

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone
Projects

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

2-2016

Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level

Ryan P. Tofil

Graduate Center, City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/688

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level

by

Ryan P. Tofil

A capstone research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level

by

Ryan P. Tofil

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Carrie Hintz

Date

Thesis Advisor

Matthew Gold

Date

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level

by

Ryan P. Tofil

Advisor: Professor Carrie Hintz

Pulitzer prize winning playwright John Patrick Shanley wrote, “Theatre is a safe place to do the unsafe things that need to be done.” For my Capstone Project, I have compiled my autobiographical poetry, prose, and performance monologues into a theatrical manuscript to be used as the basis for a play. The final Capstone Project is a manuscript of an anticipated theatrical production based on the grieving process surrounding my brother's suicide, as well as an exploration of my sexuality and the relationships I developed during the years surrounding his death.

The Capstone Project's theatrical manuscript is also accompanied by a 20-page analysis essay describing how my autobiographical works, mainly based on sexuality and grieving, relate to famed autobiographical writers Alison Bechdel, author of the graphic memoir *Fun Home, A Family Tragicomic*, and Joan Didion, who wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Bechdel's text focuses primarily on her homosexuality and her father's closeted sexuality, which led to his suicide. Didion's novel is an account of her grieving the sudden death of her husband, as well as coping with the critical illness of her daughter. Both authors have had their novels turned into Broadway productions. I have shaped my writing in the same theatrical fashion. My analysis

paper describes how writing, transformed into a theatrical play, is more compelling for a live audience. Intimate work based on issues that are difficult to describe tends to be better understood when experienced by actors performing truthfully under the written word of the playwright.

Oscar Wilde's prose and Walt Whitman's poetry also served as inspiration and guidance for my project. I was influenced to take my poetry to a theatrical level by Whitman's line from his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, "A great poem is no finish to a man or a woman but rather a beginning." My poetry served as the starting point from which my script will unfold. Wilde's line, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life," confirms that the autobiographical events I write about will be best received in a performance venue, where a heightened and theatrical reality are key to successfully telling a compelling story.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my thesis advisor professor Carrie Hintz, and inspiring professors throughout my undergrad to master's degree: Debora Lidov, Gary Schidgall and Jeffrey Hogrefe. Also, tremendous appreciation for Matthew Corozine, Beverly Z. Davis, Mary Vetting and all the artists at the Matthew Corozine Studio for their constant encouragement and support.

In memory of my brother Bruce Edward Tofil, 1974-2003

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Copyright Page	ii
Approval Page	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Analysis Paper:	1
Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level	
Bibliography	22
Theatrical Manuscript:	23
PART ONE: A Play in One Act	

Autobiographical Poetry to Plays: Taking Memoir to a Theatrical Level

Pulitzer prize-winning playwright John Patrick Shanley wrote, “Theatre is a safe place to do the unsafe things that need to be done.”¹ For my Capstone Project, I have compiled autobiographical poetry, prose, and performance monologues into a theatrical manuscript to be used as the basis for a play. My submitted Capstone Project is a manuscript of an anticipated theatrical production based on the grieving process after my brother's suicide, as well as an exploration of my sexuality and the relationships I developed during those years.

The following essay describes how my autobiographical works, mainly based on sexuality and grieving and told mostly from my mother's viewpoint, relate to famed autobiographical writers Alison Bechdel, author of the graphic memoir *Fun Home, A Family Tragicomic* (2006), and Joan Didion, who wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). Bechdel's text focuses primarily on her homosexuality and her father's closeted sexuality, which led to his alleged suicide. Didion's novel is an account of grieving the sudden death of her husband, as well as coping with the critical illness of her daughter. Both authors have had their novels turned into Broadway productions. I have shaped my autobiographical writing in the same theatrical fashion. Throughout this paper I will detail how my pieces, transformed into a theatrical play, are more compelling when presented before a live audience. The intimate and personal autobiographical works that Didion and Bechdel chose to share continue to touch and transformed the lives of their audiences.

Oscar Wilde's prose and Walt Whitman's poetry have also served as inspiration and guidance for my project. I was influenced to take my poetry to a theatrical level by Whitman's

¹ John Patrick Shanley, *The Big Funk: A Casual Play* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1991), 5. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

line from his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), “A great poem is no finish to a man or a woman but rather a beginning.”² My poetry serves as the starting point from which my script unfolds. Wilde’s line from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), “I love acting. It is so much more real than life,”³ confirms that the autobiographical events I’ve incorporated into the script will be best received in a performance venue, where a heightened and theatrical reality are key to successfully telling a compelling story.

GETTING NAKED WITH WHITMAN AND WILDE

In my early 20s, I decided to continue my academics and earn an undergraduate degree following my time spent at a musical theatre and acting academy. One of my first courses at Hunter College was *Whitman and Wilde: The Art of Subversion*, taught by Professor Gary Schmidgall. At that time, I was simultaneously rehearsing, and eventually starring in, an Off-off Broadway production of *The Big Funk, a casual play* (1991) by playwright John Patrick Shanley. I was astonished at how the themes in Whitman and Wilde’s literary work paralleled the plot of Shanley’s piece. Whitman and Wilde’s words empowered me and made me a more courageous actor. The overall plot of *The Big Funk* (1991) not only revealed the heart and soul of all the characters, but also my character’s naked body in the show’s conclusion.

The director of the production, Matthew Corozine, stylized *The Big Funk* (1991) around an imaginary mirror focused over the audience. The mirror represented the truth of each

² Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman Selected Poems 1855-1892*, ed. Gary Schmidgall (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 13. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989), 70. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

character's soul. This helped the audience see directly into the eyes of the actors. The objective was to enable the audience to realize the truth for themselves.

“It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,” (17) wrote Wilde. It is the audience, the spectators, who experience the feelings. When art is expressed in a theatrical venue, it triggers one into being present to the action and emotions on stage. It propels humans to take a deeper look at reality, and indirectly unifies the audience with a shared experience.

Shanley wrote about the inevitable connection that humans have with each other in his preface to *The Big Funk* (1991):

Each person has an enormous effect. Call it environmental impact if you like. Where my foot falls, I leave a mark, whether I want to or not. We are linked together, each to each. You can't breathe without taking a breath from somebody else. You can't smile without changing the landscape (5).

Whitman eloquently illustrated the same idea when he wrote, “From the eyesight proceeds another eyesight and from the hearing proceeds another hearing and from the voice proceeds another voice eternally curious of the harmony of things with man” (7).

Whitman was like an actor when he expressed the truest feelings of his soul for all mankind to live through and simultaneously experience. He proclaimed in the introduction to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as well belongs to you” (1-3).

In *Leaves of Grass* #24 (1855), Whitman asked his readers to,

Lift me close to your face till I whisper,

What you are holding is in reality no book, nor part of a book,

It is a man, flushed and full-blooded—it is I—*So long!*

We must separate—Here! Take from my lips this kiss,

Whoever you are, I give it especially to you;

So long—and I hope we shall meet again (“Leaves” 1-6).

