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Child of Divorce: A Play

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Child of Divorce: A Play

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Bachelor of Fine Arts Musical Theater

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the effect of divorce on adult and young-adult children through the context of a play. The play examines this event from several perspectives: the divorcing parents, the children, and a friend of the children who herself has been a child of divorce. I wanted to tell a story that addressed the pervasive issue of divorce and its effect on the family. I felt equipped to tell this story because of my own experience as a child of divorce, my training as an actor, and my participation in the Musical Theater Writing class taught by former faculty member Ryan Scott Oliver. With the story telling tools I learned through studying famous and influential playwrights, and the technical aspects of storytelling I learned in class, I believe I was able to tell an interesting and compelling story.

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Introduction

Child of Divorce is a one act play that tells the story of a small family coping with marital problems and subsequent fallout. Through conversations between siblings, friends, and parents, these characters reveal how they feel about each other, their lives, and such societal concepts as marriage and the importance of the family unit.

Creative Process

The inception for the concept of this play actually occurred well before the thesis was officially assigned. Being a child of divorce myself, I felt that I wanted to tell a compelling story about this all-too-common family crisis. According to the American Psychological Association, about 40-50% of married couples in the United States divorce, making this a hugely common phenomenon. Though the story I tell is not auto-biographical in nature, it tells a relatable story that hopefully connects with many readers; both those that are members of 'broken' families and those who are not.

As I mentioned earlier, I myself am a child of divorce. When I was in the seventh grade, my parents sat me and my older sister down at the dining room table and told us they were separating. At the time, I did not know what that meant, especially since they were still living under the same roof and most of lives seemed unchanged. Things escalated when my dad moved out. Their apparent attempt at saving their marriage through 'trying to date each other again and find the spark' had failed, and the marriage was no longer redeemable. At this time, I was in the eighth grade and my older sister was in her final year of high school.

The following years included my growing realization of my parents' animosities towards each other and their divorce, even retroactively, seemed to make more and more sense. Me

and my siblings became proxies for this cold war that was happening between our parents, passing along messages and absorbing arguments and grievances between our feuding parents.

This experience has had a significant impact on my life and my perspective on the purpose of relationships. Since parents are vastly responsible for the development of their children both socially and personally, it comes as no surprise that a failed marriage would have this type of impact on love and relationships. Though this story may not have actually happened in real life, the prevalence of divorce in modern times makes it a relatable and convincing story.

This story was originally conceived at a time in my life when I felt aimless and creatively handicapped as I was taking time off between high school and college to apply to schools for theater instead of physics. The title was to be originally abbreviated as "C.O.D." in an homage to the Kyle Patrick Alvarez film, *C.O.G.* starring Jonathan Groff. The stories had practically nothing to do with each other, but I admired the movie and I appreciated the way it told an uncomfortable story in an authentic and engaging way.

It was from this point that the original concept for the story was born. Originally titled "C.O.D.", the play was about a family of three: two parents and their 17-year-old. The parents decided to get a divorce without telling their son because of literature they had both read about the negative impact that a divorce would have on their son's perspective on relationships and the family unit. Since he was so close to being in college anyway, they thought they could prolong the inevitable until that point and would speak in code/abbreviations with each other to avoid detection. In the first draft, the son ultimately found out anyway and was therefore affected more because of their attempted deceit. I ultimately decided though, that this version

was not telling the story that I wanted to tell and I decided to go back and rewrite where I scrapped almost everything except for the theme of divorce.

The current script involves not a family of three, but a family of four, which introduces a different family dynamic, and allows me to develop additional relationships between the characters. Instead of one child being the only object of attention, two children spreads the attention among the parents and introduces a dynamic between the two brothers that can comment on the state of affairs in the family as a whole.

I tried to write the script with naturalistic and modern dialogue so that readers (or audience members) would be able to identify and connect with the characters quickly and with more ease than if the script was written in a more elevated manner. I also use this as a tool to demonstrate both the setting of the play and give the actor or audience an insight into who these characters are.

Literary Analysis

Much of the research I did for this project revolved around the effect that divorce had on children, mostly psychologically. However, I was able to find some sources that suggested investigated effects at other stages in life, and were therefore more pertinent to the story I was attempting to tell. For example, in their article “Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course” in the journal *American Sociological Review*, researchers Andrew Cherlin, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Christine McRae found that parental divorce during childhood or adolescence continues to have an effect when a person is in their twenties and

thirties. They also found that those whose parents divorce later in their life still show the same kind of negative effects as children whose parents divorce earlier, probably due to the fact that marital problems still existed in the time before the report. Regardless, there seems to be an existing effect independent of when the divorce occurred, as they write: “[the report] would suggest that this childhood event can set in motion a chain of circumstances that affects individuals’ lives even after they have left home, married, and entered the labor force” (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 247). This study suggests that divorce and marital problems will both continue to affect children later into life than previously thought. This conclusion supports the parents’ decision in my play to try and obscure the fact that they are having significant marital problems that are leading to divorce.

This is also experienced in different ways by the two brothers in the story: the younger brother (Marcus) is more present during the majority of the problems his parents face and is therefore callous and cynical, whereas his older brother who has been living away from home for most of the marital issues is less likely to believe there is anything wrong. According to the findings of this research, there should be a difference in the severity of the effect that the divorce has on the each of the children.

