

CONFESSIONS OF POVERTY

A stage play by

Om Rupani

Om Rupani
406 West 147th Street
New York, NY 10031
917-543-1420
mail@OmRupani.com

© 2011, Om Rupani

CONFESSIONS OF POVERTY is a new play about four characters navigating the tug of war between desire and appearances, between convenience and real passion. It's a penetrative journey into our yearning to build a life of substance and meaning---within ourselves and through our relationships. *

Characters:

BEN --- is a NY lawyer in his 30s. He is a sleepless man struggling to find coherence in his life and relationships. There is an urgent yearning in him to inquire into and comprehend the trek of his life so far. On the surface he is the picture of a modern, successful man who is well-liked and sought by women, but there is an old hermit and philosopher inside of him.

CLAIRE --- is a NY lawyer in her early 30s. She has always succeeded at everything. Proud, capable, independent, fit---the envy of most women. She is haunted by the biggest failure of her life so far---her failed marriage.

MAYA --- is a poetess and actress in her late 20s. She is rooted in her body and sensuality. And her soul is in touch with the muses. She is as soft as she is incisive.

DAVID --- is a professor in his 40s/50s. He is smart, witty, fun. He can charm anybody in any room. And he takes himself lightly. He loves women and has known many, but none for long.

SCENE ONE.

(Modern NY hotel room at dusk. Deep, rich colors. Stylishly decorated. The feel of the room is reminiscent of an Edward Hopper painting.)

(BEN stands at the window looking out. He is wearing a suit.)

(CLAIRE is sitting in a chair. She is leaning low into it. Legs stretch in front, heels planted in carpet. She too is wearing a well-fitted suit.)

(There is an opened bottle of Scotch on the side table. A tumbler half filled is near each of them.)

BEN

Sleep doesn't last long these days.

CLAIRE

No?

BEN

I get into bed exhausted. That good feeling.

CLAIRE

Like after a long run.

BEN

Yeah. Long run. Good meal. Spent. Done for the day.

CLAIRE

Yeah.

BEN

Fall asleep right away. No problem. But then.

CLAIRE

Then?

BEN

3 hours. 4. Eyes wide open. Clear. Sitting up in bed.

Bad dreams. CLAIRE

No dreams. Just wide up. BEN

What? CLAIRE

Like I've forgotten something. And I am sitting there in the dark trying to remember. BEN

And? CLAIRE

And nothing. BEN

Bad conscience. CLAIRE

Like I am forgetting something. I missed something. BEN

Then? CLAIRE

(BEN shrugs. Turns from the window. Picks up his drink.)
I start working. Read cases, do research. BEN

Hey, if you can bill your insomnia, why not? CLAIRE

That's right. Why not? Put in a few good hours. Sometimes sleep a little more, most of the time not. Then it's light. BEN

And what about your new girl? When you are up pacing about, soul searching in the middle of the night? What's her name again? CLAIRE

Maya. BEN

CLAIRE
Maya. She Indian? Mexican?

BEN
Bit of everything.

CLAIRE
Hmmm.

BEN
She's not there every night. Most nights.

CLAIRE
You are cute Ben. Sweet to see you shy.

BEN
Bit strange talking to you about another woman.

CLAIRE
I agree. But lets. Hell what have we got to lose now? So.

BEN
So?

CLAIRE
How is she? Is she pretty?

BEN
She is.

CLAIRE
Prettier than me? Strike that. Tell me one of her features you like.

BEN
She has a sweet singing voice.

CLAIRE
Ahh.

BEN
She can be very funny sometimes. Nice curves.

CLAIRE
Alrighty then.

BEN
What about your guy?

CLAIRE

David. You would like him. He is a bit older. 10 years. He is brilliant. Accomplished. Also funny. Or rather witty. Charming. Can hold his own with anyone in any room.

BEN

Hmmm.

CLAIRE

What?

BEN

Oddly, it's very easy to see you with him.

(This flusters Claire a bit.)

What?

CLAIRE

Strange thing to hear from one's husband.

BEN

Oh, I can think of a couple of inquiries that might turn out to be even a bit more dicey.

CLAIRE

Sex! Man wants to know what the new man has been doing with his old woman.

BEN

I don't really.

CLAIRE

Ben...that first time I called you, asked you if we could meet...what did you think?

BEN

I was surprised. And a bit glad actually.

CLAIRE

Really?

BEN

Yes. The thought had occurred that perhaps instead of talking with my therapist about my ex-wife week after week, maybe I should try talking to my ex-wife about my ex-wife. So. You kind of let me off the hook by calling first. And...these NY hotel rooms cost about as much as an hour with my shrink...so...

CLAIRE

I see. And why did you think I was calling?

BEN

I wasn't sure. Thought maybe you had some of the same things on your mind...to try and...mop up some of the horrid mess we created.

CLAIRE

You didn't think I was calling for sex?

BEN

No.

CLAIRE

No? Not even for a second?

BEN

No.

CLAIRE

How come?

BEN

Wouldn't imagine you needed me for that.

CLAIRE

Haa! Give yourself some credit.

BEN

I'd think you have plenty of options in that area. Not something you need to come running back to me for.

CLAIRE

True. Yes. But you didn't think maybe there was something special...that we had...something that maybe I couldn't get anywhere else. Something that only you could do for me.

BEN

A very flattering thought I admit. But one that never crossed my mind.

CLAIRE

Hmm.

BEN

What?

CLAIRE

You must not have thought our sex life all that special.

BEN

Oh, I think we had it going pretty good in that department...

(Claire: And?)

...well, to tell you the truth... even then, even while we were at it and it was good, it felt...you felt rather...self-sufficient.

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

BEN

Well. How shall I put it. I think we had good form. Neither of us too inhibited. We knew the mechanics of getting each other off. But I don't know whether there were so many moments when I felt I was....

CLAIRE

What?

BEN

...doing something for you that you couldn't do for yourself.

CLAIRE

Ahh Ben! I don't think you are giving yourself enough credit.

BEN

Maybe so.

CLAIRE

I remember some of our long, winding sessions. Sometimes we would actually drench the sheets with our sweat like they write about in bodice rippers. And we regularly managed to come together. Do you know how rare that is? My girlfriends would get green with envy when I would tell them. I am serious. Several of them asked to borrow you for a weekend.

BEN

I'm afraid I'll have to share that credit with some double A batteries.

CLAIRE

Ohh, this way or that. We got it done. Simultaneous orgasms!

BEN

We may have come at the same time; don't know if we ever came together. There were times I think when except for the connecting points we could have been in separate rooms.

CLAIRE

(She raises her glass.)

Well then. Here's to the connecting points.

BEN

(pointing to the bed.)

Should we just do it. Is that what you're waiting for?

CLAIRE

It's one way to go.

BEN

That will disappear the mess you think?

CLAIRE

That's your agenda, not mine.

BEN

Why *did* you call me? Because I don't think it was for one-of-a-kind, mind-blowing sex.

CLAIRE

I was hoping that...we might converse again. Differently. That perhaps the last chapter was not how it ends between us for good.

BEN

I get it...look...our lives met...intersected some years ago. Our stories met and...moved together....for almost 8 years. Our stories met...and separated. Ended. But what ending? What structure? I am not trying to tag on a better ending. I want to see the shape of this thing we shared. See the design. See if it had any purpose.

CLAIRE

You are moving backwards.

BEN

Leaving everything as it is, that feels like abandoning the scene of the accident. It feels cowardly. You call it moving forward. I see you running.

CLAIRE

Is that so?

BEN

You always have Claire. Some effort is needed to comprehend one's life. To not barrel through it. Are our stories merely an incidental link of events? Our stories collided. But how much was our doing? What was our doing? What were the causes? That's what I want to know.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

Instead of being left at the end...with the scraps of a collision. The broken, unrecognizable parts. Our stories together. Our lives, what will be the sum of us if so little is left at the end of each chapter? What will add up to what?

CLAIRE

(Softer. More hurt)

Scraps of a collision? That's what we are?

BEN

Feels that way, doesn't it?

CLAIRE

And your idea for making sense of these scraps is to go excavating into the past?

BEN

Where else could we go but the past?

CLAIRE

(Coming around.)

Fine.

BEN

Fine?

CLAIRE

Let's revisit. The scenes of our accidents. Where were we going today?

BEN

Russian River Valley.

CLAIRE

Right. You want to tell me why we are going down this particular memory lane, or you just want to surprise me?

BEN

Surprise.

CLAIRE

Ok...It was...spring break. Our third year.

BEN

Yes.

(Ben has been rubbing the right side of his neck. Claire notices.)

CLAIRE

What's going on there?

BEN

Oh...had a tweak on my right side for a few days.

CLAIRE

Lie down. I'll give you a massage.

BEN

Since when do you give massages?

CLAIRE

Hey maybe I've picked up a trick or two since you left my bed. Maybe the new man has taught me some new things. Don't worry. I promise to leave your honor intact. Come on lie down. Take off your shirt.

(Ben takes of his shirt and gets on bed. Claire climbs on top of him and hikes up her skirt. She hikes it up higher then necessary. They talk as she massages him.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

So. Spring break. Third year.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

We had been together, what, a little over a year by then.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

I remember that week. I remember a feeling of ease. We were almost done with school. We had jobs and clerkships lined up. We were on our way.

BEN

Yes. We were. There was this momentum I felt we had gained in life.

CLAIRE

And it was good to have a few days. To take a few days.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

So up we went. It was a beautiful drive. Nice b&b. Good food. I am sure some nice sex happened in there, although for sake of honesty I must confess I don't remember any specific episode.

BEN

No. And then on the third day I think, we went for that walk.

CLAIRE

Yes. We were feeling a bit restless. We hadn't had a good run in a few days. Too much pent-up energy.

BEN

We started walking.

CLAIRE

Yes. We kept walking. Finding vineyards. Found a place for lunch. And then just kept walking on and on.

BEN

Yes. And then the rain.

CLAIRE

Then the rain. I think I could smell the salt in it. Must have moved in off the ocean.

BEN

And there we were. Caught in the rain. Running around in some field trying to get away from it.

CLAIRE

Yes. I remember. That was a nice day.

BEN

We found a tree.

CLAIRE

We found a tree. We stayed there. It got late. Started getting dark.

BEN

We decided on a whim to spend the night under that tree.

CLAIRE

Yes. I remember hesitating. I figured the rain would stop and then we would see.
But then it felt ok.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

I felt safe.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

And I just remember waking up. And it was morning already. Didn't even
remember falling asleep.

BEN

Wait.

CLAIRE

And I remember getting up and walking up to the water. And dipping my hands in
it, and..

BEN

Wait.

CLAIRE

What?

BEN

What water?

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

BEN

We were in a field. What water?

CLAIRE

There was a little pond or lake or something nearby.

