

Mother's House

A play

by

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ACT ONE

SCENE ONE — FOYER

The stage is initially empty except for the video screen, which remains stationary and is used throughout. On the screen we see both Susan, a middle aged woman, and Phoebe, her kindergarten aged daughter, FaceTiming one another. Susan is standing in a driveway in front of a house with a backpack.

Susan: Hi! It's mommy!

Phoebe: Mommy! Where are you?

Susan: I'm in Rhode Island. Mommy flew on the airplane.

Phoebe: Over the ocean?

Susan: No, not over the ocean. I'm at granny's house.

Phoebe: Did I go there?

Susan: No, you've never been to granny's house.

Phoebe: Where's granny?

Susan: Granny's not here. She died.

Phoebe: Oh. When?

Susan: A few months ago. Phoebe, this is the house I lived in when *I* was your age.

Phoebe: Are there monsters?

Susan: Monsters? I'm not sure. I don't think so. I'll watch out for them though.

Phoebe: Are there aardvarks?

Susan: No, no aardvarks. Definitely no aardvarks.

Phoebe: Are you coming home?

Susan: No, mommy won't be home tonight. I have to stay here and go through all of granny's stuff for a few days.

Phoebe: Awwww...

Susan: I know. I know. I know. But daddy's going to do everything just the same, the bath and reading and tucking you in and everything.

Phoebe: Does daddy know about the fluffawig?

Susan: Yes, daddy knows all about the fluffawig. I told him everything.

Phoebe: He has to call the fluffawig the right way.

Susan: Well, he'd better!

Phoebe: Can I go play now?

Susan: Yes, you can go play now. Love you!

Phoebe (*turning away from the camera, calling*): Daddy, I'm—

Call ends.

Lights up on a foyer with an ornamental fountain. Screen: tall windows, as if in a great room. Sound of water dripping irregularly in the background.

A young girl in a blue jumper enters right, stops to peer into the fountain for a moment before immediately running off left.

Susan enters stage right with luggage, looking around in every direction. After a long moment she picks up her phone, taps.

Susan: Hey.

Rox (*audio*): Hey!

Susan: I made it.

Rox: How is it?

Susan (*considering*): Hmm. Is there such a thing as reverse homesickness? I already feel sick just from being here.

Rox: Mmmm.

Susan: I just got off the phone with Phoebe. She asked me if there were monsters.

They laugh.

Rox: Is it the same as you remember it?

Susan looks around, considers.

Susan: You know, it's funny, it's —. I mean all these McMansions are still trying so hard to look different that they end up looking identical to one another. And my skin crawls just thinking about how this used to be Native land and then farmland and now it just feels like this vast barren suburban wasteland. —So to answer your question, yes, it's exactly the same.

They laugh.

As the conversation continues, Helene, a dignified woman in her seventies wearing painter's garments, enters left. Throughout the scene she busies herself with her equipment, setting up an easel, paints, stool, and palette, prepping and beginning to paint with great focus.

Rox: Wait, if you grew up in a McMansion, then what does that make you? Ronald McDonald? Or the Mayor? Hamburglar? Grimace? Wait—was there a female Grimace? Or am I making that up? Why were they all men? And why didn't I notice this before?

Susan: I'm guessing you haven't take your meds yet today.

Rox: Ah, but you know me too well. — Are you going to be okay?

Susan: Yeah...I think so, I just —. It's like she's still here. You know?

Rox: Yeah. I do.

Susan: It's so weird to think that I'm going to sleep in this house again.

Rox: You don't *have* to sleep there. You can just pitch a tent in the backyard, like we used to! She can wait.

They laugh. Helen peers over at Susan briefly.

Susan: Sure. (*Exhaling*) All right. I should go.

Rox: Love you.

Susan: Love you too.

They hang up. In the ensuing silence the sound of the dripping is now louder. Susan looks around and sees Helene for the first time.

Susan: Ah, there you are, mother.

Dripping is even louder.

Susan: Where is that coming from?

Susan takes a minute to inspect the foyer, gradually moving to search the fountain, eventually getting down on her knees and reaching behind it. The water noise stops. She gets up and brushes herself off, then turns to face Helene.

Susan:

After you died mother

the house inspector's report

detailed all the decay you had painted over—

over and over and over.

Rot is inevitable in natural things. Painting is not.

And since so much was covered up mother

i have returned to make my own inspection—

an inventory of internal damages.

Hard to write, harder still to read;

but such has always been my kind of report.

—Hasn't it, mother.

Helene glances again at Susan briefly, but otherwise keeps working steadily and remains onstage. Susan regards her for a moment before exiting right.

SCENE TWO — BEDROOM

Susan's bedroom, empty. Screen: text message conversation:

Aaron: Hey

Susan: Hey.

Aaron: How's it going?

Susan: Yep, so far so good

Aaron: Just wanted to ask before you got too far into things if you saw the email

Susan: Which one?

Aaron: From the gallery

Susan: No. Another one? Today?

Aaron: Yeah, this morning. they copied me on it

Susan enters in sleepwear, walking and texting, and lays down on the bed.

Susan: Okay

Aaron: I don't mean to pester

Susan: I know I know I know

Susan: Just

Susan: I will get back to you on that

Aaron: Okay.

Susan: How's Phoebe?

Aaron: Fine. She's down, she wore herself out earlier. She definitely misses you.

Susan: Okay.

Aaron: You going to be all right?

Susan: Yep. Nope. I don't know. Eventually. Maybe.

Aaron: OK

Susan: I should go. Love you.

Aaron: Love you.

Call ends. Screen: Moon, nighttime. Susan gets up from the bed.

Susan (*to the audience*):

To remember things, we are taught

to build a memory palace:

you construct in your mind an imaginary house

and, in each room, you place

an item you want to memorize.

This house, for me,

is a memory palace in reverse:

a real building

with every single room calling forth memories

I long to forget.

Helene stops painting, takes off her smock, moves to the bedroom, and begins pacing behind Susan. Susan takes her time to get in bed, pen and paper next to her on the bedside stand. Gradually she gets under the covers, settles down, and turns out the light. Nighttime sounds. Helene is still pacing. Finally Susan sits up in bed.

Susan: Do you mind?!?!

Helene is unfazed. Susan stares at her as she paces. Finally, without any change in expression, Helene moves to the rocking chair and sits.

Really?

Without moving her gaze from Susan, Helene begins rocking the chair back and forth, loudly and deliberately. Susan watches her for a moment and finally lays back down, facing the audience.

It's gonna be a loooooong night.

Pause.

SCENE THREE — KITCHEN

Lights up to Susan on a kitchen stool with her laptop. On the screen is a Student, who is laughing as the scene begins.

Susan (*laughing*): ...No, it's true, I go back and forth between the wonder of it all and the absurdity of it all. You know, the absolute glory and delight of poetry and the sheer density and complexity of the world in which our poetry now exists. I myself just feel so fortunate to be on

sabbatical and have time and space to write and think. And I recently went to a writer's retreat which was very powerful, like an island within an island, and I'm so grateful for the opportunity. These are such privileges. And so that's why I try to double down on outreach efforts as well to help lift up all kinds of diverse voices that are not as privileged as I am, that don't have the luxury of tenure or a sabbatical or a writer's retreat. Because their art is so, so important too.

Student: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. (*They look down, reading directly from their notebook.*) One last question before we wrap up today. Your mother, Helene Cordron, was well known in the region as a painter and she died eight months ago. I guess I'm just wondering what it was like growing up with such a strong and successful mother?

Susan freezes.

Susan (*stumbling*): I...uh...What was it...*like*...?

Student (*encouraging, oblivious*): Mm hmm?

Susan: I... I...guess...I couldn't say exactly what it was *like* because I didn't really have anything else to compare it to. I...

Long awkward pause. Student looks up from their notebook and finally realizes what's going on.

Student: Oh, I mean, if you don't want to talk about it, that's *totally* fine...

Susan (*over*): No, no, it's not that, it's...

Student (*panicking*): No, no, I completely understand...Yeah, no, it's not a problem...So sorry, I must've spaced out there for a minute...Listen, I think we have all we need for the podcast and so the edited version will come out later this month. Thank you so, so much for the great interview and we'll be in touch soon. Okay? Okay, thank you, thank you, okay, thanks, bye.

Susan (*over*): No, no really, it's no problem, it's just...Oh, okay, okay, yep, okay, great, well, thank you, no thank *you*, thank you so much. Okay, yep, sounds good, okay, bye.

Susan hangs up, reacts. She gets up and moves across the stage.

