

Dark Room

being a play inspired by the work of
Francesca Woodman

by George Brant
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Dark Room

Cast

A minimum of six female actors are required to perform the play, however, the cast may be as large as desired.

While the rest of the cast may play multiple roles, The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress should play no other roles but her own.

Music

Companies are invited to create the music that will accompany the songs in the play.

Nudity

The subjects in Francesca Woodman's photographs were frequently naked. Nudity has not been indicated in the script, but may be utilized as much or as little as desired by the production.

Performance

Dark Room is an evening spent inside of Francesca Woodman's photographs. This script is a skeleton of the play, not the finished product.

I imagine dance and movement will be integral to the play, along with live music (including of course, piano).

The play invites creativity and collaboration, particularly in the transitions between the scenes. Perhaps more of Woodman's photographs are represented as stills, perhaps a flash occasionally goes off, perhaps some scenes are in white light and others in the red or amber of the dark room.

The end result should be fluid and nimble, moving easily from one moment and tone to the next with a confident dream logic. While it lives in a place of darkness, err on the side of unsettling rather than horrific.

The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress is a stand-in for Francesca, or the dream Francesca, or her ghost, or the after-image following the flash of a photograph. Perhaps she is an Alice in Wonderland figure at times in the play, perhaps she merely watches the scenes unfold, perhaps she is more active. In any case, this is her world, but she does not control it, any more than we control our own dreams.

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Dark Room

Amber or red light up on a decrepit loft: peeling wallpaper, rotten floor boards, broken windows, unmade bed. Various odd items are strewn about the room (a claw bathtub, broken shards of mirror, unhinged doors, a glass display case containing mounted stuffed birds with spread wings). Hundreds of photographs are scattered about as well.

Music. Sitting on the sill of an open window we find a young woman in her early twenties, the Girl in the Polka Dot Dress. She looks down at the sidewalk far below. She puts on a pair of white gloves.

She picks one of the photographs off the loft floor and drops it out the window, watching it fall to the ground.

Another. Another. Dozens.

Figures appear from the corners of the room, as if summoned. They appear from behind fireplace mantels, makeshift gravestones, doors off their hinges, and headboards.

The music continues, changes. The figures dance, the Girl both leading and following. The forms shift, scatter, leaving two figures behind: two beautiful women, one older, Judith, and one younger, Theresa. They wear long white gloves and carry fishbowls. They assess the room.

THERESA

I call the bed!

JUDITH

It's all yours.

THERESA

You never want the bed.

JUDITH

Not particularly.

THERESA

But it's the best part.

JUDITH

For those with a less distinguished palate, yes.

THERESA

I'm not that young.

JUDITH

I'll be in the bathroom.

THERESA

Surprise.

JUDITH

It's quick. A good warm up.

THERESA

Don't like to dive right in?

JUDITH

You probably ate your dessert first too, didn't you?

THERESA

Maybe.

JUDITH

I'll give you some privacy.

THERESA

(teasing) You can watch if you want to. It'd be more fun than Q-tips.

JUDITH

Debatable.

Judith exits.

Theresa approaches the rumpled bed, stalking it. She paces in front of it, seeming to almost sniff the air.

She lightly touches the sheets, searching. She catches a hint of something, a smile flickers across her face, but then fades.

She brings the pillow to her face, smothering herself in it.

She lowers the pillow, a faint smile again on her face, but there has to be something more...she pulls back the covers and climbs into the bed.

She starts to slowly writhe, searching (at no point does Theresa touch herself).

THERESA

Mmmm...mmm? Mmmm. Mmmmm...mmmmmm...mmm?

This continues for some time, Theresa seeking out past pleasures, following avenues of lost ecstasy.

But there must be more...making sure Judith isn't approaching, Theresa takes off her gloves and touches the sheets with her bare hands.

There! Now she is on to something. She starts to slowly moan, surprised at the intensity she's experiencing.

Judith enters from the bathroom. She stares at Theresa, curious despite herself.

Theresa's moans seem headed for an epic climax, but suddenly become weeping, howling, growing in intensity until they become a terrifying thing.

Judith leaps into action, yanks Theresa out of the bed.

Judith shakes Theresa, who seems unsure of where or who she is.

JUDITH

Theresa? Theresa? Theresa!

Recognition comes back to Theresa's eyes.

THERESA

Judith?

JUDITH

Yes.

Theresa hugs her like a frightened child hugs her mother.

It's all right, it's all right.

THERESA

I - it's too -

JUDITH

It's all right.

THERESA

I couldn't - I couldn't do it.

JUDITH

You took off your gloves. And you should never get under the covers.

THERESA

I didn't think there was anything there.

JUDITH

There's always something in the bed.

THERESA

Would you - would you finish?

JUDITH

Of course. Sit.

Judith walks back to the bed, keeping her distance, laying her hand lightly on the sheets, palm outstretched.

There.

Judith's face is transformed into a more contained version of Theresa's ecstasy.

Judith raises her hand, closes it as if she is gathering something up within its palm.

She walks across the room, picks up her fishbowl in her other hand. Judith sticks her closed hand into the fishbowl, then opens it, releasing whatever energy she has gathered inside it.

Judith's face returns to normal.

THERESA

I'll never be as good as you.

JUDITH

Nonsense.

THERESA

You knew when to stop.

JUDITH

Only because you went first.

THERESA

Lust, love, pain, regret. It was engulfing.

JUDITH

That's why there's two of us.

THERESA

I guess so. Thanks.

Theresa puts her gloves back on.

How was the bathroom?

JUDITH

You were right. Nothing.

THERESA

I don't know why you bother.

JUDITH

I have found traces on occasion. Rubber ducks they had as a child, that sort of thing.

THERESA

(smiling) Oh, okay.

JUDITH

When in doubt, look for the baby blanket.

Judith walks back to the bed.

And speaking of...

THERESA

(of the bed) Careful!

JUDITH

It's harmless now. Besides, I spot a gold mine.

She reaches to the bed and picks up...a teddy bear.

THERESA

(disbelief) No! Wasn't she a little old for that?

Judith motions for Theresa to be quiet and she holds her open palm over the teddy bear.

After a moment, Judith smiles a deep smile.

JUDITH

From her mother. When she turned 21. A last gift to the girl she once knew.

THERESA

Mom sounds sweet.

JUDITH

She was.

Judith gathers the energy and closes her hand around it, once more depositing it in the fishbowl.

THERESA

2-0. I better catch up.

JUDITH

Yes.

They split up, picking up various objects in the room. Theresa heads for the bookshelves.

Good choice.

THERESA

Yeah, but there doesn't seem to be...

She pulls out a paperback.

Ah! *Anna Karenina.*

JUDITH

Oh?

She "gathers" the memories of the book.

THERESA

Read it three times back to back. I'm on the board.

She closes her palm around the memories and places it in her fishbowl, while Theresa rummages through a pile of shoes.

(looking at the book post-gather) Not the best translation, but -

JUDITH

(picking up a pair of boots) Ah!

THERESA

(doubting) Boots?

Judith gathers.

JUDITH

Walking back to a summer cabin at midnight. A baby deer on the trail, standing not three feet away. She fed it some raisins out of her hand, felt its wet muzzle in her palm. She was awestruck.

THERESA

Boots.

JUDITH

It's not all about sex, young lady.

Judith deposits the energy into her fishbowl as Theresa scans about the desk, picks up a pen.

THERESA

Ah!

JUDITH

You're getting better. Lots of possibilities there.

Theresa gathers it.

THERESA

A few birthday cards...bills...ug.

She drops the pen in defeat.

JUDITH

No?

THERESA

Not much of a letter writer.

JUDITH

Curse of the modern age. The pen used to be sure-fire.

THERESA

Something...something...here!

She finds a record collection.

JUDITH

Music.

THERESA

(sensing) The M's, the M's, the M's...ahhhhh!

JUDITH

Joni?

THERESA

How'd you know?

