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The Mental and Emotional Impact of Loneliness through Advanced Age and "The Reach"

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THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF LONELINESS
THROUGH ADVANCED AGE
and
“THE REACH”

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BFA Musical Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Through the process of adapting Stephen King's short story, "The Reach," into a short play, it became necessary to research the psychological and emotional impacts of loneliness on people as they reach an advanced age in order to better understand the lead character's decisions and feelings throughout the piece. Stella Flanders, the protagonist, is the oldest woman still living on her island, having chosen to never visit the mainland across the reach. By the end of the piece, she decides to finally make the journey across the reach to visit the mainland, unfortunately passing on the way. In her advanced age, she has grown weak and sick, and her memory has started to fade, which brought to light a number of questions, most significantly: in a world without technology, how does loneliness affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of the elderly? In short, feelings of loneliness have been shown to correlate with a poor state of psychological well-being, typically including noticeable signs of depression, particularly in older people (ages 65 and older) (Lim and Kua, 1).

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II. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, we are constantly surrounded by technology. We are able to maintain a constant state of “connection,” or in this case, immediate access to people and information that before the internet, would have required extensive planning, research, and forethought. As their physical ability declines, making in-person social interaction difficult to sustain, social media has proven to be an effective tool for helping seniors manage relationships and a support system without the need for face-to-face meetings (Erickson, 4). How, then, did older people manage in a time before these modern conveniences existed? What might that look like for a person who is not only limited in their ability to contact distant connections but whose health is also in decline? In Stephen King’s short story, “The Reach,” the reader follows Stella, the oldest woman on her island, as she grapples with the realization that, as one of the last remaining members of her generation still living on the island, the world she lives in has begun to outpace her.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

As we age, the social circles we exist in grow progressively smaller: people pass away, move to other locations, or we simply grow apart. The feelings of loneliness that occur as a result of this are relatively new in terms of legitimate research. It is only in the past five to ten years that researchers have begun to explore this topic in any significant way. A majority of the research performed is focused on the rise of social media, identifying ways in which its increased use has affected social connection by eliminating the need for in-person interaction. Despite this research being legitimate and important, that is not my central focus, though elements of this specific subset of my topic may be incorporated into my paper for various reasons. In this thesis, I aim to explore how loneliness, or decreased social interaction, impacts mental health and

emotions as we age, without the presence of the internet or social media. Current research shows a significant correlation between feelings of loneliness and a poor state of psychological well-being, typically including noticeable signs of depression, particularly in older people (ages 65 and older) (Lim and Kua, 1). The perspective on this varies from researcher to researcher, as there is no one identifiable cause for an emotional response to a relatively subjective and personal topic. Causes, in this case, are difficult to specifically locate because there does not appear to be a strong pull towards any one reason for feelings of loneliness; the correlation of loneliness and a generally lower quality of psychological well-being, however, is unanimously agreed upon. In addition to this, many researchers have chosen to also explore the psychological impact of sociability as well as common effects of old age, such as perceived health, self-efficacy, and socioeconomic status (Singh and Misra, 2). Unfortunately, due to a general lack of research on this topic, contrasting viewpoints have been near impossible to find, which begs the question of whether there are significant gaps in the currently existing research or if these implications of loneliness on mental health in old age is unanimously agreed upon.

As this thesis is meant to accompany a creative piece (in this instance, my play adaptation of Stephen King's short story, "The Reach"), my focus is primarily in collecting as much information as possible regarding the topic of loneliness and its effects on mental health. "The Reach" centers around an older woman who lives mostly isolated on an island with the few remaining peers and family members she has, after losing a majority of them over the course of her life. Internet was not a factor at the time the story was written, and in order to maintain the authenticity of the text, I am attempting to focus my research primarily in areas in which technology does not play a significant role. Unfortunately, this eliminates a large amount of existing research on my chosen topic; however, I may apply any relevant information I find

within technology-focused texts in order to provide a more nuanced context for my creative piece.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

As I researched this topic and wrote my accompanying creative piece, everything I digested seemed to revolve around one overarching question: how does loneliness affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of the elderly?

V. METHODOLOGY

As my thesis does not necessarily require one specific answer but rather acts as a vessel with which to generate a broader understanding of the psychological impact loneliness has on people of an older age, my specifications for choosing what literature to include are not absolute or rigid. In general, I have omitted most literature in which technology is made to be the central focus, as technology plays no role in my accompanying creative piece. This decision was made in order to keep the creative piece as focused as possible without interruption from overly-contemporary sources since the piece itself lends to a less modern approach. I generated a majority of the literature used in my thesis from searching databases, as well as utilizing Google's search function for specifically scholarly articles, in order to eliminate the risk of using information that I could not confidently identify as being legitimate. The key phrase I used in all of my searches was "effects of loneliness in old age," which was sufficient in terms of collecting initial sources from which to base my thesis. Additionally, I chose not to utilize any outside funding for the development of both my creative piece and my research-based thesis, and as such, did not purchase any literature that required a significant amount of money to incorporate

into my research. This choice was primarily made to ensure that any texts I used were easily accessible to anyone, allowing for my reader to cross-reference my sources and to continue their own exploration of my topic, as it is fairly open-ended.

