

What My Mother Told Me

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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Pregnant and alone in the aftermath of an affair with her pastor, emotionally repressed Hester Bennet must visit the college of her estranged daughter, Baby Bennet, in hopes of finding understanding and support. A series of flashbacks relates Hester's tumultuous backstory, illustrating her process of becoming cold and repressed. During these flashbacks, Hester is able to retrospectively imagine conversations she wishes she had had with Baby, furthering the theme of how taboos and silence help form the conception of womanhood passed down from mother to daughter. Framed by interactions between Hester's interpretations of the biblical figures Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene, the play explores the Madonna-whore dichotomy and female sexuality in the Protestant community of the American South.

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What My Mother Told Me

a play in two acts by Anna Millard

The world of the play moves back and forth between Hester's visit to Baby's college in 1992 and a series of memories from Hester's past. Hester was born and raised in a mid-sized city in a mid-sized state in the American South. Baby's college is located in another mid-sized city in the same state. Hester is sometimes able to step out of memories and speak, in retrospect, to her daughter. These speeches should be directed toward the audience. The scene she has temporarily removed herself from remains frozen until she returns. It is important to note that Hester is not actually saying these soliloquies to Baby, rather realizing what she wishes she had expressed. Baby's character does not hear these monologues and remains unchanged by them.

The world of the play is framed by Hester's imaginings of the biblical figures Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene.

Scene titles and dates should be somehow incorporated into the production, perhaps with an announcement, sign or projection.

Stagehands should not be hidden, and should begin to change the set while the previous scene is still ending. They are in charge of moving Hester from one place in time to the next. They can change Hester's costume on stage and push her into the next scene if needed. Scene changes should be markedly out of Hester's control and border on violent for her. Other characters move in and out of scenes with ease, as a ghost might pass through a wall. Sets should be simple and moveable. One or two pieces of furniture should be enough to set the scene. Accumulation of costume pieces and props on stage from previous scenes is encouraged.

The Characters

Hester Bennet Forty-three years old in 1992, Hester is a quietly intense and emotionally repressed woman. She has a Southern accent. She wears pearls to the grocery store. She has not always been this way.

Baby Bennet Hester's daughter. A college student in 1992. Smart but naive. Resentful of her mother and rebellious.

Roger Bennet Hester's husband. Forty-five years old in 1992. The kind of man who is described as a "nice guy" or a "good man." In love with a domestic ideal.

Roommate Baby's college roommate. 90s grunge.

Grandmother Hester's mother. Sixty-seven years old in 1992. The matriarch of the family. Quietly terrifying. Very judgmental. Used to being obeyed. She has a very thick Southern accent, bordering on a drawl.

Daemen A college-aged boy Baby is sleeping with. 90s grunge.

Pastor Pete The pastor of the Bennet's church. Fifty-two years old in 1992.

Doctor A psychiatrist in 1972.

Frat Bro A fraternity brother at Baby's college in 1992. He has a Southern accent.

Stagehands The Stagehands can actually be working backstage, or can be actors dressed as such. They change the set and are in charge of placing Hester in different moments in time. They antagonize Hester and seem to enjoy controlling her life.

In "The Sequence of the Two Marys":

M. N. an incarnation of Mary of Nazareth

M. M. an incarnation of Mary Magdalene

Voice 1, 2, 3 offstage male voices (likely pre-recorded)

Suggestions for Cast Doubling

Actor 1 (female) Hester

Actor 2 (female) Baby

Actor 3 (female) Roommate, M. M.

Actor 4 (female) Grandmother, M. N.

Actor 5 (male) Frat Bro, Daemen, Doctor

Actor 6 (male) Roger, Pastor Pete

As none of the male characters appear in the same scene, they could be played by a single actor. Attempting this is encouraged. However, if two actors are used, then splitting the characters up by age or physical type would likely prove useful.

ACT I

The Sequence of the Two Marys: Scene I

Hester: The Bible tells us that there were two Marys. Growing up, my family went to church every Sunday, and there was this great big stained glass portrait of the Virgin Mary right at the entrance to the chapel. I remember thinking she looked so beautiful, with light radiating from behind her flowing hair. I don't remember ever learning about Mary Magdalene, but I always knew her. She was sort of there without being there, silently looming in the background. My mother sometimes called women of ill-repute Magdalenes. I always wanted to be the Virgin Mary in the nativity play the children put on around Christmas time, but they said I was too quiet. I didn't talk a lot, and they were afraid my lines wouldn't be heard from stage. I've always wondered about the Marys. What happens to them after the story ends? I like to imagine them after death. I imagine they would meet, waiting to be judged at the gates of heaven. On earth, their stories were larger than life. In death, no one has a story. I imagine them without context. Would they recognize each other's image in the white spaces between the words?

Purgatory is a waiting room.

M.M. and M.N. sit on a bench.

THEY know each other, but don't know each other.

M. M. : Mary.

silence.

M. N. : No dear, that's your name.

M. M. : Yes, but it's yours as well.

M. N. : Oh. Oh, *Mary*. I hadn't said my own name for so long. I think I forgot it altogether.

silence.

M. M. : I forgot my name once. Then I carved it on the mattresses of men all over the city, so I wouldn't forget. Tall men with beards that looked just like him, so I wouldn't forget. Short men clean-shaven who looked nothing like him, so I wouldn't forget. Mary, they called, *Oh! Mary!*

M. N. : What was it again?

M. M. : Mary.

M. N. : Oh, Mary. Were you ever?

M. M. : Ever what?

M. N. : Married.

M. M. : No.

M. N. : I was married once.

M. M. : How did that turn out?

M. N. : We had a son. He is the light of the world.

M. M. : Every mother thinks her son is the light of the world.

M. N. : He was different.

M. M. : I'm sure he was.

M. N. : He was.

M. M. : No, I'm sorry, I meant it. I'm sure. What was his name?

M. N. : He is called Prophet, Redeemer, Son of God, Holy One, King, Lilly of the Valley, Emmanuel, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. There are they who call him Christ, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Master. . .

M. M. : And what do you call him?

M. N. : When he bit at my breast I called him Jesus. Singing to him when he cried I called him Little One. *Little One do not fear, Night has come, Morning is near.*

M. M. : I knew one by that name once. I loved him dearly. When he left he said he would come back. I told everyone I knew, *He will be back!* I said. They laughed at me. *Silly woman* they told me. *She is hysterical*, one said. But I heard him.

M. N. : Dry your tears, dear.

M. M. : He looked me in the eye and told me he was coming back.

M. N. : I believe you.

M. M. : You do?

M. N. : Yes.

M. M. : I've been waiting a long time. Giving my name to the men who pass by for a night, the ones that stay for years. Etching my name into their bodies, their sour breath, so that I would not forget. He shattered all the mirrors when he left. But I can hear their voices. *Mary*, they said, *you are so beautiful. Mary, your eyes are like the ocean. Your hands are long and lean like the roots of a tree. Mary, an angel kissed your cheeks, that's why you have dimples. . . .Oh Mary, Oh Mary!* So that when he comes back I will remember who I am. When he calls out my name, I will know he is talking to me. I will know my life has been saved at last and all the sins of before are forgiven. I will wear white when I am married.

M. N. : You seem so familiar, dear. Perhaps we've met before? I hear myself in your story.

M. M. : Thank you, Mary.

M. N. : No dear, that's your name.

M. M. : Yes, but it's yours as well.

M. N. : My name?. . . .What was my name?

M. M. : What do they call you?

M. N. : Son calls me mother, Husband calls me wife, Father calls me daughter.

M. M. : And what did your mother call you, when you bit her breast, when she tucked you in at night?

M. N. : It starts with mouth drawn open, like watching a sunset, *aawww*, or *oooh*. And it ends with smiling for a picture. Say *cheeeese. AAH, EEE*. It starts with a parent's love. Father. *FFF, FF AAA EEE*. Is Fairy a name?

M. M. : You must be very loved to be named for such happiness.

M. N. : Yes, I am very loved indeed. Thank you.

silence.

M. N. : Fairy isn't a name though, is it?

M. M. : It could be, like a fairy princess!

M. N. : But it's not really. It's not really a name.

(Sound from off-stage. A man's voice ominous and deep, "Mary Magdalene!")

M. N. : Mary, that's you dear.

M. M. : Yes it is.

M. N. : Good luck.

M. M. : Thank you.

M. N. : Really, I hope you are lucky.

M. M. : Thank you, Mother—

M. N. : Dear, you may call me Fairy.

M. M. : Yes, of course, thank you. . . .Fairy.

M. N. : It doesn't sound right, does it?

M. M. : It does. Like a fairy godmother.

M. N. : Yes, yes that's it! Fairy godmother. That seems to fit, doesn't it?

M. M. : Yes it does.

M. N. : Oh, thank you dear. What was your name again?

M. M. : Mary.

M. N. : Oh, Mary. Were you ever?

M. M. : Ever what?

Hester's Wedding Night, 1970

*WEDDING BELLS sound, A CROWD cheers.
ROGER carries HESTER over the threshold
into the hotel where THEY are honeymooning.
SHE wears a traditional white wedding gown.
It is the happiest moment of their lives.*

Roger: Here we are, Mrs. Bennet!

Hester: It's perfect, Mr. Bennet.

Roger: You're perfect, Mrs. Bennet.

Hester: Oh, Mr. Bennet! You're going to make me blush.

Roger: You're pretty when you blush.

Hester: Stop! I'm getting redder by the minute.

Roger: Mrs. Bennet, I have a secret for you: *(in her ear)* The rest of our lives begins now!

Hester: Finally. We've waited long enough.

Roger: God, I love you so much.

Hester: Come here.

HESTER pulls ROGER toward the bed.

Hester: Let me show you how much I love you.

*HESTER begins to undo her dress.
ROGER breaks away.*

Roger: How about some champagne?

Hester: Um, yeah, that sounds nice.

Roger: God Bless America! I forgot cups. I'll run to the ice machine. Don't go anywhere.

HE kisses her and exits.

Hester: Hurry back!

*HESTER hurriedly takes off her dress.
SHE is wearing bridal lingerie.
SHE turns off the lights and lays on the bed.
Darkness.
ROGER enters with plastic cups.*

Roger: Oh, honey why are the lights off?

*ROGER turns the lights back on and goes straight
for the champagne without seeing HESTER. HE
struggles opening the bottle and pours two cups.*

Roger: I don't know much about champagne but it's supposed to be very good. One for Mrs. Bennet. And one for Mr. Bennet.

*ROGER turns around and sees HESTER.
Startled, HE almost drops the champagne.*

Roger: God Bless America!

Hester: Sorry, I—

Roger: No, no, of course, I—

Hester: Do you want to drink the—

Roger: Yeah, let's just—

HE joins her sitting on the bed.

Roger: The guy at the store said it was a good year. It was very expensive.

Hester: It's good.

Roger: Mm. Yeah it's sort of tart. There's supposed to be a floral something-or-other—

HESTER downs her cup.

Roger: Do you want more?

Hester: Yes please.

HE pours her another.

Roger: See if you can taste the—

HESTER downs the second serving.

Roger: Babe, slow down.

Hester: Oh, I'm sorry, am I being rude?

Roger: Look—

Hester: Look! Look at me, Roger!

Roger: I see you, I just. . . .

Hester: You just what?

Roger: You look very nice.

Hester: Thank you.

Roger: Is that. . . new?

Hester: Yes.

Roger: Well it's very nice. Where's it from?

Hester: Macy's has a bridal collection.

Roger: No kidding?

Hester: They sort of hide it, I mean it's in the back by the cash register. Not in the window display or anything.

Roger: Who knew? I mean it seems kind of odd doesn't it? Bridal *lingerie*. *Bridal* lingerie.

Hester: What's odd about it?

Roger: Well, I mean bride's wear white, you know? And their daddies walk them down the aisle. You never think about what *lingerie* someone's wearing under the dress—

Hester: Well we have to wear *something* under it, Roger.

Roger: That's true, I mean, of course. You just wouldn't think about it.

Hester: *You* wouldn't think about it.

Roger: I mean, is white a sexy color?

Hester: Roger! I go to all this trouble to look, to look *sexy* for you and I feel like you don't even—

Roger: No, no. Hush. I'm sorry Hester. I didn't mean to make you feel. . . it's just I. . . Oh! Wait right there!

ROGER runs offstage.

Hester: Where would I go?

ROGER comes back with a bouquet of flowers.

Roger: Here! Flowers.

Hester: Thank you.

Roger: You're welcome. I thought they were pretty, just like you.

Hester: Roger?

Roger: Yes?

Hester: What do I do with these exactly?

Roger: I guess there's not a vase around. . .

Hester: No.

Roger: You could press them. My momma used to press flowers into books, they stay forever that way.

HESTER wraps a sheet around her body.

Hester: Roger, it's our *wedding night*—

Roger: I know—

Hester: All of the pomp and circumstance has been lovely—

Roger: I wanted to make it special—

Hester: Roger, you want to. . . you want to *have sex*, don't you?

Roger: I don't know—

Hester: You don't know?!

Roger: I mean we were just at the church with the pastor and everything. It feels sorta weird. . .

Hester: But it's our *wedding night*.

Roger: Would you believe I'm nervous?

Hester: No. You're not the nervous type.

Roger: I got nervous before we went on that roller coaster! I threw up in the trashcan at the park. The one that went upside down—

Hester: But you weren't really nervous, it just turned out you had the flu. You were in bed for three days after.

Roger: I just—I don't want things to change.

Hester: (*taking his hand*) Oh, darling.

Roger: You're the most beautiful, smart—I should have better words—You're just so amazing, I honestly can't believe you married me. Looking at you now, you're so totally perfect, I mean you're like a classical oil painting or figure from a poem—

*HESTER climbs on top of him and kisses him.
After a moment, ROGER pushes her off.*

Roger: Seeing you today in that white dress. I thought I was the luckiest man—that sounds so—oh, words, words, words!

Hester: And I'm the luckiest woman in the world! I just—I mean I'm so glad we waited—

Roger: Of course! So glad to have waited—

Hester: And we talked about how much more it would mean after we said our vows—

Roger: And what Pastor Pete said about the holy spirit being invited in—

Hester: Right! Don't you want to *feel* the holy spirit *in our bodies*?

Roger: Don't say it like that, it sounds so—

Hester: Roger, do I—do I *turn you on*?

Roger: Now you're being obscene—

Hester: I've seen your *magazines*—I know you, I know you *masturbate*—

Roger: God Bless America, Hester!

Hester: The pastor says it's OK! I was helping with the food for the youth group and he was talking to the boys, they were separate from the girls and he was telling them that it's natural and we aren't *Catholic* or anything so it's alright to, well to *masturbate*—

Roger: I'm not going to listen to this!

Hester: Roger, it's our *wedding night*—

Roger: I know that! OK? I know.

(to *BABY*) Expectations ruin everything. It's why New Years Eve is never quite as fun as you think it should be. I should have told you to make your own expectations. I should have shown you how to be happy. How could I teach you something I didn't know myself?

