, Adlai was a freshman, and Eva was somewhere in between based upon grade points earned and missed. Ethan relished his senior year and aired his ambitions to become a famous journalist. Adlai was a freshman full of freshman ideas. Eva found contentment in the social aspects of schoolin' and was more proud of passin' her drivin' test than the quiz in world geography. Though as different as flakes of snow, they were a tight knit bunch.

(halfheartedly)

Jonathan P. Freeman was not the kind of man to place his job before his family. If it weren't for that phone call in the middle of the night, it all would have turned out differently. The call came in around two in the morning from an 'endearing' school board member, sayin',

"Superintendent Freeman, I'm sorry to disturb you at home, but there are lights on again at the high school. I hate to call this late, but I thought you ought to be informed."

(gossipy)

Mr. Freeman knew Mr. Byrd, the board member, relished the opportunity to call no matter the clock hand position. Still, a board member is a board member.

(dispassionately)

Mr. Freeman tried to relay the message to the constable, but there was no answer. He had no option but to drive downtown to check things out. Probably the custodian forgot to cut the lights after cleanin' up on his ev'nin' rounds. It'd happened far too often.

(perturbed)

It's not like the electric bill would be sendin' the district into financial collapse, but it was the appearance of things. Mr. Freeman wanted to lead by example, and how could he demonstrate fiscal responsibility to his constituency with those lights burnin' 'round the clock? He normally just took care of it himself, but last time, there were signs of mischief. The constable instructed Mr. Freeman to let him handle it in the future, just to be safe.

(with melancholy)

The next mornin', the constable did arrive, but he came directly to our home. Jonathan's car was not in the drive, but I was oblivious to such detail. I had waited up as long as physically possible but fell asleep on the divan. "If you're lookin' for Jonathan, he's not here," I told the constable.

(solemnly)

"I know, Leena, I know," was all the constable could manage at the moment. He proceeded to give me the news no one deserves the responsibility to give. All the more, no one deserves to receive such grief at the hands of one not a next of kin. The details were sketchy, but they were only details. It seems some youth were in the process of turnin' select items of public property into private gain when Mr. Freeman happened along. There was a scuffle, a chase. Jonathan was unaware of a second party waitin' on the back lot ready to make a quick getaway. The car clipped him and sent him reelin' into concrete reinforcement. The head injury was not fatal for someone receivin' prompt medical attention. Tragically, the custodian made the discovery only upon his arrival to unlock the premises early the next mornin'. The constable found the car involved in the hit-and-run and detained the owner's son. He pieced together the sequence, but the boy was unwillin' to give up his friends.

(pausing, plainly)

I'm surprised I remember anything from that night, but pain etches a deep imprint. The constable wasn't sure anything he said had registered from the absence of a response, but he turned and exited the awkward scene regardless.

(pausing, painfully)

Only Ethan was able to console me, for the other children bore far too great a family resemblance. Throughout the funeral, it was obvious that I was lackin' in copin' skills to get beyond the situation. Back at the house, I commented to one of a long line of comforters bearin' baked goods, "Life stores up precious memories in a pile. When the pile topples, we can reclaim only fragments, but faith can orient the fall." This was odd comin' from me, for on this spiritual battleground, I was stripped barren.

(pausing, recovering)

I legally changed my name back to Adams, so that my very *signature* would not bring me daily sorrow. I used to break out in tears just to write out a check, especially for groceries. Strangely enough, I found more comfort in Adams, the name of my first husband over my maiden name, Williams. I preferred Adams. It suited me. A husband who vanishes voluntarily is much easier to erase than one permanently held captive by the grave. Besides, if I took my maiden name, it might be misconstrued that I was open to another relationship. No, Adams suits me well.

(merrily changing gears)

But enough dreariness, Mr. Beauregard. I am celebratin' my sixtieth birthday. Eva has sent me a lovely card, and Adlai is on his way to take me to lunch. You know, Adlai is an actor, Mr. Beauregard - usually quite a good one. What a glorious day!

(Lights fade out.)

SCENE THREE

(In front of the Adams home on the sixtieth anniversary of Leena's birth at 10:25 in the morning. Adlai pulls up in a red T-Bird convertible but parks on the street opposite the house. Adlai is a handsome man dressed in a pressed white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark slacks. His dark hair is slicked back, and he carries the air of an actor who never leaves the stage. He remains in the car talking to himself, constantly checking his rear view mirror. Adlai prides himself in his ability to mold himself into the character of the moment, but he cannot shake his southern accent when not playing a part.)

ADLAI

(perturbed)

Just me alone, a consummate actor with no fanfare. I *hate* enterin' that house, yet I have to do it over and over again. When was I elected to oversee all such familial commemorative events? Just 'cause I'm the only one with guts enough to settle within a hundred miles of her?

(crescendoing)

If not for these family chains, I could be a famous Hollywood actor or Broadway star. I know it. I'd be the name on everyone's lips. I have the looks, the talent, the drive, but not the freedom.

(self-endearing)

Today, I'll give a stellar performance to an audience of one. She'll have no idea of the disdain I harbor deep within. She'll never know I'd rather be anywhere but here. By the end of the day, she'll love me for my outward manifestation of carin'. Leena Adams will praise me for my faithfulness.

(consolingly)

At least today, I don't have to face it alone. Unbeknownst to Mama, Ethan will be joinin' us for the festivities. That is, unless he disappoints again.

(impatiently)

Where is he? He should be here already. He needs to be here already.

(Adlai stays in the car. He checks the rear view mirror, but the only image there is his own. He looks admiringly at himself.)

ADLAI

(egotistically)

Adlai, you *are* a handsome devil. Take a note. Eat better. Too many late nights and late night snacks, common in drama circles. I *must* retain my Barrymore-ish charm lest I be typecast as a character actor of deep-set eyes and hallow cheeks. The day *will* come when my appearance and surroundin's do not overstate my financial position. Appearance *is* everything, second to a good line. Right now, however, I am playin' myself, pure and unadulterated.

(strategizing)

Ethan will arrive at any moment. Perhaps in tandem we can confront Mama, but I desperately need to coach Ethan on his lines.

(defiant)

Ethan needs to set Mama straight on a few things, even if it *is* her birthday.

(fraught)

Ethan may only blow in for the day, leavin' no other option. Perhaps with Ethan backin' me up, we could get through to her that some things must change.

(Adlai is compelled to unbutton his sweat-soaked collar.)

ADLAI

(agitated)

It's like a sauna out here with the walls closin' in on me.

(A handkerchief brings temporary relief from the symptom. There is no liberating breeze. Almost out of panic, Adlai exits the car and leans backwards against the hood, one foot on the bumper.)

ADLAI

(apprehensive)

Where is he? Surely, I won't have to do this alone.

(Adlai bumps his watch to verify the hands aren't lodged in place. Adlai runs both hands through his long jet black hair once, then twice. On the third time, he slumps over and paused midway through the motion. With his head buried in his hands, he momentarily loses himself.)

ADLAI

(candidly)

Who am I, really? Do I write my own lines, or am I merely recitin' my destiny? I botched the one good relationship I had with Christina. We were perfect for one another. Why did she have to press me about settlin' down? Didn't she realize I could not tether myself to this town. I had to be ready in a moment's notice to answer the beckon of a Hollywood producer. Such is the life of an actor. I thought I loved her, but maybe I was caught between my feelin's and the notion that I was an actor playin' a love scene - a good actor. There were many after Christina, but they all ended similarly, yet without the extended drama. I am a good actor, though. When a worldly co-star gives me the proper cue, I play the part as deeply into the script as she cares to take me, yet these relationships are simply role plays - Act II, Scene 1, Take 3.

(While Adlai is captive to his thoughts, Ethan arrives unnoticed. He parks behind Adlai in his old Ford F150 and quickly exits. Ethan has on gray trousers and a short-sleeved button down. He has the air and subtle flair of a reporter. Ethan still carries a southern accent, though moderated by city life. He walks up to Adlai and places a hand on his shoulder.)

ETHAN

(briskly)

Adlai, wake up!

ADLAI

(recoiling)

Brother, I thought I was gonna have to do this solo.

ETHAN

(discounting)

What are you talkin' about? It's Mama's birthday - a milestone for her. Where else could I be? What are we doin' out here? Let's go inside.

(already beginning to break a sweat)

It's gonna be a scorcher.

(Adlai still a bit groggy, takes a step towards the front door before catching himself.)

ETHAN

(gently urging)

This way, Adlai. Wow, I can't believe Mama is sixty. She doesn't look it.

ADLAI

Don't kid yourself. The truth is she *looks* much older, and moreover, she *acts* much older than she looks.

(Adlai grabs Ethan by the arm.)

