

THE MARRIAGE OF MOM & DAD

A Full-length Poetic Drama with Dance

by

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SYNOPSIS:

“MOM” is dying. Represented by a small tv that silently broadcasts archetypical tv mothers, she lies in a hospital bed on the last day of her life, as her two daughters (the NARRATOR and her SISTER) journey through family memories within a spiraling, non-linear narrative to understand their mother’s choices and her untimely death. By engaging dance and poetry within the tragicomic framework of naturalistic scenes and magical realism, *The Marriage of Mom & Dad* explores the emotional landscape of a 39-year marriage that begins in 1950 and is dissolved by death. JOY (OF COOKING) and MONTY HALL provide social commentary; perspectives shift and temporal lines blur; and multiple versions of MOM and DAD vie for “the Truth.” In the end, the NARRATOR of this poetic drama unearths deeper human truths about love, memory, and absence – for the benefit of them all.

CHARACTERS:

“**MOM**” Tall woman, graceful. The epitome of motherly goodness. (Think “Leave it to Beaver.”) Plays from 22 years old to 62, probably best if played by a middle-aged actor. Also plays the voice of **ROOMMATE**.

“**DAD**” Tall man, boyish, with glasses. Earnest, clueless, and gung-ho America. Plays from 24 to 74, best if played by a middle-aged actor, same general age as “MOM”.

MOM The essential spirit version of “MOM”. An unknowable and eternal entity who has a long-term perspective and a sense of humor. She must be able to dance. **MOM** also plays **NURSE, AUNT, and MA**.

DAD The essential spirit version of “DAD”. Same description as MOM, above. Must dance. **DAD** also plays **UNCLE, DOCTOR**, and provides the voice of **JAY STEWART**.

NARRATOR A woman old and wise enough to look back with some distance on her childhood. Earnest. Should be able to move, if not dance. Also plays **CLERK**.

SISTER (JOY/MINISTER/MONTY HALL/PIE LADY) The NARRATOR’S older sister, who plays a variety of other characters, including JOY (see below). She is strong-willed and decisive. She should also be able to move.

NOTES:

It is important that MOM be in the same age range as DAD; however, MOM and DAD could be played by younger or older actors.

JOY is the embodiment of The Joy of Cooking, and always wears an apron. She is sunny, rigorous, plasticine.

In the hospital scenes, “MOM” is represented by a small television set in the bed. On the screen are reruns of the following tv characters in this order: Harriet Nelson, June Cleaver, Carol Brady, Wilma Flintstone, and Olivia Walton.

When we hear “MOM”/TV speak in the hospital scenes, it is in pre-recorded voiceover, so that the same actor can play the offstage voice of ROOMMATE.

The set is made up of a hospital room on one side (hospital bed with a curtain/screen behind it, two chairs) and a kitchen on the other (table and four chairs, counter, oven). There should also be a neutral central space that can be used for dances and poems/scenes, and a 50’s era turntable.

All costumes and props should be kept to a minimum – just enough to suggest changes in age, eras, or setting. Lights should be used to highlight significant interjections and to indicate scene change.

FORMAT:

As this play incorporates poetry and dance as well as naturalistic scenes, the format was adjusted to accommodate the content. Anything spoken is left-justified in the script; all stage directions and descriptions of dances are right-justified.

Titles appear in bolded large font. Other than the Beginning(s), End, and Epilogue, the titles are categories based on the question, “**What do most couples fight over?**” I leave it to the director to determine whether and how to communicate the titles (and the question, for that matter).

DANCES:

A list of music and dance titles appears at the end of the script. Not all of each song must be choreographed, (particularly the Tchaikovsky) but feel free to use the entire piece of any song if need be. I envision the dances to flow between the poems and action organically – there should be a fluidity to all transitions.

When MOM and DAD are not dancing, they are present onstage most of the time, as onlookers and sometimes commentators.

FINALLY:

Sadness of the play does not need to be played that way. It will take care of itself.

*For Alice and Tom,
and “Tom” and “Alice”*

THE BEGINNING

Light on a turntable.

*NARRATOR enters, smiles.
Places the needle on an old LP:
A recording of a woman singing:
“The Waiting-On Blues”*

NARRATOR: When does a marriage begin?

*“MOM” and “DAD” face each other
in front of MINISTER, hold hands.*

MOM and DAD enter, circle the couple.

As the vows are uttered?

ANY OR ALL: Have. Hold.
Better. Worse.
Rich. Poor.
Sickness. Health.
Honor. Obey.

(Beat)

Death.

Part.

NARRATOR: When he says

“DAD”: I do.

NARRATOR: When she says it?

MOM: (soft) I do.

“MOM”: (louder) I do.

MOM: Do I? I did.

“DAD”: We did it!

DAD: Do wacka do wacka do.

NARRATOR picks the needle up from the LP.

NARRATOR: It's done. June 29, 1950. St. Louis, Missouri.

NARRATOR puts on a different record while she speaks:

But

What about moments before?

"MOM" and "DAD" drop hands.

Weeks before? Months?

What about courtship?

*They back apart
slowly, and exit.*

Family Folklore has it...

That he pursued her

That he pressured her

That she said yes

in her senior year at Wellesley

(you were dead meat if you weren't
engaged by your senior year)

but that she

MOM slides off her ring

took off her engagement ring

On a trip to Europe

My sister and I accept this as fact.

SISTER joins NARRATOR.

NARRATOR: And then

SISTER & NARRATOR: We make assumptions...

MOM: ...that I left the ring at home

...that I was keeping my options open

...that I was hoping something

better

might come along.

SISTER & NARRATOR: We don't think about him at all.

SISTER: He is my father/not my father

NARRATOR: He is the pursuer, the aggressor

SISTER & NARRATOR: The one she settled for.

(Beat.)

Because?

*NARRATOR drops the needle down:
“The Blue Danube”*

The Tall/Short Dance I

*MOM and DAD: In assembly line fashion,
MOM chooses to dance with DAD
because he’s taller than she.*

DAD steps forward.

DAD: That’s it? That’s your answer?
It’s just more assumptions!
Where are your facts?
You can’t build a case with assumptions.

SISTER: My father went to Harvard Law School.

DAD: Maybe she married me
because she loved me!
How about that?
And because she knew I loved her?
You don’t know.
You’ll never know, not for sure.

NARRATOR: True.

DAD: Maybe it looked like this...

The Revised Tall/Short Dance II:

*“The Blue Danube Waltz,” by Freddy Martin
on the “Salute to the Smooth Bands” album.
MOM and DAD: This is DAD’s version – MOM
chooses DAD because he is the most
dashing dancer and she loves him.*

MOM: Or like this...

The Revised Tall/Short Dance III:

“The Blue Danube,” on “Romantic Hits on Accordion”

MOM and DAD: This is MOM's version – MOM chooses DAD because he seems to love her so much; his love overrides her doubts about him.

NARRATOR: Agreed. (to SISTER) Some help, here?

SISTER: I got nada. Perhaps we all agree to disagree?

NARRATOR: My sister went to law school too. Can we all at least agree on when the marriage ended?

A beat, then:

ALL: Yes.

*DAD & SISTER back away and exit.
Lights change.*

FOOD... & DRINK

I.

*Beeps of hospital machines.
MOM exits.*

NARRATOR: A hospital room, 1989.
Sterile.
Hard.
Cheerless.

Fine grey hair
 mats close to the skull.
Bruises litter limbs.
Swollen stomach protrudes,
Black lips part for air
 but find only blood.

“MOM” is dying today.

*Loud tv audio: “The Price is Right.”
Lights on a hospital bed,
“MOM”/TV (see notes) in it. The screen is blank.
A curtain behind the bed, a rolling cabinet, a chair.
NURSE appears, carrying two trays.*

NURSE: (loud) Okaaaaaay... good morning! Time for breakfast! Gotcher tray here.
“MOM”/TV turns on,

flickers.

That's right, it's morning! Didja sleep good? Yeah? Gooood. Where do ya want the tray, hon? Where should I—

*NURSE looks at "MOM"/TV,
More flickering.*

Okay well I'll just putcher tray RIGHT HERE, okay? Okaaaay, there ya go.

*JOY appears in light,
holding the Joy of Cooking
as though she is singing from it.
She does not look at it.*

JOY: Tray meals can be a delightful stimulant if they include a surprise element in the form of a lovely pitcher, a small flower arrangement or some seasonal delicacy.

*NURSE disappears behind the curtain, shouts.
The following voices are both from offstage:*

NURSE: Here's yer tray, yer breakfast! Where do ya want it? You're not WHAT? Wait a sec, hon, wait...

The tv snaps off.

Okay, what?

ROOMMATE: Huh?

NURSE: What did you say?

ROOMMATE: When?

NURSE: Where do you want this?

ROOMMATE: I don't. I'm not hungry.

NURSE: Oh, haha, you're not hungry. Well, we'll leave it just in case, okay? Okay.

ROOMMATE: I'm not—

NURSE: There we go! Okay, we'll see ya later.

NURSE exits briskly, past "MOM"/TV.

JOY: Make sure, especially if the recipient is an invalid, that all needed utensils are present, that the food is hot or cold as required, sufficient in amount, and fresh and dainty looking.

*A hand pulls aside the curtain a little.
We can't see anyone.
ROOMMATE's voice is still offstage.*

ROOMMATE: Hey! Helloooo. Hey there, hey you there.

Harriet Nelson appears in close-up on MOM/TV.

ROOMMATE: Hi.

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): (Unintelligible.)

ROOMMATE: Huh?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): Help me.

ROOMMATE: Oh, good, how're you?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): (Unintelligible.)

ROOMMATE: What? How'd ya like your visit last night, from your daughters? Did ya like that? They were your daughters, right?

“MOM”/TV: (Nothing.)

ROOMMATE: You hungry?

“MOM”/TV: (Nothing.)

ROOMMATE: Huh. Well, well.

II.

JOY: At weddings, a cake can become the center of interest; and this interest, happily, has been known to extend to the cook. Thirty years of fan mail prove to us that almost every woman wants to bake a perfect cake.

NARRATOR: June 29, 1950.

*MOM and DAD sit in chairs,
“driving.”*

After the vows,
The toasts,
The dances,
The bouquet, and

The advice
Mom and Dad weather the squall of rice.

From her childhood home
They drive in an Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser
Through cornrows of conformity
To the Honeymoon Factory:
Niagara Falls.