I also wanted to capture a realistic perspective among the parents, and since I have never been a part of a long term relationship ending in divorce, I looked again to my research to inform the decisions and perspectives of my characters. In their article “Reasons for Divorce: Perspectives of Divorcing Men and Women,” contributors Lynn Gigy PhD and Joan B. Kelly investigated some of the more common reasons that divorcing couples cited as the source of their marital problems. In emotionally-involved problems such as divorce, there are so many

subjective variables and circumstances that make it hard to use broad terms with specific definitions, but Gigy and Kelly used a checklist with common reasons and asked couples which factors they felt were pertinent to their marital conflict. According to their study, among the most commonly cited factors were unmet emotional needs, growing apart, boredom with the marriage, and lifestyle differences. Since these are largely emotional states of being, they are hard to define in a concrete way, but they provided a solid foundation on which to build my characters and the plot of the play.

Since it was a commonly cited reason for divorce, and mirrored my own life experience to some extent, I chose to use the reason of 'growing apart' to define the marital trouble my characters were experiencing. For adults who find themselves in unfulfilling or difficult relationships, it can be difficult to take the necessary steps toward addressing and ultimately fixing any dissatisfaction within the relationship. Personality and past experience also have a role in determining the level of effort a partner may be willing to exert into improving the status of their relationship. In her 2016 article "Conflict or Divorce? Does Parental Conflict and/or Divorce Increase the Likelihood of Adult Children's Cohabiting and Marital Dissolution" in the journal *Marriage and Family Review*, author Constance T. Gager found that people who experienced lots of family conflict are more likely to suffer from psychological complications related to family trauma; however, divorce itself was not found to be solely responsible. In fact, divorce actually served to calm family conflict and therefore decreased the likelihood that children would experience cohabiting dissolution.

This is a theme that I use within the context of my play, as one of the parents already believes that a divorce will serve to mediate some of the conflict. Rather than creating an

environment that will generate more conflict, and therefore adversely affect their younger child, one of the parents thinks a divorce is the best course of action. If this research is taken to be wholly true, then the father who is pushing for divorce is actually (knowing or unknowingly) taking steps to improve his younger son's life and cohabiting situation further down the road. Whether this is part of either of the parent's decision making process is left to be ambiguous though, as the purpose of this story is to demonstrate that even adults and parents are people who have their own emotions separate from anyone else in their family, and that these people make mistakes, because even though they have a different level of responsibility, they are still humans.

I also wanted to show that the effects of divorce can manifest differently in different people: This is how the character Stephanie was introduced into the play as well as her offstage (mentioned but never seen) younger sister Ellie. It was important to me to include another perspective on divorce, and see the effects taking place later in a family's development alongside the events of the play. I also thought it would be more beneficial to the main characters to have a friend present that they could seek council with at various times in the play. In the academic journal *Social Development*, authors Katherine H. Shelton and Gordon T. Harold wrote an article entitled "Marital Conflict and Children's Adjustment: The Mediating and Moderating Role of Children's Coping Strategies" which investigated children's venting of negative emotion, social support seeking, and problem solving strategies and their effect on the link between marital conflict and child psychological health and adjustment. They discovered the role that non-constructive coping strategies had on children's psychological health, and I wanted to represent some of these "non-constructive" coping strategies within the play

without making them a primary focus. I used Ellie's character to depict some of these strategies from a third person perspective: an element that was never seen explicitly on stage, but was a topic of conversation for the other characters (they comment on her habit of drug and alcohol use/abuse, and conflict with parents). Similar results were found by Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly in their book *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce*, where they observed: "For children and adolescents, the separation and its aftermath was the most stressful period of their lives. The family rupture evoked an acute sense of shock, intense fears and grieving which the children found overwhelming" (Wallerstein and Kelly 35). With an event as personally significant and potentially traumatic to a child as divorce, it is documented and logical that children will take steps to detach themselves or attempt to avoid this situation.

These behaviors are a result of the psychological trauma that a divorce with much marital conflict before the separation would impart on a susceptible child. I consciously decided to make the two sisters have different reactions to their parents' divorce because I wanted to mirror the dynamic in the other family, and show the different impact divorce can have on children of varying ages.

In some instances though, the relationship that parents have with their kids does not reflect the other marital problems taking place. In fact, some parents put more emphasis on the relationships they have with their kids as an outlet for the strained relationship they have with their spouse or ex-spouse. Wallerstein and Kelly wrote about this occurrence in their book as well:

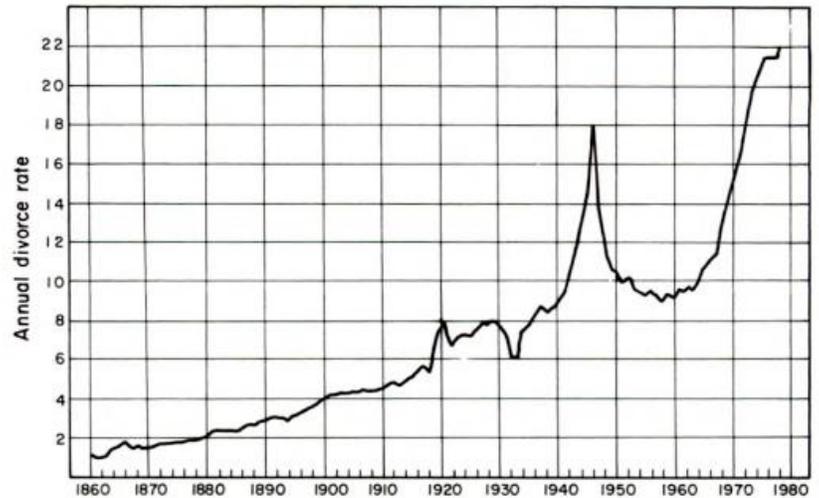
In a significant number of conflict-ridden households, the parents were loving and supportive of the children's physical and emotional development. The quality of father-

child relationships ranged from good enough to exceptionally good for at least one-fifth of the children. Similarly, the mother-child relationship was good enough to exceptionally good for one-third of the group. One-quarter of the children had two committed parents. Three-quarters of the children had a mother who was physically available to them when they needed her presence. One-half of the children had a physically available father. Furthermore, whereas only a tiny fraction (5 percent) of the married couples were able to communicate well with each other, at least one-quarter of the fathers and one third of the mothers were able to communicate very well with their children (Wallerstein and Kelly 15).