STAGEHANDS undress HESTER.

Time skips.

ROGER and HESTER sit in bed, post-coital.

silence.

Hester: I'm just going to put my dress back on . . .

HESTER dresses.

Roger: Right. You know—

Hester: Don't look at me.

Roger: I'm sorry.

Hester: It's OK. I'm sorry.

Roger: Why are *you* sorry?

Hester: I don't know, why are *you* sorry?

silence.

Roger: I didn't know—

Hester: Please don't—

Roger: I just didn't know you would want—

Hester: You didn't seem to mind—

Roger: When you asked. . . .I just didn't—I shouldn't have—

Hester: But it seemed like you enjoyed—

Roger: Why would you—Where did you learn to—

Hester: Can we not talk about it?

silence.

HESTER begins to cry quietly.

Roger: Please don't cry—

Hester: I'm not.

Roger: Hester, you're like, you're like a goddess. Everything about you is. . . perfect. I love you so much. *That's* how I want to think about you—

Hester: That's how I want you to think about me—

Roger: I don't want to say those kinds of —

Hester: But you liked—

Roger: It's just, it seemed wrong, for both of us—

Hester: I'm sorry, I don't know why sometimes I—

Roger: It's just not the way married people should—

Hester: I'M SORRY!

Roger: No, no. I love you so much. Don't cry. No, I was just thinking out loud—

Hester: I was there too, I know—

Roger: Come here darling, you're tired.

Hester: I am tired.

Roger: Let's turn off the lights.

Hester: Alright.

ROGER gets into bed.

HESTER sits on the bed facing the audience.

Roger: Goodnight, love. Tomorrow we wake up for the first time as husband and wife.

Hester: Goodnight, love.

(to BABY) The next morning I woke up and your father was out getting breakfast to bring me in bed. He's a very sweet man. And very good company. He left a note next to my pillow:

SHE pulls the note from her bra and reads.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.

. . . It's faded too much to read here, but then it says

I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints.

The rest is smudged. It's a sonnet. I forget who by. Pretty words. I put it in a shoebox I keep in the back of the closet. I had this idea that I would collect all the love letters I was written throughout my life, thinking that one day I would be feeling very down and I could bring out the box and read them to remind me of all the love in my life. I thought, if I was to have a daughter, one day when she was old enough, maybe before her own wedding, I could open up the box and share all the love with her. I'm not sure why, I just thought, it shouldn't live only with me. Then when I die, all the love would die along with me. But, I thought if I had a daughter, I could open the box and show her what love really looks like. The particulars of it all. I'm sorry I never did. I owe you an apology for that. The fatal flaw of my little love box is that it's empty. There's just the one note, from your father, on our wedding night. But I kept it anyway, just in case—well I don't know what exactly. And I put the lingerie I wore that night in there too. I kept it—just because—well I don't know. I wasn't going to wear it again anyway.

SHE pulls the shoebox from under the bed and kisses the note before putting it in. STAGEHANDS push the bed offstage. One STAGEHAND takes the box from Hester's hands, ANOTHER takes out her lingerie and mocks it. THEY run offstage with items in hand. SHE chases after them.

November, 1992

*Baby's dorm room.
BABY is sitting on her bunk bed while her
ROOMMATE draws on her arm with a marker.
DAEMEN sits nearby, absorbed in a magazine.*

Roommate: No. Peeking.

Baby: Well what is it?

Roommate: I think you're really going to like it.

Baby: Are you sure you know what you're doing?

Roommate: It's just a marker.

Baby: Permanent marker.

Daemen: If you can't handle a little Sharpie on your arm then you shouldn't get a tattoo.

Baby: You're right.

Daemen: I know.

Roommate: Hold still or it will smudge.

Baby: Right.

Roommate: So why do you really want a tattoo?

Baby: I told you, to piss off my mother.

Roommate: Huh.

Baby: What?

Roommate: You're just so honest, it's weird. Most people make up some bullshit excuse for things, but what they really want to do is piss off their parents.

Daemen: With Baby, there's never much below the surface.

Baby: He's joking.

Roommate: He's not. But as long as I've known him—

Daemen: Day one, freshman year orientation—

Baby: Oh, practically forever—

Roommate: As long as I've known him he's been grumpy and mean so don't listen to him.

Baby: And that's coming from the queen of apathy—

Roommate: That's why we're such good friends.

Daemen: I think she wants it to go with her new vintage army jacket—

Roommate: Where did you get that thing?

Baby: The Salvation Army. I thought it looked cool. You don't think—

Daemen: It looks like you're trying to look cool, which—

Roommate: Which is decidedly not cool.

Baby: Oh.

Roommate: But, I will give you points for admitting you're in it to piss off your mom—

Baby: Well, if you knew her you'd understand. She wears pearls to the grocery store—

Daemen: Oh my God, your mom is like the kind of mom that packs your lunch with little notes in it, isn't she?

Baby: Yeah except the notes would say scary things like, "If you keep buying dessert from the cafeteria, your mother will know it and your thighs will show it."

Roommate: Your life is all domestic and shit. You're so—

Daemen: Fresh off the farm—

Roommate: It's so adorable I might puke—

Baby: I'm not adorable!

ROOMMATE laughs.

Roommate: Daemen?

Daemen: Hm?

Roommate: I think that's your cue for a compliment.

Daemen: Hm.

Baby: Well, I didn't grow up on a farm.

Roommate: You said you grew up on a farm.

Baby: It was an historical plantation.

Daemen: Same diff.

Baby: Not really.

Roommate: It's so Faulknerian.

Baby: I mean I'm from the South, but other than that—

Daemen: Do you hate your mom because she traded the last of your family's money on a new set of teeth and a prostitute?

Baby: Faulkner's women aren't that exciting. They're mostly dead or dying.

Daemen: Boring.

Roommate: Dudes have all the fun.

Baby: Yeah.

silence.

Baby: So, I didn't know you were taking Southern Lit—

Daemen: She's not.

Roommate: I'm not.

Baby: But you know Faulkner—

Daemen: She reads.

Roommate: I read.

Baby: Oh! Are you—

Roommate: That's enough talking now.

Baby: Yup.

silence.

Roommate: Why are you still here if you hate it so much?

Baby: What?

Roommate: Stop squirming —

Baby: Ow.

Daemen: If you'd stop moving it wouldn't pinch.

Baby: Alright, sorry.

Roommate: Why are you here, at a college like three hours away from where you grew up, if you hate the South so much?

Baby: I don't hate the South.

Roommate: You hate your mother, you keep rooming with me because you think I'll make you cool because I'm from Seattle—

Baby: I'm rooming with you because I felt bad no one else wanted to—Ow!

Roommate: Stay still. You don't pull off sarcasm well.

Baby: My grandma is paying my tuition. This is as far as she'd let me go.

Daemen: That's boring too.

Baby: Yeah, sorry.

Roommate: I'm almost done.

Baby: What about you?

Roommate: What?

Baby: Well, why are you here—

Roommate: Shut up.

Baby: Are you ever going to tell me about yourself? We've been living together for two years and I don't—

Roommate: No. You're almost finished.

Baby: It's done?

Roommate: I said almost.

DAEMEN begins to leave abruptly.

Baby: Where are you going?

Daemen: Somewhere not here.

Baby: Why?

Daemen: I got bored.

Roommate: *(pausing her work to look at DAEMEN)* You know, you're not as cool as you think.

Daemen: *(holding Roommate's gaze for a long moment, then abruptly)* Don't worry Baby, I'll come back later tonight, and the company will be a little more interesting.

*DAEMEN kisses BABY sloppily.
HE makes prolonged eye contact with
ROOMMATE during the kiss.
HE leaves without saying Bye.*

Baby: Bye!

Roommate: Wow.

Baby: Sorry for the PDA—

Roommate: Not what I meant. Are you and Daemen dating?

Baby: Yes. Well, no. I mean, who “dates” in college anymore, right?

Roommate: Huh.

Baby: Did he, like, say something?

Roommate: No.

Baby: I mean you never have like a boyfriend but your love life seems active—overly-active if anything—

Roommate: That's me. You're you.

Baby: What does that mean exactly—

Roommate: You're done.

Baby: Excuse me?

Roommate: Your arm.

Baby: Oh!

BABY runs to the mirror to look at her arm. ROOMMATE has drawn a full-color image of the confederate flag with an inscription reading "The South Will Rise Again."

Roommate: I just thought a closer to home approach would—

Baby: I look like I grew up in a trailer park. It's perfect!

Roommate: I told you.

Baby: Will it stay throughout Thanksgiving break?

Roommate: That's what, four days? Yeah it should. Maybe skip a shower or two to make sure.

Baby: Thank you so much.

Roommate: Thank me by leaving.

Baby: Two more days.

Roommate: I can't wait.

Baby: Are you sure you don't want to go home? You can hitch a ride to the airport—

Roommate: You know why I like you? You basically leave me alone. I like to stay uncomplicated by other people's—by other people. The entire campus will be empty. No one is going to talk to me for half a week. Why would I want to fuck with that?

Baby: Good point.

ROOMMATE puts on a pair of oversized headphones and begins reading a book. BABY checks her answering machine.

Baby: Oh, good, I missed a call. Probably from my *mother*. I don't want to check the message, she doesn't understand technology at all. There's always a full minute of just (*imitating her mother's voice*) *Baby*. . . .*Baby, Are you there?*. . . .*Baby, I'm not sure if I've got your message machine or if the phone is just quiet.*. . . .*Are you.*. . . .*Baby?*. . . .

HESTER enters unnoticed by BABY.

Roommate: Uh. . . .Baby—

Baby: *Baby*. . . *Baby?*. . . .

Hester: Baby.

Baby: Holy shit!

Hester: Language, Baby, *please*.

Baby: What are you doing here—

Hester: Hello to you too—

Roommate: (*with a mock bow*) Good afternoon, Mrs. Bennet.

Hester: Why, hello dear. I see you've acquired a new hair color since we last met. How. . .fun.

Baby: How long have you been here?

Hester: I just got in. The drive wasn't too bad, thanks for asking.

Baby: Mom, you can't just come into my dorm unannounced—

Hester: Well I'm hardly unannounced. If you had listened to that message or bothered to answer your phone in the first place, you would have heard that I was on my way.

Baby: I'm completely. . . I can't believe you're just. . . here. . . Am I dreaming?

Hester: Baby, don't be so dramatic. This was always the plan.

Baby: The plan?

Hester: Yes, the plan. That I would come down to get you for Thanksgiving and drive you home.

Baby: That was never the plan—

Hester: Don't be ridiculous, we talked about it before you left in August—

Roommate: Now that I think about it, I'm sure I heard you mention that your mother was coming—

Baby: Shut up.

Hester: Baby! God Bless America, what has gotten into you?

Baby: Mom. *We never* talked about you coming.

Hester: (*sighing*) You're becoming forgetful. I thought college was supposed to make you sharper. Are you doing the pot?

Baby: What?

Hester: The pot. Are you doing it?

Roommate: I think the kids are injecting it these days—

Baby: *Dear*, would you mind giving us a minute?

Roommate:—into their eyeballs.

ROOMMATE pulls a mason jar of weed out of her pillowcase.

Roommate: I'm gonna go smoke.

Hester: Oh, cigarettes are a filthy habit—

Roommate: Don't worry Mrs. Bennet, I'm not smoking cigarettes. I'm going to go get high on marijuana. Have fun Baby!

ROOMMATE exits.

Hester: I'm not so sure she's a good influence on you, Baby.

Baby: Mom! Why are you here?

Hester: This was the plan. I'm staying the night and driving you back in the morning—

Baby: You're staying the *night*?

Hester: Baby. Stop this game, right now. It is not attractive young lady.

Baby: It's not a game—

Hester: Your father and I felt it was important that I come to retrieve you so that I could check in on you. We're worried about you.

Baby: What, why? I make good grades, I'm not in debt or sick, you have no reason to be worried about—

Hester: God. Bless. America.

Baby: What?

Hester: Baby Bennet—What is that on your arm?!

Baby: Oh, shit—

Hester: Is that a *tat*?

Baby: A *tat*?

Hester: Do not play me right now Baby Bennet, you are in serious trouble.

Baby: Don't *play you*?

Hester: It's marker isn't it?

Baby: No, Mom, it's a *tat*.

Hester: It looks like marker.

Baby: Have you ever even seen a tattoo before, Mother?

Hester: Yes. The woman who works at the gas station has one of a bird spitting fire on her. . .
.well spitting fire into her *cleavage*—

Baby: Well, it's real.

Hester: It doesn't look like the girl at the gas station's.

Baby: Mom, why are you *here*?

Hester: Well, whether you remember or not, I'm here now, so just get used to it.

Baby: But why—

Hester: It'll be fun! Like a mother-daughter sleepover—

Baby: What's that?

Hester: You know like when you used to crawl into bed with me when you were little—

Baby: I never did that. Literally not once did we ever do that.

Hester: You were just too young to remember. But don't worry, it's never too late to start bonding.

Baby: I think it might be a little late—

Hester: It's going to be fun. You'll see.

Baby: Sure. We can get matching *tats*.

Hester: You're playing me. It's marker, isn't it? You. . .impish girl! Well, at least you're starting to show some Southern pride.

Baby: But it's—

Hester: A historical joke. You're so funny, Baby.

Baby: You think it's funny?

Hester: Sure, your mother isn't so out of touch she can't take a joke. You've always been a . . . funny girl! Now, I want to splash some water on my face and freshen up a bit. Is there a washroom?

Baby: It's down the hall—

Hester: Great, I'll be right back.

Baby: Don't hurry.

Hester: You'll catch more flies with honey, Baby.

As HESTER exits, ROOMMATE enters, stoned.

Hester: Oh, hello dear, back from “getting high”?

Roommate: Um, yes?

Hester: Oh, you.

HESTER exits laughing.

Roommate: Was she—

Baby: Friendly.

Roommate: That's weird?

Baby: Yes. That's very weird.

Roommate: Thank God. For a minute I thought I was just too stoned.

Baby: Something's off.

Roommate: Was she pissed about the tattoo?

Baby: Not exactly.

Roommate: What did she say?

Baby: I don't know, she kept saying "tat" a lot.

Roommate: "Tat"?

Baby: "Tat" and "tatted up".

Roommate: Is that. . . .bad?

Baby: It's certainly new.

Roommate: So you don't think it worked.

Baby: I don't think she was angry but I couldn't tell why.

Roommate: Huh.

Baby: She's usually a lot meaner. Underhanded and passive aggressive—

Roommate: She was a little mean.

Baby: She's usually *a lot* meaner to me. I mean, she's nice to other people, so it would make sense for her to be all sugary sweet to you, but. . . .I mean she's usually a total bitch—

Roommate: I believe you—

Baby: She probably did all of this—coming unannounced so I wouldn't be prepared, acting all nice—to convince me I'm crazy. To convince *you* I'm crazy—

Roommate: You're sounding pretty crazy, Baby—

Baby: See! She's gaslighting me.