VI. ADAPTATION OF LITERATURE TO THEATRE

There are a number of ways to approach the adaptation of a piece of literature to a piece of theatre, though ultimately, there is no one “correct” method. However, based on my experiences as an actor who has worked on piece in the process of adaptation and development, my process is one that is relatively commonplace amongst writers in theatre. I initially wrote an adaptation of “The Reach” with a peer of mine, Joe Ottavi-Perez, as a fifteen-minute contemporary opera. There was little to no dialogue, and in order to create such a short piece, a significant amount of King’s storytelling and background had to be eliminated. What resulted was a fairly truncated version of the piece I have produced for my thesis; there were only four characters, minimal dialogue, and upon completion, the piece sat at a mere six pages long. In order to create this (and as the writer in charge of both the dialogue and lyrics, where Joe then added melodies and underscoring), it was my responsibility to read the original text, locate what I found to be significant moments, and to construct a condensed version of the story that could be presented in as little time as possible while still maintaining some semblance of the original text. I was then responsible for identifying the core meaning of each of these moments, in order to ensure that there was a goal for the characters involved, as well as obstacles they had to face to reach said goal. This was extremely constraining for me, as a writer, as King’s original text, though lengthy, was written in a way that created a very natural flow to the piece in its entirety. Though Joe and I produced a version of “The Reach” that dramaturgically contained the core

meaning of what King originally wrote, I regularly wondered what the piece might look like expanded and theatricalized as a straight play in one act, rather than an extremely brief, almost entirely musical piece.

For this iteration of “The Reach,” I wanted to start out by staying as true to the text as possible while maintaining a structure that allowed for the viewer to follow a relatively linear plot. After I had essentially re-written “The Reach” in its entirety (as it already possesses a naturally theatrical essence), I took a step back from the piece, and with feedback from my advisor, considered what might concern a contemporary audience while viewing a short play. The first issue was that of time; the piece jumps between past memories, imagined circumstances, and has several abrupt jumps forward in time, all while being narrated from a perspective implying that none of this was happening in real time, rather, a period of time after all of the events in the story had occurred. This is where I began to make structural changes to my adaptation: first, taking the piece out of the past and putting it in the present, to create a sense of immediacy and to allow the audience to better connect with Stella on her journey. By putting the piece in the present, I allow the audience to follow Stella as she tells her story, rather than forcing my viewer to watch a retelling of past events.

Outside of some minor restructuring to create smoother transitions between scenes, as well as making the scenes themselves coherent, the only other significant issue I faced was that in King’s original text, the main voice of the piece is that of a narrator, telling Stella’s story for her (except for a few moments in which Stella narrates for herself). I opted to make Stella the primary narrator of the piece to allow for a bit more freedom in terms of how time and space functioned: by allowing Stella to narrate her own story, I could easily weave in the aspects of memory, non-linear time, and imagined circumstances (as found in the original text), simply by

giving Stella the authority to dictate what she wanted the audience to see or experience with her. By giving her character the power to explain what is happening, as well as her thought process, I had freedom to explore the more experimental aspects of my piece, mostly dictated in the stage directions. Memory is not linear, and by existing in someone else's memory, I would not have to force the audience to accept a world in which nothing moves linearly, but rather, allow them to follow Stella as she guided them on her journey in and out of different memories.

After completing a first draft, another issue arose out of the choice to have Stella narrate the piece: she would be speaking for an inordinate amount of time, and have very little interaction with other characters. To alleviate some of the pressure from Stella, I took a number of "scenes" that she describes in her memories and theatricalized them by turning her descriptions into dialogue while keeping her present, as if to create an environment where Stella is not only guiding us through her experiences, but either reliving them herself or imagining what the story she is telling may have looked like.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to maintain a clear focus on my topic of choice, it was necessary for me to first identify a concise definition for "loneliness" in this context, and I ultimately landed on the following, from Singh and Misra's 2009 study on loneliness, depression and sociability in old age: "Loneliness is a subjective, negative feeling related to the person's own experience of deficient social relations" (Singh and Misra, 2). This fits well with the creative portion of my thesis, in that it highlights the subjectivity of loneliness and specifically references a deficiency of social relations; a continuous theme throughout "The Reach."

In addition to reduced social interaction, another significant theme that continued to pop up was that of memory. Stella finds herself unable to recall specific information when asked questions by her family (although much of the piece centers around recollection and storytelling), and Stella regularly expresses her desire to have the ability to share these memories with her loved ones. At the same time, she grapples with the gradual disappearance of the life she once knew, both in memory and in actuality; being the oldest woman on her island, she has watched countless loved ones pass away or leave, and as the seasons change she comes to realize that the life she had before no longer truly exists. In addition to this, her health is in constant decline, with a number of references to a cancer she believes she has but has never had diagnosed. This causes her immense pain and discomfort, the majority of which she keeps to herself, leaving the few remaining loved ones she has completely out of touch with her physical state. The combination of these many factors begged the question: what is at play between memory, loneliness, and mental and emotional health in the elderly population? A significant portion of my research revealed a “significant relationship between depression and loneliness,” typically involving “external factors, which are absent in the social network... [and] internal factors, such as personality and psychological factors” (Singh and Misra, 2).

