

Three Quarter Inches of Sky

a play by
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CHARACTERS:

Trula—a woman in her 60's

Jake—her younger brother

Time—a young girl in her early teens

SETTING:

Trula's house. The living room is the largest room, in the center of the stage. On one side, her father's room. It's offstage. On the other side of the stage, her kitchen. Trula has to walk across the living room to get from the kitchen to her father's room, and back again.

The house is filled with the usual things that houses are filled with.

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The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

The Go-Between

J. P. Hartley

Time isn't holding us
Time isn't after us
Time isn't holding us
Time isn't after us

Time is the most common noun in the English language

Is time memory or is memory time? No one has enough of
either one to figure it out.

PROLOGUE

TIME

(Time enters the living room, carrying an uncooked large, homemade chicken pot pie in a colorful ceramic pie dish, ready to go into the oven. It's beautiful.

She shows it to the audience.

She sings, in the range of a *mezzo* soprano:)

Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye.
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened
The birds began to sing;
Wasn't that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?

We don't put song birds in pies anymore. We prefer to eat birds that don't sing. Chickens are the bird of choice for pies these days. Chicken pot pie is like pizza, it's a complete food—you've got your protein, thanks to the chicken, your veg thanks to the peas and carrots, your straight up starch in the crust, more protein and fat from the creamy goop it all floats in. Vitamins, minerals, usually an insane sodium level, it's all there.

They say that a million years from now, when all life on this planet is gone, and only fossils buried deep in landfill will remain, the chicken will appear to have been the only bird that lived on earth. All the song bird bones on the surface will long be dust, the ducks and geese, the birds of prey like raptors, the eagles and the vultures--all evidence of them will be gone. And all these birds are smarter than the chicken—the chicken is so low on the intelligence scale that I can't even find it listed. I looked. There are birds that can recognize your face and hold a grudge against you for years. There are birds that hold funerals for their dead. There are birds that can use tools, birds that can solve problems, there are birds that can know things and

remember them. And yet the only memory of a bird that will remain will be the chicken—the dimmest of them all. I'm not sure what that means. Is it smarter to remember something, or be the thing that is remembered? The chicken knows nothing, but we know it. Of course, we know it in a way that I assume they'd prefer we didn't. We know it because we want to fry and bake and nugget it, we want to put it in a thousand different dishes, including a dish with a few vegetables and a crust.

Chicken pot pie.

(She goes into the kitchen, puts them in the oven.)

90 minutes to bake.

(She shows us a large timer on whose face the setting is easy to read.)

I love timers, don't you? They are a map to the future. After all, in life, there is always a clock. Sometimes we get to see it. Sometimes we don't. But it's always there. It's always ticking.

(She sets the timer to 90 minutes. It begins to tick.)

And thinking about time makes me wonder. I wonder, for instance, what would have happened if we had given the chicken long enough to evolve, if we hadn't bred them for insanely large breasts to make more white meat or for docility in their cages, but just let them alone. I wonder if, left to themselves, there would have come a time when an evolved chicken would have said to itself, "I wonder what it is that I could know that would save me from all these fried chicken dinners and chicken cacciatore and cream and pastry pies? What could I know that would save me from destruction?"

(She sings again, this time in the range of a soprano:)

When the pie was opened
The birds began to sing;
Wasn't that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?

BLACKOUT

PIE #1

TRULA

(A timer goes off.

Lights up on Trula, turning the alarm on her apple watch off.)

I walked into my father's room.

(She walks across the living room, goes offstage into her father's room.)

TRULA

(o.s.)

Your dinner's ready, dad. You need anything else?

(She comes out of his room.)

He was watching a movie on TCM. I had looked at approximately 2 seconds of it—

TIME (o.s.)

I don't like the way Teddy Roosevelt is looking at me.

TRULA

--so I said:

(Calling back toward his room)

North by Northwest.

Then I walked into the kitchen to get his chicken pot pie.

(She walks toward the kitchen.)

I was proud of that. Not of the pie, which was organic and had the lowest sodium content of any chicken pot pie on the market and which I have to drive to the Whole Foods three towns over to get--but the ability I had to "name that tune" when it came to movies, to identify a thousand or two thousand maybe? movies in under three seconds flat. From what felt like a single frame, but was probably...

(She has gone into the kitchen, where she takes a chicken pot pie from the oven. This pie is much smaller than the one Time put in the oven, it's not in a ceramic pie dish but in one of those little aluminum ones. It's a store-bought pot pie.

It's a deep golden brown. She puts it on a tray that has a napkin and a fork on it and walks to her father's room.)

30 or so? Or is it 300? How many frames are there in a second? Damnit I used to know. Well, however many frames there are? That many.

(She goes unto her father's room.)

TRULA (o.s.)

You're not drinking enough water. I know, I know, it seems like you are but you're not. Try harder.

(She emerges, without the tray and pie, a moment later.)

TRULA

I can also do it from three or four notes of a soundtrack. *Star Wars* is probably two note territory—the orchestration is pretty unique. I can recognize every Hitchcock film and every John Ford movie in two seconds and I can recognize John Wayne and Bette Davis from a single word. I have always been filled with pride, with self-satisfaction about that.

But right after I said, "*North by Northwest*" and went into the kitchen for the pie and felt the smug knowingness that knowing something brings—I felt something else. I felt the hollowness of having made a home inside me for these...parasites. What was wrong with me? How could recognizing a movie be important, be worth anything at all? Our ancestors had to recognize important things—like the mushrooms that could kill them, or that it was time to plant the wheat when the full moon rose over a certain hill. What was recognizing *North by Northwest* in two seconds protecting me or my children from?

Now the fact that I don't have any children to protect is not the point.

I wouldn't be able to protect anyone with that knowledge. That knowledge? Was worthless.

Knowledge. Ha.