JUDITH

It's always Joni.

Theresa makes a deposit in her fishbowl.

THERESA

It certainly was for our girl. No one appreciated Miss Mitchell like her.

JUDITH

Of course not.

THERESA

Well. How're we - ?

Judith senses.

JUDITH

I think that's about all.

Theresa senses.

THERESA

Me too.
Do you like her?

JUDITH

That's a funny question.

THERESA

I think I like her.

JUDITH

Joni fan?

THERESA

We have to stick together.
...do you know how she...?

JUDITH

Does it matter?

THERESA

It was violent, wasn't it? A car crash or something?

JUDITH

Worse.

THERESA

Why don't we ever get the peaceful ones?

JUDITH

They don't need us.

THERESA

Why not?

JUDITH

The ones who have months, years to prepare - the ones who accept it - they've had time to gather themselves on their own.

THERESA

But the sudden ones - her?

JUDITH

That's where we come in.
Shall we go?

They start to leave. Theresa stops.

THERESA

Wait.

JUDITH

What?

THERESA

There's something else.

JUDITH

I don't think so.

THERESA

No, there's definitely...something...yes!

Theresa picks up an umbrella in the corner of the room.

Ha! You were ready to walk out! Miss Know-it-All was ready to - ! *(her face falls)* - you knew. You were testing me.

JUDITH

And you passed.

THERESA

Do you know what it is?

JUDITH

Just that it has a trace.

THERESA

Do you want to - ?

JUDITH

You earned it.

Theresa smiles and gathers the umbrella.

THERESA

Where are you...where are you...there.
It's him.

JUDITH

Who?

THERESA

From the bed. He's all over it. It's from the night she broke up with him, she was scared he would try to tame her, break her, strip her of her magic.

JUDITH

And the umbrella?

THERESA

A break-up present. He told her it was the biggest one he could find, hoped it would protect her after he was gone.

JUDITH

And she kept it.

THERESA

She did.

JUDITH

And she kept him. In her bed. Her heart.

THERESA

Regret, regret, she was all regret. It aches so, vibrates.

JUDITH

Gather it. Let's go.

THERESA

Can I...can I keep it?

JUDITH

Theresa.

THERESA

It...reminds me. Of how it was. When I was...

JUDITH

That was a long time ago.

THERESA

To feel that way again, that ache.

JUDITH

It's hers.

THERESA

I loved once.

JUDITH

We all did.

THERESA

You! Might as well be wearing a sanitary mask. You don't believe in Love.

JUDITH

I do. That's why you have to give it to her.

THERESA

Why?

JUDITH

Because she won't recognize him without it.

THERESA

...he's there?

JUDITH

Two years ago. An aneurism.

THERESA

Oh.

She offers Judith the umbrella.

Here.

JUDITH

Are you sure?

THERESA

You'll like it.

Judith delicately gathers the energy from the umbrella, a smile of ecstasy and pain on her face. She closes her hand around it and places it in the fishbowl.

JUDITH

That was lovely. Thank you.

THERESA

You're very welcome.

JUDITH

Shall we?

THERESA

In a minute. Do we have a minute?

JUDITH

Well, we have many more to...of course.

Theresa places an album on the phonograph. Joni Mitchell's "River" plays. Theresa closes her eyes and sways to the music. She takes off her gloves. After a moment, Judith takes hers off as well.

O, the ache

the ache
the ache
the ache

*The song plays, the women are joined in their sway
by other forms. We come to focus on a solitary
woman who holds a pair of white mittens, the
Mother.*

MOTHER

I was buying new mittens for her every week. Each time a different story - I lost them, they fell off, a kid stole them - all delivered with the same shrug and a smile. She'd have lost her head if it wasn't...I sound like my mother.

I bought one of those metal clothespin thingies to clip them to her jacket, but that didn't help. She'd clip the mittens everywhere but on her coat; I'd find them hanging from the shower door or the refrigerator handle, or most often, I wouldn't find them at all.

Now I had to buy mittens and clips. It was getting old. She was a handful, and it wasn't just mittens. I should've tried the opposite tactic just to see if it would've worked - "Yes, please, go swim in the deep end," "yes, touch the stove"...it couldn't have been worse.

My big thing was the fire escape. She loved to play out there; it drove me crazy. I'd have to haul her in crying most every day. "The birds, mommy, the birds!" She loved to see the birds.

She wanted to be one when she grew up. I tried to explain that wasn't how it worked, but she didn't buy it. One day it was a blue jay, another a cardinal, for a while she wanted to be a nightingale. Uh - woodpecker week was the worst.

Anyway, one day she went out on the fire escape in the middle of a snowstorm. She must've leaned over the railing to grab at something and oop! over she goes. I didn't see it happen, but I heard it. I dropped my cup of tea, ran out to the escape, calling her name. She wasn't there.

I refused to look down, looked up instead, hoping to see her there in the sky, hoping her dream came true, that she'd joined a flock of sparrows.

But there was just snow. She was down. Coat unzipped, of course, hat off. There wasn't any blood. Just white, white snow.

I was gripping the railing. I felt something cold under my left hand. It was a metal clip. Her white mittens dangled from it.

They were swaying in the wind, blowing back and forth, back and forth.

They're still there. They're my flag, my windsock. I fill them with seed, watch the birds gather. I can watch them for hours.

Music. The Mother is joined by a younger woman who holds a pair of white mittens. The two dance a duet, then vanish.

A table and two chairs have appeared, as if in a café. In one chair is Joyce, a woman dressed in a heavy coat, a feathered hat and a pair of gloves.

In the other chair is Mira, a young woman in a short-sleeve blouse and pants. Mira sips her tea.

MIRA

I used to feel so sophisticated here, an adult. My entry into that world. Do you remember? When ordering tea felt like a transgression? Now it's just one more grey room.

Would you please take off your jacket?

JOYCE

I'm cold.

MIRA

Your hat? Gloves?

JOYCE

It's drafty.

MIRA

I can't talk to you with all of that on. It always feels like you're about to leave, like you have one foot out, like I have to say something important every second, something good enough to keep you with me.

JOYCE

I'm cold.

MIRA

Like every conversation we have is on a timer, your timer.

JOYCE

Fine. Here.

She takes off her hat.

Feel my ears in five minutes. Your fingers will stick to them.

MIRA
I'll risk it. The jacket?

JOYCE
Let me store up some heat first.

MIRA
You should go to a doctor. Bad circulation.

JOYCE
No. Just a bad heart.

She sips her tea and looks out the window.

Oh God.

MIRA
What?

JOYCE
The old man again.

MIRA
Joyce.

JOYCE
Staring in at you.

MIRA
Maybe it's you.

JOYCE
No. It's you, it's always you. You encourage him.

MIRA
I sit here. I sip tea.

JOYCE
Like a whore.

*Mira turns red with anger. A moment. Then Mira
picks up her tea-cup and slurps, "whore-like."
Joyce tries to ignore it until -*

Mira.
Stop it.
Stop it.
STOP IT!

Mira puts down her cup, satisfied.

MIRA
Ah!

JOYCE

You can laugh now, but you will wake some night and he will be at the foot of your bed. His old man hands will grab you by the ankles. He will pull you toward him and rip off your underwear. He will trace the curve of your young legs with his old man finger. He will bend his blistered lips to yours and you will smell licorice or some candy they don't make anymore. He will smile through rotted teeth and his face will crack open. His dry tongue will find your ear and it will scrape across your lobe like sandpaper. You will try to rise but he will be too heavy, the weight of his years will be too heavy on top of you, all that life, ninety years of life pressing down. He will find his way inside you and you will weep and you will wonder when is Joyce coming home, she can stop this, Joyce can help me, and then you will remember, you remember Joyce is not coming home she warned you until she grew tired of warning and she left but the warning remained stuck in your ears and you hear it again now the warning with every dry thrust of the old man you hear it you hear it grow louder and louder until the warning bursts your eardrums and sprays blood on your pillow until it is all you hear until it is all you are until you and the warning are one.

