

THINGS THAT BREAK

A novella

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This...is not the first word of this play.

I have found the light. I stand in it. I am wearing a black velvet evening gown. Gorgeous to look at. Cunningly made--they cannot see the pockets, the carefully constructed hiding places for the wrench, the clamps, the screwdriver. The lines of the gown flow, uninterrupted. The nap of the fabric shines. Behind me, there is a red velvet curtain.

I don't care for velvet. It shows where it is touched. It creases where it is folded. It hides too little. It tells too much of its story.

I am holding a hand blown champagne glass. It has been blown so thin, so fine, that I imagine it almost appears to float in my hand. There are threads--twisted rivers of glass--inside the casing of the stem, but no color anywhere--it is clear, brilliant glass. There is gingerale in the glass--I imagine that it almost appears to be champagne.

I say, The first word of this play is glass.

A large sheet of glass floats down from high above me. I steady its descent--it is a large rectangle, five feet wide, three feet high, with holes drilled in each corner. I am quick to make it very clear that this glass is not the glass that will be the first word of this play as I reach into my pockets, removing

braces and screwdriver, and begin fastening the glass, upright, like a wall, into a slot prepared for it in the stage floor.

This glass is safety glass, I say. As I say the word glass again, again making it clear that this glass is not the first word of this play--another rectangle of glass descends above me. I steady it, as before, connect it to the first piece of glass at a right angle, and continue to make the nature of safety glass clear. This glass--and again I make it clear that this glass is not the first word of this play--this glass has been subjected to rigorous tests. Official documents have been signed, stating that all this glass is absolutely safe.

I am interested in assuring them of their safety because it is important that they are assured.

This is the theatre. Should danger, or the illusion of danger occur at the theatre, it is important that it stay on its side of an illusory line, right here--I walk to the edge of the stage, and touch it with my toe. Danger--here, on the side of the line where I stand. Safety--there, on the other side of the line, where they sit.

This is the theatre, and in the theatre, their safety comes first. It is illegal to yell fire in a crowded theatre. Fortunately, the first word of this play is not fire. If the first word of this play were fire, and if the first thing they were going to see were fire, and not glass, then the fire marshal, with rigorous tests and official documents not unlike the ones that I have assured them have been rigorously conducted and officially signed concerning glass, would have certified the fire as absolutely safe.

As the third sheet of glass descends, as I steady it and fasten it to the first, it occurs to me that it is not illegal to yell glass in a crowded theatre. In fact, if a tornado of sufficient speed and destruction were about to descend, it would in all likelihood be considered a courtesy to yell glass, so that they could

all double over in their seats and cover their eyes, except there is rarely any glass in a theatre, crowded or otherwise. Occasionally, in the chandeliers. In the Broadway houses, at the bar, on the mezzanine. But that, as a rule, is about it. So there is rarely any reason for anyone in the theatre to cover their eyes. It would be a counterproductive thing to do at any time, and completely unnecessary tonight, because this glass is here for their protection. Like the paper strips on motel toilet seats when you were kids. Wasn't it nice to know they cared, back then? Don't you feel the loss of that protection, now that it has been replaced with a foil wrapped chocolate mint, positioned carefully near the pillow on the motel sheets?

I would have liked to put a little chocolate mint on each of their seats, tonight. I would have liked that, a lot. If the first word of this play were chocolate--well, it would be a different play. I wish it were. It would be so much easier, to walk out on stage, knowing that each and everyone of them has got something dark, and sweet, and soft melting in their mouth.

But they don't.

The first word of this play is glass, and I couldn't put a little foil wrapped piece of broken glass on each of their seats tonight, even if I wanted to.

They are watching me finish up the three sided barrier of glass. They are wondering what it is for. They are thinking that even if I drop the champagne glass, the barrier will protect them. Even the ones on the front rows are sure that they are safe.

They are watching me, thinking they are safe.

I pick up the champagne glass, and hold it up. I toast the open, empty air.

To things that break, I say.

I drain down the ginger ale, already a little warm in the heat of the lights, but still bubbling, still pretending to be champagne. I drop the empty glass behind the barrier of glass. I assume it shatters at the moment the lights vanish, but I don't know. I have never actually seen it fall. I know there is the sound of the glass shattering, amplified through the sound system, impossible not to hear, and I hear it. But I am already moving to my mark. The moment the lights vanish I am already gone.

The lights vanish, plunging us all into darkness.

ACT ONE

I careen off stage in the blackness, into the arms of my dresser. She grabs hold of the gown, at my shoulders, and rips, smoothly, quietly, the Velcro strips give way. Someone brushes past me--on their way on stage. I pull at the Velcro sides of my velvet gown, my dresser pulls it off, sweeps it away.

A rush of air (produced by the red velvet curtain as it opens)--cools my back, my legs. Lights up behind me, on stage. Hands fly over my body, I am changing, changed. I am wearing a nurse's uniform, my dazzling white nurse's uniform. It is one hundred percent cotton, starched, pristine--I believe it looks slightly archaic, a touch too forties, but not aggressively out of style. Someone hands me my cap--a classic nurse cap, with a little border of blood red around the rim. I fasten it into place with bobby pins. I pull on my white hose, and slip into white pumps--no sensible nurse's clodhoppers for me.

My dresser hands me a Lucite clipboard, with charts clipped to it, they are charts that chart an imaginary wellness, a metaphorical health. I know this, but I carry the clipboard anyway. On the lapel of my blouse, above my heart, one of those pens on a retractable cable is always pinned.

I am already at the back of the house as the lights come up on the stage. My dresser and I have been moving the whole time I've been dressing,

moving quietly, surely along a side corridor. I end up in the quiet, empty lobby. I open the doors that open from the lobby into the world and watch it all begin again.

There he is. Peter Demery. Early thirties. He is wearing an expensive suit with the tie loosened, and the shirt a bit too wrinkled, sitting on a chair in the waiting room at St. Mary's. The room is a bit shabbier than I'd like it to be, but just nice enough that it looks like someone cares. Along the upstage wall, the hospital administration has provided vending machines, which are of course filled with over-bright, over large papermache candy bars, ham and cheese sandwiches, and fruit.

Peter is bending over the small glass coffee table in front of him, where a Scrabble board is in play. He has a folded up Wall Street Journal beside him. Elizabeth Demery, his mother, is sitting on the sofa. She is wearing a shirt waist dress in a jewel tone, the kind of dress women in cities wear. On the floor beside her is an ample knitting bag, filled to overflowing with yarn and half knitted projects. She is knitting a sweater...well, it's supposed to be a sweater. One night the prop mistress, for reasons no one can understand, switched it with a...but it would be gossip to talk about that. And anyway, it might have been an honest mistake. It might have.

Peter arranges several tiles on the Scrabble board, and sits back, proud of himself for completing a word. He says the word out loud:

GLASS.

A chill shudders through me.

This is the glass that is the first word of this play.

He reaches for the scoring pad, and, pointing to each letter tile, spells out the word: "G-L-A-S-S."

Elizabeth looks up from her knitting and says directly into the

air in front of her, “This is killing me.” Then she calmly resumes her knitting.

Peter, meanwhile, is adding up his score, slowly, methodically. “2 for G. 2 for--” he stops. “Did you just say something, Mom?”

Elizabeth looks up, surprised that he thinks she has. She thought she was talking to herself.

“Me? No.”

“You’re sure you didn’t...I mean I thought I heard...”

“I maybe cleared my throat. That’s all.”

Peter shrugs. “Okay.” He continues with the scoring. “2 for G.” She doesn’t hear him say “2 for G”, he didn’t hear he say “This is killing me”, he’s talking to himself, she’s talking to herself, I used to wish they’d talk to each other, but they can’t, even though they’d like to, too. I’m used to it now. I’m sure it has something to do with the setting. With the situation. I’m sure they’d talk to each other if they were somewhere other than this hospital waiting room. I know they’d talk to each other if they could.

“2 for L.”

This is my cue. I fling open the doors, sweep down the aisle, and say to the audience: Hello. My voice rings across the sea of faces. I include everyone of them with my voice, my presence. I introduce myself, I tell them that I’m Nurse Pitkin. Everything about my manner suggests that I am in absolute charge, and everyone will be just fine.

“This is killing me” Elizabeth says, as if she hasn’t heard a word I’ve said. And, of course, she hasn’t. “Except, of course, that it might not be killing me. Everything might turn out all right, in which case, this would not be killing me. In which case, this would just be--making me strong. After all, what doesn’t kill you, makes you strong.”

“2 for A.” Elizabeth and Peter can’t hear me. This isn’t necessarily fair, but that is the way it is. That is the downside of story nursing.

I ascend the stage. The lights dim in the house. I have a special, a spot, and when it finds me and I find it I have the most precious thing the audience has.

Their attention.

I say, The first thing I’d like to say is that all our patients are special. But all their stories are the same.

I can say this, you see, because I’m the Head Story Nurse here at St. Mary’s. St. Mary’s. The hospital with the three C’s--Care, Concern, and Compassion--engraved in granite on the admitting room wall.

I wasn’t always a Story Nurse, of course. For a long time, I was June Pitkin, Head Dialysis Nurse. It was a rewarding, fulfilling charge. I had the hands for the work. I had the patience--with a C--for the patients--with a T--but I soon discovered that I was just not cut out for piecemeal work. Kidneys, Kidneys, Kidneys. K-I-D-N-E-Y-S. Seven letters--out of which we can make:

Kid

kids

key

keys

den dens--

“I think that that’s what’s killing me.” Elizabeth is at it again.

“Yes. That’s it. What is killing me is not knowing whether this is killing me, or making me strong.”

--din dine dines

I continue with calling out my list, counting on my fingers.

sine sin kin

kind kinds
 send end ends
 ski skid sky
 ides side die

And here I pause, for maximal effect before saying:

dies...

You'd be amazed at how many words have dying in them. You really would. Almost as if the language had a death wish. Built right in. Let's see now...where was I...I've lost my place--side, die, dies...that's only twenty five. And there are forty-nine anagramic possibilities using the letters in the word kidneys. I'm twenty-four short...dei...dey...nei...oh, hell. It just goes to show you how far I've put kidney work behind me. And who wouldn't, really, if given the chance? What's dialysis all about, really?

I'll tell you.

You clean out the machine, you hook up the patient, you clean out the patient, you unhook the patient, you clean out the machine.

It's assembly line work. It's still just nuts and bolts. It's still just connect this to that. This to that. Thisness and thatness. But, to make a long story short--I got out of this and that. I traded all of that and this in, for the over all narrative. The scope, the scale, and the larger casts, that come with the duties of the Head Story Nurse.

Elizabeth knits furiously. "After all, if it turns out that this is killing me, rather than just making me strong, I'll still have to be. I'll have to be strong, because if everything I have ever believed and loved and lived for is true, then I won't have any choice. I'll have to be strong."

“And two total for the S’s. That’s eight all together.” Peter is excellent with numbers, by the way, he’s not actually this slow, but he’s trying to distract himself, keep his mind disengaged.

“I think, now that I really think about it, that that’s what is killing me. Yes. What is really killing me is--” but it eludes her. It just barely, precisely, eludes her.

“Triple word score. Twenty-four.” Peter tucks his scrabble score pad in his pocket, and heads for the restroom. I follow him.

“Damn.” Elizabeth throws down her knitting. “I need to get this right. I really do. What doesn’t kill you makes you strong...” She gets a strange, cold glint to her eye, a new face washes over her old one. She opens her mouth, and lets a single word escape. “Bullshit.”

Elizabeth covers her mouth with her hand, shocked at herself for thinking such a word.

“Bullshit. Bullshit.” Elizabeth is enjoying herself, now, singing out the syllables. “Bull...shit. I never actually thought the word bullshit before. Really thought it. Damn and hell were as far as I ever had to go.”

Peter passes the revolving door that leads into the operating theatre, and the tall upstage swinging doors, that lead into an area of “great heat and light.” No one is sure what that area of great heat and light is truly like. It is the one place we never go. We never go because we can’t go. It doesn’t actually exist. It’s just a stage direction, a description from the Setting page.

Peter walks up to the women’s restroom, and taps on the door.

“Jackie?”

No response. He pushes the door open and sticks his head in. Lights come up on the Ladies Restroom.

There are two stalls. Two sinks. The restroom is missing most of its walls, so I can see that both stalls are currently in use. There are sturdy legs ending in stylish, but sensible shoes, dangling an inch off the floor, in both of them.

Jackie Demery, Peter's sister, is standing over one of the sinks, looking in the mirror, playing with her hair. She has a brush in one hand, and a handful of clips and bobby pins in the other. She is beginning to pull apart the hairstyle she's just concocted.

Peter rushes over to her. "Jackie--NO!"

Jackie ignores him, continues pulling her hair-do apart.

"Jackie, your hair looked fine like that--don't--JACKIE!!!

JACKIE THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH YOUR HAIR!"

There is a faint quiver from the ladies' legs in both stalls. A response to a man's voice in the ladies room? I have my theories, but the story has never needed me to have more than that.

Jackie holds out her brush to Peter. "Hold this."

He refuses. "No way."

"Why not?"

"I won't be an enabler."

"An enabler?....Oh, my God. You're in therapy."

"I am not. I'm in counseling. Couples counseling.

"You think I don't know what kind of word enabler is?"

Enabler, by the way is not a word, not officially, that is. Oh, I have no doubt that it will make its way into the dictionaries eventually. That is the beauty of the lexicon of illness. You cannot cure an illness until you have a name for it. Naming a disease is the first and most important step in the search for the words that will cure it.

In the waiting room, Elizabeth is still enjoying the benefits of an expanded vocabulary. “Bullshit” she savors it. “Buuuuuuulshit. It feels good. Glad I saved it for an emergency.”

I enter the restroom. I hike up my skirt. I unbutton my blouse. I pull on a pair of white opera length gloves. I pull out a magician’s assistant’s stand that has been cleverly concealed in an ingenious hiding place, and produce a large top hat, which I pop open to full size. I stand next to Jackie, and take the brush from her, with a great flourish. I intend to hold that brush, and pull things out of that hat, and help Jackie with her hair in any way that I can. Peter is pacing, displaying every cliché of impatience in the book.

“Jackie--come on. Mom’s sitting out there alone--”

I pull a French made faux tortoise shell teasing comb from the hat, and offer it to Jackie. Jackie takes it, and attacks her bangs. “You’re so worried she’s alone, you go out and sit with her. I can’t come out yet, okay? Not until I get it perfect.”

“Stop it! Stop it NOW! Your hair looked fine. Stop trying to make it perfect. When it comes to hair there is no perfect. What would be the point of perfect? HAIR IS JUST HAIR!”

Jackie gives me the teasing comb back.

“If hair is just hair, then why were you always after me about it? If hair is just hair--why were you and mom always on me, always saying ‘Can’t you do something about your hair?’ I HATED that. I was trying to do something--it was just a different something.” I pull a curling iron out of the hat, and hand it to Jackie. “And now my hair is always the first thing I think about whenever I think about doing anything.” Jackie wraps a few strands of hair around the curling iron. It is quite hot--its “ready” light is bright red--it

appears to be plugged in to the inside of the hat, but that's for appearances, it's actually run on batteries. Still, the heat is still hot, and Jackie's hair curls on cue. "Good things, bad things, great things--just running to the store for a quart of milk--I can't think about doing anything without worrying about what I'm going to do with my hair."

"You think about your hair when you think about doing great things?"

"Yes."

"By great things, you mean--what--curing cancer? Saving children from burning buildings?"

"Well...yeah. More or less." Jackie inspects her curled hair, shakes her head, hands me back the curling iron, and wets down the incongruous curls while Peter gives her a little superior smile and says "People who do great things don't worry about how their hair looks while they're doing them."

"You never worry about your hair, do you Peter?"

"Nope. I'm married now. I worry about Penny's."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." She holds out her hand for the blow dryer I've plucked from the hat. She turns it on. It makes a high pitched, low volume noise--it's audible, it sounds like a blow dryer sounds, it blows Jackie's hair, and the audience is still hear every word Elizabeth says.

"So. 'What doesn't kill you makes you strong' is bullshit. So. I'm an educated woman. Surely I can come up with a way of organizing my thoughts without resorting to a shopworn cliché. Surely I can come up with something with a little punch to it. After all, as my father-in-law was so very fond of saying: It's a poor workman who blames his tools. But only an ass tries to blow glass out of his--"

She falters. This is going a little further than bullshit. This is definitely one step around the corner but, if not now, when? When is she ever going to need whatever these words have in them that makes them so forbidden and delicious?

And so, she repeats the old man's favorite phrase with relish. "Only an ass tries to blow glass out of his asshole."

On "asshole" the stage manager cues the sound of two toilets flushing. Two little old ladies fling their bathroom stall doors open. These are expertly dressed little old ladies--professional old ladies. They're wearing Chanel style suits, expensive jewelry, scarves, fabulous handbags, fabulous shoes.

"So I said to him--you cannot undo what you did" Stella, the taller one says. She practically stumbles into Peter as he tries to dive behind one of the doors. Josephine, the shorter one, gives Peter a vicious little sideways kick. The audience, of course, assumes that the kick is in the script, but frankly, it's not. And even I cannot tell if it's on purpose or some sort of odd accident, a kind of back brain reflex that the actress has chosen to make a permanent part of her entrance. The two ladies head for the waiting room area. They travel deliberately, hanging on to each other's arms for support. In some way, they are small tanks.

Elizabeth, flushed and a little drained by the recent "asshole", shakes her head and, pulling a nice long length of yarn out of her huge basket of yarn, gets back to knitting. "This is a nightmare" she sighs. Then tilts her head to one side, reconsidering. "No, no, this is a nightmare just won't do. It's the oldest cliché in the book."

Stella and Josephine trudge through the waiting room. "You cannot undo what you did. You gave up that locket."

Josephine shakes her head. “Frankie’s children were whores.”

Elizabeth is completely oblivious to them. “This is not happening to me” she insists, trying to figure out what is, what is happening, “this is not happening to me” she says again, it’s a simple enough statement, but it is unsatisfactory to her. She tries it another way.

“This is not happening to me.”

Still not satisfied.

“This,...is...not....happening...to me.”

But this way isn’t any better than the first three.

“On his deathbed they squabbled.” Stella squawks as they take a slow spin past the vending machines. “You could hear them in the next wing.”

“What those doctors put him through. A crime.” Josephine clucks her tongue in awesome remembered horror.

“So? He came out of it all right, in the end. Surprised ‘em all.”

Stella selects a Kit Kat bar, inserts her money, punches the button, and picks up the bar with her long, claw-like magenta fingernails. “Of course, he died on the way to Arabia.” she adds. They exit, along the upstage wall.

Peter has been looking over Jackie’s current hair do. “You know--this one almost works for me. It does. The Cinderellaish top knot here--the sleeping Beauty ‘I slept on my hair wrong for a hundred years and I can’t do anything with it’ effect there. It almost works for me. It does.”

“Meaning?”

“I like this side, but I don’t like that side.”

“Yeah. Me too.” She undoes the pins and clips, I help. “This side--greatness. This side--running to the store for a quart of milk. I don’t suppose you worry about that either, do you.”

“Running to the store for a quart of--”

“Greatness.”

“Oh. Greatness. Well, my feeling is that some men are born to greatness. Some have greatness thrust upon them. And some have sisters who worry about greatness for them.”

“Ha ha ha.”

Elizabeth has gotten her second wind. “All right, now. I’ve got to do it. I’ve got to come up with a catch all, but specific phrase to organize this thing that is killing me, or not killing me.” Yes, she’s still going introspectively strong. “I have always been an organized person. But what I need to get organized is something with a good, strong visual attached to it. I can’t keep on with this vague, imprecise ‘This is not happening to me’ shit.” It’s sloppy. It’s flabby. It’s the very worst way an organized person should be dealing about her life.”

“Peter” Jackie says, and turns to him with a pleading tone to her voice, “I don’t know how I’m supposed to look. I mean, maybe there is a perfect way to wear your hair while you’re in a hospital waiting room. I mean look at the time and money people, since the beginning of time, have spent on their hair, for big occasions, for little occasions, for great occasions, and maybe they do that for a reason. Maybe they do it because it actually helps. Maybe, if, I could get my hair absolutely, magnificently right—if it were perfect, maybe--”

“You know what?” Peter has been squinting at Jackie, with his head held sideways. “You look like a Sharon Tate murderer. You do. Of course, it could just be the light--but with your hair like that you look like you’ve taken seventeen different drugs and are disgusted by all of them. They’ll show up in your hair, you know. All the drugs. If you ever try to get a government job, or run for office, they’ll be able to pinpoint all the great highs of your life with an unnerving accuracy--they can read the whole story, just by

examining a single strand of your hair.” He holds up a single strand of her hair. She yanks it away from him. It breaks her heart, a little, that she has tried to tell him about what she needed, from her hair, and he didn’t hear a word.

“Well--it’s better than what they’d find if they got a hold of one of your hairs.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“They wouldn’t find anything if they tested my hair, Jackie.”

“Exactly. Not a single high point. Not a one. A blank page. That’s what you’d look like to them, when they looked at your hair.”