ADLAI

(edgy)

Hey, Ethan, how long's it been? You weren't here last year, nor the year before. Mama's really not doin' so well. She forgets to pay the bills. She tips the boy who mows the lawn with twenties. Nothin' is ever clean enough. Last month I had to pay to get her gas turned back on. When she got the bill, she just said, "There must be a mistake. They'll sort it out by next month." Before that, it was the phone bill. I don't know how much longer I can do this alone.

ETHAN

(remorsefully)

Let me pay you back for that phone bill. Mama was callin' me almost daily. I should have asked her to reverse the charges. She seemed distraught, but I never could get her to divulge what was really the matter. She just kept sayin' that it was good to hear my voice. There would be long pauses when I knew she was ready to break through, but the words wouldn't flow. I got only fragments - somethin' about Peter lovin' my brother and knowin' the truth all along. It didn't stop her from

callin' and tryin' all over again. Finally, she must have found solace, 'cause the calls stopped. She just thanked me for listenin' to an old woman's chatter. I don't even know any Peter, unless she was referrin' to Ol' Pete, the butcher. Adlai, any clue as to what she was talkin' about?

(Adlai wipes his brow and upper lip once again before responding.)

ADLAI

(nervously)

Hey, Ethan, the theatre's packed with disoriented folk, but I don't recollect any named Peter, and you know, Ethan, I'm a straight-flyin' kite.

ETHAN

(resoundingly)

Of that I'm sure. That's why I could make neither heads nor tails of it. Has Mama been takin' her medication, for I thought maybe the pills were wearin' off or somethin'?

ADLAI

(whining)

All I know is the pills disappear, and I keep payin' for more. Her last checkup went well, so I assume she's followin' doctor's orders. Lord knows she doesn't listen to me!

ETHAN

(sincerely)

She loves you, Adlai, more than you'll ever know.

ADLAI

(unconvinced)

Sure.

ETHAN

(diverting)

Hey, Adlai, how's the acting? Any big breaks?

ADLAI

(belligerent)

Who can get a break here in Waltham City?

ETHAN

(reaching)

Maybe you could make your own break? You had chances before. Remember when you had the leadin' role in the senior play in high school, and you were offered a partial scholarship to continue your education?

ADLAI

(rejecting)

I was ready to act, not ready to study actin'. The lights burned bright for me. I derive no satisfaction in goin' to the movies or watchin' television. I know I could do better than the lot of 'em, if just given the chance. But here in Waltham City, how could anyone get a real chance to do anything aside from fake their way through church?

ETHAN

(making light of the situation)

Yes, Adlai, you are an actor extraordinaire. You have convinced yourself you are a victim. Or rather, you have convinced me that you are convinced.

ADLAI

(back on task)

Enough about me. I need your help with Mama.

(They reach the back door.)

ADLAI

(pointing toward the screen door
with his palm up)

See this! This is what I'm talkin' about.

(Adlai now places his palm parallel to the door, inches away.)

ADLAI

(with mounting fury)

Feel that? Her electric bill is sky high, 'cause she wants to cool all of Waltham City! Does anyone else live life twenty-four hours a day with the back door open? She padlocks the front, but the back door is public access number one. I ask her to do her part in conservin' energy, but she just says, "Oh, Adlai," and that's the end of it. Ethan, you gotta *help* me with this one.

ETHAN

(unenthusiastic)

Adlai, she's lived with just this screen door between her and the world for nearly twenty years. Do you honestly think that we have the right to tell her she's been doin' it all wrong?

(convinced)

Now maybe if this were Los Angeles, there'd be a safety issue, but we're in Waltham City. Honestly, if I were a crook, I'd not waste my time on Waltham City. Look!

(Ethan pulls off a large wafer of exterior paint.)

ETHAN

(resolutely)

Not even the paint wants to stay in this town. I'll send a little extra startin' next month. Just let her slide on this, but I *will* remind her that she needs to pay her bills on time.

ADLAI

(harkingly)

So you're gonna turn on me, too! While you live the good life in Kansas City, I rot here. When you leave to go back, I'll still be chained here. I need to be somebody!

ETHAN

(dubious)

Stop overacting, Adlai. Let's see Mama.

ADLAI

(Perking up on a dime)

I never could fool you, Ethan. I never can.

(A curious grin crosses Adlai's face.)

ETHAN

(in jest)

Why, Adlai, I do believe no more honest words have ever pursed your lips.

ADLAI

After you, my dear *half*-brother.

(Adlai opens the door for Ethan, and they both enter the kitchen.)

ADLAI

(loudly)

Mama, we're here. Happy birthday!

(Adlai releases the screen door, achieving an inescapable whack. Ethan steps into the cupboard for a surprise entrance. Leena makes her way to the kitchen from the other room with a grimace on her face.)

LEENA

(scoldingly)

Do you have to let that screen door batter the house like that? It's the only one I've got.

ADLAI

(redirecting)

Mama, let's not fight today. It's your birthday. Besides, I brought a guest.

LEENA

(chastisingly)

I hope it's not another girlfriend. I just don't approve of your parading those young actresses through my kitchen.

(Just then Ethan steps out from the pantry.)

ETHAN

(eagerly)

Happy birthday, Mama.

LEENA

(reverberating in a quite different tone)

Oh Ethan, it's you!

(a little perturbed)

Why didn't you tell me, Adlai, that Ethan was comin' to town? I could have baked a cake or somethin'.

ETHAN

(heartily)

Mama, it's your birthday. I'm not the one to get a cake, you are. Only, we are not the ones to bake it either, so why don't we all go out to eat - a birthday lunch.

LEENA
(flabbergasted)

A birthday lunch ... ?

ADLAI
(interposing)

Mama, don't act surprised. We've been plannin' a birthday lunch all along.

LEENA
(gleeful)

I know, but this is altogether different. Ethan is here.

ETHAN
(interjecting, sensing Adlai's
blood pressure on the rise)

Coming unannounced was my idea. Adlai had great plans for you two. Mama, this is your day, and I'll tag along only on one condition.

LEENA
(withdrawing)

Conditions? I'm not really one for conditions.

ETHAN
(jovial)

The condition is that we save room for angel food cake.

LEENA
(glowing)

Angel food cake - my favorite!

ETHAN
(building)

With strawberries and ice cream.

ADLAI
(apprehensively)

And you'll buy?

ETHAN
(comforting)

It'll be my treat.

(All notions of conflict calmed momentarily.)

ETHAN

(accommodating)

Only one question remains. Where shall we go?

ADLAI

(responding quickly)

Why don't we try the new diner on 5th Street? I hear they have great desserts - includin' a real mean pecan pie.

LEENA

(retorting)

What wrong with Mabel's? You know that's my favorite. When someone has a favorite, you just shouldn't take chances on somethin' less.

ETHAN

(arbitrating)

Adlai, it's Mama's birthday. I think we should let her decide. Besides, I already planted the notion of angel food cake, not pecan pie. Let's go to Mabel's.

ADLAI

(relenting)

Mabel's it is, then.

(The fury inside Adlai swells. As the clan makes their way toward the back door, Adlai turns.)

ADLAI

(opportunistically)

Mama, let's just pull this back door shut while we're out, just to keep the cool air in.

LEENA

(reacting)

Oh, Adlai!

(The door is only a nickel's thickness from resting in the doorframe when Ethan grips Adlai's hand, still on the knob.)

ETHAN

(calmly but resolutely)

Adlai, let it go.

(Adlai's face reddens quickly. He clinches his opposite fist, ready for whatever might happen next.)

ADLAI

(confessing)

Growing up, I was never endowed with the upper hand.

(Ethan firmly releases the door to swing back to its natural open position.)

ETHAN

(diffusing the situation with ease)

Adlai, let's go celebrate. I bet even Mabel serves up pecan pie. I could go for some short ribs and fried okra first. How does that sound? Remember, it's my treat.

(Ethan puts his left arm around Adlai's neck, and reaches out with his right to take his mother's hand.)

SCENE FOUR

(Mabel's Dinner on the town square - a homey atmosphere with conservative 1960's decorum. There are red and white checkerboard tablecloths and booths rather than tables. The lights are dingy, diffuse yellow-white. Staff is dressed in uniform, complete with apron. The appearance is clean and orderly. The diner is near capacity. Leena, Ethan, and Adlai appear at the front and stop at the sign, "Please Wait to be Seated.")

LEENA

(distressed)

Ethan, it's packed, and oh, look, my favorite seat is occupied.

ADLAI

(irritated)

Mama, a seat is just a seat. It's not like the theatre. Here the stage is the table in front of you.

LEENA

(whining)

You know I like to dine near the window by the walkway. Mabel always has that stretch so well landscaped. Food just tastes better when surrounded by flowers, and Mabel's chrysanthemums are in full bloom.

