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DIRTY LAUNDRY

A THESIS

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By

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DIRTY LAUNDRY

A THESIS

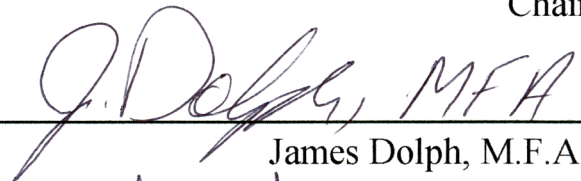
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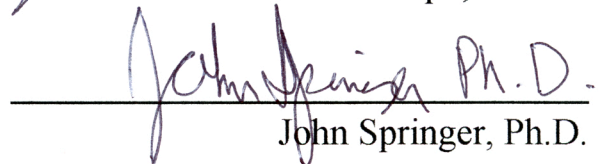


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## ABSTRACT

*Dirty Laundry*, a play in two acts, revolves around the life of Ruth, a member of the sandwich generation, who cares 24/7 for her petulant mother of 89, Jenny, who is in the early stages of dementia and in remission from cancer. Stew, 31, Ruth's intelligent sloth of a son merely adds to her burdens. Already exhausted, Ruth must also be on constant guard against her conniving brother, John, the "favorite child" who only comes around when he has yet another scheme to swindle his mother out of her savings.

When Jenny's regular hospice nurse is temporarily replaced by a vibrant and gentle man, Wes, Ruth finds herself reawakened, both personally and sexually. Her longtime desires to be a writer, go to college, and claim a life of her own, struggle against the insatiable needs of her family. As her relationship with Wes grows, so do the exhausting problems of caring for and protecting her mother.

After a heated altercation with Jenny in which Ruth slaps her, a guilt-ridden Ruth resigns herself to the solitary role of caregiver. She kicks Stew out, knowing that she can no longer be his enabler, yet she cannot turn her back on Jenny, who--having just found out her cancer has returned--needs her now more than ever. Unable to change Ruth's mind about pursuing her dreams, Wes agrees to leave but refuses to give up on her.

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**Dirty Laundry**

A Play in Two Acts

by  
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Characters: JENNY HOLT, 89, in remission from cancer and suffering the first stages of dementia. She is sharp and plain-spoken one minute and confused the next.

RUTH BAKER, 55, Jenny's daughter, a caregiver who gives too much. She is physically exhausted most of the time and is starting to become resentful.

JOHN HOLT, 57, Jenny's son, the favorite child, who only comes around when he wants something. Manipulation is his M.O.

STEW BAKER, 31, Ruth's son, an intelligent sloth, who cannot seem to operate in the real world. His mother's home is his safe house that he returns to again and again. He needs her yet he resents her.

WES CHAMBERS, 48, a hospice nurse, attractive and compassionate

Setting: Ruth's home. There are three doors on the back wall: the one on the right leads to the kitchen; the one in the middle leads outside, and the one on the left, to the hallway. On the back wall, between the hallway and the front door, is a hospital bed. To the right of it is a night stand; to the left is a laundry hamper and a chest of drawers. Between the front door and the kitchen is an entry table with a manual typewriter case underneath and a small trash can nearby. Downstage is a couch, rocking chair, end table, coffee table, and TV. A walker sits next to the rocking chair and a remote control is on the coffee table. To the right of this area, closer to the kitchen door, is a dining table. The furniture is drab and there are no decorations of any kind.

Time: Present

## Dirty Laundry

### ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE

AT RISE: JENNY rocks in her chair, staring blankly across the room. She is wearing a faded purple housecoat and red slippers. There is a barely-touched plate of toast and bacon on the coffee table. RUTH enters, wearing a pair of old sweats and loaded down with grocery sacks.

RUTH

(tired)

Did you eat your breakfast?

JENNY

The burnt toast and bacon?

RUTH

It wasn't burnt.

JENNY

It was burnt. And the bacon was so sharp it could slit your throat.

RUTH

You wanted it crispy.

JENNY

I could have choked.

(RUTH sets the bags down on the bed, pulls out a box of tissue, and sets it on the night stand.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Is that the lotion kind? You know I like the lotion kind.

RUTH

That's the only kind I ever buy you.

(RUTH pulls a hair pick out of the bag.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

I bought you a new pick. This one's plastic. Maybe you won't bloody your scalp with it.

(RUTH picks up the bags and walks toward the kitchen.)



JENNY

My scalp itches. I can't help it.

RUTH

There's nothing wrong with your scalp.

JENNY

I have dandruff.

RUTH

I've checked your scalp. There's nothing there except skin.

(RUTH exits through the kitchen door.)

JENNY

I have dandruff!

(After a moment RUTH reenters. SHE walks over and lifts up the lid to the hamper.)

RUTH

Where are all your dirty clothes?

JENNY

What?

RUTH

Your dirty clothes. Where are they?

JENNY

They're in the hamper.

RUTH

There's one blouse in here.

(RUTH begins rifling through the chest of drawers. SHE pulls out a couple of blouses, sniffs them, then tosses them in the hamper. SHE feels up under the mattress and pulls out several pairs of panties.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(holding up the panties)

Mom, why do you do this?

JENNY

Do what?

RUTH

There's a hamper right here for your laundry.

JENNY

I know that.

RUTH

Then why don't you use it?

(There is a knock at the door.)

JENNY

Someone's knocking.

(RUTH tosses the panties into the hamper and walks toward the door. SHE stops halfway there and turns back toward her mother.)

RUTH

I called and asked them to send Karen back out.

JENNY

What for? I'm in remission, right? You said so yourself.

RUTH

I know, but you've been losing weight again and--

(Another knock. RUTH walks toward the door.)

JENNY

Well, they should just let me die. Then you'd all be happy.

(RUTH ignores this and opens the door. On the other side is an attractive middle-aged man, WES. HE is wearing hospital scrubs and has a photo ID clipped to his shirt.)

RUTH

Oh...hello. We were expecting Karen.

WES

Yes, ma'am. Karen's on vacation.

(extending his hand)

I'm Wes. I'm picking up a couple of her patients while she's gone.

RUTH

(accepting his hand)

Well, it's nice to meet you. I'm Ruth, Jenny's daughter. Come on in.

(WES steps inside, pulling a small case behind him. HE smiles at JENNY.)

WES

This must be our patient.

JENNY

Who are you?

RUTH

This is Wes, mother. He's a nurse.

JENNY

(to Wes)

You're a man.

WES

Well...yes Mrs. Holt, I am. Karen's on vacation and--

JENNY

It doesn't matter. I don't need either of you. I'm in remission...or don't you read the charts?

WES

It's very unusual for someone your age to be able to fight this cancer the way you have. You must be a pretty tough lady.

JENNY

(sarcastically)

And you must be a really *tough* man, being a nurse and all.

RUTH

Mother, this nice man is an RN just like Karen. There's nothing to be concerned about. It's just a check up.

JENNY

Nice man? How do you know he's nice. You just met him two seconds ago. He could be Dr. Kevorkian for all we know.

(WES pulls his bag around and sits down on the couch, next to JENNY'S chair.)

WES

That would be Nurse Kevorkian...or...you can just call me Wes.

(JENNY stares at him for a moment, not knowing how to respond.)

RUTH

See, Mom, he's even got a sense of humor.

JENNY

(sarcastically)

Yes. Very funny...a regular Jack Benny.

(WES opens his bag and pulls out a folder, a blood pressure cuff, and a stethoscope.)

WES

Jack Benny, huh?...My dad used to watch that show.

(WES walks around to the side of JENNY'S chair with the cuff and the stethoscope.)

WES (CONT'D)

Okay, Mrs. Holt, I'm just going to slip this cuff around your arm.

(RUTH walks over and sits down on the couch.)

RUTH

Did you watch it with him?

WES

Pardon?

RUTH

Jack Benny...with your dad?

WES

(fastening the cuff)

Oh...no, I was too young. But, I caught some of the re-runs when I was older.

(As WES is airing up the cuff, he stands straight up and attempts his best "Benny" impersonation.)

WES (CONT'D)

"Oh, Rochester..."

(RUTH laughs.)

JENNY

(sarcastically)

I'm glad you two are finding humor in this.

(WES bends down, places the stethoscope in his ears and the chestpiece against the crease of her elbow. HE begins to listen to her pulse.)

RUTH

Come on, Mom. You used to love Jack Benny.

JENNY

Yes. (pointing to Wes) But, he's no "Benny."

RUTH

Be nice.

WES

Okay, Mrs. Holt, I need you to be really still...

RUTH

He means be quiet.

(JENNY cuts her eyes at her daughter.)

(WES listens for a few seconds, then releases the cuff. HE puts his fingers to her wrist and stares down at his watch.)

JENNY

(to Wes)  
Can you find it?

(HE smiles.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

I'm not dead yet, am I?

WES

(releasing her wrist)  
No, ma'am. Your vital signs are excellent.

JENNY

I told you that when you walked in.

(WES sits down on the couch and begins to write in the chart.)

WES

So, I hear you're not eating much.

JENNY

I eat.

RUTH

She picks at her food, actually.

JENNY

(to Wes)  
If you had to eat her cooking, you'd "pick" too.

WES

It's really important that you get those three square meals a day...to keep your strength up.

JENNY

What for? I've never heard of a marathon for old ladies on walkers...(contemplates this) Although, if they had one, I'd smoke all those old biddies. You can be sure of that.

WES

(laughing)

Yes, I've no doubt.

(WES flips a page in the chart.)

WES (CONT'D)

Okay, I need to ask you a couple of questions...Have you noticed any weakening of your muscles?

JENNY

No.

RUTH

She's a little slower on her walker than she used to be.

JENNY

I'm a little older than I used to be.

WES

Have you had any sudden onset of pain recently?

JENNY

No.

RUTH

You told me your legs were hurting the other day.

JENNY

That's because you wanted me to go walk with you.

WES

Exercise is good. You don't want those muscles to atrophy. Even if you just walk a little ways down the sidewalk and back a couple of times a day...

RUTH

That's what I've been telling her.

WES

(writing in the chart)

How are your bowel movements?

JENNY

They're brown.

RUTH

Mom, stop being difficult.

WES

It's okay. She has a sense of humor. I like it.

(There is a knock at the door.)

JENNY

Someone's knocking.

RUTH

Excuse me.

(RUTH gets up and walks toward the door.)

(WES gets up, carrying his stethoscope and walks around to the side of JENNY's chair.)

WES

Okay, Mrs. Holt. I'm just going to listen to your lungs now. (puts the scope to her back) Take a deep breath in for me and slowly release it.

(JENNY does this.)

(RUTH opens the door. JOHN is standing on the other side in a rumpled suit and an open collared shirt. HE is holding a bouquet of lavender lilies.)

JOHN

Hey, Sis.

(HE walks right past RUTH and into the house.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Knock, knock.

JENNY

(thrilled)

Johnny!

(HE walks over and kisses her on the cheek.)

JOHN

Hey, pretty lady. I brought you some flowers.

JENNY

They're lovely. My favorite color.

(RUTH rolls her eyes and walks over toward him.)

RUTH

Here, I'll take them.

JOHN

Thanks, Sis.

(RUTH takes the flowers and walks toward the kitchen.)

JENNY

(to Wes)

This is my son, Johnny.

(to John)

And this is Jes.

RUTH

(as she is exiting)

Wes.

(The two men shake hands.)

WES

Nice to meet you, Johnny.

JOHN

Call me "John."

(WES places the scope against JENNY'S chest.)

WES

(to Jenny)

Okay, another deep breath for me.

(JENNY takes a deep breath and releases it.)

JOHN

You been causing trouble again, Momma?

JENNY

No, no. You know your sister. She's as paranoid as a prisoner who just dropped the soap.

(JOHN laughs.)



JOHN

Now, Momma. I'm sure she just wants to make sure you're okay. She cares about you.

JENNY

Yeah, I know, I know.

JOHN

(to Wes)

So, how is this ornery little lady?

WES

She's great. Her vital signs are all within normal range and her lungs sound clear...She just needs to eat a little more and get some exercise.

JENNY

(to John)

He wants me to go out and walk up and down the driveway like some senile old kook.

JOHN

Now, now...you should listen to the doctor.

JENNY

He's a nurse.

JOHN

Really?

(WES smiles and holds up his ID badge.)

JOHN

(reading it)

Wes Chambers, R.N....Well, I'll be...hmm.

WES

She needs to stay active so those muscles don't give out on her.

JOHN

Don't worry. I'll take her out for a few laps later.

(RUTH reenters with the vase of lilies and puts them down on the entry table.)

WES

(packing up his bag)

Well, it was very nice meeting you all.

RUTH

Leaving so soon? Would you like something to drink before you go? Tea or soda?

WES

No, thanks. I have a full schedule today.

RUTH

Well...um...if...if you're back this way and you get thirsty or something...feel free to stop by.

(WES holds her gaze for a moment.)

WES

Thank you. That's very kind of you.

RUTH

(blushing)

...It's just that I know it's really hot out there today and--

JENNY

It's a little hot in here if you ask me.

WES

(ignoring Jenny)

Yeah, it's supposed to get up into the 90s.

(an uncomfortable moment of silence)

WES (CONT'D)

...Oh, and remember to keep on her about the food and exercise.