Peter sighs. “Can we go back out yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Jackie this is ridiculous! Mom’s sitting out there alone, we’re in here, talking about hair”—

“We are not talking about hair, Peter! We are talking about greatness.”

“Okay. Your hair looks great. So can we go back out now?”

He is headed for the door, Jackie pulls him back.

“If I asked you to help me do something--if I really needed your help--would you help me, Peter? Or would you give me a lecture about enabling, and turn me down?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether what you want me to help you do will really help you.”

“Oh, you can depend on that, bucko. I promise that if you help me, it will help me. So. Can I depend on you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“So? You going to tell me what you want me to help you do?”

“Burn it down.”

There is a beat. A pause. I feel the small ripple of interest I always feel at this moment, spiking through the audience. I feel them thinking about fire. Wondering if I lied. Wondering if this really is a play about fire. Wondering if they are safe.

“Let’s see” Elizabeth says to herself, “where should I begin. My stomach is on fire, my hands feel like they are ten miles away, my feet feel like they are in Ohio, my heart is beating it’s brains out—no, that’s too specific. Descriptive, yes, but too specific for what I need. Oh, it’s killing me that I can’t figure this out!

Peter pretends he doesn’t know what she’s talking about. “What are you talking about?” he says.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Nope.” Peter moves away a step. “Don’t have a clue.”

“Oh hell” Elizabeth says, throwing her knitting needles down in her lap, “I can’t figure out what the hell--” and then her face lights up in ephipany. “Hell! Yes, of course! That’s it! It’s obvious. This is hell! I am sitting in a seven by twelve square foot piece of hell!”

I put away all the hair accessories, fold up the magic stand and collapse the top hat. I won’t be enabling this conversation much longer. And I’m always curious to get back to the waiting room, and see how Elizabeth is coming along with her knitting. She’ll be finishing this sweater in a couple of performances, and everyone knows that this time it’s for me. It takes her about two weeks, give or take a matinee, to make one. The director got the first one

she made, Jackie got the second, her husband got the third, and now—it's my turn. I've been watching her. To be absolutely honest with you, I think she's getting a little careless, especially with the design around the neck.

Meanwhile, Jackie is heading into one of the stalls. Peter tries to stop her.

“Where are you going?”

“Where does it look like I'm going?”

“I don't believe this.”

“Trust me, Peter. This is one of the easier things to believe.”

Jackie goes into the stall and closes the door in his face. Peter stands there, dumfounded for an instant.

This is just one example of why kidney work was just too limiting for me.

I am stripping off my long white gloves and restoring the prim, proper look to my uniform. Now don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with a kidney story. And it's not that kidney work isn't good, fulfilling, honest labor. But a kidney story is, in the final dialysis, a lot like a love story. Boy is born with kidney. Boy loses kidney. Boy gets the use of a pseudo kidney. It works out or it doesn't. The end. I admit I sometimes find myself drawn in by the simple eloquence of a love story--but the sad fact is that the things in me that can be changed by love stories have already been changed.

That's why I'm looking for a new story.

Peter heads back into the waiting room “My sister must have the smallest bladder in the world” he announces to himself. “My sister must have a bladder the size of a pea.” He takes out his Scrabble pad, thinking about how he used to feel sorry for Jackie's future husband. He used to imagine her bankrupting him with her toilet paper bills. “I imagined the headline--

WOMAN’S TINY BLADDER BANKRUPTS HUSBAND” he says, remembering, and he begins scribbling computations down on the pad. “Little did I know the joke would turn out to be on me.”

Elizabeth has been unable to find happiness with the “this is hell” organizational category. “No, I can’t work with this vague, imprecise, “This is hell shit. Who the hell knows what hell looks like, right?”

“Little did I know that waiting for me at the end of the aisle was the only other woman in the history of the species who also had a bladder the size of a pea.”

Bladder, I say to the audience. B-L-A-D-D-E-R

“And it’s not that this isn’t killing me or not killing me, and a nightmare, and I’d swear that it is not happening to me. But it is.” Elizabeth keeps on talking, and I do too, keeping it low.

“There’s got	ladder add adder
to be	lad lade lea
a way,	led lead read
to tie	red bed real
these things	deal blade bladed
together.	blare blared blear
Otherwise	bled bald baler
A person	bread lad ladder
just gets trapped in cheap	lade laded larded.
sentimentality.	able abled alder
	ale add addle
In bullshit.	adder are dab
And what a person needs at a	bard bead debar
moment like this is something	dear dare drab

profound.

ear earl real dread

blade

bled

dead.

D-E-A-D dead. I shrug my shoulders. What did I tell you? All these words have one thing written in them.

Jackie flushes the toilet. It is a rather astonishing flush. It has been augmented so that it sounds a little like an atomic bomb. I know, it sounds far fetched, but the sound designer is very proud of it—he sampled bits of the movie Fail Safe’s soundtrack.

Elizabeth has an epiphany.

“Nagasaki!” she screams. Yes! Nagasaki fills the bill! Nagasaki--the moment after the blast. The sudden absence of the known world. One moment--everything is fine. Everything is good, or bad, everything is killing or not killing you in ways you can understand. Life is good or bad, but it’s there. And then--the next moment--there was no world left. Well, there was a world, but it wasn’t any world they knew.”

We are all looking for a new story. Think about it. You know it’s true.

“Yes.” Elizabeth is enormously pleased with herself. “The absence of the known world will do.”

Jackie leaves the bathroom, enters the waiting room area, and goes over to the vending machines. I follow her, and prepare to help her with the whimsies.

Whimsies are an old, old glass blowers tradition. After the general run of glass was made, and the fire started to cool, there generally remained a small amount of molten glass in the furnace. Glass blowers have always been

allowed to use it to blow glass in fantastic shapes and shades to show off their skill to each other, and to take home to impress sweethearts and mothers and wives. Because they were never made to suit the factory's purpose, and because they were always free-blown, never mold-blown, whimsies were known as off-hand glass. For over a hundred years, the Demery family has been particularly proud of their "off-hand" glass. Each successive Demery tried to outdo the whimsies of his father, and uncles, and grandfather. Every shelf, table, and clear space in the Demery home has been crowded with extraordinary, impossible whimsies—created to mark all the important occasions--weddings, births, anniversaries, deaths.

I reach into Jackie's knapsack, and take out a particularly lovely, amber colored whimsy. It is cold to the touch, like stone, and it is rough, just like sandpaper.

Most glass, of course, is nothing like sandpaper. But all these glass whimsies are. Oh, they look perfectly smooth, whether you're sitting in the front row or the back of the house. But they're not. Just before the whimsies are completely cool, the glass blower that has been commissioned to fabricate our whimsies roll each piece in a delicate mixture of sand, which helps to make sure that, night after night, they do not slip through our fingers. The audience thinks that the care I take while taking them out of Jackie's knapsack is because I am afraid the delicate, "ancient" glass will break. But it's not. It's because if I am not careful, the glass scratches me.

I hand the first whimsy to Jackie.

She opens an empty compartment in the vending machine--it's one of those types with carousel mechanisms, with lighted windows to display the food--and places the beautiful, small, brilliant amber-colored whimsy carefully inside it. I hand her another whimsy—she selects another empty window, and

puts it in. We do this three times, four times, five. Jackie's knapsack is full of the most extraordinary antique whimsies collected in one place anywhere on earth, even though of course there are five identical replicas of each one of them in the prop room, each one of them with its invisible coat of sand.

Sometimes, Jackie has to remove a prop piece of fruit or a sandwich from a little window, to make room for a whimsy. Occasionally, props will have a little surprise waiting for her—nothing too devilish, little messages written in *Cheeze Wizz* on the fruit, that sort of thing.

The light from the vending machines shines through the whimsies, turning the vending machine into a kind of stained glass window. The audience doesn't register the fact that the vending machine is scaled much larger than normal in order to hold the whimsies, and to make sure that sure the glass objects read properly, even from the back of the house.

Six, seven, eight. I am very busy now, assisting Jackie, handing the glass objects to her, the whimsies are supposed to be lined up under the trap door in the right order, but sometimes the stage hand under the stage, who is handing them to me through the knapsack's false bottom, gets #6--the peach blow tower, and #7--the scarlet globe with a hundred spikes—confused.

The tech rehearsals for this particular bit of stage business took almost a full day.

The glass blower who makes the whimsies, and the 5 backups, and rolls them all in sand, has told me a secret about glass: Glass is true. It is elemental. Even nature, herself, makes it, occasionally. Deep in her heart, in the steamy asshole of the world, she will sometimes have the desire to make glass. And she'll melt a million tons of sand and dirt and rock, in giant batches, and will make mirror bright obsidian. She will fill up a mountain with it, till it overflows with shinning black volcanic glass.

Even the bomb made glass, the first time she had the chance. Made a lovely green glass, the color of tourmaline. Left it scattered, like a miraculous bloom of emerald Easter eggs, hot and easy to hunt, on the scorched desert floor. Technically speaking, of course, every piece of glass made by the atom bomb would be considered a whimsy--and the scientists at Alamogordo (misplaced craftsmen, to the last) followed this offhand tradition and fashioned jewelry from the choicest bits of glass, harvested from the center of the blast. Their wives wore these pendants and chokers and bracelets proudly. And then their soft skin began to blister and burn beneath the sparkling baubles. The stones were filled with a fire that put diamonds to shame. Filled with a fire that lasts.

“At sixty cents a roll, let’s say one roll every other day....Three hundred and sixty five divided by two that’s one hundred and nine dollars and twenty cents a year.” Peter and his computations, I ignore him at moments like this, I do.

“Jackie?” Peter calls back over his shoulder, he still hasn’t noticed what she is up to. “One hundred and nine dollars and twenty cents is your estimated yearly expenditure for toilet paper. Unless, of course, your habits have substantially changed, or you’ve upgraded to one of the higher priced spreads.” Jackie and I stop loading in the whimsies, and she goes over to him. He tears off the sheet of paper and hands it to her.

“Why did you do this?”

“I don’t know. Every time I went into the bathroom it seemed like you’d used up another roll. So, I always wanted to do this. That’s all.”

“And you picked now to do it? You picked now to think about toilet paper?”

“Look, Jackie, it’s just something to do, okay? To take my mind off it. Okay?”

Well of course everybody understands the concept, of course, who wouldn’t? But his mother isn’t distracting herself thinking of toilet paper. No, she’s working on a much more complicated obliteration of the now.

“I know there is something wrong with a woman comparing her husband’s surgery to Nagasaki.” Yes, Elizabeth doesn’t mess around. “I am an educated woman. I am aware of the--profanity--involved in borrowing that hideous, unthinkable moment, and transplanting it here. But I can’t help it. And I don’t see why I should. The moment that may or may not be the moment the sudden and absolute absence of the known world happens to me could happen to me any moment now.”

During Elizabeth’s musings, I have moved stage right and downstage in order to be out of the way of the surgeon and his team, so I can say, at the proper moment: Enter Dr. Glass and Company.

Through the two huge swinging doors that open out of the place of extreme heat and light, they burst onto the stage. They are dressed as All the Queen’s Horses and All the Queen’s Men, wearing surgical caps and gowns.

I don’t mind telling you I never get used to their entrance. I don’t think I ever will. It’s not that I’d like them costumed differently, or singing another tune, or bursting in more quietly. They should march in like they owned the place, they should be wearing the Queen’s Horses/Men/Surgeon costumes (which were horribly expensive, the most expensive costumes in the entire show—and for what—three minutes of stage time?) and of course, what other song can they be singing? I know it’s all as dramaturgically appropriate as it can be. But I still can’t get used to it. It’s an entrance that tends to wake up the

audience members who've eaten too much dinner before coming to the theatre, however, so that's an incontrovertibly good thing

There are four of them. The Doctor, the Anesthesiologist, the Assisting Surgeon, and a Young Intern. The Doctor is at the head of the parade. They are singing in the best barber shop harmony.

HUMPTY DUMPTY DIDN'T EAT RIGHT
 HUMPTY DUMPTY WORKED LATE EVERY NIGHT
 ALL THE QUEEN'S HORSES
 AND ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN
 COULDN'T PUT HUMPTY TOGETHER AGAIN

Enter the story doctors, I announce, grandly,

HUMPTY DUMPTY WORKED LIKE A SLAVE
 THE FAMILY BUSINESS TRYING TO SAVE
 HE WORE HIMSELF DOWN

They are hitting full, impossible low notes:

DOWN
 DOWN
 DOWN INTO BITS
 AND HUMPTY DUMPTY'S INSIDES
 JUST CALLED IT QUILTS

They halt in front of the family. Dr. Glass reads from his clipboard, while the team chants softly, in harmony, under him.

"Pulmonary function" (*Humpty Dumpty*)--"20 percent. Blockage of main heart valve" (*Humpty Dumpty*)--"100 percent. Secondary valve blockage" (*Humpty Dumpty*)--"60 percent. Usable cardiac collateral" (*Humpty Dumpty*)--"zip. Looks like a job for--"

And they leap back into the song on cue:

ALL THE QUEENS HORSES
AND ALL THE QUEENS MEN
WE'LL PUT HUMPTY DUMPTY
TOGETHER AGAIN..

Dr. Harold Glass. Yale undergrad. Yale medical. Cholesterol level: One hundred ninety-seven. Dr. Glass takes Elizabeth's hand. "Mrs. Demery" he says, and he shakes her hand enthusiastically, warmly.

He takes Peter's hand. "Peter. Good to see you again." Dr. Glass has a son at Harvard. Daughter at Dana Hall. Wife's cholesterol level: One hundred ninety-nine.

"And you must be--Jacqueline!" He takes both of Jackie's hands in his. You can feel it in his handshake--he's got the healing hands.

"We are going in!"

Elizabeth is still in a mild state of shock. "Yes?"

Dr. Glass heartily shakes their hands again, in reverse sequence.

"We're about to begin!"

"Yes?"

Peter clears his throat. "Look, as long as you haven't started yet, there are still a few questions you never answered that I--"

"No time now, son." Dr. Glass and the team join hands with lightning speed, and in a low tone he invokes: "Oh Lord. Give me the skill to do what can be done, the knowledge to know what can't be, and the malpractice insurance to cover them both. Amen."

The rest of team murmurs, "Amen." They drop hands, and sing again, with Dr. Glass singing the lead.

WE ARE GOING IN.

Rest of the team: GOING IN

WE'RE ABOUT TO BEGIN!

Rest of the team: ABOUT TO BEGIN

WE ARE ALL THE QUEEN'S HORSES

Rest of the team: ALL THE QUEEN'S HORSES

WE ARE ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN

Rest of the team: ALL THE QUEEN'S MEN.

And then they all tear into the lyric in unison.

IF ANYONE CAN DO IT

THEN WE ARE THE MEN

WHO'LL PUT HUMPTY DUMPTY

(WHO'LL PUT HUMPTY DUMPTY)

TOGETHER--AGAIN!!!!!!

AAAAAAAAAGAIN!!!!!!!

They parade through the revolving doors that lead into the operating room, and their voices, thankfully, trail away

Elizabeth hazards a brave smile. “Well. That was nice of him, wasn’t it? To stop by. To reassure us, like that? So we don’t worry? So we know everything’s going to be just fine?”

“I don’t trust that doctor.”

“You don’t trust anyone, Jackie.”

“Well why should I?”

“Because you can’t go through life not trusting people.”

“Oh, yes. Let’s not forget the Demery Family Golden Rule:

One: Always be overdressed. Two: Always stand up for what’s right. And Three: Always trust everyone. That way, we’ll be well dressed, stationary targets who make it easy for people to shoot to shoot us down.”

“Jackie--”

“Peter doesn’t trust people either, do you, Peter?”

“Hell no. They have to trust me.”

“See?”

“Don’t encourage her, Peter.”

“Look, Mom, it’s the truth. People have to trust me with their money. Well, you can’t give your money to someone you can’t trust, and you can’t trust a man with your money if he’s stupid enough to trust other people, right? It’s just a fact of life.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be. I can remember when everybody trusted everyone. When the biggest deals were conducted on a simple handshake. Your grandfather never signed a contract in his life. Always said that if his hand on a deal wasn’t good enough, it was no deal.”

“I don’t think that’s what Granddad used to say Mom. Not exactly.”

I still love it when a story dovetails like this. Don’t you? The healing hands of business and medicine. Great myths, separately--together like this they--well--they give the new story an old fashioned resonance.

“You’re pretty close, mom, but what Granddad used to say, exactly was: My hands made the glass, and the glass makes the deal, and if my handshake doesn’t seal it, then you can kiss my--”

“Jackie, please!”

“Well I can’t help it, can I? If Granddad loved the word ass.

Peter hates the way Jackie’s always doing this kind of thing to their mother, but he just can’t help himself this time. The two of them can’t help saying:

“PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GLASS HOUSES
GET WATCHED WHILE THEY WIPE THEIR ASS”

They laugh, and Elizabeth sighs and shakes her head. Peter is caught up in the nostalgia now.

“It’s the only thing I really remember about him. Boy, he loved the fact that ass rhymed with glass. What kind of an ass works at the Demery Glass Works?”

This was Jackie and Peter’s favorite game, once upon a time. “A Demery Ass works at the Demery Glass works at the Demery Glass Works the Demery ass works”--they do it faster and faster and faster, trying to say it as fast as they can, trying to force the other one to trip up--”at the Demery Glass works the Demery ass works the Demery glass at the Demery Glass works the Demery ass works the Demery glass for the ass working glass--”

“That’s enough, you two.” Elizabeth’s been knitting away, and has finished the row she’s working on. She pulls more yarn up out of her knitting bag with a nice big tug.

The string of yarn--it’s a golden brown color--has transformed into a boa constrictor of approximately the same hue.

That’s right. A boa constrictor. Very lifelike. Perhaps alive. It looks alive to me. It probably doesn’t look alive at the back of the house, in the same way it looks alive to me, but the illusion--or reality--sustains itself, I’m sure. Perhaps it looks even more definitely animate, back there. It might, after all. It very well might look absolutely, and completely terrifyingly, real.

Elizabeth looks at it as she continues to pull up the yarn, transfixed, unbelieving. The snake wraps itself around her. “Jackie? Peter?” Elizabeth’s voice squeaks a bit, as the boa starts to strangle her.

Jackie and Peter look over at her. “Yeah?”

Elizabeth waits for them to notice the snake.

“Yeah, mom?” Elizabeth still waits. “What--is something wrong?”

Elizabeth realizes they don’t see it. How is this possible? If they saw it, they would do something, they would rip it off her, they would--”No. Nothing. What could be wrong?” They don’t see it. The absence of the known world is overwhelming, but Elizabeth isn’t giving in just yet. She dramatically rips the snake off her, stuffs it and the sweater--my sweater--back into the bag. She quickly pulls out another project.

This one is made of brightly colored yarn--that variegated red/white/blue yarn that was such the style about 15 years ago? According to the costume and props designer, who are big fans of back story, this is a hat that Elizabeth started to knit in 1971 for Peter, who was on his way to Iceland with a contingent of Eagle Scouts. When the itinerary for his trip arrived it came

complete with an official Boy Scout green cap and mitten set, so Elizabeth put this hat aside and has never looked back at it since. Until this morning. When, according to the director, who is also a big believer in back story, Elizabeth grabbed every unfinished project she could dig up from the back of the linen closet and stuffed them into her knitting bag. I am not an advocate of back story. I believe that all true back story is embedded in every word and deed of any good play, coded into the gesture of every present tense moment. But I am not the director. So, Elizabeth dug into the back of her linen closet this morning, and grabbed every unfinished project she could and stuffed them into her knitting bag, afraid she wouldn't have enough to occupy her mind during the long hours ahead of her at St. Mary's.

You might be interested to know that we sell Demery Glass at St. Mary's, here in the Ladies Auxiliary Gift Shop, located down the hall, past Pulmonary, take your first right. All proceeds from the gift shop help the Auxiliary purchase the infant car seats—and here I pick up an infant car seat, wrapped in a pink bow, from behind the couch, and show it to the audience--that we present to each baby born at St. Mary's. Over twelve hundred given out so far this year.

Elizabeth pulls out more yarn, pulling a large king snake out of the bag. Elizabeth looks at it, looks around her, looks back. The king snake snakes its way into her lap.

Josephine and Stella enter from the side of the stage they last exited from. This time they are men. They are wearing the exact same costumes, and they are Josephine and Stella, but they are men.

“You say she went in for a simple procedure?” Josephine asks.

“Simple? Simple?” Stella rearranges the phlegm in his/her throat. “If she'd gone in to have a hangnail removed, she'd of been at greater risk.”

I am carrying the car seat over to an area near the vending machines. There is an alcove there, where my dresser waits for me. I hand her the car seat.

“They punctured her?” Josephine demands.

“Punctured her? Ha. The Hindenburg was just punctured, compared to what they did to her. Like a sieve. Well, they rolled her right across the parking lot from the doctor’s office, right into surgery.”

“Did they get to her in time?”

“Depends on how you look at it.” Stella says. “She was dead when they got her to the table. And she was somewhat worse than that, when they were done.” Stella and Josephine cross the stage, and disappear.

Elizabeth stuffs the king snake back into the bag. “Well. This is a much more fascinating turn of events than I’d anticipated. But I guess that’s the point.” She pulls out another knitting project--a dark tan one. “When the known world prepares to absent itself, there’s no telling where it prepares to go.”