What these statistics seem to show, is that in many dissolving families, many parents still put an emphasis on their relationships with their kids. Not only do these parents obviously care for the ultimate well-being of their children, but these relationships serve as a source of comfort that their spouse is not meeting. However, even though these statistics say that a significant number of parents are there for their children in times of divorce, they also show that there is a significant portion of people that do not have good relationships with their children. This is ultimately where Ellie and Stephanie lie on the scale of things, and why Ellie has unhealthy behaviors resulting from her parents' conflict. Alternatively, Marcus and John's parents, Paul and Marissa, do make an effort to connect to their children and support them despite their own marital dissolution.

The prevalence of divorce in this story (it affects every family in the play) is meant to be an observation of the current state of marriage in the United States, mirroring the trend of divorce rates rising steadily since the mid 19th century. As Andrew Cherlin writes in his book

Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage: “The divorce rate, however, has been rising since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. Figure 1-4 shows the number of divorces per 1,000 existing marriages (after 1920, per 1,000 married women) in every year



between 1860 (the earliest year for which data are available) and 1978” (Cherlin 22). The rate has continued to increase since Cherlin wrote his book, and it was this level of societal impact that informed the widespread prevalence in my play.

I also found it interesting that the rate of divorce would have such drastic fluctuations due to culturally significant events like war or depression. Similarly, the feminist movements in the middle to end of the twentieth century had quite an impact on the rate of divorce.

Child of Divorce

Lights up on a backyard graduation party. There are plastic tables and chairs scattered around the stage with decorations like balloons and a banner hung on the side of a house reading "Happy Grad-uation!" The party guests are in a small circle surrounding one of the tables:

PAUL: (Raising his glass) Wow, what a year! I'm so glad that you were all able to join us to celebrate Marcus here graduating high school! And on the dean's list, at that!

MARCUS: (Lowering his glass momentarily) Alright dad, calm down

PAUL: Let me brag a bit! (Back to the group) Not everyone gets as lucky as us to have not one, but TWO bright and wonderful kids. So I just want to raise a glass one more time to Marcus, Cheers!

Everyone standing around the table raises a glass and loudly toasts Marcus.

PAUL: Thank you again everyone for coming, please feel free to stay as long as you'd like. We've got food and drinks to spare so make sure you see me before you leave so you can take some home!

The small crowd around the table slowly disperses to different areas of the yard. Throughout the next couple minutes people should slowly make their way over to Paul and Marissa before

leaving the party so that only Stephanie, Marcus, Paul, Marissa, and John are left. During this time also, Stephanie, Marcus, and John all make their way to a table on SR, away from their parents and the rest of the guests.

STEPHANIE: Ya know, part of me really can't believe that you're already graduating high school.

When I first met you, you were like... 7

MARCUS: (*lightly*) I think I was 12, actually?

STEPHANIE: That may be true, but it sure felt like you were 7! But anyway, it's so cool to see you all grown up is all

MARCUS: Tell you the truth, it feels good to be all grown up!

JOHN: Well, relatively speaking anyway. (laughing) Steph, don't you remember our sage 18-year-old wisdom?

STEPHANIE: Oh how could I forget! (To Marcus) You know what I meant by grown up, right?

MARCUS: Yeah, yeah I know. Still much to learn

JOHN: By the way, I think I'm out of the loop on this one, but did mom and dad say you had picked a major yet?

MARCUS: Yeah, actually! I ended up deciding on environmental science with a concentration on chemistry. I was thinking more and more about how I can make a positive impact. And without getting sucked into the depressing black hole that is politics... I thought this was my best bet!

JOHN: That's awesome!

MARCUS: Yeah, and we get tons of research money, apparently, so I can get started pretty much as soon as I get there. Like, I won't have to wait around for two years before they let me do anything interesting.

STEPHANIE: Sounds like you've really thought this through! Well I'm glad we still have people who care enough to actually make a change.

MARCUS: Or try to, anyway.

JOHN: (Raising his glass again) To people who care!

MARCUS and STEPHANIE: (repeating him, raising their glasses) To people who care!

STEPHANIE, John, and MARCUS all take a drink. STEPHANIE and MARCUS end up finishing theirs.

STEPHANIE: (Noticing Marcus' empty glass) What are you drinking? I'm grabbing another one for me, I'll get you something while I'm up!

MARCUS: Oh, I was just having one of those green bottles of beer, not sure which one it was

STEPHANIE: Say no more. Johnny, you all good?

JOHN takes a quick look at the drink in his hand, then shakes his head no.

STEPHANIE: Great. (To Marcus) Be right back!

JOHN: (After a short pause) We really couldn't be more proud of you, man

MARCUS: (giggling a little) Oh yeah, everyone knows graduating high school is the highest achievement imaginable

JOHN: I know you're being sarcastic, but seriously? It's a pretty big deal to graduate with honors, on the deans list, and be on your way to a good university on scholarship.

MARCUS: Yeah, yeah I know. It just feels weird to be celebrating something that feels like it was always such a given. Or not a given, but just...and expectation. Ya know?

JOHN: I feel you there. Try being me and graduating straight in the middle of the pack! It definitely felt weird celebrating that.