Susan: What was it like. What was it like? *She turns and calls offstage.* Mother? *Helene appears with sketchbook and pencil in hand.* What was it like, mother? What was it like? It wasn't *like* anything. It was...*you* were...

Susan steps forward and addresses the audience.

Mother

There is no punctuation mark that can follow
no symbol to capture the totality of your presence
no way to fully signify what happened next—
the word is noun, verb, adjective, cipher.

You joked about the two of us—

Helene: *Unstoppable force meets immovable object!*

Susan: —which from early on taught me
my own innate impossibility.

I had no tutor for this most important of geometries.

I am my own proof—proof of concept? proof of life?—
a proof i am still, still, *still*
desperately trying to solve.

Susan looks around. Helene is still drawing away in her sketch book.

Susan: Any solutions for me, Mother? *Helene does not change.* Didn't think so.

Sound of phone ringing. Screen: Incoming call — Preston Gallery. Susan stares at it while it rings. She keeps staring, hesitating, seemingly for an eternity, until finally it goes to voicemail. She sighs.

SCENE FOUR — SCREEN

Screen: Susan is FaceTiming with Olivia.

Olivia: How long have you been there?

Susan: An eternity? A lifetime? —This is day three.

Olivia: And?

Susan: You know, it's funny. All the stuff you see in horror movies, all the blood, the gore, the money they spend on CGI? It's really not necessary. Just take a screwed up childhood and a bunch of doors you haven't opened for twenty years—*that's* really all the fear you need. The entire place still makes my flesh crawl...and of course everything is a reminder. It's like a haunted house...like both she and my memories have been trapped here all this time, waiting for me.

Olivia: That's quite an evocative image.

Susan: Thank you. Good thing I'm a writer.

They laugh.

Susan: Sorry I'm being such a smartass. I think talking with Rox all the time is rubbing off on me.

Olivia: Listen, Susan. The work you're doing—going home, dealing with your mother's estate, confronting your childhood, and all that it entails—this is good, important work. It takes courage. (*Susan scoffs.*) No, seriously. I mean it. Many people know what they want to do, or *need* to do, but they can't always face it. It takes a kind of resilience. I hope you can give yourself credit for the courage you're showing right now.

Susan: Can I ask if there's some cowardly way out of this? (*They laugh.*)

Olivia: You know what I always say. The way out is through.

Susan: The way out is through....

SCENE FIVE

Screen goes blank. Susan enters right, no setting visible, and slowly makes her way center.

Susan: The way out is through...

She sighs and closes her eyes. Long pause.

Susan: (*Calling offstage*): Okay...You can come out now.

Pause.

Hello? Hello?

Pause.

Look, I know you're in there. Just come on out.

Pause.

Come out, come out, wherever you are!

Pause.

It's okay, she's—she's not here right now.

After a pause, Suzie, elementary school age, comes out.

Susan (*warmly*): Suzie! There you are! Come here, you!

Suzie runs to Susan, jumps in her arms.

Susan: Hello there! Oh, I missed you.

She puts her down.

Susan: Sue? Sue!

Sue, a teenager in rebel clothes, comes out slowly, dragging.

Sue: What.

Susan: Hey.

Sue: What??

Susan laughs.

Sue: *What?!?*

Susan: You never change, do you.

Sue: I don't know what you're talking about.

Susan: Right.

Suzie: What are you doing here?

Susan: Yeah...I know it's been a long time. But I'm here because we've got some work to do.

Sue: Is *she* going to be here?

Susan: Yes, she's still around. Probably for a while.

Sue: I'm not doing *anything* with her around!

Susan: I know it's not easy. But here's the thing. She's actually dead.

Suzie: Dead? Really?

Susan: Really.

Sue: But wait, if she's dead, then what are *we* still doing here?

Susan: Exactly. (*Sighs*) The fact is, I have inherited the house. It's mine now, but she's still here. Her stuff is here. You're still here. We have to clean house. And the only way I know how to that, and do it right, is to go space by space, room by room.

Sue: Sounds awful.

Susan: I know. I don't blame you. But I really don't know any other way. And I'll be with you the entire time. Come here. *She hugs them both.* So. (*to Suzie*) Ready?

Suzie (*clinging to Susan*): I'm scared!

Susan: I know. It's okay. I'll be right here. (*She turns to consider.*) So. We might as well start outside and work our way in. Which means the driveway is first.

SCENE SIX — DRIVEWAY

Screen: A garage door. Mandy, another elementary age girl, enters with a toy chest. Suzie and Mandy sit down, open up the toy chest, take out toys and dolls, playing.

Susan: I am six or seven.

It is summer

and I am playing barbies in the driveway

with my friend Mandy

—when, somehow, it almost comes to blows.

Suzie (*getting up*): This is boring! Let's go climb a tree.

Mandy: No, but wait! Barbie hasn't gotten to put on her new outfit yet!

Suzie: We do the same thing *every* time...

Mandy: But it's a new outfit! Look!

Suzie (*getting up in her face*): I said, I don't want to play Barbies anymore! *She pushes her over. Mandy starts to cry. After a moment Suzie starts to cry. Mrs. Mandy enters stage right.*

Susan: ...and when her mother meets us out on the driveway...

Mrs. Mandy (*crouching down tenderly between them both, a hand on each of them*): Hey, hey, what's the matter? Come here, both of you... What happened? *She begins talking with them quietly.*

Susan:

Her mother's patience

with both of us

is so beautiful

and so foreign to me—

Mrs. Mandy: So that's what we'll do next time, okay? Can you both say sorry?

Mandy: Sorry.

Suzie: Sorry.

Mrs. Mandy (*reassuring*): Okay. There you go.

Susan:

—so beautiful

and so foreign to me

—and i am so jealous

and so horrified

at my own jealousy—

Susie reacts, runs off left just as Helene enters left, in painting gear, baffled as she runs by.

Susan: —I never invite her to play again.

Helene turns to Mrs. Mandy quizzically.

Mrs. Mandy (to Helene): It's okay. They just had a little argument...

Helene (puzzled, turning back and forth): Oh... really...

Mrs. Mandy: But—we worked it out. *Pause.* —You know how it is, with girls at this age...

Helene (still puzzled, tries to laugh it off): Oh, yes, of course, of course, haha.

Sue (to Helene): But you didn't have a clue what she was talking about, did you?

Susan: No. She didn't.

Helene pauses awkwardly, then turns and exits left. Mrs. Mandy, now puzzled herself, exits right. Pause.

Susan: While we're still outside...we might as well get this over with.

SCENE SEVEN

Sound of a garage door opener. The garage door on the screen opens. A car is inside. Onscreen Helene, dressed up, drags Suzie, also dressed neatly, to the car, silently and angrily making her get inside. She goes around to the driver's side and slams the door. Sounds of distant muffled shouting.

Susan:

sound
in an enclosed space
rebounds reverberates resonates
echoes even
as is demonstrated

(for example)
by the sound
of a woman
shouting at the top of her lungs
at a
threefourfivesixseveneightnineten-
year old girl
cowering
in the back seat
of an enclosed car—

The muffled shouting continues, then the car finally starts, backs up, pulls off.

Susan: —late for church.

Susan and Sue react.

Susan: I think that's enough for now. *Sue nods, hugs Susan, exits right.*

Susan pulls out her phone, regards it, sighs. Screen: Voicemail. Susan taps her phone and the voicemail plays.

KAYLA (*audio*): Hi Susan, this is Kayla from Preston Gallery. Sorry to bother you, I hope I'm not intruding. My understanding is that you're in town, so if you are, please feel free to call me anytime. I'd love the opportunity to speak with you about your mother's estate—but of course, only if and when you're ready. It'd be so good to see you again. Take care. Bye-bye.

SCENE EIGHT

Susan stares at her phone for a moment before dialing a number. Screen: FaceTime. Rox appears.

Susan: Hey, what are you doing?

Rox: (*chewing*) Well, right now, I'm eating these truly disgusting veggie burgers, but I still have a cold, so I really can't taste them at all. It's pretty awesome. What are you doing?

Susan: What do you remember about my dad?

Frank enters left, a pile of papers under one arm, reading as he walks.

Rox: Your dad?

Susan: Mm hm. *For the rest of the scene Susan circles Frank and surveys him from various angles.*

Rox: Uhhh, I dunno—nice guy? Kinda bland? Mysterious job? Took off eventually?

Susan: He didn't exactly take off. I think they both just got kind of tired of screaming at each other.

Rox: Okay. Other than that— I think that's all I got.

Susan leans over and waves her hand in front of Frank's face, trying to get his attention. He gives no response, keeps reading. Susan straightens up.