Mira stares Joyce down. She touches Joyce's ear.

MIRA

Hot. Take off your coat.

Joyce does so.

Gloves.

Joyce does. Mira looks her over.

JOYCE

Happy?

MIRA

I still hear the timer.

JOYCE

Then may I put them back on?

MIRA

No.

It's nice to see you. See what's under all of that bulk.

JOYCE

It makes you happy?

MIRA

It did.

JOYCE

I have to go to the bathroom.

MIRA

Another exit.

JOYCE

You can keep my jacket as collateral.

Joyce exits. Mira picks up one of Joyce's gloves and makes it caress her face. It brings a melancholy pleasure for a moment, then sadness.

Mira puts it back down on the table.

She then rises and walks defiantly to the window and the old man outside. She stands in the window and unbuttons her blouse. She flashes him.

She turns on her heels and walks back to her chair. She sits.

Joyce returns, looks out the window.

JOYCE

He's still there.

MIRA

Uh-huh.

JOYCE

And he's smiling.

MIRA

Good for him.

JOYCE

(suspicious) He's really smiling.

Joyce turns to look at Mira - what did she do? Mira is mum, shrugs, smiles and loudly sips her tea, whore-like.

JOYCE

MIRA! I swear, the way he looks at you - !

MIRA

It's how you used to.

JOYCE

I never looked at you like that.

MIRA

I know, it's hard to remember, but there was desire.

JOYCE

I didn't mean -

MIRA

Before there were coats and hats and gloves, when you longed to touch me with your bare hands. When you would stare at me for hours on end.

How will you picture me? How will I be remembered? A year from now, when someone says 'Mira,' what picture will pop into your head without your thinking about it?

JOYCE

You must have an answer.

MIRA

What?

JOYCE

To want to ask the question. You first.

MIRA

I will not picture you smiling on a summer day.
I will not picture your breasts, your hips.
I will not picture your ears.
I will not picture your bent and mournful little toe.
I will not picture your head on my pillow, hair spread out like a cloud.
I will not picture you in the shower, laughing.
I will not picture you laughing.
I will not picture your belly swelling.
I will not picture you holding a child.
I will not picture you out of focus, too close for a picture, kissing my lips.
I will not picture you in love.

JOYCE

Finish.

MIRA

I will picture you in this café, in your hat and overcoat and gloves, standing in front of me, leaving.

That will be my picture, my only picture.

Does that bother you?

No. JOYCE

You could change it. MIRA

Too late. JOYCE
I will picture your neck, your throat.

That will make you happy? MIRA

It will. JOYCE

*A beat.
Mira reaches toward Joyce. She touches her ear,
delicately, feels its coldness.*

You can put it on. MIRA

Joyce puts on her hat.

*Joyce extends her arm to Mira. Mira touches Joyce's
forearm.*

Goose-bumps.

*Mira takes up Joyce's coat and slips it over
Joyce's shoulders, then takes a step back.*

*Joyce holds out her hand. Mira takes it in hers.
She presses it to her face for a moment, then puts
on Joyce's gloves, one by one.*

*Joyce picks up her purse and begins to exit, then
stops.*

*She turns back to Mira to get her last picture, but
Mira covers her throat with her hand.*

Move your hand. JOYCE

No. MIRA

Please. JOYCE

No. MIRA

JOYCE

My picture.

MIRA

This is your picture. Me denying you.

JOYCE

Please.
Please.

A moment. Mira does not change her position.

MIRA

Click.

JOYCE

...click.

A flash illuminates their pose.

Another.

A series of flashes (not a strobe) illuminate the strange shadowy figures moving across the stage. Perhaps we see a woman with the head of a rabbit, figures with clothespins affixed to them, a woman swallowed by wallpaper.

A final flash as the sequence ends.

The sound of seagulls.

Two stunning women stand on a beach, the older in a black dress (Negra), the younger in white (Blanca). Blanca holds a lily. They freeze in an "artistic" pose for a time, then break it, worried.

NEGRA

She should be here by now.

BLANCA

Has she ever not shown?

NEGRA

Never.

BLANCA

We have the beach. The waves.

NEGRA

We can't inspire the waves. They are indifferent to us, come and go without our beauty. We need her, her eye. This? Nothing but seagulls and red tide.

BLANCA

Hey! We could take turns.

NEGRA

Doing what?

BLANCA

Looking at each other. Admiring.

NEGRA

It's not about admiration. It's deeper than that. You'll see.

BLANCA

I hope so. (*the lilies*) Do you think she'll like these?

NEGRA

Those? Those are a huge mistake.

BLANCA

They're beautiful.

NEGRA

Flowers and children and dogs. The three great upstagers. Watch. When she gets here? You or the lilies. See which one is in focus.

BLANCA

Come on.

NEGRA

See which is in the background.

BLANCA

You're serious.

NEGRA

Just you wait.

BLANCA

(*worried now*) Wait, you're - you're really - well, what do I do? Tear them up?

NEGRA

Petals scattered across the beach? (*mimicking picture-taking*) Snap snap snap!

BLANCA

I'll burn them, then.

NEGRA

Ashes of flowers? From beauty to dust? The allegory! Snap snap snap!

BLANCA

I'll hold them between my naked breasts.

NEGRA
Desperate. And it won't work.

BLANCA
My breasts are perfect.

NEGRA
The lilies will turn them into lumps of misshapen clay.

BLANCA
Not these.

NEGRA
Snap snap snap!

BLANCA
What do I do, then?!

NEGRA
Only thing you can. Bury them in the sand. Hope she doesn't notice.

Resigned, Blanca does so.

BLANCA
I feel naked.

NEGRA
Deal with it.

BLANCA
I don't know what to do with my hands.

NEGRA
Make them pretty.

Blanca several poses with her hands. None are pretty.

BLANCA
Damn it!

NEGRA
Better think of something or she'll cut them off.

BLANCA
What?!

NEGRA
Right out of the frame. I've seen her do it. To hands far more beautiful than yours.

BLANCA
I don't believe you.

NEGRA

Oh, she cuts off heads, feet, elbows.

BLANCA

Not mine.

NEGRA

Don't kid yourself. By the time she's done with you, you'll be a double amputee.

BLANCA

Stop it.

NEGRA

Hopping around in the sand.

BLANCA

Stop it.

NEGRA

Like a seal for a fish.

BLANCA

Stop it!

NEGRA

Bark, bark, bark!

Blanca slaps Negra. A trickle of blood appears on Negra's face. Negra touches her cheek, finds the blood.

NEGRA

What - did - you - have - in - your - hand?

Blanca opens her hand guiltily. There is a seashell there.

There goes my head.

BLANCA

Ooops.

NEGRA

(of her bleeding face) With this? Right out of the frame. She'll have to.

BLANCA

Ooops.

NEGRA

Who the fuck do you think you are?

BLANCA

I'm a seagull! No, that's not right. I'm a lily! No, that's not right.

NEGRA

You're a nutcase.

BLANCA

That's about right.

NEGRA

You heartless bitch.

BLANCA

I would've been the focus anyway, but now -

NEGRA

I'll rip you apart.

BLANCA

And break those lovely nails?

This freezes a furious Negra.

Let's see. I'll be lying down on the beach, the hem of my dress slightly wet, just slightly, fanned across the sand like a wave, a mermaid's tail.

NEGRA

The Virgin Mermaid.

BLANCA

Exactly. I will have collapsed in a near faint, a state of virginal ecstasy.

NEGRA

Is there such a thing?

BLANCA

Oh, yes. To own oneself is intoxicating. The lilies will lie at my side, mirroring my pose -

NEGRA

- or the other way around -

BLANCA

Both of us in perfect focus. And you will be there, too.

NEGRA

Will I? How generous.

BLANCA

Not your whole body, of course.

NEGRA

Naturally.

BLANCA

Just an ugly appendage sprinkled in the corner for contrast.