When we were little, my brother Jake and I played games about knowing things. The names of the presidents in order, the state capitals, the periodic table in the order of when each element was discovered. Things I'm sure nobody bothers with memorizing anymore, now that the internet makes all that knowledge instantly available. But our favorite game didn't involve presidents or states or any kind of normal knowledge. It was called The Classics Illustrated Game.

(Time comes out and hands her a small stack of comic books.)

We had dozens of Classics Illustrated comics. We saved up our allowance to get them, they were 15 cents back when 15 cents was a fortune.

(She holds up the comics to show us.)

Here's *The War of the Worlds*...here's *Moby Dick*...*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*...

(She finds another one.)

Oh, yes, my favorite, *Kim*, by Rudyard Kipling--

(She shows us the cover triumphantly.)

--it had Kim on the cover, sitting happily astride a British cannon in Lahore, where he worked the streets, begging and stealing, barefoot and free.

(Pointing to cover of the comic to demonstrate.)

All the Classics Illustrateds had this yellow box that said Classics Illustrated on the upper left of the cover, and the title was on the right hand side.

Now, most of the covers were outdoor scenes, so the top part, above and around the title--

(She points to area above the title.)

--was almost always sky.

It was sky because in order for the title to pop, the background can't compete, and sky is a good choice for that. It doesn't have to be totally clear sky, of course--there can be clouds, or the sun, or weather of some kind, but sky is something we all know how to see. So it's a good neutral background for the title and the empty three-quarters of an inch above it.

But if you're thinking that means a lot blue sky, you'd be wrong. Blue is not the default sky color for a Classics Illustrated. Emotion, tone, that's what the sky is about in a cover illustration. *Lorna Doone*--

(She shows us *Lorna Doone*.)

--has this weird pink sky. Angry black and grey clouds turn up frequently for books about war. Each sky is a part of the narrative of the story inside it. A blue sky is rare. As rare as a great classic about happiness.

Of course, *Kim* was exactly that.

(She points at the blue sky on the cover of *Kim*.

She opens the comic, pages through it)

It was about colonialism, which is synonymous now with oppression, racism, and greed, but at the time Rudyard Kipling wrote it? Colonialism was the glory of the British Empire and its colonies were what made England so very happy. And all that happiness is reflected on the cover--which had a perfect clear blue sky.

Kim was my hero. He was the son of Kimball O'Hara, a British officer, and an Indian woman, so Kim was a half-caste in India, in a world where caste was everything, which is the way I felt, growing up in a little Midwestern provincial backwater filled with religious fundamentalists—I felt like an untouchable. Kim was not quite an untouchable, but he was an orphan, a beggar, a liar, and a thief. And guess what? His nickname was “the little friend of all the world.”

What child wouldn't want to be called the little friend of all the world? To lie and steal and have everyone love you for it? Oh, and then he grows up to be a spy. Of course he was my hero. My role model.

(She holds up the comic.)

This Classics Illustrated was my idea of a life plan. It was like a field guide to a happy life.

If you leave out the part about colonialism. The part of the happiness that was a lie.

But instead of growing up to be a spy, I grew up to teach 18th and 19th century history at a small college known for its self-actuating students and its trees. I've been the chairman of the history

department for 10 years now. I'll be stepping down at the end of the semester. Well, that's okay. I've wanted to for a long time, the nonsense you have to put up with in academia now? Anyway, I always meant to have my students read *Kim* as part of the section on colonialism. But I've never actually read the book—just the comic—so I couldn't very well assign it. And yes—in college? I did write papers about books I'd only read as Classics Illustrateds. I got A's on those papers. Every time.

I didn't really think I was cheating. I mean I *knew* I was cheating, but I didn't *feel* like I was. I was the World Champion of the Classics Illustrated Game.

This is the way you play the Game: Stack your Classics Illustrateds neatly on top of each other—

(Time comes out, holding a stack of the comics,
holding them up so they are facing the audience.)

--and then pull the one on top down, to reveal a fraction of an inch of the one beneath it, uncovering more and more sky.

(She demonstrates.)

The two of us, my brother and me, would do this slowly. How slow? We did it slower than any 10 and 12 year-old have ever done anything in the history of the world.

The amount of sky above the title—

(She points.)

--was always small. Just three quarter inches of sky, right? That's all there was. We used every atom of our brains to identify the title before the three quarter inches ended, and the top of the letters of the title appeared.

(She slowly, slowly, moves the one on top down
revealing the one beneath it.)

It was an indescribable pleasure to be the one who cried out--

(At super speed)

--*DAVID COPPERFIELD* or *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*
or *DON QUIXOTE*--

(Back to regular speed)

--as fast as you could, a fraction of a second before the other one did. We lived totally in the moment of triumph and then we moved on. We didn't keep score.

But winning still mattered. When you know something someone else doesn't know you've won something. Here's the ugly truth your parents and teachers keep from you: The point of knowing things is almost never about the things you know. It's about knowing them faster and better than other people. When you're 15 years old and Grieg's Wedding Day at Troldhaugen comes on the sound system, and you say, "ah, that's Grieg's Wedding Day at Troldhaugen"--

(Grieg's Wedding Day at Troldhaugen plays.)

--and everybody goes, "ooh, ahh, she's so smart"--you've won.

(Time wheels on Jake, playing a piano. It is a baby grand.)

That's my brother. Jake. Playing Mom's Steinway. I got the Steinway after mom died even though Jake should have—he really loved playing the piano. I didn't. I couldn't figure out how practicing something was knowing it. I couldn't find a way to know a song any better the 20th time I played it than the first.

I got better at playing it, of course. Who wouldn't? But practicing it didn't change it. Or me. So it wasn't the kind of knowing that interested me.

Anyway, for those of you who don't know, what Jake is playing is, of course, Wedding Day at Troldhaugen. He played it approximately 500 times the week before his regional competition recital during high school, which is why I can recognize it instantly, in any situation, and still impress friends and enemies alike with my knowledge of it. I can win with it, without actually knowing it—well, without knowing it the way Jake did.