He wanted so much to embrace all of humanity. Whitman was insistent, passionate, forceful, and forthright on exposing and sharing all his love, doubts, fears, passions, ideas, and mysteries so everyone could experience and share the divine feelings of his soul. Shanley shared the same beliefs in regard to acting, “An actor that is truly heroic reveals the divine that passes through him, that aspect that he does not own and cannot control” (5).

An actor, or any artist, faces the challenge of truly revealing their soul while fearing judgment and ridicule from the audience. Wilde illustrated this struggle and frustration in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1989): “The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (21). Yet, in order to be a true artist, one must reveal. The only meaningful reality to which mankind can connect is achieved through human emotion. Emotionally uninvolved people are merely shadows of existence. Ironically, Sibyl Vane, a character in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1989), announced to her lover Dorian that she was giving up her profession as an actress, “I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be” (75). Dorian harshly responded, “Without your art you are nothing” (75). Sibyl Vane was found dead the next day. Although it may not be the literal reason for her death, the scenario indirectly illustrates that without art—the expression of one’s truth—one ceases to exist.

“I will not bare my soul to their shallow prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing” (25), wrote Wilde. Yet, as a performer, one is always begrudgingly being examined. In the production of *The Big Funk*

(1991), my character, Austin, was a philosopher and an actor who announced in his opening monologue exactly what it meant to be *an actor* and how it felt to have his heart constantly under a microscope. Austin said people tried to get him to, “do this, believe that, eat this, change my hair, change my clothes, my manners, my posture” (12). He then catches himself in the imaginary mirror and expressed how that really made him feel, “. . .it don’t make me feel loved” (12). Austin hated when people treated him that way and was confident in stating his philosophy to anyone who would listen, “I believe in live and let live” (11). Like Whitman, who wrote, “Men and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are” (9). Austin was dedicated to honoring his and other people’s decisions and realities.

The Big Funk (1991) also had three other important characters, all of whom express what it feels like to be misunderstood. The character Fifi, first seen looking like a stereotypical housewife, drops her social persona and reveals her true self in the mirror. In doing so, she admits that most of her pain came from the fact that her father was not a very loving individual (8). Such calculations echo Wilde’s statement, “Science is that it is not emotional.” Feeling an overwhelming sense of loss, Fifi metaphorically enters the desert to tear her hair and hurt herself with stones. In her torture she discovers her soul and rejoices, “A cry came out of me. And as it came out, the sky cracked open, the earth burst into flames, and I saw beauty. Again” (8). This self-discovery encourages Fifi to continue in spite of life’s harsh realities. Her finding “beauty” as a sense of hope, reflects Wilde’s philosophy, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope” (17).

Fifi is married to Omar, a man who feels that his parents didn’t praise him enough. Now, in his adult life, he has a hole where his heart should be (10). Jill, the girl to whom my character tries to play hero, opens the show by saying very matter-of-factly, “I am not the hero in this play.

I am not the hero of any play I could be in” (7). Men have hurt her to the point that she doesn’t feel loved. Austin sets his sights on correcting the wrongdoings of mankind.

Finally, Austin is angered and heartbroken when he sees the pain of his mother in Jill’s eyes. He tells Jill that his mother died without ever facing herself. Austin continues his painful lament by saying, “She went to her grave a victim.” Austin then reluctantly turns to Jill and admits, “You’re like her” (44). Shanley’s lines about not facing herself, causing her to go to her grave a victim, can be interpreted as owning up to one’s soul, just as Oscar Wilde’s Sybil Vane gave up her passion for acting and subsequently died the next day.

Austin, no longer wanting to feel like a failed hero or savior for everyone, abruptly exits the stage. For motivation while performing as Austin, I recalled Whitman’s line, “I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me” (“Leaves” 11-12). Austin soon reenters a changed man; an enlightened and literally a naked man. A man who does not want to die without facing himself, his fears, and his doubts. He reappears nude, revealing himself and his soul entirely. Carrying only a hand held mirror, Austin shows the audience and the other actors themselves so that they may also try to see the divine truth in their souls.

I had thought when I accepted the role that if I felt uncomfortable being naked, I could maybe appear semi-naked. Yet, as an actor I needed to reveal my body entirely to be true to myself and true to the playwright. Wilde wrote, “Nothing should reveal the body but the body” (1205). Shanley sought to expose the audience to true human existence so that they may become one with their body and soul. Wilde also stated, “To influence a person is to give him one’s own soul” (28). As he wrote, “He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him” (29). Yet, Wilde also wrote, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is

art's aim" (17). In this case, John Patrick Shanley was the artist concealed in the lines of the show. And my character, Austin, was the one who had to reveal himself in order to tell the story.

Shanley, like Wilde, also believed that art is the consequence of true expression, as he wrote in his preface to *The Big Funk* (1991),

Act from the depth of your feeling imagination. Act for celebration, for search, for grieving, for worship, to express that desolate sensation of wandering through the howling wilderness. Don't worry about Art. Do these things and it will be Art (6).

"The aim of life is self development. To realize one's nature perfectly—that is what each of us is here for" (29), wrote Wilde. Achieving the experience of accepting and realizing one's nature was my goal in the production. Post-performance, I felt successful because I expressed Shanley's words and intent to an audience. I was, and will forever be, grateful to have been given the chance to perform such an inspired role. The show was closely related to some of Whitman's and Wilde's work, so both poets' philosophies informed my motivation throughout the performance. To continue as an actor, I knew I had to write and uncover what was in *my* heart and soul as well. I did so, as an undergrad, by writing poems.

NAKED POETRY

In my mid twenties, my poetry education was just beginning. To expose the truth within myself would become an ongoing battle—not because I intended to lie—but because once a truth is discovered, a new truth is exposed. Therefore, art and poetry are never complete. It is a perpetual process in which humans explore and express the deeper meaning and reality of life. In doing so, a good poet will mold his or her craft so that others may experience and share the journey for themselves.

As a new poet, I recalled my initial reactions to starting as a nascent actor. When I first began training in theatre, I thought it was the observation of others that would enhance my craft. I have since learned that it is rather the observation and realization of oneself that makes for a powerful performance, which in turn leads to an intimate connection with the audience. Like good acting, the more specific the poet is to their feelings and experiences, the better the poem will be received and felt by the reader. Thus, a connection is made specific by one's own example, rather than playing for something that is generally accepted or cliché.

Beauty can be found in the simplicity of a gesture, or even one's experience of gazing at the sky. Yet, how does a poet gesture in writing? Words are the only way a writer has to express feelings. Whitman explained the necessity and power of text, and also gave an example of his observation, when he wrote,

But to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art (7).

Somehow, his words evoke nuances and sensations in the reader's heart. "The movements of animals... the sentiment of trees." Beginning with a non-abstract example of animals moving, to personify the sentiment of trees, results in his words taking life and therefore allowing his words to figuratively gesture to his reader's heart. Like Whitman, writing was quickly allowing me, also, to connect with emotions, both my own and my readers', and take risks I would have otherwise feared in life.