(Ben is baffled.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

A little stretch from where we were, there was water. I walked up to it in the morning. Washed my face with it. Even drank from it. It was lovely. Clean and sweet.

BEN

We were under a tree. In the middle of a field. Trees and grass all around. Probably another vineyard to one side.

CLAIRE

Ok.

BEN

Ok?

CLAIRE

So we remember things a bit differently. Small details. You know how unreliable eyewitnesses are.

BEN

We were in a field. I remember looking at that field for quite some time. I can still see that field.

CLAIRE

Ok. Maybe I'm mistaken. Maybe the pond was another day.

BEN

Do you think you are mistaken?

CLAIRE

No.

BEN

Do you remember me coming up to this body of water? Dipping my toes in it? Drinking from it?

CLAIRE

No. I was there alone.

BEN

Where was I?

CLAIRE

I don't know. Maybe you went off behind a tree or something to pee. It was not a long stretch of time. Just a few minutes. And then we were off.

(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

I think we asked someone for directions to our b&b. We got there sooner than expected. I don't remember much about the rest of that day, but next day we...

BEN

I don't care about the next day.

CLAIRE

We drove back the next day.

BEN

It's irrelevant.

CLAIRE

It's irrelevant?

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

Compared to what?

BEN

It was that night.

CLAIRE

Which night?

BEN

Outside. Under the tree.

CLAIRE

What about it?

BEN

(Ben seems burdened, exhausted.)

Nothing.

CLAIRE

Ben?

(Ben moves away from the Bed, disengaging their massage contact. Leaving Claire a bit awkward and exposed alone on the bed.)

BEN

Doesn't matter.

CLAIRE

Doesn't matter?

(Claire is irritated. Saying something she has been holding in.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

You know what I think your problem really is Ben? You know what I think is at the core of this understanding-disease that you seemed to have caught?

BEN

Do tell.

CLAIRE

I think you got into marriage with the same antiquated, absurd, romantic notion that boys of yore used to have about going to war. You were expecting to get shot...and have your buddy die in your arms...just so that you could what?--grow from the experience?

BEN

Yes. Exactly. That would have been nice. Instead of that I just found myself back in the dorm room. Only with a female roommate and better furniture. I mean what changed after we got married? What started? What big journey did that big ceremony signify? All that fuss just to wade in stagnant waters. Where was the adventure in that marriage?

CLAIRE

The adventure in marriage?

BEN

What is the point of making all these gestures? This coming together as men and women as if we can't really go at it alone and then living like 2 passing nomads sharing a tent for the night? Where was that thing that we could only have done together? That thing which would have been impossible to do on our own?

CLAIRE

(Beat)

Did you fuck someone?

BEN

(Without passion.)

No. You asked me that before. Don't you believe me?

CLAIRE

(She studies him for a crack of deceit and knows that it is not there.)

No. I do believe it. But I swear to god Ben. At this point I actually wish you had. I mean at least that would have been something...tangible. Some infatuation that got a hold of you---whatever. Even sexual boredom---that I could have handled---there are solutions for that. But all this----this is saying----what?

BEN

What?

CLAIRE

THAT YOU WERE BORED WITH ME!

BEN

I wouldn't quite say that.

CLAIRE

You wouldn't quite say that!? I mean I don't even know where I fell. Was I a bad wife or---what, merely a bad hostess? I didn't entertain you well enough? You didn't have a good enough time in my company?

BEN

Good enough time?

CLAIRE

Yes.

BEN

That's why people get married, to have an entertaining person around? An anti-boredom pet?

CLAIRE

Then what? What the hell were you expecting our marriage to be?

BEN

I don't know. I guess I figured I was about to find out, but I never did. I never did.

CLAIRE

So you decided to quit.

BEN

So I quit.

CLAIRE

But of course you blame me for this failure. It isn't marriage itself that you became disillusioned with was it?

BEN

No. It was you.

CLAIRE

What the hell was I supposed to do?

BEN

I don't know. Something. There ought to have been something more to it all. But you never felt that lack. Otherwise we just might have been able to do something. That might have been our first real journey together, something that we were looking to find together that we could not find alone.

CLAIRE

This is what everyone does Ben. This is what people do. You work, you talk, you eat, you take vacations. Some people raise kids...we decided that wasn't for us. You haven't changed your mind about that?

BEN

No.

CLAIRE

Then what?

BEN

You could just as easily look at it from the other side.

CLAIRE

What other side?

BEN

That most people are bored to death of each other. Most people do quit each other. Most people do start looking elsewhere. I mean if a lousy marriage were a fatal condition this would be a much quieter planet.

CLAIRE

And what?...you think you are going solve this...pandemic for us?

BEN

I don't have that much hope. I was thinking that we must be the first species on the planet that doesn't even know how to fuck properly. So the odds are slim.

CLAIRE

This is sordid Ben. I am too young to be having a mid-life crisis.

BEN

Maybe you haven't got as long as you think.

CLAIRE

You've changed.

BEN

From what?

CLAIRE

I was thinking that after our last meeting. The way you are now, this man would not have divorced me. You call us the scraps of a collision, I see us as some time-warp, causality conundrum. Like some weird, three dimension puzzle.

BEN

Puzzles have solutions.

CLAIRE

The man you became as a result of our divorce is a man who would not have given up on me. An irreversible change needed to prevent the change.

BEN

Maybe you were just prepping me for other women.

CLAIRE

Hah! An expensive lesson.

BEN

That it was.

CLAIRE

And still, the lesson is missing.

BEN

That it is. Besides if the man I became after our divorce is a man who wouldn't have divorced you, shouldn't I be rushing into your arms right now.

CLAIRE

The night is young.

(Ben looks exhausted. He starts to dress.)

BEN

The night doesn't feel young.

(There is a sense that the evening is over. Ben slowly continues to dress. Claire is finishing her drink before doing the same.)

CLAIRE

Why are you putting your tie back on?

BEN

I am meeting Maya later on. She likes to see me dressed up.

CLAIRE

Hmmm.

BEN

Says I am the first man she has been with who wears a suit everyday. Says she likes to see me walking across the room to her all put together. Makes her feel all grown up.

CLAIRE

You like this girl, huh?

BEN

She is just a different sort of conundrum. I think half the time it only seems like we are talking about the same things but we are on entirely different planets.

CLAIRE

Hey...that's just like these sessions here!

BEN

Last month we went camping for a few days. We get there. She unpacks her little satchel, and she's got nothing in it except a few dresses?! Who wears dresses while camping? I wanted to go for a hike the next morning...she says she would rather sit and read...make notes on a poem that is coming to her. I come back 3, 4 hours later...she is in the exact same spot ---- under the apple blossom tree...reading and writing poetry! Who does that!? I mean what century are we in?

CLAIRE

Maybe that's just what you need Ben. After a hard bitch like me. A girl in a pretty, print dress...in dappled light. With ribbons in her hair. Does she wear ribbons in her hair?

BEN

No. No ribbons. Flowers sometimes.

CLAIRE

So...where does this leave us? Will we be having another chaste hotel rendezvous, or have we exhausted our....excavation project?

BEN

After I get back...I'm going home to visit my mother after this week for a few days.

CLAIRE

Ok. How come?

BEN

I don't know Claire...I keep getting these cryptic notes from my brothers...mom went in for some tests, some treatments. Not sure for what. I call her...the woman is about as forth coming as a stone buddha.

CLAIRE

You think she is sick and not telling you? Why?

BEN

I don't know. She is being particularly evasive these days. That can't be good.

CLAIRE

Talk about tough broads man. Your mom used to scare even me, that little woman.

BEN

Little woman. We would make a comical picture as a family even by the time the three of us were in high school. Three hulking boys hovering over this hundred pound woman who had brought them into the world.

CLAIRE

I think everybody feels a bit on edge around her. She certainly threw my mother for a loop during the wedding. And my mother is not one to easily go off kilter. You know there were moments when she would just beam at you and it was like the sun came out. But the rest of the time the woman was like a tomb. I just assumed she didn't like me.

BEN

You and me both.

CLAIRE

No. You don't mean that.

BEN

Couldn't tell you for sure Claire. None of us ever could. The three of us would live for those moments when she was happy and beaming and engaged. But just as often it felt like she couldn't wait to get away from us. To lock herself in her room with her precious journals. Jesus! Did you ever see that bookshelf in her room?

(Claire indicates 'no'.)

BEN (CONT'D)

Dozens of them! Over a hundred. There must be a novel in there.

CLAIRE

What does she write about?

BEN

Who knows. We never dared to sneak in there. Would you want to read your mother's journals?

CLAIRE

That would be 10 more years of therapy. Are you really afraid she's sick?

BEN

Don't know. That's why I want to go see in person. You worry about your parents dying?

CLAIRE

We're getting to be that age. Been to a few funerals over the past year...parents of friends, co-workers.

BEN

Yeah.

CLAIRE

Well...wish her well for me. Not sure she'd be interested in hearing from me...but give my regards.

(Ben is dressed and ready to head out. He makes one more effort at completion.)

BEN

Claire. There really was something....I haven't been bringing up the past....There is a reason I brought up that weekend...It was...

CLAIRE

Just tell me Ben.

BEN

It was that night. Outside. Under the tree.

CLAIRE

What about it?

BEN

(Ben searching within, pulling up the memory.)

That night. That evening. We laid down under the tree. It was still raining. You put your head on my chest. We were talking. I don't remember what about. Your eyes were closed. You fell asleep.

CLAIRE

Yes.

BEN

I remember that moment. The sun was going down. It was still raining. We were talking. And I could feel you drift off. Almost mid-sentence. I heard your breathing change. Felt your head grow heavier on my chest. And you fell asleep.

CLAIRE

(Sensing that there is something significant in this for Ben. Being patient.)

Ok.

(Ben hesitates.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

What happened then?

BEN

Nothing. I just remember that moment. That evening. The rain stopped. It had gotten dark. I could see the stars. It got a bit chilly. You pressed closer into me. I held you. Kept you warm. You kept sleeping. I was awake. Looking at the sky. Hearing you breathe. Thinking.

CLAIRE

What were you thinking?

BEN

About the two of us. There outside. Just a man and a woman under a tree in a field. Under the stars. It seemed important somehow. Things seemed to fit. We seemed to fit.

CLAIRE

You were protecting me?

BEN

Maybe. Something like that. That I was there for you. That I was needed. That if I wasn't there, you couldn't be sleeping so peacefully. Some part of you was counting on me.

(Ben looks at Claire. Claire waits for him to continue.)

That night. There under the tree. I thought it might not be a bad thing, to continue, to keep going, together.

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

BEN

To be man and wife. To not part ways when school was done. To actually move ahead together. Build a life.

CLAIRE

That's the night you decided to marry me?

BEN

Something like that.