Regardless of any scientific research or possible solutions to help ease Stella’s struggle, one of the most significant causes of her distress was her inability to share her memories and feelings. A 2009 study by Chiang, et al, discussed reminiscence therapy as a form of treatment for depression in the elderly populous. By giving participants the opportunity to share their emotions, they were able to better understand that everyone, not just themselves individually, had lives that were meaningful and filled with varied emotions and experiences. Reaching this realization made the participants feel more satisfied and prouder of themselves, improving their

psychological well-being and supporting the claim that reminiscence therapy could be beneficial for elderly people, due to its potential for “ego strengthening and dissonance reducing.” These effects are more significant when considering the group aspect of reminiscence therapy, allowing several elderly people to support one another and strengthening the positive psychological impact through positive reinforcement of shared experiences (Chiang, et al, 7). Unfortunately for Stella, being physically unable to reminisce may have likely had a negative impact on her mental health, as reminiscence therapy has shown to be a viable way to ease depressive thoughts and feelings amongst the elderly.

In addition to her lack of access to therapeutic solutions for her loneliness, Stella also lived in a time before social media. Facebook, in particular, was chosen as an online social platform to be used in Erickson’s 2011 study on social media being used for bonding amongst individuals over the age of 65: although many subjects were hesitant to share their personal information online due to a lack of general understanding of how social media functions, “a number did [report] receiving some emotional support via Facebook by connecting with others who had shared experiences (e.g., medical issues or loss of spouse)” (Erickson, 4). This method of communication did not even exist at the time Stella was alive, though it is now seemingly omnipresent, and would have given her the ability to connect with individuals experiencing similar situations to her own.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this thesis I have shown that there are a number of correlations between loneliness and mental and physical health. Reminiscence therapy was found to be an effective way at easing some of the negative mental implications of loneliness amongst older people

(Chiang, et al, 2), but for Stella, her physical incapacity prevented her from being able to reap the benefits of said therapy. Additionally, Stella's life was set by King in a time where social media did not yet exist, though having access to social media may have allowed her to connect with those in situations similar to her own, thus giving her another opportunity to receive emotional support. In fact, with access to all of these methods of support, it is likely that Stella would not have felt a draw to visit the mainland at all, and furthermore would have had an easier time locating care for her medical conditions. It is the combination of the lack of access to care, both emotional and physical, that prevented her from being able to resolve her mental and bodily ailments, as well as gradually losing the people in her support system that forced her to make the choice between living in a familiar place with unfamiliar circumstances, or to finally see the outside world.

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THE REACH

an adaptation of Stephen King's "The Reach" by Noah Virgile

Lights up on the interior of a house. An old woman sits in a rocker with her granddaughter and son (LOIS and ALDEN) and great-grandchildren (TOMMY, LONA, and HAL) by her side, looking outside through a window. It's summer.

STELLA

The reach was wider in those days.

TOMMY

What do you mean, Gram? What does she mean?

LOIS

(smiling, shaking her head) Why don't we go outside and pick some berries? It's a beautiful day. ALDEN, will you take them?

ALDEN

Sure.

LOIS hands ALDEN a pot, and he exits with TOMMY, LONA, and HAL. Lights shift.

STELLA

... I forgot. Perhaps I never knew.

LOIS

It's okay, grandma. They've gone outside.

STELLA

I'm sorry. I just can't seem to remember things the way I used to.

Lights shift. Out of time:

STELLA (cont.)

The Reach had been wider in those days. If anyone knows that, well, that person is me. I was born in 1884, and I am the oldest resident of Goat Island. I've had the opportunity many a time, but I've never once in my life been to the mainland. This was the last summer before the ghosts began to appear. It floated by like a breeze... and then it was fall.

Lights shift. It's fall. The children re-enter, along with HATTIE, RICHARD, and MARY. SARAH stays by the door, waiting for STELLA, as the group sets up a small party. A few moments pass, and they freeze. STELLA continues..

STELLA (cont.)

It was a cold fall, without the necessary rain to bring a really fine color to the trees, either on Goat or on Raccoon Head across the Reach. The first flurries came on November 19, swirling down out of a sky the color of white chrome. Happy birthday to me, I suppose. Most of the village turned out. *(pointing out each person as she explains who they are)* HATTIE, whose mother had died of pleurisy in 1954 and whose father had been lost with the Dancer in 1941. RICHARD, his arthritis riding him like an invisible passenger, and his wife, MARY. And SARAH, of course. Her mother, ANNABELLE, was my best friend. We went to the island school together, grades one through eight. ANNABELLE married TOMMY, even though he pulled her hair in the fifth grade and made her cry. I married BILL, who knocked all of my schoolbooks into the mud, but he... he did not make me cry. ANNABELLE and TOMMY are gone, now, and SARAH is the only one of their seven children left on the island. SARAH's husband, GEORGE, or "BIG GEORGE" as we called him, died a nasty death over on the mainland in 1967, the year there was no fishing. An ax had slipped in his hand, and there was blood... too much of it, unfortunately. We held his funeral on the island three days later.

Suddenly, movement. SARAH approaches STELLA.

SARAH

Happy birthday, Gram!

They embrace as the group sings "Happy Birthday." Once they finish, they freeze.

STELLA

HATTIE made me the most tremendous birthday cake with her best friend, VERA. There were ninety-five candles on that cake.

Suddenly, the candles are blown out by a gust of wind.

STELLA (cont.)