ADLAI

(rebutting)

Mama, chrysanthemums have no detectable fragrance at more than nose distance.

LEENA

(quaintly)

I just love the rows of small orderly petals in stunnin' colors. God did it right when he made chrysanthemums.

ETHAN

(confirming)

He surely did.

LEENA

(overly perturbed)

Just gander at that sickly-lookin', ungrateful stranger from out of town. Why, the gaunt-lookin' man in my seat with deeply embedded eyes and saggin' jowls has not even once glanced toward the walk. His eyes are fixed upon the woman opposite him with more buttons unused on her blouse than necessary.

(crescendoing)

It's just not right! People come to Mabel's to enjoy a good meal in pleasant surroundings. He's neither eatin', nor admirin' the scenery beyond the adjoinin' seat. Must he occupy the best and parade the worst?

ADLAI

(tugging at his mom's arm)

Let's just not make a scene, Mother.

(A waitress comes to take them to their seat. They follow reluctantly as they are guided past the stranger and the best seat in the house. Ethan guides Leena along after she stops and turns her head for a last angry gaze. The man is visually occupied.)

ETHAN

(interceding)

I'm sure the food will taste equally well anywhere in the diner, and the only view I'm truly interested in is the one at the bottom of my plate.

(They all chuckled, as Leena, Ethan, and Adlai were steered around islands of flowers and potted plants to a booth near the kitchen.)

ETHAN

(delighted)

Ahh, right next to the kitchen! What a perfect place to celebrate. Not only do we get to feast on our own meal selection, but we also get to sample the aroma of everything on the menu. Mama, after today you may just have a new favorite seat.

(A thin, little girl with minimal makeup and a worn look on her face pops up at the table side.)

WAITRESS

(tentative, as if reciting her lines.)

My name is Amanda. I will be your waitress. Can I get you something to drink, while you look over our menu?

(The waitress extends three menus in their direction.)

ADLAI

(patronizingly)

You must be new. We are not. We won't be needin' menus. However, if you bring us three iced teas, by the time you return, I'm sure we will have made up our minds.

(The waitress abruptly departs after jotting down something on a printed pad.)

LEENA

(curiously)

Adlai, how did you know she was new to the job?

ADLAI

(arrogantly)

She barely knew her lines, and though she squeezed them out, she wasn't lookin' at any of us in the delivery. She is simply a novice. I spotted it immediately. Then, of course, the confirmation came when she discarded face time to jot down "3 iced teas." Anyone at the job for long would have simply smiled and scribed the ticket in the back.

ETHAN

(vigilantly)

That's quite remarkable, but did you take the time to notice she is also pregnant and unmarried? Did you see her finger only adorned a senior ring and that her feet were so swollen she could not completely lace her shoes? Did you see that look on her face that said, "I'd rather be anywhere but here, yet I need the meager wage and all the tips I could earn?" I admire her for her willingness to become a novice.

ADLAI

(uncaring)

Then someday, no doubt, she shall make a *fine* waitress.

(The waitress returns with three iced teas. She sets them down, then pulls the pad and pencil nub ready for the next phase.)

WAITRESS

(feigning eagerness)

Shall I take your order?

ADLAI

(sarcastically)

Yes, you shall. And may I add, you are performin' splendidly. I've never before been served a glass of tea so refreshingly filled with ice.

LEENA

(disappointed)

Oh, Adlai!

ETHAN

(redirecting)

Yes, I believe we are ready to order. Mama, you go first. It is only right. It is your birthday.

WAITRESS

(excited, unscripted)

It's your birthday? Mine too. Technically, mine was yesterday, but I'm celebratin' it today - or rather tonight, after work. What would you like? I'll make sure the cook does it up special.

LEENA

(without hesitation)

I'll have the chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with cream gravy, and fried okra.

WAITRESS

(frowning)

That's it, Ma'am? For you birthday, don't you want to add somethin' sweet?

ETHAN

(composed)

That's comin', but one thing at a time. I'm gonna have a stack of your barbeque short ribs, fried okra, and corn so tender it's fallin' off the cob.

WAITRESS

(engaged)

Now you're making *me* hungry. And you, Sir, what would you like?

ADLAI

(coldly)

I'll have beef Wellington, fresh asparagus, and sautéed mushrooms. And please add a spring salad with blue cheese dressin'. Oh, and next time you freshen up our tea, a little rum in mine might be nice.

WAITRESS

(blankly)

Well, I don't remember all that from the menu, but I wrote it down. I'm sure our cook can accommodate. I'm not sure of the prices.

ADLAI

(disregarding)

I am not concerned about price.

(pause, then pointing to Ethan)

He is payin'.

WAITRESS

(reassuringly)

I will get this out to you as soon as possible.

(The waitress leaves. The lights dim.
When the lights come up, the main meal is complete.)

ADLAI

(content)

While the surroundin's are marginal, Mabel's cookin' did not disappoint. Let's order desert.

LEENA

(tentative)

Well I don't know ...

ETHAN
(firmly)

But I do.

(Ethan catches the glance of the waitress,
and she is immediately drawn to him.)

ETHAN
(kindly)

We are now ready for a round of Mabel's famous angel food
cake. And please make the birthday girl's special.

ADLAI
(crosswise)

Make mine pecan pie - a double portion.

WAITRESS
(gracious)

Yes, Sir. It'll be right out.

(The waitress whirls around joyfully
prepared to please. A few moments of
unpronounced discussion fill the time. The
waitress returns with the order.)

ETHAN
(lovingly)

Mama, the day's not complete without somethin' you love.

(Leena's eyes are as wide as saucers when
the waitress brings her a wedge of angel
food cake drenched in sliced strawberries,
chocolate syrup, and homemade vanilla ice
cream. The others were similarly great,
but Leena's is grand.)

LEENA
(overwhelmed)

It looks so marvelous. I don't know where to begin.

ETHAN
(humorously)

I do, Mama. Begin by pickin' up your fork.

LEENA
(endearing)

But I just want to look at it a moment longer.

(Adlai proceeds to eat and talk with his mouth full.)

ADLAI

(indulgent)

Presentation *is* everything, but I am now making introductions to those finer senses - taste and delight.

ETHAN

(flattering)

Mama, I do believe you can make a better cake, but this one tastes better than the sum of the ingredients, because we are all here together.

LEENA

(tongue-tied)

I am ... speechless.

ETHAN

(wittily)

And it's a good thing, because unbeknownst to Adlai, it's not polite to talk with your mouth full.

(Adlai stands flailing his arms.)

ADLAI

(purposefully strident)

Waitress! Oh, waitress!

(The waitress comes running.)

WAITRESS

(worried)

Anything wrong, Sir?

ADLAI

(reckless)

Yes, indeed. We are missin' somethin'.

(A flush look is upon the waitresses face, afraid she botched the order and her opportunity at a much-needed tip.)

ADLAI

(imposing)

We are missin' a song. Gather the service crew for a birthday serenade.

LEENA

(bashful)

Oh, Adlai. You shouldn't.

(The waitress gathers a few idle staff.)

ADLAI

(overzealous)

Nonsense. I will start us off. Happy Birthday ...

(They all sing. The service crew disperses.)

LEENA

(confessing)

Well I say, I was embarrassed to no end. I guess in addition to my slice of cake I got a slice of what must motivate you, Adlai, even if it were only a small portion. We really had no business orderin' dessert, but I sure am glad we did.

ADLAI

(theatrical)

Life ... is experiential.

ETHAN

(practical)

A little indulgence at sixty is on the menu.

LEENA

(candidly)

I am thankful to have my family with me on just such an occasion.

ADLAI

(tactlessly)

Well, we aren't *all* here. Mama, what do you hear from Eva? Still not talkin'?

(Ethan gives Adlai a penetrating stare.)

ETHAN

(upset)

Adlai, you know full well that the two are not, but you threw out the glove anyway.

LEENA

(consoling)

It's okay, Ethan.

ETHAN

(augmenting for completeness)

I *spoke* with Eva, and she *did* so wish to be here today. She tried to make arrangements, but even the simplest of itinerary changes can be knotty for those who don't drive. She told me that she loves you more than words can express, and she wants to patch things up between you two. She plans to come spend a few days with you next month, if you're free,... and I believe she sent a card.

LEENA

(gratified)

Why, yes, she did - a wonderful card. You simply must read it when we go back to the house. There was no mention of a visit in her card, but it was a lovely card all the same. Please tell her that I am lookin' forward to her visit, but please have her call first, so I can give her my undivided attention.

ETHAN

(agreeing)

I'll do that, Mama. You two have a lot of catchin' up to do - a lot of catchin' up.