POETRY TO PLAYS

Famed author Joan Didion said that writing her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), aided the grieving process surrounding her husband's death. Transforming her work into

a theatrical production also helped. When discussing the adaptation of her book into a play, she said, “For me, it's part of the process of understanding anything. Because until I have gotten it outside of myself, I don't understand it.”⁴ The script version of her memoir forced Didion to rewrite the piece and experience an actor interpreting and performing her written emotions. Didion was not only literally getting the feeling and words out of herself. She was allowing an actor and director to interpret her point of view on the death of her husband.

I looked closely at what Didion chose to keep when transferring her memoir into a one-woman, staged adaptation. The play is considerably shorter than the book; 227 pages are condensed into 62. The play, written in the first person, as was the memoir, follows the same format as the book, yet omits elaborate explanations and focuses on concrete details to bring the audience closer to the story's action. Her book opens with the lines:

Life changes fast.
Life changes in an instant.
You sit down for dinner and life as you know it ends.⁵

The play, however, attempts to bring the audience more immediately into the moment with the first line, “This happened on December 30, 2003.” Didion follows with, “That may seem a while ago but it won't when it happens to you.”⁶ And the actor adds solemnly, “And it will happen to you” (2007, 1). This serves as a direct warning to the audience that they will, one day, experience tragic or sudden events. She continues to write that although an individual's

⁴ Renee Montagne, *NPR*. February 8, 2007.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7238970> (accessed November 8, 2015), 1.

⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Vintage International, 2005), 3. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Joan Didion. *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 1. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

details will be different from hers, something unexpected will happen, and one will remember each moment as clearly as she did.

In her memoir, she wrote more about the moments before her husband stopped moving, about events that led up to just before she realized he had passed out. The play quickly establishes her setting with the line, “We had come home” (2007,1). Deciding to stay in and build a fire, Joan was able to create the warmth associated with the moments prior to her husband’s death, recalling other times when the couple would build a fire to heat their Malibu home. “Fires said we were home, we had drawn the circle, we were safe for the night” (2007,1). Yet on the night her husband stopped moving, she recalled, “Memory stops. The time freezes” (2007, 2).

The character Joan, from the play, then addresses the audience, “I’m telling you what you need to know” (2007, 2). Though her book allows the reader to experience the tragedy as she experienced it, the play more clearly acts as an instructional guide for the audience to remember when a similar life-changing event occurred. The play continues with the lines, “You see me on this stage...” The author is making a clear connection to allow the audience to break the fourth wall, allowing the play’s character to interact directly with the audience. She brings her listeners closer by saying, “... you sit next to me on a plane, you run into me at dinner, you know what happened to me.” To emphasize the importance of her words, Joan concludes her opening statements by saying, “You don’t want to think it could happen to you. That’s why I’m here” (2007, 2).

After someone dies, especially when the death is unexpected, many people say to the grieving, “I can’t imagine what you are going through.” Didion’s book and play try to help

enlighten such people, and both works act as introspective views into her life, the events that led up to her husband's death, and how her mind coped with the tragic loss of her spouse.

I was able to relate a lot of Didion's feelings and thoughts in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). When my brother committed suicide, I was enrolled in introductory poetry courses at Hunter College. It was at that time that I was exposed to the poem *Part of Eve's Discussion* (2003) by Marie Howe:

It was like the moment when a bird decides not to eat from your hand,
and flies, just before it flies, the moment the rivers seem to still
and stop because a storm is coming, but there is no storm, as when
a hundred starlings lift and bank together before they wheel and drop,
very much like the moment, driving on bad ice, when it occurs to you
your car could spin, just before it slowly begins to spin, like
the moment just before you forgot what it was you were about to say,
it was like that, and after that, it was still like that, only
all the time.⁷ (1-9)

Howe's poem inspired me to write about the moment I was told about my brother's death. I tried to express the feeling and sensation exactly as I recalled it; using the moment-to-moment framework Howe used when constructing *Part of Eve's Discussion* (2003) My poem, is titled *What It's Like When Your Brother Commits Suicide*:

⁷ Marie Howe, *The Writer's Almanac*. August 18th, 2003.
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2013/08/18> (accessed November 8th, 2015), 1.

after your mother tells you
her voiced pitched in a way you have never heard her use
she hands the phone to someone else
and that voice says, *did you hear all that*
you say, *yes*
and hang up the phone
then you go over to the food you were just about to eat
and tell the person standing there
who knows something bad has happened
you tell her
then you sit down to eat
because you know you won't feel like eating later
but you find yourself staring at the food
thinking now might be a good time to cry
so you get up
but it's hard to get up
and you see yourself in a forest
and wonder why you're even thinking about a forest
two tall pine trees
side by side
and for some reason
the earth shakes
or one tree is shaking

as if it has an uncontrollable
 itch up its spine
 the tree tears itself to the forest
 you feel your legs want to give way
 ripping part of your skin
 and you see yourself
 the younger child
 standing

The challenge I face when using my poetry and short stories as the pivotal moments in my theatrical manuscript is whether to have them delivered exactly the way I wrote them, or to write the scene as dialogue between my character and the friend I was with at the time. Do I write the exact conversation of the phone call, or use the sparse suggestion of moments as written in my poem?

In Didion's play, she breaks down the thought process that occurred the moment she noticed something different about her husband. She says he was:

Slumping over. Pretending to be dead. You've seen people make that kind of joke. Maybe you've done it yourself. Meaning "this is a hard day, we got through it, we're having dinner, we've got a fire..." (2007, 3).

In the book she merely wrote, "His left hand was raised and he was slumped motionless. At first I thought he was making a failed joke, an attempt to make the difficulty of a bad day seem manageable" (2005, 10).

Didion's play proved to be just as emotionally stirring as her memoir. Though her memoir goes into much greater detail and story telling, the play proves to tug at the heartstrings

more with its theatrical and in-the-moment feel. The play, rewritten to shape Didion's story into a dialogue format, bring the audience even closer to the root of the character's grieving. Also, the condensed play version allows a reader to experience Didion's story in one sitting, resulting in a shared cathartic experience. Though I never saw the play version performed, I imagine the experience to be far more emotional as the actress playing Joan would allow sadness and grief to come to create a realistic encounter of a woman suffering the death of her loved one.

Unlike Didion's memoir, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home, a Family Tragicomic* (2006) changed remarkably when it transitioned from a graphic novel memoir to a Broadway stage production—mainly because the stage version of the book is a musical. Bechdel allowed the creative team of Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori to rewrite the book and create lyrics for the added songs, and compose the show's musical score, respectively. The staged version of *Fun Home* (2006), though no longer in Bechdel's hands, stays true to the novel's integrity.