Roommate: You're paranoid, and you're making me paranoid.

Baby: I'm sorry. She's just always trying to control my life—she's not allowed to come into my dorm unannounced and just take control of the scene like that.

Roommate: Maybe the marker-arm thing just wasn't enough to piss her off.

Baby: So what do I do?

Roommate: Something else—something bigger.

Baby: Yes! You're a genius.

Roommate: I know.

Baby: Would you pretend to be my girlfriend?

Roommate: You're not my type.

Baby: Please, come on, it would piss her off so much if I was a lesbian—

Roommate: Pissing off uptight middle-aged women is your thing, not mine. I don't care.

Baby: Fine.

Roommate: But I do kind of want to see this all blow up in your face—

Baby: Oh, thanks.

Roommate: Think more creatively.

Baby: I could pierce my—

Roommate: No, God, everyone does that. That's not at all creative.

Baby: Well you said no to the lesbian thing!

Roommate: What pisses your mom off more than anything in the world?

Baby: Oh my God.

BABY picks up her phone and dials.

Roommate: What?

Baby: You're a genius.

Roommate: I know.

Baby: I got her message machine.

Roommate: Whose message machine?

Baby: Grandma!! It's Baby. I was just calling because Mom's here, at my dorm, and she's acting really strange. She's in a bad place, a dark place, I think she needs some help. We're driving down for Thanksgiving tomorrow and I thought you might want to come with us. I miss you, and I think Mom could really use some guidance. Let me know. Love you!

Roommate: You're evil.

Baby: An evil genius.

HESTER enters.

Hester: That bathroom is—

Baby: It's filthy. It's communal, Mom. It's not my job to clean it.

Hester: I was going to say it's quaint. Now, what are you planning for the evening? I thought we might get some dinner—

Baby: I didn't know you were coming, Mom. I'm busy. I have things to do.

Hester: That's alright. I'll give Martha Browning a call and we'll *hang out* tonight. You and I can hang out tomorrow.

Baby: Stop saying hang out, Mom, it's embarrassing. You and Professor Browning are not going to *hang out*—

Hester: What should I say?

Baby: Just say "see" or "catch up" like a normal person.

Hester: Fine. You and I will have plenty of time to catch up tomorrow.

Roommate: I for one can't wait.

Growing Pains, 1988

STAGEHANDS put an apron on HESTER and set up her home kitchen. HESTER is cooking dinner, humming. ROGER reads the paper. HE watches his wife and smiles.

Roger: I love our life.

Hester: What makes you say that, dear?

Roger: Just, reading the paper. Watching my beautiful wife make dinner. Our beautiful house. Our beautiful daughter on her way home. This is The American Dream right here. *La vita è bella*.

Hester: What's that?

Roger: What?

Hester: That last thing you said, was it English?

Roger: Oh, no, it was Italian. You don't know that phrase?

Hester: I don't speak Italian.

Roger: It's a popular phrase.

Hester: Well, I've never heard it.

Roger: Don't get defensive now, it's not a big deal.

Hester: I'm not getting defensive, I just wanted to know what you were saying.

Roger: It means "life is beautiful."

Hester: Well why didn't you just say that in the first place? Why do you have to say it in Italian?

Roger: Now, let's not fight.

Hester: We're not fighting!

Roger: I just wanted to tell you that I love watching you cook. I love looking at our beautiful house with you in it. We don't even have to talk, just watching you go about your business is enough to make me realize everyday just how beautiful life is. That's how much I love you.

Hester: Where is Baby anyway?

Roger: It's Tuesday. She goes to those lectures at the college after school. The series on Victorian novels I think—

Hester: (*to BABY*) I should have told you that I like to read Victorian novels too. Wuthering Heights saved my life when I was sixteen, and what do you think of Heathcliff? I found him so smothering. I should have told you I was proud.

She was supposed to be home an hour ago. She said she was going to help me with dinner.

Roger: You don't need help.

Hester: That's beside the point.

Roger: See, here she is now.

BABY enters jubilantly. SHE runs to her father's side and kisses him on the cheek.

Baby: The lecture was wonderful! The professor is dynamite. I can't wait to go to next week's.

Hester: Hello to you too.

Baby: Sorry. Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad.

Roger: Has anyone told you yet today that you're the most beautiful girl in the world?

Baby: Daddy, you say that everyday.

Roger: And do you want me to stop?

Baby: No. What are you reading about?

Roger: Just an editorial about the mayoral candidates.

Baby: Oh, we were just talking about that on the ride back.

Hester: Who's *we*?

Baby: George gave me a ride.

Hester: George who?

Baby: George Belridge. He's in the accelerated class with me. He goes to the lectures too.

Hester: Belridge. I don't know his parents. They don't go to our church?

Baby: Is that the end of the world?

Roger: Stop you two. Well what were you and George saying about the candidates?

Baby: Well, he was saying that he thought Johnson's experience with the banks would be beneficial when dealing with balancing the budget and issues of boosting the economy and so forth—

Hester: He looks trustworthy.

Roger: Did you say something, dear?

Hester: Johnson, Bob Johnson, is at church every Sunday. And he always looks nice, wears a nice suit, but a fun tie. His whole family is so polite. I'd vote for him. He just seems trustworthy.

Baby: Well, I said that you had to look deeper at the bank's records. When he was working there it was so corrupt—

Roger: That's just what this article is about! Johnson was jacking up interest rates, meanwhile he has a secret account for his *mistress*—

Baby: I know. I read it this morning.

Roger: That's my girl. So smart. Always one step ahead of rest. That George never stood a chance.

Hester: Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?

Baby: What?

Hester: George.

Baby: George isn't here.

Hester: I mean the fact that our daughter spent an hour doing God-knows-what in a car with a *boy*—

Baby: The lecture went over. He gave me a ride.

Hester: A boy with questionable moral upbringing—

Baby: Just because you don't know his parents—

Hester: They don't go to church—

Baby: They don't go to *our* church—

Roger: Oh! Are they Catholic?

Hester: Catholicism is practically idol worship.

Baby: Oh my God!

Hester: Do not take the lord's name in vain in my house.

Baby: You just did.

Hester: Excuse me?

Baby: You just did. You said I was doing 'God-knows-what' —

Roger: That's true, you did say that Hester.

Hester: That's different.

Baby: How?

Hester: Saying 'Oh my God' is taking his name in vain, because it's, it's an exclamation of—I mean it's practically a substitute for cursing. But saying 'God-knows-what' isn't. You can't never say God's name, we're not *Jewish*, you just can't take it in vain.

Baby: That's so stupid!

Hester: Oh, and now you're calling your mother stupid?

Baby: Well if the glove fits—

Roger: Girls. Stop.

Hester: You know, girls that stay out late with boys don't get to wear my wedding dress when they get married—

Baby: I don't want *your* dress anyway—

Hester: Maybe I'll give it to the next door neighbor girl. She's always home on time. I bet she'd appreciate it—

Baby: What is *wrong* with you?!

Hester: Neighbors notice these kinds of things—

Roger: (*lackluster*) Baby, you'd better go to your room.

Hester: You go to your room, and don't bother coming down for dinner!

Baby: What did I do to you to make you so mean to me?!

Hester: You stay out late with boys and call your mother stupid and I'm the one who's mean?

Roger: Baby, go to your room.

Baby: You're on *her* side?!

Roger: There are no sides. I love you. But you insulted your mother while she's making your dinner—

Hester: And took the lord's name in vain and stayed out doing God-knows-what—

Baby: You said it again!

Hester: IT'S NOT THE SAME THING!

Roger: Baby, go to your room.

Baby: God, you're so. . .spineless. You just placate her, it's disgusting!

Hester: Oh!

Roger: Room. Now.

Baby: I hate you and I hate you. I hate you both!

BABY exits.

Hester: (*to BABY*) Do you think Heathcliff's cruelty is caused by frustrated love for Catherine? Or is he simply cruel?

You were a lot of help.

Roger: Why do you do that?

Hester: I'm your wife, you're supposed to support me.

Roger: You antagonize her like that.

Hester: You're supposed to be the disciplinarian. How do you think it looks, her out at all times of the day with a boy whose parents don't even go to church—

Roger: She's a good girl. She's never given us any reason not to trust her.

Hester: If you had it your way she wouldn't have any supervision at all.

Roger: She was an hour late. She's trustworthy. Do you really think she was doing anything with that boy?

Hester: What does it matter if they *did* anything. People see her driving around in cars with boys when she should be at home. People assume.

Roger: I'll talk to her.

Hester: You'd better.

Roger: She just needs some understanding. I'll go now.

Hester: Roger—I'm not trying to start fights. I just want her to grow up to be the best woman—I love her and I love you too much to have the family reputation—

Roger: It's fine dear.

Hester: I just don't want you to think—I know I get, I get ahead of myself sometimes—but—

Roger: Babe, I know you just want what's best for the family. But Baby is different from you. She's an intellectual. Her mind's on fire, it just runs wild.

Hester: Oh, well if she's *an intellectual*—

Roger: Don't be cross. I love you just the way you are. You're absolutely perfect. And you made our perfect family. You two just need to find some common ground.

Hester: I don't want—I just—she—

Roger: I'm gonna go talk to her.

*ROGER exits.
silence.*

Hester: (*calling after him*) Does this mean I'm serving dinner late?

silence.

It'll dry out if I keep it in the oven too long!

HESTER throws the dish she was working on to the floor violently. STAGEHANDS strike the scene, take Hester's apron, and spin her in circles until SHE is dizzy, pushing her into the next scene.

November, 1992

A frat party. It is loud and full of movement, with no absence of things to look at. HESTER is milling about a bit awkwardly, but friendly. SHE is drunk.

*SHE may dance by herself.
A FRATERNITY BROTHER with a thick accent
approaches with beer, checking her out.*

Frat Bro: You're not from here are you?

Hester: No. . . .I'm visiting a friend.

Frat Bro: Where do you go to school?

Hester: Um. . . .Yale!

Frat Bro: I SAID WHERE DO YOU GO TO SCHOOL—

Hester: I SAID YALE!

Frat Bro: I CAN'T YELL MUCH LOUDER—

Hester: YALE—Yale University.

Frat Bro: Oh.

Hester: Yes.

Frat Bro: Well do smart gals shotgun, or are they too good for beer at Yale?

Hester: What's that?

Frat Bro: SHOT. GUN.

Hester: NO I HEARD YOU. I MEANT WHAT DOES, I meant what does that mean?

Frat Bro: You're new. Are you a freshman?

Hester: Yes.

Frat Bro: You look older.

Hester: I took a gap year.

Frat Bro: You look *a lot* older—

Hester: I took two gap years, is there a problem?

Frat Bro: Look, it's easy. All you do is hold the can in front of you like this, then take the keys and cut a hole in the can towards the top here—

HE takes out his keys and pantomimes.

Then you turn the can upside down and bring the hole up to your mouth real quick so all the beer rushes down.

Hester: But why do they call it a shotgun?

Frat Bro: Here, I'll cut yours for you.

HE gives HESTER a beer and cuts the hole. Then HE does the same to his.

Frat Bro: Ready?

Hester: Well—

Frat Bro: One, two, three, GO!

The FRAT BRO shotguns his beer and throws his can to the ground with a grunted exclamation. HESTER does alright for a moment but ends up spewing beer all over herself.

Frat Bro: Man, I love freshmen!

BABY enters just in time to see HESTER spew beer everywhere.

Baby: What are you doing here?!

Frat Bro: Lay off—

Baby: Shut up.

Frat Bro: *(to HESTER)* Do you know this girl?

Baby: Are you fucking kidding me?

Hester: God Bless America, Baby, language!

Baby: Are YOU fucking kidding me?!

Hester: I think you should probably leave now, um—Oh, I'm sorry, I never got your name—

Baby: You don't need his name.

Frat Bro: It's Ben—

Baby: BYE BEN!

Frat Bro: (*giving up and exiting the scene*) Drunk girls get all emotional, fucking crazy man.

Hester: (*calling after him*) It was nice to meet you Ben!

Baby: No it wasn't!

Hester: You should really be nicer Baby, strangers are just friends I haven't met yet.

Baby: You haven't met yet.

Hester: Exactly!

Baby: Do you know how long I've been looking for you? You were supposed to come home after dinner!

Hester: Well, we had some wine with dinner, then Martha wanted to take me to the bar the professors all go to—

Baby: Oh my God! Is Professor Browning here too?!

Hester: No, no, she dropped me off at the dorm.

Baby: Then how exactly did you get here?

Hester: Well, it turns out that it wasn't the right dorm. It was someone else's dorm. A different one.

Baby: So why didn't you call me?

Hester: I didn't have a quarter for the payphone! Some people told me which way it was so I started walking and then I passed this street with all the big houses and when I was passing this one there were people on the roof and they yelled down at me to come in and I thought they might have a phone in here so I did—

Baby: Some people. Some strange frat guys. On a roof. Called you to come party with them. So you did?

Hester: Essentially, yes. That is correct.

Baby: Do you know what kind of trouble you could have got in?

Hester: Everything's fine! Why don't you have a drink—

Baby: You're telling me to drink?

Hester: Well, you're 21 now! Why not?

Baby: God, this place is disgusting. And sticky. I haven't been inside a frat house since freshman year.

Hester: Why not? The guys are so nice! Let's get some of them over here to meet you—

Baby: No, Mom—

Hester: You'd like them if you met them! HEY BEN!

BABY clasps her hand over Hester's mouth.

Baby: You are being so embarrassing right now!

Hester: Then why don't you just leave?

Baby: I'm not leaving you here to pass out in a frat house!

Hester: Awww—

Baby: What?

Hester: You like me—

Baby: Not right now.

Hester: *(sing-songy, as though to a baby)* Yes you do, you like me—

Baby: Will you stop so we can get out of here?

Hester: You like me, you like me, you like me, you like me—

Baby: You want to know what I think of you? I think you're cold and unfeeling and you don't *do* anything with your life except get caught up in church gossip and make Dad dinner—

Hester: *(about to cry)* You're right.

Baby: Momma, don't, don't *cry*—

Hester: *(crying hysterically)* My daughter hates me!

Baby: No, Mom, don't cry. I just said that because I thought you wouldn't remember. . . I love you?

Hester: You don't mean it! I wouldn't love me either.

Baby: Stop it, Mom. You're making a scene!

Hester: *(over dramatically and loudly, making a scene)* Oh! I'm sooo sorry! I don't want to make a scene! My daughter hates me, my husband would probably hate me if he even *knew* me, and now I'm just bringing this baby into a world of HATE!

The FRAT BRO approaches HESTER, taking her by the arm.

Frat Bro: I'm gonna have to ask you to leave.

Hester: What?

Baby: Hey, let go of her!

BABY kicks the FRAT BRO in the balls.

Hester: Ben!

Baby: Don't fucking touch my mother ever again!