(Ethan really wanted to finish his dessert, but it was all he could do to draw little doodads on his plate with his fork in the leftover chocolate syrup. It'd been at least two minutes since anyone was able to raise a utensil, placing an undue burden on human interaction.)

LEENA

(furtively)

I don't wish to be controversial, but, Ethan, why don't you stay through the weekend? You could even come with

me to church on Sunday. There's someone there I know would be tickled pink if you'd show.

ADLAI

(enjoying the moment)

We all know exactly where *this* line of questioning is leading. Mama, how is Rachel?

LEENA

(praising)

Rachel is stunnin' ... simply stunnin' - always has been. What *do* you say, Ethan?

ETHAN

(pauses then firmly with a grimace)

Mama ... are you gonna eat that last strawberry? If not, I want it.

(They all chuckle.)

ETHAN

(straightfaced)

I'm serious. Forks it over.

(Leena submits.)

LEENA

(appreciative)

What a wonderful sixtieth birthday!

(They all get up to leave. Ethan returns to the table to leave a tip. He doles out several bills, stops, then tops the stack off with a few more.)

ETHAN

(to himself)

She deserves better. May God bless her.

(Ethan exits to join the others.)

SCENE FIVE

(Eva's residence in Greenville. It is a humble place, not too tidy. It is noon, and Eva is already physically and emotionally depleted. Eva is a mentally fragile, modest looking woman with unkempt hair in housecoat and slippers. Her face is etched with despair and neglect.)

EVA

(exhausted)

What a day, and the sun refuses to go down! It just sits there high in the sky taunting me. There's never enough time in a day to get things done, and you just have to prove that it's me and not you. Every time I stop to catch my breath, you remind me that I'm unable to keep up with you stride for stride. Look at that clock! Either it's broke, or I'm broken. Where's my list?

(distraught)

Phone call to Mama? Oh, why did I ever agree to that? Ethan caught me at a particularly weak moment. I didn't want to answer the phone, but it kept on ringin' and ringin'. Most folks get the message when no one picks up after the first five rings. Last night, Ethan was persistent ...

(Flashback to Sunday night. Lights fade on Eva and rise on Ethan from his bedroom in Kansas City. It is a simple tidy room with unimposing décor in browns and blues. Ethan sits on the corner of the bed with a phone in hand. A faint ring is heard five times.)

ETHAN

(impatient)

Eva, pick up the phone. Just pick up the phone. Most folks get the message that a man willin' to wait five or more rings really has somethin' important to say.

(There is an audible click. The lights come back up at Eva's place, a little less tidy with evening lighting.)

ETHAN
(uncertain)

Eva is that you?

EVA
(rhetorical)

Who else would be answerin' my phone at this hour? Yes, it's me, Ethan. I could pick your voice out of a lineup of fifty.

ETHAN
(encouraging)

Eva, you know tomorrow is the big day. We'll both be there. I think it would mean the world to Mama if you'd call her up to wish her a happy birthday also.

EVA
(Whining and belligerent)

You know I can't do that! Besides, I already mailed her that card you bought. I made it perfectly clear that I would not even pay for the stamp. I signed my name, and disposed of it for a proper postmark, but that's all I agreed to do!

ETHAN
(persuasive)

Yes, I thank you for doin' your part, but this is no longer about you. This is about an old woman turnin' sixty who loves you more than you can imagine.

EVA
(lost and rejecting)

Love? Really, after all that's been said and done? But what could I possibly say to her?

ETHAN
(conciliatory)

You don't have to tell her you love her - just a simple birthday greeting. That would be enough. She can fill in the gaps. Folks don't turn sixty every day.

EVA
(worn down)

Oh, Ethan! I suppose that true, ... but I'll only do it because you asked. I don't want to disappoint you, Ethan. You love me too much.

(The lights go down on Eva's place.)

ETHAN

(appreciative)

Thanks, Eva. I love you more than you'll ever know.

(The lights go down for Ethan. The lights come up in the present for Eva.)

EVA

(hesitant)

Quarter past twelve and it's now at the top of my "To Do" list. Do I dare disappoint Ethan? I need to just keep tellin' myself it is just another item tacked on the end of an extensive shoppin' list. Let me put away the groceries first.

(Eva walks to the cupboard to shelve a few cans, then stops.)

EVA

(anxious)

Let's just get it over. Would she be upset if I just said "Happy Birthday" and hung up?

(Eva walks back to the phone. She nervously dials the number.)

EVA

(dizzy)

I can't think straight. What are the last four digits? I don't want to remember. 43 ... 27. Lord, give me strength!

(Eva has to distance the receiver to avoid the vacillating handset.)

EVA

(feverish)

With each resounding pulse, I feel my jaw muscles tightenin' like twists on the keys of an ill-tuned guitar. Oh, Lord, it's ringin'! What will I say? What can I say?

(A sense of relief floods her face when there is no answer after five rings. Eva

quickly drops the handset into its home base.)

EVA

(frazzled)

If she were home, Mama would never let the phone ring more than five times before pickin' up. Yes, I believe five rings was more than sufficient. I can cross that item off my list as accomplished. I promised to honor my brother's request to call, and I did. I cannot control an unwillingness to answer.

(relieved)

I feel like a thirty-year weight has been lifted from my shoulders, if but for a moment. Mr. Sun, please drive your chariot across the sky ... for me. End this day without regret.

(Lights fade.)

SCENE SIX

(Ethan's pickup on the highway towards Kansas City Saturday afternoon. Ethan turns on the radio and is unhappy with the station. He tunes to another, then a third. Finally, he twists the knob off, unable to find a suitable outlet worthy enough to subdue his thoughts.)

ETHAN

(tortured)

Why did Mama have to arouse thoughts I had pronounced dead and buried? Now, all I can think about is Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. High school doesn't seem so long ago. We were an item - one of those teen romances that just wouldn't go away. When I took up that job in Kansas City, it spelled the end, or at least the end of another chapter. What would it hurt to have spent the night ... to have seen her, to talk to her, wish her well?

(badgering himself)

Ethan is *far* too responsible for that. No, Ethan is expected back at the Herald, and so that's where *he* is gonna be. Why am I so responsible? What's wrong with being a dreamer, like Adlai - content without accomplishment, bankin' on the future?

(contemplative)

Mr. Beauregard used to say, "You can't fault a man for daydreamin', so long as his dreams don't get in the way of his livin'." Only thing, I have difficulty reconcilin' if I am livin' or dreamin'.

(pausing)

Nothin' wrong with a pastor's daughter. You can always pinpoint her whereabouts on any given Sunday. Eva used to tease me about bein' in love with a beanpole. Rachel *is* slender but has just enough curve to add a touch of interest to her innocence. Even at that, when she slips into a silk dress and a pair of high heels, she can pack the pews for a Sunday service.

(validating)

It was no secret that Rachel only had eyes for me. She had plenty of opportunity. Even Adlai tried to snag her, while I was off at college studying journalism. Adlai never understood why anyone needed schoolin' to communicate more effectively. Everything flowed so easily for him, but then, he thought the words themselves had little value. It was all in the delivery. Rachel

saw through that duplicity quickly enough and dropped Adlai like a hot potato. No, words were important to Rachel ... but words failed me that day.

(Lights dim on Ethan and raise on a flashback with Ethan and Rachel in Mabel's diner. They are seated in a booth, sharing a dessert - apple spice rum cake with whipped cream and maraschino cherries.)

ETHAN

(anxious)

Rachel, I asked you here to celebrate, ... and everything is better topped with a maraschino cherry.

(Rachel rests her fork and dangles the fingers of her bare left hand in giddy expectation.)

RACHEL

(restless)

Whatever for, Ethan?

ETHAN

(uneasy)

It's difficult just to dive in.

RACHEL

(impatient)

Let me make it easier. The answer is, "Yes."

ETHAN

(confused)

Yes? To what?

RACHEL

(forthcoming)

I have practiced before a mirror all the many ways I could say yes to a proposal of marriage, but I don't mind doin' the askin' if it means I get to don a lace veil in *this* lifetime. You know Father likes you, and he approves. I told him at a moment's notice he might have some extra business to perform, *ex gratia*, of course. Sometimes you have to nudge time a bit when people get in the way.

ETHAN

(slight laugh and toss of the head)

Now you sound like Mr. Beauregard.

(leaning in unphased and serious)

Rachel, our marriage is a foregone conclusion, but I have some other news - great news! The Herald in Kansas City has offered me a job writin' features - a columnist.

RACHEL

(masking her hurt)

Oh, we're celebratin' a job offer ... in Kansas City? That's wonderful news, Ethan ... wonderful news. You have to accept. You simply have to. The answer is indeed, "Yes."