JAKE

(Without looking up from the keyboard, as he continues playing.)

Cheater.

TRULA

Oh, yes. Always. I always was.

JAKE

You were always a cheater.

TRULA

Didn't I just say that?

JAKE

Yes, but you're going to find a way to turn saying you're a cheater into some kind of virtue.

TRULA

Of course I am, that's the way cheaters work. How do you think they get away with it? With cheating?

JAKE

I don't know.

TRULA

I know you don't. And you know why you don't know?

JAKE

No.

TRULA

Because you're not a cheater. It took you playing Wedding Day at Troldhaugen 500 times to know it by heart, note perfect.

(Jake is just about finished with the Grieg.
Time continues wheeling the piano across
the stage.)

JAKE

I didn't even like Grieg. You liked it a lot more than I did.

TRULA

Please, that can't be true. You played it 500 times. How could you not have liked it? How could you have not liked it when—Jake?
Come back--

(Jake and the piano have almost been wheeled
off stage.)

JAKE

What did the doctor say?

TRULA

Jake I wanted to ask you. Who won the most, when we played The Classics Illustrated Game? I'm pretty sure I was the Champion, but—

JAKE

That's not what you wanted to ask me.

TRULA

Yes it is. Jake? Jake?

(He's gone, he doesn't answer. The final notes of
Wedding Day at Troldhaugen play.)

I know I won the most. I know I was the champion. I just wanted to hear him say it.

I just want to hear him say that the way we remember our childhood is the same.

That our memories are the same.

PIE #2

TRULA

I walked into my father's room.

(She walks across the stage, goes into his room.)

TRULA (o.s.)

He was watching a movie on TCM. I looked at approximately 2 seconds of it—

TIME (o.s.)

Mustn't go to bed. Mustn't sleep. It's a waste. Time doesn't sleep. Oh, look how it's clouding up. It's getting darker every second. It's funny, I can still feel the sun on my hands.

TRULA

(She emerges from her father's room.)

--and I said:

(Calling back toward the room)

Dark Victory.

Then I walked back into the kitchen to get his chicken pot pie.

(She walks toward the kitchen.)

Dark Victory is the Bette Davis film where she has this super polite brain tumor, it gives her a few headaches now and then, a little memory loss but nothing alarming, and best of all, it's going to give her like a warning to let her know that in five minutes she's going to be dead. The warning will be in the form of sudden darkness. This will be the sign that she'll have five minutes to arrange herself artistically in bed, and say something moving and memorable before she dies. That's brain cancer in the movies. Guaranteed to give you time to say your final words in good lighting and gentle music.

That's the thing about the movies—they are lifelike. But not like life at all.

(She goes into the kitchen. She takes a chicken

pot pie out of the oven, places it on the tray.)

In real life it would go like this: you notice that your long term memory is fine, but your short term memory is shot. You dismiss it. You'll say you're just getting older.

Gradually, you'll realize that things are getting darker. You'll replace all the 75 watt bulbs in your lamps with 150 watt ones. Eventually, maybe in a year, maybe in 5, no one can say for sure—you'll go completely blind. By this time, of course, you'll have seen a doctor, but because you are not Bette Davis your doctor will not marry you and leave his or her practice and throw themselves into research to try to save you. Nope. You'll sleep more, and more, and then one day you'll slip into a coma. And then you'll die.

Compare this poorly lit, badly staffed, probably smelly, lonely death to the way it happens to Bette Davis. Who wouldn't want to die in the movies. No wonder so many characters do. Also, the costumes are great.

(She comes out of the kitchen, carrying the chicken pot pie.)

I can't find the chicken pot pies dad likes at Whole Foods anymore--it's been months since I've been able to get them in a store. So I have to have them delivered by Instacart. They're the only thing he'll eat. I'm not sure how that happened, but other than an egg in the morning, and cereal, that's it. It's a chicken pot pie for dinner, or nothing. Well, when I was little I read that a chicken pot pie is a complete food—protein, vegetables, a little flake pastry. So at least there's that.

(She goes into her father's room with the chicken pot pie.)

TIME (o.s.)

I have no idea to this day what them two Italian ladies were singin' about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away.

TRULA (o.s.)

Shawshank Redemption again? But you just saw it last--no no, no, I agree, *Shawshank* IS a masterpiece—I'd watch it every day if I had the time.

(She emerges a moment later.)

TRULA

I would. Well, okay, maybe not every day. And maybe not the whole thing. It's a long movie. But—yeah. I'm not lying. I'd watch it.

(Time walks by, holding a medium sized shipping box. She puts the box next to Trula.)

Ah. The next shipment of Classics Illustrateds from eBay has arrived.

They say you can't step in the same river twice. But eBay is all about that. eBay is where America time travels to its past. It's a place where you can visit all the things you used to own and threw away. It's a current that runs upstream.

(Trula goes to the kitchen, gets a knife.)

Here's the sad story of why I have to buy these on eBay.

I had carefully stored all the Classics Illustrated in two boxes in the basement. They were waiting for when I had children so I could play the Game with them. But it turned out I'd married a man who didn't want children. When we split up I got the house.

The basement was so crammed with things you could barely go down there--I had also stored all the family furniture that was too big for this house but wouldn't be for the house we were going to move into when we had the children that I'd been so sure I would be able to talk him into having. So I forgot about those two boxes. And then I lost them when I lost almost everything I owned in the flood waters of Hurricane Irene.

(She comes back with the knife, hands it to Time.)

It took me three months to fill out the insurance claim. Near the top of the list, value wise? Not my grandmother's Baker dining table that we weren't allowed to eat at because we might scratch it. Not my great-grandmother's Biedermeier bedroom set that my mother had practically worshiped like a god. Nope. Those comics. It was a total surprise, but they were worth a small fortune. They had been in almost mint condition, we were such careful children. But the real

loss, as far as I was concerned? The Game. The chance to recognize all those three quarter inches of sky.