Having read the novel and seen the live performance, I feel the stage show pulls more at the audience's heartstrings. Repeating themes in the music and exhibiting individual points of view by each actor allows Bechdel's story to expand beyond the pages of her book. Like the memoir, the musical is narrated by Bechdel's character. However, in the theatrical version each actor is able to express their own nuances and interpretation of the roles, which gives the story more layers as well as a more realistic and immediate experience for the audience.

In the graphic novel, Bechdel parallels her experiences with literary and mythical characters. The memoir opens with illustrations of her father playing a game of "airplane" with a preteen Alison. He is lifting her with his legs and she is "flying" over him. The caption reads, "In

the circus, acrobatics where one lies on the floor balancing another are called *Icarian Games*.⁸ She follows the comic strip frame with the caption, “In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky” (4). Bechdel then states, “For if my father was Icarus, he was also Daedalus—that skillful artificer, that mad scientist who built the wings for his son and designed the famous labyrinth” (7). Alison’s father, Bruce, is a man whose life is entirely invested in literature, art, and architecture. By the book’s conclusion, Bruce, a high school English teacher, has indirectly paved the way for Bechdel’s literary sophistication due to his many artistic interests.

On the surface, they were a handsome family living in an old but beautifully restored home in Pennsylvania. However, in another illustration, Bechdel depicts the family well-dressed at mass with a caption reading, “But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” On second glance, the reader notices the father’s eyes watching the altar boys’ procession with interest (17). The picture perfect façade of the family would continue to darken throughout her story. Bechdel tells the story as if her father were already missing from her life, even in her preteen years, before his suicide when she was 21. Many frames show her father singing, bathing her, or doing yard work. However, the caption reads, “But I ached as if he were already gone” (23).

I can relate to this sensation when I remember my older brother, coincidentally also named Bruce. Even when Bruce was around, there was a feeling that he was already gone. I recall playing with him on the playground in grade school, him running with his friends and me

⁸ Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 3. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

chasing after. Eventually I couldn't keep up but he never turned around to include me or encourage me to continue following behind.

In our twenties, about three years prior to his suicide, I had a dream about Bruce. I was alone, searching for him in the woods, looking everywhere—under rocks, behind trees. Finally I saw him walking on a path that led upward. He stopped to turn, with one foot still in the continuing direction, and give me a last look. In that instant, I understood that he would leave us.

I feel the dream was preparing me for his suicide a few years later. The reality that Bruce's suicide was a possibility was made clear by an aunt who once said matter-of-factly, "Don't be surprised if you come home from school one day to find your father or brother in a body bag." I was shocked both by the unemotional quality of her remark and the fact that she added Bruce to the scenario. I was aware that my father was capable of committing suicide; I watched him attempt it when I was 12 years old. I would later learn from my mother that it was a staged act for the purposes of getting her attention.

I wasn't shocked when my brother killed himself. He had been imprisoned for multiple driving-under-the-influence infractions and, upon his release, plainly stated that if he had to go to jail again that he would kill himself. However, at the time, I still thought it would be my father who would go first, as the image of him slouched over the dining room table after writing his final goodbyes, with empty pill bottles surrounding his pen and page, was so clearly burned into my memory.

Like Bechdel and Didion, I knew I needed to write about my life in order to cope with my feelings and try to make sense of them. My poetry served as a way to express my emotions without interacting with my family, who still lived in Michigan while I had moved to New York City.

Bechdel wrote about her return home to attend her father's funeral service. She recalled a guest expressing, "I can't believe it. Such a good man" (27). Dumbfounded at these words, Alison recalls scenes in which her father had been caught with young boys, and arrested for supplying a minor with alcohol. I remember my brother's service in a similar way. People said, "We are so shocked. Why would he do such a thing?" I wanted to say, "It's sad maybe, but not shocking. He said he would."

Bechdel follows the illustration of the guest's remark with a caption about her father carrying a copy of Camus' *A Happy Death*, a few weeks before, when a truck hit him while crossing a highway (27). She writes that Camus' first novel was about a consumptive hero who died unhappily, and then a frame illustrates a line of text that her father had highlighted in Camus' book, "He discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love—first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage" (28). In the next caption, she reveals her true feelings about her parents' relationship: "A fitting epitaph for my parents' marriage" (28) Throughout her story, Bechdel writes of her mother's disgust regarding her father's affairs with young boys. Another caption reads that her father's death, "was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time" (83).

Looking back, I feel that the dream in which I was searching for my brother only to see him walking an upward trail was the impetus of my acceptance that he would soon leave this earth. Shortly thereafter, I began writing a play wherein my brother kills himself at the end. The story opens with a true account of Bruce as a little boy throwing a rock at my father's truck window and shattering the glass. Acting like he wasn't the cause, he ran and told the family, "Come look! A spider wove a web all over dad's window!" He hoped that my parents would believe his shock and fail to realize that he had thrown a stone.

Another incident with a rock involved Bruce getting caught with my father's yellow pocketknife. When he was found playing with it, my dad threatened him with the belt for taking it out of his dresser drawer. Bruce adamantly swore that he had done no such thing and that the pocketknife had been discovered when he was throwing rocks on the driveway. He claimed that he threw one rock so hard that the concrete cracked open and out popped the yellow knife. My dad retorted, "If you can get another rock to crack open the driveway and produce a knife, then you won't be in trouble." The whole family knew Bruce was lying, of course. But each of us began forcefully throwing rocks on the pavement to try and break it open. It became a joke and we were laughing as we did it; for a moment we were all having fun. The laughing stopped when my brother was yanked into his bedroom. I heard Bruce's screams each time my father's belt whipped across his back, so I ran outside to throw rocks even harder in a desperate effort to validate his story.

Bechdel also writes about her father's temper. As a perfectionist, he would become hostile if the family did not do things in the exact way that he wanted them done. As an example, Bechdel writes about a time when she was creating a drawing for school. Though her father supported her efforts, he was quite demanding as to how she should improve the illustration—so much so that he eventually took over and enhanced her picture to his specifications.

Further illustrating her father's demanding control, Bechdel writes that she was given her first diary by her father—with the first three words already included, "Dad is reading"(140). Alison recorded her life's events in that diary each day, in the same literal fashion, but soon incorporated the tiny words "I think" at times (141). She would eventually replace "I think" with a triangular-looking symbol that she called "a curvy circumflex" in her memoir. The symbol would represent what she really wished to be writing about; her sexuality, her feelings for

women, and the problems in her home. Those early journal entries later became the impetus for writing her memoir. Her diary and drawings, both initially tampered with by her father, would eventually become the devices Bechdel used to illustrate her life from childhood to early adulthood, poignantly captured in her critically acclaimed best seller *Fun Home, A Family Tragic Comic* (2006).