ETHAN

(blindly bliss)

You'll see, Rachel. This job will create a stability not often afforded to folk in Waltham City. Once established, you can join me there.

RACHEL

(nurturing)

It's a wonderful plan, Ethan. You'll make me so proud. I'm takin' out a subscription to the Herald first thing in the mornin'. I can't wait to read whatever you write. I'll start a scrapbook for us with all your clippins. It doesn't matter if the news has no bearin' on life here in Waltham City. It doesn't matter if the paper arrives a day late with yesterday's news. It doesn't matter if your column highlights an unsolved murder, exposes corruption at City Hall, or reports the aftermath of a solitary twister. I will clip every article and read each at least three or four times before pastin' it into our memory book.

ETHAN

(blissfully blind)

I doubt I'll have anything to write off the bat, but the editor wants me to start next week. Rachel, you are so understanding. I don't deserve the likes of you.

RACHEL

(softly)

Until the day you call, you know where to find me.

(The flashback fades to black, and lights re-emerge with Ethan on the road back to Kansas City.)

ETHAN

(to himself with regret)

It was unfortunate that Rachel's nudge came the same day as the Herald job offer. Once on the payroll, however, the work was all-consumin'. Besides, Rachel is a Waltham City kind-of-girl. Kansas City would swallow her alive.

(wiping away a tear)

When the additional words stopped comin' wrapped in personal stationary, the returned perfumed responses did also. We just sorta drifted into separate rooms where the walls fail to intersect, but all it took was a suggestion firmly planted to get the wheels turnin' again.

(whaling)

Mama, why'd you stir up the pot? Why let old issues cloud present judgment.

(sighing)

It's a long way back to Kansas City - just totin' the dotted line, the one sortin' those comin' and goin'. It's peculiar how a little reflective stripe is able to separate life from death. A little yellow paint provides just the margin of safety required - people propelled at blazin' speeds in opposite directions, barely missin' one another.

(pensively)

Shall I cross over? The collision would not in itself be life-threatening. It's the momentum of diametrically movin' objects that can sever body and soul with ease.

(dejected)

No, I will tow the line - all the way to Kansas City. I am exhausted beyond belief, but I know my bed will provide not one iota of relief. Sleep is not a remedy for one unable to dream.

(Ethan clears his eyes, as lights fade.)

SCENE SEVEN

(Leena enters the kitchen through the screen door. She is alone. She sets down her purse on the counter.)

LEENA

(to herself)

Home again. Wasn't that delightful! A birthday to end all birthdays.

(Leena turns to the empty kitchen table.)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, I didn't hear you come in, but then, you're welcome anytime. You know that.

(pausing)

What did I have to eat?

(lighthearted)

Why, Mr. Beauregard, a lady just doesn't reveal *everything*, but I will say I ate a tad more than a lady should.

(giggling)

Fiddle-dee-dee, it is my birthday.

(pausing)

Adlai? ... He'll be right back. He had to run an errand.

(pausing, disappointed)

No, I couldn't persuade Ethan to stay. He said he was expected back on the job. I don't know too many folk with an ounce of work on a Sunday, but I tried. I tried, Mr. Beauregard. He did say he would return when Eva is free to spend some time with me.

(pausing)

No, I don't rightly know when that'll be, but it sounded like it'd be soon. Won't that be somethin'. Been a long time, Mr. Beauregard, since I had a full house - the whole family together.

(pausing)

Eva? What about her? You mean I never confided in you the whole story?

(openly)

You see, we haven't been on speakin' terms for a quite some time. Eva had the world on a string 'til that tragic night. I don't know if it was the loss of a male role model or a complete rejection of a future without the father who adored her. Either way, Eva lost the ability to discriminate positive male relationships. Rather than seekin' someone who could compensate for her

emotional weakness, she sought the company of those with similar deficiencies. She didn't look for qualities in a man with her father as a template. Eva sought out comfort in the equally scarred. As on a seesaw, two on the same side can never achieve balance, no matter how high they lunge together. I took notice of the change in profile of the boys comin' by the house,

(slow and lamenting)

but my warnings were ineffectual. I failed to deal with the root problem. Eva got pregnant.

(accelerating with embarrassment)

The embarrassing affair kept the whole family out of church services for a spell, 'til Ethan's girlfriend requested her father to pay a house call. Regardless of ulterior motive, the pastor's visit did some good. It got the family movin' forward again and in attendance on Sunday.

(caring)

I helped Eva however I could after the baby was born, almost elevatin' the child to one of my own. Eva didn't seem to mind sharin' motherhood, for the psyche responsible for this baby's existence still groped for resolution. I became especially alarmed the day I came home to find Eva in the company of yet another man, while her baby was unattended in the next room.

(Flashback to when Eva was just nineteen. Lights fade on Leena in the present and rise on a much younger Leena entering her home through the back door. Leena pauses as she enters, hearing the sound of inexplicable shouting. The background noise falls silent following the familiar whack of the screen door.)

LEENA

(cautiously frozen in the kitchen)

Eva, is that you?

(There is abnormal silence.)

LEENA

(alarmed)

Eva!

EVA

(winded)

Yes, Mama, it's alright. I'm okay.

(Eva slinks into the kitchen. Eva tugs at her sleeve, but there is unconcealable bruising on one arm and a trace of blood on Eva's lower lip.)

LEENA

(cautiously frozen in the kitchen)

But, Eva, you are *not* okay! Your lip is bleeding, and are those bruises on your arm?

(A man slithers in, dressed in tattered jeans and a t-shirt. He uses a willing Eva as a shield as Eva ushers the man toward the door.)

BOYFRIEND

(callously polite)

Good evening, Ms. Adams. Just on my way out.

LEENA

(incensed)

There's nothing good about it, but the faster you leave my kitchen, the more likely you'll live to see another.

(Reaching out, Leena grabs him by the wrist just as he is about to make his escape.)

LEENA

(angrily staring him down)

You're that Watkins boy?

BOYFRIEND

(borderline scared)

Yes, Ma'am.

LEENA

(firmly; gently releasing her grip)

Mr. Watkins, if I see your face again, ... I'll remold it with my fryin' pan. Is that understood?

BOYFRIEND
(truly scared)

Perfectly, Ma'am.

(The boyfriend scoots out, and the door bangs in his wake. Eva foresees imminent displeasure in the next conversation. It shows on her face and in her mannerisms. Eva wrings her hands incessantly.)

LEENA
(calmly)

Was that the father?

EVA
(embarrassed)

No, Mama.

LEENA
(forcefully)

Eva, we have to talk.

EVA
(sassily)

Are we not talking now?

LEENA
(sternly)

No, this is conversation. We must talk. Eva, what are you doing with your life? This simply must come to an end for the child's sake. Your lifestyle is destructive, and I simply don't have the tools for this fight. Eva, I am not angry *at* you; I am angry *for* you.

(Leena tries to look Eva in the eye, but Eva avoids contact. Leena reaches out and lifts Eva's head to make her point. Eva counters by placing her hand on Leena's wrist.)

EVA
(spiteful)

Anger is all this world has to offer, Mama. What good does it do to get angry back? Don't you have more to offer me than love and concern? I deserve a good whippin', Mama, don't I? But your anger is misdirected

(pointing out the door;
despairingly)

at the world out there.

LEENA

(disarmingly)

Eva, pain on top of pain is no salve. Besides, you're nineteen. If you were seven, a paddle serves a purpose, but not at nineteen. Why, I'd paddle the world, if I could latch onto it, before I'd dream of compoundin' your pain.

EVA

(suffering)

I need to feel *somethin'*, Mama. I suffer through horrific numbness - the kind of numbness that binds the soul. What's a little bruise, an issue of blood? Pain bridges the gap between reality and indifference. When the hurt ebbs, apathy swallows me again.

(Leena reels in Eva in a prolonged embrace, while Eva sobs.)

LEENA

(consoling)

There, there, Eva, why don't I mix us up a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies? It will make us both feel better. There's not a problem in the world that a fresh oatmeal raisin cookie can't fix, properly baked ... along with a tall glass of warmed buttermilk.

(Eva pulls away from Leena in disgust.)

EVA

(retaliatory)

Mama, you don't get it, do you? The world barfs in your face, and you want to serve up oatmeal raisin? The world has a name for sugar-coating a problem. They call it a *placebo*. No confection can help *me* ... or *you*!

LEENA

(announcing with shaky voice)

That attitude is unacceptable. *You* are unacceptable. This is *my* home, *my* family. I will not allow this virus to run its course and infect us all without remedy. It is *my* decision. Eva, you are no longer welcome in my home.

EVA

(panicked)

What do you mean, Mother?