Susan (*slowly formulating the idea*): Father was always absent, even in his presence; while mother was always present, even in her absence.

Rox: Ooh, that's a good one. —I don't think he ever knew my name.

Susan: Well, we were very good at avoiding my parents when you came around.

Rox: Do you blame me?

Susan: No, of course I don't blame you! I blame my mother for everything, you know that. *They laugh.*

Rox: Do you think your parents were ever really happy together?

Susan: Were they ever happy? Were they? (*to Frank*) Were you, Father? (*after his no response*) Hmm...I can think of one time...

SCENE NINE — PATIO

Sudden loud music and sound of a crowd. Screen: an outdoor patio, crowded with a party, bustling with hubbub. The stage, too, is suddenly flooded with partygoers, including Helene and Frank, who move to opposite ends of the stage. There are leaves on the patio as well as a few remnants from the party. Suzie enters stage right holding a piece of paper.

Susan:

once

on the patio

during one of your parties

i drew a picture for you—

a picture! that I drew for *you*, mother!—

and i was so proud of my accomplishment—

Suzie climbs up on a table awkwardly, turns to face the crowd.

Suzie: Mother, look!

Susan:

and i saw you both happy

laughing drinking talking

but far apart

from each other

and from me.

Suzie: Mother, look! Look, Mother!

For that one brief moment!

all three of us happy but

alone,

separate

each in our corners.

and then—

Suzie (increasingly desperate): Mother! Mother! (She starts to cry. A random Partygoer and Helene turn and notice at the same time.)

Partygoer: Hey, hey, little one, what's the matter? Hey, we need to get you down from there, that's not safe!

Frank, from afar, turns around and sees the scene but does not move.

Helene (*briskly coming over*): Susan, what are you doing on that table! Get down from there!

Suzie cries, still holding out the picture, which Helene does not take.

Susan: Enough!

Everyone freezes. Spotlight on Susan, Suzie, Helene, and Frank only. During Susan's speech the rest of the party melts away.

Susan: Did you not see, mother, what I made for you?

(reaching for the paper) A picture for you! I was trying to be like *you*! And when I cried, my tears fell all over the paper and it was ruined.

Helene and Frank pantomime arguing over Suzie and what to do. Susan takes a broom and begins sweeping the leaves and party detritus. Eventually Helene takes Suzie off, Suzie crying, Frank fuming but alone. Susan stops sweeping.

Susan: I was too young to measure distances then.

But here, from middle age,

surveying the weeds and crumbled tiles before me,

shrunk realm of a faded happiness,

i can measure these distances now.

Lights up on the empty patio, leaves blowing.

Frank looks at Susan for a moment, beseechingly, unsure.

Susan *(to Frank)*: It's okay. You can go. I know you had to.

Frank pauses for a moment before reluctantly turning and exiting left. Helene returns, drink in hand, moves to stand next to Susan while the scene changes.

SCENE TEN — BEDROOM

Screen: Nighttime. Susan and Helene sit down together on the bed, Susan settling in for the night, Helene still drinking.

Helene: You know what you should do. You should go upstairs. To the studio.

Susan: Your studio? Why? What's there?

Helene: You know what's there.

Susan: No.

Helene: Oh, yes you do. You know you want to.

Susan (over): No. No, no, no...

Helene, amused, rises and leaves, chuckling to herself.

Helene: I'll see you up there...

Susan (*drifting off*): No, no, no, no, no...

Pause as she falls asleep, still murmuring to herself.

SCENE ELEVEN — BEDROOM

Screen: Windows change from night to early morning. Suzie enters and starts jumping excitedly on the bed.

Suzie: Wake up, wake up!

Susan (*sitting up, startled*): What? What is it?

Suzie: It's Christmas! Come on! *She runs off left. Susan laughs, shakes her head.*

Susan: Ah, Christmas morning... The living room....

SCENE TWELVE — LIVING ROOM

A living room, decked out for Christmas, including a camera on a tripod off to one side. Suzie sits down in the center of the stage beneath the tree breathlessly. Helene and Frank, dressed up in Christmas morning finery, briskly and energetically build a wall of presents in front of her until she is no longer visible. Just as quickly Suzie opens each of the presents, appreciating each one for just a second before moving on to the next one.

Susan:

Everything on Christmas day hits like a flood:

a flood of presents, a flood of food, a flood of arguments...

Helene: Here, let's take the picture over here by the mantel.

Frank: Are you sure?

Helene: What do you mean, am I sure? Of course I'm sure!

Frank: It's just...All the different colors on the mantel might be a bit distracting, I think...

Helene (*stern*): Susan, put that down and come over here and get in the picture. (*to Frank*) — *You're lecturing me* about colors now?!

Frank: No, I didn't mean it like that, it's just...

Helene: Frank, nobody looks at the background, they will be looking at us! I don't know why you have to make everything so difficult!

Frank: Just the tree and not the mantel would make it look better, that's all!

Helene: Jesus Christ, Frank, you are impossible! That's it! Never mind the goddamn picture! We just won't have one! (*Exits left.*)

Frank: Helene...

He storms off left behind her.

Suzie (*calling to them*): Daddy! Daddy! It's okay, Daddy! Mommy says *I'm* impossible too!

After she gets no response, Suzie sighs, sulks over to the tree and plops down underneath it.

Susan:

a flood of presents, a flood of food, and a flood of arguments

washing you and father away.

I am left alone

stranded beneath the tree

on a desert island of tinsel and plastic.

Suzie looks around, then reaches for an empty box and tries to balance it on her head repeatedly.

Over and over and over

with nothing but an empty box and gravity

teaching myself how to survive

a flood on a desert island
trying desperately to understand
the hidden, invisible powers
that govern my world.

Susan sits down cross-legged next to Suzie and watches her admiringly.

Sound of doorbell. Scene dissolves as Susan exits right. Screen: kitchen.

SCENE THIRTEEN — KITCHEN

Susan returns with Kayla, a gallery representative, in tow.

Kayla: Thank you for having me.

Susan: Thanks for coming.

Kayla: It's been a while since I've been here.

Susan: I know, I'm sorry.

Kayla: Oh, no, no need to apologize, it's always... These things are rarely ever easy.

Helene enters stage left and hovers throughout the scene.

Susan: So, what do you want to see?

Kayla: Well, before she died, Helene did mention some pieces she was still working on. I never did quite get a sense if she ever finished them. You know how things got there in those last months.

Susan: Yes. So, you want to check out the studio?

Kayla: If it's not too much to ask.

Pause.

Susan (*gesturing upstairs*): That's fine. You can go up. I'll wait.

Kayla: Oh, I wouldn't presume to — Don't you want to come with me?

Susan: No, it's—it's okay. I trust you.

Helene chuckles.

Kayla: Are you sure?

Susan: Yeah, go ahead. It's fine. It's...I... I can't go in there yet.

Kayla: Okay. I understand. —I'll be careful. I won't touch anything.

Susan: I know.

Kayla exits left. Screen: abstract paintings, one after another, in various hallways. Susan paces slowly across the stage, moving in time with the screen, looking up at them.

Susan (to Helene):

A confession, mother:

walking the hallways now

like a tourist

i do find your paintings

powerful, accomplished

despite myself

and despite how much they cost me.

whenever i bring people to the house

and they admire your paintings

i want to tell them,

this is the roman coliseum—

impressive, enduring, inspiring even,

until you stop and realize,

—oh, wait, that’s right,

they *killed* people here.

Kayla enters left.

Susan: Well?

Kayla: Susan, I—There are some wonderful pieces here. It’s — It may be hard to say without consulting her notes whether some of them are finished. But regardless, we would definitely be interested.

Susan: Okay.

Kayla: I must confess. I’ve always wondered about that moment when your mother switched from representation to abstraction. It’s quite striking. She never really wanted to talk about it. Did she ever...?

Susan fixes her with a look. Pause.

Kayla: —Well, I know these are often emotional decisions, so we’ll give it some time to settle. But are there any other questions I can answer for you right now?

Susan: Yeah. Where does one go around here to launder blood money?

Kayla: Is that what it feels like?

Susan: Yes. It does. — I’m not a philistine, you know.

Kayla: What?

Susan: I mean, I — I know I’m being all emotional and difficult and oppositional about this, but, I do know what it’s like to appreciate good art.

Kayla: Of course you do! You’re a poet! No need to explain. —Listen. Your mother was a female artist at a time where that was not easy. Of course, it’s *still* not easy—but *especially* back then. I know many people, including many collectors, who respect, value, and even cherish your mother’s art, Susan. Please know that. —Take all the time you need. You have my number.