Like Bechdel, I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a writer. One of my first childhood toys was a Snoopy stuffed animal from the Charles Schultz comic strip *Peanuts*. I loved the cartoons, but much preferred reading Schultz's comic strip books. Even though Snoopy never spoke, he was my favorite character, much more so than Charlie Brown, possibly because he was also a writer. The drawings of Snoopy sitting atop his doghouse typing, "It was a dark and stormy night..." always struck a chord in my heart and inspired me to want to do something similar. It was especially poignant to me that he wrote instead of speaking; I felt that I, too, might be able to express the feelings that I couldn't verbalize as words on a page. Coincidentally, by the time I reached college and began writing autobiographical plays and short stories, my writing would explore "Dark and stormy nights" as well.

Luckily I learned early on in my writing career that, even with true events, some elements might need to be fictionalized. I was fortunate to work with biographical writing professor Jeffrey Hogrefe at The New School University who instilled in me that the truest, most compelling biographies are essentially works of fiction. To tell a story well, it may need to be told slightly differently than the way it actually occurred.

But I knew I needed to first be truthful, to come clean with all the issues and feelings inside of me. I began writing in earnest, and learning the techniques to do so, as a junior in high school. My teacher at the time, Mrs. Baron-Klask, instructed us in a free writing exercise taken

from Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1986). The object was to write in a stream of consciousness style, without putting the pen down.⁹ Even if you could not think of anything to write, then write that, over and over, until something came up. I took the exercise to heart. I followed it to the bone. I remember once, when I wanted to avoid my sexuality, I wrote, "But I can't talk about that right now. And here I am sitting in fifth period English Literature class where the teacher very candidly just told us, 'You know, one in ten people are homosexuals. It's pretty much a fact.'" And instantly I thought about how there were at least 20 or so people in the class, meaning there were at least two homosexuals in the room, and I was one of them.

I recall the moment when I first learned the word "bisexual," in the seventh grade, from a girl who used the word in reference to her uncle. I immediately asked, "What is that?" She told me, "It means he's interested in men and women." That didn't sound so bad. I could survive that. I could be bisexual. I liked girls and I had girlfriends, but I knew I was attracted to boys. I hadn't been with one yet, but I certainly felt yearnings. However, somehow I knew the term bisexual didn't ring true for me. But thinking about my sexuality for the first time was a step, a step to at least writing about who I was. I know I must have written about sexuality in some way that day in high school. One of my best friends, who also took that class, is a homosexual, as well. The two of us, the one in 10, or the two in 20, in Mrs. Baron-Klask's English Literature course.

As I complete my Master's in Biography, Autobiography, and Memoir at CUNY Graduate Center, I am reminded of the steps and courses that got me to this point: coming to New York City to study acting; completing an undergraduate degree focused primarily on creative writing and poetry courses that allowed me to record the life events I wanted to share; the influence of Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde teachers, professors, and directors; and now, the

⁹ Natalie Goldberg. *Writing Down the Bones* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1986), 8.

written and theatrical works of Joan Didion and Alison Bechdel. I am so grateful that I have been, and continue to be, encouraged to write, and I will proudly present my theatrical manuscript as my graduate thesis in January 2016.

Bibliography

- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Vintage International, 2005.
- . *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play*. New York: Vintage International, 2007.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1986.
- Howe, Marie. *The Writer's Almanac*. August 18th, 2003.
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2013/08/18> (accessed November 8th, 2015).
- Kron, Lisa. *Fun Home*. London: Samuel French, 2014.
- Montagne, Renee. *NPR*. February 8, 2007.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7238970> (accessed November 8, 2015).
- Shanley, John Patrick. *The Big Funk: A Casual Play*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1991.
- Whitman, Walt, and Gary Schmidgall. *Walt Whitman Selected Poems 1855-1892*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Perennial Library, 1989.

PART ONE

A Play in One Act

by

Ryan P. Tofil

Email: RyanTofilMCS@gmail.com

Cast of Characters

Ryan: A man in his late 20s. Also plays various other characters as indicated in the script.

Mother: Ryan's mother. An elegant, blond, petit woman in her late 50s. Also plays other characters as indicated in the script.

Note: When actors are playing other characters of opposite sex it is not important to change pitch in voice or characterization. They merely need to say the line with thoughtful intention.

Scene

An empty stage. Two characters explore the introspective and extrospective realities faced after the death of a son and brother.

Time

The present.

ACT IScene 1

SETTING: An empty stage.
Shadowy lighting
cast a somber feel.

AT RISE: RYAN and MOTHER
take stage. RYAN
walks stage left
and MOTHER enters
and stands stage
right following
RYAN'S entrance.

RYAN

(To the audience)

My mother met my father when she was a freshman in
high school. She was fourteen years old. My dad was a
year older.

(A projection reads
"THE BEGINNING")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I'm looking down, following the tar lines on the
street like a tight rope. The hair on my toes is

white. My dad had white hair when he was a little boy. He said everyone called him 'whitey.' He works at Chrysler making glass for cars. The tar sways out of line. I follow it. Some of the stones mixed into the concrete sparkle. The line is straight again. I'm with my friend Joan. We are walking close, but not touching. I hear a car. Joan bumps me with her arm. We stop. There are two boys driving in a light blue convertible. Joan tells me:

RYAN

(As JOAN)

Look, Janine. And there are two of them.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I feel my heart without touching it. Joan slides her hand over her breast. I see the shape of her nipple under her shirt. She looks at me and smiles. The boy's faces come closer. Their car moves slowly, then stops two feet in front of us. I'm wearing cut off shorts and sandals. The heat from the radiator makes my legs hot. One boy has brown wavy hair, the other, long blonde curly hair. I bend my thumb into my palm and scratch. Joan always does the talking. I want to smile at the one with brown hair. The blonde's hair is very long. Driving one night, Joan saw someone with long hair in the car ahead of us, so we followed him. At the light, the man turned. He was a girl. Joan will like the man with long hair. The brown haired boy says hello to Joan.

RYAN

(As BRUCE)

Hello.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I press my fingers into my palm.

RYAN

(As BRUCE)

What's your friend's name?

MOTHER

(To the audience)

He wants to know me. I don't say my name. But I unclench my hand. The blonde, longhaired boy says hello to Joan. I look at the hood of their car. There's a hole where a hood ornament should be. Looking at the boy with brown hair makes me feel like sand is filling my stomach. The heat from the radiator gets too hot, so I step back.

RYAN

(As BRUCE)

I'm Bruce.

MOTHER

(To BRUCE)

Janine.

RYAN

(As BRUCE)

Off from school?

MOTHER

(To the audience)

Joan tells him we skipped class. I look at her and try to spell 'shut up you'll get us in trouble' with my eyes.

RYAN

(As BRUCE)

We had a half-day today. This is my buddy Joel.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I walk over to Bruce. He looks at me, he looks at my eyes. Men have complemented my eyes before. Bruce says nothing. My eyes squint and I see him between my black lashes. If only his hair were longer he'd look a little like Jim Harrison of *The Doors*. But Bruce's lips are thinner and he smiles with his mouth shut. There is something in my stomach that is moving up towards my chest.

Joan walks over to Joel. She puts both hands on the door. She lowers her chest and pushes one shoulder forward. I exhale. Bruce takes his hand off the stirring wheel and lays it over the door.