CLAIRE

Something like that?

BEN

Yes. That was the first time I felt...it might fit. That we might have something here worth building on.

CLAIRE

Ben, we didn't talk about marriage for more than a year after that.

BEN

I know. But for me it was that night.

CLAIRE

You never told me any of this.

BEN

No. So I am doing it now.

CLAIRE

Yes. Interesting timing.

BEN

Anyway. It's one of the things that's been on my mind. That day. That night.

CLAIRE

Wondering whether it was fate or accident? If it hadn't rained that evening...

BEN

Hey, you could be going 15 rounds here with an entirely different man!

CLAIRE

I see.

BEN

Yes.

(Ben moves away from Claire, relieved, he has finally said his piece.)

CLAIRE

This is what Ben, the 4th time we are meeting?

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

4 evenings in 4 different hotel rooms. I have felt like..... I have been playing along. Listening to you.

BEN

Indulging me?

CLAIRE

Perhaps. A little.

BEN

Being the good wife finally?

CLAIRE

(Claire bristles at this a little but decides to let it go.)

This is the first thing I have heard that feels...I don't know...new? Significant?

BEN

My therapist seemed to think so.

CLAIRE

Oh? So you've talked about this?

BEN

It came up. She asked. Asked when was the moment I decided to marry you. I kept giving her the *reasons* I had, but she kept asking for a *moment*. I had to think about it for a whole week, but then it came to me...that night out in the country.

CLAIRE

And what did she say about it?

BEN

She said I felt needed.

CLAIRE

You felt needed?

BEN

Yes. And that it must have felt good to feel needed.

CLAIRE

Hmm. I often hear men complaining about women being too needy.

BEN

Yes. Well, you can put money down no boyfriend has ever had that complaint about you.

CLAIRE

Wait a minute. That's supposed to be a bad thing?

BEN

No dear.

CLAIRE

Wait a minute. So this is what we have been getting at?

BEN

Getting at what?

CLAIRE

(Getting heated.)

This is where I went wrong? This was my fault, you not feeling needed in our marriage. That's how I screwed up our marriage?

BEN

We were talking about me.

CLAIRE

(Escalating anger.)

We have been talking about you. Talking and talking. And this is what you have been arriving at? I ruined our marriage by not making you feel like some matinee idol? I wasn't enough of a damsel in distress for you to rescue? What fucking century are *you* living in?

BEN

Apparently the wrong one. And what the fuck is wrong with...you know, how often are women complaining that their men aren't around? That when they need them, they can't count on them? So what is wrong with...

CLAIRE

So, what, now I am being punished for being self-reliant? For being able to take care of my business on my own?

BEN

So go take care of your business on your own. What did you ever need a husband for anyway? On my end, yes, I think it would be nice. It would be nice to need my wife and feel needed by my wife. To feel that I can give her something she can't get anywhere else. And yes maybe it would be great that when I am fucking my wife, my wife can actually just enjoy me fucking her, enjoy what I am doing for her, instead of also pulling out a drawer full of vibrators to keep us both company.

CLAIRE

So that's what this is about?

BEN

No. That's not what this is about.

CLAIRE

What, I didn't swoon enough at your cockmanship? Your cock felt unneeded at the sight of my implements.

BEN

Go fuck yourself.

CLAIRE

Is that what you're getting from your new girlie? Does she just squirm and cum at your every slightest touch? Get down on her knees and worship your manhood?

BEN

(Less angry. More disgusted, sad, resigned.)

Here's the Claire I know.

CLAIRE

(Enraged. Bitter.)

Fuck you.

BEN

I've been wondering when you were going to unleash her.

CLAIRE

Go fuck yourself.

BEN

Indeed.

(Ben starts to gather his things in order to walk out the door.)

CLAIRE

Go fuck yourself and go fuck your little twit of a tart.

BEN

Yeah baby.

CLAIRE

I am sure she makes you feel like the big man. The big man in the big suit.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

Go play out your little power fantasy with her.

BEN

On my way.

CLAIRE

I am sure she's plenty helpless. Should keep you busy feeling important for years.

BEN

Indeed.

(Ben's at the door. About to walk out.)

CLAIRE

(Imploring.)

Ben wait!

BEN

What for?

CLAIRE

(Sad. Deflated.)

Please. Please let's not end like this.

BEN

Why not? It's tradition.

CLAIRE

(Starting to cry. Disgusted with herself.)

Don't say that.

BEN

(Resigned. Exhausted. Sad. Almost to himself.)

Man. Serves me right. I thought I was doing something new here. I thought we might actually unearth something. Gain some wisdom! (Haa!) But this feels just right. Just what we need. A few final nails in the coffin.

CLAIRE

Don't say that.

BEN

(Pausing. Almost gentle.)

What do you want Claire?

CLAIRE

This is not fair Ben.

BEN

Far from it.

CLAIRE

It's like...picking a dress off the rack and then tossing it away on another floor.

BEN

What the hell are you talking about?

CLAIRE

It's like you got buyer's remorse.

BEN

Well my love, I think it's safe to qualify all divorce as buyer's remorse. Don't you think?

CLAIRE

So you felt something that night out there. You felt needed. You felt like the big protecting man.

(Ben bristles. He doesn't want to continue fighting.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

(Quickly.)

No. I am not even criticizing Ben.

BEN

Really.

CLAIRE

I am not mocking.

BEN

Un-huh.

CLAIRE

It was fine you felt that way. I understand. I can see. But this is like you are punishing me for not delivering on something. And I don't even know what it was. I wasn't even in on it.

BEN

(Sad. Conceding.)

Maybe.

CLAIRE

Just tell me this. Did I pretend? Did I misrepresent myself? Did I change overnight from before we were married to after we were married?

BEN

No.

CLAIRE

(Emphatic. Powerlessly triumphant.)

No! You knew who I was! You knew who you were getting!

BEN

You are right. It's not fair.

CLAIRE

Ben please. Can't we just be kind to each other.

BEN

(Exhausted. Feeling the impossibility of it.)

Let's just call it a night.

(Ben moves to exit.)

CLAIRE

Ben are you walking out on me?

(Ben pauses. Unsure whether he is or not.)

Will I see you again?

BEN

Give me some time. Let me make the trip home. After.

CLAIRE

All this time we have been talking, something has been sitting in my stomach too, waiting for the right moment. Like a confession. It's regret. I regret what happened with us. Deeply so. And I don't have your searching and yearning to understand and make sense of it, but I do want to say that much. I regret what happened....has happened between us.

(Ben hears this. There is a slight acknowledgement in his body that he heard it. He exits.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Regret. How it changes over the years what we regret. There were years in the past when I would have feared that I might regret entering such a room as this one alone with a man. What would they think...those who see us? Now I wonder what they must think...when they come in here...into these dissection rooms of ours, and find these perfectly made beds left behind.

(She starts to gather her things. She moves to exit.)

(She is at the door when her eyes stop on the still perfectly made bed. She stops. She puts her briefcase down. She goes to the bed and pulls the blankets and sheets out and throws the pillows around.)

(She jumps into the bed and rumples it up to make it look like it has been well used.)

(She stands up. She pauses to examine her work. She picks up her briefcase. She exits.)

SCENE TWO

(Ben's apartment. Masculine sense and decor but well put together, comfortable. Looks new, recently assembled.)

(Dusk outside. Warm, amber lighting inside.)

(There are 4 large, square, sensual photographs on a wall.)

(Maya is on the bed, writing in her journal. She is in lingerie. Ben is off stage.)

MAYA

(Looks towards Ben wondering where he is.)
Hey Benji! It's getting lonely in here.

BEN
(Enters wearing pajamas)
You know, every time you call me that I feel about 10 years old.

MAYA
Yeah?

BEN
Miss Simmons used to call me that in grade school.

MAYA
Miss Simmons?

BEN
Miss Simmons. She taught us proper English. Good grammar. And we're happy to learn.

MAYA
Hmmm. She was quite motivating was she.

BEN
Indeed. If all teachers looked like her, we'd be a nation of geniuses or something.

MAYA
So what'd you think of tonight?

BEN

It was beautiful. I loved it. Thanks for inviting me. I needed the break.

MAYA

Your case is almost over?

BEN

Yes. Few days.

MAYA

You are going to win it?

BEN

Yes. It's settling in our favor. Just wrestling over the numbers right now.

MAYA

How much is it going to be ?

BEN

Around 47 million.

MAYA

Jeez. Successful Broadway plays don't make that much.

BEN

That's because Broadway is small peanuts compared to pharmaceutical patents.

MAYA

That's the most romantic thing you've said all evening. All that money just to not go to court.

BEN

That's the idea.

MAYA

So I don't get to see you up there in front of the judge, pacing back and forth, making an argument.

BEN

Not this time. And we never pace around in front of the judge. That's just for TV.

MAYA

Will you get promoted?

BEN

Doesn't hurt to be on a winning case.

MAYA

Will you get some of all this money you've earned?

BEN

You're cute. There're about 17 other lawyers on this case. Including some senior partners. I think they'll see a new jaguar before me.

MAYA

17 lawyers! So what did you do on the case?

BEN

What'd I do. You know, at this point, it'd be difficult to say.

MAYA

So tell me what you thought of today's performance.

BEN

It was beautiful. The dancers were amazing. Awfully good of your friend to get you those seats for free.

MAYA

Amazing what you can get with a few well-placed mounds of flesh.

BEN

You and Miss Simmons.

MAYA

What did you think of the spoken word piece.

BEN

Ahh. That was so-so. Not my thing.

MAYA

You thought it was pretentious.

BEN

I thought it was pretentious bullshit. But that's just me. That's not how I relate to language.

MAYA

You know I see you writing all the time. And you know like the whole dictionary. I would think the words would be your thing even more than the hot dancers.

BEN

Oh no! Definitely take the hot dancers --- in silence. And I just throw around big words to impress chicks. I don't really know what they mean.

MAYA

Be serious.

BEN

Babe, what do you want from me? I had a nice evening. And no, I don't think all that flowery language is very effective. Feels self-indulgent. You are not communicating; you're just leaving people out.

MAYA

You are a snob. They are not leaving you out; you don't let them in. Besides the whole thing was *about* language and the use of language and its origins.

BEN

Yeah, I didn't get all that either.

MAYA

The Rhythm of Gestures. He was saying that our gestures, our own body and its movements must have been the first things that fascinated us at the dawn of consciousness.

BEN

Got that much from the fake camp fire and the shadow dancing.

MAYA

Precisely. And that even music must have followed dance. Rhythm started in our heart beat, in our joints. And from that rhythm came all music and communication, even words. That rhythm is the origin of all language.

BEN

Well that's an interesting idea. If I saw an article in the science section of the NY Times on that hypothesis, I'd read it.

MAYA

You are such an ass.