We think of glass as fragile. We are trained, from childhood, to handle it delicately, tenderly, because glass is first, and foremost, a thing which breaks. But technically speaking, glass is forged and fused in fire--which makes it metal. And metal is the last thing we expect to break.

And here is another secret about glass, imparted to me by the glass blower who fabricates all the glass we use in the play. This, in particular, is a delicious secret, because it seems to be a secret that glass does not know about itself:

Glass is liquid. It melts. It flows. And if left alone long enough, hanging in a window, will spill down, over the sill, and pool in a small puddle on the floor. Glass will break before this happens, if it is forged improperly, or

dropped or hit. But it was not made to break--breaking is not its true destination. It is only the result of accident, or disease.

Jackie has returned to her work at the vending machines. "Peter?"

(I am sometimes tempted to break one of the less expensive pieces piece just so that he will have to make and deliver a new one, and tell me more secrets. It takes 5 days from order to delivery on the whimsies, so we must never have less than that magic 5 extra pieces for every piece of glass.)

Peter looks up from the Wall Street Journal. "What?"

"Don't you ever miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"The glass. Making it."

Glass, I think I should point out here, is nothing more than a kind of ice--room temperature, present tense ice, made of a special water that freezes in time, not cold, and will melt, is melting now. You've seen the ripples in old plate glass, and the fat bulges at the bottom of stained glass windows. We see glass as solid because we are trapped in time--in the story time necessary to our own narrative.

"I can't believe you're starting in on this, Jackie" Peter whines.

"I'd miss it, Peter, I'd miss it--a lot, so I was just wondering, you know, if you missed it, because--"

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE BRINGING THIS UP AT A TIME LIKE THIS!"

"All I asked was if you missed it, Peter. Jesus."

A rattlesnake emerges from Elizabeth's bag, rattling away.

Glass begins as sand, becomes a little slow piece of flowing river, and returns to sand. That is the story of glass--sand to sand. It is similar in this

respect to the ashes-to-ashes story of the body, but the body's story is always a relatively short one. The story of glass makes a more serious claim upon time.

Elizabeth squashes the rattlesnake back in the bag, matter of fact, and takes out a half finished fluffy white angora scarf that she has promised to the market director's daughter for her birthday.

"You just can't pass up an opportunity, can you Jackie--give you the smallest opening, you pile up the guilt, you pile on the abuse--"

"It's a simple question. A simple, reasonable question. I can't help it if you feel guilty. I can't help it, and I don't care. It's a simple question, Peter. Do you miss making the glass."

"NO."

"Thank you."

Sometimes, it is necessary to involve oneself more intimately in a particular family and their story. Because no question is too small, no thought too crazy. We at St. Mary's are here to help. A thousand cc's of the three C's--that's our motto. I step into the alcove. My dresser is there. Her hands move over me. My crisp uniform falls to the floor.

Elizabeth knits like a house on fire. The market director's daughter's birthday is less than a week away. She has only about two minutes a performance to work on the scarf, before it turns into a huge white king cobra

"So...how about the abuse? Do you miss that?" Jackie asks him,

"What do you think?" Peter sneers. I hold my hands up high, sheltered in the hidden alcove, and my dresser slips my next costume down over me. I stand still as a cool soft velvet gown whispers down my body, my thighs.

The white angora scarf turns into a huge white king cobra. Elizabeth tries to push it back down, business as usual, but it just hisses at her, rising high and higher.

“No, I guess you wouldn’t miss the abuse, would you, bucko? After all, you’ve got Penny for that.”

Peter stands up, and flings his Wall Street Journal down. “You really are a piece of work, you know that? You really are.”

Other hands have been busy, tugging and twisting and pinning my hair, sweeping it up into an elegant style. My dresser hands me my earrings, I put them on as she slaps the strip of velcro along the back of my gown closed--it is a gown that will look familiar to the audience. It is identical to the one I wore in the prologue, except that now it is a blinding, overwhelming, virginal, white. I am holding a champagne glass, which is almost identical to the one I let fall behind the barricade made of three glass walls.

I step out of the alcove.

Peter turns, without looking where he is going, and runs right into me. He slams into me, crushing the champagne glass between us.

“SHIT!” He stoops down to start picking up the broken bits of glass that have fallen at our feet.

I’m Penny now. And, as Penny, I say what Penny, at this moment, has always said. “No need to apologize. I hate people who apologize.”

Peter picks up the slivers and shards of glass--of course, it’s not glass at all, at the moment he slammed into me, I moved the glass into one of my pockets, the stage manager called the sound cue so the sound of the breaking glass filled the house, and what Peter is picking up off the floor is just plastic. Safe, harmless plastic, there is absolutely no danger that he will cut himself, he is absolutely safe. But he picks up the slivers and shards as if every one of them could cut him to the bone and back. Every night, to the bone and back. “You are the last thing I need right now” he tells us. It seems to me that he always whines a bit more on this line than is absolutely justified. “The very last.”

Elizabeth is busy watching the cobra. “I suppose a doctor would just call this an anxiety attack. And God knows, if it is, I’m entitled to it. But from where I’m sitting, it sure as hell looks like a cobra to me.”

Penny(Me) is busy watching Peter pick up the glass. Penny(Me) asks him, “What are you doing?”

He screams back at us, “I am not thinking about you I am not thinking about you I am NOT.”

Elizabeth can’t hear Peter, even when he screams like this. She is studying the snake. “What does it eat, what does it eat, it looks hungry. If I could give it something to eat, it might go away.”

Jackie has used up all the empty vending machine slots, and has to empty sandwiches and sad looking fruit out of every compartment she opens. She is about to throw the food away, but then reconsiders. “You want anything to eat, mom?”

“A mouse, or a gerbil, maybe--a small rabbit might do the trick.”

“What mom?”

“Nothing dear. I’m fine “ she tells Jackie, in a singsong voice, then continues muttering to herself. “I have always considered myself a resourceful woman. It is hard to imagine where a resourceful woman would be hiding the resources to rise to this occasion--but that’s the definition of resourceful.”

“If you’re not thinking about me” Penny and I say to Peter, watching him put the shards in his pocket, “then what are you doing with that glass?”

“Picking it up--there’s a couple over there, dancing barefoot, and—no--I am not thinking about you I am not thinking about you, I--”

“You’re putting it in your pocket.”

“Yes. I am putting it in my pocket. I put it in my pocket, and you say “That’s the stupidest thing I ever saw in my life”, and then we get married, and we have three children, and things go to shit, but we hang on anyway, we try to make it work, and then my father gets sick. My father starts to maybe die. And on the day I leave to go the hospital, you don’t even...you don’t even...you don’t even say you love me...”

He is still on his knees, at our feet. “Please. Please just leave me alone. I am not thinking about you, I am thinking about my father, I am not thinking about you--” He starts to weep. “Tell me you love me, tell me you love me, please tell me you love me.”

We pause. We wait. We look at him, on his knees. We look at the handful of broken glass in his hands. We say “That’s the stupidest thing I ever saw in my life.”

Peter stops weeping, wipes his nose with the back of his hand. and continues to pick up the glass fragments and put them in his pocket. “Well?” we say. He ignores us. “Well, Peter? I said, that’s the stupidest--”

Peter snaps, “I heard you!”

“Then you know what happens next” we say.

“Yeah.” Peter ticks off the events on his fingers. “Marriage, move, mom’s broken heart, children, shit.”

“Oh, Peter, don’t be coy. You know what happens next.” We drape ourselves around Peter’s shoulders, from behind. “Here? Now?” Peter says, as we lead him behind the couch.

“That PBS special on the Sacred Snakes of India! Yes! I watched that series religiously!” Elizabeth is one of those women who actively long for more nature specials on PBS. “They showed this wonderfully grainy black and white film clip of a high priestess, performing an elaborate ritual with a very

similar--though much smaller--snake. She had to kiss the snake--peculiar, isn't it, that in a country where it's a crime to touch the majority of the population, it's a blessing to kiss a snake? Anyway, she had to kiss the snake, on its head, three times. Like this." She bobs and weaves from side to side along with the movement of the snake, and kisses it. "That's one."

"Sure. Why not?" We turn around, so that Peter can unzip our dress.

"Right here? With my mother right here, and my father lying on the operating table--no, I won't--"

Elizabeth kisses the snake again. "That's two."

"Sure you will. Come on, Peter. It's completely understandable. Happens all the time. And who's going to know? No one. That's who. This is what you want. This is what you need. You know it is." I drape myself around his shoulders, from behind. "We'll do it just like we did it that first night at the country club. You know. After you ran into me, and broke the champagne glass, and ruined my dress. It'll be just like it was. The first time." He turns to us, we embrace passionately, and sink down onto the floor, behind the couch.

Elizabeth kisses the snake a third and final time. "That's three!" The snake immediately becomes docile, tame.

And it begins to rain.

Elizabeth doesn't know whether to be thrilled or disappointed.

"Rain. Of course! Now I remember. The high priestess kisses the cobra for rain." It is a small, focused rain, virtually nothing else other than Elizabeth and her chair gets wet. Peter usually gets a few ricochet drops on his back, but that's to be expected, after all. The techies are not magicians, and the production budget is not bottomless. They worked for almost a week to get the

rain focused right, and the producer said if there were any more problems with it, we could kiss it goodbye, and have to settle for just sound effects.

Jackie is still at work on the vending machines, oblivious of what we and Peter are doing behind the couch. She starts to apologize to Peter. “I’m sorry, Peter. I know things with you and Penny have not been good lately.”

This is what we’re doing behind the couch: We’re looking at the pages of the script, which we’ve taped to the back of the couch. This portion of the play was rewritten at the last minute, and it’s tricky, with all the kissing and such, and since the audience can’t see us anyway—well, it makes life easier.

We have to be very careful with the kissing and such, because the area behind the couch is amplified for sound. So, the amplified sounds of our kissing, and then, of Peter’s fly being unzipped can be heard all the way to the back of the house.

“You know what, Peter? I miss the abuse too. Giving it to you, that is. I miss it as much as I’m going to miss the glass. See, that abuse was my gift to you. You were so dim. So dense. So slow. Someone had to slap you around a little, so you’d be prepared for the hash realities of the cruel, hard world.”

This is the way the text on the back of the couch looks:

PENNY

(The amplified sound of Peter's zipper being unzipped.)

My, oh my!

PETER

And here I thought--

---penny, penny please!---

--here I thought you did it because you like it.

You can tell the difference between when Peter is speaking to Jackie, and when he’s talking to Penny—everything he says to Penny is indented, and in lower case.

JACKIE

I looked at it as my sacred duty, Peter.
How was I to know that you weren't, in reality,
stupid? How could I have known that you were
only stupid, compared to me?

PENNY

Darling you're tearing it--don't tear it--

JACKIE

(Holding up a beautiful clear and white
cased glass object. To the Audience.)
This is one of mine.

PENNY

Oh, that tickles.
(She giggles.)

JACKIE

It's cased glass--two layers of glass, the
clear, on the inside, then you pick up a gather
of white.

PENNY

(She giggles some more.)
Stop it stop it stop it stop it!

JACKIE

You work them both and then you grind or carve
off parts of the outside so the inside shows.

PENNY

Bad, bad boy.
(She slaps him. He growls.)

JACKIE

I was 18 when I made it.

PETER

---oh, jesus penny your skin is so smooth---

Peter makes little sex noises that bounce around the room. Jackie, naturally, cannot hear them.

JACKIE

I made it to impress a boy named Dickie Shaw.

PENNY

Oh--

PETER

---yes---

PENNY

Now--

PETER

---please---

Peter and I lie so that only our feet are visible, sticking out from the side of the couch. We begin making love. Peter pumps away passionately. We writhe and moan.

JACKIE

I don't know where I got the idea that something like this could be a viable part of a mating ritual, but he took one look at it, said, "You really made that?" and asked Sara Toombs to the prom.

ELIZABETH

(Opens her mouth, drinking in the rain.)
Rain, as it turns out, was the last thing I expected. But I can't really say that I mind. It's quite refreshing. A little warmer than it might be--but I can adapt. I have always prided myself on being an adaptable woman.

(She opens the neck of her dress a little, takes out a handkerchief, and gives herself a sponge bath.)

PENNY

Please--

PETER

---now---

PENNY

Yes--

PETER

---oh!---

JACKIE

It turned out that Dickie did ask me out a couple of times after we graduated.

PENNY

Don't stop--

PETER

---i can't stop---

PENNY

Don't stop--

PETER
---i can't--

JACKIE
And after him, there were a half dozen or so serious tries.

(She lines up six whimsies, all wildly different, some totally out of control, on the end table, then puts them into the vending machine too.)

PENNY
Stay there!

PETER
---i'm trying--

PENNY
Harder! Try there.

ELIZABETH
(Elizabeth is enjoying her spitbath enormously.)
There. I've adapted. I've learned to like it. To use it. To--
(The rain abruptly stops.)
Bullshit. Even the rain is full of it.
(Flowers begin to grow around Elizabeth's chair, up out of her knitting bag, and out of her.)

JACKIE
But I just couldn't settle for less. The way Peter did.

ELIZABETH
Flowers. What a nice touch.

PETER
(His head pops up from behind the couch.)
Jackie I did not settle.

JACKIE
Of yes you did.

ELIZABETH
Flowers will come in handy, for the hospital room, during recovery, or for the--well, they'll come in handy. Either way.

PENNY

Touch me there--

PETER

---okay--

PENNY

And there--

PETER

--okay--

PENNY

And there--

PETER

Jackie you're the one that settled.

JACKIE

For what?

ELIZABETH

I do hope they'll be tulips. Tulips would be nice.

PETER

For the glass.

JACKIE

Oh, right. Mr. Investment Banker. Mr. Man Who Makes Nothing But Money. Mr. Man Who Makes Nothing That Stays.

PETER

(Gasping, out of breath)

Why do you always--

PENNY

STAY THERE!!

PETER

---i'm trying!

Why do you always try to make me feel bad about my job, Jackie?

JACKIE

You mean you don't?

ELIZABETH

(The flowers are starting to bloom--large, lush, jungle-like.)

Well, they're not tulips.

PETER

I'm proud of what I do.

JACKIE

Well, I suppose that's possible. Improbable, but, in the scheme of things—I mean, Mom and Dad are proud of you, after all. Of course, knowing them, they'd be proud of you if you'd ended up a dishwasher or a garbage collector, but—they're proud of you all the same.

PETER

You—

---jesus, please, please, please---
--too.

JACKIE

No, I would not be proud of you if you were a garbage collector, Peter.

PETER

I mean they're proud of you.

JACKIE

Well, of course. They were proud of us the day we were born. No—I take that back. They were proud of us the day they were born. They were made that way.

You know what, Peter? Nothing's changed since the day we were born. Because nothing either one of us has said or done has made the slightest bit of difference to them. Unconditional love.

(She shakes her head.)

What a joke. We could have grown up to be twin ax murderers, and they'd still love us. They'd still love us, and it wouldn't say anything about us and what we are and what we've done. It would just say something about them.

Jackie looks over at her mother, and sighs. Her sigh is full of the things a sigh is full of when we envy another person's love. Jackie is a complex difficult character, the director told us. She is envious, he told us, of her mother's love.

“But it’s for her” the actress playing Jackie protested, “How can she be envious of love that’s for her—that IS hers?” Well either understand this sort of thing or you don’t. But a director can still get something approximately understanding—that is, a performance. And so Jackie gives a sigh, full of the things a sigh is full of when we envy another person’s love.

JACKIE

Mom and dad were always clear—do what you want. But if you weren’t going to take over the works, you should have at least settled for your second choice. Supreme court justice. Remember? You were going to be the supreme supreme.

PETER

(Gasping for breath)
You mean—you mean chief justice.

JACKIE

No, I mean supreme supreme. Because that’s what you said you were going to be.

PETER

You can’t make me feel guilty about this, Jackie. You always try but you can’t.

JACKIE

I know. Why is that?

PETER

You know, you should become the supreme—
---oh, sweet jesus!---
--supreme yourself, it was so important to you.

JACKIE

It wasn’t important to me, it was important to you, that’s why it was so important to me.

PETER

Well, other things are--
---yes—yes—yes---
--important to me now.

JACKIE

Like your job?

PETER

There is nothing wrong with my job!

JACKIE

And how about your life?

PETER

I love my children--

JACKIE

Well, who doesn't.

PETER

And my wife--

JACKIE

Sad, but true.

PETER

And my job--

JACKIE

You don't have a job, bucko.

PETER/PENNY

YES!

JACKIE

That's the point.

PETER/PENNY

GOD!

JACKIE

You are just a conduit.

PETER/PENNY

OH!

JACKIE

So that numbers, passing from one bank account
to another--

PETER/PENNY

OH GOD YES

JACKIE
--have something to pass through
(The flowers continue to bloom. They are
huge, and not tulip-like at all.)

ELIZABETH
No.

PENNY/PETER
YES

ELIZABETH
They're definitely not tulips.

PETER/PENNY
GOD

ELIZABETH
African violets, maybe.

PETER/PENNY
OH

ELIZABETH
I don't care for violets...too showy.

PETER/PENNY.
YES

ELIZABETH
But I have to admit--

PETER/PENNY
OH

ELIZABETH
--they make a lovely corsage.

PETER/PENNY
YES--YES--THERE!!!

We climax.

“THERE!!!!”. Peter and Penny(Me) make extremely appropriate gasps, moans, sighs and squeals which, thanks to the amplification, resound throughout the room.

From behind the revolving doors that lead into the operating theatre, there comes a huge, overpowering, thunder. It is like glass breaking, but deeper, fuller. It is terrifying.

This is the moment when all the flowers open, hideously on cue. All have fang-like surgical steel teeth, and scalpel like incisors. Elizabeth reaches out to pick one, and it bites her. She screams.

Jackie rushes to her mother’s side. “Mom--what’s wrong--what--” She is interrupted by the amplified, augmented (sampled from The Wizard Of Oz, the tornado sequence) thundering sound of the revolving door as it lumbers into motion, overwhelming them all.

A boy, dressed in equal parts surgical garb and singing telegram uniform, is spinning in the revolving doors. After several terrifying revolutions, he emerges, and sings:

Singing Telegram for the Demerys

Singing the Demery Telegram

He sashays up to the couch. He pops his gum. He blows a bubble, snaps the gum again, and speaks. “You the Demerys?”

All three of them nod, struck dumb with terror at what is going to happen next, in the next instant, will it cut them off from hope, will it burn through the moment, is this the blow, the blow that lands on them all, is--

The boy pulls in a big breath and bellows in his brightest style:

They're in. They're in!

*His system stood up beautifully
to the trauma of the drama of the opening
And I've been sent to tell the tale
to report the patient hearty and hale
and chances are his heart won't fail!*

He makes a classic, exaggerated aside gesture, and whispers loudly: “during the next 7 hours of the operation...SO!” And then he breaks into one of those show tune finale type dance kick numbers:

*That's all for now
No more to say
I hope I was clear
I know that you are
just sick with fear
but that's all for now
no more to say
sign here.....*

Jackie, Elizabeth, and Peter just look at him numbly, mouths open, uncomprehending. The telegram singer looks at them all expectantly, holding out the form for them to sign.

We are still lying on the floor, pinned underneath Peter. We give Peter a look of disgust, and shoot up our hand, making a “give it to me” gesture. We take the clipboard, and sign for the telegram.

“Honestly, Peter” we say, handing the clipboard back. “You are so damn needy sometimes.”

We throw Peter off us, and vanish behind the couch in order to transform back into just myself. Peter pulls his jacket back on. He looks guilty. I don't. I don't have to. I have to play Penny, at this moment in the narrative, it's my job. It is not doubling, you know, no, that's what the actors playing Stella and Josephine and the Doctor and the team are doing, that's doubling. It is my actual job, as Story Nurse, to play Penny. The job of one character to play another. So I stay Nurse Pitkin, while I also become Penny. You see the difference? And while the character being played might feel guilty (although, given Penny's character at this moment, guilt is the last emotion the director would ask her to play) the instant that character is sloughed off--the guilt or whatever is sloughed off too.

Still, I don't want you all to think I indulge myself often like that. I don't. Get too involved, breathe too much life into too many characters, and a story nurse loses her perspective. Her point of view. Still, at the same time, of course, a good story nurse does her best to straddle both worlds. To acquaint herself--intimately--with the hospital narrative from both sides—hospital staff, hospital client--of the story line.

The telegram boy has left, disgruntled, after waiting a moment or two for a tip.

Elizabeth is staring at the place where the flower bit her. Jackie comforts her with a hug. “See, Mom? It's going to be okay. It is. The hard

part's over. Everybody knows, it's getting in, it's cracking the rib cage, getting in, that's the high risk part. Right, Peter?"

"Right" Peter pipes in. "It's the danger zone--and it's over. We're already through it. Right, Jackie?"

"Right."

But their mother is in shock. She has not heard a single word they've said. She rocks in her chair, back and forth. "I should have expected the bite. I should have expected the venom. The sting. The pain."

Jackie can tell something is wrong. She is getting concerned.

"Mom--mom--you okay?"

"And I'm cold. So cold."

"Mom--MOM!"

