1988

Calliope Manuscript Day 1988

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Calliope

Manuscript Day

1988

English Department
WMU

Beech & Carlson, Ltd.
MANUSCRIPT DAY 1988

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Centreville...............................................................Will Brenner
Comstock..............................................................Diane Hamilton
East Grand Rapids....................................................Steve Azkoul
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Forest Hills Northern.................................................Steve Azkoul
Grand Rapids Central................................................Steve Azkoul
Lakeland..............................................................Dorothy Segowski
L’Anse Creuse........................................................Barbara Mora
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Lincoln Consolidated...................................................
Northville............................................................P. Dorrian-Sandbothe
Plainwell...........................................................Candace Lockwood
St. Joseph.............................................................Dan Holt
Sturgis..............................................................Marcia Arend
Wayland.............................................................Kathie Johnson
West Bloomfield.....................................................Janice Mekula
Winston Churchill...................................................Richard Bott

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HE’D MAKE A LOVELY CORPSE

Such a gentleman in his starched blue suit--no wrinkles, no lint. No movement.
Make-up hides him, or perhaps enhances him, as an actor on stage.
"He looks so natural. He looks so natural..."
He is a natural dead person.
Mouth open in life’s last breath, he invites a kiss on his purple lips, devoid of blood, yet swollen like bloated worms.

His cologne is generic Death, bushy flowers and embalming fluid.
Veins sucked of blood hide in his stiffened hands, folded properly.
His hair, like a cheap toupee, is shellacked thickly in place.
There’s no need--he won’t turn in his sleep.
His fingernails are squared and clean clean clean.
Short.
Once underground the darkness will make them grow.
His skin will shrink.

Oh yes, I think as I look at him. He’s a natural.

Su Stitz
She woke up
With a scream

the cause
a fleeting nightmare

She quickly placed her hands on her shoulders
So as to give herself an embrace
For there was no one else to embrace her

She began cooing
and making other soothing sounds
to an imaginary baby
An imaginary baby
    who would have been hers if ...

She no longer used coat hangers
They made her sick

"Daddy, I love you"
She had once said
He replied
"I know"

"Tommy, I love you"
She had once said
He replied
"I love you too
for the way you make my body feel"
"Brian, I love you"
She had once said
He replied
"Let's not worry about that now
Lie down"

And there had been others
But none had ever said "I love you"
Was she that unlovable

She was empty inside
She existed only on the surface
She had no complex
or intricate emotions
Only love and hate

Loving others
Hating herself

She was ready to leave now
She stopped in front of the mirror
Loathing the person she saw
silently cursing herself
She straightened her jewelry
checked her make-up
And repositioned some loose strands of hair

She walked out the door

an emotional virgin
a physical slut

and sold herself to the night

Preston Brown
PLEASANTLY TIRED, RELAXED

pleasantly tired, relaxed,
and yet alive--every sense awake
and stretching after slumber.
the moon so bright
that I can see the world--
but differently--
as faerie,
where enchantments could be real.
the clouds drift by so fast
it seems Diana rides
through gently lapping waves,
and a small star follows.
the trees are sharply etched
against that bright, bright moon
and shadows sway gently
across my path.
cool--
not crisp,
but halfway between there and warm
it’s lazy, lovely,
and that’s the way I feel
so sharply, languidly aware of myself.
I wish you were here.
I'm a virgin, 
but I don't feel like one, 
not tonight--
tonight it's as meaningless a state 
as death 
as the time before we enter the womb. 
I can feel your chest 
as I lean against it 
tucked under your shoulder 
my arms roped loosely about your waist 
the murmer of your deep voice 
and my reply. 
I look again at the moon's bright disciple 
and think of the wish I made 
on the evening star 
does Venus, the lovers' patron, 
look more kindly on a lover's wish? 
I slide into my car 
start the engine, 
from the tapedeck 
David Bowie's voice reaches down 
to caress my belly.

Mary Oettinger
Chad is sleeping,  
still wearing his coat 
and shoes. 
Momma sneaks out  
before he wakes up.