MARCUS: Well, maybe. But you ended up being successful a little bit later. So maybe it was just preemptive celebration

JOHN: Yeah, sure! Let's call it that (he quietly laughs to himself)

MARCUS: So how are things going out there in New York?

JOHN: Oh, no complaints really! It's a been a ton of work, especially in the last couple of months, but the company is doing really well!

MARCUS: How much work is 'a ton' exactly?

At this point, STEPHANIE comes back with three beers in her hands

JOHN: (Still to Marcus) It's about 50 or 60 hours a week when you add it all up, but it's pretty fulfilling and I still feel like I have a semblance of a life, so it's hard to notice sometimes

STEPHANIE: You work 50 or 60 hours a week and don't notice? (looking off into the distance) I want that

STEPHANIE passes a beer to MARCUS, then offers the third bottle to JOHN who looks at it for a moment, then takes it from her.

JOHN: Steph, you know me so well

STEPHANIE: I would I hope I did by now. How long have we been friends?

JOHN: I think it's about 8 years by now?

STEPHANIE: Exactly.

JOHN: (Raising his glass) To friendship

STEPHANIE: To Marcus, and the future (she drinks) Man, you really like doing toasts, huh?

MARCUS: Yes! Let's do another one to me!

They all drink.

MARCUS: Oh, by the way, how's Ellie doing? I haven't seen her in a bit

STEPHANIE: She's good! Well, only kind of, actually

JOHN: Wait, what happened?

STEPHANIE: Oh, nothing happened. Nothing new, anyway. I just don't think she's completely gotten over the whole divorce thing

JOHN: Still? (pause) I don't mean to sound insensitive, but... wasn't that a while ago?

STEPHANIE: Yeah, no you're right, it has been a bit.. And I think I may have worded that wrong. She's over it emotionally, but I guess I mean her behavior never went back to normal. She still hangs out with that crowd who parties three times a weekend. Whatever freedom we got from the miscommunication between our parents she always took full advantage of

JOHN: Wait, really? I had no idea

STEPHANIE: That's the thing. No one really knew. She was still doing well in school and never got caught or anything so it didn't raise any red flags

MARCUS: How did she get around your parents though?

STEPHANIE: Well when they had just announced they were getting a deivorce, they were especially... (pause) hostile. And distracted. We could basically just say we were hanging out with a friend or staying at the other parent's house and then we could disappear for the weekend. They hated each other too much to check, so we got a lot of extra freedom.

JOHN: We did take a bunch of random camping trips 'cause of that

STEPHANIE: Exactly

MARCUS: Wait, I didn't know you did that too

JOHN: Yeah, I actually wanted to pass on some of my gear to you when I heard you got into it too, but I've actually been putting it to good use recently

MARCUS: Well, next time mom and dad are in a fight I'll be asking you which sites to hit

JOHN: Wait, what do you mean?

MARCUS: Oh, like that's when I ask them since they care less

JOHN: Hey, they don't care less

MARCUS: Fine, when they're more distracted than usual. Then that two day trip can turn into a three day trip, ya know?

JOHN: Oh, oh, gotcha. Well yeah. But hopefully, you know, for their sake, they keep the fighting to a minimum.

MARCUS: Eh, I like my chances

JOHN: What's that supposed to mean?

MARCUS: Well I just mean, since you're only ever around anymore for holidays and celebrations and stuff you don't really see it, but they've been at it with each other quite a bit in the last little while. (To Stephanie) Actually since about the time your parents split. Or at least that's when I started to notice it more. I don't know, maybe they were always fighting, but now they don't care if I'm there or anything

JOHN: How come you didn't tell me about this?

MARCUS: Well I just didn't know what to think. For the most part, they seem happy enough. Sometimes, they just..

JOHN: Listen, everyone fights. It doesn't mean the relationship is failing

MARCUS: You're probably right

STEPHANIE: And also it's an especially stressful time of the year so that doesn't help.

MARCUS: Yeah

STEPHANIE: Take it from me, as someone who saw their parents go through all that firsthand, your guys' parents look like they're in pretty good shape, in my "expert opinion" (she laughs quietly to herself for a moment, then pauses while keeping her eyes low, spacing out a bit) Anyway, you guys still down to come over after all this? (To Marcus) I know Ellie would love to see you (to John) and you know my mom absolutely loves you.

JOHN: Yeah, definitely. Just got to clear it with the parents before we head out but that should be fine. Marcus?

MARCUS: Yeah, sounds good to me!

STEPHANIE: Cool, I'll head out now then and I'll see you guys over there.

All three stand up, STEPHANIE hugs MARCUS then JOHN, then goes over to PAUL and MARISSA while MARCUS and JOHN continue to talk, still standing.

JOHN: We should probably clean up some of this stuff before we go, too. Probably better not to leave mom and dad with everything while we just take off.

MARCUS: Good call, want to grab me a trash bag from inside?

JOHN: Sure thing

Blackout. End Scene

SCENE 2

PAUL and MARISSA are sitting at the dining room table in their house. PAUL is wearing his reading glasses and reading the newspaper while MARISSA sits at her laptop, typing. Each of them have a mug for tea in front of them and we can tell that it's dark outside. The scene starts with about 10 full seconds of silence.

MARISSA: I forget, did the boys say when they'd be back?

PAUL: (not looking up from the paper) They said late, I think

MARISSA: I know. But they didn't say a time, did they?

PAUL: Not that I can remember

MARISSA: Me neither. Would you mind texting them and asking?

PAUL: Why can't you?

MARISSA: Well, my phone is in the other room so I thought it would be easier if you just did it.