NEGRA

Uh-huh.

BLANCA

Yes, poking out of the left corner, half-buried in the sand, there it is, your stubby right foot.

NEGRA

Ha! Little fool! That's all I need.

BETSY

To what?

NEGRA

To eclipse you.

BLANCA

The foot of a washer woman against my entire magnificent- ?

NEGRA

These feet have launched a thousand photographs.

BLANCA

Liar.

NEGRA

The warmth of a thousand flashes, a warmth your pig toes will never know.

BLANCA

They're not so beautiful.

NEGRA

(oh yes, they are) No?

BLANCA

(they are) My God, that arch is - damn it! *(brandishing the shell)* I'll cut them, too!

NEGRA

Try, you little twit. I'm ready this time.

Negra picks up a shell of their own. A stand-off, the two breathing heavily, until their anger become hopelessness and they drop their shells.

BLANCA

She's not coming, is she?

NEGRA

No. We've been abandoned. And there's nothing more tragic than an unused muse.

Negra nurses her wound. Blanca sees something.

BLANCA

It's probably not worth mentioning -

NEGRA

What?

BLANCA

Well. There's a teenage boy over there.

NEGRA

And?

BLANCA

He's looking at us.

NEGRA

And?

BLANCA

And he has a camera.

Negra covertly turns to look. She sees. Resigned to her fate, she sadly poses. Blanca does the same, but can't figure out what to do with her hands. Negra takes pity on her, stoops and hands her the lilies. Blanca smiles. They pose.

A flash.

The Girl in the Polka Dot dress appears, assessing them critically as they stand frozen, then dancing around them.

Figures appear and sing to the Girl.

FIGURES

Playing chess on a turtle's back
Crawl 'longside and then plan attack
When the game's over, it's a nice snack
Playing chess on a turtle's back

Jumping rope with a red fox pelt
Rubbing down there below the belt
Don't tell mama how good it felt
Jumping rope with a red fox pelt

Turn the handle

Lock the Door
You're not a baby
Any more

There are new games
To explore
Turn the handle
Lock the door

Dancing 'round with a bowl of eels
Do it right, it'll make you squeal
Don't tell daddy how good it feels
Dancing 'round with a bowl of eels

Turn the handle
Lock the Door
You're not a baby
Any more

There are new games
To explore
Turn the handle
Lock the door

Playing catch with an old brown hen
Tossing turtle, fox, eel and then
When you're all done, start it again
Playing catch with an old brown hen

Turn the handle
Lock the Door
You're not a baby
Any more

There are new games
To explore
Turn the handle
Lock the door

Turn the handle
Lock the door

*They disappear. We are left with a large mirror,
lying face-up on the floor. A young woman, May,
standing on top of it, searching the reflection for
answers.*

An intimate, Christina, enters.

CHRISTINA

Careful. Narcissus got stuck.

MAY

Quiet. I'm looking for her.

CHRISTINA

Your Grandma? You won't find her in there.

MAY

Why not? This was hers.

CHRISTINA

That doesn't - honey, you've cried enough.

MAY

I'm not crying anymore. I'm searching.

CHRISTINA

I know this has got to be...but she meant to, it wasn't an accident, you know? Drowning takes time, determination. And in your own bathtub? With salvation inches away? I didn't know that was even possible. Honey? Please stop. Honey?

MAY

It watched her every smile, saw every primp, every nod of approval, every contemplative ponder. It saw every wrinkle from its inception, was witness to a thousand disparaging sighs. And then it watched her die. It will watch me die.

CHRISTINA

Not for a while, I hope.

MAY

It is patient.

CHRISTINA

Do you see her?

MAY

Not yet. But I am patient, too.

CHRISTINA

It's only glass.

MAY

No. Water.

CHRISTINA

What?

MAY

Water. The original mirror. Your Narcissus.

CHRISTINA

(the mirror) This isn't a lake.

MAY

No, it is. They found a way to contain it. They put a frame around it and you can hang it on a wall. But it's still water. An ocean contained by a frame.

They look into the mirror together for a moment.

CHRISTINA

Lean back.

MARY

Why?

CHRISTINA

You're cutting off your head.

She leans back.

CHRISTINA

Better.
Wait.

MAY

What?

CHRISTINA

I see her.

MAY

Where?

CHRISTINA

Keep looking.
There.

MAY

Where?

Christina touches May while looking at her reflection in the mirror.

CHRISTINA

They're the same. Here. Your chin. The tip of your nose. Your elbows. Your wrists. Your heart.

MAY

(not taking the compliment) She was a miracle.

CHRISTINA

And so are you.

MAY

I'm a stupid girl. She was a goddess.

CHRISTINA

She was a woman. She made the most of her time. You have to do the same.

MAY

I never got to say goodbye. I need to hold her again. Just once. A touch.

CHRISTINA

You will. One day.

MAY

Sooner.

CHRISTINA

Hold me instead.

MAY

In a minute.

CHRISTINA

(the mirror) Look closely. You'll see what I see. She's in there.

Christina exits. May gazes at the mirror, searching.

MAY

Forgive me.

I should have eaten your ribbon candy, no matter how stale.
I should have helped you make mince pie.
I should have asked you for more stories.
I should have listened to the ones you told.
I should have known you well enough to have nothing surprise me.

Forgive me.

A hand rises up out of the water, peacefully, beautifully. May beams and her hand reaches for the other.

Amber light floods the room.

Three tombstones are arranged in a line. Perhaps they are true tombstones, or ones fashioned from the debris. At least one has angel's wings on its face.

Three women are perched on top of the tombstones.

Lydia is dressed in the brightest colors, Mary, the center figure, in a more subdued but beautiful dress, and Millicent is all in black. Millicent's dress is in the style of the 1860's, Lydia's the 1880's, and Mary's the 1890's. Mary breaks the silence.

MARY

I suppose it had to happen sooner or later.

LYDIA

No, dear.

MARY

He's only human.

LYDIA

It's early yet.

MILLICENT

Not so early.

LYDIA

Quiet. You're not helping.

MILLICENT

Should I be? You know as well as I do that eventually -

LYDIA

Shh.

MILLICENT

- the passage of time -

LYDIA

Quiet.

MILLICENT

- fine, fine, fine.

MARY

It's all I have - one day a year.

LYDIA

I know, poor thing.

MARY

All I have to look forward to.

LYDIA

I know.

MILLICENT
A funny day to look forward to.

MARY
What?

MILLICENT
You heard me.

LYDIA
Millicent.

MILLICENT
Well?

MARY
No, she's right, spend your entire life praying the day will never come and then it becomes the most precious one you have.

MILLICENT
Because of him.

MARY
Yes.

MILLICENT
He still shapes your entire existence?

MARY
He does.

MILLICENT
Now, that is funny.

MARY
(*furious*) Anyone with a heart would understand! Did you have no one?

MILLICENT
What?

MARY
No anniversaries honored, no birthday celebrations -

MILLICENT
Quiet.

MARY
- no siblings, children -

MILLICENT
I said quiet!

MARY
Did you leave no mark on the world?

MILLICENT
QUIET!

It is.

MARY
(*apologizing*) That was unkind.

MILLICENT
I left a mark.

MARY
I'm sure of it.

MILLICENT
More than you. More than the both of you put together.

LYDIA
Now, I had twelve children, mind.

MILLICENT
And? I probably saved half of them.

LYDIA
What?

MILLICENT
My serum. I invented a serum.

MARY
You did? Invented?

MILLICENT
Don't look so surprised.

MARY
I'm not, I just...

MILLICENT
What?

MARY
You don't seem...

MILLICENT
Like a scientist?

MARY
No. Generous.

MILLICENT

Well, generosity is not a prerequisite for doing good. It's true, I was driven more by ambition than charity. But the results were the same.

LYDIA

(to Mary) Do you believe her? She could tell us anything.

MILLICENT

Here. (*gesturing toward her headstone*) Read it.

They do.

MARY

"Tireless Inquisitor."