(Time opens up the box. She takes out a dozen Classics Illustrateds.)

Replacing everything you own takes more time than you might expect. Lampshades and beds and can openers and lawn mowers—it all takes time. But the fact is that you don't actually replace things—you get new things to impersonate the things you lost. Instead of sitting in a chair your great-grandmother loved, you sit in a chair nobody loved. Don't tell me that chairs and tablecloths don't have memory, that they aren't containers of knowledge, that they aren't the banks where we store the moments of the past. Instead of making the bed with sheets that were part of your mother's trousseau, filled with all those hopes and dreams and plans for the future—you lie in bed at night in Italian made Egyptian cotton sheets with obscenely high thread count you scored on sale at Cultivar or West Elm. You dream and sleep on sheets that are nothing but a bargain. All of a sudden your house, which used to be full of things that your mother and grandmother touched and which made you think of them when you touched them is just full of things. Things that nobody you loved ever touched. Things that make you think of nothing when you touch them. Except the things they can never replace.

One of the nice things about Dad moving in with me was that he brought a lot of furniture with him that we call “original issue”—stuff from our house from when I was growing up. It's comforting for him to have his things around him. It is for me too. We had to decide—either he moved in with me, or into Courtland Heights, an assisted living place. This was about 2 years ago, when we noticed his memory was starting to fray. My memory was starting to fray too, specifically I was having trouble remembering why I was still working full time

when all my friends were retiring. Going part time this year so I could take care of dad was like a blessing.

So, anyway, I didn't need to buy anything, let alone these Classics Illustrateds. But googling them for the insurance claim had made it clear—my childhood was out there. So I came up with a plan to reclaim a little piece of the past. To gather up just a little lost knowledge, a few of those lost skies. I would just buy 5. When my brother came to visit, we would play the game—it wouldn't really be fair because I would know which 5 I had resurrected from the dead, and he didn't, it would be an unfair advantage, but, as I've made clear—

(Pointing to herself)

--cheater—and it would be fun to watch him struggle to remember them, then to see the look of recognition race across his face. We would talk about the favorite ones we had lost, we would talk about the ones with the covers the hardest to recognize and the ones that were the easiest.

So the 5 I'd ordered came—and suddenly I didn't want to stop at 5. The Game would be too short. The Game would be over just when it started. No, I couldn't stop at five.

These—

(She holds the comics Time has taken from the box.)

--are some of the more popular ones, the ones they published a lot of, so they're the easy ones to find. The rare ones are a different breed, and the websites where collectors buy and sell them are confusing. For one thing, the rare ones tend to be frayed and beat up. Should I spend 15 or 25 dollars for a Fair *Puddn'head Wilson*—that's a Mark Twain novel—or one that was rated G, for good condition? Should I spend 45 to 75 dollars for VG—very good, or 150 to 500 dollars for VF—very fine. Well, then how about 10,000 dollars for an impossibly rare one in M—mint condition?

It had looked so easy, when I started. The waters always look calm from a distance, but the closer you get, the steeper the bank seems, and the faster the current. Stepping in the same river twice was harder than I'd anticipated.

PIE #3

TRULA

I walked into my father's room.

(She walks across the stage on her way to her father's room.)

I didn't have to guess what movie it was. I had put in the DVD myself. It's my father's favorite movie.

(She goes into her father's room.)

TIME (o.s.)

Then you and Victor were?

Yes. YES. SAY IT. He was my...BOYFRIEND.

TRULA

(She emerges from his room, laughing.)

Young Frankenstein.

(Calling back toward his room.)

If you get tired we can stop it and finish it tomorrow.

Then I walked back into the kitchen to get his chicken pot pie.

(She is walking toward the kitchen.)

The whole city is apparently out of the chicken pot pies he likes. Even Instacart can't get them. I had to go to Trader Joes and get some of theirs.

(She goes into the kitchen to take a pie out of the oven and puts it on the tray. The pot pie is much larger than the last ones were.)

I like Trader Joes. But I don't like everything they make.

(She leaves the kitchen, holding the larger pot pie on a tray.)

I'm hopeful, but not optimistic.

(She goes into her father's room with the chicken pot pie.)

TRULA (o.s.)

Here we go. You don't have to eat it all, dad. I know, it's bigger than the other ones. Just eat what you want. No, it's probably not as good. Well, the pies you like are made in New Hampshire, we could take a fieldtrip to the factory, see if they'll sell us some, but other than that? It's this or nothing. Just try it, okay?

(She comes out of his room.)

He's not going to eat it.

(Jake comes out of the kitchen, holding a Trader Joe's chicken pot pie on a plate, eating it.)

JAKE

It's not so bad.

TRULA

But he's not going to eat it.

(She goes into the kitchen, comes back with a pitcher of water that is half full. She goes into her father's room.)

TIME (o.s.)

Mick! Give him your wallet!

What for?

He's got a knife!

That's not a knife. *That's* a knife.

TRULA (o.s.)

You switched to AMC? No, that's fine. You can watch the rest of *Young Frankenstein* anytime. And here—we're measuring now, remember? You have to drink it all before you go to bed. I know, I know, but that's the way it is.

TRULA

(She comes out from her father's room.)

Crocodile Dundee. If you weren't here I'd watch it with him. You know what I like about watching old movies set in New York City?

JAKE

What.

TRULA

The sidewalks. They're so clean. Whether the film is set in front of a mansion on Fifth Avenue or a tenement on the Lower East Side. No trash cans. No recycle bins. No bags of trash spilling onto the street. Just clean sidewalks. Not like it is now. I mean, it's so *Blade Runner* now.

JAKE

What is?

TRULA

New York City. There's trash everywhere and everyone's wearing dirty black clothing that looks grey.