RUTH

Easier said than done.

WES

(smiling)

Yes. She's a live one, isn't she?

(HE walks toward the door.)

WES (CONT'D)

Bye, Mrs. Holt.

JENNY

Uh, huh.

JOHN

So long, Doc.

(RUTH walks behind WES.)

RUTH

Have a nice day.

WES

You too.

(RUTH closes the door behind him.)

JENNY

(to Ruth)

Maybe you could get that excited about getting your *brother* something to drink.

JOHN

Oh...no, thank you. I'm fine.

JENNY

(to John)

So, sit down over here. What have you been up to? How is everyone?

RUTH

Yeah. To what do we owe this honor?

JOHN

(ignoring Ruth and sitting)

Oh, fine. They're fine. We're all really...good.

JENNY

How's your job? You still liking it?

JOHN

Lord, Momma, how long have you had that housecoat?

JENNY

(laughing)

About a hundred years.

RUTH

At least.

JENNY

Ruth, did you buy me some tissue?

RUTH

Yes, they're right over here.

(RUTH walks over and retrieves the box of tissue from the night stand.)

JENNY

Are they the lotion kind?

RUTH

(handing her the box)

Yes, Mother.

(JENNY pulls a tissue out and blows her nose.)

(a moment of uncomfortable silence)

JENNY  
(leaning over and patting  
John's leg)

So...my boy.

JOHN  
Life treating you okay, Momma?

JENNY  
Life? Yes. People?...They all hate me. And that's fine...I'll  
be dead soon enough.

JOHN  
Hate you? How could anyone hate such a pretty lady?

JENNY  
(smiling)  
They're jealous, I suppose.

JOHN  
Damn right, they are.

RUTH  
(to John)  
So what exactly is it that you're doing now?

JOHN  
What?

RUTH  
For work?

JOHN  
On second thought, I would like a glass of iced tea.

(RUTH studies him with suspicion.)

JOHN (CONT'D)  
...If it's not too much trouble.

JENNY  
Of course not.  
(to Ruth)  
Ruth, get your brother some iced tea.

(Ruth gets up and exits through the  
kitchen door.)

(JOHN waits until Ruth is completely  
out of earshot.)

JOHN

Listen, Mom, I wanted to talk to you about something.

JENNY

What is it?

JOHN

Do you remember my friend Bill that I told you about?

JENNY

Bill?...Oh, yes, the one who owns the Laundromat.

JOHN

Actually, he's an entrepreneur.

JENNY

Ooh, sounds like a nice young man.

JOHN

Yes, he is...and very smart, too.

JENNY

(bends and pats his leg)

Not as smart as my boy.

JOHN

There's this opportunity, Mom.

JENNY

Really? Well, I'm very happy for you.

JOHN

For us.

JENNY

What?

(JOHN gets up and walks over toward the kitchen door and listens for a moment.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Listen, Mom, we don't have much time.

JENNY

You have plenty of time, Dear. I'm the one staring down the Grim Reaper.

(JOHN walks over and sits back down next to JENNY.)

JOHN

It's magnetism.

JENNY

For goodness sake, Johnny. What are you talking about?

JOHN

It's our future...

(The kitchen door opens a crack. JOHN does not notice it.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

A new source of energy...for our cars, our heaters and air conditioners...even our washers and dryers.

JENNY

Sounds complicated.

JOHN

It's revolutionary. And you and I have a chance to get in on the ground floor.

JENNY

How's that?

JOHN

Through Bill.

JENNY

Who's Bill?

JOHN

(frustrated)

My friend, the--

(HE stops, composes himself, then takes her hand.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Mom, you know I love you.

JENNY

And I love you. You're my boy...my only son.

JOHN

Dad asked me to take care of you, and that's what I'm trying to do.

JENNY

I know. It's so sweet of you to stop by.

JOHN

So, you know I wouldn't steer you wrong.

JENNY

In what way?

(Moment of silence)

JOHN

I need money, Momma.

JENNY

I don't have much.

JOHN

You have enough...Listen, we could double Dad's pension, triple it...in no time. You would have--

(RUTH reenters, carrying a glass of iced tea and a soda can.)

JENNY

Ruth, look who's here. Johnny stopped by.

RUTH

Yeah. I can see that.

(RUTH sets the glass of tea down in front of JOHN.)

JENNY

He was just telling me about his nice friend...

(to John)

What was his name again?

JOHN

(getting up)

Listen, Mom. I better go.

JENNY

So soon? I thought we were going for a walk?

(HE bends over and kisses her cheek.)

JOHN

Next time.

JENNY

Okay, Dear. Say hello to your friend with the Laundromat.

JOHN

Yeah.

(HE walks toward the door. RUTH steps in front of him and stares him down for a full three count, then SHE speaks.)

RUTH

Next time.

(HE steps around her and walks out the door.)

JENNY

Oh...my boy...Isn't he a jewel?

RUTH

Yes...a genuine diamonelle.

JENNY

Are you drinking that nasty soda again? I told you, it's poison. You're going to drop dead someday.

RUTH

(under her breath)

If I'm lucky.

JENNY

What?

(RUTH picks up the used tissue, then walks over and throws it in the garbage can.)

RUTH

(walking back toward Jenny)

Let's go, Mom.

JENNY

Where are we going?

RUTH

To walk. You need your exercise.

JENNY

(pushing herself up on her walker)

Oh, yes...up and down the driveway...the neighbors will all be talking about the senile old lady.

(RUTH holds JENNY'S arm as they make their way toward the door.)

RUTH

Probably so.

(The lights fade.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE TWO



(JENNY is lying in her bed asleep. RUTH is folding laundry on the dining table. STEW enters from the hallway, wearing only his boxers. HE has just woken up, and his hair has yet to see a comb.)

RUTH  
(not looking up)  
Good afternoon.

STEW  
You get my M&Ms?

RUTH  
Yes.

STEW  
The peanut kind?

RUTH  
That's the only kind I ever buy you.

(SHE gets up and walks into the kitchen. STEW falls down onto the couch, grabs the remote and turns the TV on. RUTH reenters with the bag of candy, tosses it to him, then sits back down at the table and continues folding.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
There's a newspaper in the kitchen.

STEW  
(focused on the TV)  
Uh-huh.

(HE rips open the M&Ms with his teeth and pours a few pieces into his mouth.)

RUTH  
Just thought you might want to check out the classifieds.

STEW  
(flipping through the channels)  
Man, there's nothing but a bunch of shit on daytime TV.

RUTH  
(folding)  
Probably because most people work during the day.

(STEW ignores this and turns the TV volume up louder.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
 (loud whisper)  
 Stewart! Your grandmother's trying to sleep.

STEW  
 (muting the TV)  
 Huh?

JENNY  
 She said I'm "trying to sleep."

(JENNY pushes herself up, yawns, pulls her walker over, and begins to slowly shuffle her way over to her chair.)

(STEW un-mutes the TV and turns it to a lower volume.)

JENNY (CONT'D)  
 What are you watching, Stewie?

STEW  
 Nothing. Like every other day, it's all crap.

JENNY  
 (seating herself and reaching)  
 Well, hand over the remote. My program's coming on.

STEW  
 (handing it to her)  
 Which one?... "The Young and the Sexless" or "As the World Squirms."

RUTH  
 There's nothing "sexless" about any of them.

JENNY  
 General Hospital.

STEW  
 Ah, yes...General Hospital...I'll save you the trouble, Grams: (in a mocking serious tone) A man's in a coma, waiting for some altruistic soul to die so that he can finally get that brain transplant he's been needing for so long, and his wife's weeping at his side, begging, "Please forgive me. I never meant to sleep with your best friend, and if you could just find it in your heart to give me a second chance, I swear I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you."...(deadpan) Meanwhile, the doctor and nurse are screwing in the janitor's closet.

RUTH  
 How do you know the nurse is a woman?

STEW  
 (turning to look at her)  
 I never said the doctor was a man.

JENNY  
 No one ever screws in the janitor's closet.

STEW  
 Really? Then, why are we watching it?

JENNY  
 Keep it down, I'm trying to listen.

STEW  
 Sorry, Grams.

(STEW lies down for a few seconds,  
 staring at the TV, then sits back up.)

STEW (CONT'D)  
 ...But, you could at least get me current.

JENNY  
 On what?

STEW  
 (pointing)  
 Well, like, who's that sitting in the waiting room, filing  
 her nails.

JENNY  
 (in disgust)  
 Ugh...That's Carly...slut.

STEW  
 What does she do?

JENNY  
 I don't know...first she was a physical therapist, then she  
 owned something...uh, a makeup company or something...now I  
 think she owns a hotel.

STEW  
 (sarcastically)  
 That seems like a natural progression.

JENNY  
 She's sure been "progressing" through a lot of men. I can  
 tell you that.

STEW  
 Oh, yeah?

(RUTH carries one stack of the folded clothes out through the hallway door.)

JENNY

Well, she got pregnant with A.J.'s baby, then she drugged him...

STEW

The baby?

JENNY

No, A.J....then she met Sonny and they did the deed--

STEW

The "deed"?

JENNY

Yes, in a limo...and then she was with Jax because he needed someone to help him take care of *his* baby--although I don't know why he'd ever choose that tramp--but then she couldn't forget about Sonny and--

STEW

Hold on, hold on. Let's go back to the limo part.

RUTH

(reentering the room)

Mom, you need to put something on your stomach before I give you your meds.

JENNY

I'm not hungry.

RUTH

I'll bring you some saltines.

(RUTH exits through the kitchen door.)

STEW

So, who's in the hospital...Sonny?

JENNY

No...I guess...I don't remember. Probably another one of her victims.

STEW

This woman is wicked evil.

JENNY

Venomous.

STEW

And she sleeps around a lot?

JENNY

Her knees have two different zip codes.

(RUTH reenters with a package of saltines. SHE opens it and sets it down next to her mother.)

RUTH

Here. I just need you to eat a couple of these, okay?

JENNY

What happened to the Zestas?

RUTH

They were out of Zestas at the store. This is all they had...just a couple, okay?

(JENNY takes one of the crackers and begins chewing on it. STEW reaches, grabs a couple and stuff them into his mouth.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(to Stew)

The trash is full.

STEW

(chewing)

I'll get to it.

(RUTH exits into the kitchen.)

STEW (CONT'D)

(still focused on TV)

Why is she crying?

JENNY

She's faking it.

STEW

How do you know?

JENNY

She's got a heart made of playdough. That's how I know.

STEW

Ah, Grams. I bet you had your share of men in your day.

JENNY

(indignant)

I most certainly did not.

STEW

Come on. Be honest.

JENNY

Your dear Grandfather was my first love...my only love.

STEW

That's pretty boring.

JENNY

Oh, he was *far* from boring.

STEW

Really? Any "limos" in your past?

JENNY

(trying not to smile)

No...but there was a grassy field or two.

STEW

(teasing)

Tsk, tsk, Grams...sex in a public place. That wouldn't set well with the local Neighborhood Watch Association.

JENNY

No one was *watching*. That's the whole idea...Christ, I have to teach you everything.

(RUTH reenters with a glass of water and some pills.)

RUTH

(handing them to Jenny)

Alright, get these all down...And swallow them one at a time. I don't want you choking like you did yesterday.

STEW

I think maybe you could teach Ruth a thing or two.

JENNY

(popping one of the pills)

No, that's a hopeless cause.

RUTH

What are you talking about?

JENNY

Your love life...or lack there of.

RUTH

Yeah, well, I would hope the two of you could find something more productive to do with your day.

STEW

(turning to look at Ruth)

You're right, Grams. It's pretty hopeless.

(RUTH ignores this, picks up the other stack of clothes off the table, carries them over to JENNY'S chest of drawers, and begins putting them away.)

JENNY

Although...I did see her get a little flustered over that nurse earlier.

STEW

What nurse?

JENNY

Isn't that right, Ruth?

(Still ignoring them, RUTH finishes putting the clothes away.)

STEW

What are you talking about? What nurse?

(RUTH walks across the room, pulls the typewriter out from under the entry table and sets it up on the dining table. She pulls some paper out of the entry table drawer and sits down in front of the typewriter.)

JENNY

(sarcastically)

Ah, here she goes again. She's going to be a real writer someday. Someone's going to read her novel and the next thing you know it, Bam! She'll be a best-selling author on...What's that list called?

STEW

The New York Times.

JENNY

Yes. The New York Times.

STEW

Grams...are you going to tell me about the nurse or what?

JENNY

What nurse? On the show?

STEW

No, the one that Ruth got "flustered" about.

JENNY

Oh, yes...Well, your mother thinks I'm dying again, so she sent out for reinforcements and they sent this guy...um...Jes, I think...

RUTH

(typing)

Wes.

JENNY

...and your mother turned school-girl pink.

STEW

What kind of nurse flirts with a client?

JENNY

Oh, *he* wasn't the one doing the flirting. It was Ruth who was stammering and offering to serve him up a little of her nectar.

(RUTH pulls the page out of the typewriter, wads it up, and throws it in the trash. Then, SHE puts a clean sheet in and begins typing with bitter determination.)

STEW

Okay, that's disgusting. I don't want to know anymore.

JENNY

I didn't really understand the attraction myself. He looked like a bit of a fluffer to me.