Susan: Thank you.

They hug briefly. Kayla exits right. Susan turns to Helene, who is practically gloating.

Susan: Why the switch from representation to abstraction, mother? Why, indeed? Should we answer that one? Hm? *Helene stops gloating.* Tell you what. Why don't you go get the last realistic painting you ever did.

SCENE FOURTEEN — DINING ROOM

Music. As the dining room is set up, central to which is a table with two plates of food on it and Sue seated at one end, Helene enters holding a large painting, staring lovingly at it. She dances with it in a pas de deux, smitten, enraptured. Helene finally hangs the painting so it sits over the center of the table, in the center of the stage. She stands back and considers the portrait, shaking her head admiringly. It is a portrait of Suzie, smiling.

Susan approaches from the other end of the dining room table.

Susan (*to the audience*): Here is a love triangle:

you, me, and the picture you painted of me

when i was a child

and hung on your wall

and prayed to like an icon

and did not want to replace ever again.

Susan gradually makes her way down the dining room table, drawing closer to Helene.

Helene turns and sees Sue sitting at her end of the table, sulking.

Helene (*pointedly*): Eat.

Sue sulks.

Susan (*continuing*): I know she is prettier than I.

She does not sweat, bleed, age, or complain.

But does not our common flesh count for something?

But in the end it is flesh too common.

I hated her, smiling, smug on her wall.

I hated the way you so loved her perfection, mother,
and I could do nothing to change it.

Helene: I said, eat. You need to eat.

Sue: I'm just not that hungry! God!

Helene: Fine. You can sit there until you *are* that hungry.

Sue: This is ridiculous! I'm not five!

Helene: Don't you *dare* call me ridiculous!

Sue: I wasn't—I didn't say *you* were ridiculous, I said— *Sue bursts out laughing.*

Helene: You're laughing? At me? How dare you?

Sue (*still laughing*): It's *always* about you, isn't it? No matter what!

Helene: You're grounded! *She begins to storm out left.*

Sue buries her head, her laughter turning to angry tears.

Sue: Uh..huh...AGH!

Suddenly she gets up, runs, and throws the plate of food at the portrait, splattering food all over it. Helene spins around and sees it. They both look at each other and freeze.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE—

Susan alone onstage with her notebook.

Susan:

Fugue.

My mother died here
the event of which created feelings of—guilt
and now I have inherited my mother's house
The existence of which
location of which
privilege of which
ownership of which, *or* the sale of which will
create feelings of—guilt
All of which creates, among other things, unbridled *rage*—
Which, in turn, creates—more guilt.

And where does one go to feel guilty?

Lights up reveal the interior of a large closet with a variety of girl's clothes. Suzie and Sue enter stage right.

Susan:

The irony of this house—

larger and larger rooms

pushed me into smaller and smaller spaces.

As she speaks, Suzie squeezes herself into a cramped position in the closet.

i can no longer fit

in the closet

where i would curl up in shame

as if my sins have now

metastasized me

beyond redemption.

but even then, when i could fit — even my guilt was wrong.

Helene (*offstage*): Susan? Where are you?

Suzie squeezes herself tighter, covering her head, crying.

Helene enters, looking around searchingly, exasperated. Finally she enters the closet and finds Suzie.

Helene: What on earth are you doing in here? Get out!

Suzie: I'm sorry, mother, I'm sorry!

Helene: Out! Right now! *She points offstage. They both go. As soon as they exit, Sue takes her turn squeezing into the closet.*

Susan:

You raged at my hiding

mistaking my penitence for defiance.

Helene returns.

Until, at last, it *became* defiance.

Helene (*offstage*): Susan? Where are you?

Helene enters, looking around searchingly, exasperated. Finally she enters the closet and finds Sue.

Helene: What on earth are you doing in here? Get out!

Sue: No! I'm not coming out! And you can't touch me! I'll tear the clothes and cost you money!

Helene (*scoffing*): You think I'm going to spend another dime on you for behaving this way! Your punishment will still be waiting for you, no matter how long you spend in here! You better go to your room immediately! *Exits. Sue comes out, reacts, then exits right.*

Susan:

Even my guilt was wrong for me
like the clothes now still hanging in the closet
uncomfortable
ill-fitting
and eventually
outgrown.

SCENE TWO—BEDROOM

Susan's bedroom door is now visible, hanging to one side. Sue is hunched up in bed under the covers. Susan has sandpaper and for a minute works around the edge of the door frame with the sandpaper. She stops and faces the audience.

Susan:

An eighth of an inch:
the amount needed to sand down
the bottom of my bedroom door
which instead stuck in the carpet
and never closed entirely.

An eighth of an inch:
also the gap that resulted
between my bedroom door
and its ill-fitting frame.

Unmeasurable:

how this tiny gap

let everything in—

lights sounds but especially the fear

that you could come in at any time

and when you did

to lecture, inspect or punish—

Helene bursts through the door and drops a bucket and rag loudly on the floor. The bucket has a large sign on the side: VERY CAREFUL. Sue shoots up in bed at the bang of the bucket. Helene spins and exits.

Susan:

—it confirmed to me

that i was not my own.

these tiny gaps let everything out

that was mine for the longest time.

Sue gets out of bed, takes the rag and bucket, huffing, and exits left. Phone rings.

Screen: FaceTime. Phoebe and Aaron are on.

Phoebe: Hi Mommy!

Susan: Hi!

Phoebe: Are you still at granny's?

Susan: I'm still here!

Phoebe: Are there any monsters or aardvarks?

Susan: Nope!

Phoebe: Okay, bye bye. *She is replaced on the screen by Aaron.*

Aaron: Hi there...

Susan: Well, that was quick today!

Aaron (*chuckling*): Yeah.

Susan: You doing okay?

Aaron: Yeah, just — work's getting busier like I predicted it would.

Susan: Yeah. You always seem to have a good feel for that. Hey, let me ask you something. —I do have to sell this place, right.

Aaron: I mean, I guess you don't *have to* have to. You *could* hang on to it.

Susan: I can't imagine keeping it.

Aaron: It's definitely an asset. Which reminds me: Steve and I are scheduled to go over the portfolios and possible tax strategies next week.

Susan (*scoffing*): Steve.

Aaron: What?

Susan: No, it's just — I've been thinking about this, and I just feel stuck, because obviously I can't just leave it sitting here, it would end up costing a lot to maintain, which makes no sense. But selling it, let alone selling her remaining paintings, it just feels—

Aaron: Susan. Think about it for a second. I mean, this is Phoebe's entire college fund we're talking here, easily. At least.

Susan: I know, I know, but — I'm trying to describe to you how frustrating and nauseating this all is. I understand the practical side of all of it. Truly I do. I just don't know if you understand the emotional side of it. I don't care how much this place is worth. Her money feels completely worthless to me if it's going to make me miserable every time I think of it.

Aaron: But after all you went through in that house, wouldn't it make sense to finally get some good out of it? And to provide for Phoebe?

Susan: What, are you saying I'm not providing for Phoebe now?

Aaron: What?!? No, I —

Susan (*over*): —You don't think I make enough money as a professor. You think I should be doing something else instead!

Aaron (*over*): Are you out of your— Susan, how could you—

Susan (*over, irritably*): No, no, it's fine. It's fine. Listen, I can feel a migraine coming on.

Aaron: Susan!

Susan: I'll talk to you later. *She hangs up. ARRRRRGH!*

Helene floats in left, gloating. Pause. Susan looks up and notices her.

Susan: Oh, kiss my ass!

SCENE THREE — DINING ROOM

Screen: Dining room in darkness. The portrait hangs center, still with food on it. Sue enters left, bucket and rag in hand. Helene watches from one side without Sue seeing her. Carefully she approaches the portrait, takes it down, daubs gently in the bucket and gently wipes the painting. When she is finished she admires the painting for a moment, then gently hangs it back up on its hook and leaves. Helene moves forward, inspects the painting for a long moment, then leaves.

SCENE FOUR—GARDEN

Screen and stage: garden plot with weeds and struggling plants, late evening, rain. Sound of thunder and rain. Susan enters. Sue enters, wet hair, with a hoe. She works at the plants angrily. Susan hovers around her.

Sue: Do you see how she left this? She says she's going to do it and then she just forgets.

Susan: I remember...

Sue: It would be great to have fresh food! Fruit, vegetables! But I don't know what I'm doing! I can't tell if I'm doing it right!