PAUL: I don't have my phone with me either

MARISSA: Oh, I thought you did

PAUL: Well I don't.

MARISSA: (After a short moment of staring at him) Is everything okay?

PAUL: (He barely looks up as he answers) Yes. Why do you ask?

MARISSA: You're being very short with me. I just want to make sure everything's okay

PAUL: (after a brief pause) Actually, there's something I want to talk to you about

MARISSA: (fearfully) Oh god, oh I knew it / (she stands) I could tell something was off at the party, but I didn't want to say anything because Susan said that I was overreacting but I ...

PAUL: (over MARISSA's lines) Marissa, now wait a second. Hold on, I just want to talk to you. Will you please stop talking like that?

MARISSA: Fine.. What do you need to talk to me about?

PAUL: I want a divorce

MARISSA: (After a long, uncomfortable pause) You want a divorce. (pause) After 25 years you want a divorce.

PAUL: Marissa, you have to admit, we've been growing apart for some time now. I feel like we've become such different people since we got married. Every time we go to the marriage counselor it gets harder and harder to be honest about how I'm actually feeling because I'm using all my energy to try and make things work

MARISSA: I thought we talked about this with Doctor Rosenstein though. We're growing, as people do, but we're growing together. That's the whole point of marriage

PAUL: Don't you understand though? That's the whole point of marriage and I'm telling you I don't feel that way, so that's why I say I want a divorce

By this time, MARISSA is standing on the opposite end of the kitchen from PAUL. She is leaning on the counter with both arms and her head held low. We can't see, but we can hear in her voice that there are tears in her eyes.

MARISSA: So you don't love me anymore?

PAUL: Marissa...

MARISSA: Just say that you don't.

PAUL: I can't.

MARISSA: Why not?

PAUL: Because I still do, but...

MARISSA: But what?

PAUL: But it's not that simple. We don't live in a fairytale. This is real life. Love isn't enough anymore

MARISSA: So that's it then? Love isn't enough, so you're just giving up? You're not even going to try to work on us, and do what needs to be done to make us work?

PAUL: That's what I'm saying to you right now Marissa! I feel like I've been working on us and it's exhausting and I don't see any change at all

MARISSA: I don't even know what you're talking about!

PAUL: Fine, for example today at the party. You just couldn't stop asking me to run around and take care of things all day. When I finally told you I was too busy to grab more plates at that particular moment, you turned to Susan or whoever was there with you and made some comment where you said it's not like you're busy or anything and...

MARISSA: That was a joke! You know how Susan and I are we like to poke fun

PAUL : No, it wasn't. And even if it were, the fact you had me running around the whole party without even offering to help had me absolutely crazy anyway. I didn't get to sit and relax and

talk to my son who we were celebrating or any of my friends for more than 5 minutes because then the grill needed to be checked, or the cooler needed to be refilled, or we needed more plates, or I had to clean up the spill in the kitchen

MARISSA: You know you could have asked me to help any time!

PAUL: And then listen to you complain about how you do everything? Believe me, it was easier just to run around. Except then I had all this frustration myself –

MARISSA: Jesus, Paul you make it sound like you're my dad and I'm you disobedient 12 year old. We're adults, and we're married adults, don't you think we communicate more effectively than that?

PAUL: I really don't! And that's why I want a divorce!

At that moment, the front door opens and closes

JOHN: (from offstage) Hey mom and dad, we're home!

MARISSA: We'll talk about this more later

PAUL: Fine

JOHN and MARCUS enter and greet their parents with hugs as they talk. PAUL seems quiet and somewhat distant, while MARISSA seems to put on a happy face

MARISSA: How was Stephanie's?

JOHN: It was good! Ellie was having her own little graduation thing.

MARISSA: Oh, lovely. You told her mom I said hi, right?

JOHN: Of course

MARISSA: Okay good. Can I make you some tea or anything?

JOHN and MARCUS look back at each other and shrug

MARCUS: Actually, I'm good. I'm probably just gonna head to bed

JOHN: Yeah, me too. It's been a long day

MARISSA: Are you sure?

JOHN: Yeah, I'm sure. Oh, and for tomorrow are we still trying to do a big family breakfast?

MARISSA: Your cousins had to cancel but I think we're on with everyone else

JOHN: Awesome! Alright sounds like a plan. Anyway, I'm gonna call it a night. Marcus?

MARCUS: Goodnight mom and dad!

JOHN: (as he's leaving) Love you both

MARCUS: Yeah, love you!

MARISSA: (as they leave) I love you both more than you know!

Blackout. End Scene

SCENE 3

In MARCUS' bedroom that same night. There are boxes everywhere and the walls are mostly bare save for a few posters that seem almost cliché for a teenage boy's room: There is a pulp fiction movie poster, the one Levi's ad where it's the woman's butt but the pocket and label are drawn on her in sharpie, and the poster of Einstein sticking out his tongue. JOHN and MARCUS

are both sitting on the floor, MARCUS leaning up against the end of the bed and JOHN leaning back on his hands in the middle of the floor.

MARCUS: I feel like they had to know I was stoned as hell

JOHN: Nah, I think you totally nailed it. I'll be they don't suspect a thing

MARCUS: True, I mean did you see dad? He was probably high as fuck himself

JOHN: He did look super spacey

MARCUS: Kevin Spacey!

JOHN: (pause) What?

MARCUS: Oh... I don't know. You just said spacey so I thought of Kevin Spacey

JOHN: Can't talk about that guy anymore though, remember?

MARCUS: The guy's a pedophile and an asshole, but it doesn't mean you can't say his name.

He's not the uh... the... what's the horror movie where when you say the name the thing shows up?

JOHN: Beetlejuice?