STEW

(laughing)

Fluffer?...You mean he's gay? How could you tell?

JENNY

His walk, the way he combs his hair...You know, the usual stuff.

(RUTH continues to type without looking up.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

But, that didn't seem to bother your mom. I guess after you've suffered such a dry spell, you're determined to find that water...even in the Sahara.

STEW

(walking toward the kitchen)

Now *I* need something on *my* stomach.

(As HE is exiting, he does a full-body shiver.)

RUTH

(to Stew)

Get the trash!



(RUTH stops typing.)

RUTH

(to Jenny)

Why do you have to go on like that?

JENNY

What?

RUTH

You know what I mean.

JENNY

I enjoy amusing the boy.

RUTH

Yes, at my expense...and he's hardly a boy.

JENNY

Really? What is it about him that makes him a man...besides his age?

(RUTH ignores this and begins typing again.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

That's what I thought.

(JENNY focuses her attention back on the TV.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Oh, these people will never learn.

(RUTH gets up and exits through the hallway.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

(to the TV)

What you're doing will never bring her back...

(toward the hallway)

...you know that don't you?

(blackout)

END OF SCENE

### SCENE THREE

(RUTH is sitting back at the dining table, typing away.)

JENNY is sitting in her rocking chair with her head down, asleep. There is a knock at the door. RUTH gets up and answers it, still lost in her train of thought. WES stands on the other side.)

RUTH

Oh...Hi...You're back.

WES

(handing her a business card)

Yeah, I...wanted to give you my card. In case there are any changes or anything, you can call me directly...on my cell.

RUTH

Thank you. That's very nice.

(Awkward moment of silence)

RUTH (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. Would you like to come in?

WES

(stepping inside)

Sure. I just finished up with my last patient, so I think I'll take you up on that offer you made earlier.

RUTH

Offer?

WES

Something to drink.

RUTH

Oh, right....um...I have tea, soda, and water.

WES

Iced tea would be great.

RUTH

Coming right up.

(RUTH exits through the kitchen door. WES notices the typewriter. HE sees some pages with text sitting next to it. HE glances down, then looks away for a few moments, then walks closer and begins reading.)

RUTH (O.S.)

Do you like sugar in it?

WES

No, thanks.

(HE continues reading. RUTH pushes the door open and WES averts his gaze, as if he is taking in the contents of the room. SHE hands him the tea and sets a can of soda down at the table for herself.)

WES (CONT'D)

Thank you.

RUTH

Have a seat.

(WES sits down at the table.)

WES

(pointing toward Jenny)

Are we going to wake her up?

RUTH

No. Only the television can do that.

(RUTH begins putting the typewriter into the case.)

WES

Wow! An old Royal model?

RUTH

Yeah.

WES

1950s, right?

RUTH

I believe so...It was my father's, actually.

(SHE sticks the typewriter underneath the entry table and sets the pages on top of the table.)

WES

Was he a writer?

RUTH

He was...a little bit of everything.

WES

And how about you? Are you a writer?

RUTH

No...not really...I mean, it's just something I do for relaxation...It's sort of cathartic.

WES

Well, we all need that.

(A moment of silence.)

WES (CONT'D)

Mine's needlepoint.

RUTH

What?

WES

My cathartic thing.

RUTH

Needlepoint? Really?

WES

Yeah. My grandmother taught me when I was young. She said I was a natural. And I thought it was cool watching this work of art come to life under my fingertips...Anyway, I stopped when I got into high school because, you know...

RUTH

Mean boys?

(WES smiles and shrugs his shoulders.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(teasing)

Oh, it was the *girls* you were worried about.

WES

Yeah, you know, a stud like myself couldn't be seen walking around carrying his needlepoint.

RUTH

(laughing)

So, when did you pick it back up?

WES

When I started working in the ER. Nothing's more stressful than the night shift in the Emergency Room.

RUTH

God, I can't even imagine.

WES

Some nights everything was just so erratic...people running back and forth, doctors shouting orders, patients screaming, family members crying...(beat)...then I'd go home and sit down in my recliner and I'd push that needle through...and suddenly all my focus was on that one thing...and my world was calm again.

RUTH

That sounds nice.

(a moment of silence)

WES

So...what do you write about?

RUTH

Oh...just...stupid stuff...nothing I'd want anyone to see.

WES

Is it like fiction or...

RUTH

Yes, kind of...It's fiction, but it's based on some truth.

(The phone rings.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(getting up)

I'm sorry. I'm sure that's my aunt. She calls once a week like clockwork. I'll tell her I'll call her back.

(WES nods and smiles. RUTH exits through the kitchen door. After SHE is out of the room, HE walks over toward the entry table and peers down at the pages. After a few moments, HE hears the door open. HE quickly leans over as if to smell the flowers in the vase.)

WES

These are really nice flowers that your brother brought over.

RUTH

Yes. He always knows how to make a grand entrance.

(THEY sit back down at the table.)

WES

Let me guess...you're the giver; he's the taker...but, somehow, he's always been the favorite. Am I right?

RUTH

Yeah...I guess that was kind of obvious from the show you saw this morning.

WES

I see it all the time in my line of work.

RUTH

He never comes to see her unless he wants something...and she always makes excuses for him..."My dear boy, Johnny, he works so hard. They never give him any time off."...It's just infuriating.

WES

Do you ever take any time off?

RUTH

Are you kidding? This place would crumble to the ground if I was gone more than an hour. Besides, Mom's dementia's getting worse...It's just so strange because she seems perfectly lucid one minute, and then she'll turn right around and forget where she is.

WES

I hate to say this, but that part's only going to get worse.

RUTH

So I've been told.

WES

Do you have anyone that can relieve you once in a while...a relative or a close friend?

RUTH

I used to...When my husband was around, we worked different shifts, so there was always someone here...But, he left several months ago...(thinking) I guess about 7 or 8 months...anyway, I didn't have anyone to help me take care of Mom anymore, so I just decided at that point to retire early.

WES

You're a good daughter.

RUTH

I'm a tired daughter.

WES

That's another reason I wanted you to have my number...Caregivers are always so busy worrying about other people that they neglect their own needs...

RUTH

(blushing)

...You mean?...

WES

...You should have someone to vent to.

RUTH

(embarrassed)

Oh...oh, of course...

WES  
So, you were telling me about your writing.

RUTH  
I was?

WES  
Fiction based on truth?

RUTH  
Yes...um...It's kind of silly actually.

WES  
So, it's a comedy?

RUTH  
No...well, it's not supposed to be anyway. But, I'm afraid I've never had any formal training and--

WES  
Training? Why do you need training? So you can end up sounding like everyone else?

RUTH  
(smiling)  
You have a point.

WES  
Some people just have a natural gift for it.

RUTH  
I think that's stretching it a bit for me.

WES  
Can I be the judge of that?

RUTH  
What?

WES  
Do you mind if I read some of your work?

RUTH  
You want to read my stuff?

WES  
Yes.

RUTH  
Why?

WES  
You like to write; I like to read...let's just say I'm interested.

RUTH

I'm sure the books you're used to reading--

WES

Are commercially-driven swill...most of them anyway. It's hard to find real stories anymore.

RUTH

What makes you so sure mine isn't swill?

WES

I don't know. You just don't seem like the swill type, I guess.

(HE stares at her intensely.)

RUTH

(uncomfortable)

...Um...Would you like some more tea?

WES

(looking down at his glass)

I guess I was thirsty.

RUTH

There's plenty.

(SHE takes the glass and exits.)

RUTH (CONT'D) (O.S.)

Still no sugar?

WES

No. The caffeine will keep me going for a while.

(HE hears a noise coming from the other side of the room and turns to look. With her eyes still closed, JENNY is waving her arms violently about, appearing to catch something in her hands, then stuffing it down her shirt. HE watches her for a moment, amused. RUTH reenters and sees this.)

RUTH

I see Mom's won Publisher's Clearinghouse again.

WES

Publisher's Clearinghouse?

RUTH

Yeah, she has this recurring dream that she's won all this money. Ed McMahon used to bring it right up to her front door, piled up on this great big pallet.



WES  
Ed was pulling the pallet?

RUTH  
Uh-huh...right up until he died.

WES  
Now what?

RUTH  
Now they just shoot it at her from this huge cannon.

WES  
And she stuffs it all down her shirt?

RUTH  
Down her shirt, down her pants, whatever it takes.

WES  
(laughing)  
That's the funniest thing I've seen in a long time.

(RUTH watches her mother for a moment  
and begins to laugh.)

RUTH  
I really should videotape it sometime.

JENNY  
(eyes still closed)  
That's mine, you old biddy!

(THEY laugh harder.)

WES  
Wow...even in her sleep.

RUTH  
(confirming)  
Even in her sleep.

(JENNY goes back to her relaxed  
position again, head down, fast  
asleep.)

WES  
She's so funny.

RUTH  
She's a handful.

WES

I have people in your position tell me all the time how strange it feels when they realize they've switched roles with their parents.

RUTH

It's like I'm taking care of a small child, again.

WES

I bet that's hard.

(A moment of silence.)

WES (CONT'D)

Sometimes it can be really difficult to give so much of yourself and not get much in return.

RUTH

(shrugging)

It feels about the same as it did the first time. He never listened to me; neither does she.

WES

You have a son?

RUTH

Yeah.

WES

Does he live around here?

RUTH

Pretty close by. How about you? Do you have any kids?

WES

No...I was married once. We tried for several years, but we couldn't have any...I couldn't have any...And she wanted someone who could.

RUTH

I'm sorry.

WES

Nah, that's life, I guess...Besides, that was about the time I was doing that night shift in the ER, and I don't think I was very easy to live with back then.

RUTH

So, tell me what that was like.

WES

The marriage or the ER?

RUTH  
Same difference, right?

(WES laughs.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
No, I'm kidding...the ER.

WES  
Hmm...Where do I start?...Well, lots of patients and lots of sleep-deprived doctors and nurses.

RUTH  
Anything like that TV show?...the one with George Clooney?

WES  
I suppose there was *some* truth to that show, but there were no doctors and nurses kissing over the top of unconscious patients or getting it on in the janitor's closet.

RUTH  
Really? Not ever?

WES  
Not to my knowledge.

RUTH  
That's a shame.

WES  
It was either really dead--pardon the pun--or just so crazy that you couldn't stop to think about anything. And, more times than not, it was crazy.

RUTH  
I don't see how you guys can do it.

WES  
Well, you just switch over to automatic-pilot. You have to. And then, on the way home, you scream or cry or play some really loud music...whatever it takes to clear the slate so you can start over the next day.

RUTH  
Needlepoint?

WES  
Exactly.

(Moment of silence)

WES (CONT'D)  
What really used to drive me crazy were those people that would come in with a cold and act like they were dying.

(SHE laughs.)

WES (CONT'D)

No, seriously, they were almost always the ones demanding to be seen or whining because they had a runny nose...Meanwhile you have the other side of it...like this guy one night who came in with a knife stuck in the side of his head...

RUTH

Oh my God. And he was still alive?

WES

Yep. Alive, conscious, and completely calm. No whining.

RUTH

How is that possible?

WES

(gesturing)

The insertion point was through his left temporal lobe and the point of the knife came out into his mouth.

RUTH

And he lived?

WES

Not only did he live, but he left without any permanent damage...just some stitches.

RUTH

That's amazing...You should be the one writing the book.

WES

Oh, that's nothing...One night this lady--

(HE stops himself in mid-sentence.)

RUTH

What? Keep going.

WES

I don't know...It's pretty sick.

RUTH

Sick as in bloody or sick as in twisted?

WES

Twisted.

RUTH

I love "twisted."

WES

Alright, but don't say I didn't warn you...Okay, so this lady came in one night complaining of pelvic pain. The doctor asked her the usual questions about her periods and if she might be pregnant...

RUTH

Was she?

WES

No, it wasn't anything like that. So, after he exhausted the normal possibilities of what was causing the pain, he decided to do a pelvic exam...Are you sure you want to hear this?

RUTH

Yes, yes, keep going.

WES

Okay, well, during the procedure, he found...something.

RUTH

What?

WES

He reached in and pulled out a roll of money (gesturing) this big.

RUTH

(suppressing a laugh)

She was keeping her money in her--

WES

Yes, but that's not the best part...The attending nurse had already come out and told us the story and we were laughing and cracking jokes...I know you're not supposed to do that...ethically, but--

RUTH

But, how could you not?

WES

Right, so then the doctor comes out, looks around at us and says: "Talk about payment at the time of service."

(RUTH bursts out laughing. After a moment, she catches her breath.)

RUTH

She didn't ask for change, did she?

WES

(laughing with her)

Yeah, but the coins kept falling back out.

RUTH  
 (trying to catch her breath)  
 So, *that's* why they say you should always wash your hands  
 after touching money.

WES  
 With *antibacterial* soap.

JENNY  
 (with her eyes still closed)  
 It's mine!!

(THEY laugh even harder.)

RUTH  
 (bending and holding her side)  
 My side hurts.

(RUTH walks over, grabs a kleenex, and  
 begins wiping her eyes.)

(STEW walks through the front door as  
 RUTH and WES are still laughing.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
 Stew...

STEW  
 What's...going on here?

RUTH  
 This is Wes. He's your grandmother's nurse.  
 (to Wes)  
 This is my son.