MILLICENT

You see? The headstone of a scientist. A savior.

LYDIA

Really? Then where are *your* visitors, the thousands of children you supposedly cured?

MILLICENT

Elsewhere.

LYDIA

We can decipher that much. Where?

MILLICENT

Another stone.

LYDIA

Why?

MILLICENT

My partner claimed my discovery. Shut me out. I was only a woman, after all.

LYDIA

But surely you -

MILLICENT

I protested until I was removed from my post. I tried to get other work, but I was blacklisted. The end.

LYDIA

You...you ended it?

MILLICENT

No. I wasn't a coward. It was a long and horrible life.

I'm sorry. MARY

I don't need pity. MILLICENT

You deserved more. LYDIA

MILLICENT
Didn't we all? *(to Lydia, of her inscription)* What about yours? "Devoted Mother?" Washing diapers all day? They didn't even let you escape on your stone. Trapped in motherhood's amber forever.

I don't mind. LYDIA

The eternal martyr. MILLICENT

They brought me joy. LYDIA

MILLICENT
Of course they did. And you? *(reading Mary's stone)* You, the... "Beloved Wife?"

I lacked nothing. MARY

Your entire existence? Two words? MILLICENT

...yes. MARY

Enviably. MILLICENT

What? MARY

MILLICENT
Your degree of certainty, acquiescence. You bought into everything.

I loved him. MARY

MILLICENT
All the tripe they cram down our throats. All the fairy-tale lies to keep us down.

MARY
Allow me my happiness.

MILLICENT
Happiness? Morbid!

MARY
What?

MILLICENT
For him to come today. Why not your birthday? Celebrate
your life instead?

MARY
He wasn't there for my birth.

MILLICENT
So?

MARY
So it doesn't...it doesn't mean as much to him.

MILLICENT
Shouldn't it?

MARY
I - I don't -

Lydia tries to save the day.

LYDIA
Tell us again, Mary.

MILLICENT
Oh, God.

MARY
Millicent's right, I've told it one time too many.

LYDIA
Please. Please?

MARY
...Millicent?

LYDIA
(*you'd better agree*) Millicent?

MILLICENT
...fine.

LYDIA
There. You see? Go ahead, Mary.

MARY

All right.

He sat beside my sickbed every day, for months on end. I couldn't speak, couldn't even open my eyes, couldn't let him know that I knew he was there. But he spoke to me just the same. Told me he loved me, read me books, Dickens.

MILLICENT

Dickens.

LYDIA

Quiet! Mary?

MARY

He kept me tethered to the world. Until one day, I felt his warm lips touch my ear and his words vibrate through me telling me to let go, that it was all right to let go. And so I did.

Lydia sighs.

MILLICENT

Maybe he was tired of playing nurse.

MARY

No. He told me out of love. His tears ran down my cheeks as he spoke. I carried them with me as I left. I can still feel them.

LYDIA

(so romantic) On your cheeks.

MILLICENT

Tactile hallucinations.

LYDIA

Millicent!

MARY

I - I - !

LYDIA

You are horrible!

MILLICENT

Only trying to help.

LYDIA

Help?

MILLICENT

To brace her for the inevitable.

MARY

God!

LYDIA

Inevitable?! There's nothing inevitable about it. He has been nothing but faithful.

MILLICENT

So far.

LYDIA

Six years. You can't pretend to have not seen him, felt his weeping.

MILLICENT

I saw it.

LYDIA

He honors her, he treasured her.

MILLICENT

You can tell all that from overdramatic sobbing?

LYDIA

Overdramatic? Millicent. Perhaps when our hearts beat we could be fooled by false sentiment, but now...?

A moment. Millicent realizes she's in the wrong.

MILLICENT

Forgive me. You're right. Nothing stings like the slap of a false tear hitting our ground. His were...they were sincere.

MARY

Thank you. But I fear you are right to doubt him.

LYDIA

Now, now, the day isn't done. What time did you pass?

MARY

Twenty after six.

LYDIA

In the morning?

MARY

Evening.

LYDIA

There? You see? We're not past five yet. Give him time. *(help me)* Right, Millicent?

Millicent is looking at something in the distance.

Millicent?

MILLICENT

Someone's coming.

MARY

What? What?

MILLICENT

It's a man.

LYDIA

She's right.

MARY

(eyes closed, praying) Is it him? Is it him?

LYDIA

It is!

MARY

Thank God!

MILLICENT

Oh dear.

MARY

What? What?

LYDIA

Mary -

MARY

What?

MILLICENT

I think you should -

MARY

What?

Mary opens her eyes as a man enters, dressed formally, carrying an armful of lilies. A beautiful woman is by his side. Silence, broken by:

LYDIA

A...a sister?

MARY

He had no sister.

LYDIA
A mother?

MARY
That is not his mother.

LYDIA
A friend, then. A dear friend who -

MARY
She wears a ring.

LYDIA
Oh. Yes.

MARY
As does he.

LYDIA
But surely it's only -

MARY
It's not mine.

*Quiet. The couple speak, but we cannot hear them.
The man kneels, the woman stands by his side
respectfully. The man weeps, but it is not
audible.*

What are they saying?

MILLICENT
You know we can't hear them.

MARY
What are they saying?

LYDIA
I don't know. He's crying.

MARY
I see that. I feel it.

LYDIA
That has to be worth something.

MARY
It was.

MILLICENT
I'm sorry, Mary.

MARY
She's beautiful.

LYDIA
She is.

MARY
She is a whore.

LYDIA
Mary -

MARY
A bitch - cunt - whore!

MILLICENT
Mary.

MARY
(to the woman) How dare - how dare you come here?

MILLICENT
It'll be over soon.

MARY
Go away! Away!

LYDIA
They'll leave. He will lay the flowers down and they will leave.

MARY
I am the Beloved Wife! I am the Beloved Wife! You are nothing! A brittle substitute! A shadow!

MILLICENT
(to a higher power) Let them leave. Please, let them leave.
The man starts to lay the flowers down.

MARY
No! I don't want them! I don't want them any more! No!
The woman stops the man's hand. A moment.

LYDIA
Did she hear you?

MILLICENT
Lydia -

LYDIA
I think she heard you.

MILLICENT
They can't -

LYDIA

Look.

The woman takes the flowers from the man. She kneels on the dirt and solemnly prays. She caresses the stone, whispering silently all the while. Finally she lays the flowers down at Mary's feet, then kisses them.

Quiet.

Moved, Mary kneels and caresses the woman's face, wiping away a tear. A genuine tear.

MARY

Thank you.

The man rises and helps the woman to her feet. He touches the flowers and then leads the woman away. A moment.

MILLICENT

'Till next year.

MARY

Yes.

I shall look forward to it.

Music. The three are lifted off their perches by other figures, who become their partners in a more formal dance befitting their attire, perhaps a waltz.

They eventually vanish, leaving a young woman, Beth, alone on stage. Another young woman enters, Wendy, dressed for the winter, shivering.

The air between them is uncertain, the uncertainty not broken by a timid kiss.

BETH

You poor thing.

WENDY

It's all right.

BETH

I didn't realize it had dropped so much.

WENDY

30 degrees. They're talking about hail.

Beth grabs Wendy's coat.

BETH
Here, I've made some cocoa.

WENDY
Great.

Beth busies herself with the cocoa.

How's Sue?

BETH
She's fine. Out of town for a few days.

WENDY
Really?

BETH
Can't you tell? No teacups everywhere.

WENDY
True, true.

BETH
Visiting her boyfriend in Italy.

WENDY
(the weather) Good timing.

BETH
No kidding.

She hands Wendy the cocoa.

Let me know if it needs more chocolate. Oh my God, your hands!

WENDY
They're always cold.

BETH
No they're not.

WENDY
They are.

BETH
Wendy. I speak from experience.

WENDY
Okay, they're cold.

BETH
Drink, drink.

WENDY

I was glad you called.
Was starting to wonder if you'd got my messages.