MARCUS: No, not beetlejuice. Also that's not even a horror movie. (pause) OH! The bogeyman!

He's not the bogeyman

JOHN: Are you sure the bogeyman shows up when you say its name? I thought the bogeyman was the one that punished kids

MARCUS: Well whatever, you get what I meant

JOHN: Yeah. Yeah, I got you.

MARCUS: What were we even talking about again?

JOHN: Uhh, Bogeyman, Kevin Spacey, Dad being spacey... I think that's it

MARCUS: Oh, yeah. I thought it was kinda weird he was just sitting there..

JOHN: It's weird to just sit there?

MARCUS: That's not what I'm saying –

JOHN: (laughing) That's exactly what you were saying though

MARCUS: No, what I meant was like, didn't he just look unhappy. Like, out of it for sure. But like the bad kind of out of it.

JOHN: I don't know, I didn't really see that. He just looked tired to me

MARCUS: You're really telling me you don't think anything's up between them?

JOHN: Like I said before, man, I just think they have their ups and downs like everyone else. If there were something seriously up, don't you think they would tell us?

MARCUS: But you have to see the other side of that argument; they wouldn't want to tell us before anything was official so we don't freak out over nothing, right?

JOHN: You seem pretty stressed about them. Have you tried talking to them about it? Or at least talking to someone about it? Are you still seeing your therapist?

MARCUS: No, they stopped making me go and I really felt like I was wasting time there so I decided to stop.

JOHN: You could always go back!

MARCUS: (grinning) What are you trying to say, huh?

JOHN: (grinning back) Oh shut up, you know I didn't mean anything by it

MARCUS: I know, I know. I'm just messing with you

JOHN: Come on, man. Don't mess with me when I'm high, that's fucked up

MARCUS: What? You do it to me all the time!

JOHN: If I do, and that is not confirming that I do, it comes from a place of brotherly love so that doesn't count.

MARCUS: That doesn't even make sense

JOHN: Sure it does! You're just high

MARCUS: You're doing it again

JOHN: Doing what?

MARCUS: You're playing mind games again

JOHN: (laughing) Yeah, I definitely am

MARCUS: Whatever man

JOHN: Hey, you know I don't mean anything by it. It's just part of an older brother's responsibility to mess with his little brother a little bit. (pause) So, what are we watching tonight?

JOHN stands up from the floor and throws himself down onto the bed and turns on a projector sitting next to MARCUS' bed that shines a light straight out into the audience. MARCUS also picks himself off the floor and onto the bed.

JOHN: I still can't believe dad gave you this thing. The whole wall is your TV!

MARCUS: It's been pretty awesome. And I was thinking something dumb and funny.

JOHN: Have you seen 'Fast Times' yet?

MARCUS: No, what's that?

JOHN: Oh, it's a good one. It's this movie from the 80's about all the crazy shit that goes down at this one high school. I think you'll like.

MARCUS: Alright then, sounds good to me. Throw it on

Blackout. End Scene

SCENE 4

Lights up in a restaurant where there is a nice table set with white place settings. The restaurant is clean and elegant, Around the table sit a large family. PAUL and MARISSA are sitting next to each other with PAUL at the head and MARISSA to his side. JOHN and MARCUS are sitting next to each other a few seats down from their parents. (For this scene, other characters are having their own conversations, but quietly or silently, and the featured conversation can be heard over the din).

MARCUS: What was the point of the whole Spicoli arc?

JOHN: No, that's the point of the movie. It doesn't really have a plot, it just follows the people's lives. And they're all different people so they all have their own stories. Spicoli was just the dumb stoner counterpart to the other characters

MARCUS: But everyone else it seems is tied together throughout the movie more and Spicoli is literally just in his own realm the entire time

DANIEL: You have a point there, but think about this: That movie would be horribly depressing without that bit of comic relief

JOHN: Not only that, if you're mad about the Spicoli plot line, why aren't you mad about the Brad plotline. He is also secondary to the main four characters but he still gets a bunch of screen time too.

MARCUS: Yeah, but at least he's Stacy's older brother so he's more relevant than Spicoli. The only relationship that Spicoli has with the rest of the cast is that he happens to go to the same high school as the rest of them.

DANIEL: But I once read that the movie is based on a book that a guy wrote after he went undercover at some high school in San Diego. So you know he saw that dude in real life and was like 'this isn't relevant at all to the rest of the stuff I see, but that character is too perfect to not include in the final draft.'

JOHN: Actually that would make a lot of sense

MARCUS: Yeah, I buy that

JOHN: Why do you know so much about *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*, Daniel?

DANIEL: I just watched that movie a lot when I was his age (gesturing to Marcus) so I read up on it and such. Plus it's just a good movie, what's with all the questions

Focus changes to the end of the table where PAUL and MARISSA are seated. Their roles have seemingly reversed: PAUL is seemingly putting on an attitude that everything is okay and MARISSA is staring blankly at her plate

PAUL: What do you reckon they talk about?

MARISSA: I can't believe you're doing this to me

PAUL: Marissa -

MARISSA: No. I can't deal with you right now.

PAUL: I'm not doing anything to you

MARISSA: It's taking every ounce of me to not burst out crying in this restaurant right now and you're trying to make casual conversation with me? I shouldn't have even come to this.

PAUL: Don't say that..

MARISSA: Whatever. Let's just get through this meal and we can talk more later.

PAUL: Fine, if you want to talk more later we can. But I feel like I've said everything I need to say

Our focus is taken back to where JOHN, DANIEL and MARCUS are, then DANIEL clinks his glass and stands

DANIEL: Everyone! Everyone! Can I get your attention please! I would just like to say how lucky we are that we get to be a part of this wonderful family, and that we can all come together to celebrate Marky Mark here. There is so much love at this table and it's a day like today where we can really just enjoy each other and this wonderful food.