WES  
 (extending his hand)  
 Nice to meet you.

(STEW ignores this gesture and walks  
 toward the couch.)

STEW  
 So you're the fluffer?

WES  
 Fluffer? I'm sorry I don't know--

RUTH  
 Oh, it's nothing...just...it's nothing, really.

(A moment of silence)

WES  
 (smiling at Ruth)  
 Well, I better get going?

STEW  
 (sarcastically)  
 So soon? But, we haven't had a chance to get to know each other yet.

WES  
 (to Ruth)  
 Thanks for the tea.

RUTH  
 Sure...anytime you get thirsty...

WES  
 Thanks.

RUTH  
 Thanks for stopping by...I haven't laughed that hard in a really long time.

WES  
 Me either.

(HE glances over at STEW, then looks back at RUTH.)

WES (CONT'D)  
 And think about what I said about your own needs.

(STEW cranks up the volume on the TV. JENNY begins to stir. WES walks toward the door; RUTH follows behind him.)

RUTH  
 (over the volume of the TV)  
 Have a nice evening.

(HE smiles and exits; RUTH closes the door behind him.)

STEW  
 (turning the TV down)  
 "Anytime you get thirsty?" Jesus, Ruth, why don't you just hang a red light in the window?

JENNY  
 What are you watching, Stewie?

STEW  
 Nothing.

JENNY

I'm hungry.

STEW

Yeah. Well, I doubt there's anything cooking in the oven.

JENNY

Ruth, what are we eating?

(RUTH ignores this.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

(to Stew)

Give me that remote. I want to watch my shows.

STEW

It's 6 o'clock, Grandma. Your shows are over.

(RUTH walks over to the dining table, pick up WES's card and smiles.)

(lights fade)

END of ACT ONE

## ACT TWO

### SCENE ONE

AT RISE: JENNY is rocking in her chair, staring blankly across the room...a room that has been, somewhat, brought back to life with splashes of color, such as the arrangement of flowers that sits on the entry table, a decorative throw that hangs over the back of the couch, and a painting on the wall. Yet, JENNY seems unaffected. RUTH enters from the hallway, wearing a pair of slacks and a nice blouse. Her hair has been styled and sprayed, and she is wearing makeup. She carries a load of laundry over to the couch. A plate with an barely-touched sandwich sits on the coffee table.

RUTH

You didn't eat your sandwich.

JENNY

I like *ham*.

RUTH

That is ham.



(JENNY looks puzzled, leans over to examine the sandwich, then sits back.)

JENNY

I wanted tuna.

RUTH

(folding the laundry)

Well, you got ham and you need to eat it...remember what your nurse said about keeping up your strength?

JENNY

You mean the nurse you've been diddling?

RUTH

Behave yourself, Mother.

JENNY

I still think he's a fluffer...but, what puzzles me is...what does that make you?

RUTH

A fluffer lover, I guess.

JENNY

I guess so.

(A moment of silence as JENNY rocks and RUTH continues folding.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

What do you really know about this "man" anyway?

RUTH

Well, let's see...he's about 5'10"; he's into threesomes, and he has a dick the size of a torpedo.

JENNY

(amused)

Feeling a little feisty today, are we?

RUTH

Just trying to keep up with you.

JENNY

No, I would have said "submarine."

RUTH

That doesn't surprise me.

JENNY

Just make sure that thing doesn't "surface" while I'm around.

RUTH  
 (handing Jenny the remote)  
 Aren't your shows on?

JENNY  
 I'm tired of those people.

RUTH  
 Okay, then, let me see what I can find.

(RUTH begins surfing through the channels. After a few seconds, JENNY reaches toward her.)

JENNY  
 Give me that thing.

RUTH  
 That's what I thought.

(SHE hands JENNY the remote and continues folding the laundry. After a moment, RUTH realizes that JENNY is struggling.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
 What's wrong?

JENNY  
 I don't understand...there's some kind of cowboy movie on my station.

RUTH  
 (reaching for the remote)  
 Here, Mom. Let me see...oh, you have it on channel 25. Your show's on 8, remember?

(JENNY snatches the remote back.)

JENNY  
 (defensive)  
 I know what channel it's on. Don't treat me like a child. I gave birth to you, remember?

RUTH  
 No, I'll have to say that I don't remember that. But, I've--

JENNY  
 Well, I most certainly do...You came out fat and screaming like a chimpanzee...

RUTH  
 Yes, I've heard this story.

JENNY

...that piercing scream...You had everyone in the room rattled with that piercing scream...It was like a...uh...a...

RUTH

An alarm.

JENNY

Yes, like a high-pitched alarm that you can't shut off...the nurses were scrambling to find some way to pacify you, to shut off that alarm...

RUTH

But, they couldn't.

JENNY

And when I got you home, it wasn't any better. You cried constantly...finally, I just handed you over to your father. "Here," I said. "This one's yours. I can't handle her." And he took you--

RUTH

And I stopped crying.

JENNY

And I'll be damned if you didn't stop crying...Daddy's little girl...Daddy's tomboy, his little shadow...You never wanted anything to do with me.

RUTH

That's not true.

JENNY

From the time I squeezed out your fat little body, you've had an attitude toward me. I was good enough to cook your food and do your laundry, but I was never *him*.

RUTH

Doesn't it mean *something* that you're here? Now?

JENNY

Only because he made you promise to take care of me.

(RUTH looks away.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Yes, I overheard your conversation. And, as I remember, you weren't exactly sold on the idea. But, you never denied him anything...as he never did you...Once you came along, you were his one true love...and I became the maid...there was the occasional perfunctory sex, but mostly I was just there to feed you all and to make sure your dirty laundry was taken care of...I guess having a daughter changes everything, doesn't it?

(RUTH darts her eyes at her mother, then gets up and walks toward the kitchen.)

RUTH  
I'm going to get your medicine.

(SHE exits. JENNY picks up the remote and turns the volume up a bit. STEW enters, wearing his boxers and messy hair. HE plops down on the couch.)

STEW  
What's up, Grams?

JENNY  
I'm trying to watch my show.

(HE picks up the sandwich and begins devouring it.)

STEW  
How's our little slut Carly doing?

JENNY  
She'll never learn.

STEW  
Let's hope not. That's the only thing that makes this show interesting.

(RUTH returns, carrying a dish of pills and a glass of water. SHE sets them down next to her mother and exits through the hallway.)

STEW (CONT'D)  
Your drugs have arrived.

JENNY  
I'm watching my show.

(With sandwich still in hand, STEW begins rifling through the pills.)

STEW  
What does this red one do?

JENNY  
It wards off dirty old men.

STEW  
You're funny, Grams. But, you're really going to have to start sharing the drugs. What does the white one do?

(RUTH reenters, carrying a pair of men's jeans and a newspaper. SHE throws them both over the back of the couch and snatches the sandwich and the pill dish out of Stew's hands.)

STEW (CONT'D)

What the...?

RUTH

This is your grandmother's sandwich. If you want something to eat, the kitchen is that way.

(to Jenny)

Mother, you're going to eat part of this sandwich if I have to force-feed you. Then, you will take these pills, one at a time so that you don't choke. Now, are you going to cooperate or are we going to fight some more?

JENNY

(snatching the sandwich)

You sure are bitchy today.

RUTH

(to Stew)

Put these jeans on. I'm tired of you sprawling out in my living room with your baloney pony on display. And here's the classifieds. I've already circled some jobs for you. After you take out the trash, you can go put in some applications.

(RUTH exits into the kitchen.)

STEW

(putting on the jeans)

What the hell's wrong with *her*?

JENNY

It's that girly nurse boy. He's been putting ideas in her head.

(STEW shakes his head and exits through the hallway. JENNY begrudgingly takes a bite of the sandwich and begins chewing.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

(yelling toward the kitchen)

I like tuna!

(RUTH re-enters, holding a can of soda. She pulls the typewriter out and sets it on the table.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

So, what are we cooking up this time, Ms. Bronte?

RUTH

Oh, I had an idea for this story where a middle-aged woman is driven mad by her mooching sloth of a son and her evil, elderly mother.

JENNY

What happens?

RUTH

She poisons their food.

(JENNY stares down at her sandwich, then sets it back on the plate. RUTH begins typing. STEW returns, fully dressed and heads toward the front door.)

STEW

I'm going to Taco Bell.

RUTH

(jumping up)

Don't forget to take this with you.

(SHE holds the classifieds out. HE stares at her, then snatches the paper, and slams the front door behind him.)

JENNY

Great. The last time that boy ate at Taco Bell he farted for two days.

RUTH

(sitting back down at the typewriter)

Did you take your pills, yet?

JENNY

I'm taking them, I'm taking them, alright?

(RUTH continues typing. JENNY stares down at the water, sniffs it, looks toward Ruth, then begins to take the pills, dramatically pretends to pass-out, holds the position for a second, then opens one eye to find that Ruth is ignoring her. When JENNY finishes, she pushes herself up on her walker and makes her way, very slowly toward her bed. RUTH watches her struggle with a look of concern, but remains seated.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

I'm taking my nap now. Don't smother me in my sleep.

(SHE lies down. RUTH stops typing and stares out, as if contemplating something, then she continues typing. She repeats this sequence several times during which JENNY begins to snore, stirs slightly, then rolls over onto her side.)

RUTH

(to herself)

Let's see...how is she going to tell him--

(SHE is startled by a knock at the door. SHE smiles, gets up, and opens it. WES stands on the other side, holding a take-out bag in his hand.)

WES

You still hungry?

RUTH

Starving.

(HE kisses her, then walks toward the table and sets the lunch down.)

RUTH

(moving the typewriter)

Let me get this out of the way.

WES

Sorry I'm a little late. One of my patients was having a tough time today.

RUTH

I'm sorry to hear that.

(WES distributes the lunch, and they begin to eat.)

WES

How's your mom?

RUTH

I'm a little concerned...I mean, she's still as mean as ever, but she seems to be getting weaker.

WES

How's the eating and the exercise going?

RUTH

Ugh! She's so damned stubborn...I had to threaten to force-feed her today, and getting her outside to exercise is like trying to get a 5 year-old to take a bath.

WES

(touching her hand)

Have you thought anymore about getting someone in here to help you?

RUTH

No...no, I can do it.

WES

I'm just worried about what this is doing to you.

RUTH

I'm tough.

WES

Yeah, well I think that "stubbornness" you were talking about runs in the family.

RUTH

Oh yeah?

WES

Yeah.

(HE leans over and kisses her.)

WES (CONT'D)

I'll check her out when we finish eating.

RUTH

There's also some bruising...

WES

More than usual?

RUTH

Yes. It seems to be getting worse lately.

WES

The skin gets thinner at her age, so it could just be that, but I'll take some blood...just to be on the safe side.

(HE notices her tension and changes the subject.)

WES (CONT'D)

So, did I tell you that I've always had this *thing* for "lunch ladies."

RUTH

(smiling)

Yeah, right.



WES

No, I'm serious.

RUTH

Well, that wasn't exactly my dream job...I just sort of ended up there.

WES

What was your dream?

RUTH

I was going to school to be a teacher...

WES

Really? What happened to that?

RUTH

In my second semester I met my ex-husband...and, well, sometimes the dream dies along with the rabbit...I got a job at a middle school cafeteria and...I just stayed there.

(A moment of silence)

RUTH (CONT'D)

So, you had a *thing*, huh?

WES

Uh-huh.

RUTH

I'm listening...

WES

When I was in the eighth grade, there was this lady that worked in the cafeteria that was so...fine...

RUTH

Really? How could you tell with the hairnet and the frumpy smock?

WES

Oh, a growing young boy can tell, trust me...Anyway, everyday when I walked through the line my heart would start pounding and I could feel the sweat beading up on my forehead...

RUTH

And then what?

WES

And then, she would look over and wink at me...and I swear, there were a couple of times that I had to position that tray carefully in front of my pants to disguise my joy.

(RUTH begins to laugh hysterically.)

WES (CONT'D)

What?

RUTH

(still laughing)

Nothing...It's just...

WES

What?

RUTH

It's just that no matter what we're talking about, you can always make me laugh.

WES

I'm just trying to point out how inspirational you might have been without knowing it.

RUTH

Well, thank you. But, I can honestly say that never crossed my mind.

(Moment of silence)

WES

So, what about this teaching thing?

RUTH

I tried to go back at one point...to school, I mean. But, it was just too hard to work, go to school, and raise kids. I knew something was going to suffer, and I didn't want it to be my children.

WES

Children? As in more than one?

(RUTH stays silent for a moment.)

WES (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, If you don't--

RUTH

No, it's okay...My oldest child, Beth...She was three years old, and we were in the car on our way to a doctor's appointment...And she was really cranky because she wasn't feeling well. Well, she dropped her juice bottle on the floor and started throwing this huge fit...All I could think about was that I needed her to stop crying. So, I leaned over--just for a second--to get the bottle, and I missed the red light. I don't know how, but I did...The car t-boned us and Beth...didn't make it.

WES  
(placing his hand over hers)  
I'm so sorry. I had no idea.

RUTH  
It's okay. I...I don't know why I decided to burden you with that...kind of brought down the mood, didn't I?

WES  
No. I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to share it with me.