"What, dear?"

"Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?" She pats Jackie on the knee, reassuringly, but then whispers to herself, desperately: "this is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends" the terror mounting insider her, till the words rip themselves out of her in a full out scream, "THE GODDAMN FUCKERS LIED TO ME ABOUT THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS! THEY LIED ABOUT THE WHIMPER! THEY LIED ABOUT THE BITE! THEY NEVER MENTIONED THE POISON!"

All of a sudden, she calms down completely. "Damn. Now I've used up the word fuck. I've used up the word fuck, and it's just the beginning. Just the first hour. When it gets to be hour number five, number six, number seven--what words am I going to have left?"

Jackie hasn't officially heard a word of her mother's hysterics, but according to the director, she can feel them, so she's getting more and more

concerned. And of course, since the audience can hear them, it doesn't trouble them at all when Jackie, who can't hear them, seems to respond as if she has. "Would you like us to get you something to eat? A cup of coffee, that might make you feel better?"

Elizabeth looks up at her sweetly. "No, no, I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

Peter is concerned too. I know this, because even though he doesn't play concern very well, the text reads like this:

PETER

(Concerned)

"You sure, mom? You look kind of funny."

So, Peter says, concerned, "You sure, mom? You look kind of funny."

"What do you mean, is there something wrong with the way I look?"

"No, no, of course there isn't" Jackie gives her mother her best reassuring look, and then turns on Peter. "What is the matter with you?"

"What? What? What'd I do now?"

Elizabeth looks off into space, caught in a spontaneous reverie. "I don't suppose that windbag Socrates gave his appearance a second thought, as the poison from that hemlock cocktail worked its way north, up through his body."

"You don't tell a woman she looks funny, Peter! Funny--tired--upset--you never tell her."

"But Jackie--"

"Cleopatra, on the other hand" Elizabeth continues, free associating classic moments of poison and death, "Cleopatra probably didn't think about anything else except the way she looked. Of course, she took the asp express--"

ten to twenty seconds from take off to arrival--which gave her little time, it's true, for philosophical or cosmetic contemplation."

"But she does look funny--"

"Obviously I have my choice of traditions. And, even while it seems deeply superficial to be concerned with how I look at a time like this--I have a responsibility to the children. So--for their sakes." And so, for their sakes, she begins straightening her hair, her dress, the flowers growing out of her body and the chair.

She smiles warmly at her children, and says as sweetly and reassuringly as she can, "I know I must look a little worried. After all, I am worried. I'm supposed to look worried."

"Mom, you look fine." Peter says, lying. Elizabeth looks unconvinced. He kisses her cheek, and tries to lie better. "You look fine even when you're worried."

I take out a small trowel, a spade, a surgical retractor, and begin to do a little gardening on Elizabeth and her flowers.

"It's just...it's just that I was thinking about the sound it makes" Elizabeth says.

"The sound what makes?" Jackie asks, confused.

"You know. The sound it makes when--you know. When--when they cr_____ " Elizabeth tries to say it, but she can't. The sound her husband's chest makes when it is opened is not a sound that makes sense.

So I come to the rescue. I say the word crack for her: Crack: to decode, decipher, or decrypt.

Elizabeth is still struggling to say it. "...when they cr_____ "

Again, I jump right in: Crack: a joke, drollery, gag, or jest.

"...open his...when they cr_____ "

Crack: to do in an instant, a jiffy, a flash--in the space of a twinkling wink of an eye.

“...when they cr_____” Elizabeth is getting increasingly distressed about this. I’m glad to be here to help: Crack: proficient at, cracker jack, masterful, expert, skilled.

“...open his...” Elizabeth falters, she can’t say it. “Jackie? I can’t-- I can’t--”

Crack: take a stab at, a shot at, a whack at, a whirl.

“What, mom, what is it--”

“When they--when they--” And now Elizabeth and I say together, “Smash and splinter and carve and split and rend and shatter and slice and--” Elizabeth is practically exploding with every word--”and SLASH and GUT and SPILL and--”

“Mom, what’s wrong--Mom, Mom, are you okay--MOM!!!”

Jackie shakes her mother, who turns to her, quiet and scared.

“I was just wondering what it sounded like, when they cr--”

Even with all my help, she still can’t say it. “When they opened him up” she finally says.

“Let’s talk about something else, okay? Get your mind off it.”

“Jackie, she wants to talk about it, let’s talk about it.” Peter says, quite sensibly, at least as far as he’s concerned.

Jackie yanks him to the side for a little chat.

“This is the absolute last thing she should be thinking about.”

“Who made you the expert all of a sudden.”

“Everything is so cold” Elizabeth has made another discovery. “Everything is so slow. And thin. And far away. How did the world get so thin? And slow? And cold.”

Josephine and Stella enter. She and Stella are played by two other actors, wearing Stella and Josephine costumes. Stella is carrying a tray with glasses of orange, tomato, and apple juice on it. Both of them are wearing cheery St. Mary's Auxiliary aprons over their Chanel's, and large orange buttons printed with the slogan "**ST. MARY'S JUICES FOR YOU!**"

"Well" Josephine says, "he got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom after that little operation to remove that growth on his nose. Broke his leg."

Pointing at his mother's obvious distress, Peter whispers viciously, "This is all your fault, you know."

"My fault! How?"

"She hates it when you start nagging me about making glass, you know she does."

"Well" says Josephine, arranging the juice glasses, "when they were setting the leg, they noticed he'd formed a clot."

"She hates it when you start in on me about the glass, Jackie, you know she does."

"Well, the medication they gave him to break up the clot started him hemorrhaging. So, they gave him something to stop the hemorrhage."

"You know she does, and still you start in. You bring it up--at a time like this--you just can't stop yourself."

"Oh--so now I don't have your permission to talk about glass, is that it Peter? I can't even MENTION the word?"

"Meanwhile, the clot broke up, lodged in his brain, he had a stroke." Josephine says, as she offers Jackie a glass of juice from the tray.

"Well here's a news bulletin, Peter--I'll talk about glass all I want to." She takes a glass of apple juice off the tray, drains it down.

“He survived the stroke, the operation to reverse it, and the post-op trauma, but--he had an adverse to the anesthesia. Puffed right up.” Josephine offers Peter a glass of juice from the tray.

Jackie holds up her empty glass. “Demery Glass. It’s easy to tell. For me, at least.” She sets it down, and gives it a good thwack. “Maybe you’ve forgotten about the distinctive, brilliant ring that all good glass has. Well, Demery Glass has it! Demery Glass has a resonant, pure sound. And don’t forget its incredible clarity.” She holds it up to the light. “Demery Glass is never chilly, or cold. And, of course there’s the unmistakable shade of famous blue-green Demery Glass--kinder than cobalt, richer than turquoise. But even if you’ve forgotten how to tell Demery Glass, Peter--you can always cheat. Just turn it over and check for the touch mark on the bottom--the capital D, with the tiny heart inside it.” She hands him the glass, and returns to the vending machines.

“Jackie, come back here. JACKIE!!! That’s right, that’s right--just get up in the middle of the conversation, just walk away--”

“Well, he developed a bad bladder infection from the medication they gave him to puff him down--” Josephine says, as she takes Peter’s juice glass from him, “had to catheterize him, the tip broke off. Bam. Back to surgery.

Elizabeth sighs. “I wish to God I knew what to wish for.”

“Pre-op thought he was a Mister E. Brown, not Mister F Brown. And that’s why they gave him the proctoscope. By mistake.”

“But as I understand it” Elizabeth reasons, “the return to me of the world I knew is the one thing I may not wish for anymore.”

“And that’s when they found the cancer?” Stella asks.

“Yep.” Josephine puts all the juice glasses down on the coffee table. “And just in the nick of time, too.”

At this point I take a much needed break from gardening. I wipe my brow and toss back a glass of apple juice. I’d prefer orange juice, but it leaves too much residue on the glass for the next story enhancing moment which goes like this: I hold the empty glass up, admiring the way it catches the light, and say: Demery Glass. It’s easy to tell. All good stories are easy to tell.

“Mom?”

“Yes dear?”

“What do you say we take a little walk, maybe go down to the cafeteria--”

“All right, dear. That might be nice--” She puts out her hand, Peter takes it, to help her stand. But she can’t.

Her legs are entwined, prisoners of the vines and flowers.

All good stories are easy to tell. But great stories--great stories tell themselves.

“Actually, Peter--I’d rather stay here. If that’s all right?”

“Sure it’s all right. We can just say here and talk, all right?”

“All right.”

“Now. About that sound.”

“No, dear, Jackie’s right. We shouldn’t talk about it.”

“But we should, Mom. Just in a different way. The way we should talk about that sound is--as sounding good.”

Elizabeth looks at him as if he’s from the planet Mars. “Good?”

“Exactly. See, mom, like anything else, you can ascribe a value to that sound. You can examine it, in context. You can look at it from the opposite point of view, the other way around. See, we’re looking at it as

something horrible, but to the doctors, that sound is a part of the system. A part of the works.”

I return to gardening with a vengeance. I know Peter’s trying his best, but every time I hear Peter’s best it’s all I can do to keep my head down and my little spade and trowel safely at work.

“I figure there’s one way it sounds, when they do it right, and another way, when they do it wrong. And since these doctors are the best--I made it my job to make sure that the best is what they are--and since the best know how to do their job--then the sound becomes, from our point of view, just a part of the job that the best know how to do.”

I sit back on my heels, wipe my brow and sigh what I hope is an imperceptibly huge sigh of relief. Peter’s lame little reassurances are over; he’s made it through his monologue once again.

Elizabeth hugs her son to her as tightly as she can, with her flower covered arms. And I always think, well, Peter’s lame little reassurances are good enough for her. They might not be good enough for me, but I’m not the one they have to be good for. Peter’s best is good enough for her.

Then she says, over his shoulder to herself, “He thinks I’m an idiot. My son thinks I’m an idiot.” She hugs him closer. “He’s sweet, and wonderful, and he thinks his mother is an idiot.” She kisses him on the top of his head. “His wife thinks I’m an idiot too. Well, maybe she’s right. I wish I knew whether I was an idiot or not, because if I am one--

“Well of course! That’s it! That’s what I’ll wish for! Since being strong and organized and resourceful, and adaptable has added up to nothing--has added up to zip, in the face of this...since my entire life is in the process of adding itself up to zip...I’ll wish to be an idiot. I’ll be an idiot. I’ll give up

fighting to be strong, to get on top of this. I'll let it get on top of me. Yes. That's what I'll do. Starting now.

“Thank you, Peter!” she says, as she gives him another peck on the cheek for good measure, “I am going to try to think about everything that is going on here as good from now on.

They stay there, holding each other. I put my hand on the coffee table, knocking off my empty juice glass.

It doesn't break.

Not when it hits the floor, not in my hand when I grab it, and not when I slam it down on the table. It doesn't break. This happens all the time. All day. And so, of course, I think, how many times in a day, does a piece of glass refuse to break?

Have you noticed this? Have you? Have you thought much about what is the reasonably constant, statistically significant unbreakability of glass?

Peter has.

But that's not so surprising, really. After all, no one ever had to tell Peter Demery about the true nature of glass. It was obvious to him, at every turn, that glass was the most durable substance in the world. He played with glass toys that had been in the family for generations, sat in glass chairs, ate on massive glass tables, walked on mosaic glass floors, slept in beds crowned with glass headboards. His world was made of glass, and it was obvious that it was strong, and sure, and true. And there was another thing that was obvious to Peter too.

He and Jackie were made from the finest, purest sand in the world-- the famous Crystal City sand, the silica of dreams. They were pure to begin with, and they were forged and fused in the truest fires, by skilled hands. They were finely made.

And they would flow, perhaps, one day, back into the ground, melting gradually, gracefully, in the pull of time, like all good glass. But breaking, in any way, shape, or form, was out of the question. Their name was Demery, but in a town built on glass, they were known to everyone as the Glass Twins. They were Hansel and Gretel, and they could go where they wanted. Let the fairy tale witches try to cook them for supper. They'd already been forged in a far hotter oven.

Peter reluctantly breaks from his mother's embrace. He looks around him, sees Jackie at the vending machines, and notices, for the first time, what she is up to.

He rushes right at her. "Jesus Christ--what the hell do you think you're doing! Goddamn it, Penny--"

"Penny?" Jackie says, with a little sneer.

"Well now. Let's see," Elizabeth says, as she absentmindedly rearranges the vines and flowers that Peter's embrace has inadvertently crushed, "what would an idiot be thinking about at a time like this?"

"You can't do this--the whimsies are all that's left."

"Wrong. They're almost left. I'm getting rid of them--so they're semi-left. At best."

St. Mary's is also a story built out of sand. Most of our nation's oldest and most spectacular hospitals are. In America--a land built on hard work--the first work was glass. Even before the Jamestown settlers had food to eat or huts to sleep in, they built a small glass works, for the production of glass beads, to use for trade with the Indians. Consequently, among the settlement's first recorded injuries and deaths are those involving accidents that occurred during the manufacture of glass.

Digging around in the weeds that are beginning to crowd the legs of Elizabeth's chair, I find a shard from the champagne glass that Peter and I broke. I hold it up for the audience to see.

It is no coincidence that the Glass Works is so convenient to the hospital. The story of hospitals and the story of glass have always gone hand in hand.

I draw the shard of glass across the palm of my hand. A line of deep red blood appears.

I walk over to a small dispensary alcove, remove the preset bandages and gauze, and begin wrapping my hand, wiping away the stage blood. To our right, I tell the audience, pointing with my good hand, to our right, I tell them, is the old Demery Heart Wing. To our left--the old Demery Lung Wing. Much of St. Mary's was a Demery This or That, originally. Oh, not because the Demerys were great philanthropists--although of course they were. No. Most of the thises and thats had Demery tacked onto them because glass work is very hard on the human this and that.

Glass work was so hard on the men who gave the glass, in fact, that for two hundred years, not a single glass house in America stayed in continuous operation for longer than five years. If the works didn't burn down, or the workers didn't strike, or the insatiable furnaces didn't reduce every available stand of timber within a hundred miles to mud and stumps--the glass works simply ran out of men. Or rather--used them up. Broke them, from the inside out. In the small sun heat of the crucible, their hearts exploded in their chests. Their lungs, coated with whisper fine silica dust, aching from the strain of pushing breath into molten metal, gave out, and gave out, and gave out.

Peter is looking at the whimsies. "Jackie, this is crazy."

“Why? It’s not my fault granddad left you and dad the works. And left all the glass to me.”

“This is not a rational activity. I know you’re upset--I’m upset, mom’s upset, but people are supposed to be upset at times like this, so it’s really a good thing you’re upset.” Jackie rolls her eyes, does Peter think she’s an idiot? “It’s good to be upset, Jackie, but this is bad. They’re mine just as much as they are yours--no matter what granddad did--”

“Wrong-o again. But--I’m prepared to make you a deal” Jackie says.

“What would an idiot think of, what would an idiot think of.” Elizabeth is still trying to figure it out. “Well, an idiot might be worrying about whether she left the tea kettle on, or turned the iron off, but I wasn’t an idiot when I left the house this morning, so I really can’t justify worrying about that.”

“I am prepared to sell you my birthright” Jackie says, gesturing at the whimsies, “I am prepared to trade you. My birthright--for yours.”

“Tomorrow morning, you are really going to hate yourself for doing this. There’s some satisfaction in that for me. Not much. But some.”

“I’m not going to hate myself for doing this, Peter.”

“I’ll hate you” Peter says, and he means it.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Elizabeth is stumped. “Can’t think about now. Can’t think about later.” But surely, if she tries a little harder, “Well, that leaves--before. Yes.. I think that’s just what an idiot would think about at a time like this--they’d think about their life before the known world announced its intention to just up and vanish--they’d think about the world when it was still whole.”

Jackie points to a piece of purple glass in the vending machine. “Look, Peter. It’s Granddad’s heart.” She gets out some change, drops it in,

slides the door open, and retrieves it. “I made myself a promise about this. I swore I wouldn’t chicken out. But--but I can’t help it. I have to keep this.” She holds it up to the light. “The last piece of glass Granddad made. Granddad’s purple heart. I mean, it’s not like it’s this piece that killed him, that’s cockeyed thinking, but the human race will romanticize things like this, like it’s the bullet and not the war that kills a man, you know. I think it’s because a bullet is easier to hold in your hand than a war.”

“Do you have any idea what a collector would give you for these?” Peter says, beginning to believe that she actually means what she says, that she actually intends to abandon them here.

“Yeah. Money. Amazing, isn’t it? How can that be right? That money--piles and piles of money is the only thing that you can get for these.” She gives Peter a handful of change. “Here’s the deal:

“Pick one. Pick any one you like. It’s yours—no matter what happens, it’s yours to keep. I’ll give it to you free, and clear. But if I can guess the one you pick—you win them all. Only one catch. I get the works, in return. It’s a trade. You get the glass, I get the works. Oh, actually, there are two catches--you have to come with me and you have to--I guess there are three catches. You have to help me too. You have to come with me, and you have to help me. That’s the deal.”

“Help you do what?”

“Is it a deal?”

“No, it’s not a deal. What do I get if you guess wrong?”

“I won’t guess wrong.”

“Of course you won’t. You’ll cheat.”

“I know you better than anyone in the world, Peter. I don’t need to cheat. I know which one you’ll pick.”

Peter is still not convinced. He's aware there may be a secret catch. "Say I agree to do this. Say I pick one. Say you guess it right. Say I go with you--what happens then?"

I come down stage, and whisper to the audience in the finest stage whisper tradition: This is a simple story.

I tell the audience this because I believe in stylistic simplicity. At the beginning of the course of any disease, the scenario is always simple.

S-I-M-P-L-E.

Lips smile,
plies,
impels slime,
limp lies.

"It's just a phone call, right? A dial tone. Seven numbers. Some man's voice, on the other end. A simple phone call. And it's all gone."

In the beginning, the scenario is always simple. It is only later that complications set in.

"You're not serious."

"I am."

A simple story...going once...

"This is a joke."

"Yeah. On us."

Going twice...

"Look, Jackie" Peter says, looking longingly at the whimsies trapped in their tiny prisons behind the vending machine glass, "you want to throw these away--it's crazy, it's hurtful, it's mean, irrational, but doing that--that other thing...you've got no right to do it, Jackie. No right at all. The glass

is yours. All the glass. Past, present, and future. The glass is yours. But the works. Are mine.”

“Funny guy, grandpa. To do that.”

“Yeah. Funny guy.”

“I don’t want to do it alone, Peter.”

“Do it--I can’t even believe we’re talking about it!”

“Yeah. I’d much rather burn it down. Return it to the fire. That’s what Granddad would say. Return it to the asshole fire. From whence it came.”

In the drop of molten glass that falls, unnoticed, into the packing material. In the escaping spark from the roaring furnace. In the exploding shard from a flawed, red hot flask. The fire is always waiting. Fire, the glass man’s greatest fear, is always there, waiting. To take back everything it gives.

“I need you. What’d Granddad always say? “Takes two to light the asshole furnace.”

“I will not help you make that phone call! I won’t do it.”

“Yes you will. You want these whimsies, don’t you? So you will.”

“What if I need it to stay, Jackie? What if I need someplace--that stays?”

“To come back to?”

“You know I can’t come back--you know Penny, you know she’d never--Jackie I think she’d leave me if I--you know I can’t come back.”

A simple story going once--twice--three times.

Jackie shrugs. “Then it’s gone already. If you’re not coming back--it’s already gone.”

A simple story--gone.

“But what about Dad--what about--”

“You heard mom last night.”

“You know, it’s really very simple. I can think about anything I want, as long as I don’t think about right now, right here” Elizabeth decides. “So I might as well go back to when I was young, and nothing bad had ever happened to me, or ever would.”

Peter looks over at his mother. He heard her last night. He knows what she wants. “Yeah.”

“She meant it.”

“She didn’t mean this.”

“It doesn’t matter what she meant. He promised her. He never sets foot in the Demery Glass works again.”

“I’ll think about the day I met him. How strong and handsome he looked. And nothing bad had ever happened to him, or ever would.”

Peter plays with the coins in his hand for a moment.

“I’ll start with him walking toward me. From far down the street. I’m visiting my cousin, Betty, and I look up, and there’s a man, walking toward me. I can’t quite see his face.”

Jackie turns her back on him, so she won’t be able to see which whimsy he picks.

He puts in eight quarters, a nickel, and two dimes into a slot that once held a tunafish sandwich, and selects a goblet--Nile blue, partially cased in ruby glass, a magnificent goblet with ropes and swirls--heavy and delicate, at the same time.

“I watch him coming toward me. I like the way he walks.”

“You got it?” she asks him.

“Yeah.”

Elizabeth is going slowly, meeting her husband for the first time in her own sweet time. “I turn to Betty and I say, I like the way he walks. And

Betty says, ‘that’s Victor Demery.’ And I say, ‘who’s that?’ And she says, ‘everybody knows who the Demerys are.’”

Jackie clears her throat, grandstanding a bit, for effect. “You’ve picked Red Demery’s Egyptian Goblet--presented to his wife, our great-great-great-great grandmother Louise upon the birth of their first son, Peter MacDowell Demery. January 17, 1810. The King’s Cup.”