Even over the singing, I could hear the wind. Although, I admit, my hearing is not what it once was. I could swear I heard the gust calling my name. *(STELLA looks out the window, as if*

searching for something) I wish I could have told my grandchildren more about my life on the island. I feel so old... but I was not the only one. In my day there were many that lived and died on the island. There was no mail boat in those days; BULL SYMES used to bring the mail when there was mail. There was no ferry, either. If you had business on the Head, your man took you in the lobster boat. So far as I know, there wasn't a flushing toilet on the island until 1946. BULL's boy HAROLD put in the first one the year after the heart attack carried BULL off while he was out dragging traps. I remember seeing them bring BULL home. I remember that they brought him up wrapped in a tarp, and how one of his green boots poked out. I remember... so many things.

Lights shift, and the party dissipates. It's winter.

STELLA (cont.)

On the first day of winter, a month or so after the birthday party, I opened the back door to get stovewood and discovered a dead sparrow on the back stoop. It had been forty years since I had seen a frozen bird--1938. The year the Reach had frozen. I threw the dead sparrow in the old rusty incinerator as I went by it and just tried to forget about it.

STELLA steps outside and walks to the Goat Island Store, where she sees LARRY. She is picking up wood.

STELLA (cont.)

(to LARRY) Cold day today. Clear, deep blue sky, but no snow. You know, on the night of my birthday four inches of snow had fallen, then melted, and no more has come since then.

LARRY

Got to come soon.

STELLA

I don't doubt it.

STELLA leaves, carrying a pile of wood with her. She is at her back door, where the sparrow had fallen. She looks down at the spot where she found it.

BILL'S VOICE

STELLA.

As she looks down at the spot the sparrow fell, BILL's shadow appears beside her own. His shadow's cap sits jauntily to the side, just as he had always worn it.

BILL'S VOICE

STELLA, when you comin' cross to the mainland? We'll get NORM JOLLEY's old Ford and go down to BEAN's in Freeport just for a lark. What do you say?

STELLA spins around, frightened, seeing nothing but the wide expanse of the Reach in front of her, and the mainland just beyond.

STELLA

(calming herself) There was an old lobsterman's joke that went something like this: know how to read y'compass when the fog comes, boys; between Jonesport and London there's a mighty long Reach. A Reach is a body of water between two bodies of land, a body of water which is open at either end. I know that much. I know it as well as my husband's name... and how he used to wear his hat. I sometimes wonder why I've never been across... but I suppose I never saw any reason to go. Besides, it's dangerous in the winter. In January, two months after my birthday party, the Reach froze for the first time since 1938. The radio warned islanders and main-landers alike not to trust the ice, but STEWIE MCCLELLAND and RUSSELL BOWIE took STEWIE's Bombardier Skiddoo out anyway after a long afternoon spent drinking Apple Zapple wine, and sure enough, the skiddoo went into the Reach. STEWIE managed to crawl out... although he lost one foot to frostbite. The Reach took RUSSELL and carried him away. That January 25 there was a memorial service for RUSSELL.

The memorial service assembles.

STELLA (cont.)

His new widow sat with EWELL MCCRACKEN, the minister. I couldn't help but look at her and think... She'll be crossing the Reach soon enough, I guess. She'll move to Freeport or Lewiston and go for a waitress, I guess.

STELLA is snapped back into reality by HATTIE, VERA, and SARAH mid-conversation.

HATTIE

No, I didn't hear! What did FREDDY say?

STELLA (aside)

They're talking about FREDDY DINSMORE, the oldest man on the island. *(with smug satisfaction)* Well, he's two years younger than me. Anyway, he sold out his store to LARRY in 1960, and now he's living on retirement.

VERA

(taking out her knitting) Said he'd never seen such a winter. He says it is going to make people sick.

SARAH

STELLA? What do you think?

STELLA

No... the Reach froze in '38, but there was snow that year. Do you remember BULL SYMES, HATTIE?

HATTIE

(laughing) I think I still have the black-and-blue he gave me on my sit-upon at the New Year's party in '53. He pinched me that hard. What about him?

STELLA

BULL and my own man walked across to the mainland that year, that February of 1938. Strapped on snowshoes, walked across to Dorrit's Tavern on the Head, had them each a shot of whiskey, and walked back. They asked me to come along. They were like two little boys off to the sliding with a toboggan between them.

The women stare at STELLA, touched.

SARAH

And you didn't go?

STELLA

(fidgeting, uncomfortable) No, I didn't go with them.

HATTIE

(almost indignantlly) Why not?

STELLA

(snapping) It was washday.

Suddenly, MISSY (RUSSELL's widow) begins to sob. STELLA turns to look at her, and sees BILL sitting beside her, smoking. She begins to cry out, but a clang rings out from the stove and stops her.

SARAH

Oh, poor thing...

HATTIE

Well shut of that good-for-nothing. Little more than a tramp for pay, that man. She's well out of that two-hoss trace.

STELLA continues to stare at BILL.

BILL

We're waitin' on you, STEL. You come on across and see the mainland. You won't need no snowshoes this year.

Another clang rings out from the stove, and BILL disappears. STELLA leaves, distraught, as the memorial service fades out. Transition to night time in VERA's home, where she is on the phone with ANNIE.

VERA

I'm telling you, ANNIE, STELLA doesn't look well, not at all.