LEENA

(gaining resolve)

I have decided that you must leave. Once you have regained your faculties, you can take up your role in motherhood once again.

EVA

(distraught)

Where would I go? What would I do? You wouldn't toss me out like old newsprint! I've got rights - parental rights!

LEENA

(with unsure delivery)

Which is precisely the reason you must go. You must seek professional help. I will make arrangements for you at the conservatory in Greenville.

EVA

(pleading)

But it's the middle of the night. Greenville is in the next county.

(Leena fishes a wad of money from a cookie jar and shoves it into Eva's ungrateful hand.)

LEENA

(with clarity)

This should cover bus fare. You have ample time to catch the ev'nin' run. The conservatory is two blocks from the Greenville terminal. By the time you arrive, they'll be expectin' you.

(With no recourse, Eva flung open the screen door and exited, taking her fury out on the door frame with a thunderous whack. Leena walks to the door to watch her daughter's escape, then she melts to into a chair, sobbing. The lights dim and remount in the present with Leena and Mr. Beauregard.)

MR. BEAUREGARD

(empathetically)

That musta been some kinda hurt, Miss Leena. For youz, I mean.

LEENA

(with lament)

I watched Eva head for the bus station, knowin' her hand had been trumped. Deep down, I knew it was the right thing. That child, my grandson, deserved better. It was the right thing, Mr. Beauregard. Don't you agree?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(concurring)

I doz like me a good oatmeal raisin, but I reckon Eva called fer a bit mo'.

LEENA

(sadly)

Still, the mind is more easily convinced through injury than nobility. Eva clung to her hatred ... of me ... of the world - mostly of me. Mr. Beauregard, they teach now that we are a product of our environment. For proper mental health, they teach we are not the problem. If only we can redirect the issue, identify an external source, and transfer our anger, we can heal ... mentally speaking.

(accepting)

If hatin' me makes Eva better, let her hate.

MR. BEAUREGARD

(objecting)

Iz not a learned man, Miss Leena, but soundz lik a heap of collard greens gone bad to this un.

LEENA

(melancholy)

I was overwhelmed with genuine concern for a daughter I was ill-equipped to rescue, because ... I was in the fire, too. It was the manner of execution that failed to receive applause by all. I decided that between the two of us, life and pocketbooks allowed only one to get better. Two women, both in desperate need. One chose an outward expression, while the other somehow was able to masquerade through life. That day, I slumped into a

breakfast chair, convinced it was the best and most cruel thing I had ever done.

(pausing, then perking up)

Eva caught the red-eye to Greenville for what turned out to be an extended stay, since state insurance paid the bills.

(sadly)

The rivers ran deep for Eva, requirin' extensive respite care, accordin' to the doctors. To my surprise, when Eva was better, she requested that her son come stay with her in Greenville. Gettin' away from Waltham City seemed to be the best therapy, accordin' to one professional's recommendation and Eva's concurrence.

(resigned)

From that time on, we've found little we could talk about. Our conversations are filled with tortured silence - I, afraid to compromise my daughter's condition with an inappropriate word, and Eva, fearful that the words she needed to hear would never come.

(pausing)

The two of us just stopped sharin' the same world. Unfortunately, superficial exchange never served the inner needs of either of us. We fell victim to silence. Silence preserves itself. Wouldn't you say so, Mr. Beauregard?

MR. BEAUREGARD

(concurring)

Iz not a talkative man, Miss Leena, but when Iz got somethin' to say, I sayz it; otherwise, Iz mo' quiet den da graveyard on a Monday.

LEENA

(in self-deception)

Someday soon, Eva *will* come, and we will work things out. You'll see.

(Leena gets up, unruffles her dress, and takes a few steps toward the bedroom before stopping to readdress Mr. Beauregard.)

LEENA

(flustered with congeniality)

Mr. Beauregard, you'll have to excuse me. This day's been such a whirlwind, I simply must take a spot of rest.

Better I do that before Adlai comes home. You can see yourself out, or stay ... if you like.

(Leena cuts off the light as she leaves the den. The stage lights fade to black.)

SCENE EIGHT

(Adlai returns home and enters the kitchen.)

ETHAN

(content)

It's mighty quiet. Mama must have had so much her fill that she needed a nap. Just like I predicted, Ethan made a guest appearance and exited, stage left, with me here to carry the torch. As long as Mama and I are separated by at least a couple sheets of drywall, the house can bathe in tranquility. It was a good lunch. *Free* is always good.

(in retrospect)

It's nearly four o'clock, and no one has been home to receive a mail delivery. I'll go check the drop box 'round front.

(As Adlai swings open the screen door, he sees a small pile of unopened deliveries on the counter.)

ADLAI

(spewing)

What insolence! What nerve! I am incensed that a postal worker would have the audacity to open the door to an empty house just to save himself a few steps.

(As he sorts the mail, Adlai's face reddens when he comes across a bill.)

ADLAI

(seething)

The electric bill! At this point, the invoice tally on the inside doesn't even matter. Somethin' just has to be done. Leena has gone too far!

(Adlai turns out the light and takes a seat, brooding in shadowy silence.)

Just wait. When that first shoe drops through the door jamb onto this well-worn linoleum, I'll give her an earful.

(After extensive silence, Leena reemerges, but Adlai has calmed considerably. He has to delay his barrage temporarily until his anxiety level once again crosses the threshold for what he needs to say.)

ADLAI

(sternly)

Mama, mail's on the counter.

LEENA

(mentally murky from her nap)

Oh, really? I didn't hear the postman knock. I must have been sleepin' like a log. Usually, he doesn't give up on me so easily, but thank you for acceptin' it for me.

ADLAI

(crescendoing)

I suspect he didn't give up easily at all, but he'd of had to knock quite loudly for us to hear him *all the way from Mabel's Diner!*

(vociferously)

The fact is, I found a stack of mail sittin' on the kitchen counter. Mama, the mailman or whoever can just come prancin' in here any ol' time he pleases. Somethin's just gotta change. The mailman took liberties that I find offensive and downright criminal. Any decent mailman would have walked to the front and used the receptacle that's befitтин' mail deliveries. If that's not enough, look what came today - your electric bill. Mama, it's outlandish to run up such charges. Daddy's pension barely covers the essentials, leavin' me to make up the difference.

(inductively)

Now most folks would see these as two separate issues, but I can see that these are problems rooted in the same solution. Mama, we've gotta start closin' the back door, keepin' in the cool air and keepin' out undesirables. It's just that simple.

(preaching)

Screen doors never solved anyone's problems. They were made to let the cool breeze in while keepin' bugs out. Can't you see, we've got it all backwards here. Bugs come in, and the cool air goes out. I am tired of such foolishness, Mama.

(As Adlai finishes, he walks to the back door and slams it shut.)

LEENA
(Rebutting)

Oh, Adlai!

(Leena walks in his wake and briskly opens the door to its natural state. Then she turns to Adlai with a directed comment.)

LEENA
(assertively)

In my house, I decide what can come in and what should go out. That's all I have to say about the matter. I think an old woman privy to such a wonderful sixtieth birthday also has the right to end the day while the good still outweighs the bad. Goodnight, Adlai.

(Leena turns and departs briskly to her bedroom, leaving Adlai alone.)

ADLAI
(fuming; to himself)

Me, upstaged by my mother? Despite all I've done for her, she cuts through my forcefully delivered lines like a knife through marmalade? And with what - the juvenile punch of an "Oh, Adlai?"

Cannot fiscal responsibility nullify the flesh and blood order of things?

(revisiting the exchange)

Surely, I was in the right? My delivery was clear and concise. The mood and tone were perfect. The stage was set. So, why didn't the scene evolve through its natural progression? Who allowed such improvisation to interrupt the foreshadowed conclusion?

(frustrated)

Surely, I must be taken seriously by my own kin? The very walls of my boyhood home now mock my words. The scene must not end like this. The curtain has not yet closed.

(gathering his things)

I'll yet make a grand exit and reestablish my pride. I will be proven right. I'll rightfully serve as gatekeeper and director. An old woman is not the lead.

An old house is not the theme. A screen door is not the curtain!

(With that, Adlai quietly turns out the stage lights, shuts the back door, and gingerly pays homage to the screen.)

ADLAI

In my own home, there is sanctuary. There, amongst props, an actor can find a lick of appreciation.

(Leena appears in the den at the doorway leading to her bedroom.)

LEENA

(tired)

Was that Adlai leavin'? I am findin' difficulty discernin' fact from fancy. I am plum worn out by the day. Adlai was just bein' Adlai, so the way the day ended is not of concern.

(steadily stimulated by her own words)

What a great day, from the surprise visit of Ethan through that splendid birthday lunch! What better way to top off a day than with angel food cake and strawberries? Why, tomorrow, I'll bake myself another cake. I might even have cake for breakfast. I'll even save a thick slice for the mailman when he happens by on Monday.