Susan: It would have been nice to do it together.

you were like rain

mother

at times, the soft mist that gently waters the garden;

at times, the storm that floods the garden.

the rain and my sweat as i tended to the garden

mingled and trickled down my body.

why so many storms? why so little mist?

did you not know how much runs off in storms, uselessly?

did you not think of what you would carve in the soil beneath my feet?

(to the sky) Rage on, mother, rage on,

but i have a garden to attend to;

so i will swallow you in heaving gulps

and i will sweat and piss and bleed you out of my body

and i will continue to tend to my garden

despite all your rages.

More sounds of storm. Sue and Susan both bow their heads in the rain.

SCENE FIVE — ATTIC

The attic is comprised of stacks of boxes, files, shelves. If possible, the set should evoke an Escher-like quality of stairs and doors, whack-a-mole, peek-a-boo, hide-and-seek. Susan appears and looks around.

Susan: Mother? *Helene pops up in another part of the attic. They both disappear, move, reappear.* Mother? *Helene pops up again, this time behind her. Repeats.* Are you in here? Mother? *Repeats a few more times until Helene does not reappear. Susan sits.*

This attic is filled with pieces of a life.
Pieces of a puzzle, perhaps —
but puzzles can only be truly completed
if you have *all* the pieces.

Will I ever find you in here, mother? Do I have to? Do I even want to?

Susan rummages through a large box for a moment, reacting each time she pulls out another item. Finally she reaches for her phone. Screen: FaceTime with Rox.

Susan: You're not going to believe this.

Rox: What?

Susan: I'm in the attic and in this box there's, let's see: *Knitting for Beginners*; *The Big Book of Polack Jokes*...

Rox: Offensive, bizarre...

Susan: An entire set of cooking utensils, unopened...A bunch of pamphlets about coin collecting...and then...wait for it...waaaay down in the bottom, neatly tucked away, is a copy of — surprise! The DSM. And guess what page is dogeared?

Rox: Oh God I'm scared.

Susan (*reading*): 301 point 81... Narcissistic personality disorder...Let's see... grandiose sense of self-importance, check...preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, check...believes that he or she is special and unique, check...requires excessive admiration, check...has a sense of entitlement, check...shows arrogant, haughty behaviors...check, check, and checkmate!

Rox: But wait, did your mother own this? Was it hers? Was it your father's, maybe?

Susan: Tantalizing, isn't it? Another mystery.

Rox: Didn't you say she told you about some trauma of hers?

Susan: Not exactly...

Sue enters right and starts rummaging angrily through boxes. Helene reappears. Susan steps aside and watches.

Sue: Listen, I'm not going to talk to you about it!

Helene: Just what exactly do you think you're going to do with an English degree? Teach? Ha!

Sue: What? You don't think I'm capable of being a writer *and* teaching? You think I'm not good enough?

Helene: Susan, teaching is just so...so...

Sue: What? Say it! *She reaches into a box and pulls out a notebook.*

Helene:... *We are better* than that!

Sue: Oh, really? We are, are we? Oh, *I see now.* —And where exactly did this “We are better” idea come from? From your parents, who never even went to college? From dad’s money, that he gets from who knows where? Or from your own innate creative genius? Huh? Huh?

Helene (*approaching her, furious, trembling, vulnerable*): When you say these things to me, you know what it’s like? It’s like you are saying, (*slapping herself hard in the face*), “*That didn’t hurt. That didn’t hurt! That didn’t hurt!...*”

Sue (*recoiling, shocked*): Mother!

Helene (*continuing hard, crying by now*): “*That didn’t hurt! That didn’t hurt! That didn’t hurt! That didn’t hurt! That didn’t hurt!*” *She cries, falls down.*

Sue (*astonished, tentatively approaching her*): Mother...I...are you...is that...did that...really happen to you? Mother, did someone...*do* that to you?

Helene cries. Susan tries to come closer; Helene puts her hands up. Long silence. Helene catches her breath, slowly gets up, wipes her face, steadies herself. They exchange a look. Pause.

Sue (*gesturing, conciliatory*): Mother, I...

Helene inhales.

Helene: GET OUT OF MY ATTIC!

Pause. Sue, crushed, regards her with pity for a long moment.

Sue (*softly*): Well, I found the notebook that I was looking for. So. *She leaves. Helene reacts.*

Susan: That was the only time I ever got a glimpse.

After a moment Helene exits left.

Susan: And then — nothing.

Pause.

Rox: God, Susan.

Susan: Yeah. (*abrupt shift in tone*)— But, *anyway*. Now if you were a semi-successful regional painter, would you not leave a will where you specified exactly what you wanted to have done with all of your works when you died? Wouldn't that be, like, the one thing that you cared the most about?

Rox: I could never be a semi-successful regional painter. I could never be a painter, period.

Susan: No?

Rox: Nn nn. I get overstimulated really easily. Too many colors, too many shapes, too many choices. It's a wonder I even get dressed in the morning.

Susan: I just wish she had left some really annoyingly specific instructions so I could complain about how stupid they were.

Rox: But at least you get to choose what feels right for you...?

Susan: Do I, though? Or is she still going to haunt me, no matter what I do?

Rox: Even as your best friend I'm gonna say that one's above my pay grade.

Susan: I know. —And then at the same time, I feel like whining about my inheritance in any way is *the* definition of a first world problem. (*Sighing*) Sometimes I think it would have been so much easier if she had just beaten me.

Rox: What??!? You wouldn't have wanted that!

S: I didn't say I would have *wanted* that. I said it would have been *easier*. Simpler. More straightforward.

Rox: Are you saying you still harbor, along with a lifetime's worth of resentment, some sort of grudging admiration for your mother?

S: Are you imitating Olivia right now?

Rox: Yes! Was it good? Was it convincing? I'm gonna call her right now and tell her!

S: Don't call my therapist. She'll think it's an emergency.

Rox: Okay, *fine*.

Susan (*pulling a photo frame from the box*): Oh, hey, do you remember a trip where I wore a blue jumper to Fuller Park?

Rox: Did I go with you to Fuller Park? Was the blue jumper the one your mom got so mad about when you got it dirty?

Susan: No, that was the pink dress. That was at Edenbach.

Rox: Riiiiight.

Susan: You still owe me for that.

Rox: What? Why?

Susan: You were the one who convinced me to roll down the hill with you!

Rox: Edenbach Hill? You're still mad about *Edenbach Hill*? Was it not worth *every* second?

Susan: No, you're right. It was totally worth it. *They laugh.* I'm just looking at this one picture of me as a kid and having a hard time placing it.

Rox: Ooh, I gotta go. Hey, send me a picture of it!

Susan: Okay.

On the screen we see a picture of the girl in the blue jumper from Act I. Susan works her phone and sends it to Rox. Sue reenters, approaches Susan tentatively.

Susan: There.

Rox: Okay, love you!

Susan: Love you too. *She hangs up, sees Sue.* Hey.

Sue: Hey.

Susan: What's up?

Sue: I don't want to bother you.

Susan: Why would you be bothering me?

Sue: I know you're angry.

Susan: Angry? Well, of course I'm angry. But—I'm not angry at *you*.

Sue: Okay.

Susan: What is it?

Sue: It's just...(curling up in her lap) There were good times in this house too.

Susan: Oh, there were, huh? (*Sue gives her a look.*) Yeah, you're right. I know.

Sue: I think we need to go there. I mean—I want to.

Susan: No, you're right. Sure. —What I meant to say is, of course. *She hugs her fondly.*
Where to, then?

Sue: Well....

SCENE FIVE — LIBRARY

Sue and Susan enter. The library is filled with many books, perfectly organized by color. Suzie enters, pulls some off a shelf, uses them like blocks, building towers. Frank wanders in reading some paperwork, spots her, chuckles.

Frank: Just put them back exactly the way you found them or your mother will be angry.

Suzie: Did you read all these books?

Frank: No.

Suzie: Did Mother read all of these books?

Frank (*laughing*): No.

Suzie: Why not?

Frank: She doesn't really buy them to *read* them.

Suzie: Why not?

Frank (*sighing*): See how pretty they all look? Just make sure you put them back exactly the way you found them. *He leaves, reading.*

Susan: I did what he said. I learned how to put them back perfectly, every time. Until one day, when I dropped one...(Suzie does.) ...it fell open to a page that read:

Suzie (*slowly*): “She flew above the clouds to another realm.”

Susan: “She flew.” Electric. She *flew*! I didn’t know who she was, or how she flew...but if she could fly, maybe I could too.

Suzie gets up and pretends to fly. Sue and Susan sit down center.