BEN

Maybe I'm just not a poet.

MAYA

No, you just like to sleep with them.

BEN

Yes!

MAYA

You are uninvited from coming to my poetry slam next week!

BEN

Oh, I'm going to be there! In the front row! Roses in hand!

MAYA

Really?!

BEN

Yes! And after this case is over and done, I'm taking you away some place---for at least a weekend.

MAYA

Yeah!?

BEN

Yes!

MAYA

Maybe we can go camping again.

BEN

Yes! Or since you are not a big fan of camping activities, maybe I can just find us a house in the country for a few days.

MAYA

That sounds nice.

BEN

But I do need to go home first.

MAYA

Ah. Mama's been calling?

BEN

She's not been calling. That's the problem. Have left her messages. Nothing. Just need to go down there. Woman is turning in to some kind of a reclusive nun in her old age.

MAYA

When will you go?

BEN

I should be done with this thing finally by the end of the week. Just going to get in the car and drive. Spend a few days. Check up on things.

MAYA

You should take me with you.

(Ben is uncomfortable about this.)

She'll like me! Mothers like me!....well actually that's not true at all. Quite a bad track record on that one in fact. But I would love to meet her. The womb of your origin.

BEN

That's how I usually introduce her.

MAYA

Actually I would be terrified. Worse than opening night. But it might be worth the gamble---in case she likes me.

(Ben indicates he doesn't understand.)

I think you might love me more if she liked me.

(This jars Ben. Maya studies Ben's response.)

Did she like your wife?

(Ben squirms.)

You've been seeing her, haven't you?....Claire.

(Ben feels caught. Maya studies him quietly, not demanding answers.)

It's alright. Not really my place to come between man and wife.

BEN

Ex-wife.

MAYA

I don't know Ben. She feels pretty close. Makes me feel like the other woman.

(She looks to see his reaction to this.)

But that's ok. I'll take it.

(Ben seems pained, guilty.)

BEN

You don't have to say that.

(Ben sees Maya's dejection. He lets out a big grunt of frustration.)

Fucking hell. Why does it always end up here.

(They look at each other. Maya seems at a loss at the moment.)

Yes! I have been seeing Claire. But I've not been fucking her! Does that make it better?

MAYA

(searching)

This is excruciating. Every piece of information is going to bring questions I'm afraid to ask.

BEN

See now this is the part I don't get. Some man-woman divide here. A man would be relieved to know that his woman has not been fucking someone else. But with you gals, something else----

MAYA

There're worse things to dread.

BEN

Like what?

MAYA

Dare I ask, what *have* you been doing with her?

(Ben gestures: 'How am I going to explain this.')

BEN

I've been inquiring. I've been searching. Been trying to solve the Man-Woman puzzle. Trying to figure out just what the hell has happened in my life so far.

MAYA

I see.

BEN

Yes.

MAYA

And how has this inquiry been going?

BEN

It's kicking my ass. It's laughing at me. Just like that fucking...

(Ben's arm extends and points to the side. He stops.)

MAYA

What?

BEN

Just like that dress that would hang in the corner of our closet. Her wedding dress. That dress, all cleaned up and wrapped in plastic. Hanging in the very corner of our closet. Always there. Never to be picked up again. That started to feel like a nice symbol for how I was feeling about my marriage by the end. I'd steal glances at that fucking thing every time I was in there. It too was mocking me. Making me wonder just how far had we come together as man and wife since that day. From that day to this one, and this one, and this one. That wedding and those ceremonies. Inviting the whole world over to come and witness. Witness what? Why do we need any of it?

MAYA

O, reason not the need!

(Ben stares.)

Reason not the need my love. Our basest beggars are in the poorest things superfluous.

(They stare at each other a bit.)

Sorry. Lear tends to creep in from time to time once you play him.

BEN

When the hell did you play King Lear?

MAYA

I played Goneril. One of his bitchy daughters he delivers the line to.

MAYA (CONT'D)

Poor Ben. You're a man caught between too many women. We're starting to take a toll on you.

(Ben feels exposed and pinned.)

Besides, do you think a tradition as old as humanity is really without meaning, without need?

BEN

Wouldn't be the first time.

MAYA

It's because we're so different.

BEN

We get married because we're different?

MAYA

No. We have the wedding because we're so different.

BEN

How's that?

(Maya dances around Ben)

MAYA

We don't understand each other. Don't see things the same.

(She is back to back with him. She holds his hips and moves them and moves her own in a different rhythm.)

We don't move the same in this world. Are practically 2 different species.

(She moves face to face with him into a formal dancing stance.)

But we fit.

(Dances and speaks.)

So when things are nice. When we're getting along, it's good to come together and say, hey this works, this is good; we can see it through, and let's try and remember this moment because there will be times coming when things won't feel so good together.

(Moves away from him in dance.)

Times when our differences will overwhelm us.

(This interpretation of a wedding strikes at something in Ben.)

BEN

Is that what I did?

MAYA

What?

BEN

Let our differences overwhelm me?

MAYA

Did you?

BEN

See, maybe this is all I needed at the right moment to save my marriage---an interpretive dance on the logic of weddings.

MAYA

Where was I when you needed me?

BEN

Where were you when I needed you?

MAYA

Elsewhere & elsewhere. Nowhere & Right here.

BEN

That makes no sense either.

MAYA

The required absurd ending.

BEN

To what?

MAYA

All unanswerable inquiries.

BEN

Maybe I should take up dancing instead.

MAYA

You have.

BEN

And maybe some poetry writing.

MAYA

Hmm...I would start with some poetry reading perhaps.

BEN

Yeah?

MAYA

To soften the heart a little. Let in other's views. Who knows, it may even soothe your sleep. So you won't go haunting the hours like lady Macbeth.

BEN

Read me some of yours.

MAYA

Oh no thank you.

BEN

I promise not be an asshole.

MAYA

You'll listen with kind ears?

BEN

I promise.

MAYA

Good. Or I'll beat the shit out of you.

(Maya picks up her journal and finds a page. She refers to the pages, but mostly uses the journal as a prop as she dances and performs the words for Ben.)

MAYA (CONT'D)

This is a piece I'm polishing up for next week. Its current title is, 'The Nocturnal Longings of a Poetess'!

I want to find a quiet corner in a busy room. Sit somewhere, sip my drink, and watch the juggler's act and the poet's recitations. I want to hear snippets of philosophy the guy down the bar is ranting on and on about, just small, broken phrases suggestive of deep yearnings, and searchings, and hidden structures. I want to watch the painters hanging up their work, scrutinizing the perpendicularity of the frame to the floor. I like to watch them as they steal glances at their own canvasses, looking anxious, uncertain like a man keeping an eye on his beautiful wife across the room, wondering whether she means all those smiles, all those laughs, whether it is safe to keep letting one's wife make men fall in love with her just between the walk from the bar to the ladies room.

I want to be an extra in a non-stop Fellini movie. I want to be a little stray sheep in a Chagall painting. To hear the notes from the fiddler's violin rising skywards and then showering down, down on the village in shades of blue.

I want to look in the mirror and find a femme fatale, out of a Modigliani painting, one of those women with endless waists and circle breasts. I too want to be an irresistible woman with hard, dead eyes. An irresistible woman. An irresistible woman. A living ghost that haunts, that torments, that possesses, that enters and occupies all the empty caverns in the souls of men. An irresistible woman that makes men feel complete while she is devouring their innards.

(MORE)

MAYA (CONT'D)

I want to fly over the roofs and chimneys of slumbering houses and observe the night prayers of sad children rising into the heavens like silver strings and entering the ear of god. I too want to ride one of those silver strings and fly into the ear of god. Into the mind of god. Sleep there an eternity in his silence. Till he spits me out again with his word and hurls me to the earth. To make me anew. To make me anew. To pour of you into me and back and back again. And I want to see his smile stretched in the sky as he examines his mischief.

There is a piece of you in me. There is. There is. God put it there. There is a piece of you in me. But I can't give it to you. You'll have to come looking. Come looking. You'll have to find me to find it. You will have to come to me. And you have. You have.

LIGHTS FADE

SCENE THREE

(Claire's apartment. Well decorated, comfortable home. Dusk.)

(Claire & David walk into the apartment. Claire a few steps ahead of David. They are dressed up like they have been out. They are both tipsy from the evening's festivities, Claire quite a bit more so than David.)

CLAIRE

Did you have to be such a prick about it?

DAVID

No, not really. It just seemed to be more fun that way.

CLAIRE

Why do people even talk about religion? Let alone argue about it?

DAVID

Darling, I'm an academic. Staking a point of view and defending it relentlessly is how we earn our bread.

CLAIRE

Well, I consider it rude. It's a private matter.

DAVID

Like the confessional.

CLAIRE

Or one's sex life.

DAVID

No orgies in our future then?

(Claire glares at David again, raises a finger to make a point, stalls, forgets her thought. Continues.)

CLAIRE

It is a private business. And I appreciate the delicacy of that set up. No prying. And if one must talk, why not talk about the beauty of it.

DAVID

Of religion or sex?

CLAIRE

About the singing. The hymns. The coolness of church walls. The symmetry of the pews and the sheen of the wood.

(Claire flops on the couch.)

The exalting curves of the arches.

(David is intrigued by Claire's romance for churches.)

The way light comes in through stain glass widows. The way the singing voices rise in the knave as if there was a gentle force tugging them upwards.

(Claire seems to doze off for a moment.)

The coolness of the grass underneath your feet.

DAVID

The grass underneath your feet?

CLAIRE

(Gesturing that she is not drunk.)

In the garden. The garden of our church. My mother and I would plant flowers. Never felt grass like that in a park or a yard. There was something lovely in it. The smell of the soil. Sometimes the choir would be rehearsing inside while we worked.

DAVID

Sounds idyllic. A bit subdued though. No firsthand encounters with the holy spirit? No speaking in tongues?

CLAIRE

Episcopalians don't catch the holy spirit. If you can't sing in tune, you're encouraged to mouth the words.

DAVID

So, no running down the isles screaming and passing out in the preacher's arms?

(Claire smiles and doze off again. David comes close to her. Looks at her softly. Caresses her forehead and face.)

(Claire meets David's gaze. She is pleased by the look of great affection she sees there and shies away from it.)

CLAIRE

Don't look at me like that.

(He does not shift.)

Ok. Don't look at me like that too much.

(She pushes him away gently.)

Go. Go get me a glass of water.

(Claire thinks of something that makes her smile.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

That guy was a bit of a blowhard though.

(David returns with a glass of water.)

It was really funny the look on his face when you started going on about how all sociopaths are also inherently atheists.

DAVID

Which probably isn't even true. But it seemed like a good hammer to use at the moment.

CLAIRE

You are terrible.

DAVID

I know dear. It's just years of training. Using one's wit to slug. Especially on schmucks like that guy.