JAKE

You're talking about Midtown.

TRULA

So?

JAKE

Well, I don't go to Midtown. It doesn't look that way on the Upper East Side.

TRULA

It will. Midtown is just time travel to the Upper Eastside, to Fifth Avenue in 2029.

JAKE

Anyway, that was just an artifact.

TRULA

What was?

JAKE

Of the fact that they were filming. They hid the trash cans. So it's a cheat. A lie.

TRULA

You don't know that.

JAKE

Now days, cinema verite and all that, when they film on the Lower East Side, they probably dress the set with *more* trash cans. To make it *more* Lower East Sidey. So it's a lie too.

TRULA

You could be right.

JAKE

Of course I'm right. What's that quote, film is a lie at 24 frames per second?

TRULA

24 frames per second. It was driving me crazy that I couldn't remember. Thanks. But I think it's the truth.

JAKE

What is?

TRULA

"Film is *truth* at 24 frames per second. And every cut is a lie."

JAKE

See? Your memory's fine. Better than mine.

TRULA

I've known that stupid quote for years, doesn't count.

JAKE

Yes, the quote is stupid. You have to cut, eventually. A movie can't go on forever. You have to cut it so it ends. So, a movie is by its very nature, a lie.

TRULA

I don't care, I still like seeing those clean sidewalks.

JAKE

When I see a movie set in New York, in the 80's and 90's? And there's a shot of the twin towers? I like that. I like seeing the twin towers again.

TRULA

Me too. I always go, yes.

JAKE

Yes. Yes. Yes.

TRULA

It's like, when we're watching home movies, and every so often, there's mom, and you go oh, she was so beautiful. How is it possible she was so beautiful and now she's gone.

JAKE

But they weren't.

TRULA

Weren't what?

JAKE

Beautiful. The towers. I don't think they were. I don't like that kind of architecture.

TRULA

But you live in a modern building.

JAKE

Yes, *Modern*. I live in a Mies van der Rohe. The architect of the towers, was like...Formalist, or something.

(Trula rolls her eyes.)

TRULA

Oh, please. Who even knows what formalist means. Well, I don't think they were beautiful before. But they are now. When I see them, I know they weren't beautiful but they feel beautiful. Something in my heart just swells, it opens, I feel all these things that I feel when I see something beautiful.

JAKE

I know. It's weird. Pictures of them now *are* beautiful, but they were ugly when you saw them during the time those pictures were taken.

TRULA

Huhhh. That's true.

JAKE

But mom really *was* beautiful. She was like a cross between Elizabeth Taylor and Ingrid Bergman.

TRULA

Have you ever talked to anyone who doesn't think their mother was beautiful? But when I see a picture of mom--its overwhelming--all the real beauty combines with the way we remember her--

JAKE

Yes. Yes. Yes.

TRULA

I wonder, if I got memory loss from the drugs, and I saw a picture of her--would that overwhelming explosion of beauty still happen to me?

JAKE

I think it will. I think it's a kind of knowing that doesn't need memory. They're two different things, you know. Knowing and remembering. Even if you don't remember who she is, when you see that picture, you will still feel that. You will still know her in a way past memory.

TRULA

Yeah, I think you're right. We know that forever I bet.

JAKE

I mean, I hope we will. That thing people have with their mother--that's forever. The weird thing is that people with Alzheimer's don't remember their children, a lot of times.

TRULA

Dad knows exactly who we are, Jake.

JAKE

That's not what I'm saying—

TRULA

And he just has a memory thing, like anybody his age, sure it's a little worse, but it's not Alzheimer's, there's no name for it—

JAKE

Trula, that's not what I'm saying--

TRULA

Okay.

JAKE

I was just sharing a fact.

TRULA

Worried you're going to forget your children?

JAKE

There are some days I wish I could.

TRULA

I've pre-forgotten mine in a much more efficient way.

JACK/TRULA

No children.

TRULA

Check. And now no child will ever have to look at a picture of me, and have Scarlett Johansson crossed with Uma Thurman blossom inside them.

JAKE

You think you look like a cross between Scarlett Johansson and Uma Thurman?

TRULA

Not on my best day in my wildest dreams.

(They laugh. She gets up.)

Come on, let's go, I've got a lead on a new chicken pot pie source at that all natural store on Booneville. There's never any parking, so you'll have to circle the block in the getaway car.

JAKE

Every time I come over you're searching for a pie he'll eat.

TRULA

So? It's like the Holy Grail. Eventually, I'm going to hit pay dirt.

JAKE

This is not the way you should be spending your time. Isn't there something you've always wanted to do, to see, somewhere you've always wanted to go? Wait, what about the Barrier Reef?

TRULA

I'm going in October, remember? To be awed and transformed by the great natural wonder of the world. And you're coming to take care of Dad while I'm gone.

JAKE

October?

TRULA

Don't tell me you forgot--

JAKE

I didn't forget, I just—you know how busy things are with Erica starting her new business, and—wait. Have you taken him over to look at Courtland Heights and gotten him signed up on the waiting list?

TRULA

What does that have to do with my trip?

JAKE

Nothing, well, it--I mean it does—

TRULA

It's just two weeks, Jake.

JAKE

You're not doing him any favors, the sooner he gets acclimated, used to the place--

TRULA

No.

JAKE

You can't keep this up, Trula.

TRULA

You want to send Dad to Courtland Heights because you can't be here for two weeks?

JAKE

You know that's not what I'm talking about.

TRULA

Do I?

JAKE

You finally quit teaching, you should have done it two years ago, but okay, you quit. You have this window of time. Yes, you're going to the Barrier Reef, but you could do anything.

TRULA

I don't have anything better to do.

JAKE

Don't say that. You have friends, you have money, you have--

TRULA

No, listen, to me, I have nothing. *Better.* To Do.