I look into the car. I see Bruce's legs. They are tan and hairy. He's wearing blue cut off shorts. Something about his knees makes me want to touch them.

The sensation in my chest moves to my throat. When I look at his knees, the sensation becomes stronger. Then I see his toes. They're bent in the wrong direction. I want to say something.

(Lighting changes
to create suggest a
beat change)

RYAN

(To the audience)

My mother told me when she met my father she was distracted by how his toes looked. He wasn't wearing any shoes in the car. She only saw his left foot at first. She asked him what was wrong and he told her some story about how he broke his toes and that they never healed right. Later in the relationship she saw his other foot. It was exactly the same. He was born that way. She knew he lied to her.

My parents were married for 18 years. The first-born is Bruce, named after my father. I'm the second: Ryan. Jason is the youngest. My parents fought a great deal of my life. My brother Bruce got to see them when they once showed love. I saw a little of that. Jason never saw them happy.

Two years after my mother divorced my father, she married a man named Chuck. She told me that a customer at her work asked her:

MOTHER

(As the CUSTOMER)

Now that you're divorced and remarried, do you regret naming your son after your ex?

RYAN

(To the audience)

She thought the woman was stupid for saying that.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 2

(A projection reads
"JAIL")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

My son Bruce was sitting in a room with no windows. Not bars or bread and water, but a door that locks from the outside, and a camera with men at the end of the wires watching him: his arms folded, fingers rubbing the ends of his short-sleeved shirt, inhaling, then exhaling—expanding the time in-between each breath. His heart slowing, head tightening.

I came to visit with Chuck. I got to the gate. It was guarded. Bruce was behind it. I wasn't even allowed to touch the gate.

RYAN

(To the audience)

She pleaded with the guard:

MOTHER

(To the GUARD)

Could he come out, just for the day? I'm getting married. I'll take full responsibility.

RYAN

(To the audience)

And though the guard said something, whatever it was it meant no.

When she talked to Bruce that day in jail he promised her he would never drink and drive again.

MOTHER

(To BRUCE)

But you're still going to drink? What will make you realize that this is problem? There is nothing worse than jail.

RYAN

(To the audience)

She later told me she was just beginning to realize that being an alcoholic was really a disease. She always thought drinking was just a lack of will power.

MOTHER

(To BRUCE)

You just need to stop drinking. Like when I was 27. I smoked. But then I knew I needed to quit. I knew it was bad for me. So I just quit and never smoked again.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 3

(A projection reads
"THE RECEPTION. HER
2nd MARRAGE")

MOTHER

What will I say if someone asks me where my son Bruce is? People might not ask because it's my second wedding. They will assume he doesn't get along with my new husband, Chuck. But that's not true. Bruce told me:

RYAN

(As BRUCE Jr.)

Mom, Chuck's a nice guy.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

But he doesn't have to like him. Bruce is grown up. I'll tell everyone he couldn't make it. If someone asks why, I will look as if I'm about to answer and then turn my head and thank another guest for coming. I won't tell them about the oncoming car, the one-way street. They might laugh, think it's a joke. Things that are not ordinary make me laugh. Him not being here is not ordinary.

I hear Chuck call my name:

RYAN
(As CHUCK)

Janine.

MOTHER
(To the audience)

I see him at the table. He extends his palm and lifts his body halfway out of the seat to greet me. I imagine a smile on my face and wonder if it actually formed. He sits down. I turn my head and see the door. It's brighter outside. I look back to Chuck and tell him I'll be right back. Chuck nods. I walk towards the exit. I see my sister Stephanie. She is smiling at me and says:

RYAN
(As STEPHANIE)

You look beautiful.

MOTHER
(To the audience)

My eyes wink in place of a thank you, and I step outside into the sun.

(Lights change to a
bright setting)

MOTHER
(To the audience)

A tall white flag pole stands surrounded by four rocks, with tiny red and yellow flowers planted in-between. I follow the length of the pole to the top,

dividing the sky on either side. I see a not so shiny brass ball at the end. The sun comes into focus. I have to look down. The asphalt is crumbled and looks like gravel. I see my cream colored shoes and hear the sound of tiny stones scraping with each step, remembering walking down the aisle with my first husband, the smell of incense in the church, the stale smell of carpet in courthouse when signing the marriage papers with Chuck.

A car goes by. A man is driving. I see him stop at a red light. Bruce didn't stop in time. The light changes and the man drives away.

I feel like I've done something wrong. When Bruce was little, I sent him to his room if he were bad. After five minutes, I hear the bedroom door open. The sound of his feet walking slow to the living room. The television, click, and turning on. I walk into the room. Bruce's tiny back is to me, watching the screen. I told him, "I didn't tell you to come out."

He answered:

RYAN

(As BRUCE Jr.)

I thought about it.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

Then he turns his head, his tiny dimpled chin poking around his neck, mouth and eyes unmoving, holding his gaze to mine a few seconds longer than I expect.

RYAN

(As BRUCE Jr.)

You told me to go to my room and don't come out till I thought about it. I thought about it.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

He turns back to the television. Bruce has listened and figured out what I did not mean to say. But he did listen. He must be good. I must have done something right. I ask him if he's sorry.

RYAN

(As BRUCE Jr.)

Yes. I'm sorry.

MOTHER

(To audience)

I inhale quietly, hoping that Bruce will not hear the pitch of my breath, sense that I felt ashamed by not knowing what to do. I tell him that lunch will be ready in 10 minutes. I feel my head nod in agreement to myself. For the moment I am satisfied. I tell him I'm making soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. His body bounces up and down. Bruce is excited. Because he is happy, I should feel happy.

(Lights change to suggest a shift in the story)

MOTHER

(To the audience)

There's a reception going on inside. My reception. Bruce is in jail. I will tell them he couldn't make it. If anyone asks why, I'll smile and say, "Oh," and pretend to be distracted by another guest. I will take a walk around the building before going back inside. One walk around the building and if I make it around without crying, I will be ready. If I start to cry, I will walk to my sister's house two blocks away. Only two blocks. I won't be gone long. If anyone asks, I'll tell them I went there to use the bathroom.

(Lights shift to
suggest mood
change)

RYAN

(To the audience)

I was looking at my mother when a guest did approach her and ask where Bruce was. She paused only for a second. Looking down, and then quickly back up. And simply said:

MOTHER

(To a GUEST)

He's in jail.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I was shocked she said it. My mother is quite a candid woman. My grandmother, her mother, was also an alcoholic. When my grandmother died, my mother spoke at her funeral.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 4

(A projection reads
"WHAT MY MOTHER
SAID")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

We all know my mother likes to drink. A lot. I was driving. This was about 15 years ago. She was riding in the back seat. Her sister Bobo was riding up front with me. We were talking about aunt Lillian. She was an alcoholic too. My mother questioned, "Do you think I might be one of those?"