The Arm-Punching Dance:
“Theme from A Summer Place,” by Percy Faith.
MOM and DAD: MOM dances with DAD
as though she is comatose,
then suddenly, without warning
breaks into a hysterical flurry
of uncontrolled movement.
This repeats.

Every few hundred miles,
Mom punches Dad.
Just hauls off and socks him.
Hard.

I’m sure she had her reasons.

MOM: Driving too fast?
Driving too slow?
Talking too much?

DAD: Reliving?
Realizing?
Regretting?

NARRATOR: Mom and Dad stayed married
Thirty-nine years.

NARRATOR reads from a letter.

“MOM” (V.O.) Dad and I had planned to go out for dinner, but postponed it until tomorrow when the Austins can join us. We’re all celebrating June anniversaries (don’t worry dear, nobody else remembered either – not a biggie – the 39th.)

NARRATOR: My mother wrote that letter in June of 1989. Six months later, she was dead.

III.

In the darkness, "DAD"'s voice:

"DAD" (V.O.): Hey, look what I found at the store! Why do we never get this stuff? I love this stuff! I bought a big box of it...

Light.

"MOM": Every six months
My husband rediscovers
Velveeta.
For days
He enjoys its smooth, silky texture,
its creamy meltability,
its interminable shelf life.

And then,
It is forgotten.
Months go by, and
still it sits,
lost in the hinterlands of the
turquoise colored refrigerator,
still luminescent,
still ready to be consumed.

Until I throw it out.

JOY: We can only echo Clifton Fadiman when he declares that processed cheeses represent the triumph of technology over conscience. If you are willing to condone the gummy texture and the insipid taste... you may find yourself paying an exorbitant price for some highly synthetic and commonplace materials.

"MOM": And like the seasons,
Half a year later,
The beautiful life-cycle of Velveeta
begins anew.

"DAD"'s voice:

"DAD" (V.O.): Hey, look what I found at the store! Why do we never get this stuff? I love this stuff! I bought a big box of it...

IV.

SISTER & NARRATOR: Gift from the Mother.

During the following, "MOM" wraps a present and puts a bow on it, writes a small gift card, and places it on the package.

SISTER & NARRATOR: Here.

SISTER: It's nothing.

NARRATOR: It's just a... well, you'll see.

SISTER: You can always take it back.

NARRATOR: I will not be offended in the least.

SISTER: It's nothing.

NARRATOR: I'm sure

SISTER & NARRATOR: You'll hate it.

SISTER: I couldn't find anything decent

NARRATOR: So I just got this, knowing

SISTER & NARRATOR: That you'll hate it.

NARRATOR: It's pathetic.

SISTER: It's nothing.

NARRATOR: It's horrible.

SISTER: It's nothing.

SISTER & NARRATOR: If you don't hate it, I'll be stunned.

SISTER: And the card!

NARRATOR: The card—

SISTER: Embarrassing.

NARRATOR: SO bad.

SISTER: Just awful.

SISTER & NARRATOR: It's worse than nothing.

“MOM” holds the now-wrapped gift out to the audience.

SISTER & NARRATOR: Gift From the Mother:

NARRATOR: Presence

SISTER: Full of Apology.

V.

NARRATOR: “Mom on the Couch, Part I”

Faded, once-elegant
Rust-colored sofa
Cradles long limbs, too long
Too long and too tired
For perfection.

Light is long, too.
Late afternoon.
It is
That Time.
Dreadful, despicable, demoralizing time.
Time to think about

What’s

For

Dinner.

The Living Section
of the Cleveland Plain Dealer
rustles,
whispers:
Listen, housewife.
I can save you.
I will tell you

What

To

Make.

JOY: (speaks the following very fast)

Quick Lobster Supreme!

Combine:

1 can condensed asparagus soup

1 can condensed mushroom soup

Add: 2 cups light cream

1 can lobster meat

Heat this soup but do not let it boil.

Add: 3 tablespoons dry sherry

(slows down) Know the comfort and reassurance of a larder well-stocked with processed soups!

NARRATOR: We never had soup for dinner.

*A kitchen.
"MOM" is making dinner,
"DAD" is mixing a drink.*

NARRATOR sits at the table.

This was the Midwest of America, in the 1970s.

NARRATOR starts doing homework at the formica table.

JOY: (tightly, miffed:) When in doubt,
the stock answer
to the menu problem is,
"Let's have steak!"

NARRATOR: It's what's for dinner!

"DAD": How soon?

"MOM": Less than five.

"DAD": Whaddlya have?

"MOM": Whatever's easy.

"DAD": Whisky sour?

"MOM": That's easy?

“DAD”: It’s what I’m having.

“MOM”: Fine.

JOY: Never forget that your family is really the most important assembly you ever entertain.

“MOM”: (to NARRATOR) Dinner’s almost ready. Could you clear the table, dear? And set it please. Thank you.

NARRATOR: Okeydoke.

JOY: Always check the freshness of the air...

“MOM”: Does it smell all right in here?

JOY: The temperature of the dining area...

“MOM”: Is anyone cold?

JOY: And the proper heat or chill for plates.

“MOM”: This oven is so small...

JOY: If warming oven space is limited you may wish to install an infrared heating unit which can be raised or lowered above a heatproof counter.

“DAD”: Damn!

“MOM”: What.

“DAD”: Damn, damn. Spilled it. Oh well...

He puts his lips on the counter and slurps.

“MOM”: Oh, good God.

“DAD”: What? It’s after five!

“MOM”: The counter?

“DAD”: The counter’s clean! I’m not gonna waste good booze!

NARRATOR: Spoons?

“MOM”: Just forks and knives. Steak knives.

NARRATOR: What are we having?

“MOM”: Steak.

“DAD”: Steak! Oh, great! Man, I’m salivating already.

“MOM”: That’s disgusting.

“DAD”: No it’s not, it’s science.

NARRATOR: Science? Really.

“DAD”: Sure!

“MOM”: (to NARRATOR) Where’s your sister?

NARRATOR: I dunno. Rehearsal?

“MOM”: Oh, that’s right. All rightee, let’s eat. Take a plate, please!

“DAD” hands “MOM” an enormous drink.

“DAD”: Here ya go.

“MOM”: Thanks. It’s too big...

“DAD”: It’s just a shlook. Cheers.

*NARRATOR displays a ring on her finger
to the audience.*

NARRATOR: My mother’s “cocktail ring”
Rests on my right hand.
How did one piece of jewelry
Come to signify an entire pre-prandial ritual?
There are no entrée bracelets,
No appetizer cufflinks,
No dessert brooches.

I don’t drink cocktails much.
Or beer, either –
To my father’s great disappointment.
He always said,

“DAD”: You should learn to drink beer so you’ll be a cheaper date!

“MOM”: Cheers.

“DAD”: Cheers.

“MOM”: Take a plate, everyone. NOW.

“DAD”: Gee, okay! Someone’s in a hurry. El Capitan!

NARRATOR: (to audience) I’m surprised he hasn’t asked me to put on—

“DAD”: Oh, hey! Music. (to NARRATOR) Would you—

NARRATOR: Sure, Dad.

*She leaves the kitchen,
as “MOM” and “DAD” take their plates
to the table and eat.*

(to audience)

We listened to music every night at dinner:
Ray Anthony, Freddy Martin, Les & Larry Elgart.
All my Dad’s favorites.
Big band, smooth jazz, tangos.
Peppy stuff.
And of course, this guy.

*She drops the needle on
Roger Miller’s “Do Wacka Do.”*

It never occurred to me
That we never listened to
The Brandenburg Concertos or Tchaikovsky,
Mom’s favorites.

*She returns to the table.
“DAD” is snapping his fingers
vigorously with the music.
He sings:*

“DAD”: “I wish I had your happiness
And you had a do-wacka-do-wacka-do
Wacka-do-wacka-do-wacka-do.”

NARRATOR: Hey Dad, our teacher said that drinking kills braincells.

“DAD”: HA! Well that’s just ridiculous, honey. Why, if that were true, no one would drink!

NARRATOR: So my teacher's lying?

"MOM": Eat your dinner.

NARRATOR: Ugh. Do I have to eat ALL my lima beans?

"MOM": You know what I think.

NARRATOR: Dad?

JOY: To lure your family into eating vegetables,
you will find
they will respond more readily
if the vegetables
are attractive in shape
and perhaps rather sparse
in number.

"DAD": Aren't you getting a little old for this?

JOY: Think
of the irresistible charm
of vegetables
floating like flowers
in a Japanese lacquered bowl.

NARRATOR: Please? Will you part them?

"DAD": Well, I guess so. There. You choose which half.

NARRATOR: Thanks, Dad!

"MOM": Let's Make a Deal triumphs again.

JOY: In order to provide
a canned Lima bean
with glamour,
you must do a fan dance with it!

NARRATOR: (to JOY) What does that even mean?

"DAD": (to MOM) Aw, c'mon. You don't mind, do you?

"MOM": (brightly) It's fine!

NARRATOR: (to audience) My father was a smart man, but I don't think that in thirty-nine

years he ever realized what those two words, coming from my mother, really meant.

“MOM”: How’s your steak?

“DAD”: It’s okay. Kinda tough.

“MOM”: Tough? Really? I gave you the tenderloin.

JOY: As it should be!

“DAD”: I don’t know, it just is. Maybe you overcooked it. See? It’s not really pink in there.

“MOM”: I’m sorry.

“DAD”: Hey, that’s okay! No problemo, senora. I sure as heck couldn’t do better.

NARRATOR gets up from the table.

NARRATOR: (to audience) No, he couldn’t. All he could do was heat things from a can. After she died he figured out how to cook an egg. Necessity, as they say—

DAD appears.

DAD: Excuse me, can I butt in here?

NARRATOR: Uh, okay...

DAD: I’m not the only male in America in the 70s who couldn’t cook. And didn’t try. It’s just the way it was.

JOY: Amen!

DAD: I just wanted to point that out.

NARRATOR: Thank you. Point taken.

DAD: Thanks.

NARRATOR: Is that all?

DAD: For now.

NARRATOR: Okay.

DAD: Oh, and I did know what “It’s fine” meant.

MOM appears.

NARRATOR: Are you sure?

MOM: No, you didn't.

DAD: I didn't?

MOM: No.