Frat Bro: What the fuck. . .

Hester: That was the most awesomest thing anyone has ever done for me!

Baby: It was an impulse—I don't—Let's get out of here before he gets up.

Hester: I love you so much—

Baby: Now! Come on!

Hester: Wait!

Baby: We need to go—

Hester: *(yelling to no one in particular)* FUUCCKK!!

Baby: *(laughing)* Let's go, Momma.

THEY run out of the party.

Back in Baby's room. HESTER has been talking non-stop all the way back. BABY supports HESTER as she walks. While HESTER rambles, BABY gets her mother ready for bed, taking off her shoes and tucking her in.

Hester: And then there was the time you called me a *bitch* so I grounded you and then you cried for days because you couldn't go to a party that this boy you had a crush on was going to be there and you kept telling me I was ruining your life YOU'RE RUINING MY LIFE YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS IS ALL I HAVE and so I never told you but I cried every night when you cried because I just wanted you to be happy—

HESTER is finally in bed.

Baby: I snuck out that night and went to the party anyway.

Hester: I KNEW IT!

Baby: I'm sorry.

Hester: Really? I'm sort of glad you did.

Baby: I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't think about you. . . .crying—

Hester: The secret they don't tell you is that you never grow out of that. Of hurting the people you love. That's why they put for better or worse in the vows—

Baby: Go to sleep now, Mom.

Hester: (*jovially*) I'm supposed to say that! (*very somber*) I'm supposed to say that.

Baby: I'm turning off the light soon.

Hester: Is this what college is like?

Baby: What do you mean?

Hester: All the parties and the boys and the running?

Baby: There's usually less running.

Hester: It was fun.

Baby: Goodnight, Mom.

BABY puts a blanket on the floor and prepares for bed.

Hester: I love you, Baby. Let's be friends. Let's be great friends and move to Europe together and hide from everything and have adventures.

Baby: What kind of adventures?

Hester: I don't know, more like tonight. I've never kicked anyone in the, you know—

Baby: You want to kick someone in the balls?

Hester: Yes. I'd like to try out kicking some *balls*. Some *European balls*!

Baby: I'm thinking about going to Italy, for study-abroad next semester.

Hester: Oh! Do it!

Baby: I didn't think you would want me to—

Hester: Baby, just do one thing for me?

Baby: What's that?

Hester: Be happy.

Baby: I'm turning out the light.

*BABY switches off the light.
Darkness.*

Hester: Do you think your father will forgive me?

Baby: For what?

Hester: The baby.

Baby: Me?

Hester: The new baby that's not his baby.

silence.

Baby: I love you, Momma.

Hester: Oh, my Baby.

Baby: Goodnight.

Hester: Night-night, Baby.

Thoughts on a Funeral (1973)

STAGEHANDS wake HESTER, drag her out of bed and give her a black dress, which SHE changes into. STAGEHANDS thrust a baby into her arms. STAGEHANDS throw a bouquet on the floor and she stoops to collect strewn flowers.

Hester: (*to BABY*) When my father died we had a funeral. You were eighteen months, and we got you all dressed up to go, but you were fussy that day.

GRANDMOTHER enters.

Grandmother: Hester! What are you doing on the floor?

Hester: I dropped the flowers.

Grandmother: Get yourself together.

THE BABY begins to cry.

Hester: Shh—

Grandmother: Oh, give her here.

GRANDMOTHER takes the baby from HESTER.

Grandmother: It's alright, Grandma's here. Can you say Grandma? She's a late talker—

Hester: She makes noises, you probably make her nervous.

Grandmother: Full of excuses. Like always.

Hester: She can say Da-Da. . .

Grandmother: (*cooing to the baby*) We're going to be a good girl and stay quiet during the service today, aren't we? Aren't we? (*to HESTER*) You know, maybe if she had a proper name of her own to say—

Hester: I've got the flowers now, you can give her back—

Grandmother: Oh, God Bless America. Pull up your shirt—

GRANDMOTHER pulls Hester's shirt up.

Grandmother: Really. We're at a funeral.

Hester: I know, Mom, it's *my father's* funeral.

Grandmother: He was my husband. And he would turn over in his grave if he saw you looking like a *hussy* at his service—

Hester: Here, I'll trade you flowers for Baby.

Grandmother: He worked hard to make sure his family was provided for, and all he asked in return was that you act in a manner fitting of the privileges—

Hester: Mom—

Grandmother: Don't you dare talk back to me, young lady. Today of all days I would think you could just *act* like a lady. I mean it's my husband's funeral but you don't see me crawling around on the floor with my shirt down like some kind of—

Hester: Can I have Baby back now?

Grandmother: Listen, if you need me to keep her today—I mean if you're feeling *unwell*—

Hester: What does that mean?—

Grandmother: You know full well—

Hester: I'm fine, Mom, thank you.

Grandmother: It's an emotional day, I took care of her last time you had a, a *spell*—

Hester: That's not how it works!. . . I'm fine Mom. I'm feeling fine. Will you give me back Baby now?

Grandmother: You know, it would be nice to name her after your father.

Hester: You want me to name her Harry?

Grandmother: Hellfire, Hester, don't be *smart*. Harriet, for a girl—

Hester: Mom, she's a baby, not a seventy year old woman—

Grandmother: One of my best friends in the whole world is named Harriet, you could have some respect—

Hester: You know I didn't mean—

Grandmother: Well think about it because you have to call her *something* at the christening—

Hester: She doesn't seem like a Harriet—

Grandmother: But she seems like a baby? Shocking. Why don't we just name all things that way; it would be so much easier. We could have named you Space Cadet. Oh don't look at me like that, I'm obviously joking.

Hester: You weren't laughing—

Voice from Offstage: "Oh, dear, there you are!"

Grandmother: Oh Harriet! We were just talking about you!

Hester: Mom—

Voice from Offstage: "You poor thing, come here. How are you holding up? The flower arrangements look so nice!"

Grandmother: *(as she begins to exit)* It's my cross to bear, I'm just trying to keep it all together so everyone else can fall apart. Aren't the flowers smart though?

Hester: Mom!

Grandmother: I got them from the same place the Kennedys order all the flowers for their funerals, bless their hearts.

HESTER runs after GRANDMOTHER, taking the baby out of her arms just before GRANDMOTHER exits the stage.

Hester: Mom, give me back Baby!

Grandmother: Hester. You *will not* embarrass me today. Do you understand?

Hester: *(pushing back tears)* Mom, it's Daddy's—

Grandmother: Do. You. Understand?

Hester: Yes.

Grandmother: Yes *mam*.

Hester: Yes mam.

GRANDMOTHER exits.

Hester: *(to BABY)* I hated my mother. I didn't even realize it until my father was dead and she was the only family I had left. My father was a really lovely man. You would have liked him. He read a lot. I will never forgive my mother for taking his funeral from me. She made it into a *show*. It was disgusting. I thought about running away. I thought I would take you and just leave all of the people I hated so much. We'd use the money I had left from my trust fund and move out of the South entirely. Maybe to New York. Or to Europe. I could get a job teaching English. I got you back from Grandma and made it all the way out to the car. I had the keys in the door when your father came up behind me.

ROGER enters.

Roger: Hester! I snuck out to check on you. It's cold, what are you doing out here?

Hester: We're fine dear! Just seeing if Baby's pacifier was in the car!

ROGER puts his arm around HESTER.

Roger: I know you miss your dad.

Hester: I do.

Roger: Did you come out here to cry?

Hester: You caught me.

Roger: Let's go back in now, I'll stay right by your side the whole time. I'm here for you, hun. I promise.

Hester: Alright.

Hester: *(to BABY)* You know, Christ's sacrifice was loud. There was blood and wine and miracles. It was recorded. I mean the Bible is the bestselling book in the world. Anyone who's ever been a parent can relate to the sacrifices you'd be willing to make for your children, to the ongoing need for grace. But there's always been something that was a little hard for me to relate to—and in that moment, walking back into the church with your father, I realized what it was. The loudness. For a moment I wondered: If God had been a woman, would She have put herself into the body of a little African baby that was going to die of malaria before its first birthday? Would She have slipped grace into the world quietly, and left unrecognized? Mourned only by

one, memory kept alive by the ache in one woman's breast where milk swells for the dead? Life is pain. I don't need a crown of thorns to remind me of that. I thought at least this way you would get one good parent.

Roger: Let's go in now, honey.

Hester: Coming, dear.

ROGER leads and THEY exit.

ACT II

The Sequence of the Two Marys: Scene II

Hester: I took a class about women in the Bible at the church one summer, and we learned about the myth of Mary Magdalene. About how everyone thinks of her as a prostitute, or Jesus' lover, and art shows her as some naked hermit repenting. But, in class we learned that that's not really how she is in the Bible. For a writing assignment, I wanted to go through the text and have the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene hold a conversation using only lines they say in the Bible. I wanted to hear what their voices sounded like. Only they didn't have enough lines! They're talked about but they don't *say* anything. I imagine them mute. I imagine them as actresses stuck in a bad movie.

On a movie set. A large spotlight center stage. M. N. II, an actress, stands to the side of the spotlight. A SERIES OF MASCULINE VOICES from offstage (the director, the writer, the producer, etc.) direct the scene. Although SHE does not speak, M. N. II responds both to the professional direction and the men's conversation.

Voice One: Yes, good Mary, could you step into the light please?

Voice Two: A little to your right. . . .No, sorry, my right.

Voice One: Good, good right there.

Voice Three: Now, if you would look up into the light—

Voice Two: Try to make your face soft, think motherly—

Voice Three: Good, now reach up toward the light—

Voice One: No, that looks wrong.

Voice Two: Try moving the hand to the belly.

Voice Three: Yes! Alright now tilt your head down. No, not all the way down. Here, come center, look straight forward. Ok, now look to your left. Now tilt your head—No, no wait for the full instruction—

Voice One: Please wait for the full instruction, Mary—

Voice Three: Alright, tilt your head on a 45 degree angle, so your chin points towards your right collarbone, and your eyes are looking downward but we still see your face.

Voice Two: Oh, that's nice.

Voice Three: Thank you.

Voice Two: Now, bring your hand to your brow. . . .No, the other hand, yeah keep that one on the belly.

Voice One: Do you think she's too thin to be pregnant?

Voice Two: Well, of course, but what else are we supposed to do? No one wants to see an actual pregnant woman on screen—

M. N. II becomes increasingly upset.

Voice Three: For Christ's sake, when my wife was pregnant with our second she gained an obscene amount of weight. It took her forever to lose it, too.

Voice One: Yeah, yeah, I remember that. Too bad, too bad.

Voice Two: They don't tell ya that after the kid pops out all that belly doesn't just go away—

Voice Three: It's not just the belly, it's all the weight, the fat in the arms and thighs. I mean I know I'm supposed to love her and all but what can I do?

Voice One: Mary, honey, you've stepped out of the pose.

Voice Two: Right there, that's gold. Don't you think that's gold?

Voice One: Just the right amount of motherly tenderness and trepidation.

Voice Three: Right, I think we're ready to move on. Enter Mary II!

M. M. II enters.

Voice One: Mary II, I like that.

Voice Three: Yeah, I thought it worked, you've got Mary I and Mary II.

Voice Two: Alright, Mary II, hun, you walk in and stand behind Mary I.

Voice Three: Sort of half in the light, half out.

Voice Two: And take the blouse off the shoulder a little bit.

Voice Three: A little further down—

Voice Two: Not that much—

Voice Three: Right there!

Voice One: Now, we're looking for a sort of menacing look from the character—

Voice Two: Menacing, but sexy—

Voice Three: Think fire in the eyes. Think, you've got a secret that you want the audience to know you know, but you don't want to tell them what it is.

Voice One: Oh, that's great direction.

Voice Two: Yeah, yeah, great direction.

Voice Three: Thank you. It takes a certain *je ne sais quoi* to communicate with actors. You've got to understand how to make them do what you want them to do, but without telling them what to do, you know?

Voice One: Women hate being told what to do—

Voice Two: And you've got to understand how to talk to women—

Voice Three: Oh, you've got to understand women to talk to actresses effectively. Actors too, really.

Voice Two: Oh yeah, even male actors are women.

Voice One: They hate being told what to do—

THE ACTRESSES exchange a look and prepare to leave.

Voice One: What are you guys doing? We're not done with rehearsal.

M. M. tries to talk but no sound comes out.

Voice One: Hun, your mic isn't turned on for this part, we're not going to be able to hear you—

Voice Two: Look, we'll try to make the rest of this short—

Voice Three: We won't pay you if you leave now, it's still early.

THE ACTRESSES begrudgingly step back to their poses.

Voice One: Ok, I think the opening pose is good, let's just start with the first line.

Voice Three: The first line please!

THE ACTRESSES drop out of pose and look at each other, then at the audience.

Voice Two: Oh, God—

Voice One: What's the hold-up?

Voice Two: Guys, we've—

Voice Three: We don't have all day, ladies.

Voice Two: Guys! We've forgotten to write them lines.

Voice Three: Are you sure we forgot to write them? Maybe they just didn't learn them. . .

silence.

Voice One: I'll look through the script.

Voice Two: Does anyone remember writing their lines?

Voice Three: I feel like we did. We talked about it—

Voice One: OK, I've gone through it, we definitely forgot to write them lines.

Voice Three: Well, no harm no foul. We'll get back to it after lunch.

Voice Two: Ok, that's lunch folks! Everyone meet back in an hour.

Voice One: That's *one* hour, ladies, back and ready to film—

Voice Three: That means hair and makeup—

Voice Two: We'll probably have the lines figured out by then.

Hester's "Spell", 1972

STAGEHANDS strike the scene and bring on a crib. ONE dumps out half a bottle of wine on the stage and gives the bottle to HESTER. ANOTHER lights a cigarette and takes a drag before giving it to HESTER.

Hester: (to BABY) I should have told you that there would be times you would scare yourself. And hate yourself. And deserve it. Or at least that I did. And if you do too, it's OK. You can tell me. Is what I should have said. But first I would have to say I'm sorry a million times. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry (etc)

HESTER crouches by a crib. Inside A BABY is crying relentlessly. HESTER shakes, smoking a cigarette and clutching a half-empty bottle of wine.

Hester: Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up. . . .

HESTER drags from the cigarette and unsteadily gets up.

(singing) Hush little baby, don't you cry

Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring

And if that diamond ring don't sing—

Fuck, those aren't the words.

What does it matter? You don't understand anything anyway. YOU DON'T SPEAK ENGLISH, DO YOU? And you've got the memory of a goldfish. I should flush you down the toilet, then maybe you'd shut up for two seconds. Shut up, shut up, shut up—

What's wrong with me?

Look, I can make noise too!

HESTER uses the cigarette to burn her arm, screaming as much out of pain as at the baby.

AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!

ROGER enters.

Roger: God Bless America—

HE runs to the child, picking her up and cradling her.

(to the baby) Hush now, hush.