She asked as if she really didn't know. I thought it was a joke. I had expected her to laugh real soon. But she didn't. She was serious. She didn't have a clue.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 5

RYAN

(To the audience)

When I got the call that Bruce killed himself, I knew I'd have to go back home. I didn't know what my mother was going to be like. I saw my dad first. I hugged him. He was shaking. But I was more concerned about my mother. I saw her standing by the church doors. She was wearing a long coat. It was winter. She had Bruce's teddy bear in her hand. When Bruce was little he would pin a dishrag around the bear's neck to make a cape. He named the bear Space Bear and would throw him in the air.

My mother can be an angry, loud woman. I didn't know how she was going to be at the funeral. We sat down in the church office. The priest was making us decide what songs and what bible stories were going to be read. My mother didn't like to have to make decisions. She just wanted to cry, but she answered all the questions.

My father was sitting with his head down. He was uneasy in the church. The priest asked if my father's parents were still alive and would they like to read something at the mass. My dad told the priest that they were in Florida and that they would not be able to make the trip because his father wasn't feeling very well and feared he was getting sick.

My mother practically climbed over the table while screaming:

MOTHER

(To BRUCE)

That son of a bitch should be sick! He's the one that gave Bruce the gun that killed him!

RYAN

(To the audience)

And then she sat back down. I thought she'd keep going, start yelling off the list about how my father is an alcoholic and a drug user, like she always does when she gets mad. But she stopped. She just sat back down and became quiet.

On the last day, Bruce's body was laid out in the church. My mom and dad were the last ones standing at his coffin. I saw the backs of the two of them together for the first time in ten years. They weren't fighting. My mother was even holding my father's hand. Both had their heads down, looking at my brother's body. And my mother moved in even closer to my dad and said:

MOTHER

(To BRUCE)

We may have done a lot of bad things in our marriage, but this was the one thing we got right, our son.

RYAN

(To the audience)

It was the first time I ever heard a kind word
expressed between them. In the worst possible moment,
I saw my parents love each other for the first time.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 6

(A projection reads
"RYAN")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

He's 9; sitting on a half-wall outside the open door of my salon watching me cut Dorothy's hair. Ryan is always there, his short legs hanging down. There is something in the way he watches me. His legs dangle and then pause when Dorothy says something. He's trying to understand.

RYAN

(As Dorothy)

My grandson wants to go away to college.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I finish toweling off her hair. I reach for my scissors, grab my comb, and section her hair.

RYAN

(As DOROTHY)

He wants to get laid.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I cut wet black hair between my fingers. It falls.
Ryan's legs stop wiggling.

RYAN

(As DOROTHY)

He doesn't think I know that.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

Ryan puts his finger near his mouth. I don't let him see that I see him. I don't want him to see in my eyes that he shouldn't have heard what Dorothy said.

I think of another meaning for the word laid: "His father is a construction worker, he's laid bricks." If Ryan asks what "laid" means, that's what I'll tell him: "Daddy lays bricks. Dorothy's son wants to be a bricklayer." I feel it's safe to look at Ryan. He sees my face. My eyebrows lift to answer if he asks. Though he's looking at me, nothing in his face changes. I continue cutting Dorothy's hair. Ryan watches each piece fall. I grab the hair near Dorothy's ear.

RYAN

(As Dorothy)

He wants to have sex.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

I want to cut her. Sex is a bad word. It is something you do. You don't talk about it. It is something below. Something between my legs. Touching is not sex. Touching inside is. I step back and pretend I am examining her hair. Then step back in and pull the hair from both sides of her head to check the evenness of length. I want to pull harder.

RYAN

(To the audience)

She didn't think I knew what sex meant. All I knew was it had something to do with her screaming. Me waking up in the middle of the night. Not knowing why she was screaming but knowing that it annoyed me. I walked over to her room. The door was open. I could see the outline of her legs in the dark. Even though she was screaming, something in me knew she wasn't hurt. I wanted to tell her to shut up. I went back in my room, closed the door. I said shut up very quietly. I rolled over and eventually fell asleep.

To my father, sex is about satisfaction. He enjoys telling me stories about the sex he's had with my mother.

He told me, "She wouldn't do it before we were married. I'd put it in her and she'd yell 'get it out, get it out.' Once we were married, I did all the work. She'd never move. Your mother would lay there like a starfish with her legs open and me on top."

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 7

(A projection reads
"DESCENDING THE
STAIRS")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

How would I feel if Ryan were gay? And if he is, will I still love him? Is gay a word or is it a person? Gay means he sleeps with men. But he's only nine years old. Or does it just mean he likes men? He doesn't have to sleep with them.

Whenever I see a gay man, whatever it is he owns has a certain look to it. Like a car. If a gay man gets out of a car, than the car is also gay. There would be something about it not pure.

RYAN

(To the audience)

There was a man in a department store whose voice was very loud and effeminate. My mother turned to me and said, very firmly:

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Don't you ever get like that!

RYAN

(To the audience)

Whenever she cut my hair I could feel her disgust for me wanting me to keep it long.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Don't you think that's a little (she doesn't finish her thought).

RYAN

(To the audience)

She finished the sentence by lifting her hand and flitting it in a very effeminate manner. She wanted to say "faggy." Two years later she did. I was home to get a haircut. In high school I moved out of my parent's house to live with my aunt and uncle. I only went back when I had to. It was right before Christmas and I needed it cut. Going to someone else would be the most insulting thing I could do.

MOTHER

(To the audience)

You hair looks like shit. I'm going to cut it off.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I got up out of the chair and went to my room. On my way out of the house I saw her coming down the steps into the foyer.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Are you leaving? Please, it's Christmas. I'll make you look good.

RYAN

(To the audience)

The way she spoke and how her body slowly descended the stairs was like she was flirting with me, trying to get me to like her again.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Come on, Ryan. I know how to make it look nice. Everyone else likes how I cut their hair. You're the only one who complains.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I told her no. Then her voice got even softer.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Don't you think it looks a little faggy?

RYAN

(To the audience)

She followed those words with a small smile, as if how she said it, along with her expression would convince me that she was right. I felt I must have looked like a homosexual but I didn't want to be called a fag.

I told her, "If this is the way you're asking, I don't want to talk to you."

I felt something invisible lift in the space between us, a hard thick sheath of glass that stopped my fists from coming at her. I felt everything in my stomach lift. She was ugly to me. The words she used and the way she said them. I left the house and went back to my aunt and uncle's. The next day I went to the barber.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 8

(A projection reads
"JASON")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

He's always been shy. When he was little he wouldn't talk to anyone. Not even his father. He would whisper things in my ear.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I would watch her with Jason. They were always giggling. They liked to tickle each other. It felt uncomfortable to watch.

Jason is also gay. Eventually she became fine with me being gay. She trusted me. She didn't trust Jason. She had a problem with him liking men.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

You have to talk to him. He will listen to you. Tell him not to be that way.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I told her I was the last person to tell Jason not to be gay. She thought he was just copying me.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

He's very impressionable. He's around gay people. Tell him not to.