RUTH  
I know I haven't been the world's greatest mom to my son. I've never been as strict with him as I should've been...MY mother calls me an "enabler"...And I'm sure she's right...but when you only have one child left, you want to give him the world and at the same time, you don't want to let him too far out of your sight.

WES  
Which is why he lives with you?

RUTH  
Yeah. Sometimes I get so pissed at him, and I think, *How dare he take advantage of me this way...*But, I'm the Frankenstein who created that monster, and now...I have to deal with him.

WES  
Look...I'm the last person in the world to give parenting advice...But, I'm just concerned about what this is doing to you.

RUTH  
I told you, I'm tough.

WES  
"Tough" meaning "stubborn."

RUTH  
I suppose.

(Moment of silence)

WES  
Why don't you go back to school?

RUTH  
You *do* realize how old I am, don't you?

WES  
There are plenty of people older than you in college.

RUTH

Yeah, that's great, then it's just three steps from graduation to the morgue.

WES

Well, just think about it this way--People will already be here for your graduation, so they won't have to make two trips.

RUTH

You're a smart ass, you know it?

WES

No, seriously, I can bring you the college application forms to fill out...since you don't believe in computers.

RUTH

I don't have the money for school. You know that.

WES

Which is why it will be very easy for you to get a Pell Grant.

RUTH

You have an answer for everything, don't you?

WES

I just think that you should do something for yourself...for once.

(RUTH gets up and starts walking toward the kitchen.)

RUTH

Would you like some tea?

WES

I'd love some.

(After SHE exits, WES walks over to the entry table and begins reading her pages. HE smiles and nods his head. When HE hears her return, he pretends he is smelling the flower arrangement. SHE sees him and begins to laugh.)

RUTH

Those are fake, you know?

WES

They looked so real.

RUTH

Here's your tea.

WES

Thanks...I've been meaning to tell you that the house looks great.

RUTH

Oh, thanks.

WES

Is that a new painting?

RUTH

No, it's been in the attic forever. My Dad bought it for me years ago, and when Mom moved in, I thought it might be too painful for her to see it. But, the other day, I decided to get it down and clean it off.

WES

And how did she react?

RUTH

I don't think she's even noticed it.

WES

I'll go out and get my bag. I hate to wake her, but--

RUTH

No, that's fine. I'll wake her while you're gone.

(WES exits. RUTH walks over to the bed to stir her mother.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(gently shaking her)

Mom?

JENNY

(very groggy)

Huh?

RUTH

Mom, wake up. Your nurse is here.

JENNY

Who?

RUTH

Your nurse.

JENNY

Karen?

RUTH

No, Wes...remember?

JENNY  
 (slowly stirring)  
 Where's Karen?

(RUTH grabs some pillows off the couch  
 to put behind Jenny's back.)

RUTH  
 Let's set you up so he can examine you.

JENNY  
 What for?

RUTH  
 It's just a precaution.

JENNY  
 I'm fine.

(WES returns, pulling his bag behind  
 him.)

WES  
 Hello, Mrs. Holt.

(JENNY stares at him for a moment, then  
 she recalls.)

JENNY  
 Ah, Nurse Kevorkian.

WES  
 You remembered.

(HE opens his bag and pulls out a  
 folder, a blood pressure cuff, and a  
 stethoscope.)

JENNY  
 How could I forget. We've had such a lovely relationship.

WES  
 Okay, Mrs. Holt, I'm just going to slip this cuff around your  
 arm.

(HE pushes up her sleeve.)

WES (CONT'D)  
 You've got a lot of bruising going on here.

JENNY  
 My daughter beats me.

WES

I seriously doubt that.

(HE slips the cuff over her arm.)

WES (CONT'D)

I'm going to start pumping this cuff, but you let me know if it hurts, okay?

JENNY

Speaking of "pumping," what have you two been doing while I was asleep?

RUTH

You're not supposed to talk while he's doing this.

JENNY

It better not have been on my chair.

WES

Okay, Mrs. Holt, I need you to be very still and quiet.

(WES bends down, places the stethoscope in his ears and the chestpiece against the crease of her elbow. He begins to listen to her pulse. After a few seconds, he releases the cuff, then puts his fingers to her wrist and stares down at his watch.)

JENNY

When's Karen coming back?

RUTH

You're being rude.

(HE releases her wrist and begins writing in her chart.)

WES

Okay, Mrs. Holt. I'm just going to listen to your lungs now. (puts the scope to her back) Take a deep breath in for me and slowly release it.

(SHE does this.)

WES (CONT'D)

Another.

(SHE does.)

WES

Now, I'm moving the scope around to your chest.

JENNY  
 Sure you can find it, girly boy?

RUTH  
 Mother!  
 (to Wes)  
 I'm sorry.

WES  
 (to Jenny)  
 Deep breath in and slowly release.

(SHE does. HE pulls the stethoscope away and writes in her chart. Then he pulls a vile and disposable needle from his bag.)

WES (CONT'D)  
 Almost done, Mrs. Holt. I just need to take some blood, okay?

JENNY  
 What's going on here? I'm in remission.  
 (to Ruth)  
 You told me I was in remission. Why are you letting him do this?

RUTH  
 Mother, I told you, it's just a precaution.

WES  
 You'll just feel a little pinch. Are you ready?

(JENNY glares at both of them.)

JENNY  
 Fine. Just get it done and leave me alone.

(HE wraps a tourniquet around her arm, swabs it with alcohol, then takes the blood.)

WES  
 There, that wasn't so bad, was it?

(JENNY doesn't answer.)

(WES packs up his things.)

WES  
 (to Ruth)  
 I'll get this to the lab and let you know what I find out.

RUTH  
 Thanks.



(WES begins walking toward the front door. RUTH follows him.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

And thanks for lunch. I had a nice time.

WES

Me too...Think about what I said...about school.

RUTH

(smiling)

I'll think about it.

(HE kisses her and exits.)

JENNY

What was he saying about "school"?

RUTH

Nothing important...That was a really short nap. You sure you're ready to get up?

JENNY

(slowly pushing herself up)

Yes. I don't want to miss my show.

RUTH

(looking down at her watch)

I think your show's about over, Mom.

JENNY

(slowly making her way to the chair)

He thinks you're just perfect, doesn't he?

RUTH

Who?

JENNY

The nurse.

RUTH

I doubt it. No one's perfect.

JENNY

Ah, but I think you have him fooled. Just like you did your father.

RUTH

I'm not trying to *fool* anyone.

JENNY

Really?...Have you told him *everything*.

RUTH

Don't start.

JENNY

Did you tell him about the teacher...the *married* teacher?

RUTH

That was a long time ago.

JENNY

Still, relationships are supposed to be built on trust, aren't they?

RUTH

We just met two weeks ago.

JENNY

Uh-huh...And how many times have you bedded-down in two weeks?

(RUTH ignores her, walks over and picks up the pages sitting next to the typewriter, sits down at the table, and begins to examine them.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

At least three, that I remember.

(RUTH looks at her, quizzically.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Just because I'm old, doesn't mean I'm deaf.

RUTH

I'm not having this conversation with you. This is my home, and I'm a grown woman--

JENNY

--who still screams like a chimpanzee.

(RUTH picks up her pages and walks toward the hallway. Just as she is exiting, JENNY turns toward the hall and does her best chimpanzee scream.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Whoo-Haaaaa!! Whoo-Haaaaa!!

(Ruth exits. JENNY points the remote toward the television.)

(The lights fade.)

END OF SCENE

SCENE TWO

(JENNY sits in her chair, rocking, and staring out as if in a daze. There is a bowl of mostly-eaten oatmeal sitting next to her. RUTH enters from the hallway and walks toward the dining table. SHE is wearing a nice, but somewhat outdated business suit.)

RUTH

Wow. You actually ate your breakfast this morning.

JENNY

I poured it in the plant.

RUTH

We don't have a plant.

JENNY

We don't?

RUTH

No.

JENNY

Well, you better check behind the couch then.

(RUTH's eyes widen. Slowly and with apprehension, SHE leans and peeks behind the couch. Then SHE shoots a look of disapproval toward her mother.)

RUTH

You're bluffing, old lady.

JENNY

"Old," huh? Who's going to be the "old lady" when she walks into that college today?

RUTH

(flipping through some papers)

I'm just going up there to turn in my application.

JENNY

Yeah, well, when it's time to pay tuition, don't forget to ask for the Senior Discount.

(RUTH exits through the kitchen door. JENNY picks up the bowl and finishes the last of her oatmeal.)

Then, SHE sets it back down quickly and wipes her mouth with her hand. RUTH returns, carrying a glass of water and a pill dish.)

RUTH

Time for your meds.

(JENNY starts to raise the pill dish to her mouth.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

(pushing the dish back down)

One at a time.

(JENNY begrudgingly obeys. RUTH exits through the kitchen door and returns, carrying a cordless phone and a piece of paper.)

RUTH (CONT'D)

I shouldn't be gone long, Mom. But, if something happens...anything...you can call Ms. Spencer across the street. You remember her, don't you?

JENNY

Yeah, I remember Ms. Spinster.

RUTH

"Spencer."

JENNY

Isn't Stewie home?

RUTH

Trust me, Mom. It would be much faster to call Ms. Spencer. I've talked to her, and she already knows the situation.

JENNY

I don't like her.

RUTH

You don't like anyone. Now, finish taking your pills.

(RUTH exits through the hallway.)

JENNY

(between pills in a mocking voice)

"One at a time...I can't take you to the morgue today, Mom, 'cause I'm going to college."

(RUTH returns, carrying her purse.)

RUTH  
Do you need me to help you to the bathroom before I leave?

(JENNY ignores her.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
Alright, then. I'll be back soon.

JENNY  
(yelling after her)  
Ruth.

RUTH  
(turns back)  
Yes?

JENNY  
Nothing.

(RUTH reaches for the door.)

JENNY (CONT'D)  
Ruth.

RUTH  
(turns back again)  
Yes?

(JENNY swallows hard, then speaks,  
avoiding eye contact.)

JENNY  
Don't leave.

RUTH  
Mother, I'll only be gone for--

JENNY  
No...(beat)...I mean...don't leave me.

(RUTH walks back over toward JENNY.)

RUTH  
*Leave you?*

(a moment of uncomfortable silence)

(RUTH picks up the piece of paper and  
shows it to JENNY again.)

RUTH (CONT'D)  
(gentle tone)  
Just call Ms. Spencer, Mom. If you need anything, just pick  
up the phone and dial this number, okay?

(JENNY takes the paper from her.)

RUTH

I'll be back soon.

(RUTH exits. JENNY picks up the remote, turns the TV on and begins flipping through the channels. After a few moments, she is startled by a knock at the front door.)

JENNY

Ruth?

(Another knock.)

JENNY

(toward the hallway)

Stewie?

(Another knock, louder this time. JENNY picks up the piece of paper, contemplates for a moment, then picks up the phone and begins to dial.)

JOHN (O.S.)

Momma?

JENNY

Johnny?

(into the phone)

Oh, sorry Ms. Spinster, nevermind.

(SHE hangs up, pushes herself up with her walker, then moves slowly toward the front door.)

JOHN (O.S.)

Momma? You in there?

JENNY

I'm here, Johnny. Give me just a minute...I'm coming...almost there.

(SHE makes it to the door, unlocks and opens it. JOHN is standing on the other side, holding a bouquet of lavender lilies.)

JOHN

There's my girl.

(HE walks in and hugs her.)

JENNY

They let you off work today.

JOHN

What?...Oh...yeah...I just told them I had an appointment with a lovely, young lady.

(holding the flowers out)

These are for you.

JENNY

(smelling them)

They're beautiful. You can just lay them on the dining table for now. I'll have Ruth put them in some water when she gets home.

(JENNY begins to make her way back over to her chair.)

JOHN

Where'd she run off to, anyway?

JENNY

Who?

JOHN

Ruth.

(JENNY struggles a bit, as if the walker has suddenly become heavier.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Momma, you okay?

(HE walks over to her.)

JOHN (CONT'D)

Here, take my arm.

(SHE grabs hold of his arm. HE pushes the walker out of the way and guides her back to her chair. Then, HE sits down on the couch.)

JOHN

So, you were about to tell me where Ruth was going.

JENNY

Ugh...She's lost her mind. That girly boy nurse...Did you meet him, by the way...?

JOHN

Yeah, the last time I was here. He seemed nice enough.

JENNY

Well, he and your sister have been--how shall I put it?--"co-mingling."

JOHN

(genuinely shocked)

No.

JENNY

Uh-huh.

JOHN

Ruth and the nurse?

JENNY

Uh-huh.

JOHN

Wow.

JENNY

So, now that all the blood has rushed out of her head to (gesturing) "other regions," he's managed to convince her that she's going to be a teacher when she grows up...Can you believe that?...At her age?

JOHN

How's she going to do that?

JENNY

She's going down to the college today to sign up...She'll be on Medicare by the time she gets her first job teaching.

JOHN

Do you think she'll be gone long?

JENNY

Who knows?

JOHN

Well, you're the one I came to see, anyway.

JENNY

I'm glad you're here. It's so nice when you come by. Your sister's always nagging me about something and that son of hers is never going to separate himself from her teat.

JOHN

That's what I was talking about, Momma...the last time I was here. Do you remember?

JENNY

About Stewie?