BETH

I needed to see you.

WENDY

Me, too.

BETH

But if I'd known it was going to be like this out there...

WENDY

It's okay. Makes it more cozy.

BETH

Yeah, but...hail?

WENDY

So what?

BETH

Well, how will you get home?

Wendy's face falls.

WENDY

Home? Tonight?

BETH

Well, yeah, it'll only get...

Beth stops, realizing she's put her foot in it.

WENDY

Oh.

BETH

Wendy -

WENDY

Home.

BETH

Wendy -

WENDY

No, my fault, the out-of-town-roomate talk threw me in a
different -

BETH

Oh my God, I'm sorry, that didn't even -

WENDY

It's fine, it's fine, I get it, you asked me over to - you didn't want to tell me over the phone.

BETH

Wendy, I just don't think we're meant to -

WENDY

You don't have to convince me.
I hear them now.

BETH

What?

WENDY

Thump.

BETH

What?

WENDY

Every time.
There was a glass hallway that connected the buildings.

BETH

I'm sorry, where?

WENDY

High school. Math and science in one building, everything else in the other. You went back and forth all day.

BETH

Okay.

WENDY

There was no escaping that glass hallway. That sound.

BETH

Sound?

WENDY

Below the girls' giggles: thump, thump.

BETH

What was it?

WENDY

Birds. Little birds. Flying into the glass.

BETH

Oh my God.

WENDY

And if you didn't hear it, you saw it. Saw the pile of tiny bodies outside, scattered across the lawn, their heads sometimes popped clean off. I tried to keep my eyes forward, my ears plugged. It was impossible. Everyone else carried on as if they weren't there, as if this daily holocaust wasn't happening. I couldn't.

BETH

Of course not.

WENDY

It drove me. More than my parents, myself.

BETH

Drove you?

WENDY

To do well, to succeed. The birds were dying for me, they were the cost of my education.

BETH

Wendy.

WENDY

In my dreams I would open my locker, they would spill out, a flood of the dead. My desk would be stuffed with them, my notebooks wouldn't close over their tiny bodies.

BETH

Those were dreams.

WENDY

But then I was awake. And then I was at school. Thump. Thump. Thump. When I failed them, when my papers came back scrawled with red, the guilt would overwhelm me. And the papers did come back red, as much as I tried. I cried myself to sleep, with the snaps of their necks in my ears. I still hear them. Ever since. With every failure.

Thump thump thump.

I hear them now.

BETH

I'm not a bird.

WENDY

No. But you're surrounded by them. They've filled the room, taken up all the air. I can't see you anymore for the wings.

This was...I was very happy.

Wendy exits. Beth stands alone. Quiet. Then a startling thump against the window. Is it hail, or - ? Another. Another. Another. Another.

The thumps continue, the rhythm the bedrock to the next dance. The sounds transition into piano, played softly, gently.

A small bed is onstage, a girl, Betsy, inside of it, dressed in a long nightgown, covers pulled to her chin.

The piano plays quieter, quieter, until it ceases.

A moment.

BETSY

Don't stop.

A moment. Older sister Audra walks into the room. She wears long white gloves.

AUDRA

You're supposed to be asleep.

BETSY

I almost was. Keep playing. Like she did.

AUDRA

My hands are tired.

BETSY

I'll rub them.

AUDRA

It's late.

BETSY

Let me.

Audra walks to the bed, sits on it. Betsy sits up. She rubs Audra's hands. Audra is in ecstasy.

AUDRA

Mm. Mmmmm.

BETSY

Here. *(of Audra's gloves)* Take them off. It'll feel even better.

AUDRA

No.

BETSY
You never take them off.

AUDRA
They were mother's.

BETSY
I know.

AUDRA
I feel her perfect hands inside them. Her delicate hands.

BETSY
Can I try them?

AUDRA
No.

BETSY
She was my mother too.

AUDRA
You can have them when I'm gone.

BETSY
(*panic*) Don't say that! Don't ever say that!

AUDRA
I'm sorry.

BETSY
If you go, I'll never be able to sleep, you're the only thing
that lets me sleep.

AUDRA
I know.

BETSY
I'll be awake, always awake, always half-dreaming.

AUDRA
I won't leave you. I promise.

BETSY
You do already.

A moment.
You do leave.

AUDRA
Betsy -

BETSY
Every night you leave.

AUDRA
You know where I go.

BETSY
It's still leaving. It still counts.
Why every night?

AUDRA
It's pretty there. It's peaceful.

BETSY
Do you cry?

AUDRA
Sometimes.

BETSY
You bring flowers.

AUDRA
I do.

BETSY
Do you...talk to her?
I do, sometimes. In my dreams.
I'd like to go with you.

AUDRA
It's not a place for children.

BETSY
Why?

AUDRA
It's quiet.

BETSY
I like quiet.

AUDRA
You hate quiet.
And it's cold.

BETSY
I like cold.

AUDRA
You hate cold.
And it's lonely.

I like... BETSY

Do you like to be lonely?

Sometimes. AUDRA

Why? BETSY

It's heavy, it makes me feel...full. AUDRA

I like to be happy. BETSY

Happiness is light. AUDRA

I like light. BETSY

It's not light there. AUDRA

Why not? She's there. You shouldn't be lonely. You're with her. BETSY

"To Die is to Gain." AUDRA

What? BETSY
What?

Betsy, I...I lied. AUDRA

About what? BETSY

The headstone isn't quiet. AUDRA

No? BETSY

The headstone whispers. AUDRA

BETSY
What does it sound like?

AUDRA
Her.

BETSY
...will you take me?

AUDRA
We'll see.

BETSY
Tomorrow night?

AUDRA
We'll see.

Betsy is tired.

BETSY
Are your hands rested?

AUDRA
I think so. Are your eyes heavy?

BETSY
I think so.

AUDRA
Then I'll play you to sleep.

BETSY
Like she did.

AUDRA
Just like she did.

Audra kisses Betsy's forehead, caresses her cheek with her gloved hand, then quietly exits. After a moment, piano.

But then it stops once more. Betsy sits up straight.

BETSY
Don't stop.

Audra?

Betsy pulls the covers back. She gets out of bed. She walks to the door, presses her face to it.

Audra?

She opens the door quickly. Noone is there. She recoils, terrified by Audra's absence.

Audra?

I won't let you vanish like she did.
There's only one place you go.

Betsy leaves the house and the scene transforms around her. She is now in a cemetery. Rows of stone markers, both simple and ornate. Betsy wanders amongst them, searching.

Audra? You don't have to play for me anymore. If you teach me, I'll learn. I'll play for myself, play myself to sleep. I'll put a pillow on the keys, lay my head down, close my eyes and play. Audra?

She comes to a large tombstone, an odd one. A large rectangle is cut out of the center of it, and an inscription reads "To Die is to Gain."

Oh. Oh.

I wanted to come. She wouldn't let me. I wanted to. I don't have flowers. I should have drawn you lilies. You used to like that. My crayon bouquets.

She kneels and prays. She stops.

Is this wrong? You're not God. You made toast with butter when I was sick. God doesn't make toast. Maybe that makes you better than God.

Does Audra talk to you? Does she tell you secrets? She tells me nothing. But she plays. She plays like you did. Is that - ? Mother? Mommy?

You lied to me, Audra. I don't hear her. I don't hear her at all.

Faint piano. Betsy listens.

She digs at the grave with her hands, tossing up clods of dirt. She presses her ear to the mound of earth.

Hello? Hello?

The piano continues. Betsy lifts her head. Is it coming from the - ?

She walks to the tombstone, noticing for the first time something on the ground in front of it. She picks up...the white gloves.

She puts the gloves on.

You're right. She's holding my hand. You stood here, Audra. You faced this. You heard her voice.

What did you do next?

She reaches out to the empty center of the tombstone. The piano gets louder the closer she gets.

Determined, Betsy slowly crawls through the empty center of the tombstone and the scene transforms once more.