ANNIE

ALDEN would have a scratch of a job getting her off-island if she took sick...

VERA

Wouldn't get her off 'tall unless she was in a coma. When STELLA says "frog," ALDEN jumps. ALDEN ain't but half-bright, you know. Stella pretty much runs him.

ANNIE

Oh? Well, I-- *(the phone begins to crackle and break up)*

VERA

ANNIE? Hello? ANNIE?

The phones have gone dead, and we can hear the winds outside picking up force.

VERA (cont.)

Damn RUSSELL, reaching up his cold dead hand to snap the phone lines just for the hell of it. No-good, worthless... *(she mutters to herself as she hangs up the phone and exits).*

Transition to STELLA's home, where she is lying in bed. In her mind, her great-grandchildren sit around her, talking up a storm.

LONA

But Gram, you still haven't told why you never went across!

STELLA

Why, child, I have always had everything I wanted right here on Goat.

LONA

But it's so small. We live in Portland. There's buses, Gram!

STELLA

I see enough of what goes on in cities on the TV. I guess I'll stay where I am.

HAL

You never wanted to go across, Gram? Never?

STELLA

(gently holding HAL's hands) Why would I? My mother and father came to the island shortly after they were married. BULL SYMES' grandfather took my father as a 'prentice on his boat. My mother conceived four times, but one of her babies had miscarried and another had died a week after birth. She would have left the island if they could have saved it at the mainland hospital, but of course... it was over before they even thought of that. Your great-grandfather, BILL, delivered JANE, your grandmother, but when it was over he had gone into the bathroom and first puked, and then wept like a hysterical woman who had her monthlies p'ticularly bad. JANE, of course, left the island at fourteen to go to high school; girls didn't get married at fourteen anymore, and when I saw her go off in the boat with BRADLEY MAXWELL, whose job it had been to ferry the kids back and forth that month, I knew in my heart that JANE was gone for good... although, she would come back for a while. ALDEN came along ten years later, after we gave up, and as if to make up for his tardiness, well, here he is still, a lifelong bachelor. LOUIS and MARGARET GODLIN begat STELLA GODLIN, who became STELLA FLANDERS; BILL and STELLA FLANDERS begat JANE and ALDEN FLANDERS and JANE FLANDERS became JANE WAKEFIELD; RICHARD and JANE WAKEFIELD begat LOIS WAKEFIELD, who became LOIS PERRAULT; DAVID and LOIS PERRAULT begat LONA and HAL. Those are your names, children: you are GODLIN-FLANDERS-WAKEFIELD-PERRAULT. Your blood

is in the stones of this island, and I stay here because the mainland is too far to reach. Yes, I love; I have loved, anyway, or at least tried to love, but memory is so wide and so deep, and I cannot cross. GODLIN-FLANDERS-WAKEFIELD-PERRAULT..."

Lights fade. Forward to the end of February, on a leap year. As she steps out of bed to narrate, the scenes unfold behind her in small vignettes.

STELLA (cont.)

This was been the coldest February since the National Weather service began keeping records. By the middle of the month, the ice covering the Reach was safe enough to travel on. Snowmobiles buzzed and whined... and sometimes turned over when they climbed the ice-heaves wrong. Children tried to skate, found the ice too bumpy to be any fun, and went back to Godlin's Pond on the far side of the hill, but not before little JUSTIN MCCRACKEN, the minister's son, caught his skate in a fissure and broke his ankle. They took him over to the hospital on the mainland where a doctor, one who owned a Corvette, told him it would be good as new. FREDDY DINSMORE wasn't so lucky.

FREDDY enters, in bed, with GEORGE by his side.

GEORGE

You sure you don't need a doctor? (*FREDDY coughs*) You don't sound too good there.

FREDDY

I'll be fine.

GEORGE

Really? LARRY says you haven't stopped by the shop for weeks. People are startin' to talk.

FREDDY

It's... just a cold from goin' out to get the mail without my scarf. I'm gettin' better, I can feel it. Now, hand me my Remington, gotta clean it.

LARRY

You've got some money left over from sellin' the shop. Why not go across to the mainland and have 'em hook you up to all those fancy machines they got? Get you better faster'n waitin' around.

FREDDY

I'll be fine. Just gimme the gun and let me rest. (*GEORGE starts to exit*) And grab me a copy of the paper while you're up!

GEORGE exits. Focus back on STELLA.

STELLA

FREDDY died very suddenly just three days after JUSTIN broke his ankle. His son GEORGE, a tosspot of the first water even at the advanced age of sixty-eight, found FREDDY with a copy of the Bangor Daily News in one hand and his Remington, unloaded, near the other. Apparently, he had been thinking of cleaning it just before he died. GEORGE went on a three-week toot, financed by someone who knew that he would have his old dad's insurance money coming. HATTIE went around telling anyone who would listen that old GEORGE DINSMORE was a sin and disgrace, no better than a tramp for pay. That's HATTIE.

FREDDY wasn't the only one to get sick. In fact, there was a lot of flu around. The school closed for two weeks instead of the usual one because so many pupils were out sick. SARAH says:

SARAH appears.

SARAH

No snow breeds germs.

SARAH disappears.