(yawning, overtaken by the physical)

I am so tired - after so many relentless years. Mr. Sun, please drive your chariot across the sky ... for me. End this life without regret.

(Lights fade.)

SCENE NINE

(The apartment home of Adlai. It is strewn with film memorabilia, though thoughtfully so, as to impress guests. The furniture is overtly functional. It carries the feel of stage props, perfectly situated, lacking comfort. Adlai is ready for bed in a wife-beater tee, drawstring pants, and slippers.)

ADLAI

(wired)

Tranquility, you are elusive, even where the stage props are submissive. After nearly three hours of mental soliloquy, I draw comfort from only one course of planned action. I'll arise early and swing the door back into place at Mama's house -- not tonight, but in the mornin', so I can have my night of vindication, my twist in the plot. Yes, I'll put things back in order before she ever knows of this imposed rewrite. In fact, I can shut 'er up tightly every ev'nin', and she'll be in the dark. I can save this script, all the while relishin' in the joy of continual defiance of Mama's wishes. Perhaps after a month or two, I'll reveal the order of events with electric bill evidence in hand that I was right all along. Then there could be no denial with legs to stand. What a superb plot!

(vindicated)

Ahh! No need to dream tonight, for any revelation between the sheets could not satisfy me more. Such strength through comfort, and the strong sleep all the more thoroughly.

(Adlai steps out of his slippers and lays down on the bed. He checks the alarm.)

ADLAI

(yawning)

Six should be sufficient.

(The lights go down. A little night music plays. When finished, Morning light floods the room. It is daybreak, but Adlai is still in bed. The alarm has not sounded.)

ADLAI

(straining eyes to see anything)

What's this? Morning light but eerie silence!

(Adlai refocuses his eyes on the
nightstand clock.)

ADLAI

(Pointing to the clock)

You point mockingly at unfamiliar numbers. Surely, you
jest.

(Adlai checks the time against his
wristwatch on the night stand.)

ADLAI

(panicking)

It is already nine-fifteen! Mama always rises by half
past six, especially for church services. My best laid
plans were rescripted by the night. Mama will be livid!

(irrationally deluding himself)

Perhaps it's not too late. Maybe she overslept as I did.
We're kin, so maybe we were likewise affected by the
night's curse.

(Adlai quickly disrobes behind a screen
and dons his best suit while continuing
his lines. He drapes night clothes over
the screen one at a time to stay visually
connected with the audience.)

ADLAI

(intrepid)

A good actor needs to look the part. I must devise a
backup plan, just in case I already missed my cue. No
problem, improvisation has been my life. It only takes a
couple minutes to get anywhere in Waltham City, but
that's all a good actor needs to study his lines.

(A ridge of sweat forms around Adlai's
hairline, which he duly whisks away with a
carelessly folded linen handkerchief.)

ADLAI

I'll drive the long route, just to gather advanced
appraisal of the situation upon my arrival. From the

side street, I'll be able to see the back entrance while drivin' up.

I must make a beeline for that door to reestablish equilibrium with a gently applied force in the opposite direction from which I clandestinely brought the door to a close last ev'nin'. It is an Oscar caliber rewrite.

(Adlai exits the apartment.)

SCENE TEN

(In front of the home of Leena Adams. Adlai has arrived but remains in his car. There are persistent red flashing lights from a lingering emergency response vehicle. The constable in khaki uniform and cowboy hat is on the scene.)

ADLAI

(livid)

What tragedy is this! The constable! Did she call the police on me for a closed door?

(alarmed)

But wait! There is an ambulance also.

(Adlai cuts the engine and hops out. He loosens his tie and heads for the back door. He is intercepted by the constable.)

CONSTABLE

(authoritatively)

Adlai, you cannot go in.

ADLAI

(exhaling deeply)

Why? What's the problem?

CONSTABLE

Your neighbor came by to give Leena a ride to church. When there was no answer, she sensed somethin' was amiss. As soon as she cracked the back door, she noticed a distinctive bus stop odor and drove to the corner drug store to call me from the payphone. There was nothin' I could do but call an ambulance and start an investigation.

ADLAI

(bewildered)

And Mama?

CONSTABLE

(caringly)

Paramedics are tendin' to her now.

(Adlai turns and stumbles to his car. He opens the door and collapses into the front seat. He watches as the emergency response team carries out a body, loads it into the back of the ambulance, and pulls away without flashing lights.)

ADLAI

(raggedly)

The curtain has closed. The truck pulled away much, much too slowly. The play is over - no need to remain on stage.

(heartbroken)

But, why did she leave me before I had a chance to tell her how I really feel?

(Through glazed eyes, Adlai sobs.)

ADLAI

(with intense regret)

The lines I so oft longed to recite will never be delivered. I needed to tell Mama that I really didn't love her. It was all a ruse. When you love someone, you want them to love you back. I didn't fancy to be loved. I don't deserve to be loved. I wanted to tell her how much I detested this home and Waltham City. My life is a lie, and this place never lets me forget.

(crying out)

You are a millstone about my neck!

(beating his breast)

This is the cage befitting an animal!

(unloading)

I wanted to tell you how as a naïve freshman, I helped a group of teens break into the high school. As the son of the superintendent, I knew of all the easy access points not requirin' a key. I longed to tell you that I had no intention of anyone gettin' hurt. I wished you to know that I was in the passenger seat of the car that hit your husband - my own father. I desired you to know how my dad, en chase, stopped like a deer in headlights when he caught a glimpse of his own son in the getaway vehicle.

It mattered not one iota that I was not the novice director behind the wheel nor the screenplay writer of a plot gone bad. Eva has her own sins to recant. I was but a simple stage hand playin' a two-bit part, blindly followin' a script. How could I rewrite a scene that had

already unfolded? The plea to stop by a supportin' cast member was ignored. I wanted to tell you how we hid for hours, certain that either the police or dad would find us momentarily with promise of swift punishment, but circumstances fell in another direction. I passioned to tell you I was sorry for your years of pain and mine of dysfunction.

I wanted to tell you that whatever your present fate, I was sure that I was to blame. How was I to know? How could I know?

(depleted)

It was just ... a door!

(Adlai buries his face in his hands. He slowly raises his head, as he is drained of emotion. Without deliberating, Adlai turns the key and starts the ignition.)

ADLAI

(paranoid)

Death is not gonna catch up to me, too. All these years, his claws have embraced me, but I have survived! I am gonna pull away from this house and this town so fast that mortality will be unable to keep pace. Perhaps I can put such distance between us two that my trail will go cold.

(determined)

Time will no longer be in my rear view mirror. The road before me is my friend. It's an easy choice. I am *tired* of playing Adlai Freeman. My heart is set on a place I am sure to find no part callin' for a weak, pathetic fraud.

(intoxicated)

Ahh ... no longer a Freeman. What consolation in abandonment! I thoroughly love it - just me in my chariot, blazin' my trail, ... no regrets. ... Who cares about tomorrow? ... Who really cares?

(The lights go dim, and we once again hear the sounds of Adlai mashing down on the accelerator.)

SCENE ELEVEN

(In the den of the home of Leena Adams.
Ethan and Eva are dressed in funeral
clothes.)

ETHAN

(consoling)

Eva, I know how painful it must be for you to make this pilgrimage, our pilgrimage, to Waltham City and this house. The memories ...

EVA

(dryly)

I'm okay with it, Ethan. It's like this extreme sadness has lifted from my future and now belongs to the past. I still don't know what happened ... I mean ... with Mama.

ETHAN

(factually)

The constable said there was a slight accumulation of exhaust gases in the home, but the search indicated only a few pinhole leaks in the water heater vent line - nothin' considered lethal for one in decent health.

EVA

(recalling)

Wasn't Mama on some kind of heart medication?

ETHAN

(negating)

Only for high blood pressure. The coroner ruled death by natural causes.

EVA

(with slight anger)

How could Adlai just disappear? Not even present for Mama's funeral!

ETHAN

(blankly)

I don't know, Eva. I don't know.

EVA

(daydreaming aloud)

Maybe he finally got that once in a lifetime call for a big production somewhere.

ETHAN

(disbelieving)

Maybe so.

EVA

(confused)

Everybody at the funeral kept sayin' to me how strong Mama was. Ethan, do you think Mama was strong? I never saw her that way.

ETHAN

(reconciling)

Mama was strong in some ways and as fragile as her curios in others.

EVA

(bothered)

Maybe it's just me, but I have this funny feelin' that we buried Adlai right along with Mama.

ETHAN

(reassuring)

I assure you there was but one body in the coffin.