At this moment, MARISSA sniffles, places her napkin onto her plate and leaves stage as discreetly as she can

DANIEL: (Noticing MARISSA leaving, and addressing MARCUS and JOHN again) I didn't think I was doing *that* bad, but that's okay.

PAUL: I'll go check on her

DANIEL: Alright then. (raising his glass) Anyway, here's to Marcus! Congratulations again and we can't wait to see what else is to come

The crowd all lift their glasses and take a drink with DANIEL, and DANIEL takes his seat

DANIEL: (To MARCUS and JOHN) Hey, uh, any idea what that was about?

MARCUS:(To JOHN) Told you things can't be going well

JOHN: You know what, I should probably check on her too. Just in case

JOHN puts his napkin down, stands and follows his parents offstage, as we transition to just outside the restaurant on the street. PAUL and MARISSA cannot be seen since they are hidden behind some trees, but their voices can be heard

MARISSA: I can't pretend that everything's okay like you can

PAUL: I didn't force you to come to this. I asked you if you wanted to cancel and you said no

MARISSA: Because today isn't about me! We're here for Marcus. That's why I'm here; that's why everyone in there is here.

PAUL: Of course, I –

MARISSA: But you didn't care. You knew this was going to destroy me and you told it to me anyway, right at a time where I can't escape any of it at all

PAUL: Again, no one is making you pretend anything. If you want to go home right now, you can go home right now! No one will be mad at you for it. I'll just tell them you weren't feeling well and you can walk away right now. You don't have to 'keep pretending' if you don't want to!

JOHN: (finally getting the courage to speak) Um, mom?...dad?

PAUL and MARISSA are revealed. JOHN looks horrified. There is an uncomfortable silence between all three of them. PAUL is frozen, looking at JOHN, and MARISSA is staring blankly at the floor with tears in her eyes.

JOHN: What's going on?

PAUL: Your mother and I are just having a conversation

MARISSA: (talking over PAUL) Your father and I are getting a divorce.

PAUL looks back at MARISSA, slightly stunned that she said it so matter of fact and seems to be on board now, then he looks back to JOHN as he speaks.

JOHN: You're what?

PAUL: I wanted to wait to tell you and your brother until after the graduation and Marissa and I had gotten a chance to talk about, but yes. We're getting a divorce.

Without a word, JOHN backs up slowly a few paces, then turns around and walks back into the restaurant quickly, but deliberately. PAUL hangs his head as JOHN leaves, then turns back to
MARISSA

PAUL: (pause) If you want to leave, I'll cover for you. Otherwise, I think it's time to go back inside

MARISSA: Please, just give me one minute. I'll be back inside soon.

PAUL nods, then walks back into the restaurant after JOHN. MARISSA is left alone. She finds a place to sit and reaches into her bag where she pulls out a pack of cigarettes, puts one in her mouth and lights it. She smokes quietly until PAUL comes back onstage.

PAUL: They're not in there – Are you smoking right now?

MARISSA: What do you care?

PAUL: (exasperated) Whatever. But John and Marcus aren't in there

MARISSA: What do you mean they're not in there?

PAUL: I went back in and didn't see either of them so I asked Daniel where they went and he doesn't know. Just that John came back inside, whispered something to Marcus and they both left

MARISSA: Well I didn't see them leave through here so where could they have gone?

Blackout. End Scene

SCENE 5

Only half the stage is lit. On the lit half of the stage is a rental car seen from the front with two passengers inside (JOHN and MARCUS). The other half of the stage remains in the dark for the first part of the scene, it is also of a car, but it's PAUL and MARISSA's car.

Inside JOHN's rental car, JOHN is driving and MARCUS is in the passenger seat.

JOHN: Thanks for coming with me, man. I just had to get out of there

MARCUS: I totally get it. That's a pretty big bombshell

JOHN: Not for you apparently. You saw it coming

MARCUS: It's still a bombshell to find out for sure though.. (pause) Are you okay?

JOHN: I'm not sure yet. Are you okay?

MARCUS: Pretty much same.. Where are we going anyways?

JOHN: Oh, there's this one spot off the road up in the hills we would always go back in high school. When the sky was clear you could practically see straight out to the ocean, over the top of everything and everyone down there. It always helped me clear my head then, so hopefully it can still do the same now.

MARCUS: Sounds good to me. (after a short pause) You're not gonna like, jump off the cliff or anything, are you?

JOHN: What?

MARCUS: Sorry, kidding. Bad time for a joke, I get it

JOHN: Oh, no (giggling to himself), but to answer your question no. I'm not going to jump off the cliff

MARCUS: Okay, good

JOHN: I'd call it more of a steep hill with rocks at the bottom

MARCUS: Dude

JOHN: Hey, you can't dish it out if you can't take

MARCUS: Fair. But just to be clear, we're not throwing ourselves down any geological features, correct?

JOHN: No, of course not. I just want to go up there to clear my head. And see the view.

MARCUS: Alright then. How far up here is it, anyway?

JOHN: Not too much further! Just be patient, I promise it's worth the wait. In all honesty, I figured you would have been up here yourself by now. I feel like everyone came up here at least to party and smoke and stuff.

MARCUS: I didn't get invited to most of that. And the people who did invite me places were the kids that had cool parents who let you smoke in the house and stuff. Plus, this a pretty long haul from home.