Betsy is in the Otherworld. Darkness everywhere. With each step the piano grows louder.

Hello? Hello?

Betsy steps into a room with a deep clawfoot bathtub and a piano. Audra sits at the piano, playing.

Audra?

Audra stops playing, looks up.

AUDRA

What are you doing here?

BETSY

I followed you.

AUDRA

(the gloves) Give me those.

BETSY

No. They're mine now. You took them off.

AUDRA

I wanted to feel the stone with my bare hands.

BETSY

While it whispered?

AUDRA

You don't belong here.

BETSY
Neither do you. You promised.

AUDRA
She needs me.

BETSY
I need you more.

AUDRA
Leave.

BETSY
No.

*Audra goes back to playing. Betsy runs over and
shuts the fall, covering the keys.*

AUDRA
What are you doing?

BETSY
Please.

AUDRA
She'll wake up if I don't.

BETSY
Who?

VOICE FROM THE TUB
Audra?

AUDRA
Let go!

BETSY
No!

VOICE FROM THE TUB
Audra?

*Both freeze. A female head slowly rises from the
tub, facing away from us.*

VOICE FROM THE TUB
You stopped playing.

AUDRA
Yes.

VOICE FROM THE TUB
Why?

AUDRA
We have - you have a visitor.

VOICE FROM THE TUB
Who is it?

AUDRA
She's nothing, she's leaving.

BETSY
I'm not.

VOICE FROM THE TUB
No. Stay.

The head turns around, facing us. It is:

VOICE, NOW MOMMY
Stay.

Betsy freezes.

AUDRA
(to Betsy) I told you.

BETSY
Mommy?

MOMMY
(of Betsy) She looks familiar.

AUDRA
She's no one.

MOMMY
No, there's something familiar about her -

BETSY
Mother?

MOMMY
It doesn't matter. (to Audra) Play.

*Audra tries to lift the fall, but Betsy slams it
down again, almost crushing Audra's hands.*

Don't hurt them! I need them!

BETSY
What?

MOMMY
I need them. To hear the music.

BETSY

Play it yourself.

MOMMY

I can't. My hands...

*Mother lifts her hands out of the tub. Her wrists
have been cut, her hands dripping red.*

...they don't work. I don't know why but...they don't work
anymore. I'm alone here, all alone. If I could play, if I
could...I wouldn't be lonely. I wouldn't be afraid.

AUDRA

Let me stay, Betsy.

BETSY

No.

AUDRA

She needs me.

BETSY

No! It's not fair. She doesn't get you too. *(to Mother)* You
decided! You decided to be alone! You don't get her too!

MOMMY

Betsy.
You're my Betsy, aren't you?

BETSY

(scared) No.

MOMMY

You are.
My little Betsy.
I made you toast. With butter.

BETSY

Yes.

MOMMY

Then you owe me. You owe me this much.

Quiet.

BETSY

All right. I'll give you what you want.

MOMMY

Thank you.

BETSY

But not Audra.

AUDRA

Betsy.

MOMMY

I need her! My hands!

BETSY

Those aren't your hands. I'll give you your hands back.

Betsy takes off the gloves.

AUDRA

Betsy?

BETSY

These are your hands, mother. Your beautiful white hands.

Betsy places the gloves over Mommy's bloody hands, covering all trace of gore. Mommy looks at them with ecstasy.

MOMMY

Delicate again.

BETSY

Yes.

MOMMY

Soft.

BETSY

Yes.

MOMMY

Warm.

BETSY

Yes.

Mommy holds out her hand and Betsy helps her out of the tub. She walks to the piano.

Audra makes way for Mommy, who sits at the bench. She plays. Her face relaxes and tears silently fall as the notes pour forth. Betsy stretches out her hand to Audra. Audra resists for a moment, not wanting to leave their Mommy.

AUDRA

Goodbye.

No acknowledgement from Mommy. Audra takes Betsy's hand and they exit together.

They find their way back into Betsy's bedroom.

Happy to be back but worried Audra may be angry with her, Betsy climbs into bed. Quiet.

BETSY

Are you mad?
Say something.
Please.

AUDRA

...are you tired?

BETSY

I think so.
Will you play for me?

AUDRA

I...can't. They (*her hands*)...don't work that way anymore.

BETSY

Oh.

AUDRA

I'm sorry.

Audra starts to walk out.

BETSY

Audra?

AUDRA

Yes?

BETSY

You could...you could sing.

AUDRA

Sing?

BETSY

A lullaby.

AUDRA

Mother never used to sing.

BETSY

I know. You're not Mother.

Audra smiles.

She comes back to the bed, sits on the corner of it and sings Betsy to sleep.

AUDRA

*There once was an angel
Who fell to the ground
She looked for the clouds
She looked all around*

*She looked for the sky
She looked for the sun
She looked for the birds
And found there were none*

*She sat on the grass
Right next to a lake
And there her poor heart
Proceeded to break*

*Then she looked at the water
Believed not her eye
There were her clouds
And there was her sky*

*She looked at the water
And here's what she found
To get to go up
Sometimes you look down*

*The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress enters, drawn to the
intimate scene, she joins the singing.*

AUDRA AND THE GIRL

*Yes, she looked at the water
And here's what she found
To get to go up
Sometimes you look down*

*Audra's song is done. The Girl continues alone,
disturbed, searching.*

THE GIRL

*Sometimes you go down
Sometimes you go down
To get to go up
Sometimes you go down*

*Sometimes you go down
Sometimes you go down
To get to go up
Sometimes you go down*

A bed-time story:

The Girl in the Polka Dot Dress takes Audra's place and Audra joins Betsy in bed to listen to the Girl's story. Over the course of her tale, the other figures gather as well, perhaps helping to enact the story, perhaps just listening at her feet.

They say life is a struggle between the head and the heart, but when you only have one of them it isn't much of a fight.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful Sorceress who was only in possession of a heart. She had lost her head at some point, whether she had misplaced it or it had been taken from her, she did not know. All she knew was that it was well and truly gone. She made do with what she had, and there are those who say that the heart is a better ruler than the head, so perhaps she was not lacking. Every choice she made, every path she went down, she never had any doubt: "ah," she would say to herself, "this is the path my heart wishes to take." And there was something comforting in that, in that surrender to love, to one's kinder nature, for the heart is viewed as being warmer than the head, less ambitious, more full of charity. So for a time the Sorceress lived a life of peace and contentment.

Now I have mentioned that this woman was a Sorceress and of that there was no doubt. She could not heal the sick, but there are many who claim such a power, so this was no shortcoming. She could not bring riches, but there are even more of those that pretend to that ability, so again, she was not found wanting. No, the Sorceress had only one gift, and it was solely her own: she had the ability to conjure visions out of thin air.

Some of her visions were beautiful, and made not a few of the men in town fall madly in love with the Sorceress and her heart. Some of the visions were puzzling, and the wise men would gaze at them for hours, trying to uncover their secrets. Some of her visions were frightening, and these were tsk-tksed at by the adults, but treasured by their children, stared at by candlelight until the shivering overtook them and they could stand it no longer.

The Sorceress thought she would be content to remain in the village the entirety of her life, making presents of her gift to the friends she loved. But one day her heart grew tight in her chest, and it whispered, "go." She thought she had misheard it, and for the first time she tried to ignore her heart. But a day later it repeated its order: "go" and, with no head to counter it, she had to follow its command.

Everyone in the village gathered to bid her farewell. The women baked bread for her journey, the men kissed her cheek, and the children pinned notes of sorrow to her dress.

She walked through the forest for days on end, waiting for her heart to tell her to stop. Then one day the trill of the birds gave way to the crunch of machinery. She came to a great city, a miracle of its own, with buildings that rose from the earth and towered over the puny trees beside them. The Sorceress gazed up in wonder and fear at the sight. She shivered and made to move on, but to her surprise, her heart whispered, "here." Having no head to counter it, she had no choice but to obey.