“And I still can’t see his face” Elizabeth says, her smile growing bigger every second, as if she is telling someone a very special secret. “But I know who he is too.”

Jackie turns, and sees that she has guessed correctly. She knew she would. She knows her brother better than anyone in the world. She is sure she will always know which one he’ll pick. “Let’s go.”

She starts off, but Peter can’t bear to leave the whimsies there. “Jackie—wait--”

“I’m leaving them.”

“But I thought they were mine now--”

“Not until after.”

“But what if somebody takes them—we can’t just leave them here like this!”

“Why not?”

“Why not!”

“Because they’re beautiful? Because they’re history? Because they’re ours?”

“Yes.”

“No. Because they’re beautiful and historical and ours--that’s why I can leave them. It’s why I have to.” She holds out her hand to me, and I give her another whimsy, a little insane melon-colored miracle of interlacing spokes

and bubbles sealed in whisper thin glass. This whimsy was always one of her favorites-it's one of the oldest, and most fragile, of the whole bunch. She had always imagined that there was something magic in the tiny bubbles, that there was a power in those little bits of hundred year old imprisoned breath. She always imagined that this power would one day save her. "You ever destroyed anything beautiful, Peter? No? Me either. The perfect glass twins never had a destructive impulse in their lives."

Something truly lovely--to hold it in your hand--to feel the weight of it, the work in it, the care, the spirit of the maker, the special--oh, the Japanese have a word for it, Wu or Li, my notes, it seems, are not precise on this--a small word--for the being of the object--made in harmony. To hold something lovely in your hand, and feel the Wu, or the Li, completely, the way Jackie is feeling the little melon colored whimsy, and then--

Jackie smashes the delicate little melon whimsy against the side of the vending machine. It almost evaporates in a kind of splintered dust. Peter moves to stop her, too late.

"This is not the kind of thing a Demery does, of course. Believe me, Peter, I know that. I am well aware. A Demery does not ever destroy something beautiful. The Demerys prefer to let something beautiful destroy them."

Elizabeth didn't even hear the sound of the breaking glass. She is deep in her happy past. "I am going to just stand here, waiting." She smiles, serenely, as she watches Victor Demery approach her at the slow speed of a often dreamed dream. "It's a beautiful day, and I can't think of a better place to wait."

Peter stoops down, attempting to pick up the pale, insubstantial melon fragments, and put them in his pocket. “You wouldn’t have done that to the necklace.”

“Of course I wouldn’t have done that to the necklace.”

She takes a long strand of glass beads from her pocket. The beads are irregularly shaped, primitive looking. “I’d have to be crazy to do that to the most valuable piece of costume jewelry in the world, now wouldn’t I? A necklace worth--depending on fluctuations in the real estate market--one hundred billion? Or two hundred billion? What do you think?”

“I think that was one of Granddad’s crazy stories. That’s what I think.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Who knows? Who can tell? Who can say for sure? No one. That’s who.”

Glass, as it turns out, does not, in any scientifically detectable way, age. Glass made exactly the same as it was three hundred years ago, using the same mixtures and methods is, to all intents and purposes, exactly the same. You cannot date a flowing, living liquid. Not from where we stand. That’s why glass forgery is the easiest to make. And the hardest to see.

“Either Granddad made these as an enormous, labor intensive joke--in a river-clay pot, over an unreliable wood fire, rolling and forming each bead by hand” she holds them up so they twinkle in the special, the light hung and focused for this one moment “or he didn’t. And these are the beads that bought Manhattan. These are the shining bits of light and color that dazzled the Indians, and cinched the deal.” She takes the necklace out of the light, and the special fades away, imperceptibly. “How many first graders do you think there are, Peter? Who got to go to school every day with the price of the greatest city in the world, hanging around their neck.” Jackie loops the beads over her head,

doubles them once so they hang comfortably around her neck.

“You always were a sucker for Granddad’s stories.”

“You believed it too!”

“I was seven years old!”

“Packed your suitcase, same as me.”

I whip out a handful of newspaper clippings, cross downstage, and hold them up, for all the audience to see: GLASS TWINS MISSING FOR SECOND DAY. SEARCH CONTINUES FOR LOCAL SEVEN YEAR OLDS.

“You put in Tony the Bear, your blue blanket, and your Sunday suit--the little navy suit with the shorts, remember?”

I display another banner headline: SEARCH FOR GLASS TWINS EXPANDS. STATE TROOPERS COMB WOODS IN FIFTY MILE RADIUS.

“I only put in that suit because you made me.”

“Yeah. You really hated that suit. But I wanted us to look nice.”

DIVERS CALLED IN TO ASSIST SEARCH EFFORTS.

“I wanted us to make a good appearance, when we met the people who owned Manhattan.”

GLASS TWINS FOUND ON GREYHOUND BUS IN PENNSYLVANIA, ON WAY TO BUY NEW YORK CITY WITH A GLASS NECKLACE.

“I still can’t believe we did that.”

“I DON’T KNOW WHETHER TO LAUGH OR CRY” THEIR OVER-JOYED MOTHER TOLD REPORTERS.

“I still can’t believe we actually thought we could just walk up to them, hand them the necklace--”

WHEN ASKED BY THE SHERIFF WHO FOUND THEM
WHAT SHE PLANNED TO DO WITH NEW YORK CITY AFTER SHE
BOUGHT IT, JACKIE DEMERY REPLIED:

“I don’t remember what we were going to do with it, once we got
it.”

BUT MY GRANDDAD TOLD ME IT WAS MINE, IF I
WANTED IT

I show the final headline as Jackie says, at the same time:

MY GRANDDAD TOLD ME ANYTHING I WANTED IN THE WORLD

“--was going to be mine.”

Jackie goes over to Elizabeth. “Mom?”

Elizabeth is calm, serene. “Yes, dear?”

“You all right? You need anything?”

“Not a thing.”

“You’re sure? Because if you’re all right, Peter and I, we thought
we’d take a little walk. Stretch our legs.”

“That sounds fine.”

Jackie kisses her. “We won’t be long.”

“All of it, dear. Is fine.”

As Jackie passes by the coffee table, she notices the scrabble board.
“Glass. G L A S S. Eight points. Triple word score. Twenty four.” She
scoops up the letters. “You made glass, Peter. What do you know.” She puts
the scrabble squares in her pocket. “For the last time. A Demery made glass.”

They move toward the swinging doors that lead to the area of
“great heat and light.”

As they go through the doors, the hospital waiting room walls
begin to slide down, disappearing into slots in the stage floor.

And as the walls vanish, we see the operating theatre, which has been waiting patiently behind them. We see Dr. Glass and the team, dressed as part surgeons, part heavily romanticized boatmen, toiling over the body on the table which in several ways is a barge on a canal.

Dr. Glass leads off, with his team responding. They are bailing, and singing in lusty full-throated harmony.

I FEEL JUST LIKE
THAT GUY LA SALLE

Rest of team: FIVE CC'S FROM THE VENTRAL CANAL
I'M EXPLORING DEEP
INTO EVERY VALVE

Rest of team: FIVE CC'S FROM THE VENTRAL CANAL
WE'VE CLEANED SOME CLOGGED VEINS
IN OUR DAY
FILLED WITH PLAQUE
BLOCKED BY DECAY
AND EVERY INCH OF THE WAY WE KNOW
FROM THE A-OR-TA
TO THE CHAMBERS BE-LOWOH...
SUCTION--EVERYBODY NOW!

And they all chime in, in glorious harmony, Dr. Glass and his team, pulling out all the stops, making the rafters sing:

SUCTION--SUCK OUT
ALL THAT BLOOD AND BILE
CAUSE THE BODY IS A VENICE
SINKING FAST, YOU KNOW THAT NOW
IF YOU'VE EVER NAVIGATED ON

THE VENTRAL CANAL

Lights fade on the operating theatre, going from bright to warm to hazy to black.

THE TERRIFYING INTERVAL

I am moving before my eyes completely believe in the blackness. My eyes still see the shadow of the stage lights, as if they were still burning somewhere inside my retinas. But I know the black has fallen, all over the stage, and that I have only a short four count to reach the wings. If I don't reach the wings, the house lights will come up and discover me, scurrying across the stage like a giant cockroach, chased under the counter edge by the bathroom light.

I make it. The empty stage balloons behind me. The thin cluttered corridor stretches ahead of me. The terrifying interval--the time that stretches between the time when words make sense and colors are right and the sounds are coded and the lights are on time--has begun.

PART TWO

The lights fade, slowly. When the count is complete, I move on-stage. I am at my mark. My spotlight arrives to meet me. Then the lights expand to include the rest of the stage.

The stage is different, very different than it was before the interval. Elizabeth is still perched on her chair, entwined in her flowers, but her chair has shrunk--it's maybe the size of a kindergarten chair, in fact the entire waiting room has been reduced to perhaps a quarter of its former size. The vending machine, the couch and chairs, the walls, everything is precisely the same as it was before, except that it has been miniaturized. Elizabeth and her flowers overwhelm the area, towering over everything in the waiting room the way Alice in Alice in Wonderland did after the Drink Me or the Don't Drink Me, I can never remember which.

This radical reduction in size has left most of the stage available for the full construction of a vast, cavernous operating theatre.

We are in the heart of St. Mary's here. The oldest part of the hospital. There is a skylight, high on one beveled wall, and the walls themselves are an archeological nightmare/paradise of handmade brick and

plaster repair upon repair, modern paneling, and wide, wide pre civil war wood planks. Naturally, we have the very newest in surgical technology, but all the same we don't throw out the old wholesale. We have equipment that looks, and is, antique, and you must admit it looks oddly comforting, next to all the streamlined gleaming stainless steel machines.

I'm sure the audience has noticed all this. And I'm sure they've noticed that there are some things in this room that do not have anything to do with an operating room at all.

But that doesn't mean they won't. That doesn't mean that five minutes from now some mysterious and seemingly inanimate object will not be called upon to do a stunning little this or that. You see, most of the bits and pieces of the operating theatre mutate. They...transform, as we go along. Does it disturb me, when I turn around and a surgical lamp has changed into a glass blower's torch behind my back? It used to. Not that anything integral to the story should catch a Story Nurse off guard, but there are so many pieces to this story, and to its set, and so many of them were loaded in during tech week, when I was busy with my own story elements--my props, my lighting, entrances and exits, hitting my mark—well I just couldn't watch everything. So they still manage to surprise me now and then.

In fact, I often try to amuse myself by catching the moment the stage hands make a switch, or when some little bit of stage wizardry accomplishes a transformation. Is it breaking character to notice these things? Not at all. I am a Story Nurse, and if transformation isn't at the heart of story, I don't know what is.

Look upstage, far upstage, and you will see that there are several piles of broken glass, called cullet. Large piles. Every piece of glass that does not measure up to the famous Demery standard is, of course,

rejected, and ends up on one of these piles, sorted according to color. A brown one, a red one, a blue one, a clear one, a green one. When the lights hit them, they will look like mounds of jewels. And there is a large wooden chair, the master blower's chair, that at the moment looks like--no, I'm getting ahead of myself, the master blower's chair doesn't exactly look like anything, at the moment, because at the moment it's not exactly visible. The operating theatre is cloudy with a fine particle mist, as if it were filled with flux and dust, the way a glass works used to look, in the old days after a long, hot run, before the OSHA requirements, and the modern machines made the American workplace so very, very safe. The OSHA requirements which attempt to draw a line in the workplace story: Safety here, danger there. These regulations and rules are important, because every story starts, and ends, in a body.

Allow me to introduce the body of our story.

Victor Demery emerges from the operating theatre area, in a sort of fog, literal and figurative. He is naked, except for a loud Hawaiian shirt. He is still attached to the operating table by tubes and wires, poking out from under his shirt, taped to his arms, a vast network of life support and monitors.

He slowly heads over to Elizabeth, who is perched on her miniaturized chair, encased in flowers, knitting. Victor is still "on the table," floating in the sub-dream world of anesthesia. His eyes are closed most of the time, although he opens them, occasionally, in a dreamy, drugged way. He shows every emotion completely on his face the instant he feels it--it washes over him, uncensored. His presence is childlike, in a peaceful, calm, trusting way. I stride across the stage, to assist him.

Elizabeth looks up, sees him coming toward her. “There you are, dear. I was just thinking about you.” She pats the seat next to her, indicating he should sit.

I adjust his tangle of tubes and wires, trying to make Victor comfortable. I accept his dual existence—on the table, and at the same time, sitting next to his wife. That’s my job. I am a Story Nurse. I acknowledge the genetic need for story. For order. For a coherent narrative. No matter what the cost.

“So” Elizabeth says, after he’s settled in, “how’s your day been like so far?”

“Mostly...mostly dreams...dreams I couldn’t...quite hold on to.” Victor has to search for the words, it’s difficult to find them. “Then it was...water. Water. Deep blue green, wald-glass water. A stacked sea of water, sheets and sheets of it--seamless parallel waves of it...count backwards from 100, 99, 98, 97...waves come in 7’s. CRASSSSSSSSSSSSssssshhhhhhhh so soft. Glass water, water glass, lots of water.” He smiles. “Wakkaki.”

“Oh, dear, I am sorry about that shirt.” Elizabeth prides herself on her taste, her restraint, but she’s under pressure, after all, it’s understandable, her strong impulse to shield herself, even in her imagination, from seeing the open cavity, the ragged hole sunk into the broad chest of her husband, well who can blame her, certainly not me. “Would you have preferred I think about you wearing something less flashy? I just can’t bear to think about what’s happening to you in there” she indicates the operating theatre with a little flick of her head “under it.”

I reach behind the toy-sized vending machine and whip out the pre-set jacket and tie. I hand it to Victoria. She offers it to Victor.

Victor doesn't even open his eyes to look at the jacket, just shakes his head. "No. No. Shirt's fine." I dispose of the clothing, and begin taking Victor's vital signs.

Sometimes I am asked what it's like to be a Story Nurse--how exactly I manage to administer to a story. Well, the human body is nothing a story. And as long as the body can remember the chemical details that make up the basic narrative--it's a happy one.

Stella and Josephine enter, played by two different actors again. Stella hits her mark, near centerstage, and says "So I said, 'Doctor, Doctor, I have this pain' I said. 'Do you have normal bowel movements?' the doctor said. 'Yes' I said. He nodded his head. So then I decided to ask him, I decided--what the hell. I asked."

"You didn't." Josephine says, aghast.

"I did. I came right out and asked him. I said, 'What's normal, Doctor?' That's what I said."

"So. What are you dreaming about now?" Elizabeth asks Victor, now that she's knitting peacefully, calmed down.

"Chips. Our boxer."

"That's nice. I've been thinking about our honeymoon" Elizabeth says, she is working on a royal blue sweater, royal blue is the only color yarn Elizabeth has that she's sure will not lend itself to snakes.

"Niagara Falls. I was thinking about Nagasaki, earlier. Nagasaki. Niagara. Well, at least I'm getting around."

"Well" Stella says, with a triumphant ring to her voice. "The doctor said: 'Abnormal bowel movements are ridged. Or spotted. Or very thin. Or very hard. Or very loose. Or very long. Or green. Or red. Or golden. Unless, of course, they're always ridged. Or spotted. Or thin or

hard or loose or long or green or red or gold. It turns out, Josephine, that doctors have no idea what a normal bowel movement is. They pretend they do. But bowel movements are like snowflakes. Each one is different. No two are alike. In all the universe, there never has been, and there never will be, two that are the same.” Josephine and Stella take the last few steps that will take them across the stage, and are gone.

I’m almost finished making sure that all of Victor’s monitors are calibrated properly, and that all his vital signs are easy for the audience to see. And everyone one of them is. His body, is a miracle of function and resilience. The human body is the most precise mystery story in the world, and Victor’s body, at this moment, in hour four of his triple bypass lungoscopy, is proof that the story of the body is a good one. Good enough to make us, and keep us, who we are.

But deep in our secret heart a good, solid story is not enough. Deep in our secret heart we long for our story to be a great one--one that is strong enough to stand up to the great enemy--which is time.

Time, like glass, is liquid. Stories are the place where we attempt to step in the same river again, and again, but time stands in our way. Time, after all, heals all wounds. Time also wounds all heels. And the most famous heel of all time belongs to time’s first archetypal hero: Achilles. Dipped in a magic liquid, a sacred batch to make him invulnerable and unbreakable, only his heel, where the goddess held him, was left unbathed. Ninety-five percent protected. Shielded. Five percent unshielded. Unchanged.

Only his heel kept him from perfection and made him human. Made him a hero. You cannot be the hero of any story if you are perfect.

Stories of perfection belong to the Gods. Every hero requires a fatal flaw. If he or she would forge themselves into greatness.

Jackie and Peter enter, through the great doors leading into the area of “great heat and light” which, since the set switch, have been placed on an upstage wall.

The fog clears in the center of the operating theatre--I believe tiny, silent fans built into the table are responsible for this localized change in the weather--and the lights intensify. Dr. Glass and the operating team are revealed there, huddled around an object which is the operating table and its patient, and at the same time is also Archimedes, the great center furnace of the Demery Glass Works.

The men are all dressed partly as surgeons, and partly as glass workers circa the 1960's. Every man is holding, or has ready access, to a large glass pitkin of beer. The operating table/furnace is the center of the activity.

Dr. Glass turns away from his patient for a moment, and sees Jackie and Peter entering through an upstage door. He bellows out the instant he sees the twins--“Look who's here boys--Peter my bucko--Jackie my pearl!”

“Mackie!” she squeals, and rushes toward him. He sweeps her up in his arms.

“You kids just in time to see the sandman” Dr. Glass/Mackie says, swinging Jackie around so her heels make a circle of turbulence in the haze. “We're relighting old Archimedes today.” He turns, and sees that his team is not moving fast enough, not fast enough at all to suit him, the large clock on the factory wall says time is running out, running out, “Joe. Stu? You think a furnace can load and light itself? Get at it.” The men, who

have clustered around Peter, return to the table, and load the fuel into the furnace.

“Gonna give us a hand here?” Mackie says to Jackie, setting her down. “We’re going to be working your favorite color--rubino” he holds up a broken piece of blood red glass from the small, precious pile of red cullet that sits there like a heap of rubies. Modern glassmakers have come up with other, cheaper alchemies, but until they did, gold was the thing the fire demanded, to spin glass into ruby red. And rubino--rubino is a special formula, it gives a glass that is partly red, but produces at the same time, in the same piece of glass, gradations of color that are also blue or orange or yellow--the intensity of the fire, and the cleverness of the glassmaker conspire, to make the magic color--one part gold--one part pixie dust. “Well, Jackie?” Mackie calls out, asking her again, ignoring Peter, not out of malice, but in the name of the glass, which knows her, has always known her, and not him.

“He...he...he’s all the wrong color!” Victor suddenly calls out, from the deep, deep water.

“Who is, dear?”

“Chips. He’s...orange.”

Elizabeth puts down her knitting, preparing to get up. “Would you like me to speak to the anesthesiologist? Peter assured me the man knew his business, but maybe a little different mixture, a lighter hand on the gas--”

“No. S’okay.”

“Well. If you’re sure.” She shrugs, and goes back to knitting.

Peter is wandering around, looking at the operating theatre/glass works. “It’s funny, you know? You’d think I’d think about dad--or granddad at least--but whenever I come here--”

“You never come here.”

“--I always think of Mackie first.” He sits down in the master’s chair, which is now clearly visible. That master’s chair dates back to the beginning of the Demery glass works. It is a large, solid, wood chair with long, wide, sloping arms, the chair where the master blower has always sat, sweating in the heat, spilling and drinking more than his share of beer, rolling the blowpipe up and down the arms, making the glass, year after year.

“I can’t go on without you, you know” Elizabeth says to Victor, offhandedly, as if it’s a remark of no real importance.

“Lizabeth--”

“No, I know what you’re going to say, I’ve been sitting out here saying it for you. But I just can’t. I absolutely can’t. I know it’s dime store novel pabulum to come out and say it, you probably expect better of me, but I’ve made up my mind. I know everybody expects me to go on, but it’s a lot harder not going on. People think it isn’t, but it is. It’s much harder letting it break you. In fact, it seems to be the hardest thing in the world to actually do.”

Stu starts to light the furnace with a long match. “Stu--what the hell you doing!” Mackie yells.

Stu pulls back, terrified. “I--I--I--I--”

“He’s lighting the furnace! Boys, he’s lighting old Archimedes without waiting for me to throw one to the sandman!”

Clint rolls his eyes and sighs. “Oh, shit--”

Joe wipes his sweating forehead, and takes a long swig of his beer. “Jesus, Stu, don’t you know what that means?”

Stu, the newest member of the team, shakes his head, no.

Clint pretends to shed a mock turtle tear. “It means Mackie’s gonna tell that damn story again.”

Mackie doesn’t hear them. He is upstage, climbing on top of the tallest pile of cullet, looking for an offering for the sandman.

Cullet has always been essential for making fine glass. Every batch of glass contains its share of it. It is mixed in with the sand and melted along with the rest of the metal, and it makes the glass stronger, truer--as if, having been glass once before, it remembers, and shows the rest of the sand the way.