DAD: Oh. Okay, scratch that one.

NARRATOR: Moving on, yes?

*MOM and DAD nod, disappear.
MOM reappears.*

MOM: I still don't know how to do a fan dance with a lima bean.

JOY: Canned vegetables are greatly improved
By a bold and imaginative approach—

MOM: But what does it mean?

NARRATOR: We're good, Joy. Thanks.

VI.

NARRATOR: Much as she dreaded
making dinner every night
for 39 years
she never complained.
She saw it as her duty.

MOM: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy.
I awoke and saw that life was service.
I acted and behold, service was joy."

NARRATOR: Rabindranath Tagore.
His quote, handwritten in pencil,
Lived under the glass of her dresser
All my life.

JOY: Service? The procedures below present simple, dignified, current practice in table service.

NARRATOR: Later, Joy.

JOY: I am service.

NARRATOR: Later.

VII.

*Light back up on kitchen.
A different day. Morning.
MOM in front of the counter,
DAD sits at table.*

NARRATOR: Dinner every night,
fresh squeezed orange juice every morning.

Sound of an electric juicer.

I awake every day to this sound.

“MOM”: Hail Proctor Silex Chrome Juicit Deluxe,
with Oscillating Strainer and Porcelain Reamer,
Approved by Sunkist.
Blessed art thou among appliances
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Juices.

“MOM” offers a glass to NARRATOR.

“MOM”: Here you are.

NARRATOR: Thanks!

“MOM”: And one for you...

Gives one to “DAD”.

“DAD”: Great. *(looks at it)* Oh, lot of pulp in this one.

“MOM”: Here. *(switches it with NARRATOR’s)*

“DAD”: Thanks, sweetheart.

NARRATOR: Why do I have to—

She is stopped by a look from “MOM”.

SISTER enters, with two tennis racquets.

SISTER: Are we ready?

“MOM”: Yep! Let me just dry my hands...

“DAD”: You’re playing tennis?

SISTER: What does it look like, Daddy-O?

“DAD”: (*stands*) I will not have you speaking to me with that kind of disrespect.

SISTER: Sorry, sir.

“DAD”: (*to “MOM”*) And what about breakfast? I haven’t eaten yet.

NARRATOR: Have some cereal, Dad.

“DAD”: I was looking forward to an egg.

SISTER: (*mutters*)

“DAD”: What was that?

SISTER: Nothing.

*Pause, as SISTER realizes that “MOM”
is starting to fix his breakfast.*

Are you kidding? You’re actually doing it?

“DAD”: (*to “MOM”*) You’re a doll.

He kisses “MOM”’s cheek.

SISTER: I can’t believe it! This is total horseshit!

NARRATOR: Whoa!

“DAD”: Watch your mouth, young lady.

SISTER: Mom, why do you let him do this to you?

“MOM”: (*to SISTER*) Relax, darling. Just... relax.

“DAD”: Listen to your mother.

He attempts to pat SISTER's arm.

SISTER: Don't even.

She jerks her arm away.

“DAD”: I can pat your arm if I want to.

He tries again.

“MOM”: I don't think—

SISTER jerks away again.

SISTER: DON'T TOUCH ME.

“DAD”: I sure as hell can—

He reaches out one more time.

“MOM”: Stop it, both of you—

SISTER punches DAD in the arm.

NARRATOR: No!

“MOM”: Stop it!

*DAD pauses for a moment, thinks about it,
and punches her back.*

“MOM”: NO!

NARRATOR: Dad!

“MOM”: YOU MAY NOT DO THAT!

SISTER: (stunned) You... asshole.

“DAD”: You're the asshole.

“MOM”: NO NO NO NO NO NO NO. This cannot be. This does not happen.

SISTER: Oh my god, Mom, why did you ever marry him.

SISTER starts to leave. “MOM” follows her.

“MOM”: Wait—

SISTER: No, it’s not even worth talking about—

SISTER leaves.

“MOM” (shouts after her): Sweetie? Sweetie! Your father loves you.

SISTER (from offstage): Yeah, right. Why can’t he act like it?

JOY: Changing from marrow balls to a chiffonade of cress in the same clear soup can change the temper of a meal.

“MOM”: What have you done.

“DAD”: Me! She hit me! Hard! You saw what happened.

“MOM”: I sure did.

“DAD”: She’s crazy! Getting that upset over breakfast. Good god.

“MOM” stares at him for a moment, then exits, saying:

“MOM”: I want to make sure she’s all right.

“DAD”: Are you coming back?

“MOM”: *(from offstage)* Yes.

“DAD”: (to no one) My egg... (to NARRATOR) I like the way your mom makes my egg.

NARRATOR: Right, Dad.

VIII.

NARRATOR: What is it like to feel unloved?

*The Dance of Legitimate Insecurity,
to “Cheek to Cheek” by Fred Astaire.
MOM and DAD: A picture-perfect ballroom
dance routine, except that MOM will not look
DAD in the eye. Not once. He doesn’t realize
it at first, but eventually he notices,
then obsessively tries to force her to acknowledge him.*

She never does.

IX.

“MOM”: I stood in the customer service line
behind a woman at Heinen’s yesterday.
She had two pie boxes, stacked,
Balanced on one hand.
When it was her turn,
She went up to the clerk
And said,

PIE LADY: I’d like to return these

“MOM”: The clerk said

CLERK: Alright...

“MOM”: And took the boxes from her. She said,

PIE LADY: I’d like my money back in singles, please.

“MOM”: And the clerk said,

CLERK: They’re empty!

“MOM”: The clerk showed her one of the tins.

CLERK: You clearly ate both pies.

“MOM”: And the woman just said

PIE LADY: Mm hmm.

“MOM”: And smiled. The clerk was flabbergasted, but tried not to show it. She said

CLERK: Was there something wrong with the pies?

“MOM”: And the woman smiled sweetly and said

PIE LADY: No, there wasn’t.

“MOM”: The clerk couldn’t believe it.

CLERK: Then why do you think you should get your money back?

“MOM”: And the woman said, matter-of-factly,

PIE LADY: Because they weren't what I expected.

(pause)

“MOM”: Can you even imagine?

X.

NARRATOR: TANG.

It goes with us everywhere
Road trips, vacations
Outer space!

SISTER: Before our Egg McMuffins
Or, when he's feeling flush,
Our Grand Slams,
Out of the perfectly packed Samsonite
Comes the familiar orange and green jar.

“DAD”: Orange juice at restaurants is a rip-off!

NARRATOR: We unwrap cellophane from plastic cups
And mix and stir and stir and mix
And dutifully drink
The liquefied Sweet-tarts
Called TANG.

SISTER: Never mind that we drink it
In the motel room
An hour before breakfast

“DAD”: If it's good enough for the astronauts,
It's good enough for us!

XI.

JOY: Now?

NARRATOR: Sure, Joy. Go ahead.

JOY: The procedures below present simple, dignified, current practice in table service. When you are entertaining,--

NARRATOR: Mom was not an “entertainer.”
Perhaps that’s why
she hated entertaining.

JOY: When you are entertaining,
try not to feel
that something unusual
is expected
of you as a hostess.
It isn’t.
Just be yourself.

“MOM”: Okay...

JOY: Try serving as a dish
a true “specialite de la maison” –
something your guests are not so likely
to prepare themselves,
or find at the homes of their more
convention-bound friends.

“MOM”: Oh. Okay...

*During the following,
“MOM” attempts to cook an elephant.*

JOY: About Table Décor:
Ingenious hostesses can confect stunning arrangements...
Handsome man-made objects! Long needled pine tufts! A piece of sculpture! Borders!
Garlands!

Whatever you do, DON’T OVERCROWD THE TABLE.

“MOM”: I’ll... get to that...

JOY: (starts slowly) The dinner begins
With a seafood cocktail, in place
When the guests are seated.

“MOM”: Uh huh--

JOY: (speeds up gradually) Soup plate
served from the left
Service plate
removed with the empty soup plate
From the right
Empty hot plate
From the left
Unless meat is carved
And served in the dining room
Should sherry be served with the soup course,
Both glass and plate are removed
along with the service plate.
Then soup plate soup plate soup plate
is removed—
From?
From?

“MOM”: Um... the left?

JOY: The RIGHT. Are you listening?

“MOM” nods, wrestling with the elephant carcass.

JOY: (still gaining) The server stands
To the left
Of the host,
an extra hot plate.
When the host has filled one
Server removes and replaces it
with the empty hot plate.
Then after taking
The service plate before the guest of honor
From the right
The server gives him the filled hot plate
From the—
From the--?

“MOM”: Right?

JOY: (at max velocity) LEFT! LEFT!
Hot breads come next.
More water, more wine.
Salad course!
Asparagus and Artichokes? Vinegar dressings?
No wine!
Dessert, finger bowls, coffee.

Or, dessert, FRUIT plate with doily, finger bowls.
Then coffee.
Poured from the right.
Cream and sugar
Passed from--
Passed from--?

“MOM”: Oh God—

*“MOM” finally succeeds in shoving
the elephant carcass into the oven.*

JOY: (kindly and slowly) The left. It’s so simple.
Remember, hostess, your chances for a successful party
are much greater if you key your efforts
to your own belongings and service
rather than struggle
to meet the exacting demands
of the kind of dinner which has just been described.

“DAD”: Honey, is everything okay in there?

JOY: BUT YOUR STANDARDS NEED NOT BE LOWERED IN THE LEAST.

“MOM”: Yes, it’s fine! It’s going to be... delicious...

“DAD”: Should I get out Red or White?

(pause)

“MOM”: Um...

JOY: Be sure you know
the guests have sophisticated enough palates
to enjoy whatever you are serving –

or that they know you well enough
to be able to ask you
for an egg instead.

“MOM”: Both.

NARRATOR: Thirty-nine years.

MOM: Not a biggie – the 39th.

NARRATOR: How many dinners is that?

SEX

I.

JOY: Let's talk... about well-hung ducks.

*In the background, in darkened silence,
MOM and DAD enact a full minute
of sexual dance gyrations while
"MOM" and "DAD", in bright light,
stand motionless, apart from each other.
"DAD" is reading pornography, smoking.
"MOM" is reading the newspaper.
Eventually: Sound of a phone ringing.
MOM looks up from the newspaper.
Dancers freeze.*

NARRATOR: (into phone) Yeah, things are good. I'm all unpacked, and I got my student ID... I'm still getting lost sometimes, but it's getting better.