JAKE

But you do, you do, you—

TRULA

You're not listening. If someone said to me, you can go anywhere you want, do anything in the whole world—well, okay, sure, I'd like to base jump from the Golden Gate Bridge, surf the big Pipe on Oahu—but I can't do those things. Taking care of Dad is something I can do. There is nothing I *can* do that is better than doing this.

And he is not ready for Courtland Heights.

JAKE

But he will be soon--

TRULA

Look, nobody thought he'd be this good this long—when he moved in with me, all his doctors gave him 2 years on the outside before he would need round the clock memory care. That was 5 years ago.

JAKE

Doctors are always wrong about the clock. They tell a person they have 6 months, they're dead in 6 weeks. They tell them to go home and put their lives in order, they die in a car crash 20 years later. Too long, too short, look how wrong they've been with you.

(Pause. Gently)

Look. Everybody else in the family thinks that--

TRULA

Everybody else is not taking care of him. I am.

JAKE

And doing such a beautiful job of it. Here. Take a taste of the delicious food you're serving him.

(He offers her a bite of his chicken pot pie
She eats it.)

TRULA

Oh my god. It's awful.

JAKE

Yep. A vat of chemicals.

(He keeps eating it. She tries to grab the pie from him.)

Get your own.

TRULA

You're kidding. You're actually going to eat it?

JAKE

I'm gonna go have dinner with dad. I'm going to suffer your love in solidarity with him.

(He starts off toward his father's room.)

TRULA

But I want to go to the store—

JAKE

Later—

TRULA

No, those pies are poison—

JAKE

Then dad and I will go down together.

TRULA

Don't talk to him about it, okay?

JAKE

About what? Courtland Heights? Okay. But you have to put him on the waiting list.

TRULA

No, don't talk to him about *it*.

JAKE

About what?

TRULA

About me.

JAKE

Why not? If he wants to talk about it—

TRULA

He doesn't.

JAKE

Why not?

TRULA

He doesn't know.

JAKE

What? You still haven't told him? Trula, I can't believe you haven't told him.

TRULA

I don't want to tell him.

JAKE

Of course you don't want to tell him. But you have to.

No, I don't.

JAKE

Of course you do.

TRULA

I thought I wouldn't have to tell him. I thought he would never have to know. The doctors said 2 years, he'd be in care, 5 years he wouldn't even know me. I thought, if I could just last it out.

JAKE

Until when?

TRULA

Until he didn't know me anymore. So he'd never have to know.

JAKE

Great. Just great. In households all over America, Alzheimer's is breaking hearts, people are praying for it to slow down, and in this one, you're praying for it to go faster?

TRULA

I am not. And he does not have Alzheimer's.

JAKE

Trula that's not the point. The point is—don't you see how crazy a plan this is? Really?

TRULA

Well, the only other option is to hope for an asteroid to strike the earth and wipe out the human race before I have to tell him. But that seems extreme. To want to wipe out the human race, to save my father this pain.

If I can just hold out, when I'm gone, he won't know. It would kill him to know.

I'll take him over to look at Courtland Heights. I'll tell him we need to put his name on the waiting list.

JAKE

Promise.

TRULA

Promise.

JAKE

No, I mean really. Promise. You'll do it.

TRULA

I promise...I'll talk to him about it.

JAKE

And take him over to—

TRULA

I'll talk to him about it, okay?

JAKE

Okay. We'll start there.

(He goes over and holds her.)

Okay.

PIE #4

TIME (o.s.)

I will take it up with my lawyer, Lawyer Daggett. And he will make money and I will make money and your lawyer will make money...and you, Mr. Auctioneer, you will foot the bill.

You can't serve papers on a rat, baby sister. You gotta kill him or let him be.

TRULA

(Trula emerges from her father's room with an empty water pitcher.)

The Duke, obviously. And obviously—*True Grit*. The third time he's watched it this month. When he first moved in, he wouldn't watch something he'd seen in the last year. Still, his memory is remarkable, better than mine, some of the time. And the other times? It's not Alzheimer's, or maybe it is, it's not dementia, or maybe it is, or maybe it's a kidney function issue. All we know is that there is someone in his memory with a broom, sweeping up the warehouse where my father's life is stored. The broom uses a LIFO inventory control system—Last In, First Out, it's the preferred inventory system for memory storage the world over. You almost never hear of anyone's brain using FIFO—First In, First Out. Nope, the childhood memories stick around long after you'd think their shelf life has expired. It's the new memories that fly out the door.

(She sniffs loudly.)

Oh, no. Do you smell something burning? Crap, not again.

(She runs into the kitchen.)

This is the second time this has happened this week. My alarm goes off but if I'm doing something else I get distracted and forget that it's gone off and--

(She pulls a chicken pot pie from the oven,

puts it on the tray. It's smoking a little.)
No, it looks okay. Just a little brown around the edges.
Thank god.

(She comes out of the kitchen, with the
chicken pot pie.)

Since the Trader Joe's Chicken Pot Pie disaster last year, I've tried Marie Callenders, Stouffers, which won the Good Housekeeping award for best pot pie but still wasn't up to Dad's exacting standards, Swansons, Harry and David's—it's huge, serves 8, costs a fortune, Boston Market, Schwan's—that's the little refrigerated truck that delivers, and Applegate Farms.

(Holding up the chicken pot pie.)

This is a locally made chicken pot pie from one of the gourmet shops. So it's probably filled with salt and trans fats and god knows what other unregulated poisons.

(She takes it into her father's room.)

TRULA (o.s.)

This one is supposed to be really good. Top rated in the local foodie blogs. Try to eat it, okay? Oh, and if I were you, I'd change the channel when he starts riding Little Blackie to death in order to save Baby Sister. It always makes me cry.

(Trula comes out of her father's room.)