Mackie finds an unbroken brown glass liquor bottle, inspects it, holding it up to the light. “Look’it her, boys. Not a flaw. Not a bubble. Just one little scratch. I think he’ll take it. Okay. Now Stu--get ready with that dangerous match of yours--”

Mackie climbs down from the pile, and positions himself in front of the furnace/operating table. He cries out “One for the sandman!” in a voice filled with rasp and smoke. He throws the bottle. It makes its own little disturbances in the remaining flux and smoke.

And when it hits the side of the furnace, it, of course, breaks. Stu lights the furnace. The stage manager cues the sound of a large fire roaring to life. Peter is already on his hands and knees, picking up the fragments, putting them in his pocket.

“See him? Did you see him Jackie?” Mackie squeezes her hand, excited. “I kinda thought I maybe saw him. Yeah. It seemed to me,

Jackie, that the sandman was definitely thinking 'bout catching that bottle. I think so. I think, maybe, next time. Maybe next time, he will."

Peter has finished picking up the pieces of the shattered bottle, and heads upstage. Jackie moves away from Mackie to follow him.

"Where are you going, Peter?"

"One for the sandman" he says, and climbs up on the same pile of cullet where Mackie found the bottle.

"Forget it. Everything's been picked over--the neighbor kids have been in here, climbing around since we shut down" but she joins him in picking through the odds and ends, the rejected and the imperfect, the broken and the misshapen, all the pieces, in the daily story of glass at the Demery Glassworks, that didn't come to their expected, first quality happy ending.

The story formula for glass is simple. It has three ingredients. Sand, potash, and heat. Three ingredients. Good glass includes cullet, which is remelted sand, potash, and heat. That makes four elements. The story formula for life, written by our DNA, also uses four distinct things--four markers arbitrarily designated as the letters A, C, T, and G. In the English language, these four letters make only three words:

act

cat

tag

However, in the story of life, these letters, in almost infinite permutations, spell out the story that is life.

Peter holds up a small white plate. "How about this one? Seems okay--"

Ninety-five percent of this text, by the way, is garbage.

“Milk glass?” Jackie sneers, and shakes her head. “Milk glass is an insult. No light. No soul.”

She holds up a small melon colored vase. “Look, Peter, I found--oh, shit. Has a crack.” She throws it back on the pile. “Just a small one. But I have never believed in anything but the best for the sandman, whether I believed in him or not.”

“That’s typical Jackie thinking.” Peter scurries around, inspecting and discarding cups and bottles and knickknacks as he goes. “You should have let me keep that plate, Jackie, I’m not finding anything.”

“Either there’s always one for the sandman, or there isn’t, bucko.”

“Okay, okay.”

Ninety-five percent of our genetic story is garbage. Incoherent rubbish. Idiotic stuttering and repetitious mush. Much like our own body of literature, actually. Ninety-five percent of the story of life is junk--it rambles on and on, in meaningless descriptive flight, like an incoherent Dickens, there is a great deal of trivial conversation. Our central mystery is handed down haphazardly, more or less in the tradition of oral history.

Jackie holds up a piece of a plate that is a flesh-colored pink. “Look, Peter--Granddad’s favorite color” she says, and, imitating her grandfather’s voice, says the name of this Demery trademarked color: “Yep. We call it Rosy Fingered Dawn, when we’re selling it to the buying public--”

Peter chimes in, and they say, in unison, in their grandfather’s voice, “But it’s known as ASSHOLE, to those in the know.”

“Granddad always came up with the best names for his colors” she says, tossing the lovely, shrimp pink fragment back onto the pile.

Peter holds up a large piece of a brown-tinted glass. It’s the same color as the bottle that Mackie threw. “Here’s Mackie’s favorite color” Peter says.

Again, they sing out, in unison: “Anything rye whiskey comes in.”

“Peter! PEEEEEE-TERRRRR!!” Mackie bellows, “we’re dry! Fetch the men their beers!”

Peter hurries over. I hand him a pitcher of beer and a tray of flasks in the classic pitkin shape. I help him pour pitkins of beer for the men, and he passes them around, serving Mackie first.

Mackie drinks his beer, and holds out his pitkin for a refill. “Gather round, boys, I don’t want nobody complaining they can’t hear.”

“Oh, Jesus Mackie, not again” Clint whines, as he batches the metal. Stu elbows him, to get him to shut up. Mackie takes his place, sitting in the ancient, sweat and beer stained pear-wood master’s chair.

“Well, the first shot had barely been fired at Ft. Sumter, when the works was flooded with orders.”

“Mackie, we’re all heard it maybe twenty times, already--” Joe also receives a jab in the ribs from Stu.

“Shut up and listen, I might tell it different this time. Now. They say an army marches on its stomach, but there’s more than hardtack and beans in there. There’s whiskey! And when an army needs whiskey, it needs bottles to put it in. Shifts was doubled, then tripled, and still they couldn’t put the bottles out fast enough. Furnaces were going, full blast,

twenty four hours a day. And they say the heat was so fierce, for a mile in ever' direction, the grass withered up and the cows all went dry."

Remember the story formula, I remind the audience, while I bring Peter a fresh, full pitkin of beer. Five percent truth.

"An' in the works proper, why the men couldn't see more'n a foot in front of their faces. There was a dust storm raging there, day and night, a dust storm that was one part sand, one part flux, and one hundred percent heat."

Ninety-five percent window dressing. Filler. Filigree.

"An' it weren't young Jamie Demery's fault--his father dead, his older brother off to war, it weren't his fault, really, he didn't know, you can't push the glass but so far, and then it pushes back. And sure enough, a young gob gatherer burned his lungs so bad, he died 'fore the week was out. But the men blamed him anyways. They called strike. An' for the first time, ever. all the Demery fires went out."

Jackie throws a broken piece of glass back into the pile, disgusted. "This is nuts. There isn't a single perfect piece left." She climbs down off the pile of broken glass. "Hopeless. I told you it was. You want to go on hunting, go on, but I'm through."

She walks downstage, turning her back on the cullet just at the moment when it starts to transform, when the stage manager calls "138, go" into her headset, and the carefully placed lights inside the pile begin to glow and flicker and shine, on cue.

Peter, balanced precariously on top of the mound, seems to drink in the light and warmth with his bare hands. The audience is, of course, momentarily distracted by the glowing cullet, some of them aren't

even sure that they are not imagining these fairy lights inside the glass, but all of them are focused, and none of them is bothering to watch me.

And so it is easy for me to produce a perfect cobalt blue pitkin, more or less magically. I do not appear to move an inch. One moment I am holding nothing. And the next--well, it's at moments like this that a trained Story Nurse is invaluable to the narrative flow.

I place it on the pile of cullet, next to Peter. He doesn't see me, but he sees the pitkin. A perfect, cobalt blue pitkin, just sitting there.

He picks it up, and tells the rest of the story, the way Mackie always told it. "But when the men finally returned to work, and started up the fire under the great center furnace, Archimedes, someone cried out, and pointed, and they all saw the ghost of the gob gatherer, floating there. A frightened batcher picked up a poison blue pitkin, sitting there on the floor, and flung it at the shimmering, fire-gold ghost, as hard as he could."

Jackie turns to face Peter, sees the flask. "You found one!"

"And the ghost caught it. He held it, turned it over in his hands, and saw that it was good. Looked at the Demery touch mark on the bottom, and nodded his head, yes. And in one giant burst of light and thunder, the fire in Archimedes roared to life."

"That was perfect."

Peter hands the pitkin to Jackie. "Yes. It is."

"No, I mean the story. You told it just the way Mackie did when we were little."

Perfect? I ask the audience, Can something that is ninety-five percent flimflam, and only five percent truth be perfect?

I turn to where Victor and Elizabeth sit, side by side, and answer my own question: Sometimes.

A glorious smile explodes over Victor's face, and he inhales a huge breath of air. "You're wearing a blue hat. A blue hat...with feathers" he says to his wife.

"My Lilli Ann hat had feathers! My Lilli Ann--the one I was wearing the day I met you!" Elizabeth smiles and gives a little nod, thrilled that this is what he's remembering, as he lies under the Wakiki water, and the knives.

"Sky blue--with deep peach blow feathers" he whispers.

Elizabeth thrusts her knitting into the bag, determined to get up this time. "I really think I'd better have a little talk with that anesthesiologist. That hat was a perfect shade of forest green."

"No. I like it blue."

"But it won't match my dress, my dress is a gray green crepe with--"

"You're not wearing that dress."

"I'm not?" she says, a little concerned, there is nothing else that she ever owned that looked really good with that hat.

"No."

"Well, then I must be wearing my Mountain Home suit--the summer weight wool with the pink piping--"

"You're not wearing the Mountain Home either, Lizbeth."

"I'm not?" and the strain is beginning to show in her voice.

What can he be remembering?

"No."

"Well, I can't think what else I'd be wearing with that hat, I--"

"You're not wearing anything at all."

Elizabeth makes a little gasp. She says to Victor in a tense, low whisper “I’m meeting you for the first time stark buck naked?”

“Except for the hat.”

“Oh.” Bravely, trying to make the best of things, trying to prove her adaptability, she asks him, as conversationally as she’s able, “What are you wearing, dear?”

“I’m wearing...I’m wearing...” he struggles up from some soft deep place to bring her the answer. “I’m wearing...you.”

His face shines with the joy of it. He takes her hand, and begins to sway and rock in a sweet, gentle rhythm. Elizabeth is horrified. “The first time we met?” she becomes more and more agitated, she pulls her hand away from him, “No, Victor--stop. It just isn’t right.”

“I knew the minute I met you--” he gropes for her hand.

“What will people think, Victor--

“What people, Lizbeth? There’s just you. And me. In the whole world, there’s only you and me now. I knew the instant I saw you I was going to marry you, so who’s to think? There’s only you and me.”

“I knew it too, Victor, but--”

“Please?” He begs her.

“Not on our first date, Victor, I just can’t.” She shyly plays with a flower growing in her lap. “But if you want to think about our wedding night...”

She timidly reaches out, and touches his hand. She closes her eyes, and begins to sway with him, slowly.

Then Victor abruptly stops. “But the hat--”

Elizabeth opens her eyes. “What?”

“Just this once--could you...?” I very magically produce, and very respectfully offer the sky blue hat with the peach blow feather to him. He, in turns, offers it to his wife.

She takes it from him, and puts it on. “Just this once.” She closes her eyes again, smiling. They sway together, softly.

The problem with good stories is that the more perfect they are, the harder it is to tell if they’re true. This is why we can never be sure if we are truly the hero of our own story.

And we need to be sure! We need to believe that at the center of our own story, we are telling a true hero’s tale. We need to know the bedrock story of our lives, and believe its simple, bedrock truth.

But look what happens next. Peter says “He’s not going to like us doing this, Jackie.”

Jackie completely misunderstands him. “Peter, I already told you, Dad is--”

“Not Dad. The sandman. He’s not going to like this--at all.”

What chance does truth have? Look at the other story devices we come up against along the way. **Suspicion:**

Jackie turns the pitkin over in her hands, inspecting it. “Look-- I admit, it’s kind of spooky, a cobalt pitkin, turning up like this, but--

Red herring:

“Look’s like one of granddad’s, doesn’t it?” Peter says, and the audience thinks, ooh, maybe, maybe they have found a piece of glass their grandfather blew, maybe something wonderful will come of it.

Fact:

“Peter. Please!” Jackie says, disgusted, as always, whenever he says something that proves he never really noticed a goddamned thing. If

he had been paying attention, he would never say something that. “You know he never did this sort of blown mold work! It’s not one of Granddad’s.” She gives him back the flask.

Belief:

“Yeah. I know.” Peter says, upping the stakes. “It’s older than that.”

Smart marketing:

“Wait a minute, Peter--we ran a batch of cobalt last month, used a lot of the old mold-blown styles, they sell the best, and cobalt’s always been popular, we do a lot of cobalt--”

“You ever batch any cobalt that looked like that, Jackie?”

He tosses it to her, and she does look at it more closely, and she is curious, yes, the glass has a special look. “And look at the lip, Jackie--there’s a mark, a signature, under the lip.” Jackie holds it up, tries to make it out.

Historical detail, for better effect:

Which I supply, for the benefit of the audience, while Jackie checks under the lip. The Greeks called glass poured stone, and their slaves labored for weeks at a time, carving vessels out of solid blocks of it. Glass blowing began sometime in the first century, and the technique of mold-blowing was developed almost simultaneously. It turned glass making into the work of a moment, and the glass itself into a miracle of lightness, strength, surface and design.

All early mold-blown glass was signed--sometimes by the glass blower, but always by the die-sinker, or mold maker. The earliest surviving pieces from Rome all carry the legend “Ennion made me.” Other pieces with his mark carry this added inscription: “Let the buyer remember me.”

Jackie has completed her inspection, and is disappointed, a little, Peter had her going, but, “It’s not a signature, Peter--it’s a scratch or crack we didn’t get polished out or patched in the mold, that’s all it is.” He says nothing. “It is not a sign from the sandman, Peter.”

“He doesn’t want us to burn it down, Jackie.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“Jackie, we have to--”

“There’s no we, Peter. There’s Dad and me, but there’s no you and me. You’re here today but tomorrow you’ll be gone. We turn it over to the bank, they sell it to developers, they turn it into a condo--a trendy restaurant, a mini mall. Is that what you want, Peter?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want, Jackie--”

“Isn’t burning it braver than that?”

“It’s more selfish than that.”

“What if it wants to burn. What if the works want to.”

“Oh, Christ, Jackie--”

“Glass works burn, right? That’s what they do. Eventually. Inevitably. Wood, and fire, and molten metal--they burn.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“You’re telling me the sandman’s telling us he doesn’t want us to burn it down, I think you’ve got the market cornered on ridiculous, don’t you? You’re telling me this is a piece of Civil War glass--the same piece of glass he caught in the story, you’re telling me that’s what this is, right? A sign? Well--I wouldn’t mind a sign myself. But I like my signs big. Bold. Outlined in red.” She throws the pitkin back to Peter, who cradles it close to his body like a baby. “So I’ll make you another deal, bucko. If this is the

piece of glass sandman caught before it should be easy for him to catch it again. So, if the sandman catches it again--we don't burn it down."

Victor and Elizabeth are still making love for the first time, in her memories, and in his dreams. "This is what it means to be safe" he whispers to his wife.

"This is what it means to be safe" she whispers back to him.

"This is what it means to be somewhere with someone no one else can go."

"You. You."

"No place but you."

"No place but you. I want ten children."

"No place but--" Victor opens his eyes. "Ten children, Lizbeth?"

"Ten. Boy girl, boy girl, boy girl, girl girl, boy girl. Six girls. Four boys. Girls are easier than boys. Ten. The boys will look like you. The girls will look like me."

"I don't think it works like that, Lizbeth. The boys will look like your mother, and the girls will...the girls ..."

"I don't want my girls to look like your father, Victor."

I am standing in front of the furnace, between it and Jackie and Peter, and I am thinking, it would be so easy.

So easy. Just to reach out my hand, and catch the glass. Every night, I tell myself that tonight will be the night that I catch it. That I will defy all the rules, all the text, all those carefully scripted desires, and become, for an instant, the sandman.

"I'm frightened of your father" Elizabeth says, her father-in-law has been dead for years, but in this dream she is sharing, and at this

point in the story of her life she is knitting around herself, old man Demery is still very much alive.

And I understand both her impulse, and her confusion. I want to catch the poison blue (poison because the powder that made glass the color of sapphire often sickened and killed the men who made it) because it would make such a good story. It would make this a perfect, old fashioned story. I sometimes yearn for the old story--it's an occupational hazard, in my line of work.

"Victor" Elizabeth says, and her hand goes to her stomach.
"It's time."

But there is a hole in the bucket of story. And all the goodness has run out. The handle has broken. The hook where we hang our story has rusted away. I yearn for the good, old fashioned story--but the well is dry.

"Fire! Fire! I feel like I'm on fire!" Elizabeth cries.

"You're not on fire, Lizbeth, you're just having a baby" he says.

"Oh--it feels like a herd of elephants running around in there.
Oh--promise you won't leave me, Victor. PROMISE ME!!

"I promise, sweetheart."

In the operating room, the team struggles to stabilize the batch. I do what I can. There are complications--with this kind of operation, there always are. Things used to go more smoothly. When an old story is told, for instance, its various components accelerate and reach the velocity of the great wheel, and the story grows, and conquers time. That is the kind of story I'm nostalgic for. The story of God, for instance--that was a good story, before complications set in. Beauty, too, had its moment in the sun.

Truth, goodness, righteousness, strength, evil, knowledge, power--they have all had their turn.

“Victor don’t leave me--just--just--just get these...DARN elephants out of me! VICTOR PROMISE ME YOU WON’T LEAVE ME!!

“I already did, sweetheart.”

“WELL PROMISE ME AGAIN!”

There is a flurry of activity in the operating room and then Mackie and the boys sigh a big sigh of relief. The crisis is past.

Victor, deep in anesthetized dreams, marvels at the birth of his children. “Victor” Elizabeth cries, “look at the babies. Look at how perfect they are!”

The twins stand in front of the furnace. “Ready?” Jackie asks him.

“Ready.”

After all, the old stories had something in them that kept them from truly ending. Even if all the people in them died the story still went on. Something--the courage, or truth of those old stories endured.

“ONE FOR THE SANDMAN!” Peter says, and throws the flask.

I raise my hands, as if I am going to catch it.

But at the last instant I step aside. The cobalt pitkin is smashed to bits against the furnace wall.

Every responsible Story Nurse will tell you. The real story is that the story ends. For the hero. For the extras. For the story tellers. For the people to whom the story is told.

Peter sighs. Then walks up to the furnace, stoops down, and begins putting broken pieces of the pitkin in his pocket.

He think he's escaped.

He thinks he's escaped the story of Demery Glass. And in a way, in a little way, he has. Peter Demery will be the first Demery in seven generations not to die of Demery Glass Heart or Demery Glass Lung, or a combination of both. He has his wife Penny to thank for that. His wife Penny, and his head for numbers, numbers which never left his hands free, and open, to receive the glass.

"Lizabeth! One girl! One boy! One of each from the same batch! Just like you said" Victor says, still seeing the first sight of his children, he can never tire of seeing that again and again. "You can see the day we made them" he croons, "You can see--There! Our wedding night! There--in Jacqueline's shining eyes and melon hair--There! In Peter's little milk glass hands."

Numbers fit the hands exactly. Five is, after all, the largest number we can grasp with one hand. Our money comes to us in multiples of five, our fractions come to us in tenths--it turns out that numbers, like most man made things, retain the imprint of the hands that made them.

"Nine months to the day we were married. But who was counting?"

"Just the entire population of Crystal City, that's all" Elizabeth says.

I hold up one hand, and using my fingers to illustrate, I demonstrate that nine is a two handed number--four plus five, or two plus seven. Nine. Nine.

Jackie is watching Peter put the glass in his pocket. "You know, it's funny--I guess I was so used to you doing that that I never really

noticed you doing it. But now that I am noticing it, I have to say it. That is the stupidest thing I ever saw in my life.”

Numbers are objects. Weapons. Tools. And, when they are used in a story, they become words. When does four come after five? Again, I use my fingers to illustrate, but this time, they make no sense. When does four come after five, four comes after five, four comes after...

When does four come after five? I ask the audience again. Then I give them the answer: In the dictionary.

“I mean, it’s only a matter of time, right Peter?”

Why is ten afraid of seven? I pause here, to give the audience an instant to think before giving them the answer.

Seven ate nine.

“Just a matter of time before you forget, and stick your hand in there, and--”

“I never forget” Peter says calmly, making sure he’s picked up every last shard. After all, he thinks he’s escaped. He thinks he’s escaped being broken by the story of Demery glass. Escaped the hated glass that slipped though his hands, that were full of numbers, escaped the scorching heat that blistered his face, escaped the aching thirst, the constant, aching thirst, that no amount of beer could ever slack.

Elizabeth has started to cry. Victor turns his dreams away from the sweet, sweet memory of his babies. “Sweetheart--you’re crying--don’t cry.”

“I want to cry. I want to cry and cry and cry and cry and cry and cry some more.”

“Look at the babies, honey. Look at how perfect they are.”

Elizabeth blows her nose, and dries her eyes. “I can still remember your father, marching into St. Mary’s like he owned it. I don’t even think he heard the nurses screaming at him, he just barreled into the nursery, scooped up Jackie and Peter, held them up in the air, one in each big hand.”

Victor almost laughs, and holds his hands up in the air, as if they are full of something. “Two Demerys at one blow” he said. “That’s economy. That’s efficiency.”

Peter is young, and smart, and his children are sound, and healthy. He thinks he has slipped out of the grasp of this story, into a new one.

“I wish you’d stop doing that, Peter.”

“I’ll put broken glass in my goddamn pocket if I goddamn want to.”

Peter thinks he has slipped into a better story. One with a happy ending. One with an ending unlike the one his family has lived its life telling.

“‘A Demery in each hand.’ That’s what he said, Lizbeth. ‘A pair of drinking glasses’ he called them. ‘A matched set.’”

Peter has only escaped into the same story, with different details, but there’s no telling him that now. He doesn’t know yet that whether you make your life out of glass or numbers--I hold out my hands, spreading out my ten fingers--the story is the same.