"MOM": Oh, good. And you got all the classes you wanted?

NARRATOR: Yeah, I was lucky.

(Beat. Another beat.)

"MOM": (briskly) We got a bill from a... Dr. Kronenberg's office. It arrived just after you left. I guess he's a gynecologist? So we'll just pay that.

(Beat.)

NARRATOR: Okay.

(Beat.)

"MOM": Classes start tomorrow, right? How exciting!

NARRATOR: Yep!

*"MOM" goes back to reading.
Dancers resume. This time,
"DAD" puts down the magazine,
looks around, and watches them.
"MOM" continues to read.*

*Slowly, "DAD" moves toward her.
He reaches out to touch her.
Just as he's about to make contact,
Lights down.*

II.

NARRATOR: "Mom on the Couch, Part II"

The tomcat (Named Kitty)
arrives and stalks her,
purring in anticipation of her
mountainous breasts.

Nestled between them,
In the space reserved just for him, he kneads
Kneads, needs...
Desperate for her touch.

Reluctant,
Mom collects the paper in her left hand,
Frees her right.
Deigns to pat
the top of his head.

That, just that slight touch
from the One He Loves
Is enough
To turn on the faucet.

Drool
Joyful, contented,
Drips sweetly on her clavicle

But she is prepared
Always
for liquid eruptions.
Kleenex lives in her sleeve,
Crumpled and warm, ready for action:
Tears, snot
and yes...
Cat saliva.

Dabbing at the corners
Of his slack, happy jaws
She wrinkles her nose at me.

“MOM”: Disgusting, isn't it?

She makes no move to dislodge him.

She even
keeps patting

his head.

NARRATOR: That's it. That's as close as we're going to get.

SISTER: Except this:

“MOM”: I should have been a nun.

FAMILY

I.

*Hospital room.
Television noise – flipping through the channels.
NARRATOR and SISTER enter.
“MOM”/TV is showing static.*

SISTER: I think she’s asleep.

NARRATOR: With that on?

They stand and observe her.

SISTER: Oh, God.

NARRATOR: Her mouth looks worse today.

SISTER: I want to talk to a nurse.

*A sharp increase in noise level awakens “MOM”/TV.
Close-up on screen of June Cleaver.
SISTER stays.*

NARRATOR: Hi, Mom.

“MOM”(V.O.): (unintelligible)

NARRATOR: We’re here, Mom. It’s okay. It’s all right.

*“MOM”/TV speaks again,
but her words are lost in the noise.*

NARRATOR: Wait, Mom, I couldn’t hear you.

SISTER: I’ve got to fix this.

*SISTER disappears behind curtain,
shouts the following:*

Hello, my sister and I are here again. Would you mind turning down your television?

ROOMMATE (V.O.): Whaaat? I can’t hear you.

SISTER: Do you mind—

ROOMMATE (V.O.): Speak up! What?

Television clicks off.

SISTER: TURNING OFF THE TELEVISION?

ROOMMATE (V.O.): It's off! Christ, it's off! Whaddya want?

SISTER: We can't hear my mother, who's quite ill.

ROOMMATE (V.O.): Yeah, she looks pretty bad.

SISTER: So you don't mind keeping it off?

ROOMMATE (V.O.): Yeah, okay.

SISTER: Thanks so much.

SISTER returns.

SISTER: Sheesh. Hi Mom, sorry about that. How do you feel? Are you in pain?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): Yes.

SISTER: All over?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): Yes.

SISTER: Let me see if I can get you something.

NARRATOR: Wait. Mom? Would you like more ice chips? Some ice for your mouth?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): Please...

NARRATOR: (to SISTER) Can you get some?

SISTER: I'll be right back.

NARRATOR: Thank god we're going through this together.

SISTER: Thank Mom and Dad.

II.

*Kitchen, early 60's. Phone rings.
"MOM" enters wearing a rain poncho and boots,
carrying half-rolled up sleeping bags tied with twine,
a garbage bag with wet clothes spilling out,
tent stakes, a cooler.*

"MOM": (yelling offstage) I'm getting the phone! Just get in the tub with your sister!

SISTER: (from offstage) She's disgusting.

"MOM": You're muddy, too!

She picks up the phone.

Hello? Oh hi Marjorie—

NARRATOR: She's not doing anything, Mom—

"MOM": I... hold on... (to the girls) You heard me!

SISTER: Aw Mom, I'm so tired. I don't wanna be in charge this time—

NARRATOR: I just wanna go to bed. How come we have to take a bath?

"MOM": We're not arguing about this. Get. In. The. Tub.

SISTER: Great...

"MOM": (into phone) I'm sorry, Marj, we just got back and the girls are covered in mud. No, I can't say it was good. Relaxing? (laughs) No, most certainly not. Exhausting, terrifying, disgusting... Oh, they're fine, just tired.

SISTER: Motherrrr...

"MOM": (covers mouthpiece; to girls) NO! (into phone) Uh-huh. I'm sorry, Marj, what did you say? You wanted to... Oh, thank him for the party, of course. I see. (pause) Oh, did he? Really. Wow. Sounds like... I'm so glad you enjoyed it. Yes, I am sorry I missed it. Very. Sure, I'll tell him. (pause) Yes. Yes, a shower sounds great. Thanks. You too. B-bye.

(to girls) Are you two in the tub?

SISTER & NARRATOR: (sullenly) Yesss.

"MOM": Good. Let me know when you're ready for teeth.

*“MOM” starts sorting clothes into piles.
“DAD” enters, carrying a paper grocery bag
and a set of keys in his hand.*

“DAD”: Hi, what are these doing in the door?

“MOM”: Hi, the phone was ringing – I was in a hurry—

“DAD”: It’s dangerous to do that, someone could just walk in the door, you never know.

“MOM”: Mm hmm.

“DAD”: Well gee it’s great to see you!

He kisses her.

How are you? How’d it go?

“MOM”: It was fine.

“DAD”: Girls have a good time?

“MOM”: They seemed to. What did you get?

“DAD”: Just some stuff we were getting low on. Peanuts, tonic, paper towels. Oh! And this! I love this stuff, you never get it!

He pulls out Velveeta.

“MOM”: I didn’t know we were low on tonic.

“DAD”: Yeah. Wow, this place is a mess.

“MOM”: I know it is.

*She puts on a tea kettle,
gets out a mug and Sanka.*

“DAD”: You’re making instant?

“MOM”: Yes.

“DAD”: If you made real, I’d have some.

“MOM”: Instant is fine with me.

“DAD”: Okay, okay, no problemo. Culpa mia. Just letting you know.

“MOM”: I’m sorry.

“DAD”: No biggie. (pause) I am a little surprised that you’re not willing to make a little coffee for me.

“MOM”: Really. Why is that?

“DAD”: Well, you had your vacation—

“MOM”: Vacation?

“DAD”: Yeah, a girls’ weekend away—

“MOM”: Are you out of your mind? You have no idea what transpired over this weekend, and you have the gall to call it a vacation?

“DAD”: Taking some girl scouts camping—

MOM: You don’t have any—

“DAD”: --that’s supposed to be some arduous task?

“MOM”: --idea what it was like.

“DAD”: No, I guess I don’t. And you haven’t bothered to ask me what it was like having you gone for the weekend.

He lights a cigarette.

“MOM”: You’re right. I have not.

“DAD”: You go gallivanting off, leaving me to fend for myself, for God’s sake. You know I can’t cook.

JOY: Any clever person can take a few desolate-looking refrigerator leftovers and glorify them into a tempting molded aspic salad or mousse. Well-combined scraps result in a dish that is sometimes as good as one composed of delicacies and with a further advantage to the busy housewife as it can be prepared a day in advance and chilled in the refrigerator until ready to serve.

“MOM”: That’s it?

“DAD”: I think that’s plenty!

“MOM”: Good god.

“DAD”: You left me stranded!

“MOM”: Stranded! You don’t know what stranded is! Trying to pitch 10 tents in the dark in a downpour is stranded. Twenty little girls in the rain in the middle of nowhere in leaky tents is stranded. Eating peanut butter and jelly and cold s’mores for two days because you can’t get a fire started because everything is soaked is stranded.

JOY: Care in cooking, distinction in seasoning and presentation, can make even a tin of tuna memorable.

“MOM”: Taking four hours to make a two-hour drive because you have to keep pulling over to let the three girls in your car throw up, is stranded. And sitting on a latrine hole, thankful to have a moment of peace, and having a rat crawl up your back... THIS IS STRANDED. And then, and then, I come home... and find out that in my absence, you have thrown a party? My god! Not just a little get-together, but an all-out lampshade-on-your-head, Bartender’s Mistake Party?? I can’t even believe it. I cannot.

“DAD”: Who told you that?

“MOM”: What’s the difference?

“DAD”: There’s a big difference.

“MOM”: It’s immaterial.

“DAD”: That’s not fair, you can’t just do that. That’s not how we do things.

“MOM”: Marjorie.

“DAD”: What, she called to tell you I had—

“MOM”: No, she called to thank you. Obviously she was unaware that I was not privy to the goings-on.

“DAD”: Oh.

(long pause)

“MOM”: How could you do that.

“DAD”: I’m not allowed to throw a party in my own house?

“MOM”: You know that’s not the issue.

“DAD”: Of course it is! You left me to fend for myself, and I did! And we had a great time! No angst over the guest list, no hand-wringing over menu choices or hors d’oeuvres or centerpieces, no maniacal clean up before everyone arrived. None of it! Just some snacks and booze and great music. I’m not surprised Marjorie had a great time! We all did! We could all relax and let our hair down for once.

SISTER: Dad? Is that you?

“DAD”: Yeah, sweetie – I’ll be right up to see you.

SISTER: Are you and Mom okay?

*“DAD” and “MOM” stare hard at each other
for a long beat, then:*

“DAD” & “MOM”: We’re fine!

(long pause)

“DAD”: I’m sorry you had such a rough time.

“MOM”: Thanks.

“DAD”: A rat? Really?

“MOM”: Yes.

“DAD”: That’s awful. (beat) I guess I’ll go up and say hi. Then I’ll help you clean up.

“MOM”: Thanks.

He kisses her on the cheek, exits.

III.

SISTER: When I was six,
I fell through a skylight
To the marble floor of our
Palacio in Santiago, Chile.
My father found me,
Bloody and unconscious.