When he does,  
he stands by the door 
and cries. 
Loud sobs for Momma,  
but she is  
coming home.

Carly arrives,  
upset about K-e-n-n-y,  
a boy at school.  
She puts her homework down,  
then watches cartoons  
with Christopher.

"We’re having  
macaroni and cheese."  
Our favorite.  
Chad doesn’t want to eat,  
so I don’t force him.  
He doesn’t want  
to be a baby in his chair.
But Chris does.
He climbs in and asks,
"Will you feed me?"
(Momma was feeding Chad
before Chris was ready
to give her up.)

Back to the family room.
I tire of Candyland,
and even Chutes and Ladders.
Carly approaches.
"Will you give me
an airplane ride?"

Everyone falls asleep
on the floor.
I scoop them into their beds.
Chad wakes in his crib.
He’s getting too big
and doesn’t like it.

Momma comes home.
We talk.
Chad wakes up
to be held by Momma.

Julie Anne Pardon
DEAD GRAPES, HE SAID

Dead Grapes, he said.

Rolling smoothly through the
dark subdivision with the
high beams on,
Jazz tinkling on the radio.
Quiet park, click open,
slam close.
He takes my hand as we
walk up to the house through
the plush green lawn.
"We'll have to compliment Brian
on the yard," he said.

Standing on the step
We knock on the screen door.
"Brian," he yells; over the
hum of the amp.
Brian pads down the carpeted stairs,
White tank, tight faded levis,
and bare feet--from a different generation.
A hug for me, a shaking of
hands for him. The greeting
reminds me of the reality--
this is what adults do, a couple
"visiting."
Unlikely house for a bachelor;  
all white and echoing inside as if new.  
Upstairs I lie on the couch--  
reading a "Brianish" coffee-table hardcover.  
*Rock Stars* with Mick on the front.  
He is carrying my Casio keyboard as  
Brian settles down at his drums.  
The far wall is blocked by  
large recording and mixing machines,  
the room strewn with albums and  
a guitar here and there.  
He lies down on the carpet, and I  
join him.  

Music deafens the room.  

"Mind Failure"  
and  
"Road Accident"  

"You know, these songs are really  
awful," I laugh, "what should  
we call the group?"  

"Dead Grapes," he said.  

*Heather Strubank*
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THE MOVE TO CALIFORNIA

DEDICATED TO JOHN STEINBECK

My father crouches
on a wooden fruit
box, crying.
His tears moisten
the dirt
of his rippled
skin.

I remember when we traded
our house for a beat-up
black car, blacker than
my mother's eyes--
as black as death.

We left Oklahoma
and squandered
our lives in the backseat
of this jalopy.
As we inched
along the highway,
I squirmed
between Mom and Dad
on a quilt put
over the tears
in the seats.
At night, we curled
up in our piles of ragged
clothes, like hamsters
in their nests;
sleeping among
cans of Pet milk,
cheese, Sanborn,
bruised apples,
soft potatoes,
and a couple books.
The cramped car forbid
us to bring even one
of our most treasured
possessions.

Daddy said tomorrow we would
be in California; picking fruit
and earning money. On the way,
I saw oranges and oranges
and oranges and oranges.
But at the state line,
only police officers stood,
like a brick barrier, asking
where we planned on going.
No smiles, no sun,
no oranges.
Now, when Daddy sobs
at night, he is not
alone.

Cathy Page
STRAWBERRY FACE

Last Saturday in the park,
I hung from the jungle gym,
Where pebbles became my stars.

I stretched my arm
To groove the Milky Way
In the cool sand;
Grains packed into nails,
Chipped salmon polish.

In second grade
I held the record
For hanging here the longest,
And now I know why.
The kids laughed,
And called me strawberry face.