My mother cried when she watched it too. When I teased her about it, she said, you'll be crying too someday, just you wait and see. A couple years before she died she started crying at commercials, too. I teased her about it, but she didn't say just you wait and see. She had learned something she hadn't known before. And so she didn't take any pleasure at all in the knowledge that someday I would feel the same sorrow that she did for the brief lives people on screen pretend to be living.

(She starts to cry. Stops herself.)

Tibetan Buddhists say that crying for the dead is bad because it summons them back, and they can't actually come back. And so crying confuses them.

I don't want to confuse anyone. I hate being confused. When I was growing up, confusion was my code word for being upset—I'd say, "I'm confused" because saying "I'm upset" made me sound like a baby. But confusion was legitimate. After all, anyone of any age or gender could

be confused. So I got used to titling my head and playing dumb and saying “I’m confused” instead of “I hate you with every atom of my being and I wish you were dead.” But the irony, the irony is that in the end it is confusion that upsets me the most. The confusion that comes from knowing things better and faster for no reason, from not knowing what to do with the things I know, from knowing that what I know is worthless, from knowing that I know better but it doesn’t help—all those are the things that upset me and put me in a rage. All those are the things that in the end have their hands around my neck and make me wish *I* were dead.

I used to believe that if I just learned enough, if I just knew enough, that someday I would know the things that would save me. The things that would save me from destruction.

The problem is that is that confusion, at this stage in my disease, is not uncommon and so my greatest fear now? Is that I *did* know the things that could save me. And I’ve forgotten them

I wish Jake were here. He didn’t get confused when he got upset. He played the piano.

(The sound of Chopin’s Military Polonaise comes from off stage. Time comes wheeling on the baby grand, with Jake playing. On top of the closed lid of the grand is a box.)

JAKE

This box was outside on the front porch, so I brought it in.
(He keeps playing throughout.)

TRULA

Thanks.

(She takes the box off the piano, sets it down.)
Do you want the lid up?

JAKE

Yes, please.

(Trula lifts the lid on the baby grand. The music thunders through the house.)

Thank you. That’s much better.

TRULA

Remember how loud you used to play the piano when you were upset? I thought you were going bring the house down.

JAKE

I used the code word “disappointed” for upset.

TRULA

Really?

JAKE

Seemed more manly for some reason. At the time. Here’s how I would have used have used it in a sentence back then: Trula, I am so disappointed that you haven’t put Dad on the waiting list at Courtland Heights.

TRULA

You know they’re still investigating those two aides who were torturing the old ladies.

JAKE

Now that I am older and more sure of my authority, I can say “Trula, I am so upset that you still haven’t put Dad on the waiting list at Courtland Heights.”

TRULA

I’m thinking that we really dodged a bullet on this one Jake.

JAKE

But, to be honest, that isn’t what I want to say. What I really want to say is, “Trula, I am filled with uncontrollable rage that you still haven’t put Dad on the waiting list at Courtland Heights.”

TRULA

They called in the state inspectors and everything. Talk about a close call.

JAKE

You gave me your word. 8 times.

TRULA

Really? That seems like a lot. Are you sure you're not taking advantage of my memory issues? I only remember promising like twice.

JAKE

It was only 2 rouge aides. Bad seeds who slipped in under their usually very good vetting system.

TRULA

I sent you the videos, did you watch them? So smart, using a hidden camera in a stuffed koala. They sell them to parents to check on their nannies.

JAKE

They've been fired. Charged with criminal neglect and abuse. And you can bet there's going to be hidden cameras in every stuffed animal and potted palm in the entire place now.

TRULA

Well, that's a reassuring thought. Checking dad into a surveillance state.

JAKE

I just meant that if there's any place where there won't be any elder abuse, it's going to be Courtland Heights. Not with the security and law suits.

TRULA

Assuming the law suits don't take the whole place down. No, it's too risky. What would happen if we put a deposit on one of the apartments there, if we bought in and got dad a place, and then the whole house of cards folds? They'd be bankrupt, and we'd lose the whole buy in!

JAKE

(Stops playing, lowers his head on the piano.)

Why do I try... Why do I even try.

How's dad today?

TRULA

He just watched *True Grit* for the third time this month.

JAKE

You see? It's time.

TRULA

That doesn't mean anything. Tomorrow he could be on the phone to his accountant remembering everything she forgot to do on his last three tax returns and how much it cost him down to the penny. *True Grit* doesn't have anything to do with it.

JAKE

You know what, you're right, because whatever's happening with his clock, yours is the one we have to pay attention to. You can't keep this up.

TRULA

Of course I can.

(Trula picks up the box.)

JAKE

What's in there anyway?

TRULA

Ummmm...just a few things to replace what I lost in Irene.

JAKE

It's been 12 years, Trula. You should let that go.

TRULA

I did let it go, remember? All of it.

JAKE

Nope, you didn't let it go. You had it taken from you. By force. A force of nature. And it wasn't all of it, you have to stop saying that.

TRULA

So what if I didn't lose the things that could get wet like my china. So what? I lost everything else.

JAKE

So you have three sets of china alone.

TRULA

Yes, lucky for you—one for each of your girls. I'm leaving mom's Wedgewood to Amy. I'm leaving the Limoges to Rachael, she always played with it when she was little. And I'm leaving the Russel Wright to Jennifer. I've got it all written down in the file in my bedroom with the list.

JAKE

(Time has just about got Jake wheeled
across the stage.)

Well, I think it's a bit premature but thanks. I think you picked the right one for each of them.

TRULA

Oh, they'll still fight over whatever set they didn't get. But this way they'll be mad at me, and not at each other.

(She picks up the box.)

JAKE

Are there Classics Illustrateds in that box?

TRULA

What? No. Why would you think that?

JAKE

There better not be Classics Illustrateds in that box.

TRULA

Why? It's my money I can do what I want with it.

JAKE

You don't know the kind of money you'll need, no one knows with this kind of thing, you don't know and if you start just throwing it around-

-

TRULA

I'll throw it wherever I want to. It's my money. For now. IT'S MY MONEY.