STELLA

Near the end of the month, my son ALDEN caught the flu himself. He walked around with it for nearly a week and then took to his bed with a fever of one hundred and one. Like FREDDY, he refused to have the doctor. I was worried sick. ALDEN wasn't as old as FREDDY, but the next May, he'd turn sixty.

Finally, the snow came. Six inches on Valentine's Day, another six on the twentieth, and a foot in a good old norther on the leap, February 29. It was strange to see so much snow on the Reach that time of year, where there was usually only gray water as far as you could see. Several people walked across to the mainland and back. No snowshoes, because the snow had frozen over. I thought how nice it must be for them to go out and take a knock of whiskey at Dorrit's, then remembering it burned down in 1958.

I saw BILL four times. Once he said to me:

BILL appears.

BILL

Y'ought to come soon, STELLA. We'll go steppin'. What do you say?

As STELLA turns to look at him, BILL disappears. Back to her imagination, in bed, surrounded by her great-grandchildren.

STELLA

Everything I ever wanted or needed was here. We had the radio and now we have the television, and that's all I want of the world beyond the Reach. I had my garden year in and year out. And lobster? Why, we always used to have a pot of lobster stew on the back of the stove and we used to take it off and put it behind the door in the pantry when the minister came calling so he wouldn't see we were eating "poor man's soup."

I have seen good weather and bad, and if there were times when I wondered what it might be like to actually be in the Sears store instead of ordering from the catalogue, or to go into one of those Shaw's markets I see on TV instead of buying at the store here or sending ALDEN across for something special like a Christmas capon or an Easter ham... or if I ever wanted, just once, to stand on Congress Street in Portland and watch all the people in their cars and on the sidewalks, more people in a single look than there are on the whole island these days... if I ever wanted those things, then I wanted this more. I am not strange. I am not peculiar, or even very eccentric for a woman of my years. My mother sometimes used to say, "All the difference in the world is between work and want," and I believe that to my very soul. I believe it is better to plow deep than wide. This is my place, and I love it.

Lights shift. It's now the middle of March. An eerie presence looms over the scene, and it's as if space and time carry little meaning. STELLA passes through vignettes of her life as she simultaneously exists in the present, unsure of what's real, but unbothered by it.

Once everyone has cleared the stage, STELLA rises out of bed and goes into her kitchen. She laces up her boots, wraps herself in a bright red woolen scarf (a Christmas present from HATTIE), and slips on ALDEN's long underwear under her dress. Outside, the wind is picking up, as the sound of a radio announces that there will be snow by afternoon. STELLA puts on her coat and her gloves, then hesitates. She then puts on a pair of ALDEN's gloves over her own. Elsewhere on stage, we see ALDEN with HARLEY BLOOD, rehangng a storm door for MISSY BOWIE and her newborn girl.

STELLA stands looking out her window for a moment, staring out at the Reach, and BILL appears, standing about halfway between the island and the Head, gesturing to her to follow him.

STELLA

If it's what you want, BILL. God knows I don't.

STELLA walks towards the door and opens it, her weakness growing more apparent with each step. Her eyes are going, and her arthritis has been flaring up more than ever before. She grips at her stomach, a familiar pain, and coughs a bit of coppery blood into the snow. She passes through a vignette of when she first encountered the blood.

ALDEN

(poking fun) You eat like a horse. Don't you know that old fogies like you are supposed to be peckish?

STELLA

Get on or I'll swat ye!

ALDEN

(pretending to be scared) Don't, Ma! I take it back!

Before stepping outside, STELLA notices ALDEN's fur-lined hat (with ear flaps) hanging on one of the pegs in the entry and puts it on. She checks one last time to see if she forgot anything. She notices that the stove is low, and ALDEN had left the draw open too much again, despite her constant reminders.

STELLA

ALDEN, you'll burn an extra quarter-cord a winter when I'm gone.

STELLA goes to open the stove, where she sees the face of ANNABELLE in the flames. ANNABELLE winks, and STELLA immediately gasps and slams the door shut. She stops for a moment, collecting herself, and picks up a notepad and pencil. She stands with it for a moment, not writing.

STELLA

(thinking, not spoken) Since the first day of winter I have been seeing your father and he says dying isn't so bad. At least, I think that's it...

STELLA puts down the pad and pencil, having written no note for ALDEN to find. She steps out into the snow and is slammed by the

wind, but stays on her feet. She walks down the hill toward the cove, passing RUSSELL BOWIE's house and waving to MISSY as she walks by. Her great-grandchildren reappear at her side, walking with her as she speaks to them.

STELLA

On the island we always watched out for our own. When GERD HENREID broke the blood vessel in his chest that time, we had covered-dish suppers one whole summer to pay for his operation in Boston—and GERD came back alive, thank God. When GEORGE DINSMORE ran down those power poles and the Hydro slapped a lien on his home, it was seen to that the Hydro had their money and GEORGE had enough of a job to keep him in cigarettes and booze... why not? He was good for nothing else when his workday was done, although when he was on the clock he would work like a dray-horse. That one time he got into trouble was because it was at night, and night was always GEORGE's drinking time. His father kept him fed, at least. Now MISSY BOWIE's alone with another baby. Maybe she'll stay here and take her welfare and ADC money here, and most likely it won't be enough, but she'll get the help she needs. Probably she'll go, but if she stays she'll not starve... and listen, LONA and HAL: if she stays, she may be able to keep something of this small world with the little Reach on one side and the big Reach on the other, something it would be too easy to lose hustling hash in Lewiston or donuts in Portland or drinks at the Nashville North in Bangor. And I am old enough not to beat around the bush about what that something might be: a way of being and a way of living--a feeling.