JOHN: Cool parents... what a concept

MARCUS: Hey man, our parents are pretty cool

JOHN: Well, it'd be cooler if they stayed together

MARCUS: (pause) It's gonna be okay, one way or the other

JOHN: I don't doubt things will be okay in general. I just want them to be okay. I want them to be happy. They did the craziest thing any two humans can do and agreed to spend the rest of

their lives with each other because they loved each other so much they couldn't imagine life without one another. And now they can't imagine being together for one more second...

(pause) What changed?

MARCUS: I mean, if you ask me, *they* changed

JOHN: How so, they seem like the same parents I've always had

MARCUS: Well, sure. They're obviously still the same people. But their priorities are different. Their attitudes are different. Dad stays at work later than he has to so he doesn't have to come home to mom. Mom is frustrated by Dad not being there. It's impossible to say who started it or how it happened, it just did. Life happened and they reacted and it just pushed them apart.

JOHN: Do you think it's because I left?

MARCUS: I mean, I only know my side of the story, but I don't think it had anything to do with us

JOHN: Oh, by the way I texted Stephanie to meet us up here, is that cool with you?

MARCUS: Yeah, of course. Whatever you gotta do

JOHN: I just didn't want to surprise you or take away from 'brother time' or anything

MARCUS: Totally, but it's fine by me so no worries

At this point, the lights switch and the other half of the stage is revealed. MARISSA is driving and PAUL is in the passenger seat. PAUL has his cell phone pressed to his ear.

PAUL: Neither of them are picking up their phones

MARISSA: Well is it ringing at all or is it going straight to voicemail? Maybe their phones are off

PAUL: No, Marissa. It rings for one or two rings then it goes to voicemail. That means they're seeing that we're calling and ignoring it

MARISSA: I know what it means, Paul

PAUL: Jesus, Marissa. This isn't the time to be short or rude to me!

MARISSA: I'm sorry, I'm just worried

PAUL: (pause) I know, I am too. (pause) Listen, I want to apologize for throwing this on you as abruptly as I did. I honestly thought you felt the same way

MARISSA: I thought about it before... but I wanted to make things work

PAUL: That's the point I'm ? We don't have to be miserable while we always try to work things out. I genuinely think this will make us both happier

MARISSA: You really think this will make me happier?

PAUL: Maybe not right now. Maybe not in a year. But down the road, when you can be the person you want to be without having to take what I think into account. Or what anyone thinks if you don't want to

MARISSA quickly moves her hands around the steering wheel.

PAUL: Where are you going?

MARISSA: Home

PAUL: But we still don't know where John and Marcus went

MARISSA: They'll come back eventually. Just text them that's where we'll be. And until they do, I think we have a lot to talk about.

PAUL: (as he types) Marissa, I told you. I don't know what else to say

MARISSA: I'm done fighting you on this. You obviously won't change your mind. That's not what we have to talk about. We have logistics to sort. We own a home together. We have two adult children. We need to figure out where to go from here.

PAUL: Oh, I see. Then yes, I agree. We should talk. (pause) I texted the John we'll be at home.

Blackout. End Scene

SCENE 6

MARCUS, JOHN, and STEPHANIE are all on the top of a large hill overlooking a valley. The sky is still bright and the sun is out. There is dry grass at the back edge of the stage and loose gravel in front of it where there is a small wooden park bench facing down stage. MARCUS is sitting on the edge of the bench and facing toward JOHN and STEPHANIE, who are standing center stage and facing up stage. JOHN has his arm around STEPHANIE's waist, and STEPHANIE is leaning her head on JOHN's shoulder.

MARCUS: It's a little colder than I thought it was gonna be

JOHN: I have an extra sweatshirt in the car if you want to go grab it

MARCUS: Oh, cool! Thanks, I'll be right back.

MARCUS exits stage right. After he goes, STEPHANIE lifts her head up and looks over at JOHN.

JOHN continues staring straight ahead.

STEPHANIE: Hey

JOHN: (still looking upstage) Hm?

STEPHANIE: Everything's gonna be okay. You know that, right?

JOHN: I do. It's just...(he trails off)

STEPHANIE: (pause) 'It's just' what?

JOHN: (He turns to face her) It's just you have this very specific image of who your parents are.

They're these... almost mystical beings, that bring you into the world and show you how to survive in it. They show you the way things should be, teach you how to be a good person.. And then something that seemed so integral to you about them, something that defined them to

you.. is gone. They're still the same people, but they're also not somehow. (pause) I guess I just feel lost right now.

STEPHANIE: I know what you mean. But I'll tell you something that I realized after my parents split that helped me a lot: Everything made a lot more sense when I just realized that they're people.

JOHN: That simple, huh?

STEPHANIE: Yeah. They're not gods or 'mystical beings' or whatever, they're just people. People who have emotions.. and who make mistakes and, don't always know the answer or the right thing to do

JOHN: (makes a slight grunt of acknowledgement)

STEPHANIE: (She hugs him) Everyone is just... doing the best with what they got

JOHN: (Hugging her back) I know..

They break their hug and step apart, STEPHANIE is still holding JOHN's shoulders, almost at arms length.

STEPHANIE: Everything is going to be okay

JOHN: I know. You're right

STEPHANIE: And of course you can text me or call me or anything. You know I'm here

JOHN: Thank you Stephanie. You know that means the world

STEPHANIE: I know... (pause) So what comes next?

JOHN: I don't know.. I guess we have to go back home at some point, then after that who knows

STEPHANIE: Do you want me to come with? I can wait in the car or something?

JOHN: No, that's okay. I think I'll be okay. Thank you though

STEPHANIE: Of course.

JOHN: I think this is just one of those things that I'm going to have to face myself.

Blackout. End of Play.

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