RYAN

(To the audience)

When I called him, I told him I was sorry she had given him a hard time.

My mother soon accepted it. It only took her about a year. I was living in Los Angeles at the time, staying with my cousin Angela who's a lesbian. I invited my mother out to visit with Jason and her sister Holly who is also a lesbian. Looking back, it was hard to think she ever had a problem with homosexuality.

I made sure we all went out one night. I took everyone to *The Palms*, a lesbian nightclub in West Hollywood on Santa Monica Blvd. She was all for it.

When we got to the door a female bouncer, who was checking IDs, said, "Quite a bunch we got here. You must be tourists. This is a lesbian bar."

I told the woman, "I know. This is my brother Jason, my cousin Angela, my aunt Holly, and my mother Janine. We're all gay. Except my mom."

She looked at each of our IDs and stamped *The Palms* logo on our wrists. When the bouncer got to my mother, my mother simply gave the woman her arm and smiled.

The woman responded, "You're one hell of a mother."

MOTHER

(To the BOUNCER)

They're my family. I love them.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I knew my mother was going to be ok. This was two years before my brother's death. No one knew if my mother was ever going to be the same after that. But she soon went back to work at the salon. She was eventually herself again in between moments of tears. And overall remained positive. And encouraged me to do the same.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 9

(A projection reads
"OUR PHONE
CONVERSATION")

MOTHER

(To RYAN, looking out, on phone)

Everyone has something horrible. Andrea's friend Sue. Her son. He was over in Iraq. They were bombing and he got hit. Lost both of his legs. And his arm. And part of the other arm. They flew him out to Washington to operate on him there. He's still alive. Sue flew out yesterday to be with him. I don't know how he can make it. And if he does, to just be a shell. No arms or legs. So everyone has something bad. After your brother, so many people have told me about someone committing suicide. The realtor who is going to put Bruce's house on the market, he walked in on his mother trying to kill herself. Two years later she tried again and did it. This woman whose hair I do, her daughter. She's suicidal. In high school. She told her mom she thinks she's gay. The girl's having a real hard time with it.

I told my customer, "Have her call me. I'll talk to her. There's nothing to be ashamed about being gay. My two sons are gay. I don't care, they're my kids."

But she says her daughter isn't doing well. Very depressed and not even sure if she really likes women. I don't know what she's so confused about. I haven't

met her, but if you ask me, she's gay. There's no confusion. Why would anyone think they are if they're not? I don't know what it's like to be confused. I'm not, so I wouldn't know. Well, there were those two women. But no, I'm not. I haven't done anything. But if I was ever to, this German woman whose hair I do. She's beautiful. Married to a man. We would write each other letters. We haven't since your brother died. And this other woman who used to work at the salon. She didn't look like much, but when she got dressed up and wore some makeup, my god, she was beautiful. I'm not saying I would, but if I was, those two.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I was surprised to hear about my mother's feelings towards women. I knew it wasn't impossible for me to think she would consider women, but I never thought she'd mention it. Months later, she brought up the German lady again.

MOTHER

(To RYAN)

Remember I told you about her, we wrote letters. She invited me to her house. It was far, but I went. She wants to be my friend. She has all these paintings in her home. Like unbelievable paintings. She told me she painted them. I didn't understand it all, but I really liked it. It was smart. She had lunch for me. And desserts. A chocolate German dessert.

RYAN

(To the audience)

My father would later open up to me as well. I was in New York City. A year or two passed after my brother's death and my father thought he should finally visit me. It was the very first time he came out to see me in New York. By that time I had lived there for over 10 years. He told me he wanted to go out to a club that I thought would be fun. I told him I only knew of gay clubs. He said he didn't care. Then he went on to tell me how when he was a freshman in high school his male English teacher would suck him and his buddy Joel off. He told me:

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

Today people would consider it sexual abuse. But for me it was the best blow job I ever had.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I asked him how many times it happened. He told me:

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

It went on for 3 years.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I asked him when it stopped.

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

Just a few months before I married your mother.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT IScene 10

(A projection reads
"SOMETHING.")

MOTHER

(To the audience)

There is an idea of God I have. He is sitting somewhere up, as if in the sky. But it's not above me. It is something more to the left. He is sitting in a box-shaped chair, looking to the right, and not moving. When I think of Him again, His head is in another position. But I never see Him move his head. I've never heard Him talk. And every time I try to talk to Him, it's with my mind. I never open my mouth and speak out loud. I try whispering His name, and every time I do, I feel the presence of someone in the room behind me. I picture an outline of a person not too far away.

RYAN

(To the audience)

When I was little, I was sleeping. I woke up. Sounded like an animal crying. It was the middle of the night. I was on the couch. My mom was sleeping in my bed because she had been fighting with my father. I heard a noise in the other room, like the ocean. I pictured a large fish, a whale, it's mouth open, moaning. I got up. I knew something was going to happen and I didn't want it to happen. I walked in the kitchen and around

the corner. I could see into the dining room. My dad's back curled over the table. He was crying. I never heard him cry before. What was he doing?

His shoulders, they looked so small, like all the muscle was run out of them, just piled up on the table. I stood behind him. I saw pill bottles. I saw the back of his arm, writing. I told him to stop.

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

No Ryan. I've already done it. There's nothing left for dad. Your mother doesn't want me.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I asked him how many pills he took.

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

All of them.

RYAN

(To the audience)

I went down the hall and opened my bedroom door and woke up my mom.

I told her, "He took a lot of pills, mom. We have to do something."

She didn't even lift her head off the pillow. She told me to go to bed. And that he's done this before.

I walked back to the dining room. The pen was still in his hand. I asked him if he would be okay.

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

It's too late. You can't do anything.

RYAN

(To DAD)

I'm going call someone.

MOTHER

(As RYAN'S DAD)

No. I want to die.

RYAN

(To audience)

I picked up all pill bottles and went in the other room and pushed them under the couch. Then I went back to see him. I kept asking if he'd be all right. He told me to go away. I went back to the couch. I tried to fall asleep. I tried to get ready to wake up without a father. I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know how I'd wake up and not have a father anymore.

(Light goes out on
MOTHER as DAD. RYAN
stands alone on the
stage).

RYAN

(To the audience)

In the morning no one was home. The notebook was still on the table. But the note wasn't there. I picked up the notebook and I could see the outline of his pen pressed into the sheets of paper. I could smell his cologne in the house. He smelled near by. I walked into my parent's bedroom. Their bathroom door was open. His scent of cologne was very strong. I went near the bathroom door. The air was warm. He must have just taken a shower and left the house.

I don't remember seeing him after that. Not right after, I can't remember. But I know I never said anything. And he never said anything. But I always thought I'd wake up one morning and he'd be dead.

When my mother called me and told me about my brother, I thought it was about him. I thought she was going to tell me it was my dad who was dead. But she said, it's your brother Bruce. He killed himself.

(END OF PLAY)