The children disappear. MARY appears, knitting as she sits next to a crib. ETTIE and NORMAN enter, carrying a bundled-up baby.

STELLA (cont.)

They had watched out for their own in other ways as well. There was NORMAN and ETTIE WILSON's baby that was born a mongoloid, its poor dear little feet turned in, its bald skull lumpy and cratered, its fingers webbed together as if it had dreamed too long and too deep while swimming that interior Reach; REVEREND MCCRACKEN had come and baptized the baby, and a day later MARY DODGE came, who even at that time had midwived over a hundred babies.

ETTIE sets the bundle in the crib, and pauses for a moment, staring down at it. After a beat:

NORMAN

Maybe we should go see FRANK's new boat? It's just down the hill. Whattaya say, ETTIE?

ETTIE

(blankly, still staring at the baby) Sure.

NORMAN

We don't have to if you don't want to.

MARY

I'll watch over the baby. Don't you worry, ETTIE. Let me know how it looks.

NORMAN takes her hand and starts to lead her out. Just as they're about to exit, ETTIE makes eye contact with MARY, who is still seated next to the crib. ETTIE stops and bursts into tears.

NORMAN

(visibly upset) Come on. *(ETTIE doesn't move)* Come on, ETTIE, come on.

NORMAN and ETTIE exit. MARY and the baby disappear.

STELLA

And when they came back an hour later the baby was dead, one of those crib-deaths, wasn't it merciful he didn't suffer. And many years before that, before the war, during the Depression, three little girls had been molested coming home from school, not badly molested, at least not where you could see the scar of the hurt, and they all told about a man who offered to show them a deck of cards he had with a different kind of dog on each one.

GERT SYMES appears with her FATHER and two other LITTLE GIRLS.

STELLA (cont.)

He would show them this wonderful deck of cards, the man said, if the little girls would come into the bushes with him, and once in the bushes this man said,

GERT

(to her FATHER) "But you have to touch this first."

STELLA

One of the little girls was GERT SYMES, who would go on to be voted Maine's Teacher of the Year in 1978, for her work at

Brunswick High. And GERT, then only five years old, told her father:

GERT

The man had some fingers gone on one hand.

GERT'S FATHER looks at the next LITTLE GIRL, who nods. He then looks at the third LITTLE GIRL, who just shrugs her shoulders.

STELLA

I remember ALDEN going out one thundery day that summer without telling me where he was going, although I asked. Watching from the window, I saw ALDEN meet BULL SYMES at the bottom of the path, and then FREDDY DINSMORE had joined them and down at the cove I saw my own husband, whom I had sent out that morning just as usual, with his dinner pail under his arm. More men joined them, and when they finally moved off I counted just one under a dozen. The REVEREND MCCRACKEN's predecessor had been among them. And that evening a fellow named DANIELS was found at the foot of Slyder's Point, where the rocks poke out of the surf like the fangs of a dragon that drowned with its mouth open. This DANIELS was a fellow BIG GEORGE HAVELOCK had hired to help him put new sills under his house and a new engine in his Model A truck. From New Hampshire he was, and he was a sweet-talker who had found other odd jobs to do when the work at the HAVELOCKS' was done... and in church, he could carry a tune! Apparently, they said, DANIELS had been walking up on top of Slyder's Point and had slipped, tumbling all the way to the bottom. His neck was broken and his head was bashed in. As he had no people that anyone knew of, he was buried on the island, and the REVEREND MCCRACKEN's predecessor gave the graveyard eulogy, saying as how this DANIELS had been a hard worker and a good help even though he was two fingers shy on his right hand. Then he read the benediction and the graveside group had gone back to the town-hall basement where they drank Za-Rex punch and ate cream-cheese sandwiches, and I never asked my men where they had gone on the day DANIELS fell from the top of Slyder's Point.

The children reappear.

STELLA (cont.)

Children, we always watched out for our own. We had to, for the Reach was wider in those days and when the wind roared and the surf pounded and the dark came early, why, we felt very small--no more than dust mites in the mind of God. So, it was natural for us to join hands, one with the other. We joined hands, children, and if there were times when we wondered what

it was all for, or if there was any such a thing as love at all, it was only because we had heard the wind and the waters on long winter nights, and we were afraid.

No, I've never felt I needed to leave the island. My life was here. The Reach was wider in those days.

The children disappear as STELLA finally reaches the cove. The wind is whipping her dress out behind her as she walks out along the pier, past the SYMES boathouse, stopping at the end. BILL appears, gesturing to her. She sits on the edge of the pier and lowers herself onto the frozen Reach, walking towards BILL. She begins coughing again, harder than before, blood trickling onto the fresh snow. She hears cars passing through the Head's main street.

STELLA

They can go as far as they want... Portland... Boston... New York City. Imagine!

It finally begins to snow. STELLA continues to walk, the wind blowing the snow into familiar figures that appear for a moment, then just as quickly disappear. The snow begins to fall harder, until STELLA can no longer see the Head.

STELLA

Just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat...