She slumps to the floor. “DAD” runs in.

“DAD”: NO! Oh God, no.
Help! Ayuda! Ayudame!

He cradles her head in his lap.

Oh, wake up my darling girl,
It's Daddy.

SERVANT runs in.

SERVANT: Ay, señor! Ay dios—

“DAD”: Necesito doctor! Now! Pronto!

SERVANT: Si, llamo inmediatamente –

SERVANT runs out.

“DAD”: Please wake up. Oh please, please...
God? If there is a God,
If you're out there somewhere
And can hear me,
I'll make a deal with you.
I'll— I'll--
If she wakes up,
I'll quit smoking.
Wait –
If she wakes up and she's fine,
Her brain isn't damaged,
I will quit smoking.
And her face isn't scarred.
Okay?
No brain damage and no plastic surgery.
It's a deal on my end.
Oh, please, God.

SISTER moans, stirs.

Oh thank God! Can you hear me, honey?
It's Daddy, sweetheart.

*She opens her eyes, starts to cry,
reaches for him. He hugs her.*

Thank you, God.

SISTER: (to audience) He never smoked another day in his life.

IV.

*A kitchen in the 50s.
"MOM", "DAD", and MA sit at a table.
"MOM"'s mouth is swollen and puffy.*

MA: Well, I'm just glad you newlyweds drove all the way out to see us.

"DAD": Of course, Mom. (winks) You know I had to twist her arm, didn't I hon?

"MOM": (Tries to smile, mumbles) Very funny.

MA: Oh, he's not being very nice to you, is he? Now, for heaven's sake, how many did they take out?

"DAD": (as "MOM" holds up four fingers) They yanked all four.

MA: Four! ("MOM" nods) Well my stars, that's just awful. What a rotten thing! I am SO thankful that mine came in straight. We have ALWAYS had good teeth in this family.

"DAD": Ma, where's Dad?

MA: So, you don't want to listen to your dumb old mother, do you?

"DAD": Ma...

MA: When I'm gone—

"DAD" & MA: --you'll be sorry.

SISTER: My father was an only child.
His father was a physics professor,
An inventor.
He held five patents:
A "rotatable carbonizing machine"
and
a "horizontal retort with reciprocating agitator."

He also may have kissed me
Inappropriately
when I was five
or six.

A sharp look from MA.

MA: Now. Your father went to the laboratory to do something or other and then he's going to pick up some groceries. You're staying for supper, right?

MA rummages in the cupboard.

“DAD”: Sure.

*“MOM” motions: her mouth.
“DAD” signals: what can I do?*

Sure, Ma.

MA: I should hope so? That’s why I sent your Dad out... There is NOTHING in this house. Old Mother Hubbard. Here they are, I knew we still had some. I’m sure they’re still good...

“DAD”: Cheesy Pats?

MA: Ha! The kind you like, with pecans.

JOY: Grate cheese; cream together with butter.
Add flour and salt; mix and form into a roll.
Chill until firm; slice. Top each with half a pecan
and enjoy the satisfaction of creating beautifully crafted
foods, whether your husband notices your efforts or not.

Dust with powdered sugar while hot.

MA: (To “MOM”) Help yourself.

“MOM”: No, thank you.

MA: You sure?

“MOM”: I’m not very hungry.

MA: Oh so? (To “DAD”) Have another. Aren’t they delicious?

“DAD”: They’re okay.

MA: What’s wrong with them?

“DAD”: I don’t know, they’re... something. They’re not sweet enough.

MA: Well I didn’t know you liked them sweeter. Why didn’t you tell me? I’ll make them sweeter next time.

“DAD”: Gee, Ma, you don’t have to...

MA: It’s no trouble at all.

“DAD”: Really?

MA: Of course.

JOY: Roll in powdered sugar while hot. Just for him.

“DAD”: Thanks, that’s great.

MA: So. Tell me about your trip! Wait... Look, I have that beautiful postcard you sent me. My goodness, all that water...

“DAD” rubs his arm, jokes:

“DAD”: (to “MOM”) Do you want to tell Ma about the drive?

“MOM”: NO.

“DAD” lights a cigarette, smokes.

“DAD”: Oh, sure, I keep forgetting about your mouth. Made it in two and a half days to the falls. “Hotel Niagara.” Decent location, but other than that, the place was a rip-off. Every night I had to call the front desk at least twice about the air conditioning.

MA: You don’t say...

“DAD”: I even tried to bang around on it a little.

MA: My goodness.

“DAD”: They finally fixed it by the last night, but I’ll be damned if I was going to pay full price for all three nights.

MA: Good for you.

“DAD”: The manager and I really got into it – Boy oh boy was he STEAMED! Hoo! Big scene in the lobby, but I didn’t care. No sir. You should get what you pay for! Right?

MA: That’s so right, Junior.

“DAD”: What a scene.

MA: My stars.

NARRATOR: My mother grew up in a three-story Victorian, high on the bluffs of the Mississippi.

The casual, pinprick terror of an older brother
Adolescent, incessant

Always elicited tears.

“Your brother loves you.”

The exoneration,
From a mother who was busy trying on new hats.

Eventually, her tears vanished forever.
I never saw her cry.

MA: Oh! We have a sunflower – I have never seen one this big in my LIFE! Come on out and see it, both of you.

MA starts to head out.

You won’t believe it til you see it—

“DAD”: Sure, alright.

“MOM”: I’ll just stay here.

“DAD”: Of course, right right right. No problem. You poor thing.

MA: She’s not coming?

“DAD”: No, Ma. Her mouth.

*They are gone. “MOM” rests her head in her hands,
in pain. Eventually opens the refrigerator.
It is almost empty,
except for one cold Pepsi.
She sits at the table with it.
Her mother-in-law returns.*

MA: Thought I’d get the camera—

“MOM”: Sure.

MA: Oh.

“MOM”: Is something wrong?

MA: Well... no...

“MOM”: What is it?

MA: Oh, I... well, I was saving that for Junior.

A pause.

“MOM”: Saving. Oh! This!

MA: Yes.

“MOM”: Oh, I’m sorry... I didn’t know.

MA: That’s all right – I’ll just put it back. Would you like some water?

“MOM”: Yes, thanks.

MA: Well, help yourself! I’ve got to get a picture of Junior...

MA leaves.

V.

*The hospital room, video on “MOM”/TV shows Carol Brady.
NARRATOR gets up from the chair as SISTER enters.
They confer quietly.*

SISTER: I spoke to the doctor.

NARRATOR: And?

SISTER: He said that Mom is in the last stage of death.

NARRATOR: Oh god.

SISTER: I know.

NARRATOR: Is that it?

SISTER: He talked about morphine, giving her morphine for the pain.

NARRATOR: Shit.

They hug.

How did I not see this coming? It all feels so unreal...

SISTER: They can start a drip now if we want.

NARRATOR: Is that what we want?

MOM: Yes.

SISTER: I don't know. How are we supposed to...? Yes. Yes?

NARRATOR: Yes.

SISTER: I don't know how to do this.

NARRATOR: No one does.

MOM & NARRATOR: You're just doing the best you can.

SISTER: Thanks.

*SISTER leaves.
NARRATOR looks down at her ring.*

NARRATOR: "Dirt" lodges in tiny corners
wallpaper paste, compost
baby poop, carpet dust
latex paint, butt paste.
Atomic family flotsam
Encrusted inside platinum crannies.

And look!
There is one tiny diamond
That has gone AWOL.

No one knows that it's missing a stone
But like a tongue to a bloody gap in the teeth,
My eye is drawn to the tiny hole

Where is that diamond now?

In an envelope
For safekeeping,
Stowawayed in a nightstand
Sold at auction?

In a plastic bag of cat litter
Deep in a landfill?

Or resting
in the cool dark earth
At the base of the

Lily of the valley roots,
Her favorite flower?

Yes. That is where I will imagine it.

VI.

The kitchen. "MOM" and "DAD" stand expectantly waiting.

*"Satin Doll" by Duke Ellington plays.
NARRATOR and SISTER tap dance into view,
do a simple routine together.
They stop abruptly before the song ends.*

SISTER: That's it.

"MOM": Nice!

NARRATOR: That's all we know so far.

"DAD": (*crying*) Aw gee, girls... you got me all worked up here...

"MOM": You know your father and tap dancing...

SISTER: And Kodak commercials.

NARRATOR: And the National Anthem!

"DAD": Oh, cut it out. Can't a guy get teary over his beautiful daughters?

SISTER: Barf. I'm taking these off.

SISTER takes off tap shoes, exits.

VII.

NARRATOR: He never says it
But he wishes I had been
A boy.
So, I let him teach me

"DAD": How to throw a football
How to change a flat
How to fix the garage door opener
How to watch a boxing match

How the stock market works, and
How an eclipse happens.

NARRATOR: Those all make sense to me.

Then he tries to teach me
the mathematical concept of
Less than nothing.

“DAD”: Number lines! Debt!

NARRATOR: But to me,
the absence of a number is zero.
The end of the line.
Nothing. Zip. Nada.
You can’t have less than nothing.

We go over and over it.
Finally, I just pretend to understand.
“I get it!” I say,
And he says,

“DAD”: Phew! Thank God.

Playing along.
It’s my way
Of apologizing
For being a girl.

VIII.

SISTER: You would think
that his wife’s diagnosis
of Non-Hodgkins large-cell lymphoma
would have summoned
a geyser of tears in my dad.
Yet we never saw him cry once
(Not once)
About it.

DAD: I cried. I just hid it.

“DAD” and “MOM” hold hands in DOCTOR’s office.

DOCTOR: (all business) So that’s that. I’m sorry.

“DAD”: Thanks, Doctor. Really appreciate your time.

“MOM”: Yes, thanks.

DOCTOR: So we’ll start the treatments in a few weeks, as soon as we can fit you in.

“DAD”: Sounds good. Doesn’t it, honey?

“MOM”: Yes, yes.

DOCTOR: Alright then. (starts to leave)

“MOM”: Oh... one last thing...

DOCTOR: Yes?

“MOM”: Is there anything I should be doing? Or not doing? Diet? Exercise? My daughter says—

DOCTOR: Well, I wouldn’t take up smoking. Ha ha...

“DAD”: Ha ha ha, yeah right.