CLAIRE

Know his kind well, huh?

DAVID

Surrounded by them. The well-spoken dimwits. Men who use words like Quotidian and Propitious way more than they need to.

CLAIRE

Oh, I know a couple of those.

DAVID

It's a collection of men who were overachieving boys --- whose parents told them they were smarter than everyone else. Now they are all in the same club pissing on each other's shoes.

CLAIRE

And I thought you boys were dueling just to impress the women in the room.

DAVID

Did we succeed.

CLAIRE

Brought you home didn't I sailor?

DAVID
Come away with me Claire.

CLAIRE
Where to?

DAVID
Let's go on some adventure. Let's be outside of this city together. Just you and me. Anything. We can go skydiving.

CLAIRE
Skydiving? You've been?

DAVID
Yes. Several times. Usually after a break up. Have felt the need for an adrenalin and testosterone rush for regrowing my testicles after each woman.

CLAIRE
So we should break up first.

DAVID
No.

CLAIRE
I should leave you for some pretty, young boy. Be mean to you and say horrid things.

DAVID
No.

CLAIRE
How about camping?

DAVID
I love camping. Spent my summers of youth collecting more badges than you can count. It's where I first learned to shoot.

CLAIRE
You know how to shoot?

DAVID
Quite well. Rifles and pistols.

CLAIRE
David, I am surprised.

DAVID

Let me surprise you some more.

CLAIRE

How about we do something new in the city first. Some outing or adventure.

DAVID

A picnic.

CLAIRE

Yes.

DAVID

We could go to church.

CLAIRE

Church?

DAVID

Yes. I would love to go to church with you. We should go sometime. To church.

CLAIRE

I thought you were an atheist.

DAVID

Yes, but I'm a non-practicing atheist.

CLAIRE

Thought you said Christianity was a sore on humanity.

DAVID

Not true. I actually have a fondness for Jesus. Would love to buy the man a beer. It's just the rest of it that needs a hosing, but all that's besides the point. I want to see you, in this element you describe.

CLAIRE

You want to observe me going to church?

DAVID

Something like that. Hear you sing. In tune. See you all gussied up. The way you did back home.

CLAIRE

Hmmm. Haven't really been since leaving home.

DAVID

Miss it?

CLAIRE

I do actually. The occasion of it. I remember the mornings. Getting ready. 3 sisters and a mother. It felt like a day of truce. If there had been any bickering between the girls during the week, it was all given up that morning. Nobody made a fuss about borrowing somebody's earrings or whatever.

DAVID

An entente for fashion?

CLAIRE

One makes oneself presentable, but there was less vanity in it. It's just what you did. No different than the choir practicing so they may sing better or the minister staying up late struggling with his sermon.

DAVID

Sounds marvelous.

CLAIRE

It was. Elevating even! And in all of it there was nothing to argue about, no need of convincing people of your ways of going about the sabbath.

DAVID

I'm sorry dear. I stand corrected.

CLAIRE

And why are you trying to hop on to my sabbath ride anyway? What about your own, huh?

DAVID

Well. It's kind of tradition for me dear. My visitations to god's house have always been attached with the woman in my life. I accompany.

CLAIRE

I see. And when did you accompany last?

DAVID

Last time was to Zen Buddhist temples. But that didn't go too well.

CLAIRE

And what was her name?

DAVID

Surya. Lovely Malaysian girl. Jet black hair down to her hips.

CLAIRE

Ah-huh. And don't tell me. You managed to pick a fight with a Zen monk?

DAVID

Well.

CLAIRE

You actually managed to piss off a Buddhist monk?

DAVID

I was simply conversing.

CLAIRE

Ah--huh.

DAVID

In my utmost Socratic method...about his repressive position on sensuality. His insistence that spirituality and sex were incompatible. He kept quoting some master who had said that 'Posture is meditation.'

CLAIRE

And you had a counter argument.

DAVID

Not at all. I had a parallel argument.

CLAIRE

Do say.

DAVID

I proposed that if posture is meditation, erection must be love.

CLAIRE

How did that go over?

DAVID

Not too well actually. I almost resolved to stick with catholic girls and cathedrals after that one.

CLAIRE

Oh, that's nicer. Going to church with a good girl entering the nave with a weighted heart about living in sin with you?

DAVID

Quite true.

CLAIRE

Right. You wait in the back while she steps forward to confess and get her punishment for fucking you.

DAVID

Your version sounds romantic.

CLAIRE

So who was the last one? The last church-going, good woman you sinned with.

DAVID

Luisa, from Spain. Lovely women the Spaniards. Almost a well-kept secret.

CLAIRE

Ah-huh. And what happened with Luisa?

DAVID

I actually followed her home to Llieda last summer. She had 2 brothers, who were not very happy with the sight of this older man with their fair, maiden sister. I think they truly tried to kill me. When the drinking wasn't doing it, it was off to the bull run. Actually got quite fond of those boys by the end of the week. Spent all my days with them; hardly saw poor Luisa.

CLAIRE

Hope you at least went to church together.

DAVID

Made out in one actually. The old cathedral in town. La Sue Vella. A church and a fortress. Gothic arches. Lovely, cool stones. You would have liked.

CLAIRE

I would have huh? I do miss those walls. You can keep the sermons. The mustard seeds and the lilies of the field not toiling. Jesus! What is a mustard seed anyway? Ever even seen one?

DAVID

Oh yes. Indian girlfriend. She used them often. These potatoes and onion sauté she would make for me some Sunday mornings when she was feeling particularly pleased with me. Plenty of mustard seeds in there.

CLAIRE

You have done quite a survey of women haven't you? A world sampling. There must be a book in there.

DAVID

Most certainly. Someone should write it. I tell you, I have never even encountered two women with exactly the same nipples, let alone the rest. There is an incredible variety there.

CLAIRE

You should write a paper. Get a research grant.

DAVID

What if I tell you I am done with my research? That I am ready to stop searching. What do you say to that Claire? Want to stop searching with me?

CLAIRE

Here and now?

DAVID

Yes. Here and now.

CLAIRE

You are not going to pull a ring out of your pocket are you.

DAVID

It's not in my pocket, but I have one. My mother's. It's beautiful. Don't like that one, let's go pick one out. Anyway you want it.

CLAIRE

I still have my last one David.

DAVID

Wear that one. Don't wear one. What does it matter.

CLAIRE

Second marriage in one's 30s. Bit tawdry don't you think?

DAVID

I love you.

CLAIRE

Let me ask you something David. This may sound like a mean inquiry...Wait. You don't own a gun, do you?

DAVID

Of course. My father's service pistol. A beautiful Colt 1911. Haven't fired it in years. It's in a safety box somewhere.

CLAIRE

Not close at hand.

DAVID

I'm a non-violent marksman.

CLAIRE

How many times before...to how many other women have you proposed.

DAVID

Twice, I would say.

CLAIRE

Twice?

DAVID

Yes. Never have done the whole on my knees, ring in hand bit, but there have been 2 times when I have felt, this could work. This could go on nicely.

CLAIRE

And what did they say? Those two women?

DAVID

They said what I would have said to all the rest of them. That things were good as they were. Let's just have fun and see. Why complicate matters.

CLAIRE

And this time.

DAVID

This time I feel more than ever we could go on nicely Claire. That we could build something unique together.

CLAIRE

But you've felt that before also?

DAVID

Yes.

CLAIRE

Did you feel it with your Spaniard?

DAVID

No. Things never got that far with Luisa. We ended after that summer.

CLAIRE

Maybe if the bull run had gone differently. If only you had been gored. She would have nursed you. A silent, somber passion might have grown in the night fever. Even the brothers, guilt ridden, would have prayed for you.

(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Everyone would have come together for the wedding in the old church. You, slowly making your way up the aisle with the aid of a cane.

DAVID

What do you say Claire?

CLAIRE

I can't imagine it David.

DAVID

Don't see yourself happy down the line?

CLAIRE

I'm happy with you now.

DAVID

Are you?

CLAIRE

Yes. I can't see another marriage. Another wedding. Another announcement. Telling my family.

DAVID

Won't they be happy for you?

CLAIRE

They will be appalled. In their silent, contemptible way. My divorce was a failure. Announcing that I'm having another go at it...that would just be crass.

DAVID

Others in your family must have divorced, remarried?

CLAIRE

That's other people.

DAVID

What are you supposed to do the rest of your life?

CLAIRE

Mouth the words.

DAVID

I'm not sure I like your family.

CLAIRE

I'm sure the feeling would be mutual.

DAVID

So screw them. Let's elope.

CLAIRE

Fly away to Europe? Get hitched in some old cathedral, by a country priest with an accent?

DAVID

Sounds perfect.

CLAIRE

So you want me to marry you and divorce my family?

DAVID

Well...

CLAIRE

I'm not sure they would be wrong David. I'm not sure I wouldn't feel the same way towards one of my sisters if she were to pull a similar stunt. Appearances matter. They matter more for a woman.

DAVID

Picking appearance over happiness in the choice of malcontents.

CLAIRE

Easy to say for someone who doesn't have to make that choice.

DAVID

I'm not sure it's even a choice. I think it really might be in our gene pool?

CLAIRE

Our?

DAVID

We the Americans. Maybe we have been bred for misery.

CLAIRE

Sounds gothically bucolic.

DAVID

I'm serious. If only tall people had immigrated to America, you'd expect this to be a very tall populous. Well, we had only the poor and miserable and discontent move to America, and maybe that's what we are selected for. That tablet saying 'Give me your tired, your poor, your weary', that's not just who came here; that's who's still here. Give me your malcontent it should say. Give me your shunned desperadoes with an inferiority complex and a chip on their shoulder.

CLAIRE

We desperadoes seemed to have done pretty ok.

DAVID

Maybe it's the malcontents who will inherit the earth.

CLAIRE

And not want it.

DAVID

We'll put her up for an exchange or upgrade.

CLAIRE

A yard sale. I think it's only getting rejected by women that makes philosophers out of you men. I say I don't want to marry you, and you end up with....you know

DAVID

Oh most certainly. We wouldn't give a rat's ass about all that stuff if we were getting laid.

CLAIRE

Hardly a complaint you can make, mister.

DAVID

At least consider it.

CLAIRE

I will. I will keep it in my back pocket. I will keep it in a nice safe box. The same place you keep your mother's ring. And your father's gun.

LIGHTS FADE

SCENE 4

(Claire's apartment. Daytime. Afternoon light coming through the windows.)

(Claire is dressed in a pretty, form-fitting summer dress. She is tidying up the apartment. There is a knock on the door. Claire opens it. It's Ben. He is dressed casually. He looks worn.)

CLAIRE

Hey.

BEN

Hi.

CLAIRE

Thanks for coming over here this time. I didn't have it in me --- another hotel room rendezvous.