(to HESTER) What is wrong with you?!

ROGER exits hurriedly with the child.

Hester: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry (etc)

*STAGEHANDS clear the crib and bring on a psychiatrist's couch and chair.
DOCTOR, a psychiatrist, enters.*

Hester: . . . I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—

Doctor: Now, Hester. Do you mind if I call you Hester?

Hester: No, sir.

Doctor: Good, I like to be informal around here. Think of me as your friend.

Hester: What's wrong with me?

Doctor: Every once in a while this happens. You're hardly the only one.

Hester: Really?!

Doctor: Well, it's a rarity, don't get me wrong.

Hester: Oh.

Doctor: But it doesn't say anything about your character. What I mean is, it's a glitch, and if you're willing to help me help you, then we can fix it.

Hester: I'll do anything.

Doctor: Now, your husband told me what happened—

Hester: Alright.

Doctor: You know, men sometimes don't understand how difficult it is, the business of bearing life. It comes with a lot of emotions, it's like you've been holding the emotions of someone else in your body for nine months then they get released all at once and that's difficult. Some of them are unexpected. Sometimes there's anxiety, sometimes sadness—

Hester: Yes. Yes, I feel that. Anxiety and sadness. It's like, I just don't know if my life means anything, and then there's this new life, and does that—

Doctor: Yes, now, so you see I understand. What we need to do is stop focusing on all of the negative, the scary emotions, doom and death etcetera etcetera. Now, you're a woman. Your whole biological system is put in place to make babies. It's your whole purpose in life, as far as your body is concerned at least. Now, here at the end of twenty-five years of waiting and nine months of heavy preparation, you have a baby. What's your baby's name?

Hester: I don't know.

Doctor: Excuse me?

Hester: We haven't named her yet.

Doctor: But she's nearly three months old—

Hester: I just, I don't know, nothing seems to fit. And a name is so. . . permanent.

Doctor: Well, what does it say on the birth certificate?

Hester: Baby.

Doctor: Baby?

Hester: Baby Girl Bennet.

Doctor: Wowzers.

Hester: Roger's grandmother was nicknamed Baby, so we thought it was a suitable placeholder.

Doctor: Well. . . alright. So you've been through all this waiting, and now you finally have a baby. Well you have Baby. What's your favorite thing about her?

Hester: Well, Roger does this thing where he kisses her belly button and she laughs, and then he smiles and they look really happy together.

Doctor: You see? She completes your family. Do you get that ever, that sense of completion?

Hester: Sometimes?

Doctor: Good! Now, go on, what else do you like about her?

Hester: I don't know. She's a baby! She doesn't *do* anything—

Doctor: Now, what about when you first looked at her? When they first brought her to your arms in the hospital? Tell me, did you love her, at first glance?

Hester: Of course.

Doctor: Do you think, if they had brought you a different baby, but they had never shown you yours, just they mixed them up while they were cleaning the children off or something, and when they first brought the kid to see you, it was actually someone else's. . . .do you follow?

Hester: Yes.

Doctor: Do you think you could tell it wasn't yours?

Hester: *(to BABY)* In high school I was taught that there are infinite stars in the universe. And in order to create new stars, God has to implode an older one in on itself. That's the way it works. After all that imploding, when the parent star's insides are scattered all over the place, God doesn't point to the new twinkling thing and say *Look, you made that one. That one's what I destroyed you for. Isn't it pretty?* Because it's a star. It's just a mass of whirling molecules. We're just masses of whirling molecules, too. Only ours collided in such a way that we're aware of it. Isn't that sad? Sometimes don't you wish you could be a star, and go on shining and twinkling without knowing how or why?

(lying) Yes, of course.

Doctor: You see?! You could tell! That's the connection I want you to focus on from here on out whenever you interact with Baby. That's what you've got to hold on to, to remember.

Hester: Of course, doctor.

Doctor: Now, in the mean time, I can write you a prescription for all the anxiety—

Hester: Yes! I mean, yes. Thank you. That would be helpful.

Doctor: Now, don't worry. I've never seen a case like this that lasted more than a year or two at most.

Hester: A year?

Doctor: But the meds should help immensely. And I have faith in you. Keep coming to me once a week and I think we should have you better in no time.

Hester: Yes sir.

Doctor: Now, go home and do something nice for your husband. This is all hard on him too, you know. Make him his favorite dinner or something. What's his favorite dinner?

Hester: Meatloaf. No seasoning. Just ketchup.

STAGEHANDS enter and begin making faces behind the DOCTOR, distracting HESTER.

Doctor: Tell him thank you, for being supportive. I mean, think, where would you be if he hadn't found you?

Hester: Yes sir.

STAGEHANDS give HESTER a prescription pill bottle. SHE takes a few pills and passes out. STAGEHANDS carry her to bed.

November, 1992

Baby's dorm. Darkness. BABY and HESTER are asleep. DAEMEN stumbles in.

Daemen: Baby? Baaaby? Baaaaaby?

Baby: Daemen, what are you doing here?

Daemen: I came to see you.

Baby: I was asleep.

Daemen: I'll wake you up.

Baby: It's not a good time right now.

Daemen: Is your roommate in?

Baby: No, but—

Daemen: Come onnn, don't be so lame.

Baby: It's not that—

Daemen: Shh, don't talk.

Baby: Daemen, stop—

Daemen: Shh, it's fine—

Baby: Daemen, don't—

Daemen: Shhh, Baby

Baby: Daemen, I said stop—

Hester: Baby?

Baby: Hold on—

Daemen: Is someone else in here?

Baby: That's what I've been trying to tell you—

Hester: Baby, who's here?

Daemen: Do you have some *other guy* over?

Hester: Is there a *boy* in this room?!

Daemen: What the fuck? What's going on?

BABY turns on the lights.

Baby: Daemen, meet my mother.

Hester: Hester.

Baby: She came for a sort of surprise visit before Thanksgiving.

Hester: Please excuse the mess.

Daemen: Is she drunk?

Hester: Who?

Baby: Yes, she is a little drunk.

Daemen: Well, I think I should leave—

Baby: I'll come over tomorrow and explain—

Daemen: Don't worry about it—

Baby: No, I want to—

Daemen: I'll, uh, see you around—

Baby: Don't—

Hester: It was nice meeting you!

Daemen: Yeah, uh, yeah.

*DAEMEN exits hurriedly.
silence.*

Hester: Did I embarrass you?

Baby: Sort of.

Hester: I'm so, so sorry!

Baby: Don't worry about it. It wasn't really you.

Hester: Is that your boyfriend?

Baby: Well—Yeah, I guess, we're . . .seeing . . .each other.

Hester: What do his parents do for a living?

Baby: What? Mom, I don't know.

Hester: I'm sorry.

Baby: It's casual. We're not like dating-dating, we're just—

Hester: Oh.

Baby: I suppose you don't approve?

Hester: Of the boy?

Baby: Yeah.

Hester: And the casual not like—

Baby: Yes.

Hester: Well, he looks like just the sort of boy I would never approve of—

Baby: I think I knew that.

Hester: My first instinct would be to say that he seems like bad news, like he couldn't take care of you, and he's not good for you. You shouldn't be seeing a boy that can't take care of you—

Baby: Right. I mean maybe you're—

Hester: And of course this business of not dating-dating, I suppose that means you two are—

Baby: Well, yes.

Hester: Your grandmother always said boys only want one thing—

Baby: Right.

Hester: But. . . .

Baby: But?

Hester: But, that's what your grandmother would say. I don't want to say things my mother would say. So you know what, if he makes you happy, who cares? I approve.

Baby: Really?

Hester: You're a modern independent young woman, I suppose you don't need anyone to take care of you!

Baby: Right. No one. Yeah, no. Right.

Hester: Are you angry?

Baby: No, no. I just need to sleep on a few things I think.

Hester: Sleep on it! It will come to you in your dreams.

Baby: I'm going to turn the light back off.

Hester: Alright, goodnight Baby.

Baby: 'Night.

*BABY turns the lights off.
Darkness.
silence.*

Baby: Mom?

Hester: Yes?

Baby: Do you and Dad ever. . .

Hester: Ever what?

Baby: Ever. . . I mean other people's parents sometimes seem. . . they drink too much wine at dinner and hold hands and giggle and you think they might. . . later at night—

Hester: Baby, are you asking—

Baby: You two just never seem like that—

Hester: We haven't been. . . for a while.

Baby: I just assumed, I mean because you're so, well uptight's not the right word—

Hester: Baby, sometimes the women that men marry. . . and the ones they want to, well—

Baby: Oh.

Hester: I mean to say—

Baby: We don't have to talk about this, Mom—

Hester: Thank God.

Baby: Goodnight, Mom.

silence.

Hester: He's good a cards though.

Baby: What?

Hester: We play cards sometimes, like rummy or two-person solitaire.

Baby: Goodnight, Mom.

Hester: Goodnight, Baby.

Hester's Affair, September 1992

Outside Pastor Pete's office. STAGEHANDS keep trying to push HESTER through the door but SHE fights them off long enough to get in a few words to her daughter.

Hester: *(to BABY)* It started simply enough. I brought soup to his office once after choir practice because I noticed he had a bit of a cough during the sermon. He's so . . . passionate. About God. You can just tell he's putting every ounce of himself into saving the congregation from the hellfire of eternal damnation. I kept expecting him to have gone home, but every Wednesday night after choir there he was—

Hester: Burning the midnight oil again?

Pastor Pete: Paperwork. There's so much paperwork. You would think that devoting your life to Christ would be something more substantial but in reality it's mostly paperwork. Sit down, join me, I'm glad for the distraction—

Hester: You seem down today.

Pastor Pete: I suppose I am a bit down.

Hester: What's going on?

Pastor Pete: Well, we found a—we have a relationship, you and I, so I feel I can be frank. We found a *condom*, a *used condom* on the playground—

Hester: God Bless America!

Pastor Pete: We're going to interrogate the youth group about it. I never dealt with anything like this with my boys. Well, there was the time I found a bag of pot in their room, but—

Hester: What?! What did you do—

Pastor Pete: I almost smoked it—

Hester: You did not—

Pastor Pete: I thought, "What the hell, God never made a commandment about pot"—

Hester: Did you—

Pastor Pete: No, no. I remembered *your body is a temple*. Plus my wife would have found out. She just. . . would have.

Hester: (*the words bursting forward*) Once I found condoms in Baby's desk drawer and I replaced them with a picture of the Virgin Mary and then we never talked about it again.

HESTER clasps her hand over her mouth.

Pastor Pete: No you didn't!

HESTER nods.

Pastor Pete: But was she. . .

Hester: Oh, I don't think so. I'm fairly certain they were one of her friends'. She was always hiding stuff for this one friend. A real *wayward girl*.

Pastor Pete: That's good. Because I mean—

Hester: Of course!

Pastor Pete: That's not really a grey area—

Hester: Trust me, I know—

Pastor Pete: But you replaced them with the picture—

Hester: It was from a magazine—

Pastor Pete: We're not even *Catholic*—

Hester: But don't you think the symbolism—

Pastor Pete: And then you just never said anything about it?

Hester: Not a word. I grounded her from the Spring Dance and told her it was because of a drop in grades. . . .but it was *the condoms*!

*THEY both burst out laughing.
It's a laugh THEY have been needing to get out
for years. It takes time.*

Pastor Pete: You're hysterical.

Hester: I don't mean to be.

Pastor Pete: I knew there was something hidden under that perfect homemaker Lily Pulitzer dress exterior.

Hester: (*to BABY*) I wish I hadn't told you not to play with fire. I wish I had told you that playing with fire was inevitable and taught you how to dress your burns instead.

silence.

Pastor Pete: It's getting kind of late—

Hester: Oh, I should get going then—

Pastor Pete: No. Don't. I'm not ready to go back home yet.

Hester: Oh?

Pastor Pete: You know it's my birthday next week?

Hester: Yes, I'd heard! Karen is trying to organize the choir to sing Happy Birthday at the beginning of the Hallelujah Chorus.

PASTOR PETE remains silent.

Hester: But. . . .that's supposed to be a surprise. . . .so. . . .don't tell!

Pastor Pete: I'm getting even older—

Hester: You're not that old!

Pastor Pete: I'm fifty two, that's past middle age—

Hester: That's right at middle age—

Pastor Pete: I think my wife is suspicious of you.

Hester: What? Where did that come from—

Pastor Pete: Well, you keep coming around—

Hester: We're talking—

Pastor Pete: And you're younger—

Hester: Your wife still looks—

Pastor Pete: She wishes she looked forty—

Hester: I'm forty three.

Pastor Pete: Ten years makes a difference—

Hester: I can't help my age—

Pastor Pete: Why *do* you keep coming around?

Hester: I can leave, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be annoying—

HESTER gets up and begins to exit. PASTOR PETE stops her at the door, grabbing her arm. THEY stay frozen in this position. THEY don't break eye contact.

Pastor Pete: I didn't say you were being annoying. I just asked why you keep coming around—

Hester: I really do like talking to you—

Pastor Pete: Me too—

Hester: Then I don't see the problem—

Pastor Pete: Is that all?

Hester: I can stop if you or your wife—

Pastor Pete: I don't want you to stop.

HESTER is nervous but curious, like a bystander approaching a particularly bad car wreck.

Hester: Why don't you want me to stop?

Pastor Pete: Because I want you to keep going—

Hester: Why do you think I keep coming around?

Pastor Pete: I've considered a few different options.

Hester: Like what?

Pastor Pete: I've considered that you like talking—

Hester: I do like—

Pastor Pete: I'm also considering that you haven't pulled away yet—

Hester: I—

PASTOR PETE kisses her on the mouth then lets her go quickly and anxiously. SHE pulls him back and kisses him again. NEITHER let go this time. PASTOR PETE moves HESTER to his desk with a masculine directness.

Pastor Pete: Say something—

Hester: Like what?

THEY continue in silence.

Hester: You say something.

Pastor Pete: Like what?

Hester: I don't know, just tell me something—

PETE pulls Hester's hair.

Pastor Pete: What. Do. You. Want.

HESTER can't bring herself to say. SHE moves to undo his belt instead.

Pastor Pete: *Oh God* No! No, you're not getting off that easy. What's burning up underneath that precious homemaker facade—

Hester: *(to BABY)* I'm sorry I told you fairy tales at night before bed. I should have shown you what real relationships look like. That they are, without exception, messy. I should have told you that you will be lonely and that that is OK. I should have told you what it feels like when your perfect husband has no idea who you are so that sometimes you feel lonely even when he is laying right beside you. Even though he is nice and understanding and perfect, he cannot fill all of your needs. I don't know if one person ever can. That's why they say marriage is all about compromise. But instead I told you love looks like a white knight, that it is all-encompassing and beautiful, that if you waited long enough you would find the one perfect person to complete you and you would complete him and you would live happily ever after. I wasn't lying, please understand, only hoping. Is it so wrong for a mother to want more for her daughter? I still hope it.