DOCTOR: No, seriously.... No. Just relax, and live your life. Okay?

“MOM”: Okay.

“DAD”: You bet.

DOCTOR leaves.

He’s a great guy. I really like him. (she nods) Okay. So. You’re good. It’s no biggie. Right?

“MOM”: Right. No biggie.

“DAD”: Just a bump in the road.

IX.

The Dance of the Hamster Wheel of Western Medicine:

*“The Hamster Dance” by Hampton the Hamster.
MOM, DAD, NARRATOR & SISTER: MOM begins
with a simple, repeated gesture. DAD mimics this gesture,
then gives her a pill. MOM moves away, the gesture is reduced,*

but another, more violent gesture occurs. SISTER mimics this combination, gives her a pill. MOM moves away, those two gestures are reduced, a third arises. You get the picture.

VI.

Hospital. SISTER and NARRATOR, seated on either side of the bed. Video on screen shows Wilma Flintstone. UNCLE and AUNT enter. SISTER greets them at the door.

SISTER: Oh, thank you both for coming. (hugs them)

AUNT: Well of course...

NARRATOR gets up and hugs them.

NARRATOR: Such a long way!

UNCLE: Anything for my baby sister. (sees "MOM"/TV) Jesus! Aw, Christ. Holy sh—

AUNT: Not so loud!

UNCLE: Right right right. Aw Jesus. I had no idea she was this bad.

SISTER: Why don't you sit here... talk to her...

UNCLE: Can she hear anything?

NARRATOR: She goes in and out.

UNCLE: Jesus. Yeah, okay.

He sits next to the bed. SISTER sits on the other side.

NARRATOR: I'll get a few more chairs.

NARRATOR disappears behind the curtain, and returns with one chair.

NARRATOR: Only one. Here, Auntie, you sit on this one.

NARRATOR places the chair by the door.

AUNT: Thanks, hon. Oh my, she's pretty far gone, isn't she.

UNCLE: (loudly) Hey baby sister, can ya hear me? It's your big brother, straight from St. Louis. How are ya? I uh I uh... we just thought we'd come see ya, let ya know we're right here with ya, prayin' for ya. (to SISTER) That all right? (SISTER nods) And I thought you'd want to know that the deeds for the investment property are all signed over, so we won't have to hire those goddamn lawyers anymore! Bastards. Well shoot, you married a lawyer, didn't ya. Woops. Well, at least he got wise and did something useful with his life.

AUNT: Tell her we love her.

UNCLE: You can tell her.

AUNT: I can't see much from over here.

UNCLE: Well do you want to sit here?

AUNT: No, no... she's your sister.

NARRATOR: Are you hungry, Auntie? Why don't we go down to the cafeteria and get you something.

AUNT: Alright, yes, I could use an ice tea. (to UNCLE) You want anything?

UNCLE: Yeah, get me an ice tea too. Extra lemon.

NARRATOR and AUNT leave.

(back to "MOM"/TV) Speaking of your old man, where is he?

SISTER: At the house. He'll be here later.

UNCLE: (to SISTER) Must be shitty for him. Ya know, our dad --your Opa-- offered him the business, 50-50. He coulda run it with me, but he turned it down. God knows why. It's making a mint.

SISTER: That's great. Anything else you want to tell Mom?

UNCLE: Oh, right. Sure. (to "MOM"/TV) Uh... I know we had some tough times, ya know, didn't always get along...

MOM: Understatement.

UNCLE: ...but we also had some fun, didn't we? You were a real sweetheart, and I'm—I'm—
(breaks down) I'm gonna miss ya.

UNCLE gets up to leave.

Sorry—

SISTER: It's okay. She knows.

MOM: I do.

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): Thank you... for coming.

SISTER: See?

He nods, leaves.

SISTER: (to “MOM”/TV) This is not going the way I want for you, Mom. I hope you know that. I'm not in charge. But I'm doing the best I can.

WORK & MONEY

I.

NARRATOR: Even though Mom always works
outside the home
it is always part-time.
Tutor, teacher, real estate agent...

“DAD”: Why don’t you sell real estate? You’re always looking for the perfect house, you might
as well get paid for it.

NARRATOR: Mom’s real job is him and us
And we all know it.

JOY: Ever peel a grape? Well, it takes time, but what is more luxurious than a lovely mound of
peeled, seeded grapes, lightly tossed in a mild olive oil and vinegar dressing, served in lettuce
cups or as the center for a gelatin ring mold!

NARRATOR: (to JOY) Peeling grapes?
You must be joking.
Isn’t it time for you
To move on?

II.

***Dance of Obstruction, Part I:
Clothes Folding***
“Wives and Lovers” by Jack Jones.

*MOM’s forward movement is impeded
by folding a cloth that is continually dropped
in front of her by NARRATOR and SISTER.
She forces them temporarily
to mimic her movements.
But they go back to dropping them again.*

III.

“DAD”: I love cars.

ALL: That’s nice.

“DAD”: I really love cars.

ALL: Mm hmm

“DAD”: Maybe I’ll do something with them someday.

ALL: Go to law school.

“DAD”: Oh, okay.

Sound of an old-fashioned car honk.

“DAD”: Maybe I’ll fix them someday.

ALL: Get a sales job.

“DAD”: Oh, Okay.

(slightly more modern car honk)

“DAD”: Maybe I’ll design them someday.

ALL: Up the ladder. VP of Sales.

“DAD”: Okay.

(more modern car honk)

“DAD”: Market them?

ALL: Keep climbing. International. South America.

“DAD”: K.

(car honk)

“DAD”: I REALLY LOVE CARS. I want to buy a VW dealership and work for myself,
SELLING CARS.

*Cacophony of car honks, then the theme music
from “Let’s Make a Deal.”*

JAY: With your host, Monty Hall!

MONTY: Alright, Dad, the moment of truth has arrived. Do you pick... Door Number One? Jay, what does that look like.

JAY: Stay right where you are, Dad. A comfortable job in sales for the chemical company you work for, a company that manufactures plastics, DDT, PCBs, Agent Orange, and dioxin. A company that will someday attempt to wrest all independent control over small farms by genetically modifying seeds. A company that will contaminate our food supply and profit from the toxification and destruction of the planet we call Earth.

MONTY: I don't know, Dad. Sounds pretty good!

“DAD”’: I know.

MONTY: Or is it Door Number Two? Jay?

JAY: This one requires a colossal leap of faith and some good-sized cojones, Dad. Sell the sailboat, break that piggy bank, and borrow against your wife's inheritance. What for? I'll tell you! For a BRAND NEW CAR! Actually, for 215 hot-off-the-assembly-line 1973 Volkswagons, in assorted makes and models, to be exact! You'll trade most of your savings for half of a VW dealership in Cleveland, Ohio. Scary? You bet! But in return you'll grab autonomy, self-direction, and a personal dream fulfilled. Back to you, Monty!

MONTY: Alright! Do or die, here. What's it gonna be, Dad?

“DAD”’: Monty, I gotta go with... Door Number Two!

Horrible wah wah honking sad music.

MONTY: Aw gee, Dad. Wish I could turn back time for you on that one. Jay? Tell him what he's lost.

JAY: Dad, you've unknowingly partnered up with a co-owner that embezzles funds from the dealership during a time of oil embargos and economic crisis due to instability in the Middle East. Volkswagen discontinues the beetle and rolls out the first generation of Rabbits, a vehicle so faulty and mis-engineered that it takes decades for VW to regain its good name. The business goes bankrupt, through no real fault of your own. And that's not all. You've lost your savings, your social standing, your self-respect, eight years of your life, and your hireability... but all of these pale in comparison to the loss of the three things you truly couldn't afford to lose: your standing as a husband and provider, what little was left of your wife's estimation, and her faith in you. Yes, all of that and more, down the rat hole. Back to you, Monty.

MONTY: Sorry, Dad.

“DAD”’: Yeah, well.

NARRATOR: And at this moment,

The concept of
Less than nothing
Finally becomes real to me.

DAD: The Bhagavad Gita said,

Better is one's own dharma
Though imperfectly carried out
Than the dharma of another
Carried out perfectly.

(pause)

“DAD”: Is it 5 o'clock yet?

IV.

*The kitchen. “DAD” at the table, drinking.
NARRATOR enters.*

NARRATOR: Mom said you didn't sell any today.

“DAD”: Nope.

NARRATOR: Or yesterday, either?

“DAD”: No.

NARRATOR: I'm sorry. That stinks.

“DAD”: Yep.

(pause)

NARRATOR: Hey, guess what? I made it to the final round of cheerleading tryouts, and I really think I might make it—

“DAD”: Honey-- Honey, cone of silence. Okay? Cone of silence.

NARRATOR: Oh. Okay. Sorry.

V.

NARRATOR & SISTER: There's a Bird in the Garage

MOM: It's no one's fault.

NARRATOR: Garage is garage, doing brickly duty.
Bird is bird, living birdly life.

SISTER: Cold April mists
obscure instinct and
dampen thought

MOM: The doors are open.

NARRATOR: Incandescence lights the way.
Was she fooled by a surrogate sun?

SISTER: She would never choose to
farewell sky and soar into the
mouth of bricks

NARRATOR & SISTER: Would she?

F Flutter f p p panic pf flutter p p p
Panic f f f feather flutter flutter
Feather panic panic pppp ffff f p f p f
flutterfeatherpanicflutter

MOM: It's no one's fault.

NARRATOR: Garage is garage, doing brickly duty.
Bird is bird, trapped.

MOM: Say it again.
No one's
Fault.

NARRATOR & SISTER: Then why does my heart catch so?

VI.

Mom: When he said he wanted to buy the VW biz
I thought about leaving him.

What do you do
when one happiness cancels out another?

In a lunar eclipse,
the moon passes through the Earth's shadow
There's no negotiation.
Moon takes a back seat.

They don't compromise
And they don't apologize.

SISTER: Mom gave up a singing career to be a wife and homemaker.

MOM: What?

NARRATOR: No she didn't.

SISTER: Yes she did. You're too young. You don't remember.

NARRATOR: How would you know? You weren't born yet.

SISTER: I just know. She could have been a professional singer, if it weren't for Dad. She was good enough.

MOM: No, I wasn't.

NARRATOR: Dad didn't make her give it up.

SISTER: Yes he did.

NARRATOR: No!

SISTER: Stop defending him. You're always defending him.