JOHN

No. About getting you away from here.

JENNY

Oh, I don't--

JOHN

Wouldn't you like that, Momma?

JENNY

I don't know. Would I be living with you?

JOHN

No, Momma...I didn't mean that...What I meant was that you'll have enough money to live on your own and hire a live-in nurse.

JENNY

(disappointed)

A nurse, huh?

JOHN

Sure. With the kind of money you'll have, you could do just about anything you wanted.

JENNY

Money? What money?

JOHN

Do you remember me telling you about Bill? My friend, Bill?

JENNY

Bill?...Oh, yes the smart one...with the laundromat.

JOHN

Do you remember how I told you about the investment opportunity we have?

JENNY

You did?

JOHN

Yes, Momma...magnetism, remember?

JENNY

Magnetism?

JOHN

Yes. It's going to make us both very rich.

JENNY

I don't understand, Johnny.

JOHN

(with his hand on her leg)

All you need to know is that we have a wonderful opportunity, but we have to have the investment money to get started.

JENNY

Where are we going to get that?

JOHN

(takes her hand)

Listen, Momma, I know you have some money.

JENNY

Not much, really.

JOHN

You have enough. And what good is it doing you if it's just sitting somewhere gathering dust?

JENNY

Oh, it's not gathering much dust under the mattress.

(John's eyes widen. HE gets up and begins to walk over toward her bed.)

JOHN

Let's just take a look and see how much you got, Momma, okay?

JENNY

Well...okay...I haven't counted it in some time.

(JOHN bends down and feels under the mattress. HE removes a pair of panties and quickly shoves them back where he found them. Then he reaches deeper and smiles as he pulls out a roll of cash.)

JOHN

(standing up)

You know, you really shouldn't hide your cash under the mattress. That's the first place thieves look.

(Suddenly, the front door swings open.)

RUTH

Mom, why's this door un--

(RUTH sees JOHN next to the bed, holding the cash in his hand. SHE slams the front door.)

JENNY

Why are you back so soon?

RUTH  
(glaring at John)  
I forgot my application.

JENNY  
Look who stopped by.

RUTH  
My loving brother...It's funny...I didn't see your car parked  
out front.

JOHN  
Oh, I...parked in the alley...to leave the driveway open for  
you.

RUTH  
Really? How very kind of you. Now, you want to tell me why  
you're holding my mother's money in your grubby hands?

JOHN  
I can explain...

RUTH  
I'm listening.

JOHN  
We'll all be so much better off, Ruth.

RUTH  
We?

JENNY  
His friend is building a magnetic laundromat.

RUTH  
A magnetic laundromat?

JOHN  
No. It's much more complicated than that.

RUTH  
No, no. It's quite simple, actually...You're falling for  
another one of those "get rich quick" schemes--

JOHN  
No. It's diff--

RUTH  
I know. It's different this time, right?

JOHN  
Yes. Magnetism is going to be a major resource of energy all  
over the world. It will power our cars, our heaters and air  
conditioners--

RUTH

Are you quoting from the brochure?

JOHN

Look, I know things are tight around here. Wouldn't life be much simpler if you had some extra cash...to help take care of Mom?

RUTH

What do you know about taking care of her?...How many times have you actually come to see your mother in the last two years? How many times did you visit her in the hospital when she was suffering with cancer?

JENNY

He can't help it if they won't let him off work.

RUTH

Oh, the imaginary job. I forgot about that.

JENNY

What are you talking about? Johnny, what is she talking about?

JOHN

Nothing, Momma.

(RUTH walks over and yanks the roll of cash out of her brother's hand.)

RUTH

(staring him down)

When Dad died, he left me his handgun...for protection. If I ever catch you in my house again, I'm going to treat you like an intruder.

(JOHN stares back at her, trying to call her bluff, but SHE does not back down. So, HE walks over to JENNY, kisses her on the cheek and walks toward the front door.)

JENNY

Johnny?

(He exits.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

(to Ruth)

What the hell is wrong with you?

(RUTH places the roll of cash back under the mattress and walks over to the dining table.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

That's your brother...my son...Have you completely lost your mind?

(RUTH picks up the college application and stares down at it for a full 5 seconds. SHE shakes her head, walks over to the trash can and drops it in.)

JENNY (CONT'D)

Answer me.

(STEW enters from the hallway, wearing his boxers.)

STEW

What's going on out here?

JENNY

Your mother has lost her mind.

(RUTH exits through the hallway. STEW plops down on the couch.)

STEW

You got the remote?

(JENNY feels down in her rocker and hands it to him.)

JENNY

Here.

(yelling back toward the hallway)

I wasn't finished talking to you yet!

STEW

It's not time for your show yet, is it?

JENNY

I don't care about my show.

(toward the hallway)

Ruth, get back in here! I'm not through talking to you about this!

(RUTH returns, carrying a light jacket.)

RUTH

(holding it out to Jenny)

Put this on. There's a chilly breeze out today.

JENNY

I'm not going anywhere.

RUTH

You haven't had your exercise yet today, Mom. The nurse said--

JENNY

The nurse? I don't give a good god damn what that "nurse" said. He's the reason my daughter's running around, pretending like she's a school girl...the reason my son will probably never come see me again...

STEW

What's going on?

RUTH

(lifting her mother's arm)

Here. Let's get this jacket on you.

JENNY

(yanking her arm back)

That was *my son* you just threatened to shoot!

STEW

What? Uncle John was here?

RUTH

(lifting her arm more  
forcefully)

I said, we need to get this jacket on you.

(JENNY resists. There is a determined scuffle.)

JENNY

I said I'm not going anywhere with you...you...you whore!

(RUTH slaps her mother hard across the face. RUTH backs up, her eyes wide. JENNY holds her head down, her hand to her face.)

STEW

(to Ruth)

What the hell is wrong with you? This woman's almost 90 years-old!

RUTH

(defensive)

Don't you judge me, you ungrateful, lazy asshole!...I'm so sick of your lounging and your...your sponging...your sarcastic comments...oh, you're smart alright...smarter than I'll probably ever be. But, the way you're wasting your life makes you about the stupidest person I've ever known.

STEW

Coming from the mouth of the lunch lady.

RUTH

Yes. The "lunch lady" who made sure you had everything.

STEW

Everything? Do you realize that for the last thirty years you've lived your life on automatic-pilot? That's why he left, you know that, right?...I'm surprised that he stayed as long as he did.

RUTH

(weeping and shaking her head)

That's not true. He knew I loved him.

STEW

He didn't want to be your cell-mate anymore.

RUTH

No! He was mad at me because I kept taking you back in. He told me--

STEW

You made all of us feel like we had nothing, NOTHING to offer you!...and all because you lost the one person who meant the most...(beat)...you killed her...you killed her and you've spent the last thirty years making the rest of us pay for it.

RUTH

Get your fucking pants on and get out of my house!

(RUTH exits through the hallway and we hear a door slam. STEW leans over and tries to move JENNY's hand.)

STEW

You okay, Grams?

(SHE shoves his hand away and covers her face again.)

(The lights fade.)

END OF SCENE

### SCENE THREE

(JENNY is lying in her bed asleep. RUTH enters through the front door, wearing a pair of old sweats and carrying a couple of grocery bags. SHE sets them down on the dining table, then walks over to the laundry hamper and opens it.

SHE reaches under the mattress and pulls out a number of blouses and panties, which no longer seems to faze her. There is a knock at the door. SHE tosses the clothes in the hamper and walks over to answer it. WES stands on the other side.)

WES

Good Morning.

(HE steps inside and kisses her.)

RUTH

Hi.

(waving toward the couch)

Come on in.

WES

I see you've been to the store already this morning.

RUTH

Yeah. I wanted to get back before she woke up.

WES

You're a good daughter.

(RUTH lowers her head.)

WES (CONT'D)

You look tired.

RUTH

I think I'm just getting old.

WES

I can relate.

RUTH

Would you like some coffee or something.

WES

No, thanks. I'm fine.

RUTH

So, do you have a lot of patients to visit today?

WES

Four.

RUTH

That's not bad, I guess.



No.

WES

(There is a moment of silence. Then, they both begin to speak at the same time.)

Listen, I--

RUTH

I wanted--

WES

You go first.

RUTH

(WES takes her hand.)

This seems serious.

RUTH (CONT'D)

I got the test results on your mother...

WES

And it's not good, is it?

RUTH

The cancer's back...I'm so sorry.

WES

(RUTH lowers her head and begins to sob. WES puts his arms around her and pulls her to him.)

I'm a terrible person.

RUTH

No, you're not.

WES

Yes, I am.

RUTH

(RUTH sniffs and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.)

Hold on...

WES

(WES looks around and spots a kleenex box on the table next to JENNY's bed.)

Let me get you some tissue.

WES (CONT'D)

(HE brings the box to her.)

RUTH

Thank you.

WES

Now, why are you so down on yourself? Do you realize how many people are dropped off at nursing homes and never hear from their children again? She's very lucky to--

RUTH

I hit her.

WES

What?

RUTH

I did. I hit her.

(Moment of silence)

WES

Do you want to talk about it?

RUTH

What's there to talk about? She called me a whore, and I slapped her...I slapped her really hard.

WES

And then what?

RUTH

She just sat there...for the longest time...holding her face. She wouldn't look at me.

WES

You're human. We've all lost our cool.

RUTH

Really? You?

WES

Of course.

RUTH

You just seem so damned perfect.

WES

That's the front I've been putting on to win you over. If you had to live with me, you'd see it differently.

(Moment of silence.)

RUTH

Listen, I haven't slept much the last couple of days, so I've had a lot of time to think.

WES

About?

RUTH

About us.

WES

And?

RUTH

I can't see you anymore.

WES

...(beat)...Can you tell me why?

RUTH

My life wasn't so happy before I met you, but...it was comfortable. A sort of comfortable numbness...And then you came along and...well...

WES

And what?

RUTH

You made me feel things.

WES

And that's bad?

RUTH

If I had met you under different circumstances--

WES

Why does that matter?

RUTH

Because I have responsibilities....Look, I think you're a wonderful man with so much to give, but...you shouldn't waste your life with someone who's not able to give back.

WES

What about you? What about the application I brought you?

RUTH

I filled it out...

(pointing toward the trash)  
then, I threw it in there.

WES

Why?

RUTH

It was a nice fantasy, but I have other things I need to focus on...and I can't do that if I'm...distracted.

WES

I don't understand. Don't you want some happiness for yourself?

RUTH

(taking his hand)

I had some...and I thank you for that.

WES

There are other options. You don't have to shut the world out. Let someone help you. Let me--

RUTH

Wes...

(She stares at him as if to make sure he's paying attention)

She's my mother.

(HE nods his head. After a moment he speaks.)

WES

I've made an appointment for her this afternoon with her oncologist...at 2 o'clock...I just thought she should get in as soon as possible.

RUTH

Thank you.

WES

Karen's coming back on Monday, and that's...probably for the best.

RUTH

I don't know...I bet her Benny impersonation isn't as good as yours.

WES

Your mom didn't seem to like it so much.

RUTH

Yes, she did. She just didn't *like* that she liked it.

(HE hugs her, then pushes back and stares into her eyes, shakes his head, walks over to the trash can, pulls out the application, and holds it up to her as if to say, "I'm not giving up on you." He tucks it under his arm, and walks toward the door. When he gets there, he turns back.)

WES

By the way, I really think you should continue writing...you've got a gift for it.

RUTH

How did you--?

(HE smiles and exits. SHE closes the door behind him, takes a deep breath, then walks over to the dining table. SHE begins to remove several non-perishable items from the bag, including toilet paper and two boxes of lotion kleenex. As SHE pulls out a bag of peanut M&Ms, SHE stops suddenly and stares down at it for a moment, then walks over and drops it into the trash can--a sign of "letting go." SHE walks back over to the table, falls down in the chair, and begins weeping. Suddenly, SHE is startled by her mother's voice.)

JENNY

(flailing her arms and legs)

Get away from me! Stop it! Don't touch me! Get away!!

(RUTH wipes her eyes and rushes over to her mother.)

RUTH

Mother? What's wrong?

JENNY

Ruthie?!

RUTH

(gentle tone)

Yes, Mom. It's me. I'm here.

JENNY

(putting her arms around Ruth)

Get them away from me.

(RUTH pulls JENNY in close and begins  
rocking back and forth.)

RUTH

They're gone now. Everything's okay.

JENNY

They were trying to hurt me.

RUTH

No one's going to hurt you. I'm here now...I'm here.

(The lights fade.)

END of PLAY

### The Idea for *Dirty Laundry*

In the fall of 2008, I was sitting at my desk, staring at the cursor, blinking at the top of a blank page. For a writer, a blank, white page can simultaneously gleam with fresh promise and torment with stark emptiness. I had just been given an assignment in my Playwriting class to write a short one-act play, which was to be from 15-25 pages. But, I was short on ideas.