Pastor Pete: What do you want?

Hester: I can't—

PASTOR PETE slaps HESTER.

Pastor Pete: Tell me.

Hester: Call me a whore.

Pastor Pete: Filthy slut.

HE kisses her neck ravenously.

*STAGEHANDS enter and film the scene.
HESTER chases after them to get the tape back.*

November, 1992

*The next morning in Baby's dorm.
HESTER is asleep in Baby's bed.
BABY enters with a glass of water.*

Hester: Oh. My. God.

Baby: (*impersonating HESTER*) Rise and shine, sleepy head!

Hester: Everything hurts.

Baby: Yeah, it's called a hangover.

Hester: No, I feel sick, like really sick.

Baby: Drink this, it will help.

*ROOMMATE enters, just returning from the
previous night.*

Baby: Hey.

Roommate: I saw Daemen a few hours ago. He told me to call him. Is he looking for you or something?

Baby: Probably not.

Roommate: Whatever.

ROOMMATE climbs to the top bunk and puts on her headphones, abruptly ready for bed.

Baby: Don't you want to know—

Roommate: Goodnight!

Baby: You didn't, when you saw Daemen, like—

Roommate: I said, Goodnight!

Hester: What time is it?

Baby: It's about ten—

Hester: AM?

Baby: Yes.

Roommate: Could you guys be quiet? You're being really inconsiderate.

Baby: Sorry.

HESTER gets up and runs to the trashcan. SHE vomits into it.

Roommate: Amateur.

ROOMMATE puts her headphones back on and lies down.

Baby: Do you feel better?

Hester: Not really.

HESTER vomits again.

Hester: Now I feel a little better.

Baby: That's why we got the big trashcan.

HESTER sits by the trashcan. BABY joins her.

Baby: We better be quiet. If we wake her up, all hell will break loose.

Hester: Baby, language.

Baby: Says the woman vomiting into a trashcan.

Hester: I'm still your mother.

Baby: Don't be like that. Look, (*pulling out a note from her bra*) I was thinking through some options and I wrote them down. I'm trying to be your friend here.

Hester: God Bless America. You don't need a friend, you need a mother. Look at you, with the clothes and the tattoo.

Baby: Don't start, Mom.

Hester: What is wrong with how you naturally look? God brought you into this world beautiful and you're just messing with—

Baby: What are you doing?

Hester: I'm just saying, after I spent twelve hours in labor, I didn't push you out with a confederate flag shaped birthmark on your arm.

Baby: Well I feel stupid.

Hester: It's OK, we can get it removed—

Baby: I thought you were finally going to let all this bullshit go.

Hester: Language! Really. People are going to think you were raised in a barn.

Baby: Don't you have anything you want to tell me—talk to me about?

HESTER vomits again. BABY sits on her bed.

Baby: Maybe it's just morning sickness.

Hester: What did you say?

Baby: I said maybe it's just morning sickness!

Roommate: I swear to God if you two don't shut the fuck up so I can sleep—

Baby: Sorry!

Hester: Baby Bennet, what did you say?

BABY moves back next to HESTER.

Baby: We have to talk quietly. Last time we got in a fight she played her punk-tech music on full volume for three days straight and I had to sleep in the library. You don't want to mess with her.

Hester: Why don't you get a new roommate?

Baby: She's fun. She's different. I don't know, I like her most of the time, when she's not around Daemen—

Hester: She's a bully.

Baby: She's a girl. You're a bully.

Hester: I just want what's best for you.

Baby: Why do you get so mean when you're embarrassed?

Hester: I'm not embarrassed.

Baby: Do you remember any of last night?

Hester: Most of it. I think. Wait—

HESTER thinks SHE is going to vomit again. SHE gets the trashcan ready. It passes.

Hester: No, I'm fine.

Baby: You said a lot of things last night.

Hester: I don't want to know.

Baby: You can't just ignore everything and hope it gets better—

Hester: I'm not ignoring anything.

Roommate: *(without moving position or opening her eyes)* If it's morning sickness, why doesn't she just get an abortion and get it over with? Then you two could stop disrupting my sleep.

Hester: What did she say?

Baby: Mom, you have to talk to me.

Hester: What. Did. She. Say?

Baby: Mom—

HESTER gets up in a huff, locates her shoes and puts them on.

Baby: What are you doing?

Hester: I'm not going to stay here and listen to her blasphemous psycho-babble.

Baby: You're leaving?!

Hester: Yes.

Baby: You can't leave.

Hester: And why is that?

Baby: We have to talk about this!

Hester: There is nothing to talk about.

HESTER begins to exit, but BABY blocks her path. If HESTER moves, so does BABY.

Hester: Move.

Baby: I'm not letting you leave.

Hester: Baby, I'm your mother, you'll do as I say!

Roommate: Now, listen!

Hester and Baby: SHUT UP!

ROOMMATE exits angrily.

Baby: You always ignore whatever doesn't fit into your stupid little idea of—

Hester: Baby, I'm counting to three—

Baby: I'm not a child, Mom!

Hester: Well you're sure acting like it.

Baby: What is *wrong* with you?!

Hester: One!

Baby: Talk to me! I'm right here! You can't just ignore me!

Hester: Two!

Baby: Maybe if you paid any attention to me or Dad instead of just nagging everyone all the time your family wouldn't hate you and you wouldn't be here not-talking to me about whether or not you should get an—

*HESTER slaps Baby.
BOTH WOMEN look surprised.*

Hester: Three. Get out of my way—

*BABY slaps HESTER.
HESTER tries to exit again.*

Baby: You can't just leave.

HESTER pushes Baby down. SHE attempts to walk over her while saying, "I'm Sorry," but BABY pulls her down by the leg. THE TWO WOMEN struggle with one another and BABY ultimately drags HER MOTHER away from the exit. BABY sits on HESTER.

Baby: I'm not letting you leave!

Hester: GET OFF OF ME!

Baby: I'm not letting you leave until you tell me why you came here.

Hester: God Bless America, I can't breathe. You've definitely gained the freshman fifteen, Baby.

Baby: You're a small, mean woman!

Hester: Then let me go!

Baby: That would make you too happy!

ROOMMATE enters with a fire extinguisher.

Hester: Well, you wouldn't want to make me happy!

Baby: Well, I don't like trying new things!

ROOMMATE sprays them both with the fire extinguisher. THE BENNET WOMEN scream. ROOMMATE continues until they stop screaming.

Hester: You're crazy!

ROOMMATE climbs into her bunk.

Roommate: You'll see how crazy I get if you interrupt my sleep again!

SHE cradles the fire extinguisher and goes to sleep. THE TWO WOMEN whisper.

Hester: I want to go to church.

Baby: What?

Hester: It's Sunday morning—

Baby: Church.

Hester: Yes. I want to pray.

Baby: Why can't you—

Hester: Is there a chapel nearby?

Baby: There's one on campus.

GRANDMOTHER enters silently, snakelike.

Grandmother: Well—

Hester: *(simultaneous)* Holy Shit!

Baby: *(simultaneous)* God Bless America!

Grandmother: Language, Hester, really.

Hester: What are you doing here?!

Baby: *(quietly)* See how it feels?

Hester: Hush.

Roommate: Ok! I told you two—

GRANDMOTHER stares at ROOMMATE with such force that she is rendered speechless and drops the fire extinguisher.

Grandmother: I take it you live with my granddaughter?

Roommate: Yes.

Grandmother: Yes *mam*.

Roommate: Yes mam.

Grandmother: And I take it you are responsible for the mess in here? You got a little trigger happy with that fire extinguisher?

Roommate: Yes mam.

Grandmother: Now what would this building do if there was a fire? I'm sure you didn't mean to, young lady, but by confiscating and misusing that piece of safety equipment you put the whole building and its inhabitants in serious, life threatening danger. I'm sure the fire marshall would have something to say about that, aren't you?

Roommate: Um. . .

Grandmother: Not to mention that *attacking* two members of my family surely constitutes a violation of the school's policy on violence. I do hope no one questions your Resident Advisor about this matter, don't you? Then you'd be found out.

Roommate: Yes mam.

Grandmother: Dear, would you mind giving my family some privacy? Surely there's a hole somewhere you could crawl into?

Roommate: Yes mam.

ROOMMATE exits hurriedly looking totally perplexed.

Grandmother: Baby told me you were in a bad place—

Baby: Mom, I didn't—

Grandmother: No need to apologize for your mother's actions, Baby. I had no idea things had. . . deteriorated this badly. Look at both of you.

Hester and Baby: I'm sorry.

Grandmother: Let's not be sorry, let's just not do things to be sorry for, hm?

Hester: Baby's roommate sprayed us— Baby: It wasn't our fault—

Grandmother: Baby. Why don't you wash up and change clothes and we can all go to church? We can still make a noon service. I'll bend my rule about wet hair at church given. . .the circumstances.

BABY and HESTER begin to exit.

Grandmother: Not you.

HESTER stays and BABY exits, mouthing "I'm Sorry" as SHE goes.

Grandmother: Look at you.

Hester: It's not—

Grandmother: Hush. This isn't even about you anymore. Look at Baby. Her clothes, that thing on her arm, she looks ridiculous.

Hester: I told her—

Grandmother: It's your job as a parent, as a *mother*, to make sure your daughter grows up respectful and decent. As of now you have totally and completely *failed*. Do you think any daughter of mine would ever look or act like that? Answer me when I'm talking to you.

Hester: No mam.

Grandmother: Get a hold of yourself.

Hester: Yes mam.

Grandmother: Now, why is your daughter calling me, telling me you need *guidance*? What do you have to say for yourself?

Hester: Did Baby tell you—

Grandmother: She told me *plenty*.

Hester: I'm in trouble, Mom.

Grandmother: I don't want a sob story, we all have sob stories. I want to know how you're going to fix it.

Hester: It's complicated—

Grandmother: It's not complicated. You have a problem, fix it. No problem is unfixable, do you understand what I'm saying to you Hester? Take care of it quickly. Think of your daughter and husband and get yourself together. It's the Christian thing to do.

Hester: Are you telling me to—

Grandmother: Oh, heavens Hester. Are you thick?

Hester: No mam.

Grandmother: I think you must be thick, you keep asking me to repeat myself over and over again. I think I must have given birth to a mental retard.

Hester: I'll fix it, Mom.

Grandmother: Now, I don't enjoy being mean to you. But you need to be woken up.

BABY enters, mostly cleaned up.

Grandmother: See Baby, don't we feel better when we're not filthy?

Baby: Yes mam.

Grandmother: I'm going to go freshen up my makeup. Why don't you put on a nice dress, Baby? Hester, goodness gracious, do *something* about the way you look. Then we can go.

*GRANDMOTHER exits.
silence.*

Baby: Mom, I didn't tell her—

Hester: It's OK Baby—

Baby: No. I didn't. I don't know what she said but I didn't.

Hester: Oh, well. It's funny, I was almost relieved.

Baby: I can talk about it with you if you want—

Hester: No, dear. I'm afraid your grandmother's right. These are adult issues. I'm not going to put them on you.

Baby: But Grandma didn't even know—

Hester: Still.

Baby: Well, if I can help—

Hester: You can't. It was silly of me to think you could. I just— I just didn't— I don't have *anyone* I can talk—

Baby: You can talk to—

Hester: No, dear. I love you too much for that.

Baby: But that doesn't—

Hester: You live a pretty simple life, Baby. Fairly uncomplicated. I've worked hard, believe it or not, to make sure of that. I'd like it to stay that way.

GRANDMOTHER enters.

Grandmother: Are we going to be ready in half an hour?

Hester: Yes mam.

Baby: Why don't you go on without us, Grandma? We'll meet you.

Grandmother: You want me to sit at church *alone*? People will think I'm a widow or a recluse or something.

Hester: You are a widow, Mother—

Grandmother: Just because my husband is dead does not mean I'm a widow.

Baby: Mom, don't start—

Grandmother: Widows are sad elderly women who wear black and don't have any family to sit with them in church on Sundays. I'm not sad or elderly—

Hester: How old—

Grandmother: Old is not *elderly*. There's a difference.

Baby: Well, if you stay, you'll have to walk in next to Mom with foam still in her hair. . .

Grandmother: Bless her heart, she does look just awful— Hester, I said you look just awful—

Hester: I heard you the first time, Mom.

Baby: We'll both get a little more church presentable—

Grandmother: I'm just afraid that if you came to church like that people would think you were one of the homeless people they give the leftover communion bread to—

Hester: Mom!—

Grandmother: I'm looking out for *you*, dear! How would you feel if someone tried to give you the charity collection—

Baby: So it's decided! We'll meet you. We'll be there before the sermon starts.

Grandmother: I suppose this way I could make sure we get a seat next to the choir—

Baby: Yes! Those go quickly, so you'll want to get there early—

Grandmother: But you two are definitely coming?

Hester: Yes, Mom, we are definitely coming—

Baby: We'll be there with bells on.

Grandmother: Good. I'll see you both in half an hour.

GRANDMOTHER exits.

Hester: Did I ever treat you like that?

Baby: No!

Hester: Really?

Baby: Well, sometimes. But—

ROOMMATE enters, timidly. SHE is high.

Roommate: Pssst, Baby—

Baby: What?

Roommate: Not so loud! Is she gone?

Baby: Yes, Grandma is gone.

Roommate: Thank God.

Baby: But, I need you to do something for me—

Roommate: What?

Baby: Go find Grandma at the campus chapel and tell her we're not going to be able to make it.

Hester: What?

Roommate: Fuck no.

Baby: I need you to—

Roommate: You do it.

Baby: I can't—

Hester: What's going on?—

Baby: Mom and I are about to leave to go do some mother-daughter bonding—

Hester: We are?

Baby: It's never too late to start—

Roommate: Oh yeah, where are you going?

Baby: To the—

Hester: Movies.

Baby: To the movies!

Hester: We're going to do some mother-daughter bonding at the movies instead of going to church! (*giggling*) Oh my.

Roommate: OK, whatever, that's fine. But I don't see why *I* have to go see *that woman* —

Baby: You don't have to, but if you don't she'll just come back looking for us —

Roommate: Back where? She'll come back *here*?

Baby: And we'll be gone so it'll just be you and her —

Roommate: Fine.

Baby: Thank you!

Roommate: You owe me, big time.

Baby: How about I'll go home for Thanksgiving and you can have four whole days to yourself—

Roommate: Make it five.

Baby: Sure.

Hester: An extra day?

Roommate: Wish me luck.

Baby: She's in church, God will be watching, what's the worst she could do?

Hester: Well —

Roommate: Don't answer that question.

ROOMMATE exits.

Hester: You know Grandma is probably going to make her sit through the whole service.

Baby: She could use some God in her life.

Hester: She's pretty, I mean she's *stoned* —

Baby: The service might seem a little longer than usual.

Hester: You still want to come home for Thanksgiving? For *five* days?

Baby: I wouldn't leave you alone with Grandma after this. She'd carve you like the turkey.