NARRATOR: Maybe she was glad not to have to try. Maybe he was the perfect excuse to not take the risk of failure. Maybe marrying him absolved her of having to succeed herself. And besides, being a martyr is more powerful than being a success.

MOM: Why do you think that?

NARRATOR: That's what I did, too.

SISTER: Come on...

NARRATOR: It's true. But this is not about me.

MOM & SISTER: No? Are you sure?

NARRATOR: Let's move on.

SISTER: Fine.

VII.

NARRATOR: After the dealership folds,
Dad tries to get a job.
But now he's over fifty,
And no one wants him.

“DAD” reads a note.

“Dear Dad,
You are the best Dad EVER.
Keep your chin up. You will find a job,
I just know it.
Your loving daughter.”

“DAD”: Hello there, God,
if you're real and “out there”...
I feel like our first deal worked out pretty well.
I don't miss the smoking at all,
And it made my family happy.

Uh... this one... uh...
Oh, hell, am I a mouse or a man?
Ha ha ha
Don't answer that.
Here's the deal: you get me a job
A decent one, with some travel but not too much
And benefits,
And I'll...
I'll give up (whispers) pornography.

Whaddy say, God? Are we good?

Phone rings. Answering machine picks up.

“DAD” (V.O.): Hello, you've reached your representative for Porta-Tool Products. I am sorry I am not there in person to receive your phone call, but this new machine can record a message for you that I will listen to later. This machine can also accept your orders, large or small, and I will then call you back to confirm them as soon as I am able. Please speak slowly and clearly after you hear the sound of a beep. And thank you for choosing Porta-Tool!

Phone beeps.

SISTER: Mom's cancer goes into remission.
Everyone is thrilled,
Especially Dad.

VIII.

Dance of Obstruction, Part II:

I Just Love You So Much

"You're My World," by Helen Reddy.

MOM and DAD: They move, DAD supporting MOM, hovering.

Every time MOM tries to dance alone,

DAD hugs her and won't let go.

The hugs become increasingly suffocating,

Until she is limp in his arms.

IX.

NARRATOR: Home from college, winter break.
Three days before Christmas
Door standing open
all of them wide open
police car just leaving

"DAD": She took every pill in the house

NARRATOR: he says.

DOCTOR: Those suffering from depression
are at 25 times greater risk of suicide
than the general population.
The role depression plays in cancer suicide
is equally significant.

NARRATOR: Time elongated stretched to break
slump against wall and slide to sit
breath leaving never to return (never)

"DAD": The ambulance just left

NARRATOR: he says.

They told me she was depressed, but I
wouldn't (couldn't) didn't expect

days nights days of sighs
face contorted unrecognizable
a mask not a mother

“MOM”: They’re making a fool out of you.

NARRATOR: she had said

“MOM”: You’re a disgrace to the family.

DOCTOR: Approximately 25% of all cancer patients
experience severe depressive symptoms,
with about 6% fulfilling DSM-III criteria
for the diagnosis of major depression.

NARRATOR: Rummaging in the medicine cabinet
blind hand flutters over child-proof caps

“DAD”: Should I take these away?

NARRATOR: he says

“MOM”: I wouldn’t know what to do with them

NARRATOR: she says

DOCTOR: Loss of control and a sense of helplessness
in the face of cancer are important factors in suicide vulnerability. Most distressing to patients is
the sense that they are losing control of their minds,
especially when they are confused or sedated by medications.

NARRATOR: All this while I stepped over
a dead walleye
silver driftwood lapping water
Detoured for a reason now known
“I just needed the lake”
I said

DAD: The risk of suicide
is increased in cancer patients
when accompanied by disturbed
interpersonal relationships

NARRATOR: My father cries
on the drive to the hospital

“DAD”: I could have stopped her

NARRATOR: he says

“DAD”: but I believed her

NARRATOR: he says.

Mom stays in the hospital
In a coma
For three days.

A misguided angel, guised as nurse, says:

NURSE: You’d better pray that God takes her, because she’ll never be the same again.

NARRATOR: On Christmas morning,
She awakens.
Unable to speak, she gestures for a notepad
And writes the following:

MOM & “MOM”: I’m sorry.

NARRATOR: And then,

MOM & “MOM”: You are all so absolutely wonderful.

X.

SISTER: For the next,
And last, year of her life
She shatters the mirror.

Knowing that her suicide attempt
Is public knowledge
Seems to free her in a way
She has never known.

“MOM”: I’m going to pierce my ears.

MOM: The garage doors are open

“MOM”: I’m coming to see you in New York City.

MOM: They always have been

“MOM”: I’m never wearing panty hose again.

MOM: It’s no one’s fault.

NARRATOR: Dad settles into his routine.

“DAD”: Life is good.
I make my phone calls,
I drink coffee every morning
And do the Jumble,
And my lawn
Is pretty darn perfect.

I installed sprinklers last year
So now
I don’t have to think
About watering it.
It’s set to go off
On a timer
Automatically.

I use Chemlawn.
They come and spray it out of a big truck
Twice a year.
It’s great stuff.
Kills all the dandelions.

I don’t like to brag, but
My lawn looks better than
Anyone else’s on the block.

It takes a little effort,
And money, frankly
But it’s worth it.

NARRATOR: Finally, after three
Harrowing years,
A sigh of relief.

All sigh.

RELIGION

I.

DAD: I don't believe in God.

“DAD”: I'm a “Man of Science,” a physics major!
There's just no concrete proof
That God exists.

NARRATOR: The cancer returns,
Swiftly, and with a vengeance.
Moments after Mom is diagnosed this time,
a nurse at the hospital says,

NURSE: Your wife is such a nice lady.

“DAD”: Yes, yes she is...

NURSE: It's too bad she's so sick.

“MOM”: I'm not overtly religious.
I never talk about my beliefs.
I go to church—

MOM: But it's the music I go for.
Hymns.
“Holy Holy Holy” and
“Fairest Lord Jesus.”
And of course, the ironic favorite,
“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

DAD: I'm an atheist,
But I like to hedge my bets.

“DAD”: Dear God,
It's me, one more time.
It's the last pact, I promise.
I don't know if you had anything to do
With healing my daughter
Or getting me the job. But...

Please... if you're real,
let her beat this thing.

If she recovers,

Fully,
This time, I'll stop drinking.

II.

*In the hospital room.
"MOM"/TV shows Olivia Walton.*

"DAD": She can't hear you.

SISTER: You don't know.

DAD: I didn't know.

MOM: I know.

*"DAD" pats the tv on the top, kisses it,
and starts to walk out of the room.*

SISTER: You're leaving?

NARRATOR: Now?

DAD: I hardly remember this part.

MOM: It's okay.

"DAD": She's already gone.

SISTER: Be quiet. NARRATOR: Shhh-

"DAD": She's not here.

NARRATOR: Yes she is. She's still here.

"DAD": Wishful thinking. (remembers something) Oh.

*He walks over to the tv, leans in front of it.
We can't see what he's doing.
SISTER and NARRATOR do.*

SISTER: Stop it—

NARRATOR: No, Dad!

"DAD": They're valuable.

*NARRATOR pulls him away from the bed,
steers him toward the door.*

NARRATOR: You will not take those rings off.

“DAD”: Stuff gets stolen from dead people all the time—

NARRATOR: (close, fiercely) She is not dead.

“DAD”: Your breath is terrible. You shouldn’t talk to me like that.

SISTER: (joins them) We’ll make sure the rings are safe. It’s fine. It’ll be fine.

“DAD”: She’s crazy.

SISTER: Go home. We’ll take it from here.

DAD: I don’t remember any of this.

MOM: You weren’t really there.

NARRATOR: Yeah, just go.

“DAD”: I will. You should brush your teeth.

*“DAD” leaves. NARRATOR shakes her head.
They sit on either side of the bed,
One hand on the tv, the other holding hands.
The tv image flickers in and out
During the following:*

MOM: Silver filaments
Glinting light refracts
Edges carve memory
Symmetrical ache
Longing squared
Beveled diamond sends shafts
To pierce the eye

Silver circle, points of light
Time is the distance between
Her ring finger
and mine.

ROOMMATE: Hey there!

A hand pulls aside the curtain.

Hey you two!

SISTER: Yes...

NARRATOR: Oh my god. (puts her head down on the bed)

ROOMMATE: Is she dead yet?

NARRATOR: Oh my god.

SISTER: No, no, she's not.

ROOMMATE: Oh, okay. (pause) Lemme know when she is, so I can turn the tv back up, okay?

SISTER: Fine.

*NARRATOR and SISTER stare at each other in disbelief,
then laugh and cry simultaneously.*

III.

NARRATOR: I grew up without a dog.
But I have one now.

He loves me,
I know it.
He jumps on me
And ends up
Scratching my shins with his nails.
Sometimes he draws blood.

He doesn't know any better.
At least,
That's what I tell myself.

DAD: In World War II
I watched the ship next to mine
Crack open with a shudder,
Torpedoed without warning.

Heard the cries of men going down
In a North Atlantic slick of oil
Hundreds of despairing voices

Crying out for their mothers
Their wives
Their god.

Unbearable to watch
Unbearable to hear
And the silence was worse.

Every day I trembled
Was I next?

But I don't talk about any of that.
We're not supposed
to talk about that.

IV.

SISTER: It's okay, Mom, it's all right—

NARRATOR: What's wrong, Mom?

SISTER: We're right here. We're right here.

NARRATOR: Is she in pain?

SISTER: Mom, do you hurt?

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): No... I'm not...

NARRATOR: What's wrong.

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): What is... where... where...

MOM: Where is your father?

SISTER: You're in the hospital with us, Mom. We're both right here, and everything's okay.
You can relax and let go... and don't worry anymore.

(pause)

“MOM”/TV (V.O.): I... I guess I died.

SISTER and NARRATOR look at each other, silently saying “what do we say?”

NARRATOR: You're okay now. You're... safe.

THE END

*The Dance of Maternal Death,
Last two minutes of Serenade for Strings in C Major,
by Tchaikovsky.
MOM dances in staccato confusion...*

*During the staccato dance, ALL speak the following in voiceover,
Overlapping, repeated... as the director chooses:*

ALL (V.O):
Your mother was a special person.
Deepest sympathy.
Shocked and saddened.
Really sorry.
Thinking of you.
Special thoughts and heartfelt prayers.
Very sorry.
In my thoughts.
Warmest memories remain.
In sympathy.
If there is anything I can do.
Heal your sorrow.
May peace replace heartache.
A wonderful woman.
The service was beautiful.
In my prayers.
So sorry.
Please accept my condolences.
Awfully sorry.
I share in your sorrow.
Strength and comfort in this time of sorrow.