BEN

No, thanks for agreeing to meet.

CLAIRE

Sure.

(Claire notices Ben examining the room.)

I know it must be a little weird for you being back here. It's been a while.

BEN

It's ok.

CLAIRE

It feels a bit strange to me actually. You and I here again. The last few time we were together in this apartment ...weren't exactly our best moments.

BEN

It's ok.

CLAIRE

Can I get you something to drink?

BEN

Just some water.

(Claire notices Ben's worn appearance. She brings him a glass of water. She examines him further.)

CLAIRE

How have you been sleeping Ben? You are looking a little tired.

(Ben begins to look more unsettled. More unsure. He gestures that she is correct in her observation. But he can't find any words.)

Our last meeting...I wanted to apologize. It wasn't how....

BEN

It's alright. Don't worry about it.

(Claire stops. Looks at Ben. Ben seems to get further untethered.)

CLAIRE

What's on your mind Ben?

(Ben is searching for the words, but at the moment it seems his mind is not cooperating.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Ben?

BEN

(Almost inaudibly.)

Claire. My mother died.

(Claire is stunned.)

CLAIRE

When?

BEN

Two weeks. It's been two weeks.

CLAIRE

Ben, why didn't you tell me?

(Ben looks unspooled. He has no words.)

I'm so sorry.

(Claire puts her arms around Ben. Ben receives her affection.)

Ben what happened? How did this happen so suddenly?

BEN

It wasn't sudden. As it turned out. She had been sick for a while apparently. She was diagnosed with a tumor more than 6 months ago. It was in her liver. They said the cancer probably started in her breast and then spread. She knew it was very serious, that she didn't have very long. The doctor said she refused to undergo surgery.

(pause)

He said the odds of cure would have been very slim even if she had.

CLAIRE

Why didn't she tell you?

(Ben shrugs.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Your brothers?

(Ben indicates 'no'.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Why?

BEN

I don't know. I've been asking myself that question for two weeks. I don't know.

CLAIRE

When did you find out?

BEN

I was driving down to see her. Finally. That was...Saturday before last. I left her a message. Couldn't get her on the phone as usual. I was about 5 minutes from the house when I got a call from the hospital saying that she had just died.

(Ben seems to get lost again.)

BEN (CONT'D)

The woman on the phone said that she had the names and numbers of all three of her sons in front of her. My mother had left instructions that we be...notified.

(Pause)

The woman said that I was the first one she had dialed, and wouldn't it be better if I was the one to give the news to my 2 brothers rather her making those calls.

(Pause)

I told her that sounded good. That I would call my brothers. Give them the news.

(Pause)

I did.

(Claire is sad and baffled.)

CLAIRE

Ben, I would have come to the funeral.

BEN

(As if considering that possibility for the first time.)

I'm sorry. I should have called. I just...wasn't sure. What to do. What she wanted me to do. You know?

(Claire indicates she doesn't know.)

BEN (CONT'D)

She had already planned out all of it Claire. All of it. She had her coffin picked. The lot in the cemetery. The funeral hall. She had spoken to the minister. She had practically written what he should say at her funeral.

(Pause)

She had submitted her own obituary. She had picked the caterer and selected the menu! And she had paid for all of it in advance. Taken care of all business. All that was left -- was for her to die and for the rest of us to show up. Apart from calling my brothers, I didn't have to do anything. None of us did. I think I figured if there was someone she wanted to invite to her funeral, they were bound to receive a pre-planned written invitation from her.

(Claire is struggling to wrap her head around this. She doesn't succeed.)

BEN (CONT'D)

All those people. All of them. From that nurse on the phone to the caterer. The florist. The organ player that she had hired and pre-paid. All of them knew she was sick and about to die.

(Pause.)

Not us. Not me. Not her 3 sons.

CLAIRE

That doesn't make sense.

BEN

That's what the three of us kept saying to each other the first day. But then...it almost fits. Our mother slipping away. Slipping out of our hands. Disappearing.

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

BEN

It's something we have always known, I think. Always feared. Only, we feared it more when we lived under her roof. She had always had a way of slipping away from us. Usually only for a little while. Usually just into her writing, her journals.

I remember one Saturday afternoon. The 3 of us must have been about 12, 13, 14. We were messing around. Making a lot of noise. Maybe doing it on purpose, to get to her, to shake her loose from her desk and her scribbling. We finally managed to pull her away. She came out of her room. Looked at us a moment. We thought she was about to give us a good yelling for being such idiots. But instead, she just picked up her keys, walked out the door, got in her car and drove away.

(Pause.)

We tried to convince ourselves that she must have just gone to run some errand, that she'd be right back. But we were terrified. The hours kept passing. Evening came. We got hungry. We made ourselves some dinner. Ate it in silence, listening for any car driving by, listening for her pulling back in the driveway. But, no. Night came. 9 o'clock. 10. 11. We finally put ourselves to bed. We lay there, eyes wide open. What were we going to do? We didn't even call anyone. What were we going to say? We were being a pain in the ass and our mother left us? We just lay there into the night. Listening. Thinking out scenarios of what our lives were going to be like from now on if that woman did not walk back through that door.

Around 2:30am we finally heard her car pull in the driveway. We heard her walk into the house. And she walked straight to her room and shut the door. Not sure she even checked to see whether we were there or not. There was a moment of relief, as if the stand off was over. The 3 of us started whispering. Where had she been? Why had she gone? Why had she come back?

And then another terrible thought took hold. What if she had come back only to grab a few of her things? You know, to pack properly and then disappear for good. What if she had come back only for her precious stack of journals? Would we find her there in the morning? Or would we go to her room and find her drawers and desk empty, and her gone once again? So we lay there.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT 'D)

Listening for the sound of her packing, sound of a suitcase being pulled from the shelf, the clang of hangers as she yanked clothes off them in a hurry. Somehow we slept.

The next morning we could hear her in the kitchen. The 3 of us got ready in a hurry, and marched silently into the kitchen like good, disciplined children. She didn't say a word. We didn't either. She gave us breakfast, still that glazed look in her eyes. Like a robot. That was that. A warning. A lesson.

CLAIRE

I'm so sorry Ben. I don't understand this. I can't imagine what you and your brothers must be going through.

BEN

I'm sorry to burden you with this Claire.

(Claire indicates that it's not a burden at all.)

I'm just not sure what to do with all this. My brothers, they are ...going through their own stuff. And Maya...it doesn't feel right...need to talk to someone who knew her, you know?...at least a little. And there aren't that many people in my life...my brothers and you pretty much.

CLAIRE

I'm glad you are here Ben. I only wish you had told me even sooner....

(searching)

tell me what you need...is there anything...

(Ben shakes his head. Claire moves closer to him. Touches him soothingly.)

Ben, I can't imagine what her reasons were for keeping you in the dark...but it just might be better to believe that she had a good reason. You shouldn't be angry with her.

(Ben hears this but seems to go else where in his mind.)

BEN

(sardonic)

They never tell you about the challenge of writing a eulogy. Nobody ever tells you...that this person that brought you into this world is most likely going to die before you. And you're going to have to sit down, put pen to paper, come up with something to say, a few choice words...to sum up their life and your relationship...all before a captive audience. Let me tell you, it's not an easy task. Pretty much every piece of writing I do for the rest of my life is going to have to be measured against the difficulty of writing a eulogy for a mother who didn't like me very much.

CLAIRE

Don't say that Ben.

BEN

I'm not sure she liked any of us. It's not even like she had a favorite among her 3 sons. I stood there at the funeral, looking at her friends out there, other women her age, wondering if they all felt just as she did.

(bitter)

We are a generation of men raised by women...and these women don't really seem to think much of men.

CLAIRE

Don't hate her Ben. And don't think she hated you. Or your brothers. That is a poisonous thought. It will eat you from the inside.

BEN

Why shy away from hate? I think I'm actually beginning to appreciate hate. Just how common it is in our lives. Perhaps essential? Two of the biggest relationships of my life---my wife and my mother. Look where we end up.

CLAIRE

I don't hate you Ben. I still love you.

(Ben shrugs.)

BEN

And I love you. That's why I wanted to come here. Have nobody else to go to. Nobody else I could say these things to. And I love my mother. But look where we end up. You here in our old home with another man. Me somewhere else. And my mother on intimate terms with the funeral business.

CLAIRE

It doesn't have to be that way Ben. All of it doesn't have to be that way. People can do better. We could do better.

BEN

We tried.

CLAIRE

We should have tried harder. I see that now. We should have tried harder. Tried harder to hold on to whatever little love we still felt.

BEN

Maybe.

CLAIRE

We were reckless with what we had. How much we had.

(Ben considers this.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

And you should have called me Ben. You should have called me right away. You should have given me the chance to be there for you in this. I would have dropped everything. I would have come right away.

(Ben is visibly moved by this. We can see how much he needed this support.)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

You are not the only one feeling untethered Ben. You are not the only one who stays up nights wondering what a mess we've made. I too wake up--panic stricken, screaming. Full of regret.

(pause)

I would like to try again....make things right. I've been so lost Ben. I too want an anchor. Isn't that what you want too Ben? Underneath all the desire to understand? What's the point of understanding if you can't do it better the next time?

BEN

I don't think I've understood anything Claire. I don't think I understand anything at all.

CLAIRE

That's not true Ben. We know how we want our lives to be. We know that better today than we did before. Don't we? Maybe that's all that wisdom truly is. Knowing more clearly what's going to make us happy. And knowing enough to not let yourself get in the way of having those things.

BEN

And you have acquired that wisdom? Have you?

CLAIRE

I know I want to be there for you Ben...when things are difficult..when you are in pain. And god knows I want the same. I need it. And we had it together Ben. We had it before...in the beginning. But then we both lost our way.

(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

I'm not denying my own shortcomings Ben, but I think we both gave up a bit too easily. We both ended up being fair weather friends to each other. I think only now do I understand the weight of those vows we took. I should have trembled more, when walking down that isle, repeating those words. I should not have considered that ritual just decor, as if the ceremony were an accessory to my dress. Isn't that stupid? That lawyer in my head was saying to the priest, 'You realize of course that this contract is non-binding. He can't really sue me if I abandon him in sickness or poverty.'

We were too young Ben. Both of us. We shouldn't have assumed it was going to be easy. I think that's what did us in, not the difficult times but our low tolerance for them. And here we are today...in difficult times...and we can see that we do need each other. These are the times for which we take those vows.

Things didn't have to fall apart like they did, Ben. I see that now. If only we had slowed down a bit, cut each other some slack, forgiven each other for a few things. But neither of us was willing, you know---like two sick people, locked together, neither of them a doctor.

I still have my dress. I think it should still fit. We could do a quick ceremony. We could do it on our anniversary, or hell, we could celebrate two anniversaries; do people ever do that?