Victor lowers his hands, the power of the memory of that moment fading. “I’m sorry, Lizbeth. I know you wanted eight more --ten children, boy, girl, boy, girl, girl--”

“There wasn’t enough money for ten, I could see that. You tried to hide what was happening at the works from me, but I could tell. I’m not an idiot, Victor. To want something I can’t have.”

“I tried, Lizbeth. I tried so hard--”

“Shhhh. Not another word. We’ve got the children to think about now.”

“You’re making me nervous” Jackie says. “Peter, stop it. Come on--I mean it, Peter--” she grabs his arm to get him to stop, he screams at her, wrenching his arm out of her grasp.

“LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE PENNY!”

I step from behind the furnace, where I have been transformed into Penny again, wearing the gorgeous white evening gown that Peter always remembers Penny wearing whenever he thinks about his wife, marveling at how much he loves her and how much he hates her. We stare at Jackie. She stares at us.

Penny(Me) says “I HATE it when you call her Penny!”

Jackie says “I HATE it when you call me Penny!”

Well, we don’t really say it—all more or less bark it, in unison.

“SHIT!” Peter says. “Not again...”

“What’s wrong--did you cut yourself?” the three of us snarl.

“No” he hisses back.

“You sure?” we taunt.

“I DID NOT CUT MYSELF!”

“It’s inevitable, Peter” Jackie says. “People who play with fire get burned.”

“And people who play with glass” Penny(Me) says “get--”

“NO!” Peter cries, and he turns away from all of us.

“Smaller. Smaller. Specialize” Victor says, in a cracked, low whisper. “That’s the ticket now, you want to stay alive in business. Or bigger....bigger--dominate--monopolize--but bigger was out of the question, with Peter gone. If we had just been big enough to get bigger--or small enough to get smaller...we were always the wrong size.”

“No. The exact right size” Elizabeth says, remembering the size of their life together in a completely different way. “For booths, in restaurants, for driving, in the car, for sitting at the kitchen table. For everything. A perfect size for a family. The two of us, the two of them. The perfect size.”

“I hate you when you’re like this” Peter says to us.

“No. You don’t hate me. You hate the glass” the three of us tell him.

“What are you talking about?” he says, incredulously.

“You hate it” Jackie snaps back, this is the secret she thinks she’s known about him for the longest time, the secret she has hated to know. “You always have.”

“I tried so hard” Victor says, sadly, defeated, lost. “I tried so hard--and we almost made it, Lizbeth. Almost. And then all the strength fell out of my body with a loud crash.”

“You’re crazy!” Peter yells at us. “You don’t know anything about me!”

“I know you better than anyone in the world!” Jackie yells back.

“Do you?”

“I know you did everything you could to get away from here” his sister says, accusing him of a lifetime of treachery. “I know you married the last woman on earth who had any intention letting you come back.”

“Back to what?” Penny(me) snorts. “A broken down factory, a broken down family hanging down to a broken down dream.”

“That’s not why I left—“

“Who cares why you left” Penny(Me) says.

“Jackie cares. Don’t you, Jackie. In fact, Jackie’s dying to know why I left and never looked back. Come on, Jackie. You know me so well. Tell me why I left.”

“I don’t have to play this game” Jackie says, all of a sudden, frightened.

“Oh, right, we have to play your games but we don’t have to play mine. Right. That’s the way it always was. All right. I’ll tell you. You would never have guessed right anyway.” He pauses, relishing this moment even more than he always thought he would. “I saw the sandman.”

“What?” Penny (Me) is confused. “The sandman?...a nursery rhyme character?...oh, god...” Penny(Me) says, and we shake our head.

“You did not!” Jackie says, he’s lying, she knows he is. “You would have told me.”

Peter shrugs. “Okay, don’t believe me.”

“If you had seen him, you would have told me.”

“Why?”

“Because--we told each other everything” Jackie insists.

“So?”

Penny(Me) reaches out to touch him. “Peter, I think you should go lie down--”

Jackie pulls him toward her. “When did you see him, Peter, tell me--”

Penny(Me) pulls him back. “It’s the stress, isn’t it, your father’s operation. Come on. I know just what you need to take your mind off it, I know just what you need...” We take his other hand, and we look at him the way he knows, and we try to drag him back behind the couch again.

“Peter--” Jackie says, demanding his allegiance, pulling him back.

“Peter--” Penny(Me) insists, pulling him back to us again.

Penny(Me) turns on Jackie, screaming “I HATE YOUR SISTER. SHE WANTS YOU TO BE SOMETHING YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE” at the exact same instant that Jackie turns toward us and screams “I HATE YOUR WIFE. SHE WANTS YOU TO BE SOMETHING YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE.”

“No. It’s me” Peter says, shaking his head. “I’m the one who wants to be something I can’t be.”

“I’m blowing a bubble” Victor informs Elizabeth, in a serene, calm voice. “A glass bubble. So big. So light. I’m taking in the biggest breath. I’m blowing a bubble. So big. When it gets big enough, Elizabeth, we’ll get in. The two of us together. And sail away.”

“Sail away” Elizabeth says, nodding, pleased that he is taking care of things, as always. “From all this.”

“Yes, Lizbeth. From all this.”

“It’s so perfect, Lizbeth. So light. So fine. A bubble of breath and fire--it’s cooling now, but can you see--can you see the fire in it, the halo fading from red to orange to gold to silver, before it disappears?”

“Yes, Victor. I can see.”

“Not long now, sweetheart. When the fire is out. When the color is gone.”

Peter pulls away from all of us. He needs room to tell his story. The story he has wanted to tell his whole life, but didn't know how to. Till now.

“I was here alone one night, and it was late. It was so late it was almost morning. But I wasn't going to leave until I made something perfect. I was working a vase, a little two handled vase. I'd made about three dozen, and there was nothing really wrong with them. Somebody who wasn't named Demery, would have been satisfied hours ago, and gone on home. But I had decided--it had to be perfect. It had to be as good a little two handled vase as Granddad could make. Or Dad could make. Or you could. The glass loved you, Jackie, it did anything you wanted, but me? I didn't have the hands. Every piece of glass I touched was flawed. But I kept at it, and at it that night, and when I saw the best I could do--when I saw how ugly a thing it was--I got so angry I threw it against Archimedes, as hard as I could.”

“Almost ready now” Victor tells Elizabeth, as the bubble forms and cools in front of him. “Almost.”

“But it didn't break” Peter continues. “The sandman was standing there. He caught it. He held it up, looked at it. And he said--”

Peter and Victor say, together, “I know you're afraid.”

“Not as long as you're here” Elizabeth tells her husband.

“I know the glass slips through your fingers” Peter says, in the voice that means the sandman to him. “I know you don't know what to do.”

“But trust me a little while longer, Lizbeth” Victor reassures her. “It's strong enough. To carry us both. To carry us through.”

“And then the sandman let it fall--he let it fall, and it shattered on the floor. The pieces were like stars in the furnace light--each one shinning from the inside--stars scattered on the ground. They were so beautiful, I could have stood there and looked at them forever. But then he picked them up. And he held them tight, in his hand. I could see them begin to glow--to go through all the colors backwards--from clear to gold to molten orange.”

“It’s ready” Victor tells his wife, helping her into the dream of the bubble. “Don’t be afraid.”

“And then he opened his hand.”

“Oh, Victor. It’s so lovely, like this. Sailing away. Sailing somewhere no one else can go.”

“And it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen” Peter closes his eyes, and sees it. “Part flower, part liquid, part ice. And all of it was made out of moving, burning water. Gold and red and silver in the furnace light.”

“So high!” Elizabeth is filled with happiness, no troubles now, they have left them behind, they can’t touch them now. As if by magic, the miniaturized couch Victor and Elizabeth are sitting on sails up into the air, and gently flies around. “So high now. Up over the tree tops. So fast, so far. The lakes are plates of glass, they’re mirrors spilled on the landscape--look, the sun’s setting--Victor, the sunset turns the rivers and the streams into stained glass windows, flowing along the ground.”

“And the sandman said--he said--when you can do this, Peter. When you are not afraid to do this. Then you will know. Who you are supposed to be.” Peter puts his hand in his pocket. And then he screams.

“SHIT.”

Jackie grabs his hand, too late. “Don’t--”

“Penny!” Peter cries.

“Stop calling me Penny!” Jackie cries, terrified at what Peter has done.

“I am not calling you Penny, I am calling my wife. I am calling her name. Penny!”

“I’m here” Penny(Me) says. Peter holds out his bleeding fist, as if he is offering us something wonderful.

“Look. I did it” he whispers, proudly.

“I see” we say, as we touch his fist, gently. “I’ve been waiting seven years for you to do that, Peter” Penny(Me) says. “Seven years for you to forget and put your hand in your pocket. Your pocket, which was always full of broken glass.” We step toward Peter, and touch his hand, gently. “I thought I was waiting for you to forget. It turns out, I was waiting for you to remember--but it’s all the same. I’m glad I don’t have to wait any longer.”

Penny(Me) strips off the sleeves of our white evening gown-- on our way back to the real, not the hated/loved/hated/loved Penny. The bodice falls away, then we undo a patch of Velcro, and the entire skirt floats down to the floor and blossoms around our feet. “It’s hard” we say, as Penny, “being used for something you don’t understand.” Underneath the gown, we are wearing a simple print top, a simple gored skirt. “Give my best to your mother. Tell your father I’m thinking about him, and we’ll all drive down soon. Call as soon as there’s news. The girls miss you already.” We give him a kiss from a wife who misses him. “I miss you too.”

Penny and I walk away from him. My dresser is waiting for me in another alcove, behind the miniaturized vending machines, waiting to transform me back into Nurse Pitkin.

“Oh, Victor. It’s so lovely.” Elizabeth, still sailing along, links her arm under Victor’s, content, secure. “So--WAIT! VICTOR--GO BACK--we’ve forgotten the children--there’s no room for them--”

“They’re already gone, sweetheart--”

“No--they’re here with us--here--there are four of us--I buy everything in fours, four lamb chops, four ears of corn, four Danish for Sunday breakfast--surely there’s room for four here--not for a big family with eight or ten children, maybe--but for a family of four, Victor--”

“Gone. Peter, already. And we have to let Jackie go too.”

“Go back for them, Victor. Now.”

“Too late, sweetheart.”

“No. NO! We made a good life--we made it good and strong! What’s wrong with our lives? Is there something wrong with the life we made, did we do something wrong?”

“Lizbeth--remember what you said last night--”

“I only wanted you to be safe--I didn’t want you to sell it, Victor, I only--”

“It’s gone, Elizabeth. You made me promise. And I promised. I told Jackie to call the Mr. Connally at the bank.”

“No--oh--Jackie--” she looks around wildly, “No, we can’t sell it, we’ve got to keep it for Jackie, and Peter, and their children--Peter still might come back you know, he might--we can’t sell it!” she calls out “JACKIE! Jackie--come back, Jackie!”

“Shhhs, Lizbeth. You never trusted the glass. You should be happy now it’s gone.”

I emerge from behind the vending machines, where each little compartment, encasing a magnificent whimsy, is filled with color and light. The compartments look like a stained glass window on a day when the sun is shining from every direction at once. They look that way, because there are lighting instruments striking the whimsies from above, from below, from stage right, stage left, and from upstage. They have every opportunity in the world to shine.

I have been returned to myself, and then some. My uniform is whiter, stiffer, brighter, details that were once suggested are now insisted on. My cap is larger, more impressive, but no single thing is so very different that there isn’t a moment of doubt, in the mind of any given audience member: Has she changed her hat? Did it look like that before? Are those the same shoes? Why didn’t I notice that before?

I walk down stage, giving them a closer look. I say, There is never a moment when we believe nothing.

Gasping with pain, Peter pulls his hand out of his pocket, clenched in a tight fist, full of glass. Blood begins to seep between the fingers, running down his hand, his wrist. “Didn’t you--didn’t you always wonder, Jackie? Wonder what it would feel like?”

“I know what it feels like. It hurts.”

“You grow up in a world of broken glass--and every piece of it an invitation. To slide it across your skin. To sink it into you, so that it just disappears. You never wanted to do that, Jackie? Not even once?”

“You’ll be lucky if you don’t lose your hand! Even if you haven’t severed the tendons--the infection--the dust and flux--don’t you remember what happens when you get cut here?”

“Nobody ever gets cut here.”

There is never a moment when we do not need to believe that we believe the right something.

“What are you talking about, nobody gets cut here! This is a glass works. You work at a glass works you get burned and blistered and singed and believe me, you get--”

“No. Nobody ever gets cut here.”

“Maybe we’ll move up to St. Louis” Victor says, trying to cheer Elizabeth up. “Be closer to Peter’s kids that way, watch ‘em growing up.”

“It can’t be over” Elizabeth says, crying again--“it just started--”

“It’s not over, sweetheart. It’s just different now.”

“Look at my hands, Peter--” she holds up her hands, they are crisscrossed with silvery scars. “Look at my hands, Peter. Look! They look like Granddad’s hands, and Dad’s hands and Mackie’s hands. All crisscrossed with scars. ‘Nobody every gets cut here...’ Did you ever notice a single thing that happened here?”

“I noticed.”

The struggle to believe in the right something--in the something that will save us--is always a compelling story--regardless of the telling details.

“I noticed the glass” Peter says, and tells her his secret. The secret he knew, and tried to love, and didn’t know how. “I noticed every time it didn’t break.”

Victor struggles to speak. “Something ...something’s happening, Lizbeth.”

“Victor--”

Lights grow and focus on the operating table. Archimedes has mutated slowly, so that it is now more operating table than furnace, and Mackie, Clint, Stu, and Joe have mutated into Dr. Harold Glass, surgeon, and his team. They are all in motion, they know their job. “Here we go boys” the doctor calls, out “smooth and regular, everybody stay in sequence, tag and seal.”

“Something’s--I don’t--I can’t--we almost made it, Lizbeth. I almost...” he breathes with difficulty, he begins to slip away “...we finally got small enough, Lizbeth, and then the pain--the pain--bigger than the whole world--”

“VICTOR!!!!!!” He slumps from his chair, onto his knees, in pain. “VICTOR! Somebody help me--Jackie--JACKIE!! There’s something wrong with your father, JACKIE! Try to breathe--deep breaths--Jackie’s going for help--”

“The pain” Victor struggles to speak, and manages to say, “the pain...so big...bigger than the whole world...” He slowly walks away from Elizabeth, drawn toward the operating table, Joe and Stu take up the slack in the tubes and wires, I help Victor up on to the table, and arrange the tangle of life support and monitors as he lies down.

Dr. Glass is all no nonsense. “Get him stabilized, watch the core temperature, coooool it down, slow, slow, slower, watch it now.”

“Damn it” Elizabeth curses. “Damn it. Just like an idiot, I’ve used up the past, I’ve used it up, and this nightmare is still not over, he’s still in there, and there’s nothing left to want. Nothing left that I can get. Now. What would an idiot wish for” she says, despairing, but then an enormous, a huge idea hits her: “I KNOW WHAT AN IDIOT WOULD WISH FOR IN A HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM AT A MOMENT LIKE THIS! A CIGARETTE!”

I pluck a cigarette from thin air, hand it to Elizabeth, and light it for her. She smokes for a moment. Then she stabs it out in the ashtray I provide. “No--this isn’t the cigarette I want. This isn’t the cigarette I need. I need a very specific cigarette. I need...I need...”

“More light” Dr. Glass commands, “good, over there. Here we go.”

“I want...I want...I want a Herbert Taryton. No filter, smooth cut--a rich blend of fine tobaccos in the white and blue pack. And I don’t want just any Herbert Taryton--I WANT THE LAST HERBERT TARYTON I EVER SMOKED ON JUNE 18TH, 1965--MY 30TH BIRTHDAY!”

I produce that pack of Herbert Tarytons--with one, last cigarette in it. Elizabeth takes it, lighting it herself. She smokes with a great passion.

And then a Candy Striper enters, tap dancing and singing. She is a dazzling cute candy striper, in white and pink uniform, fresh as the morning dew. She is carrying a fire extinguisher.

YOU CAN’T SMOKE (TAP-TAP TAP)

YOU CAN’T SMOKE (TAP-TAP TAP)

IT’S NO JOKE (TAP-TAP TAP)

IT'S A NO SMOKING ZOOOOOOOOONNNNNNNNNEEE!

She breaks into a tapping flourish.

“You’ve--ruined it...RUINED IT!” Elizabeth screams.

“YOU’VE RUINED MY LAST CIGARETTE!”

The Candy Striper is oblivious, doing tap-turns with each phrase, treating the fire extinguisher like a vaudeville cane:

NOW DON’T MOAN AND DON’T GROAN

ALL THE STUDIES HAVE SHOWN

THAT YOU SHOULDN’T POSTPONE IT

AND WE CAN’T CONDONE IT

THOUGH HALF OF OUR BUSINESS

IS KNOWN TO COME FROM IT

“How DARE you tell me I can’t smoke--how DARE you tell me I can’t do the only goddamn fucking thing I want to do that I can!”

“YOU

CAN’T

SMOKE

YOU CAN’T SMOKE

YOU CAN’T SMOKE

YOU CAN’T SMOKE” she continues singing, whirling, tapping, a dervish in pastels. Elizabeth sits, imprisoned in her vines, seething with rage.

Sometimes, its just the little things that help. The little assistance here, the helping hand there. I remember, just last week we had a double O double T--Out Of Town Terminal--whose family needed some help making the shipping arrangements for the body. Well, I sat right down

at my station and made a few simple calls. It really wasn't much. But it meant so much to that family.

I hand Elizabeth a gun.

The Candy Striper is still whirling and singing.

“YOU CAN'T SMOKE YOU CAN'T SMOKE YOU CAN'T SMOKE YOU CAN'T--” Elizabeth shoots her. She falls dead on the floor, dropping the fire extinguisher. I drag the girl, feet first, off stage.

You have no idea how many candy stripers we lose this way.

“Oh, dear” Elizabeth says, looking in amazement at the gun in her hand. “I didn't mean to do that--well, I mean, I did mean to do it, I just didn't mean for it to really--I mean...killing me or making me strong, killing me or making me strong, killing me or making me strong...well, it's made me strong enough to kill.” She takes a last drag on her cigarette. “Either I don't know how to be an idiot--or I'm doing a little too well.” She looks around for an ashtray, can't find one, naturally, I am still dragging the Candy Striper off, I can't be expected to be everywhere, can I?

Stella enters, alone, without Josephine. She sees Elizabeth perched on her tiny chair, and she sits down next to her. “Hello.”

Elizabeth immediately stabs out her cigarette in a denser area of foliage, and picks up her knitting. “Hello.”

“Here with your husband?” Stella asks, indicating Victor, his tubes, their ultimate destination on the table. Elizabeth says, “yes”, of course, it's obvious, isn't it? Stella nods, she knows, “yes”, after all: “I'm here with mine.”

“Three hours he's in there” Stella says, with a sigh. “Yours?”

“Five.”

Stella nods knowingly. “Five.” She nods, again and again. She points at the royal blue sweater Elizabeth is knitting. “For yourself?”

“No.” She holds it up off her lap so Stella can see it. “For my daughter.” Both women stare at it for a moment, shocked. It is enormous.

“Hmm” Stella says, at a loss for anything better to say. “Big girl.”

Elizabeth suddenly understands that it is far, far too big, and that this is a problem. “Oh.” She crumples it up in her lap, but keeps on knitting. “Well. I guess I sort of got carried away.”

“Take it from me--I know” Stella says, patting Elizabeth’s knee reassuringly. “Scarves. Afghans. Shawls. Stay away from sweaters when you’re here. Scarves. Afghans. Shawls. They’re safe. An extra foot or two, who can tell? Who’s to know? Take it from me, I know.”

Stella smiles a little brave smile, picks at a bit of imaginary lint on her suit, and looks out into the house, as if she is looking for someone who--no--everyone--she looks out as if everyone who cares about her, or has ever cared about her, or will care about her, is sitting in the audience tonight.

“When my husband sleeps his chest fills up with birds” she tells these people who she’s sure all care. “Sparrows and hummingbirds and sea gulls that are far way. Tiny birds, specks on the horizon. Bits of movement, fragments of sound that come in pieces through the wet sea air.

“His lungs are turning into ocean. Soft and saline. His chest grows bigger and bigger--a barrel chest, the doctors call it. Emphysema chest. The lung cavity, bellowing out. The doctors say it is a symptom. But my husband knows. And I know. His chest is growing bigger and bigger, to save the birds. To give them air, and room to fly and live. But it

can't grow fast enough. The tiny birds are multiplying. There are thousands of them, and there's no room. The tiny birds are drowning.

"We hear them as the slow tide inside my husband rises, thousands of them beating their wings and crying from far away. Drowning in the soft ocean. As the water reclaims the land. Inside my husband.

"At night I lie in bed beside him. And I listen to them sing." Stella gets up, and slowly makes her way off stage.

"It's time" Jackie tells Peter. "He made me promise I'd do it now. He made me promise him that when he came out from under the anesthesia, it'd be gone."

"What are you talking about--you told him you were going to do this--"

"He asked me to--"

"Liar!" Peter screeches, cradling his bleeding hand.