Hester: Well, I'm glad you're coming home.

Baby: Look, Mom, I wrote out some options.

Hester: What?

Baby: I was trying to tell you before — I was up early this morning, just kind of worrying —

Hester: Worrying about me?

Baby: Yeah, Mom, I'm worried about you.

Hester: I'm going to be just fine —

Baby: I know that. But I thought, I don't know, I know you don't like to talk about —

Hester: Baby —

Baby: But I want to help you think through your options and I thought you might read —

BABY takes a note out of her bra.

Hester: You don't have to —

Baby: I know.

Hester: Well, is that it in your hand?

Baby: Yeah, it is.

Hester: I'll take a look —

Baby: I don't know if you really need to, it seems kind of silly now. It's a lot of logistics — like cost and rehab time —

Hester: Cost and rehab time —

Baby: But it's also a lot of just whatever came to my head, which is really just —

Hester: I'd like to read it.

Baby: It might be useful. Or it might just make you laugh. Or it might be useful by making you laugh, I don't know.

Hester: I'm sure it'll be great, or, great's not the right word —

Baby: Some of it is just —

Hester: Baby. Can I see it now?

Baby: Yeah, of course —

BABY hands HESTER the note.

Hester: Thank you.

Baby: No problem. I'm gonna go call the movie theater to see what's playing, there's usually something on at noon —

Hester: Let's see something comedic, yeah?

Baby: Oh definitely. And I'm gonna grab some breakfast from the cafeteria, do you want a bagel or something?

Hester: A bagel sounds good, thanks.

Baby: Cream cheese?

Hester: No, no. Butter if they have it though.

Baby: And I take my coffee black but you probably want like three million sugars, right?

Hester: Two should be plenty.

Baby: Ok, I'll be back shortly. Love you.

Hester: Love you!

BABY begins to exit.

Hester: Wait, Baby —

Baby: Three sugar packets?

Hester: Thank you.

Baby: Be right back, Mom.

BABY exits.

Love Letters, November 1992

Hester: *(to BABY)* Once upon a time, there was an empty box. It was a sad, lonely box, and after twenty-odd years I almost threw it away, thinking if there was going to be no love in its life then it might as well just go back to storing shoes. But then, my daughter gave me the greatest love letter I have ever received.

HESTER reads the note.

to Option one: There's a clinic on campus. We can tell Dad that I'm sick and you're going stay for a few days to take care of me. That way you can get a hotel and be away from my crazy roommate, but Dad won't wonder about the credit card charges.

Option Two: Dad would probably believe just about anything if it meant keeping his perfect family together. It would be a little lie, but I wouldn't be an only child anymore! If it's a girl, I can give her all my old clothes and teach her how to paint her nails and how to piss off Grandma. We can think of baby names together.

Option Three: We move to Europe. I hear Italy is wonderful this time of year.

A STAGEHAND comes onstage and tries to take the letter from her. SHE fights him. This takes a while. The fight is violent. SHE finally wins. The STAGEHAND considers coming back to try again but SHE makes a threatening noise (a growl, a roar, a yell, etc.) and the STAGEHAND runs away. HESTER kisses the note and puts it in her bra, happy.

If that's not a love letter, I don't know what is. Looking at you now, who you are, your ability to really love people, and at such a young age — Well, I think that for all of the wrong things I've done, I must have done something right. Whenever I take this letter out of the box and read it, I will remember myself as my daughter saw me. Far from saint, far from devil. But beautifully, beautifully human. I should have told you, you saved my life, Baby. My baby girl. *You* were my redeeming grace.

Baby: *(voice from offstage)* Mom, they were out of coffee, but I guess I don't really need it —

Hester: *(running offstage)* We'll go get some! There must be a café somewhere, I'll drive you!

Baby: *(voice from offstage)* You don't have to —

Hester: I want to! I want to!

FIN.

The Writer's Process Visited

x. "Avoid Prologues. They can be annoying. . ."
Elmore Leonard, *Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules for Writing*

Writing about writing is inherently difficult. Every Creative Writing course I have taken in college has at some point or another resulted in a teacher drawing an arc on the board, then drawing a deflated arc next to it and saying, "This is your plot. Do you understand?" I joked with my friends that I thought my defense might amount to a series of professors drawing squiggles on a board, arguing over where exactly the loop should sag, and asking me to change one squiggle to another before submitting the project for publishing. But of course, the answer is always yes; I do understand. There is something you feel as a writer when pieces work or don't work, when you engage and when you lose an audience. But it isn't an exact science. Sometimes you just hear when a word sounds wrong and another word sounds right. It's hard to explain how; you just do.

Additionally, there is something to the old adage that all writing is re-writing. Every day for the past eight months I have altered something about my play: a word, a phrase, a character, a scene, a theme. I don't want to lead my dear reader painstakingly through each of these changes, and couldn't possibly even if I did. What I aim to do in the following pages is to provide an overview of my process of writing the play *What My Mother Told Me*, so that the reader might gain a broad understanding of the project's evolution.

**I. “The hardest part is what to leave behind.
It’s time to let go.”—A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh***

When I originally proposed completing an honors thesis in Playwriting, I framed the project as a re-visitation of the first play I had ever written in my freshman year of college. The one-act titled *A-Fucking-Men* depicted a wayward high school youth group of a fictional Protestant denomination in the American South as they navigated the tension between their personal spirituality and what they perceived as hypocritical structures of organized religion. Rife with narrative flaws, the play consisted largely of a series of soliloquies, which, though interesting, didn’t add up to much of a plot. However, the themes and characters of *A-Fucking-Men* would haunt me for the next four years, so when confronted with the question of what I would want to spend an entire year composing a play about, I jumped at the opportunity to re-visit them, utilizing the added technical skills I had acquired in my four years studying Playwriting.

After re-reading the one-act, I found that four years later I was not as invested as I had once been in the high school students and their youthful rebellions. Instead I was drawn to a side character, the mother of one of the adolescents who was forced to re-shape her relationship with her husband and the church after becoming pregnant by another man. I wanted to tell this woman’s story. I proposed my idea to the department, and began shaping the project as an exploration of female sexuality within the patriarchy of the Protestant South. There seemed no shortage of abstractions I was excited about exploring. I wanted to illustrate the church’s effect on the community and express the schism between individual spirituality and organized religion, as I had done in *A-Fucking-Men*. I also wanted to present the complications of a mother-daughter relationship, explore how modern patriarchal institutions can affect an individual’s personal life,

and take the play to a mythic place by re-imagining interactions between the biblical characters Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene, scenes that would additionally highlight the Madonna-whore complex. Attempting to begin writing, my mind was as crowded as the previous sentence. Doing research only exasperated the problem. Every article I read opened the door to a newer and shinier idea I wanted to read more about. There was simply too much going on. I didn't know where to begin. The wide array of themes inhibited my writing, stunting the creation of a concrete world for the characters to inhabit. I needed to put abstractions out of my mind and focus on the characters in order to write.

I discovered that by creating backstories for the characters that centered their lives around the abstractions, the themes I was interested in exploring naturally emerged. In other words, by making Hester a Southern woman who must seek her daughter's help after becoming pregnant through an affair with her pastor, I didn't need to try to write about the intersections between *women, family, the South, the patriarchy, and the church*. The reality of these subjects would dictate the character's behavior, the same way my own actions and thoughts are shaped by my gender and upbringing. By writing Roger and Pastor Pete as characters who perceive Hester either as a chaste yet maternal or a purely sexualized figure, the pull between these conceptions would inevitably dictate facets of Hester's life. Concretely rooting the characters in my research, I was initially able to put the notion of writing a theme out of my head and to focus instead on the characters and on truthfully relating their experiences to an audience.

As I delved deeper into the mother-daughter relationship at the crux of the story, I became more interested in how women pass on ideas about womanhood through generations than in how religion forms said ideas. And so I cut my last tie to *A-Fucking-Men*, letting go of the focus on the role of the Protestant church, which I had heavily emphasized in my proposal. I

let it truly become Hester's play, and *What My Mother Told Me* was born. However, this does not mean that the role of the church has no place in the play. Its recurring presence proves its importance. But, it is now stripped of agency and tucked safely into the background; the play is not *about* religion per se. The social conventions surrounding Christian values and attending church are intrinsically tied to the language the characters use to understand the world around them, their lots in life. But, the audience only sees religion as it filters through and affects the characters. Actual theology is largely irrelevant to the play. What the audience sees instead are the social pressures that the characters connect to the church, though these may be perversions of Christian theology. In this way, the social reality of religion shapes the characters, but they maintain ownership of the play. This use of religious language and structures to enforce a moral code that is not necessarily theologically based directly mimics my own experience of Protestant culture in the South.

Letting go of the abstractions was the most difficult, but most necessary, step of my writing process. Without it, I would never have been able to begin. This is what I have learned about myself as a writer: the conceptual aspects initially get me excited. Some writers begin by envisioning a character; I will likely never be that way. The ideas I want to explore are what start my creative juices flowing. But, it is also the ability to eventually put them out of my mind that enables me to write. I have to get a certain amount of research and discussion about themes out of my system, really saturate my mind with them, before I can trust that the ideas will manifest without my actively trying to write them. Consequently, I spent the summer months researching, and the first months of fall writing character sketches that I knew would not end up in the play but that flushed out many of my themes. Only then could I begin to think of the characters as full-bodied human agents. Only then could I begin to write.

II. “though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.”
—Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*

When it comes to inspiration, nothing compares to the power of a deadline. Writer’s block consistently meets its match in a time crunch. Which is not to say that the work will always be good—although some of my best work has been fueled by a ticking clock—just that it will, somehow, despite all odds, be. This is how I found myself in a few weeks going from twenty-something pages of character studies to having seventy brand new pages of what actually resembled a play. At the beginning of the fall semester, I received a very scary and official looking email laying out a series of deadlines for the college honors candidates. Since writing a play doesn’t exactly conform to the same time-table as writing a research paper, these deadlines were re-worked for my project, and it was decided that I would submit a completed draft of the play at the end of winter break. I put it out of my head through Christmas. It nagged at me over New Year’s. And when there was nothing left to celebrate, panic slowly sank in. “Well, what happens?” my mother asked. *I don’t know. The characters need to get from one place to another place.* “Well, how do they do that?” she continued. *I. Don’t. Know.* There were tears. Nothing is more frightening than a blank page.

Then, finally, about two weeks before I was scheduled to return to campus, pure necessity to see words on a page drove me to write. I wrote frantically, madly flinging words onto the page. Sometimes this amounted to “being in the zone,” and sometimes it was more like verbal vomit. Though I know that’s not what the poem is about, Elizabeth Bishop’s last line from *The Art of Losing* haunted me. “(Write it!),” I told myself, even if it may look like disaster. Right on deadline, I had sixty-ish pages of *something*.

I cannot stress how much easier it is to work with something than nothing. At this point I had a series of scenes detailing Hester’s backstory, complete with asides to Baby, and a series of

scenes detailing the events of Hester's visit to Baby. The latter needed work, badly. But with somewhere to start from I could assess what was missing, what was unnecessary, and make changes.

At this stage, the biggest missing piece involved Baby and Hester's relationship. Hester clearly needed something from Baby; she seeks her daughter out, needing to mend their relationship enough for her to confess her pregnancy dilemma and to seek advice. But it was unclear whether or not Baby needed anything from Hester. What effect had the course of their relationship had on Baby's life? Did she need guidance from her mother? Or was her life perfectly alright without a maternal figure? This is when I decided the audience needed to know what Baby's relationship with men looked like. Hester's asides, the conversations she retrospectively wishes she had had with Baby, are mainly about the reality of romantic relationships. Did this lack of information from her mother affect Baby? And so I created Daemen. Naming him after an archaic spelling of "demon", I decided from the start that Daemen would be a destructive force in Baby's life. I wanted to show that the rebellion and resentment fostered by Baby's strained relationship with Hester was having a negative impact. I wrote Daemen as the exact kind of boy Hester would never approve of, and gave Baby the opportunity to reconsider the value of Hester's opinions. In the first *November, 1992* scene of the second act, Baby and her mother come as close as they ever will to actually having a discussion about relationships. Although Hester is only able to discuss Daemen via various shallow platitudes, Baby is still able to realize that some aspects of her conservative Southern upbringing have value.

From this point, I carefully alternated the *November 1992* scenes with Hester's backstory in a way that would give the audience the information it needs while keeping it waiting for the

information it wants. And then I had a play. It was not *the* play, but it was really, solidly, *a* play. I sent it out to my adviser, mother, friends, anyone who was willing to read it, and accumulated feedback as specific as pointing out anachronisms and as general as questions about characters and their relationships. I made changes, and was finally ready to hear the text out loud and think about it as a produceable piece of theater.

III. “My pencils outlast their erasers.”
- Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

After holding a staged reading of the play, I had a much clearer understanding of what was working and what wasn't. I needed feedback from the actors as actors instead of as readers. I needed to know what they were missing from the script that would keep them from understanding their characters when preparing a role. I needed to know what confused or dissatisfied them as temporary inhabitants of my play's world. Their answers were invaluable.

The reading was fundamentally a relief. *The play is funny! The actors are laughing! The writing gives them space to have fun! It makes them think! The dialogue doesn't sound forced! This isn't terrible at all! One of the actors told her roommate that the writing was good, and now her roommate wants to read it too!* It also produced specific perspectives on the scenes I could feel weren't clicking, but didn't know why. The largest pieces of constructive criticism amounted to the following:

Everyone thinks Roger is gay. As written, an audience will also assume he is gay. The characters need to acknowledge and deal with his sexuality.

The ending feels like the ending of Hester & Baby & Grandmother's play. We need to see the end of Hester & Baby's play.

Introducing Grandmother before she arrives in 1992 builds suspense about her pending arrival. We know she's coming but want to know what we have to look forward to.

Why is Baby able to forgive her mother for the affair? Does she know her father is gay? Is she mad at him for betraying her mother's trust, or the other way around?

What about the roommate? Can her role in the play be clarified? Everyone wants to see her have to sit through church with Grandmother while high.

What does Hester do about the pregnancy? If the problem is going to remain unsolved then the play needs to acknowledge, not ignore this.

Next, Lisa Paulsen, looking at the play from a directorial lens, was able to note what the play was lacking for her as a director. Her suggestions mostly took the form of noting motifs that she would want to work with if staging a production, but that disappeared halfway through the play, for example *names/naming things, fire imagery/putting out fires* and *love letters vs. an empty box*. This feedback proved particularly valuable since I hadn't fully understood that I had written some of these motifs. Names, for instance, came up on several different occasions. I hadn't consciously recognized this repetition; it had simply happened as a natural result of the characters' sense of belonging or desperation for such. Alerted to these elements, I was able to shape the play in a more purposeful manner to make the motifs meaningful.