Sue: I would sit and look around at all of these books and think, each one has something to tell me. Each one. So many books, so many stories...It just felt so *alive*.

Helene enters.

Susan: At first I didn’t believe my father when he said that mother hadn’t read all the books. After all, she seemed just as smart as he was. But as I got older, I started to take pleasure in the idea that I knew more about her own library than she did.

Sue (*approaching her*): Mother? I need to do a book report...

Helene: Oh, yes, yes. They still make you do those, then.

Sue: There are a few authors I’m interested in pursuing. Anais Nin, Norman Mailer, Alice Walker, Martha Gellhorn. Do you think I should check them out from the *public* library?

Helene: The library? Well, of course, I imagine so, if the school library doesn’t have them.

Sue (*satisfied, knowingly*): Oh, okay. Riiiiight. Gotcha.

Helene exits.

Susan: And somehow my mother had stumbled onto some fantastic poetry collections.

Sue (*book in hand*): “I dwell in possibility! I am an instrument in the shape of a woman! No more masks! No more mythologies!”

Susan: When a book was *too* good and I worried about getting in trouble, I’d sneak it to the guest room and hide...

Sue: Hey—don't forget—books weren't the *only* thing I snuck into the guest room. *She exits.*

SCENE SIX — GUEST ROOM/BATHROOM

Screen: a small bedroom.

Susan: Later I realized
that once you had gone to bed upstairs
at the other end of the house
i had free rein.

Screen: Sue and a Friend are seen in silhouette in a couch, giggling, sneaking, making out.

the first time
i snuck someone in
we hid in the guest room
away from my bedroom
and for once
things came easy
i felt like the guest
in my own house
in my own body
my self, my friend, and my pleasure
were all just—easy
simple
all just
passing through...

Susan: Oh, no, what's the matter?

Aaron: Hey, do you know where the disinfectant is? And Band-Aids?

Susan: I can't hear you —

Aaron: I said, do you KNOW where the —

Susan: Oh, up on the top shelf, on the right!

Aaron scrambling through the bathroom cabinet, flustered, making a mess.

Phoebe: WAAAAAAAAA!

Susan: No, no, the other side—the other side! God, would you listen!

Aaron (*over*): I'm trying to listen, it's just pretty hard when I have a screaming —

Susan: Up on the top shelf back behind the— yep, that's it—right there behind the—

Phoebe: I! WANT! MOMMY!!

Aaron: It's okay, I'm gonna put it on right now, okay? It's going to feel better in a minute. Okay, here it is, here it is...

Susan (*over*): I know, honey, Mommy's right here...I know, it hurts so much...It's okay... Daddy's got you...Hey, hey, it's all right...

Phoebe finally settles down with Aaron holding her.

Aaron: Okay, okay. Okay. There we go. Phew.

Susan: Okay. Okay. There you go. I know. Boo boos are *so* hard.

Aaron: Thank you, mommy. You helped us both.

Susan: Phoebs, you okay?

Phoebe nods sadly.

Susan: Okay. Let Daddy hold you now, okay? *Another nod.* Okay.

Susan: Okay. So now it's time for snack and then bed. And you're going to feel *so* much better. Okay? *Another nod.* Okay. I love you and miss you both.

Aaron: C'mon, Phoebs, let's go get some snack. Love you, Susan.

Susan: Love you, too.

Aaron: Thanks again.

Susan: Okay. Good night.

Phoebe (*sniffing*): Night night.

Aaron: Good night.

Call ends. Susan exhales, puts her hand to her mouth, failing to hold back tears. After a bit she addresses the audience.

At times I want to let this house decay
and let blind nature moulder and devour,
let vine and seed and fox and deer invade—
or throw wild parties to shatter, smash, and scour.
Come, let raves, or ravens pick apart
all family traces left upon these walls,
consume with weeds the stuff that we call art,
or let mud, flame, or flood engulf it all.
—Or maybe I should leave it all intact,
the past enshrined in bitter monument;
museum of horrors—a place to reenact
the scenes of my pained childhood misspent.

These thoughts would surely sound to me like madness
if they didn't hold such promise—or such sadness.

—Oh God, why am I still here??

Susan collapses on the bed. Pause. Sue and Suzie come in, and join her on the bed.

Sue and Suzie (*together*): Hey...Are you okay? Hey! Hey, wake up! *Wake up!*

Susan does not move.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE—BEDROOM

Susan is in bed, motionless. Her laptop is open next to her on the bed. Screen: A phone/voicemail icon, a text icon, and an email icon. The voicemail icon changes to one.

Kayla (voicemail): Hi, Susan, it's Kayla from Preston Gallery, just wanted to touch base...

The email icon changes to one.

Official Voice: Hi Susan. I know you're on sabbatical, but I the Program Committee is starting a new initiative that I think you'd be really great for...

Aaron (message): Hey, you there?

The text icon changes to one.

With each new message, the icon notifications continue to increase in number. Each new message is heard momentarily atop all the other messages, which continue simultaneously in the background, creating a cumulative effect of a buzzing cacophony of messages.

VARIOUS VOICES:

From the Office of Administration: Your course syllabus for English 318 is currently 5 days overdue...

Dear Dr. Cordron, my professor told me you were on sabbatical, but I was just wondering if you could look at my project...

Aaron's voice: Hey, it's me. Call me, okay? I need to know what's going on...

Hi Susan: This is Richard with the Pembroke Quarterly, just wondering when you thought you might have that review finished...

Phoebe's voice: Hi Mommy: When are you coming home? The fluffawig wants to see you...

From the Office of Administration: Your course syllabus for English 318 is currently 15 days overdue. Please submit your syllabus as soon as possible...

The numbers on the icons continue to go up, accelerating faster and faster.

Hello Professor Cordron: I was just wondering if you were having office hours today? I thought I might stop by...

Thank you for contacting the Probate Court. Our online instructions for scheduling an appointment are here. Our online system is currently not available. Please call this number...

Phoebe's voice: Mommy? Mommy where are you? Mommy? Mommy? MOMMY?

The voices stop suddenly. Susan jerks straight up in bed, waking from the nightmare, gasping. Screen: bedroom windows. She stops to catch her breath. She turns and sees her laptop open, looks at it for a moment before closing it. She slowly gets out of bed and reaches for her phone. Screen: FaceTime with Aaron. He answers.

Susan: Hey.

Aaron: Hey, what the hell is going on? Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you!

Susan: I know...I know...I...It's been a rough couple of days.

Aaron: Rough? What do you mean, rough?

Susan: I...It's some depression...Okay, maybe a lot of depression...It just hit really, really hard.

Aaron: Jesus, Susan, I almost called the cops to do a safety check on you!

Susan: I know! I know! I...(tearing up) I... was trying so hard to take care of everything in this house myself...and I just can't do it, I just can't, I'm sorry, I tried...If I stop and let myself think about all the work waiting for me at the end of sabbatical and how my manuscript isn't done yet and how much I'm missing you two and—but everything here is just so up in the air...It's just completely overwhelming and infuriating and paralyzing all at the same time...

Aaron: Hey, hey, it's okay, it's okay...What can I do? Do you want me to call people? I can get people on the phone—movers, shippers, storage units, you name it.

Susan: Yes. That would be amazing. Just — don't have them come immediately. But soon.

Aaron: I'm on it. Consider it done. *(He starts typing furiously on his laptop while they speak.)* Just promise me the next time you're depressed that you will at least ping me and not go dark like that. *Ever* again.

Susan *(small)*: I promise.

Pause, Aaron typing.

Susan: —And I'm sorry I was so shitty with you the other day, I just—I just hate dealing with money and all her shit and this house, it just —

Aaron: It's okay. It's okay. I know you've got a lot to do. But you don't need to get this all done today. Or this week, or this month even. It will take as long as it takes. It's okay. Honest.

Susan: I definitely need to finish going through all the rooms, and that will help me decide what to do.

Pause. Aaron keeps searching for a moment, then stops and sighs.

Aaron: Listen, Susan. You know my relationship with my parents is very different from yours, and so sometimes it can be hard for me to relate to all this. You kept telling me this is about more than money, and it took me a while to wrap my mind around that. But—I get it now. Look, we both love our jobs, and we're both healthy. We'll do fine. I know you'll keep me in the loop, but at the end of the day—I respect whatever decision you make. She's your mom, and it's your house, and your decision.

Susan: Thank you.

Pause.

Aaron: Sorry, what was that? You're flying home tonight, what? *They smile at each other.*

Susan: I wish.

Aaron: Did you call Olivia?

Susan: No, that's next.