She walked into the city, the thousands of people pressing against her, waves of flesh pushing her to and fro. She hid in a doorway to escape the flood of them, and saw from a sign on the door that the building had a room to let. The room was empty and vast and made her feel small but her heart said, "here" so she made it her home. In one corner of the room was a small silver dagger, covered with dust. "I wonder what you are for," said the Sorceress, and patiently sat on the floor to wait for visitors.

She waited. No one knocked on her door. The days passed in silence. The Sorceress created visions for herself, but she wanted to share them with others, and though the streets drowned in people, none of them knocked on her door.

Her heart said "wait," so she did. She grew cold. The villagers had always brought her blankets, but no one here did the same. She grew hungry. The villagers had always brought her food, but no one here did the same. Worst of all, she grew lonely. The villagers had always brought her company, but no one here did the same.

"Someone will come," said her heart. "They will come for your gift." But they did not, and the winter grew colder still. The Sorceress grew desperate. Finally, she opened her window and threw her visions out, watching as they drifted slowly to the ground, hoping that one of the passerby, just one, would stop to gaze at them. But none did. They were simply brushed off shoulders, knocked to the snowy ground, trampled underfoot.

Each neglected vision was a blow to her fragile heart. And without a head to hide her from her failure, to comfort her with hopeful delusions, her heart was left naked and unprotected.

The Sorceress thought of her village, of the friends who had loved her with such sincerity. She wished she could see them once more, but knew it would never be.

"Forgive me," said her heart. "I was wrong to lead us here."

I thought to gain more love, but instead have lost all I once had."

It was then that the Sorceress noticed once more the dagger in the corner of the room. "Ah," she said, "that is what you are for" and she plunged it deep into her breast. The pain was sharp, but when she looked down at the blade, her eyes grew wide with wonder. She looked at the wound; something was leaving her, her life was leaving her, but it was not in the form of blood. There, spilling out of her, oozing out of the gaping wound she had created, were visions, streams of images that pooled around her feet, visions of the villagers, all the friends she had left behind. These visions filled her last moments with joy, and she forgave her heart for leading her astray.

And as she left this Earth, they say it is a certainty that if the Sorceress had not lost her head so long ago, it would surely have been smiling.

*The Girl walks to the open window.
She sits on its perch.*

The Girl takes off her gloves, leaves them on the sill.

Some of the figures sense what's going to happen next and leap up to stop her.

Without further ceremony, the Girl jumps out the window.

She is gone.

Stillness.

The figures slowly return to the hiding places they first came from, vanish.

All but one figure, who walks to the window, sits where The Girl did. (this may be the same actor who played the Angel earlier)

She picks up the white gloves and holds them out the window as if offering them.

She lets go of them. They disappear.

She lowers her head and prays, fervently.

After a moment, another figure, sporting a glorious pair of wings, enters and surveys the filth with disgust.

WINGED
Helluva place to be in purgatory.

Clipped looks up with joy.

CLIPPED
Oh! Finally!

WINGED
Don't get excited. I'm just passing through.

CLIPPED
You're not a Messenger?

WINGED
Hardly.

CLIPPED
Ah.
(of herself) So you've just come to stare at the freak?

WINGED
That's about right.

CLIPPED
(the praying) I've been asking for help.

WINGED
Good luck.

CLIPPED
Someone will come for me.

WINGED
I wouldn't be so sure.

CLIPPED
I've been praying for weeks. One pure incessant plea. Like a broken car alarm at 3 a.m. Someone will have to hear me.

WINGED
Perhaps.

CLIPPED
Stop smiling. Why are you smiling?

WINGED
What makes you think it ever left this room?

CLIPPED
What?

WINGED
Your prayer.

CLIPPED

It had to.

WINGED

Did it?

A moment as Clipped takes this possibility in.

CLIPPED

They wouldn't. Block my - ? No.
You must've - when you entered the room, just now, that
close, you must've, you must've heard me.

WINGED

Not a peep.

CLIPPED

That close? Listen.

Clipped prays for a moment, then opens her eyes.

Well?

WINGED

Just the traffic below.

CLIPPED

Oh.
Oh.
Alone, then. Completely.

WINGED

Do you deserve less?

*Clipped stares at Winged, defiant, desperate and
guilty.*

You look...heavy. Are you heavy?

CLIPPED

Yes.
I'd forgotten what it...like I'm 300 pounds.

WINGED

How can you stand it? The monkey Gravity on your back?

CLIPPED

It's not easy. I've spent whole days just...

WINGED

What?

CLIPPED

It's silly.

WINGED

Tell me.

CLIPPED

Jumping. Up and down. A second of weightlessness reminding me what I once had. Up and down. Hoping with each lunge up that one time, one of these times...

WINGED

...you won't come down.

CLIPPED

Yes.

A moment.

WINGED

Why did you do it?

CLIPPED

It was kindness.

WINGED

Tell me, I need to know.

CLIPPED

Will you talk to Them for me?

WINGED

Carry your prayer?

Clipped nods.

I'll do my best.

CLIPPED

It was the woman...she summoned me, her need.

She moves to the windowsill.

She was sitting here. The window was open. She was looking at the ground below, imagining herself there, part of it, over. I sat beside her, whispered in her ear, passed my hand over hers, spoke to the sliver of her that still had hope. We sat perched for hours. I thought I had her. She had such a...she had a good heart.

WINGED

But it was broken?

Clipped nods.

A man? Woman?

Life. CLIPPED

More difficult. WINGED

CLIPPED
But not impossible. It could have healed. I tried. She listened to me for a time, to my murmurs, she must have heard me, I thought she was listening, but...

WINGED
But?

CLIPPED
...she pushed off just the same.

WINGED
It's not your fault.

CLIPPED
She began to fall and...I couldn't just watch her fall. I had to do something.

WINGED
You'd done enough.

CLIPPED
I had to do more.

WINGED
You'd done what was required. It's not for you to judge who -

CLIPPED
I took them off.
I took them off and I placed them on her back.

WINGED
You - ! Did you...did you think that would actually - ?

CLIPPED
I had to do something. And for a moment I thought I felt her become lighter, thought it was a gift I had the right to give.

WINGED
But it wasn't.

CLIPPED
No.

WINGED
That's not how it works.

CLIPPED

No.
The wings went up like white balloons and she...

WINGED

Went down.

CLIPPED

And I...stayed put.

WINGED

A caterpillar.

CLIPPED

What?

WINGED

You've reversed it. Given up the butterfly to become a grub.

CLIPPED

I'm not a grub.

WINGED

No? What, then?
(suddenly angry) Who do you think you are? Grandstanding,
making our usual - making weeks of whispering to the comatose
seem ridiculous.

CLIPPED

No.

WINGED

Do you think this makes you better than the rest of us?
Shows that you care more?

CLIPPED

No.

WINGED

Then what? Trying to shame us? Make us feel our impotence
even more keenly?

CLIPPED

No.

WINGED

Well, now you're a warning. Your head on a pike.

CLIPPED

Yes. Yes. It was for nothing. You can tell them all that,
you can all have a laugh about me. The stupid bitch did it
for nothing. The girl fell just the same. And I was
clipped, stranded here forever, and it was for nothing,
nothing at all.

Winged turns away, her face knows something to the contrary.

What? What? CLIPPED

You should know - WINGED

What? CLIPPED
Out.
Out!

Winged starts to leave, then stops.

It wasn't for nothing. WINGED

What? CLIPPED

I saw her. I was there, below when it - WINGED
Her face, her bloody face.

Don't tell me, I can't - CLIPPED

It was smiling. Like she had come to know...grace. WINGED

Clipped takes this in, beams with joy, pride.

Thank you. CLIPPED

Of course. WINGED
Back to praying?

I don't think so. CLIPPED
They know where to find me.

Winged nods and exits.

Clipped looks out the window, up, down. She walks back into the room. She jumps, up and down, up and down. She jumps up - lights out.

End of play