I know we are involved. I know that's a difficulty. It would be a worthwhile sacrifice. A smaller mess to clean up a bigger one. In a few years we may even forget this in-between period.

(They kiss.)

SCENE FIVE

(Stage is split in 2 sections. On stage right is Claire's apartment. On the left is Ben's apartment. The time is middle of the night.)

(All 4 characters are on stage in their night clothes. Maya and David are downstage; Ben and Claire more in the background.)

(Maya stands. Ben is sitting at the edge of the bed stag. His body feels heavy and guilty; his face is turned down and away from Maya.)

MAYA

(Puzzled. In pain.)

How do we fall? From being cherished? From being pursued...to being discarded? I feel so stupid. I can never see this turn coming.

(Maya looks at Ben...Challenging.)

You done with me?

(Ben's body rocks from her question, but he does not turn to look at her or speak.)

Done with these arms? This skin? Done with these breasts? Done with me. My voice. My words. What I might say to you tomorrow. What I might bring to you next week.

(Pause.)

What happens to that look in their eyes? That look...like he can't quite believe I said yes. That look...like he can hardly stay in his skin he wants me so much. Now he sits there, all twisted in a knot. Hardly breathing...or looking. No more looks.

DAVID

How many of such scenes have I been through? Since my school days. All the reasons that are dragged and presented, to make this slaughtering look like a sensible, logical affair. The reasons. I've heard all the reasons. All the reasons that it's right that I should be...done away with. 'You are too serious for me, too clownish, too critical, too intellectual. You are too smart for me.'

(Loudly indignant.)

It's when they start using your admirable qualities as excuses to leave you that you know you are really being fucked in the ass! Tell me you found a prettier boy.

(MORE)

DAVID (CONT'D)

Pick on my soft belly, my balding head. Tell me...you found yourself a magnificent cock you can't live without!

(Reflecting. Remembering.)

'You are too erudite for me.' I had a student tell me that once. Not a very bright girl...Stacia...Eastern European...a study in ovals...wide high cheeks, saucer eyes, freckled shoulders...those perfectly circular breasts. Ass like an apple. 'Too erudite for me.' I was! But who was easing whom out the door? 'Too erudite for me.'

(Loudly indignant.)

I once had my superior knowledge of Piedmont wines counted against me in this manner! I wonder if there are even people whose beauty is counted against them in such...final rounds.

'You are simply too sublime. Your radiance has become overwhelming. Forgive me.'

MAYA

I've never wondered much about the ex-lovers of my new lovers. Or the new lovers of my ex-lovers. Never pried and probed about all that. Why bother? Always been more interested in this thing here in front of me. This new thing. But this one...this one haunts me. Claire.

LIGHT GOES UP ON CLAIRE

(Claire stands stage right a few feet away from Maya. Claire looks forward steadily.)

Usually when you enter a man's life, his home, you walk into the zone of the last woman. And women always love to leave their turf marked in some way. Leave behind a tired pair of panties or some such thing. An earring. A barrette. Some item to incite an inquiry. But there is none of that here. There are no remnants of Claire in this place. The home he shared with her, he let her have. There is not even a soap dish here that she purchased or some picture frame that she hung up. And still, somehow, she lingers here. And you would think I feel her the most when...

(She gestures to the bed.)

But no. I've even looked for her at those times. One time I almost got in a panic because I thought if we kept making so much noise, we were going to disturb her, and she is going to come walking through that door. But no. It's those few times when I am alone in this place. That's when she comes. When he has gone in the morning, and I am at the sink washing my face...that's when I see her...standing in the doorway, looking at me. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't look mean or kind. What does she want from me?

DAVID

(Hurt. In pain. Feeling wronged.)

I don't think I've ever done this to a girl. If I have liked her enough to keep seeing her. I've never had such a change of heart.

(Reflecting.)

Maybe they have always left me before I could tire of them. Sparing me the cruel part in this drama.

What do people want? A little kindness. A little sex. Some stimulating conversation. Someone to turn to in moments of difficulty. How much is there to be had in another person? What is it that they find lacking in me that I don't feel the lack of in myself? If something about me irritates you, you don't like the way I touch or kiss or eat your pussy, tell me! I would be happy to oblige. I have mastered more complex mechanics.

(Softer. Imploring.)

Claire, give into me a little. The world is not as abundant as you think it is. Men are in fact not as generous as they seem to a woman in her youth. Build with me. Right here is a fire you can warm yourself by.

MAYA

(Ranting. A bit mad.)

What happens to the vows you take? The promises we make? Do they die? When you walk away? I think they hang in the air. Those words remain suspended at the altar where you spoke them---with such weight---declared yourself in front of witnesses. We end up bearing false witnesses to ourselves and we think nothing will come of this. If we were wiser, I think we would hold even bigger rituals for our endings than we do for our joinings. The man and woman ought to come back together, call back those witnesses. These endings ought to be a blood ritual instead of some civilized legal affair. We ought to come together again, man and woman, we ought to burn something, cut something, destroy something. Set a fire. Scratch each other and curse and beat and forgive. Our endings ought to be loud, screaming, public affairs. An exorcism powerful enough to dissolve vows. Otherwise...we paint the walls where blood once ran. We make the surface white and new. But our house remains haunted.

DAVID

(Defeated. Resigned.)

Moments like these, it feels that my life is built on rumors. We rumor to each other about what is unpalatable. About the mystery of death, about our origin, about our place in the world. And then there are the rumors we tell ourselves about ourselves. That I'm needed. That I'm unique. That I serve a purpose. That without me, somehow the universe would be lacking, that the people I know would be left incomplete. We have no solemn proof of all this of course, but there is enough evidence pointing in that direction. Enough to warrant a rumor.

(Looks around for Claire.)

And then this. A change. The rumors collapse. And there is nothing to be done. No evidence, or science to prop up all the notions I've been living with.

MAYA

(In Ophelia mode.)

The last time this happened I kept having nightmares about oysters. I would see them every night, swarms of them, reefs of them. See them in bright detail as if someone had placed them under magnifying glasses, under surgical lights. I could see the infinite grooves in their shells, like finger prints. First I thought it had something to do with sex---aphrodisiacs and all that. But I think they were the symbols for men---all those oysters. The hard shell...and the roughness...and the sharp edge...enough to cut you open if you let them. And their flesh and their brine. The smooth mother-of-pearl of their certain body parts. The soft and the hard of them. The smooth and the cutting. Flesh and shell. And no two alike. And each so similar to another.

(pause)

Every morning I wanted to take one of those shells in my fist and crush it till my blood ran. Or slash it into somebody's face.

(She looks at Ben.)

What should I do to him? What could I do? My imagination fails me. And my feminine spite. What I see, all I can see, is that thing in his face, in his body, that thing that says, 'I don't want you here.' 'I don't want to be in the same room with you.'

(Maya exits. David exits. Ben's body relaxes a bit. He & Claire turn towards each other a little.)

SCENE 6

(A NY Hotel Room. Evening.)

(Claire is alone in the room. She is wearing a beautiful dress.)

(There is a knock on the door. It's Ben. He looks lighter and fresher than we have seen him so far.)

CLAIRE

Ben...

(Claire just takes Ben in for a moment not knowing what to say. Ben smiles at her gently. He steps forward and puts his arms around her holding her in a sweet embrace for a few moments. Claire melts in his arms. They come apart. Claire looks at his face, happy. She caresses his cheek.)

It's good to see you.

BEN

(Ben looks into Claire's eyes gently.)

It's good to see you Claire....Have you been waiting long.

CLAIRE

No. Just a little while. How have you been? I was starting to worry a little. It's been over 3 weeks...

BEN

Yes. Thanks for letting me take my time. I needed it.

CLAIRE

Well...you've been through a lot... So...what've you been up to all these days?

BEN

Well...the last time we were together...the day after that...the night after that...I broke things off with Maya...Which was...awful. Simply awful.

(Beat.)

And you and David?

CLAIRE

Had to be done...difficult in the moment...but...it's done. Over.

BEN

Yes. Well...the day after that...that was not a very good day. I think that's when I called you and said I needed some time. I spoke to the people at work. Told them I need to take a month off. They said yes right away. They've been great.

CLAIRE

That's wonderful.

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

And after?

BEN

After...the few days after that...I don't know. I think that's the closest I've come in my life to going insane....

CLAIRE

Ben you should have reached out to me.

BEN

Well after...I don't know 2,3,4 days of just sitting there in my apartment...I don't think I slept one hour in that time...I found myself in my car, driving.

CLAIRE

Where did you go?

BEN

I went back home.

CLAIRE

Back to your mother's house?

BEN

My mother's house. My house. Yes.

CLAIRE

Why?

BEN

No idea! I don't think I had any clear ideas inside my head during that time.

(Beat.)

I got there in the middle of the night. I opened the door...My brothers had made a little collage for the funeral.

(MORE)

BEN (CONT'D)

They had gone through the photo albums and picked out pictures of her from all different years...I sat there in the living room looking at that board with all those photos. And miraculously...I slept. I got up after I don't know how many hours. I was starving. Don't think I had eaten much in a few days. I got in my car. Grabbed some food. Came back. And slept some more. I think I've gotten more sleep in the past 3 weeks than in the last 6 months.

CLAIRE

That's wonderful! So that's where you've been all this time?

BEN

Most of it yes.

CLAIRE

And you do look better! It shows. When I saw you it...it almost looked like you had come back from vacation.

(Ben looks at Claire a beat.)

BEN

And how about you Claire? How have you been these weeks?

CLAIRE

I've been good...A little anxious to hear from you...but happy. I'm looking forward to us...to our future.

BEN

Have you spoken to your family yet?

CLAIRE

No. Not yet. I wanted to wait. Till we had some... solid news to share with them.

BEN

You know, I dreamt of your father the other night?

CLAIRE

(A bit surprised and delighted.)

Really?

BEN

Yes. Been dreaming a lot lately. He and I were just hanging out in a park. Talking about life. I think we were both dressed in black tie. We just talked about things; he really wanted to know how I was. And he wanted to know what had happened between us. I think he and I chatted more in that dream than we ever have in real life. He seemed really happy to see me.

CLAIRE

(Pensive.)

He always liked you Ben.

BEN

(Getting it.)

He did like me, didn't he? You know I never paid much mind to it. He was always so quiet and reserved...I just treated him as...I never let myself really see him.

(Beat.)

But that day...he was very happy to see us get married.

(Claire is moved thinking about this.)

CLAIRE

He was. I think he was relieved. For me. That I had found someone. Said yes to someone. His difficult daughter.

BEN

He must have been really sad to hear of our divorce.

CLAIRE

(Sad. In pain.)

He never said much about it but...

(Beat.)