(politely petitioning)

Eva, can you muster enough courage to go through Mama's things. Our time is short here. I'd do it, but I feel funny rummagin' through drawers which might have distinctly feminine contents.

EVA

(unphased)

I can do it.

ETHAN

We'll just box up most to give away.

(Ethan begins opening drawers in the den, while Eva exits to the adjoining bedroom. After a few moments, Eva returns carrying some objects.)

EVA

(tentative)

Ethan, I found somethin' -- a tattered, hand-written letter with a fragile seal in ribbon in the top drawer of Mama's vanity. It looks official. Under the document was this old wooden cigar box.

(Ethan takes the letter from Eva's hand to examine it.)

ETHAN

(deductively)

The letter appears to be a hand-forged will.

(Ethan unties the ribbon. Eva presses in to read along.)

ETHAN

It *is* a will. The letter reads,

Dear Children, ...

(Ethan's voice fades out in deference to Leena's, as we hear Leena's voice reciting the remainder of the will.)

LEENA

When my life is done, don't be sad in my passin'. Life holds far too much grief on its own. In God's own time, I have broken free. I am sorry I am unable to leave you more.

Bein' of sound mind, I hereby request the followin' distribution of my worldly possessions.

Eva, I want you to have my collections in depression glass and such. The boys have no need for keepsakes which can lose all value if mistreated. I love to admire their fragile yet rigid form. I have always wondered about the bubbles trapped beneath the surface, encapsulated forever, not free to roam or wander. At one time, the glass was free flowin', but somehow the bubbles got ensnared by mistake. Without due warnin', the surroundings set fast, forever pinnin' the hopes and dreams of those bubbles on the matrix of colored glass. Freein' a bubble requires

destroyin' the matrix, but then, the piece would have no value whatsoever. Eva, you have a child and can appreciate these things. I leave them to you.

Adlai, you have been such a faithful son by your mother's side. Consequently, I leave you my most valuable possession - my home. We had so many good days here, once. Free of collectibles, you can make a proper home as you see fit.

Ethan, what more can I leave you, My Son? Your love has sustained me from afar. I want you to have the wooden box beneath this letter. It's all I have to give. I love you more than you'll ever know.

(Leena's voice fades out in deference to Ethan's, as we hear Ethan finish with the signatures.)

Leena Freeman

Witnessed by Charles T. Beauregard, Jr.

EVA

(challenging)

Look, Ethan. See how she signed her name. Is it still legal?

ETHAN

(verifying)

I suppose so. That was her name at one time, though the date indicates this will was drafted only six years ago. Strange, but I'm sure it will not be contested, unless you aren't happy with Adlai gettin' the house?

(Eva nods.)

EVA

(curious)

What's in the box, Ethan?

ETHAN

(hesitant)

I'm not ready yet. I'll open it a little later.

EVA

(agreeable)

Very well then. I think I'll begin to catalog my treasures. I never noticed the bubbles before. I always wondered how Mama could spend hours on end admirin' her knick-knacks.

(Eva exits the room, leaving Ethan alone. Ethan is uneasy about what may lie within the box. When alone, he lifts the box from the drawer and sets it on the bed.)

ETHAN

(cautious)

I feel like a boy at the edge of a swimming pool in springtime, contemplatin' a slow, gradual wade versus a quick plunge.

(Opting for the latter, he pries open the hinged lid. Perched above all are assorted family photos, aged with time and significant handling. Ethan holds up one, then another - smiling.)

ETHAN

(taken back)

Pictures perched upon pictures! All of us in these old family photos are smilin'. We were happy once. I had ... forgotten.

(Ethan digs a little deeper.)

What's this? Not so few love letters ... and an old Bible with a well-worn, familiar cover. Though the gold letterin' is fadin', the engraved name is unmistakably, *Leena Freeman*.

(Like a child, he cradles it and pauses behind closed eyes. When that moment unfolds, he notices one remaining item.)

ETHAN

(overcome)

Wedged into the bottom appears to be an old legal parchment. Though I have never seen it, I knew it existed. The typeset title says *Divorce Settlement*.

(Ethan pries loose the contract annulment from its resting place at the bottom, then stares at the empty box.)

ETHAN

(somewhat relieved)

Thank you, Lord, the succession of intrigue has come to an end.

(Ethan returns the contract to the box and picks up a family picture.)

ETHAN

(merging his thoughts)

Can such joy simply die, or do folks bury it alive?

(Ethan sets down the picture and picks up a letter.)

ETHAN

(cringing)

Do I dare read an intimate letter saved by my mother? *Why* would she leave such for me? Adlai got a house, Eva got antiques, and I got a box of my mother's love letters?

(Ethan opens a love letter, slightly embarrassed. Tears begin to form in the corners of his eyes.)

ETHAN

(with emotional difficulty)

The emotion, I dare say, leaps from the pages. It is ... beautiful.

(Now the Bible stares at Ethan from its resting place on the hand-quilted bedspread. He is drawn to it. As he raises it to a place of greater prominence with the intention of rifling the pages, the book falls open. Here, marking its place in time, is an old newspaper clipping.)

What's this? An old newspaper clipping as a Bible bookmark? It seems to be a memorable spot for the binding also - just sorta fell open to an old friend - a word of encouragement.

(Ethan turns over the clipping.)

Hey, I've seen this article before – a dated account on the death of Jonathan P. Freeman, except for these faded, but still legible, hand-scrolled words in red: *Love Adlai*.

(Ethan looks at the Bible beneath.)

Why, the same words are penciled in the margin of this Bible beside a highlighted and heavily underlined verse.

(Ethan checks the headings and subheadings.)

Let's see. This is Chapter four of First Peter, verse 8.

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

(Adlai reads it over and over silently. An immediate flashback registers.)

ETHAN

(completing the puzzle)

Love covers over a multitude of sins. The phone calls from Mama! Peter ... lovin' my brother ... knowin' the truth all along. To the reporter inside me, it all makes sense.

(Almost by accident, Ethan turns the page.)

ETHAN

(unguarded)

What's this on the next page? Look at all these margin notes! What other words of wisdom -- additions to the words of Christ, the Prophets, and the Apostles, did Mama leave me?

(sense of discovery)

Someone else besides Mama appears to have used this Bible. This note is in Mama's handwritin', but here's another distinctly different. The penmanship of the second matches the signature on the Superintendent line on all my report cards,... but what's written here has little in common with the Gospel message sharin' the same page.

(warmly surmising)

Love notes, that's what they are, all the way through church!

(searching)

Can it really be that simple? I see smilin' faces in our pictures and the love overflowin' these pages. Can it be that easy? Measured against a life of pain, she was truly happy with the small things - a card, a visit, a cake, a memory, ... a verse. Perhaps, the depth of our pain is measured against the intensity of our love. Is that Mama's gift to me? I was fearful of it - lovin', that is. My fear distanced me from what I am reminded we once had, what Mama had - what she clung to to keep this family movin' forward, to cover a multitude of sins. Can it be that easy - to love without regret, without reservation, without fear of what may be, of what might be - above all?

(breathing completely, then
continuing resolved)

Now I *know*, Kansas City holds *nothing* for me. The Herald won't miss me for long. Good reporters are a dime a dozen. The principal has been after me for years to come teach journalism at Waltham City High. I thought the memories here would haunt me, but now I know I simply must look beyond the pain to see what was mine, what can still be mine.

(shifting, gesturing to the house)

Can't live here, though. It belongs to Adlai. Besides, I need a fresh start. Can't think of a better place to start anew than the old Beauregard homestead. Once again, there will be the sweet smell of flowers to adorn this quaint street in Nowheretown. With a paint refresher, that house will be the talk of the town.

(Ethan lifts the old cigar box to eye level and runs his hand over the well-worn sides. With the wonderment of a young child, Ethan lifts the drawstring lid. He verifies the remaining unexamined contents and sets it aside.)

I'm not ready. Not sure I'll ever be. Perhaps someday I'll complete the puzzle of what became of the man who drafted those annulment papers, but not today.

(joyfully)

Today, I have plenty on my plate, for tomorrow I am gonna
hold hands durin' church and ask a certain girl to share
my remainin' days ... as a Freeman.

(prayerfully)

Lord, please drive your chariot across the sky ... for me.
Hasten the promise ... of a new day.

(The scene and play closes.)

What's in a Name?

Adam	<i>mankind</i>
Adlai	<i>witness</i>
Beauregard	<i>handsome</i>
Charles	<i>manly</i>
Ethan	<i>strong</i>
Eva	<i>life</i>
Franklin	<i>free man</i>
Freeman	<i>free man</i>
Jonathan	<i>gift of the LORD</i>
Leena	<i>delicate</i>
Rachel	<i>innocent</i>