Aaron: Okay. Good. *Pause.* Well, I gotta go meet some people now.

Susan: Okay. Love you.

Aaron: Love you.

Call ends. Susan sits on the side of the bed, closes her eyes, and meditates for a moment, breathing deeply. Screen: Windows change from afternoon to evening.

SCENE TWO — BEDROOM

Susan is in bed. Screen: FaceTime with Olivia.

Susan (*rapid*): I can't do this, this was all a big mistake, I never should have come in the first place, I just should have sent Aaron here to deal with all of it, just throw it all out—

Olivia (*over*): Easy, it's okay, slow down, whoa whoa whoa, Susan? Susan? Let's take some deep breaths and slow down here, okay? Just breathe. (*She does.*) And again. (*They do.*)

Susan: I can't—It's all too much. I've been asleep for most of the past two and a half days, I just—it just hit me.

Olivia: Okay. Up until that point, you'd been working steadily. You mentioned going through a lot of rooms and I thought a lot of good writing, too. What changed?

Susan: It's like, I know what I need to do. I know what's left. Her bedroom and her studio. It's just — every time I think about going in there, I think about how happy she was in there. Blissfully ignorant. Perfectly content to paint and ignore me and even dad and the rest of the world. And not take any responsibility for her own behavior. But I can't say that out loud, right? Because then I'm the jealous, spoiled, needy, selfish, bitchy daughter. Who fails to appreciate her mother's talents.

Olivia: It's not jealous or selfish to want your mother to stop yelling at you or emotionally devastating you. It's not spoiled to want her to listen to you and let you have your own opinions. Or let you just be a kid.

Susan: I know, but it feels that way. It has *always* felt that way.

Olivia: Susan. You know what I always say. To feel is to heal. You're *almost* there. This is the big one. But you can do it. You've come so far. You've done so much healing. You can take your time and let your memories guide you. They'll tell you what to do.

Sue and Susie enter and get on the bed, moving to be close to Susan. She sighs.

Susan: Yeah, you're right. Thank you.

Olivia: Of course. Keep in touch. And good luck.

Susan: Thanks. *She smiles wanly and logs off. She turns and snuggles with Sue and Susie. Pause.*

Susan (*sighing*): Are you ready?

Sue: I guess so.

Suzie: Is she coming in here again?

Susan (laughing slightly): No. No, we definitely won't find her here. We have to go in there.
She starts to get up.

Sue: But wait. You're forgetting—

Susan: What?

Sue: Mother's bathroom.

Susie: Yay!

Susan: The master bathroom....When we were getting along—her bathroom was...

SCENE THREE — MASTER BATHROOM

Suzie, Sue, and Susan all are in the bathroom with Helene. Luxurious bath, mirrors on all sides.

It was...the hall of mirrors. Versailles. And she was the queen. She reigned in there.
To be in her good graces was all I ever wanted as a child. And I was, on occasion. Usually she was in her best mood when she had sold a painting or two.

Helene: Why don't you ever wear your hair long? It'd probably look better on you.

Sue (*shrugging*): Eh. I don't know.

Helene: That's all right, I'm sure you've got the boys hanging all over you as it is, no matter what your hair looks like, with a body like that. I would have *killed* for a body like that when I was your age.

Susan (*pleading*):

Why always a contest between us!

i contest the contest, mother,

i was always an unwilling contestant

who refused to just come on down.

Helene (*holding up outfits*): Okay, what do you think for the Stevenson's party on Saturday? This? Or this?

Sue wrinkles her nose.

Helene: What?

Sue: Well...

Helene: What?

Sue: I don't know, I've always liked the other one.

Helene: What, the blue? But I always wear that. Need to try something different. Do you want to borrow any of my lipstick? *Sue shrugs, takes the lipstick, plays with it for a bit while Helene holds up an outfit in the mirror.*

Sue: Hey, is Mr. Wallston going to be there?

Helene: What? Where?

Sue: At the...party?

Helene: Frederick Wallston is a hack and a phony. I certainly hope he won't be there, I don't want to have anything to do with him. —Why do you care if Frederick Wallston is going to be there?

Sue (*trying to shrug it off*): Oh, I don't know, I was just...

Helene (*approaching her*): No, really. Why did you ask that question?

Sue: ...I...

Helene: Answer me.

Sue: It's nothing...I just...

Helene: Tell me. *Now.*

Sue: All right, God!...It's no big deal, I just...find some of his work...kind of...*interesting*, that's all...

Helene (*erupting*): Ah! I can't believe it! How could you compare his work and mine!

Sue: I wasn't *comparing* anything, I was simply stating an *interest*...

Helene (*over*): I will have you know that I just sold three pieces with a fourth one that is going very soon!

Sue (*over*): That's fine! Great! I'm glad that you're selling, that has nothing to do with what I was saying...

Helene: That's it, never mind, just go on, I'll figure out my outfit myself, like I always do. No! You heard me. Out!

Susan: One false move...banishment.

Sue slumps forward and leaves, joins Susan outside the bathroom.

Susan and Sue (*in slow unison*):

Regret.

Retreat.

Repent.

Relief.

Repeat.

They hug. Sue leaves right.

Susan: Suzie. Come here. (*Suzie comes to her and sits in her lap.*) I've been putting this off for a long time, but I can't any more. We have to go—in there.

Suzie: I don't want to.

Susan: I know. But it's—it's just this last time. I promise. And this time *I'm* going to be there.

Suzie: Okay.

SCENE FOUR — STUDIO

Helene's studio is busy and well-used, filled with canvases in various states of completion. Slowly Susan and Suzie make their way to center stage. Helene is stage left, painting. Susan gestures towards a chair.

Susan: Here.

Suzie: No!

Susan: I'm right here. *Pause. Suzie finally sits down. Helene turns her attention to her.*

Helene: All right now, sit back down in the chair, just like you were. Remember I told you to hold still. That's right.

Pause. She paints. Suzie starts to squirm.

Suzie: How much longer?

Helene: Hold still.

Suzie sighs loudly, tries to hold still briefly.

Suzie: This is boring. I want to go play.

Helene: I said, hold *still*...

Suzie: My dress is itching. Can I go get another one?

Helene: Of *course* you can't go get another one because I'm painting your portrait in *this* one! Now you have to hold still or this will be ruined!

Suzie (*getting upset*): I don't want to do this anymore! I'm tired! I don't care if you can't finish your stupid painting!

Helene approaches her, furious, and towers over Suzie, forcing her to sit down in the chair.

Helene: You no good, useless little—! You have no appreciation of what I'm doing for you! You ungrateful little piece of—Agggh!

Suzie (*starts to panic, over her*): Mother, no, I didn't mean it...I'm sorry, I'm sorry...Mother, Mother...

Helene puts her arms on both sides of the chair around Suzie and shakes it as she rages.

Helene: Oh, no you don't. You're not going to win this time. You and your father think you can sabotage me! You're both against me, but I'm not going to let you win. Oh, no. You're going to sit in that chair and HOLD STILL! *She raises her hand as if to hit her.*

Susan: STOP!

They freeze. Susan inserts herself between Suzie and Helene, pushing Helene back.

Susan:

Here is where I summon all the angels, brandishing swords of fire,

bringing righteous wrath down upon sinners.

you had your reasons. keep them to yourself.

the thing you failed to understand,

the sorrow that screws me to this spot,

is that when you hurt a child,

even then, the child does not stop loving you.

the child blinks, and waits,

utterly defenseless,

uncomprehending, disbelieving that this can possibly be true,

drawing on nothing but the purest of loves,

the blind love of utter trust,

which is all a child has, which is our birthright,

which is *my* birthright, to believe in the ultimate goodness of things

because I have seen it in a million different places

despite the fact that you took it from me.

the massacre of the innocents is the one massacre, the perpetual massacre,

the only massacre there is.

the rescue of the innocents to me is the only worthwhile thing left.

(to Helene) Get back, Mother. Get away. Go stand over there. *Pause.* GO!

Helene draws herself up, regally, but shaken, and retreats to stage left. Susan immediately holds Suzie in a long embrace.

Susan: It's okay...It's over...it's over...We did it. *She puts her down.*

(to Helene) You never painted another portrait after that one. *That* started the switch to abstraction. I've always wondered, mother, whether each abstraction was a freedom for you, an escape; or whether underneath each abstract shape was another portrait that you had to paint over. To destroy. —Maybe I'll never know.

(turning to Suzie, softly) Do you remember what happened next? *Suzie nods.* Show me.

SCENE FIVE — CLOSET

Suzie goes to the closet, gets in, but instead of curling up, she instead pulls a notebook and a marker from the shelf and writes. Susan watches her until she is done.