"He said, 'Jackie, let it go'. He said--"

And Victor's voice joins Jackie's, it is a far off whisper, coming from hidden speakers from all over the glassworks, as they say, together "Let it slip through your fingers. Let it fall."

"NO!" Peter insists, no, this is not the way he wants it, not now, not when inside his hand, finally, the glass--"He worked his whole life to keep this place in one piece. Why would he say that, he wouldn't say it--"

"Why did you go away!" Jackie cries, this is the question, the one question she has wanted to ask him, that she has needed to ask him, "why didn't you stay!"

"I couldn't!"

"Mom and Dad needed you! I needed you. I tried so hard but no matter how hard I tried it didn't matter--it doesn't matter anymore how

good you make the glass, it's just numbers--and you understand numbers, you do, and if you had just stayed--"

"That's not fair. So what if I had stayed. What difference would it have made, Jackie? He'd still be in there right now, so what difference--"

"NO! HE WOULDN'T!"

"Jackie--"

"He wouldn't! He wouldn't be sick, this wouldn't have happened to him, he'd be fine, everything would be like it used to be, if you had just stayed to take over the works!"

Elizabeth is exhausted from thrashing and ripping at the vines. "SOMEBODY HELP ME GET FREE OF THIS! SOMEBODY PLEASE HELP ME GET FREE!"

"Everything would be okay. If you had just stayed."

"You stayed and it didn't help, did it?"

"Don't say that, Peter--"

HELP ME WAKE UP FROM THIS NIGHTMARE, HELP ME GET UP AND RUN OUT THE DOOR! SOMEBODY HELP ME GET FREE!"

"You stayed, you threw your life away to keep it going, so I have to too?"

"I did not throw my life away!"

"I'm sorry, Jackie, I only meant--"

"I DID NOT THROW MY--"

"I SAID I was SORRY."

"You're not sorry."

“ I only meant--if you couldn't save it, then what chance did I have?”

“Everything would have been fine, Peter, if you had just--”

“No.”

“--stayed.”

“You know that's not true, Jackie” Peter whispers, a small knot of fear inside him whispering to him that it might be true, it might be true, if he had stayed, if he had tried harder, if he had been truer, but he can't think that, he can't, not now, not ever. It can't be true.

“I don't know if it is or it isn't, Peter.” Jackie is almost crying now. “I want it to be true. I just want there were some way to imagine that everything could have happened differently. That things would just go on, and nothing bad would ever happen. That's what I wish, and I don't care how unfair a wish it would take to make it come true.”

“I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO THIS!!” Elizabeth wails, her life was not supposed to happen like this. “I DON'T KNOW HOW AND I DON'T WANT TO KNOW HOW! I DON'T!”

“When we were little it wasn't like this, Peter. I know it wasn't. Good things--wonderful things--great things. You knew what they were. You knew who you were, and what you were supposed to do.”

I have returned from dragging off the Candy Striper. I hand Jackie a pack of long matches. She strikes one, then touches the match to the masters chair. It catches fire immediately, a tower of flame.

There is always a belief in the truth. In the real, and the true, and our ability to change and alter both. There is always a belief that there is a way, or a word, that will work magic.

Dr. Glass and the team have evolved past traditional glassman or medical limits, and now have ancient shammanistic, witch doctor, voodoo elements worked into their costumes. And there is something of the earth, and magic, and weaving, of primitive making, in the procedures they now perform.

Working furiously, Dr. Glass calls out, “Is it gold yet?”

I WANT THOSE BABIES! THOSE BABIES WE DIDN’T HAVE, VICTOR, I WANT THEM NOW! I WANT THEM ALL AROUND ME, BABIES EVERYWHERE, SCREAMING FOR THINGS I CAN GIVE THEM.

“IS IT GOLD YET?” Dr. Glass calls out again.

“No” Clint says, feverishly working over the body.

“I WANT THOSE BABIES, CRYING FOR THINGS I CAN GIVE! THINGS THAT I KNOW! I KNOW HOW TO HOLD A BABY IN MY ARMS, VICTOR!”

There is always the belief that there is a word that can be cried out, let loose in the world--that there is a power--unleashed in syllables--corseted in consonants--knee-deep in vowels, running over, brimming over, in a rush of sounds. A word that rides on the human voice, to work its magic in the world.

Dr. Glass is screaming, “IS IT--”

“No!” Joe cries, “we’re losing him--”

I say the word. I say it like a steely pronouncement, slow, precise: Rumpelstiltskin.

“Wait!” Joe says, there is a chance, a chance--

Rumpelstiltskin! I say it again. The magic name. Invoked! Proclaimed! The name, at this point in all true narratives, that in its various

other spellings and meanings is taken a hundred thousand times a day in vain. Not profanely. Not proudly. Just--uselessly. Unavailingly. The way great magic names are always used. By small mortal things. In mortal pain.

The chance eludes Joe. He is working desperately, but--"we're losing him--he's slipping away, I can't--"

"He's coding! He's coding!"

I call out for a third time, loud and clear, and big:

RUMPLESTILTSKIN!

Say it with all your might. There are no magic words at this moment in the story. All the magic in words has run out.

Lights black everywhere except on the operating theatre.

THE FINAL DRIVE

There are only two sources of light on stage—the burning Master’s Chair, and the surgical lights that are focused on the operating table. And on the table there is only the body of the patient. And around him, there is team of surgeons, disguised only as surgeons, working desperately to save him, illuminated in the blinding, everyday surgical lights. The burning Master’s Chair casts a little light on the rest of the stage, most of it in dancing shadows.

Dr. Glass commands in an intense fury. “GET ON GET ON GET ON--NOW!” He reaches his hands deep into the body of the patient.

Elizabeth is knitting furiously, vines intertwining with the yarn, she is desperate, blind, despairing.

“Nothing” Clint reports, checking the machines. “I’M GETTING NOTHING!!!”

“Joe” Dr. Glass moves to let Joe inside. “Massage--match me--one, two, one, two.” Joe places his hands on the heart beside Dr. Glass, they count in unison, “One, two, one, two” Joe takes over the massage.

“Everybody slow down” Dr. Glass gathers his powers for the final push. “Together now.”

Elizabeth whispers desperately “I can’t...I just can’t...figure out a way....”

“Let’s get back on, boys--”

“Up the dopamine--” Joe says.

“Color is poor--” Clint reports.

“I wanted--I tried--” Jackie falls to her knees, she feels so alone now, “I thought I could--save it all, save everything, mom and dad, the works. I thought if I worked the glass hard enough, and good enough I’d be the hero, Peter. I always thought I was going to be the one who got to be the hero here.”

“Jackie, it’s not your fault.”

“Isn’t that what Granddad always told me?”

“It’s not anybody’s fault.”

“Pressure is down” Clint reports.

“Granddad would always hold my hands” Jackie holds her hands up in front of her, palms up “and say ‘With hands like these, Jackie, the world’s a safe place. The glass’ll give you anything you want. All the things that are good to want come out of good strong hands.’”

Elizabeth’s knitting spills from her lap. “Help me God, please somebody help me. I don’t know how to do this. I’ve tried every way I know and I can’t figure it out. I don’t know how to sit out here, I don’t know how to do this. I can’t do this. Please.”

“Pressure is down” the anesthesiologist calls out.

“Please” Elizabeth whispers, again.

There is nothing more I can do. That is the problem with life. It is nothing like stories. That is the problem with stories. They are nothing like life.

“And now they’re going to be so empty” Jackie says, lowering her hands, squeezing the empty air. “Now that the glass is gone...what am I going to do now, Peter? With empty hands.”

Good stories tie things up, make them smooth and continuous. Stories are not things that break. In stories, moments of greatness arrive, and--

“Open your hand, Peter” Jackie says.

“No.”

“Pressure is down” the anesthesiologist reports, again.

“Give ‘em his cells, all of ‘em, now” Dr. Glass says.

“Oxygen saturation still down.”

“Speed up the machine, rev it up REV IT UP--”

“More K--give him more K--”

“Not looking good. Color is poor.”

In stories the chance for greatness always arrives--and stays.

“Heads up--coming off the machine again--”

Even in tragedy, where the moment of greatness is lost, where the point of the story IS that greatness slips through our hands, the story itself grabs up greatness in its greedy little fingers.

“Pressure is down.”

“Get him back on--” Dr. Glass growls.

“Color is poor--”

The story scoops up greatness in a handful of words, and rewrites the pain of living into something good and grand. Like the sound that cracked Victor Demery open, we like our pain transformed. This transformation is accomplished by the story’s perfection. The more perfect the story, the more complete and satisfying this transformation.

That is a great story’s tragedy. It is perfect.

“Those are some serious cuts you’ve got there, Peter.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“Yeah. It hurts.”

“Then open your--”

“No. Not yet.”

“Peter I’m afraid.”

“Nonono, I’m the one whose afraid, remember? I’ve been afraid of it my whole life. But I’m not now. See--” he holds out his bleeding hand—“this means I’m not afraid. It’s the proof. Until I open my hand, and everything starts up again--I don’t have to be afraid.”

There is nothing true or human in perfection.

“Let’s try it again--coming off--now--” Dr. Glass knows, this is their last chance.

“I can feel it, Jackie” Peter says, looking at his hand. And perhaps--yes--there is a light--a glow--that seems to be radiating from his clenched and bleeding fist.

A tiny, hidden battery operated bulb, activated by a tiny trigger, has filled his fist with light.

“Holding his own” the assisting surgeon says.

“Come on, come on--” Dr. Glass rallies them around the great, last push.

The purpose of great stories is to tell a lie about life. The lie that pain is good. That dreams come true. That heroes act heroically.

“Holding. Holding.”

“Looking good” the anesthesiologist says.

“Only roses” Peter repeats, one more time, to himself.

Story. S-T-O-R-Y.

sty sot sort

toy toys

troy try

rot rots--

rosy

“Holding his own” the anesthesiologist says, in wonder, and in something that is very, very calmly like delight.

There is nothing true or human in perfection--except the struggle toward it.

“Get his pulse up, Joe” Dr. Glass tells him.

“Looking good” Joe reports.

“Looks like he’s out of the woods” Dr. Glass says, standing up straight, looking around him, feeling, all of a sudden, after seven hours of weightlessness, the claim the earth puts on his arms, and his heavy head.

We are cursed with stories that lie, and do not break. We are cursed with lives that break. But are true.

“Let’s close him and get out of here” the doctor says, and lights begin to fade on the operating theatre.

I hate stories. But I love the story tellers.

“Jackie--look--” Peter says, and he starts to open his hand.

I grab the fire extinguisher that the Candy Striper dropped, and I extinguish the burning chair.

And then the lights everywhere are gone. We will not ever see the secret that might be shining in his hand.

The stage remains in total darkness for a beat. The curtain spills down from the flies, making that soft, luscious puddle of sound as it lands on the floor. Then lights come up on the apron, as they did during the prologue.

Three three-sided glass barriers, identical to the one constructed in the prologue, are flown in, from high in the wings. They descend silently, relentlessly. They are turned, so that this time, the open side is facing the audience, not away from them. Jackie enters.

For the first time, she address the audience.

“And this really did happen. Of all these true things, that did not happen, but are still true, this one really did. It is as true as I can make it, but remember--glass forgery is the easiest forgery to make, and the hardest to see. Bear that in mind.”

Elizabeth and I enter, from opposite sides of the stage. I am carrying three identical bundles.

There is only one story. One true story. It ends like this. No matter how many times it is told, no matter how many places it goes, and how many ways it goes there. All true stories arrive, at last, in the body of the story teller, in the story the story teller cannot escape.

I hand a bundle to Elizabeth, and one to Jackie, keeping one for myself. Each of us goes to a glass enclosure, and stands beside it.

We begin to undo our bundles, while Jackie speaks.

“I was on my way up to my father’s room in the hospital, a few days after the operation. I was on the elevator. The doors opened. A woman stepped in. She was--I don’t know. Sixty-five. Seventy. But seventy the way seventy is in the farmland of our fairy tale American myth. Her faded hair was braided, and wrapped tightly at the back of her neck.”
The three of us take hair pins from our bundles, and pin our hair back, away from our face. “Her face was--careworn. Right out of the movies. Auntie Em in the Wizard of Oz looked less like Auntie Em then she did.

“She was wearing a cotton print dress, calico or plaid, washed a thousand times” Jackie says. Elizabeth, Jackie and I each pull a cotton print calico dress, washed a thousand times, out of our bundles. We put them on. “She was straight, and tall, and there was a plain gold band on her left hand.” We each take a plain gold band out of the right pocket of the dress, and slip it on our ring finger. “And she was fine, until she stepped onto the elevator.” Each of us step into the three-sided glass enclosure next to us. “But as soon as the doors slid shut she started to break. And I was standing right there, I didn’t know what to do, if I touched her she’d shatter. She had used up everything to make it into that elevator, she’d walked those steps to the door at unimaginable cost, she had lasted until the doors closed and what could I say to her? What words would I use? What was the use of any of the words I knew.

“I started to reach out, but I couldn’t touch her. I asked her ‘Is there anything I can do, Ma’am?’ She shook her head. She sobbed, and the elevator climbed, forever, the elevator climbed three floors, forever. At last the doors slid open, and somehow I stepped out. And I walked blindly--just like they do in novels--blindly down the hall. I made it to my father’s room, and I told him about the woman in the elevator. About how she had stood there, and just shattered.

“And for the first time in my life, I saw my father cry.

“And my question is, how is it that I was made, by the best hands, out of love and care, to carry something magnificent inside me--and I am not good enough. To be what I was crafted to be. How is it that I have dreamed all my life, of greatness, but I was only good enough to carry that story to my father. Without the courage or heart or knowledge to touch it. In a way that could change the pain.

“And as I watched my father cry I knew the truth. The inevitable, cold sad truth. I will not flow, in the goodness of time. I will not melt, and make my way to any universal, grace filled collective sea. I will shatter, inevitably, into pieces, like all the rest before me and behind me and in front of me.”

We stand there, alone, each of us inside a glass enclosure that, like an open elevator, is closed on only three sides.

We tell the woman’s story together, but not in unison. I say two lines, the actress playing Jackie says three, the actress playing Elizabeth says one--we share the story. We share the story line.

“The day I met him--all the pieces of the world fell into place. I could almost feel the click. Now I could stop struggling to make sense out of things--oh, just because you grow up on a farm doesn’t mean you don’t think, you know. Just because you rise with the sun--and the barnyard animals are your friends--doesn’t mean you don’t think. So I did think. About a lot of things. And the minute I met him, I knew I could stop thinking about most of ‘em.

“You might think a person would be ashamed to say that, right out. But I’m not. I was happy and proud to have a man standing beside me who meant that I could stop thinking and worrying and get down to things.

“To the real things.

“Someone to work beside me. Someone to pull together with and never worry about my back, and never worry there was no one on my side. A partner for the day and its work, and the night and its rest.

“He was a good man. A good husband, good father. I could almost hear that little click nine, ten times a day. I didn’t have to think

about things, or put them together--they were already put. They made sense.

“I’m not saying that I ever fully understood about the night, though. I didn’t have to give the day and its work a second thought, but the night and its rest--that click was different. I never really understood that portion of our lives, what happened at night, between us, I never understood. I’d thought about it quite a lot before we’d gotten married--no different than any other seventeen year old girl--and I was relieved to be able to stop thinking about it, once I realized it was nothing you could really think about. But the night and its rest--I never understood it the way I understood the day--except I knew that it was good.

“People talk about it all the time, sex, sex, sex, but they never say ‘It’s good--good the way work is, and bringing up three strong healthy children is, and having the respect of your neighbors, and standing for something is.’ No one ever says that about it. But it’s true. There’s something I don’t quite understand about it, but I know that’s true.

“I can still fit into my wedding dress. I know you hear a woman say that, you feel kind of sorry for them, you think, just another sad, old dried up woman with all the sweetness sweated out of her, bragging about fitting into an old yellowed dress no one’s alive even remembers her wearing.

“But it’s not bragging. Not vanity either, or pride. It’s just this little voice inside you saying ‘I’m still the same person I was that day. I’m still standing in front of the preacher with my whole life ahead of me. I’m young and strong and I’m ready to pay. I am ready for the work, and I will pay.’

“So. I can still fit into my wedding dress. I can still feel what I felt that day.

“Let me go back and stand there again, I’ll say it again. I’ll still say I’ll pay. I’ll work hard, with this man beside me, and between us, we’ll pay.

“And I knew, in the back of my mind, that this day--today--would come--that this day was part of it--what I had to pay, part of the price you have to pay for standing there beside him. I’m not saying I didn’t know that the day would come when he wouldn’t be there, beside me--I understood that the day would come, and I would stand there, alone--but I didn’t realize, somehow, that he wouldn’t be there during the night.

“As if I understood part of what death is, but had completely left the other part out.

“The day and its work, the night and its rest. There they are, right together, you don’t get one without the other--they talk about it all the time, but they never really tell you. They tell you all kind of stories, but the stories never tell you so you know. They tell you all kinds of stories--

“But the stories never tell you so you know.

“I just didn’t know about the night. That’s all I’m saying. The day uses you up, the day and its work uses you up, and you lose the night.

“That’s all I’m saying.

“And not a single story tells you so you know.

“That’s all I’m saying. I just didn’t know.

“That’s all I’m saying.

“That’s all I’m saying.”

The lights expand outward, from us, for a full, short moment.
Then this world ends.

There is applause. There is a curtain call. The house lights rise. The line between danger, here, and safety, there, disappears. The audience returns to their lives of thisness and thatness.

To make a long story short--I return with them.

SCENES WHICH DIDN'T MAKE IT INTO THE PLAY

But printed here for the reader to wander through

JACKIE

(Lights upon Jackie, sweeping up the broken glass.)

It was summer. And hot, the way it is only in Missouri, where extreme heat or cold is always a shock, since Missouri is a part of the county without its own climate. Not a Northern climate. Not a Southern climate. Missouri is not East or West. Which means, I used to think, that the twain could meet there, if only I knew what the hell twain meant. In Missouri, of course, it means Mark Twain. But Mark Twain means Samuel Clemmons. So you can see how far that chair of reasoning went.

So anyway, it was summer, and it was hot, and my father was having an open heart triple by-pass lungoscopy Which means we were waiting in the waiting room for 8 hours. And 8 hours in awaiting room means—well—how do I tell this story? Where do I begin.

(Lights up on Elizabeth, knitting, sitting in the waiting room.)

My mother spend the day knitting.

Now my mother is an incredible knitter. She knits German, not Continental. People who knit Continental make knitting look like a nervous habit, throwing yarn, throwing yarn. Everything is smooth, when you knit German. Smooth, and seamless. That unraveled sleeve of care that sleep knits up? Sleep knits it German.

My mother is knitting that sweater for me, even though we both know I will never wear it. We both know the sweater will not fit. My mother can knit

elaborate, 18 color killer patterned vests, vast king sized afghans of heroic size and softness, microscopic mohair mittens—but she can't find the pattern for the sweater that fits me.

(She watches her mother, knitting.)

Still, she knits on. It makes her feel good and it makes me feel good too. When someone's knitting you a sweater, you feel safe. Whether you actually get to use it or not.

My brother spent the entire 8 hours reading the Wall Street Journal and playing Scrabble.

PETER

(Lights up on Peter, sitting in the waiting room, laying down Scrabble tiles on the board.)

G L A S S.

JACKIE

He's incredibly bad at Scrabble. It took him 20 minutes to make that word that day. In 20 minutes, I could blow a set of 8 wine goblets with swirled stems and get a good start on the matching cordials.

It's not that he's stupid. He's not. He's just never been good at Scrabble, anagrams, crossword puzzles, any of those word things. He likes numbers better. I think it's because numbers add up. But they don't change.

ELIZABETH

(Looking up from her knitting, saying directly into the air in front of her.)

This is killing me.

(And resumes knitting, calmly.)

PETER

2 for G. 2 for—

ELIZABETH

This is killing me.

PETER

Did you say something, Mom?

ELIZABETH

(Looks up. Surprised that he thinks she has.)

Me? No.

PETER

You sure you didn't...I mean I thought I...

ELIZABETH

I maybe cleared my throat. That's all.

PETER

(Shrugs)

Okay.

(Back to Scrabble)

2 for G. 2 for L.

ELIZABETH

This is killing me.

JACKIE

I guess knitting that sweater for me wasn't making mom feel as good as she pretended it was.

ELIZABETH

Except, of course, that it might not be killing me. Everything might turn out all right, in which case, this would not be killing me. It would be making me strong.

JACKIE

Still, even in the face of death, my mother never dropped a stitch. Not a one.

ELIZABETH

After all, what doesn't kill you makes you strong.

JACKIE

So, my mother was knitting, my brother was reading the Wall Street Journal and playing Scrabble, and we were in hell. A hell that felt like nothing in this world but is, in fact, the more or less exact same hell that happens to a hundred thousand people in this world. With minor variations. Every day.

(She turns to go—then stops.)

And how did I spend that day in the waiting room? I spent it wondering what my life would be like—without glass.

(Full lights up on stage.)

Jackie goes into the bathroom area that's connected to the waiting room, steps up to the mirror and begins playing with her hair.)