At that moment, my mother called to vent--as she does several times a week--about my grandmother. She told me that Grandma had been "hiding her dirty clothes again." My grandmother had developed a new practice of undressing, then stuffing these articles of clothing strategically around her room at the nursing home. This frustrated my mother because she had just purchased a new laundry hamper with wheels, which she had assumed would make picking up Grandma's laundry an easier process. Instead, the process had turned into a scavenger hunt. Blouses were stuffed into random drawers and panties and bras could be found under the mattress or behind the rocking chair. "She does this to torture me," Mom said. I assured her that this was the result of my grandmother's escalating dementia and not a personal attack. But, as we hung up the phone, she remained unconvinced. I sat back in my chair again and thought about the complexity of their relationship, the circumstances of life that

lead people to become dependent upon one another, and all of the frustration and bitterness that evolves--on both sides--from this dependence. And I knew I had the idea for my play.

I have often been startled (and, at times, amused) by my grandmother's forthright manner of expressing her feelings. (I once heard her remark of her ex-husband's new wife, "My butt is prettier than her face.") So when I was contemplating the character of Jenny, I wanted to incorporate this no-nonsense quality. Ruth, however, is quite different from my mother--mainly in her willingness to play the martyr. My mother does not hesitate to speak her mind or stand up for herself. Some of the traits they do have in common, though, are their feelings of bitterness and helplessness toward their role as "caregiver," and their anger at a brother who hardly ever comes around, yet maintains the title of "favorite child." Therefore, incorporating a character based on my uncle helped to further the conflict.

Unlike John, my uncle is not a thief; however, his gift for charming my grandmother with his silver-tongue played an important role in crafting the character of John. Ultimately, in this short version of *Dirty Laundry*, Ruth makes the choice to confront John, defending her mother and continuing her caregiver role, despite the fact that she will never receive any gratitude for her sacrifices.



### Expanding the Play

Upon taking this one-act play to my writers' group, I immediately noticed the level to which this subject touched home for so many people. All members of the group had caregiver stories--either about themselves or about close relatives. On my way home, I realized that this topic was actually much too complex to be adequately explored within the space of fifteen pages.

Another experience that resurfaced in my mind was watching my husband as caregiver when we were dating. Although he had taken his elderly mother into his home years earlier, her health had recently begun to decline. I observed him following a very structured and strict routine in order to meet her constant needs. As I watched his level of fatigue increase steadily, I noticed the toll this was taking on his health and began to worry that if he continued at this rate, he might die before she did. This memory made me realize that the pressure on my character Ruth would be much greater if the setting were moved into her home.

In addition, I knew I could increase the stress further by making her a member of the Baby Boomer "sandwich generation," taking care of an elderly parent and a child at the same time. The twist in her situation, however, would be that the "child," Stew, is a grown man in his thirties--fully capable of taking

care of himself, yet taking advantage of a mother whom he knows carries a level of guilt inside that would never allow her to kick him out.

In contemplating this troubling relationship, I drew upon my experience watching my sister and her son. He--now in his mid-thirties--has never grown up because he has always had his mother to rescue him. My sister's guilt stems from the fact that her son did not have an ideal childhood; therefore, she feels responsible for his endless list of failed relationships and jobs. Well-aware of her guilt, he has repeatedly returned for money and a place to stay. Watching him over the years, I had a recurring thought, which made it into the play. Referring to Stew, Jenny asks Ruth, "What is it about him that makes him a man...besides his age?"

In moving the setting of the play into Ruth's home, I knew that I would have to alter the nurse character, Karen. After giving this some thought, I felt that if Jenny was (or had been) terminally ill, then Karen (from the nursing home) could become a visiting hospice nurse. Yet, I wanted the nurse to play a more important role than she had in the one-act play. A member of my writers' group suggested that the hospice nurse could be a man. This opened up an array of possibilities that I hadn't considered before. In the textbook, *The Elements of Playwriting*, Louis Catron explains that the "point of attack occurs" when

someone or something disrupts the "static balance" of the play (101). So, I reasoned that if the nurse filling in for Karen were a man, his visit could be the disturbance that shakes Ruth out of her comfort zone and makes her feel alive again-- something that could have both positive and negative consequences.

## **Research**

### **Dementia**

Before I began this new full-length version of *Dirty Laundry*, I wanted to research the topic of dementia. Realizing that this illness has devastated the lives of so many and seeing the toll it has taken on my own family, I felt it was important to know as much as I could about it in order to create a world that people in the audience might relate to. I contacted Gail Deaton, Director of the Edmond Senior Center and former Executive Director of the Central Oklahoma Alzheimer's Association Chapter, and asked if I could set up an interview with her. She kindly agreed.

When I met with Gail, I asked her to explain the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's. She stated that dementia is simply a general diagnosis that covers a variety of progressive illnesses pertaining to cognitive deficits. Alzheimer's, one of these illnesses, causes memory loss that worsens with time and

eventually leads to death. I asked her to share some of the stories she has witnessed with dementia patients and their families. She said that watching families plagued by this disease is one of the most difficult aspects of her job. The story she shared that made the biggest impression on me came from her association with a middle-aged woman, who had suffered tremendous stress--and, consequently, emotional and physical deterioration--due to her role as caregiver for both a physically disabled husband and a mother with Alzheimer's, who no longer recognized her. In addition to the physical toll that her day-to-day routine took on her body, the dementia, which had made her mother belligerent and paranoid, drained this woman emotionally, as well. Gail suggested that I pick up the book, *The 36-Hour Day*, to gain a broader perspective on the complexities of dementia from both the clinical and day-to-day angles.

As I glanced through the table of contents of this book, by Nancy Mace and Peter Rabins, I knew immediately why Gail had recommended it. This publication covers everything from an in-depth discussion on the meaning of "dementia" to practical and legal advice for caregivers. Interspersed throughout the book are true anecdotes about caregivers, which not only serve to exemplify the particular points being made, but also stand as

evidence that those who are reading are not alone in their day-to-day feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

Mace and Rabins define dementia as "a loss or impairment of mental powers" (5). They describe the two most common forms, Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia, the latter of which is caused by a succession of strokes within the brain. When a person first starts exhibiting signs of memory loss and confusion (the type which interferes with daily life), they might be diagnosed with "early dementia." Depending on the type of dementia, the symptoms could progress into the "moderate" and "severe" stages. The authors point out that one of the most important things to keep in mind is that "severe memory loss is *never* a normal part of growing older," as only five percent of older people suffer from this stage of dementia. It is, in fact, a disease and deserves to be treated as such (7).

Caregivers of patients with dementia who read this book could benefit from the authors' thorough investigation and useful advice in matters such as eating behaviors, exercise, personal hygiene, incontinence, and various medical issues, including pressure sores, constipation, falls, seizures, and medications. The chapters involving changes in behavior and mood cover a catalog of issues, such as memory loss, night wandering, hoarding and hiding things, complaints and insults,

stubbornness, apathy, anger, anxiety, paranoia, and hallucinations.

Negative changes in behavior can be one of the most difficult problems caregivers must deal with. Many are truly taken by surprise and suffer hurt feelings when parents, who had always been thoughtful and loving, suddenly turn on them with insults and accusations of stealing their things. In response, these caregivers often develop feelings of anger, loneliness, helplessness, guilt, fatigue, and depression. At times, they are even driven to taking out their frustration on the very people they are responsible for protecting. Mace and Rabins state that these feelings are quite normal, but that the important thing for caregivers to remember when they reach this level of anger is that the negative behavior stems from a disease which interferes with the sick person's ability to control his or her actions (208). The authors suggest taking a proactive approach in dealing with these feelings, such as asking friends or relatives for help or joining a support group for family members of those suffering with Alzheimer's and other dementing illnesses (234).

*The 36-Hour Day* became an invaluable tool in developing the characters in my play. I was able to create the complex and heartbreakingly strained relationship of Jenny and Ruth, knowing the behavioral disorders that those with dementia exhibit.

Especially helpful was the section which discusses the "fluctuation" in abilities, such as cognitive impairment (45). A person with dementia (especially one in the early stages) can be quite lucid and sharp one minute and confused and forgetful the next. In addition, the chapter covering family disagreements and anger toward those unwilling to help provided a useful background in creating the dysfunctional relationship between Ruth and her brother, John.

### Hospice

In addition to dementia, Jenny's character has also had a bout with leukemia, an issue that becomes an important part of the play. In order to create a believable hospice nurse character, I knew it was important to have a better understanding of the hospice system and of the procedures a hospice nurse follows during a visit to a patient's home. The first call I made was to an RN, and long-time friend, Shawna Gibson. After a few initial questions about checking vital signs and proper nutrition, I realized that as knowledgeable as she was, I was never going to feel truly comfortable writing the part of the nurse in my play until I could witness a hospice nurse in action. Shawna suggested that I call a hospice facility and ask if I could shadow one of its nurses.

After I hung up, I continued researching. I came across a website, <http://www.hospicenet.org>, where I found excellent information on the origin of hospice; its mission ("to help the dying die with comfort, dignity, and love, and to help survivors cope both before and after the death"); and the organization of a "hospice team" for each patient; which includes a physician, a nurse, a home health aide, a social worker, and--if needed or requested by the family--a chaplain and a volunteer. At this site, I also found information on how a patient becomes eligible for hospice and on the services Medicare covers. Under Medicare guidelines, both a physician and hospice director must determine that the patient has a life expectancy of six months or less in order to be eligible for hospice.

About a week later, I was feeling a little more confident about my knowledge of hospice, but still not secure enough to write the part of my nurse. I thought about Shawna's suggestion, but was fairly certain that because of patient privacy laws, no hospice facility would allow me to observe a patient visit. Nevertheless, I reasoned that all they could do was tell me, "no." So, I pulled out the phone book and randomly selected a company in Edmond called Centennial Hospice. I explained that I was writing a play (which was also my thesis) and asked if it would be possible to shadow one of their nurses. To my surprise,



they did not hesitate to set up an appointment so that I could meet, interview, and observe a hospice nurse.

When I arrived at Centennial on July 21, 2009, the director, Karen, took a copy of my photo I.D. and had me sign a patient privacy agreement. After this, I was introduced to Dave, an RN, who had been working as a hospice nurse for five years. One of the first requests I made of him was to describe his typical day. He said that he saw anywhere from three to five patients per day, which is determined by the client load the facility has at the time. Dave told me that he visits his patients once or twice a week, depending on their needs. If the patient is in his or her last week, the nurse visits every day. The nurses at the hospice facility also take turns being on-call. If caregivers have specific concerns, they can contact the nurse at any time. Dave stated that the types of concerns range from a refusal to take prescribed medication to the patient falling. If a fall has occurred, the nurse must respond within twenty-four hours to make sure the patient has not suffered any head injuries or broken bones.

The patient we visited that morning, "Tom,"<sup>1</sup> had suffered a stroke and was no longer ambulatory. He resided at a nursing home in North Oklahoma City. Dave introduced me to this kind man and told him why I was there. He (and every other patient I

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<sup>1</sup> All patients' and caregivers' names have been changed in order to comply with their rights to privacy.

visited) seemed intrigued and quite willing to help in my quest to paint an accurate picture. Dave commenced with his examination, checking Tom's heart rate, his blood pressure, his temperature, and listening to his heart and lungs. Because the patient was bed-ridden for the large majority of the day, Dave also checked his body for bed sores. He found one on his heel and placed a pillow underneath to elevate his foot. He told Tom to leave the pillow there so that the sore did not become infected. Dave also expressed his concern about Tom's weight, which had plummeted from 147 to 107 since the time of his stroke. He encouraged Tom to eat so that he could keep up his strength and made notes in the patient's chart for both the nursing center and the hospice facility.

Centennial was holding an office meeting that afternoon, so Karen encouraged me to come back the next morning so I could observe more patient visits. The next day she paired me with Carolyn, an RN, who had been working as a hospice nurse for ten years. She told me that the first patient she had on her list to visit that day had passed away the night before. I began to contemplate the difficulty of this job and to marvel at how compassionate yet strong a person must be in order to do this day after day.

I asked Carolyn if she could get me a list of the diagnoses that are covered by hospice. She gave me a booklet from her last

employer, VistaCare, which lists these illnesses and the symptoms patients must be exhibiting in order to be eligible for hospice. A few of the illnesses listed in this booklet are heart disease, Huntington's disease, cancer, pulmonary disease, Parkinson's disease, liver disease, stroke, renal failure, and dementia.

Carolyn and I visited two nursing homes and two private homes that day. The nursing center visits (both of which were for patients who had suffered strokes) proved to be quite similar to the procedures followed by Dave the day before. Since the setting of my play was to take place in Ruth's home, I was eager to witness the private home visits. At the first home in Northwest Oklahoma City, I met 92 year-old "Mary," who was in the final stage of dementia. No longer ambulatory and mostly non-verbal, Mary lived with her sister, "Jewel," who took care of her round-the-clock. Carolyn greeted Mary--as she does with all of her patients--with a kiss on the forehead. She, then, opened up her bag (a small suitcase on wheels) and pulled out the patient's chart and some nursing supplies (blood pressure cuff, thermometer, and stethoscope).