The matter of greatest concern, and my first priority after the reading, was the ending. As it was, the action of the play ended with Grandmother's exit, literally giving Grandmother the last line. In an epilogue soliloquy, Hester revealed the moment she recognized her hatred for her mother, and shared how she became the person she is—by sacrificing, for Baby's sake, the person she could have become. The last two scenes essentially created and solved an entirely new conflict; they could have stood alone as a one-act. So I made critical changes to the epilogue, saving the best and cutting the rest, and moved it to the end of Act I. This way Grandmother was introduced sooner, satisfying that piece of feedback from the reading. Newly shorn of its original ending, I needed to figure out how I wanted to conclude the play.

Thinking about the opposing images of the love letters and the empty box, I decided that I wanted Baby to write an unconventional love letter to her mother. I thought about what kinds of love Hester had in her life, and what she was missing. I looked at the poem Roger had left her at the beginning of the play—how it idolized her all out of proportion, how it tied her to angels and not to reality. In contrast, Baby needed to show her mother love her by illustrating compassion

and understanding for her true self, flaws and all, in that particular moment in time. It didn't need to look like a love letter; it just needed to accomplish these goals. I thought that if I made the note a way for Baby to help Hester weigh her options, then the unsolved nature of the pregnancy dilemma would be acknowledged, but the audience would feel hopeful that whatever decision Hester ultimately makes will be made with support from Baby.

The next step was to think about what Hester and Baby's new relationship might look like. I didn't want to write anything dramatic, just something that reflects their future daily goings on, the little ways they co-exist and show their care for one another. I wanted the audience to glimpse their capability of having a working mother-daughter relationship. I also wanted to allow Hester finally to have some conscious agency in her life. With the newly found support from her daughter, she is able to fight off the Stagehands and keep the note with her. I thought about the illustration of Hester at the (new) end of the second act, swallowing all of herself and following her husband back into the church. I wanted her to run off the stage this time, toward something she desperately loved—her daughter's voice. She exclaims, "I want to!" as a final testament to her newly developed understanding of herself and ability to chase what is important to her. The play could be framed as the story of one woman's journey to find what love really looks like. The rest was tying bits and pieces together: the logistics of getting Baby's roommate to go to church with Grandmother, adding in recognition of Roger's questioned sexuality, a few crucial sentences here and there to up the ante on Daemen's character, to make some implicit pieces of the story more explicit. And so, two hours in a room with five actors changed my little play drastically.

**IV. “true life begins where the tiny bit begins –
where what seem to us minute and infinitely small alterations take place.”
- Leo Tolstoy, Preface to *Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?***

During the three weeks prior to turning in my project to the defense committee, I made a change that seems universal to the thesis writing experience across disciplines: I shifted from the steady, year-long writing pace of about five hours a week to writing at least five hours a day. On weekends, I locked myself in library conference rooms with fellow honors students from noon to five, or until the consensus became that no more data could be analyzed/research could be supplemented/writing could be edited until food was acquired. Then we returned to work for a few more hours until it hit that time of night where nothing you write quite makes sense. On weekdays, I basically did the same, except as interrupted by class, jobs, and homework. I counted myself among the lucky students who could spend the last weeks on heavy revision instead of needing to finish first drafts (though, of course, revision for a creative piece means something different than for an academic paper.).

During this span of time I consistently shocked myself with how much could be accomplished in a single day, and I watched my play morph daily as I refined characters, edited language, and molded scenes. I continued weekly meetings with my adviser, and we discussed changes to be considered in the forthcoming week, making lists with items that ranged from *embed more whore language to change Roger’s sexuality (again) and explore what Baby gains from rebellion*. I found that small changes, adding or subtracting a handful of words, could often serve to effectively illuminate themes and shift the tone of scenes. I took Lisa Paulsen’s advice to approach problems by finding the smallest possible change that would address the issue at hand. In this way, I found that my revisions served to specify, and thus enhance, the characters. If I had continued to add full scenes at this stage, the reader would have gotten more, but not more

precise, information about the characters. The more action and dialogue I added, the higher the risk of characters becoming unfocused; whereas making continuous small changes to what was already there served to further specify a character's language, motives, mindset, etc. The more precisely painted a play's world, the stronger an audience's connection with the story. In this spirit, I also began cutting scenes down, thinking about each scene's purpose in the play, and deciding what was essential. I think any changes I will make to the play after the defense will invariably have to do with continuing the process of specifying the characters both in my mind and on the page. This process is never quite done, though at some point all writers must stop if they want to share their work.

**V . “But if anything is certain it is that no story is ever over . . .
it isn't the game that is over, it is just an inning,
and that game has a lot more than nine innings.
When the game stops it will be called on account of darkness.
But it is a long day.”—Robert Penn Warren, *All The King's Men***

As I near my defense, I find that I am quite satisfied with my work on *What My Mother Told Me*, though creating theater is a process, and a constantly evolving one at that, so I cannot say that the project is “finished.” I want to take these last few pages to outline the major accomplishments of the play as it is presented here.

What My Mother Told Me explores the mother-daughter relationship at the tender moment when a parent falls off her pedestal and a child begins to see her mother as fallibly human. This is an important step in any parent-child relationship; it allows the child closer identification with the parent, and allows the parent to begin communicating with the child as a confidante and friend. Baby’s journey in the play is largely tracked through her changed perception of Hester.

The play also tracks Hester’s ability to regain agency in her life through Baby’s love and support. Baby’s unconventional love note at the end of the play is significant because it marks the first time the audience sees anyone love Hester for her whole, messy self. It is the discovery of an unconditional familial love that saves her in the end, and the audience can be satisfied that, whatever the outcome of her pregnancy, Hester will better be able to live by listening to herself and responding to her own internal desires instead of collapsing under the weight of outside pressures and expectations. Section III outlines Hester’s progress by comparing parallels between the ending scene, *Love Letters*, with both the first scene, *Hester’s Wedding*, and the end of Act I, *Thoughts on A Funeral*.

Framing the play with Hester's imaginings of Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene shapes the play in two main ways. Firstly, because Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene are cultural figures commonly associated with two extremes of female sexuality—one the literal virgin-mother, the other often thought of as a prostitute or Christ's taboo lover—framing the play with their interaction sets up the audience to better recognize the pulls of the Madonna-whore dichotomy on Hester's self discovery. The play could be described as Hester's acceptance of herself as a full-bodied, complicated person in between the two shallow tropes. Secondly, the biblical characters point out the patriarchal nature of the historical and literary texts our society lauds, and asks the audience to consider what affect disproportionate gender representation has had on women's conceptions of themselves. In what way are Hester's failed attempts to live her life for others part of a larger narrative of womanhood? Can a modern woman relate to the Marys' sacrifices and struggles?

The play is particularly concerned with the way in which women pass down ideas of womanhood to one another, especially within a family structure. The lack of open and honest communication between women, which is perhaps a result of society's labeling their experiences as "other," is outlined by the conversations Hester wishes she had had with Baby. My hope is that an audience member might go home after seeing the play and think about what conversations she wants to have with her daughter, or wishes her mother had had with her. More specifically, this theme is indicated by the characters' difficulty with language around the subject of sex. There are certain subjects around which the characters cannot complete a full sentence. There are certain words that must be italicized. There are certain words that can never be verbalized at all.

Some of this lack of communication is rooted in the puritanical base of the characters' Protestant background. As I more elaborately discussed in Section I, the play is based in the experience of the Protestant community in the American South. The language of the play constantly reflects the power of the church, experienced by the characters, not as a theology, but as a social structure and medium for conservatism. The harmful nature of puritanical taboos has its fingerprints all over the play, largely seen through the damaging effect a lack of communication about sex has on Hester's sexual expression and experience of loneliness.

The theme of appearance vs. reality also runs through the play. Grandmother is concerned above all else with being perceived as the head of a perfect family, with little care for the family's actual relations. Hester adopts her mother's coldness and perception obsessed language when she feels out of control, especially around Baby. Roger loves an idealistic perception of Hester as a homemaker, which results in Hester's isolation within the marriage. Hester lashes out at Baby in *Growing Pains* from jealousy that Roger can love Baby for her "wild mind," while he confines her in a box of domestic expectations. The audience sees how Hester's attempts to keep up impossible appearances not only keep her at arm's length from the men in her life, but isolate her from her daughter as well. Baby finds herself struggling to keep up appearances with her cool friends as her rebellion leaves her internally dissatisfied. At the end, when Baby and Hester decide not to join Grandmother at church, they demolish the perception obsessed aspect of their relationship by defeating the character representative of it. "The Sequence of the Two Marys" helps further this theme through the discussion of Mary Magdalene's reputation, and how this differs from her actual role in the Bible.

The motif of names and naming runs through the play, reflecting the characters' struggle with ownership of their own stories, their own lives. This is first seen in "The Sequence of the

Two Marys” as both Marys struggle with their inability to write their own history, and M. N. forgets her name because her life is oriented around other people. Roger and Hester are named after characters from *The Scarlet Letter* because Hester’s pregnancy recalls that of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s novel, another instance in which famous female characters find themselves molded by a man’s words. Hester cannot bring herself to name Baby due to her lack of personal agency and sense of connection with the world. Grandmother, on the other hand, has no hesitancy in proffering a name for her grandchild, reflecting her intent to run the lives of her family members. In Baby’s unconventional love note to Hester, she offers to help name Hester’s new baby, illustrating the agency the mother-daughter team acquires through their newly developed relationship.

Lastly, the play calls for a series of theatrical elements, which help answer the question *Why should this story be a play and not a movie, or even a piece of prose?* The Stagehands keep the theatrical nature of the piece at the forefront of the audience’s mind. They also emphasize Hester’s lack of agency by setting the scene, literally and figuratively, for Hester’s transitions in and out of flashback. The Stagehands remind me of the male voice’s domination of literature and history. Hester’s ability to fight them off in the end is symbolic of her new-found control over her own story. Other elements, like Hester’s soliloquies, the framing “Sequence of the Two Marys,” the suggestion that all of the male characters may be played by a single actor, and the suggestion that prop and costume pieces accumulate onstage, further add to the theatricality of the piece.

Research and Project Inspiration

Bechdel, Alison. "Mo Movie Measure." In *Dykes to Watch Out For: The Rule*. 1985.

The challenge that has come to be known as "The Bechdel Test" asks if a piece of media 1) includes (at least) two female characters who 2) talk to each other 3) about something other than a man. Appallingly few pieces of media meet these criteria. The test was originally articulated in Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43)*. Poets.org: The Academy of American Poets.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous sonnet epitomizes for me what it means to idealize someone into a state of non-existence, placing them amongst saints.

Carroll, James. "Who Was Mary Magdalene?" *Smithsonian Magazine*. Smithsonian Institute, June 2006. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/?no-ist>.

This article from the Smithsonian Institute traces Mary Magdalene as a cultural figure, looking at the historical origins of her representation beginning with the gospels themselves. Carroll examines the power of, "a portrait of St. Mary Magdalene in which the most consequential note—that she was a repentant prostitute—is almost certainly untrue," and explains, "the dual use to which her legend has been put ever since: discrediting sexuality in general and disempowering women in particular."

Conrad, Browyn. "Neo-Institutionalism, Social Movements, and the Cultural Reproduction of a Mentalité: Promise Keepers Reconstruct the Madonna/Whore Complex." *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no 2 (2006). JSTOR.

An in-depth illustration of the way the language of certain Protestant sects ties sexuality to morality and enforces the Madonna-whore complex.

DeRegatis, Amy. "What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present." *Church History* 74, no. 1 (2005). American Society of Church History.

An examination of the language used by some Protestant sects to talk about sex during the lifespans of the characters in *What My Mother Told Me*.

EW Staff. "50 Greatest Plays of the Past 100 Years." Entertainment Weekly, July 13, 2013. http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20712079_20716984_21360318,00.html#21360260.

I want to thank Entertainment Weekly's article for including only seven plays by women playwrights in this list, and of those, only five prominently featuring women characters.

Gottschal, Jonathan, Elizabeth Allison, Jay De Rosa, and Kaia Klockeman. "Can Literary Study Be Scientific? Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: Penn State University Press* 7 no. 2 (2006). JSTOR.

A group of researchers at Penn State use methods of multiple coder content analysis on 240 randomly selected plot and character summaries of pieces of Western canonical literature as well as 658 randomly selected folk tales from 48 different cultural areas in order to scientifically illustrate the Madonna-whore dichotomy in literature.

King James Bible. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Press, 1973.

Hester's experience of wanting to write a scene in which the two Marys attempt to communicate using only the words that are attributed to them in the Bible, and of being thwarted upon realizing the women did not have enough lines, comes directly from my personal experience of attempting to write such a scene.

Klocko, Jannette Fox. *Almost, Maine*. 2007. The Harpeth Hall School. written by John Cariani.

This production of Cariani's *Almost, Maine*, produced by the first highschool I attended in Nashville, Tennessee, included a silent love story between the actual stagehands who changed the sets in between scenes dressed as eskimos. This production's whimsical addition is where I got the inspiration to write in the Stagehands' role in *What My Mother Told Me*.

Leeming, David. "Religion and Sexuality: The Perversion of a Natural Marriage." *Journal of Religion and Health* 42 no. 26 (2003). JSTOR.

Leeming's article describes the natural connection between religion and sexuality, how sexuality came to be taboo within Abrahamic religions, and how this taboo led to the repression of women and criminalization of sexuality.

Leiter, Sarah. *Christianese: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Evangelical Dialect of American English*. Atlanta: Emory University, 2013.

A sociolinguistic analysis of a dialect of Southern Protestant evangelicalism. By analyzing Christian dating websites, the dissertation focuses on the dialect itself as well as the way it shapes speakers' perceptions of gender roles and sexuality.

Lucille Smith, 1926—2013

My grandmother, Lucille Smith, served as the main inspiration for the judgements and jealousies women hold for one another in *What My Mother Told Me*, and particularly the misconstrued ways these are articulated when one does not have full agency over one's own life. A Southern preacher's daughter, much of her life was oriented around the Protestant church. If she had lived to read this play, she may have died of embarrassment. Or she may have cried at sentiments that she never got around to expressing (she was not very good with words). Who knows? She was also a wonderful example of people's ability to change over time.

"Mary Magdalene." *Religions*. BBC, British Broadcasting Company, 2011.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/marymagdalene.shtml>

The BBC's article, amongst other things, does an excellent job of separating Mary Magdalene's role in the Bible from her role in our collective memories as a prostitute, further explaining misrepresentations of her in art.

Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. New York: Samuel French, 2008.

I drew inspiration from *Eurydice* for "The Sequence of the Two Marys," looking at how Ruhl re-imagines mythic figures using modern dialogue in a way that still sets the characters apart from the ordinary and makes them feel timeless.

Wellton, Estela. *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*. London: Karnac Books, 1992.

Psychophysiologist Estela Wellton discusses Freud's humble beginnings of the Madonna-whore complex, and analyzes the psychological effects of both society's idealization and denigration of motherhood on her patients. She further discusses ways in which perversions of womanhood are passed down from mother to daughter.