STELLA looks back, and the island, and her footprints have disappeared in the snow. Everything is a blur.

STELLA

(to herself) It's a whiteout. You got to be careful, STELLA, or you'll never get to the mainland. You'll just walk around in a big circle until you're worn out and then you'll freeze to death.

BILL appears in a vignette, and STELLA speaks to him.

BILL

I don't quite understand.

STELLA

When you're lost in the woods, you have to pretend that the leg which is on the same side of your body as your smart hand is lame. Otherwise that smart leg will begin to lead you and you'll walk in a circle and not even realize it until you come around to your backtrail again.

BILL disappears. STELLA is alone again.

STELLA (cont.)

(to herself) You can't let that happen. Snow today, tonight, and tomorrow, the radio said, and in a whiteout like this, I won't even know if I come around to my backtrail.

STELLA continues to walk, her arthritis in her knees continuing to flare hotter and hotter, limping. Suddenly, it begins to grow darker. STELLA looks at her watch, and realizes it has stopped.

STELLA (cont.)

The first time you forget to wind it in twenty or thirty years...

Distracted by her watch, STELLA slips and falls. She stays on her hands and knees for a moment, considering how easy it might be to just give into the conditions. She continues to walk, the night slowly creeping towards her, beginning to accept that she is lost. She coughs, again harder than the time before, more blood spattering into the snowy wind. She falls again, tries and fails to stand, and eventually makes it back to her feet. Suddenly, the wind whips ALDEN's hat from her head.

BILL'S VOICE

It's all right, STELLA. You can wear mine.

STELLA gasps and turns towards the voice. BILL is behind her.

STELLA

BILL? Is that really you?

BILL

Course.

STELLA

BILL...

STELLA falls, and BILL catches her, holding onto her arm.

STELLA (cont.)

Is it really you?

BILL

It's me. It's all of us.

STELLA looks around, seeing figures from her past appearing in the snow around her. First, MADELINE STODDARD and her husband. Then--

STELLA

ANNABELLE! ANNABELLE FRANE, is it you?

ANNABELLE appears.

STELLA (cont.)

ANNABELLE!

ANNABELLE

We're almost there now, dear.

ANNABELLE takes STELLA's other arm and they all move forward through the night. Other figures appear as they walk, some STELLA recognizes, and others that are unfamiliar; TOMMY FRANE, BIG GEORGE HAVELOCK, the man who ran the lighthouse on the Head, FREDDY DINSMORE, and RUSSELL BOWIE.

BILL

Look, STELLA.

They reach the Head. They have crossed the Reach. A flurry of voices begin to call out to STELLA.

VOICES

Take my hand, STELLA... do you... my hand... take my hand... do you love...

One voice cuts through the noise.

BULL'S VOICE

Will you take my hand, STELLA?

STELLA looks around and sees BULL SYMES.

STELLA

(terrified) Is it--

BULL

Time? Oh, ayuh, STELLA, I guess so. But it don't hurt. At least, I never heard so. All that's before.

STELLA bursts into tears, letting go of ANNABELLE and BILL, to grab BULL's hand.

STELLA

Yes. Yes I will, yes I did, yes I do.

STELLA joins the figures in a circle and they begin to sing, growing louder and louder, as the snow fades them all out of view. Everything goes quiet, and ALDEN appears center stage.

ALDEN

I couldn't tell DAVID or LOIS, but the summer after STELLA died, when the kids came out for their annual two weeks, I told LONA and HAL. I told them that during the great storms of winter the wind seems to sing with almost human voices, and sometimes I can almost make out the words: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow/Praise Him, ye creatures here below." What I couldn't tell them is that sometimes I hear that sound and feel cold even by the stove. I put my whittling aside, or the trap I meant to mend, thinking that that wind sings in all the voices of those who were dead and gone... that they stand somewhere out on the Reach and sang as children do. I hear their voices on these nights and sometimes I dream that I'm singing the doxology, unseen and unheard, at my own funeral.

There are things that can never be told, and there are things, not exactly secret, that are not discussed. We found my mother frozen to death on the mainland a day after the storm had blown itself out. She was sitting on a natural chair of rock about one hundred yards south of the Raccoon Head town limits, frozen just as neat as you please. The doctor who owned the Corvette said that he was frankly amazed. It would have been a walk of over four miles, and the autopsy required by law in the case of an unattended, unusual death had shown an advanced cancerous condition--in truth, she had been riddled with it.

Was I supposed to tell DAVID and LOIS that the cap on her head wasn't mine? LARRY MCKEEN recognized that cap. So had JOHN BENSOHN. I saw it in their eyes, and I suppose they saw it in mine. I hadn't lived long enough to forget my dead father's cap, the look of its bill or the places where the visor had been broken.

I want to tell the children, "these are things made for thinking on slowly. Things to be thought on at length, while the hands do their work and the coffee sits in a solid china mug nearby. They are questions of Reach, maybe: do the dead sing? And do they love the living?"

On the nights after LONA and HAL go back with their parents to the mainland in AL CURRY's boat, the children standing astern and waving good-bye, I consider that question, and others, and the matter of my father's cap.

Do the dead sing? Do they love? On these long nights alone, with my mother STELLA FLANDERS at long last in her grave, it often seems to me that they did both.

BLACKOUT. End.