As I observed Carolyn, I began to notice that many of the procedures and questions were the same for all patients, no matter their diagnoses. Carolyn checked Mary's blood pressure, her heart rate, her temperature, and listened to her lungs. She

asked Jewel about Mary's bowel movements and if she had been experiencing any increase in pain. Carolyn reminded Jewel to turn Mary every three to four hours to avoid bed sores. As Carolyn was checking the patient for sores, she showed me the bruising on her body and said that this was normal with patients Mary's age because the skin is so "paper thin" that even a slight brush with a fingernail could cause a bruise. In addition, she spoke with Jewel about Mary's eating habits. Jewel stated that Mary still seemed to have an appetite, but that she was concerned about her tendency to choke when she was feeding her the pureed food. Carolyn told her to stop feeding her immediately if she begins to choke and make sure she has completely settled down and her breathing is normal before she commences. Otherwise, as Carolyn explained, Mary could begin to aspirate (take food into her lungs). She also gave Jewel a container of a powder called "Thick-It," which when added to pureed food makes aspiration less likely.

Before we left, Carolyn expressed her concern to Jewel that she looked extremely tired. Jewel told her that she did not sleep well at night because she was concerned about her sister. Carolyn encouraged Jewel to see if a relative or friend could relieve her once or twice a week so that she could focus on her own mental and physical well-being. However, Jewel seemed

unconvinced that anyone she knew would give her sister the type of constant attention and care she required.

At the second home, just a couple of miles away in Bethany, I met a 98 year-old woman, "June" and her caregiver daughter, "Sarah." Unlike her siblings, Sarah was not married and had no children; therefore, the responsibility of taking her mother in and caring for her had fallen squarely on her shoulders. June, who also suffered from acute dementia, was non-ambulatory, but, unlike Mary, she spoke in clear, coherent sentences when asked questions. Sarah said that her dementia had been getting worse, but that we had stopped by on one of her "good days." Carolyn ran through all the normal procedures and questions and advised June to sit up as much as she could in order to keep her strength up. Sarah said that she had given June the prune juice for her constipation, as Carolyn had advised, but that it had, instead, created a terrible bout of diarrhea. Carolyn suggested decreasing the dosage to one-third of the amount she had given her before.

As Carolyn finished filling out paperwork in the bedroom, I spoke with Sarah in the living room. I asked her to describe her typical day. She responded that her entire life took place within the walls of her home. She said that if she pleaded with her siblings, she could get one of them to come up twice a month so that she could get groceries and run other errands. This

twice-monthly trip outside of her home was like a race, however, because her siblings could never stay more than forty-five minutes at a time. My heart ached for her as she described her regimented and seemingly dismal life. Something as simple as taking a shower put her on edge because her mother had tried to get up and fallen once before when Sarah was in the shower.

The most exciting thing that had happened to her recently was when--at Carolyn's suggestion--she purchased a baby monitor. This simple device allowed her to go outside and work in her garden--something she enjoyed but had not been able to do in a long time because she couldn't be out of hearing range of her mother. On the way home, I reflected on the words of Jewel and Sarah and thought about how their stories had been so reflective of those I had read in *The 36-Hour Day*. And I thought about my husband and my mother and how others could never truly know the burden of the title "caregiver" unless they had held it themselves.

### **Developing the Characters and the Structure of the Play**

Last summer, before I began crafting the full-length version of *Dirty Laundry*, I decided to review the basic guidelines for writing a good play. In one of my old textbooks, *Naked Playwriting*, I reread the section on creating the setting of a play. Authors William Downs and Robin Russin suggest that

writers stick with simple sets in order to have a greater chance of having their plays produced (16). By moving the location of my play into Ruth's modest living room, I am not only creating a simple set for directors and theatres to work with, but--as mentioned earlier--I am also changing the dynamics from the earlier one-act version. Now, Ruth becomes a full time caregiver and the dysfunctional relationship with her son can also be explored. Therefore, the stakes, and thus the level of tension, rise quickly.

I also obtained a copy of another text, *The Elements of Playwriting*, by Louis E. Catron and read it from cover to cover. None of the other playwriting books I have on my shelf had inspired me as much as this one did. By following the advice and exercises in this book, I knew--by the time I finished reading it--the motivations and personalities of all my characters, the major plot points in the play, and how it was going to end.

One of the first pieces of advice that I found helpful in *The Elements* came from the section on the action of characters. In order to understand and to be consistent with characters' motivations, the playwright should come up with an "I" statement for each one of them. The "I" should be followed by a present tense verb which describes each character's "movement throughout the play" (70). After contemplating my characters and their motivations, I came up with the following: Jenny, "I complain";

Ruth, "I survive" (This one might sound a bit vague, but for me, it helped to define that she is--as her son stated--operating on "automatic-pilot."); Stew, "I lounge"; John, "I deceive"; Wes, "I comfort."

Canton suggests that a series of questions should be answered for the protagonist and antagonist (91). First of all, writers have to know what their characters want and what (or who) has driven them toward these goals. Then, they have to answer what person or object is standing in their paths. Next, writers must decide what steps the characters will take toward achieving their goals. Finally, in order for the play to be interesting, these characters must have something important they are risking in taking these steps.

When Wes enters the scene, a frustrated and bitter Ruth is reawakened, both personally and sexually. At this point, she begins to pursue her goal of having a life outside of the role of "caregiver." However, her obligations toward Jenny, the main antagonist, stand in her way. In addition, other roadblocks arise, such as her enabling relationship toward her son and her need to stand guard whenever her conniving brother comes calling. Nevertheless, after she meets Wes, Ruth takes a series of steps throughout the play toward her goal. First, she allows herself to pursue a relationship with Wes; then, she begins to stand up to Jenny, Stew, and John. In addition, this bolder



persona now wears makeup and nicer clothing. Finally, by leaving to apply for college, she makes a statement of her seriousness to pursue a life of her own. Yet, these steps to improve her personal life put her at risk of losing the comfortable numbness to which she has become accustomed.

Jenny and Stew's mutual goal works in opposition to Ruth's. They are determined to maintain the status quo in their household. Jenny's cruel and blunt words convey only anger and disappointment toward Ruth, not only because she feels bitter about having to depend on a daughter whom she sees as weak, but also because she has always held a level of resentment about Ruth and her father's close relationship. At the same time, she realizes that her daughter might just be the only dependable thing she has in her life.

Although not physically dependent like his grandmother, Stew relies on his mother for emotional and monetary support. Every time he ventures out on his own, he realizes his inability to function in the real world. Part of this dysfunction springs from his mother's coddling. The other part, from his own laziness. Wes, therefore, becomes the object that gets in the way of this mutually shared goal of Jenny and Stew. The various steps they take to discourage Ruth from shifting her focus away from them include chiding her for writing, for applying to college, and for her forward behavior toward Wes. In doing this,

however, they risk making her even more determined to accomplish her goal.

John, another antagonist, wants to swindle his mother out of her savings so that he can get in on the latest "get rich quick scheme" and finally achieve success at something. On two different occasions, he drops by to "visit," and (the second time) almost makes it out the door with the money, but is foiled by his sister. His actions place what little relationship he has left with his family at risk.

The chapter in *The Elements* on structuring the play also proved to be quite useful. According to Catron, "the inciting incident is a major event that happened before [the] play began" that usually causes the play's "point of attack" (97-98). In *Dirty Laundry*, Ruth reveals the inciting incident when she tells her mother that she called hospice to come out and check on her.

The "point of attack"--as mentioned earlier--disturbs the play's initial equilibrium and triggers a series of events that occur throughout the remainder of the play. At the beginning of *Dirty Laundry*, Ruth has been simply surviving in her structured and unstimulating life as a caregiver. Although her frustration and bitterness surface from time to time, she does not do anything to change her situation. Wes's visit, thus, becomes the play's point of attack, occurring as a direct result of the phone call (inciting incident) and causing a reawakening in

Ruth, leading to physical changes--in her house and in her own appearance--and attitudinal changes, leading her to stand up to her three antagonists and leave to apply for college.

In reference to the intermission, Catron states, "Acts end with suspense" so that the audience will be intrigued and want to return to find out what happens (115). Act One of *Dirty Laundry* ends with a full view of the changed world following the point of attack: Jenny and Wes are complaining because Ruth's focus has shifted; while, Ruth--ignoring them--walks over, picks up Wes's card, and smiles.

As Act Two begins, the audience can see the changes in Ruth and her home. Wes, now her lover, continues to be a source of support--letting her know that her frustration is natural and urging her to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher, regardless of her age. Yet, in a major reversal (an event that "changes the course of [a play's] action" 108) in Scene Two, Ruth returns to her house, having forgotten her college application, to discover John, holding a roll of Jenny's money. After standing up to John and kicking him out with a stern warning that he will risk his life if he returns, Ruth picks up her application and drops it in the trash. Having perceived this close-call as a consequence of letting her guard down to pursue her own interests, Ruth reverts to her solitary role as "caregiver."

The climax, which is the "highest point in the dramatic series of events" (116), occurs right after this. Ruth, back in her old programmed routine, attempts to put a sweater on her mother so that she can take her out to get her exercise. Jenny, still furious with Ruth for kicking John out, struggles with her and calls her a "whore." Ruth slaps her, an event which shocks both Ruth and her son, who immediately scolds his mother for striking an elderly woman. Unable to rationally defend this action, Ruth becomes defensive and tells her son to "get his fucking pants on and get out of [her] house."

Scene Three provides the denouement, which is the action after the climax that serves to "knit together the loose ends" (118). Wes stops by to deliver the bad news that Jenny's cancer has returned. Although this is not a total surprise to Ruth, it hits her quite hard because of the guilt she still feels over striking her mother. She explains to Wes that she cannot see him anymore and that school was a nice "fantasy," but she needs to focus her entire attention on Jenny. Unable to convince her otherwise, Wes agrees to leave but refuses to give up on her, retrieving her college application from the trash and tucking it under his arm. After he exits, Ruth begins to empty the contents of her shopping bag: toilet paper, lotion kleenex, and peanut M&Ms. When she pulls out the M&Ms, she stops suddenly, realizing that she had picked them up at the store out of habit. She

studies them for a moment, then walks over to the trash and drops them in--a sign of her letting go of Stew and of the guilt she has held onto for so long over her daughter's death. As she begins to weep, she is interrupted by her mother's cries. Delusional and with her defenses down, Jenny calls out for the only real advocate she has in life--her daughter, Ruth.

### Revisions

Belonging to a writers' group has provided me with an invaluable source of motivation and support. The five other members of my group are always forthright with their opinions and suggestions. After I finished the first draft of *Dirty Laundry*, I asked if everyone was willing to do a reading of the play in its entirety. Even though I had already workshopped the first act with them, I felt it was very important to have it read from the beginning so that they could give me feedback on the play's consistency. They agreed.

As I sat back and listened, I made notes on a few passages of awkwardly worded dialogue and on a couple of misspelled words that I had overlooked before. After the reading, they made several positive comments on the authentic feeling of the dialogue and the fluid nature of the play's construction. Gaylene suggested I break up a lengthy passage in which Jenny complains about Ruth's "screaming like a chimpanzee" when she

was born. Rick commented on a couple of passages where I used the phrases, "tell me your favorite story" and "I'm going to tell you something." He said that announcing to the audience that a story is about to be told sometimes turns them off. Instead, a writer should jump right into the story so that the flow of dialogue is not interrupted by an unnecessary pronouncement.

The major point of constructive criticism that I received from all members of the group concerned the dark ending. Ron said that it was "too real" for him and was "depressing." Gaylene stated that the ending just needed a small glimmer of hope in order to be satisfying. The others agreed. Unable to sleep that night, I went over this "glimmer of hope" discussion in my head. I knew that if they all agreed, then I should definitely consider changing it. However, I was afraid of losing my vision for the play and of falling into a contrived mess. After all, Ruth had definite reasons for slipping back into her martyrdom, and to have her change her mind, suddenly, in the last scene was unacceptable to me.

The next day, I called Jennifer--another member of the group--and asked her advice. She said that she understood my feelings about Ruth, but that I should ask myself if Wes was the type of character to give up on her that easily. My answer was a resounding, "no." "Well then," Jennifer replied. "It sounds like

the glimmer of hope should come from him." As simple as her advice was, it served to dislodge the block from my brain and relieve my frustration. A simple gesture--his removing the application from the trash--was all it would take for the audience to know that although Ruth had given up on her own dreams, there would be someone out there who was still fighting for her.

When I visited with my thesis advisor, James Dolph, he said that I might have people who have issues with the "downer ending." I told him what my writers' group had said and that I was already working on the "glimmer of hope" resolution. He also expressed his concern that Ruth, the protagonist, had not shown enough growth at the end. He said that he didn't believe Ruth was sincere, for example, when she told her son to leave, stating this needed to be more "final." I knew he was right, but that afternoon as I sat in front of my computer trying to resolve this issue, I came to the conclusion that no matter what Ruth said to him, it was still going to come across as something said in the heat of an argument that she would probably change her mind about later. I decided to discuss this with my husband--another source of support and good suggestions. As we were talking about it, I made the comment that I wasn't sure why Ruth bought the M&Ms in the last scene. His reply was, "Why don't you have her throw them in the trash?" Eureka! If Ruth were to stop

suddenly when she pulled out the M&Ms, then carry them over and drop them in the trash, this would serve as a symbol of her growth. Although she has resigned herself to taking care of her sick mother, she refuses to continue being a crutch for a son who is fully capable of taking care of himself. Moreover, in taking this action, she also gives herself permission to drop the cloak of guilt she has been wearing for the past thirty years over her daughter's death. Thus, another glimmer of hope appears without cheapening the play by giving it a happy ending.



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