That first visit home after our divorce was something awful. Like a funeral. The silences.

BEN

I'm sorry for that Claire.

CLAIRE

(Going on. Unburdening.)

They all blamed me.

(Beat.)

They never said as much...but the look in their eyes. The look in my mother's eyes...all it seemed to say was, 'What the hell did you do?' My father too. My sisters. They all felt...do feel...that I drove you away.

BEN

It's not true Claire.

CLAIRE

You know my mother poured so much of herself into that wedding that...after we got divorced...

(Beat.)

My sister was telling me how much she would enjoy showing people our wedding album and talk about how she had made this thing happen and organized that part...after the divorce obviously even the mention of that wedding...

(Beat. More emotional.)

My sister said that my mother told her she felt foolish for having cared so much for all of it, for having worked so hard for it. That now it just felt like some expensive charade. Like someone had tricked her into believing it was real.

BEN

I'm sorry for that Claire.

CLAIRE

(Resolving to be optimistic.)

But now we can change that Ben. We can make things better. We can restore.

(Beat.)

BEN

Do you think we can?

CLAIRE

Ohh. It's going to take a little bit of time perhaps. But if we keep at it...in a year or two...yes. People will start to forget this... intervening period. Our divorce...you know it might even be considered something impetuous...something even passionate...temperamental. A young couple...going through challenges. Parting ways for a while. But in the end... re-finding their love. Learning from their...journey...growing from their difficulties.

(Ben considers this for a few beats. But then goes on almost as if he didn't hear it.)

BEN

Strange how I've thought so little about all this before. Never considered how much pain my life and my decisions have caused on other people...your parents...my mother too. Do you know she actually prayed for us? After I told her we were splitting?

(Claire indicates a surprised 'no'.)

The whole bit... lighting a candle at the altar and everything.

(Ben shakes his head. Thinking.)

Never even saw that woman go into a church in all my life.

(Ben sees that Claire is a bit baffled.)

It was in her journals.

CLAIRE

(Bit shocked.)

You read her journals?

(Ben nods. Beat.)

BEN

What I did mostly when I was there. Probably why I went. After I had eaten and slept for a couple of days, it was clear why I'd come.

It was almost like being back at school for a few days. All I did was read and eat. Sleep. Go for runs in between to think about what I had just read...It took a good 5 or 6 days to get through all of them.

(Beat)

You know why she started writing?...to cope with my father's death. Her first entry is about 2 months after he died. That whole first year, all her entries were addressed directly to my father, like she was talking to him.

(Getting lost in thought. Sad.)

It was something...to start there. To encounter her there. To see us...her 3 little sons...from her side of things.

CLAIRE

Did she write about her illness? Why she didn't tell you?

BEN

Yes. Quite a bit.

CLAIRE

What did you find out?

(Ben thinks a beat. Shrugs.)

BEN

She didn't want to die a mother.

(Claire is taken aback by this a bit. Puzzled.)

It's likely to happen to all of us I think. When the time comes. If we know it's coming.

(Beat. Claire is still puzzled.)

To know you only have a little time left. To think about all the parts you've played in your life. All the people who came and went. All the parts you played in *their* lives.

(Digressing. Amused.)

I had no idea how many men my mother had known!

(Shaking his head.)

All through our childhood. Our high school years. We had no idea. We never saw any of them. Never heard about any of them. She never brought any of them home.

(Beat. Thinking. Finding his way back.)

In her last months she seemed to be making a tally of all her roles...all her relationships. A daughter. A young woman. A wife. A mother. A mother of 3 boys. A widow. A mistress...The other woman...there were some married men in there too....some interesting confrontations between mistress and wives....

(Beat.)

Finally.... even the patient. The terminal patient. The dying woman.

(Ben looks at Claire. Claire seems to think all this a bit morbid.)

She was done with us.

(Beat. Ben sighs.)

She had...'Discharged her duties as a mother.' That's the way she put it. And she was right. She did well by us. Raised 3 boys on her own. Saw us grow up. Go to school. Graduate school. Build lives of our own. Make money. Get married. Divorced. What was left?

(Beat.)

She was done playing the mother.

(Beat.)

What would have happened? If she had told us? Her three hulking boys would have shown up at her doorstep the next day. We would have... hovered around her. Miserable. Helpless. She would have ended up consoling *us*...mothering *us* till her last day. She didn't want that.

(Beat.)

Good for her.

CLAIRE

(Puzzled. Skeptical. Encouraging.)

So you finally found...some of that understanding you were searching for.

BEN

Don't know. For sure I got a different angle on things reading those journals.

(Beat.)

All those pictures of her from different parts of her life...there is one in which she is very young...maybe 17. Hardly looks like the woman we know. On my way back I took that photo of her...from a time since before...she met my father, became a wife, a mother. I'm having that photo restored and framed. Making 3 copies. Going to send it to my brothers for Christmas.

CLAIRE

It's great to feel you lighter Ben. Feels...almost miraculous...since the last time I saw you...gives me hope..going forward...

(Ben looks gently at Claire for a few beats.)

BEN

What would you like Claire? How would you like things to go?

CLAIRE

(Hesitating a bit, but then plunging in.)

I...want us to get married again Ben. I want us to be together. To restore what we lost. Let's not even have a wedding or anything. I don't even need to put on that dress. Let's just make it legal. Not even tell anyone for a while. Let's just start again--just you and me. Find our new bearings. Maybe some months down the line...we could tell my family. Maybe during the holidays...we could visit...

(Claire pauses a beat to feel out how Ben's feeling about this.)

...if that feels good to you...

(Beat. Claire continues to look at Ben for a hint. Ben nods a little; doesn't reveal much more.)

How about you? Have you thought about it? How we should do it?

BEN

I have. I've been trying to see it. Since I came back...I've been wandering the streets, walking, running...trying to see...what comes next.

CLAIRE

And?

(Ben hesitates a beat.)

BEN

I have really been missing Maya.

(Claire is panged by this.)

I know this is not what you want to hear...

CLAIRE

Have you seen her?

BEN

(Ben shakes his head.)

I wanted to see you first.

(Beat.)

Been thinking about all the messes...all the disasters I have created. I created one with her 3 weeks ago.

(Beat.)

I don't know how avoidable they are these...disasters...whether it's possible to live one's life without ever making anybody else unhappy. But I feel like it's about time that I at least slowed down a little....time I at least acknowledged the body count around me.

CLAIRE

Ben...I hear you. It hasn't been easy. It hasn't been a very kind thing to do perhaps...

BEN

How did you put it...'A smaller mess to clean up a bigger one'?

CLAIRE

Ben there is such a thing as sacrifice. There are hard decisions to be made in life. Your mother made one by not telling you about her illness. We can't have everything we want. I for one don't think that it is possible to go through life without giving or receiving any hurt Ben. That's not how life is built. But we can do better. I want us to do better. To build a future together and not just... be at the mercy of some infatuation that is tugging at us today and might be gone tomorrow.

(Beat. Ben faces Claire. Puts his hands on her shoulder. Looks her in the eyes gently.)

BEN

Claire. I'm done playing your husband.

(This hangs in the air for several beats. They continue to look at each other.)

CLAIRE

(Gently imploring.)

Don't say that Ben...let's at least try...for a little while...let's at least see if we can do it better...

(Claire pauses. Takes a step back. She quickly removes her dress and throws it aside. Stands there in pretty underwear offering herself to Ben, almost as a challenge. Ben looks at her admiringly but does not move.)

...Ben let's try and move forward. There is so much more we can do. There is so much more ahead of us...Let's at least give it a try. We have nothing to lose.

BEN

Nothing to lose...don't say that Claire. You must consider yourself very poor if you think you have nothing to lose.

CLAIRE

(Getting more hurt, angry.)

So...your are just going to go back to her?

BEN

I don't know what will happen. After what I did 3 weeks ago...but if she is willing...

CLAIRE

(More venomous.)

Did you tell her?...about last time?...about being with me?

BEN

Not sure how much that would matter...

CLAIRE

She may have a different idea about it.

(Ben looks at Claire in her venomousness. He does not respond or get triggered.)

(Softer. Hurt. Very vulnerable.)

Oh Ben, I don't want to be like this. This is not what I want.

(MORE)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

I really have good intentions. For us. For moving forward. And yes, even for trying to fix what we broke. I don't think that's so terrible.

BEN

Listen to me Claire. You know what the trouble with people like us is? We can see three steps ahead. And we think we are so clever because we can. But those steps are worthless.

CLAIRE

My dreams are worthless?

BEN

Yes. Mostly

CLAIRE

All my plans for the future?

BEN

Yes.

CLAIRE

And what is it that you propose I do?

BEN

Deny them.

CLAIRE

Deny them?

BEN

Deny them all.

CLAIRE

Then what?

BEN

Live in that state of denial.

(Claire shakes her head. Not accepting.)

BEN (CONT'D)

You know, reading the thoughts and fears of this one woman...through a great span of her life...at each stage reading what she feared *might* happen...and what she wished *would* happen and then what actually *did* happen...i think I've come away with at least one little lesson.

CLAIRE

What's that?

BEN

If you think you can see your future very clearly, be suspicious. Chances are it's not the future at all. Only the past.

CLAIRE

That's not true.

BEN

We're so good at it Claire...creating the past. We've been getting lost in our own cleverness.

(Beat.)

CLAIRE

And what does this...revolution lead to Ben? Where does it end?

BEN

Well my love, it all ends with you in a small box fitted around your body. You in a nice black dress with a slit in the back of it.

CLAIRE

Why are you doing this to me? We agreed. We had decided to start again.

BEN

I'm tempted Claire. I've been very tempted...to...restore as you say. To undo. I too have felt...Shame at my failures...with you. And it's very tempting to think we can wipe away that shame.

CLAIRE

I'm not lying when I say I still love you Ben.

BEN

I know. I believe you. But still...I don't think it's the love between us that is pulling us towards each other here.

CLAIRE

Don't do this. What makes you think things are going to turn out any rosier with your new girl?

BEN

I don't. I actually have no fantasies about us living happily after. But I think I am ready for some...new mistakes with Maya. You and I again...

CLAIRE

You'll regret this.

BEN

Claire we've been through so much together. We could still see each other through...even till dead.

(Claire takes this in. Her eyes steadily harden. A look of revulsion comes on her face.)

CLAIRE

(Bitter.)

I think you've already joined ranks with the dead Ben.

(Ben hears this a beat. He's still on his knees. He slowly stands up. Looks at Claire.)

BEN

I'm going to leave now Claire.

(Ben starts to move towards the door.)

CLAIRE

Ben stop!

(Ben continues to exit.)

I'll tell her, I swear! I've nothing to lose.

(Ben pauses a beat. Then continues to exit.)

Ben!

(Ben exits.)

BEN!

LIGHTS FADE

END