Susan: And what did you write?

Suzie *(reading)*: "Someday I will leave."

Susan: "Someday I will leave." *(turning to Helene)* It wasn't just those words that helped. In that moment I realized that those words were mine and that you could never touch them. Oh, you could find my diary and tear it up. And I could just write them again and again. Anytime, anywhere. A million times I could write them, even if just in my head. "Someday I will leave." Four words that led me out of the darkness.

Suzie crawls out of the closet to Susan.

Susan: That night at dinner you gave me the silent treatment.

SCENE SIX — KITCHEN

Susan, Suzie, and Helene move to the kitchen table and sit. Suzie eats hungrily while Helene sits silently, absently, not touching her food.

Susan: And for the first time, it didn't bother me. My words were in my head. And they comforted me. And they saved me.

I'd never tasted berries that sweet. Until —

Sue enters the kitchen and takes Suzie's place at the table. Suzie exits right.

Sue: —Until the day I left for college. I went to the garden and brought in berries. The berries *I* had planted. Do you remember, mother? No, you wouldn't remember. I watched you eat them. You enjoyed them. But you didn't even think to ask where they came from. *I* grew them. *I* tended to them, and nurtured them, and now they nourished me—and even nourished you. But you were too busy being hurt. Because I'd chosen a college far, far away. And you couldn't stand that.

SCENE SEVEN — FOYER

They get up and move to the foyer, where there is luggage.

Susan:

how many times

mother

did i stand in this foyer

listening waiting deciding

whether to escape

and incur your wrath

or stay home

and endure

our clasped loneliness.

through these windows i could see a world

where there were no walls

and room for me to move.

Sue: Well, do you have anything to say, mother?

Helene tries to say something, fails, stops.

Susan (*pleading*): Can't you see, mother, that I had to find my own way forward? Just like you did! I just couldn't live like this. *People* can't live like this. I wasn't trying to reject *you*. I was just trying to find *me*.

in my blood
and bone
and heart
and guts
and memories
and past
and future;

(quietly)

but this is my house now. you need to leave.

you cannot haunt me anymore.

Helene gets up slowly from the bed, looks at Susan for a long moment, and then with slow dignity exits stage left.

Susan lets herself down onto the edge of the bed and cries. As she settles, a look of calm and resolve come over her face. After a long moment she reaches for her phone. Screen: Susan texting Aaron: I've made a decision. She makes a call.

Susan: Yes, hello? My name is Susan Cordron.

SCENE NINE

Screen: Rosario, well-dressed young woman, sitting at a desk. Susan is alone onstage, reading from her laptop next to her. They speak in tandem:

| | |
|--|--|
| Rosario: | Susan: |
| Good afternoon: To the board of directors: | |
| | Dear friends and family: |
| Thank you for joining me on this conference call on such short notice. | |
| | I'm writing to you now to offer a personal invitation. |

| | |
|--|--|
| (unison) As you know, | (unison) As you know, |
| the Magdalene Foundation is dedicated to helping women, and especially mothers, who are in need of support in the face of poverty, homelessness, sexual assault, and domestic violence. | |
| | I have spent the last two weeks in my mother's house, going through many belongings and reliving many memories. |
| We are particularly proud of our network of shelters in undisclosed locations which provide the safe sanctuary that vulnerable women so desperately need. | |
| | This is a house that has always been materially rich and emotionally poor. And since I have always seemed to be the inverse of what my mother wanted me to be, it only makes sense for me to invert that formula, to help those who are emotionally rich but |
| (unison) And so I am pleased to announce | (unison) And so I am pleased to announce |
| the anonymous donation of a new home that can house up to four families at a time, with additional numerous spaces to provide offices, conference rooms, therapy, gardening, and other services. | |
| | that I will be donating my mother's house to a worthy cause to help in that way. |
| Though the donor wishes to remain anonymous, I want to invite you, our board, to a small reception which will be held in their honor at our headquarters next week. | |

| | |
|--|--|
| | I want to invite you to a small gathering at the house next month as a memorial for my mother and a celebration of this next chapter. |
| I know that you will all join me in offering our deepest appreciation to the donor for this astonishing act of generosity. | |
| | Even though growing up this house was a place of great pain and ugliness for me at times, now at least I—we—can turn it into a place of great beauty and healing for others. |
| Sincerely, Rosario Hernandez, Executive Director | |
| | Love, Susan. |

SCENE TEN — PATIO/GARDEN

Screen: Patio, again filled with guests, including Kayla, Rosario, parents and children of all kinds. Susan and Aaron are center, chatting with guests.

Phoebe runs on from stage right, paper in hand, and runs to Susan and Aaron.

Phoebe: Mommy, mommy, look what I made you!

Susan: Hey, you! There you are! *Taking the paper.* What is it?

Phoebe: It's a picture!

Susan takes it, and she and Aaron look at it together.

Aaron: Oh, yeah, she told me about this one. That's you chasing out the monsters out of the house.

Susan: Oh, I see, okay...But Phoebe, I told you there weren't any monsters here!

Phoebe: That's because you chased them all out!

Susan: Oh...Okay... *She and Aaron exchange a look. Phoebe goes and plays with other children with parents watching. More chatting all around. After a beat Kayla approaches Susan.*

Kayla: Congratulations, Susan. *They embrace.*

Susan: Oh, Kayla, thank you so much for coming. Listen, I don't want to keep you in suspense. I've made my decision. I will sell all my mother's remaining paintings to you.

Kayla: *All* of them?

Susan: Well—I will leave a few of the hallway paintings here. It is true that my mother did create some beautiful things—so why not let anyone who stays here have some beauty in their life?

Kayla: That sounds wonderful, Susan. It really does. Thank you.

Susan: No, thank you for all your help. And your patience.

Rox enters right, carrying a small suitcase and a large shopping bag in her hand.

Rox (*loudly*): Okay, *now* the party can *really* get started!

Aaron (*moving to her*): Roxy! You made it! *They embrace.* So good to see you!

Susan turns to Rox. They embrace.

Susan: Welcome, you. So glad you're here. You know I couldn't have done this without you.

Rox (*handing her the bag*): Here's my donation.

Susan: Oh...(opening it) Ha! Tents!

Rox: I figure at some point someone's going to need them while they're here...

Susan: (*laughing*) Perfect!

They embrace again, laughing and crying for a long moment.

Rox: You are amazing and *this* (*gesturing*) is amazing.

Susan: Full circle, isn't it?

Rox: Full circle. (*taking her aside by the elbow*) —Listen, while we're busy laughing and crying, I wanted to tell you something. I finally figured out when that picture was taken.

Susan: Oh, the blue jumper? You did?

Rox (*gently*): Yes. You couldn't place it...because we didn't take it...because it's not a picture of you. It's not you, Susan. It's your mother.

Susan gasps. The party freezes behind them. Girl in the blue jumper runs across the stage from right, just as Helene enters stage left. She is startled at first as the girl moves towards her and stops before her, patiently looking up at her. Susan watches as Helene kneels down, marveling, confused, before standing up slowly, solemnly, and finally taking her hand and exiting together stage left. Return to the party.

Aaron (*to Susan*): Everything okay?

Susan: Yes, thanks. Hey, can you do me a favor?

Aaron: Sure.

Susan: Can you make sure to remove the portrait that's hanging in the dining room?

Aaron: The big one of you?

Susan: Yes. That one's definitely coming home with us.

Aaron: Absolutely. *He hugs her briefly, then returns to the party. General hubbub. After a few moments Rox clinks a glass.*

Rox: Listen, everyone...I think it's time to hear a few words from the poetess herself.

Susan nods to Rox, steps forward and addresses the audience. The partygoers move in close to one another and surround Susan.

Susan: Thank you, Rox. And thank you, everyone.

—i am not alone any more. we build things together.

we are measured in our measurements, deliberate in our deliberations.

the rooms, the storms, the gardens, are all considered in turn.

we watch and listen as forces flow around and through us.

we try to learn from what has been wrought.

children play in the garden, unafraid.

there are still storms, but they pass, and now I know this.

Sue and Suzie enter. Susan nods to them. They embrace each other and exit.

i am reborn in the force of others' goodness.

though there will always be common flesh,

there is now more than one who gave birth to me.

they will come to this house, and their human blessings will be enough.

and I will summon all the tender care that exists in this life,

all the love that arises from sheltering safety,

and I will crown all who extend it—

the earth

nature

my beloveds

and even myself—

with the truest title:

Mother.

Susan bows.

The party applauds.

END