(Time wheels Jake off stage, he's gone. The Chopin concludes with a flourish.

She takes a stack of Classics Illustrates from the Box and hides them in the closet in the living room with the other stack of them.)

Money. People don't talk about money in the last moments of their life. Who remembers money at that moment? Orson Wells doesn't whisper "municipal bonds" with his last breath, in *Citizen Kane*. No, he whispers "Rosebud," the name of his sled. Oh, god, I hope that wasn't a spoiler for you. You have seen *Citizen Kane*, haven't you? Well, that's not my fault. You should have. So, yeah, Orson Wells whispers Rosebud. And it makes the whole movie make sense. That's the other thing about dying in the movies. You get great last lines.

And it was a great last line that is the reason why I'm buying all these Classics Illustrateds.

Last year, in the last class I taught, one of my freshmen knew the exact words that the replicant played by Rutger Hauer says as his life is ebbing away in *Blade Runner*. It is a beautiful speech, spoken by an android who knows, like Bette Davis in *Dark Victory* knows, that he's going to die in two minutes, he's been given that two-minute warning that the movies so often conveniently provide so that a character can say something profound and we can be appropriately moved by it. Does he talk about money? No. He talks about beauty. Because he is a replicant who was sent to places in the universe no human could survive, he has seen things that have been seen by no one else, and his memories, preserved alive in time, will vanish when he dies.

TIME

(Time comes back on stage.)

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears...in...rain. Time to die.

TRULA

And then Rutger Hauer, rain falling on him like tears, dies. The student had remembered and recited it perfectly. It was more words than he had said in class the entire semester.

That speech is considered the most beautiful speech in the entire canon of science fiction film. The replicant's memories are singularly beautiful because having memories is sort of what the entire movie is about—because our memories make us human. During the movie, out of a longing to be human, the replicants gather pictures of men who they pretend are their fathers, women they pretend are their mothers, they find pictures of boys or girls who they pretend are themselves when they were children. They invent their memories. And once they invent them they believe in them. They look at those photos last thing before they go to sleep at night. They look at them more and more the closer they are to the moment when they know they are going to die. Their memories—which are completely and totally fake, like small movies they have constructed inside themselves—give them comfort.

At the moment of his death, the replicant Rutger Hauer plays lives fully and completely in the memory of something magnificent. And this is the moment when he proves that he is human, when he knows he's the same as us.

His memories make him truly alive. Because our memories make us who we are.

Everyone in class was very impressed that this student knew the whole speech by heart. So was I. To be honest, I had no idea that he knew *anything*. I mean, I suppose he had to know something. Probably, I imagined, something about...I don't know, music or coding. But not something that mattered to me. When I told him, later, in a conference, how impressed I was that he knew this speech by heart, he expressed his surprise that everybody didn't know it.

I didn't tell him, but I knew that speech by heart too. I had been really moved when he recited it, kind of overwhelmed by the memory it had called up in me, of that moment in the movie in the rain.

But what I didn't tell him—what I've told no one, actually, I'm telling anyone this for the first time—is that when I got home, and thought about that moment, I realized that this freshman, who I did not have a single thing in common with, who had a brain that saw nothing in the world the same as mine did—I realized that we shared this memory of this moment of tears in rain.

This confused me. I thought about all the memories that made me who I was, and how many of them were moments in movies that were duplicated in the memories of millions of people, like my little freshman.

(She goes into the kitchen, fills a pitcher carefully,
half way, with water for her father.)

And it made me feel—not more human, in the sharing of nearly identical things—but more and more like a replicant, like a replica of every other middle aged middle class American.

(She walks toward her father's room.)

And then it hit me: Because so much of my brain remembered everything about movies, what I knew and remembered was identical to what everybody else knew. This should have been good news, because it meant that all these moments inside me that I treasured would never die. I would die, but they wouldn't die with me. This should have been good news.

But for some reason, it wasn't. For some reason this...really confused me.

I didn't know what the Tannhäuser Gate was—no one does, apparently a screenwriter just made it up at the last second without any idea what it meant, everybody liked the sound of it, it evoked some huge, Valhalla like mythic thing, maybe you went through it into a worm hole, maybe it was a gate to another dimension, nobody knew, nobody cared, they threw it in and the Tannhäuser Gate became a thing that will live forever, in film and in memory, and the C-Beams will too and they are also unknown, no one knows what they do, no one knows why they glitter.

(She goes into her father's room.)

TIME (o.s.)

Well, Sir, here we are again. Course, the fireworks all blew up, but we can't very well blame that on you. Anyway, everything's turned out fine, as it usually does. Alice is going to marry Tony—

TRULA (o.s.)

Jimmy Stewart! Look how young he is!

TIME (o.s.)

Nobody on our block has to move. We've all got our health; as far as anything else is concerned, we still leave that up to you.

TRULA (o.s.)

Here, dad. Okay, I'll get you another box.

(She comes out of her father's room, heads to the closet, takes out a box of Kleenex.)

TRULA

You Can't Take It With You. One of Jimmy Stewart's first films.

(She goes into her father's room with the box of Kleenex.)

TRULA (o.s.)

I know. It makes me cry too.

(After a moment, she comes back out of her father's room.)

TRULA

Everybody recognizes *You Can't Take It With You*. Well, everybody over the age of 60 or so. But now even your age won't define what you remember--the Internet is making everything everybody knows exactly identical to everything anybody knows. Not only that, but we now know the things we know in exactly the same way everybody else knows them.

And this was the moment when I thought--all those three quarter inch skies. Nobody knows them but us. Just my brother and me. I want all those skies back. No matter what they cost. I want them. If *Great Expectations* is only available in Near Mint, I'll pay for it. I'll even pay for Mint. What do I care how much they cost. So I dumped

my TIA-CREFF retirement fund into my checking account. And I started buying them all back, every single one.