*...until
the crescendo of the song, at which point
she surrenders fully to joy and freedom.
The dance ends.*

NARRATOR: Void in the center
It encircles
The void.
Invisible meaning
Palpable absence
Echoes mother.

Her ring
Left behind with the rest of us
More permanent
Artifact of existence

Imperfect circle
Bent with the warmth of her touch
Or from mine?

We come full circle
I fill the void.

EPILOGUE

I.

NARRATOR: That night, my father
goes home to drink.
He doesn't wait for his wife
of thirty-nine years
to stop breathing.

“DAD”: Dear God,
Cheers.

NARRATOR: For the next five years,
Dad drinks.
He drinks and drinks and drinks.
First cheap wine in huge glass jugs
Then cheaper wine in boxes.

He loses addresses,
Phone numbers,
Names of neighbors.

Post-its cling to the refrigerator.
We take away his keys.

He loses appointments,
days of the month,
track of time.

Like a virus, post-its multiply and spread.
Scraps of paper are rubberbanded to food,
Taped to cabinet doors.
We hire an aide to check in on him.

And then,
He loses
Words.

Post-its have taken over.
Doctors suggest he has Alzheimer's.

II.

The Dance of Alzheimer's

*“Tied Down,” by Thom Heinrich.
DAD dances alone. He repeats gestures,
Loses his balance, repeats gestures,
Dances joyfully, collapses in complete forgetting,
Repeats gestures.
It is funny and sweet and heartbreaking.*

III.

All the alcohol finally eats
Through the lining of his stomach
And he is rushed to the hospital:
An ulcer.

It takes me a day to make it to Cleveland.
When I find him,
He is in the hallway
In a wheelchair, with
Kleenex in his mouth.

DAD: Places I lived:

St. Louis
Texas
Detroit
Santiago, Chile
Caracas, Venezuela
Toledo,... Ohio
Cleveland.

NARRATOR: And finally,

My sister and I transport Dad
From Cleveland to Buffalo.

*“DAD” sits on a chair, his legs
stretched out in front of him on another chair.
NARRATOR sits facing him, to his left.*

She and I know this is the last move.
The last place he will live.
Does he know this?

DAD: I am aware of my feet being cold
The smell of diesel and disinfectant.
I can't move my legs.

Why can't I move my legs?

NARRATOR: The drivers of the ambulette
(I like the word, "ambulette."
It makes the ride seem perkier, friendlier,
more French.)

The drivers had lifted him onto the gurney,
Sat him up like a teddy bear against a headboard,
And told him to stay.
Like a dog.

DAD: I nodded. I understood. Then I forgot.

NARRATOR: Straps across his shins and thighs
secure him to the gurney.

"DAD": Why why why why these oh what these
legs! Jeez, you know know these legs—

NARRATOR: It's okay, Dad. It's like seatbelts. They'll keep you safe.

DAD: I accept this. Then I forget.

"DAD": legs legs legs legs legs

NARRATOR: It's like this the whole way.
We rattle along in this ice box on wheels

DAD: These things have lousy suspension!

NARRATOR: My father staring, unseeing
Asking about his legs every two miles.

I watch the road slip away behind us
And imagine a time when he was
King of the Road.

*NARRATOR and "DAD" drive in a car.
NARRATOR is driving.*

"DAD": You're doing great.

NARRATOR: Thanks, Dad.

"DAD": Okay, we're going to pass this truck. Get in the left lane.

NARRATOR: Okay.

“DAD”: Signal! Always signal first.

NARRATOR: Ooh – sorry.

“DAD”: It’s okay. No problemo. Now. Look – right here, you can see him in his rearview mirror. Right? Right there.

NARRATOR: Uh... oh! Yeah.

“DAD”: That means he can see you, too.

NARRATOR: Okay...

“DAD”: Now give it a little gas, good, okay – so now we’re in his blind spot. You can’t see him and he can’t see you.

NARRATOR: Uh huh.

“DAD”: So don’t dawdle. You never wanna linger in his blind spot. More gas.

NARRATOR: Okay.

“DAD”: Good. Good! Now you can see him again, right?

NARRATOR: Right.

“DAD”: Good. Now pull ahead until you can see him in your rearview mirror.

NARRATOR: Uh... not yet. Um... okay. Now I see him.

“DAD”: That’s when you signal and pull in front. Not before, or you’ll cut it too close.

NARRATOR: Oh! I get it!

“DAD”: Good. Go ahead.

NARRATOR exhales.

This is good! Alright, let’s get a little distance...

NARRATOR: Get off at the next exit?

“DAD”: Not just yet.

*He cranes his neck around,
looking both ways on the highway.*

Okay. It's wide open here. Floor it.

NARRATOR: What?

“DAD”: Floor it. Put the pedal all the way down—

NARRATOR: I know what it means.

“DAD”: Then do it.

NARRATOR: Dad...!

“DAD”: It's fine. I'll watch the radar detector. Foot to the floor. Go.

NARRATOR: Oh god...

She does it.

Oh... oh... jeez...

“DAD”: That's it. Nice and steady, eyes on the road.

NARRATOR: Oh...

“DAD”: 90... 95... almost there... and... 100! Good! Keep it there!

NARRATOR: Oh god

“DAD”: How's it feel?

NARRATOR: Scary

“DAD”: That's okay. Man oh manischewitz this car is smooth. No vibration at all, it's quiet... what a beautiful ride. That's an American car for you.

She nods, totally focused.

Okay. Guess we should... you ready to slow it down?

NARRATOR: Yes

“DAD”: Go ahead. (*she does*) And let's take that next exit. How're ya doing?

NARRATOR: I'm kinda sweaty. But okay. Wow. It feels so slow now.

“DAD”: Yep.

NARRATOR: Oh! Is that why you...? *(he smiles)* Cool!

(Pause)

Can we do that again?

“DAD”: Next time.

NARRATOR picks up his legs and places them back on the chair in front of him. She turns her own chair toward him.

NARRATOR: Now he creeps along in an ambulette,
Facing backward in the eternal present
Doing fifty, the maximum velocity
He will ever achieve again
Here on Earth.

MOM: When sunlight hits the ring
In just the right way
The vehicle is filled with
Tiny shivering stars
A shifting constellation
That moves with them

NARRATOR: In my mind, he is
A suburban astronaut
strapped in, awaiting
Take-off.

IV.

NARRATOR: Over the next five years
I visit my father when I can.
Sometimes he knows who I am
And sometimes he hugs me too close,
Like a lecherous distant relative.

One day
I am engaged to be married
I bring my fiancé to

The nursing home to meet him.
When my fiancé steps out to make a phone call...

“DAD”: I I I I (gibberish) I I I

NARRATOR: Whaddy think, Dad?

“DAD”: He yee yee yee He yee yee

DAD: He’s the right one
I know it.
Not by the way
she looks at him—

NARRATOR: He’s pretty great, huh.

DAD: But by the way
he looks at her.

NARRATOR: Much as I hate to admit it, you two have a lot in common. I guess we all do that,
don’t we. End up marrying our fathers or mothers or whatever...

“DAD”: (gibberish)

NARRATOR: God I wish you could really talk to me.

“DAD”: (gibberish)

DAD: So do I, my darling girl.
So do I.
What I want you to know is...

“DAD”: Make sure he loves you as much as you love him.

NARRATOR: (utter amazement) ...Dad?

“DAD”: (nods) (gibberish)

NARRATOR: I will. I promise.

(pause)

And I did.

V.

SISTER: Years later,
When our dad dies

NARRATOR: My sister and I are there,
Again.
No television this time.
No breakfast trays.

SISTER: No roommate.

DAD: Just the three of us
And a ripe tomato on the windowsill.

& THE BEGINNING

I.

*NARRATOR drops the needle down.
“The Waiting on Blues” begins,
while NARRATOR speaks the following:*

NARRATOR: This is my mom singing in college.
In a large white leather suitcase I
have hundreds of pictures of her:
an entire life
frozen
moment by moment.

But this
This
Is the only recording I have
of her voice.

That voice.
Full, alive...
Yet not.

Waves in air, no more substantial
Than a spirit
A soul

A breath

When I close my eyes (*she does*)

I see her

“MOM” & MOM appear from opposite sides.

I see them.

*“DAD” & DAD appear from opposite sides.
Narrator stands with eyes closed.
“MOM” and “DAD” move to stand together,
just behind her.*

I see us.

MOM and DAD dance the

Dance of Repetition & Revision,
Which weaves elements from all of the previous dances
And may even include a fan dance with a lima bean.

One by one, all leave NARRATOR,
standing alone.
The record comes to an end,
and makes that end-of-album
repetitive sound.
She opens her eyes, and moves to the turntable.

We come full circle

NARRATOR picks the needle up from the LP.

I fill the void.

End of Play

DANCES & MUSIC

“Waiting on Blues,” performed by Alice Walz

The Tall/Short Dances:

I: *“The Beautiful Blue Danube” played by the London Philharmonic*

II: *“The Blue Danube Waltz,” by Freddy Martin on the “Salute to the Smooth Bands” album*

III: *“The Blue Danube” on “Romantic Hits on Accordion”*

The Arm-Punching Dance:

Theme from “A Summer Place” by Percy Faith

Scene FOOD V: *“Do Wacka Do” by Roger Miller*

The Dance of Legitimate Insecurity:

“Cheek to Cheek” by Fred Astaire

Scene FAMILY VI: *“Satin Doll” by Duke Ellington*

Dance of Obstruction, Part I: Clothes-Folding

“Wives and Lovers” by Jack Jones

Dance of the Hamster Wheel of Western Medicine

“The Hamster Dance Song” by Hampton the Hampster

Dance of Obstruction, Part II: I Just Love You So Much

“You’re My World” by Helen Reddy

Dance of Maternal Death

“Serenade for Strings in C Major,” by Tchaikovsky

The Dance of Alzheimer’s

“Tied Down,” by Thom Heinreich

Dance of Repetition & Revision

“Waiting on Blues,” performed by Alice Walz