Jennifer Paige Davis
"PROBLEMS"

Problems, I don't have any problems
Really
I work hard have a wife
and three kids
Nice home, Yeah I got a nice home
Over in the East side of town
But I don't have any problems
Eleanor and me got married
When she was nineteen
Beautiful wedding beautiful
She doesn't look the way she used to
But I don't have any problems
My kids here, here's a picture of
them beautiful aren't they
Suzy's seven Mark six Kelly five
Those kids sure are noisy
But I don't have any problems
My job Oh I do a little stuff here and there
Whenever I can find anything
Hey will ya quit saying I have a problem
and pass the bottle over here
I told Eleanor I'd be home soon

Emily Johnson
"LIVING WITH A MID-LIFE CRISIS"

I can really tell that my mother is experiencing her mid-life crisis now at age thirty nine. Never before did she listen to my radio stations and go with her "lady friends" to rock concerts (even if it is still Barry Manilow). Just last weekend she dragged me into a record store to see if they had the new Billy Joel Live album in stock yet. What is worse, though, is that she is wearing my clothes ever since she dropped that last ten pounds. (It really scares me that she looks better in some of them than I do). How can I tell her gently that she looks silly wearing my pink high tops and multi-colored hoop earrings.

I want to sit her down and remind her that she is no longer a teenager so she must not act like one--she is a mother of three. She has got to act her age rather than tramp off on the weekends dragging my poor patient dad behind her to some unknown but wild destination. I think that she had these babies to feel young again also, but I hate to tell her that they are
giving her wrinkles and bags under her eyes.
I tried to reason with her and explain that
she would really be much happier if
she forgot the baby idea and moved to
a condo in Florida and bought a Cockatoo,
but she didn’t believe me.
Just wait till she’s 50 and the kids
still aren’t out of the house yet.
Poor dad won’t ever be able to retire if
she keeps running up her Hudson’s charge.

Mom is about to go jogging and
asked me if I wanted to go with her, but
I just smiled and declined, saying I’d rather
be the fat and lazy teenager I portray so well
(something she can never be again—try as she might.
She even goes to the dermatologist to have the
wrinkles smoothed from her skin).
I just hope that Dad doesn’t begin
his mid-life crisis soon.
I just couldn’t see him in my pink
high-tops and multi-colored hoop earrings.

Heather Kern
The frying grease
Like an audience.
The pan is a one-ring circus.

Papa Joe is hungry,
An animal in his undershirt.
Big and hot, he calls
Anita.

Drop in the whities,
Long and meaty.
Spitting and jumping,
Curling in greasy patterns
Like Papa Joe’s hair.

Come here, he says,
I’ll show you something.
Father takes daughter,
They leave me to frying.

I fry whities for all,
Long and meaty.
But I never eat,
And Anita isn’t a little girl
Anymore.

Kay C. Hope
TABLES

Many years ago,
A mother and her daughter would stay up at night,
When the father would go out of town.
They would watch
The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson.
They would also eat shrimp.
The mother would sit in one chair,
And the daughter in another,
With a table between them.
Then the daughter would get to sleep in the
Mother’s bed
At that time,
It was a
Big Thing to sleep in the mother’s bed.
It was
Her way of saying
Which one of the children she loved best.

Angela Harding
MEAT TONIGHT

Antelope!

good meat tonight

she started to clean it by
the fire
cut swiftly through
the soft stomach skin

Then pulled out the green and
gray intestines

what good tripe!

she set them in a white metal bowl

continuing...

she reached in and one by one,
her hands clenched the heart,
lungs, liver
they pulled out with the sound
of snapping twigs.
then
she reached in deep and pulled it out, a doe not yet born

what good tender veal!

she threw it into the bowl

a naked
barefoot girl
came up

gazed into the lifeless eyes
and tenderly started to stroke
its soft, bloody fur.

Steve Rhodes
A POEM TO MAKE SOMEONE GUILTY BY

I wait for you til five,
drinking milk.
Don't feel bad that you
were late.
Three minutes, three hours.
No Big Deal.
At least I got a chance
to catch up on all of the
calcium I have missed
these past seventeen years.
I drank thirteen glasses of
milk before you decided to come.
Don't mind that it is 70° below zero,
and that my whole body
is numb. I will thaw out
in a few decades.

Kiki Cook
BROTHERLY LOVE

1. It has been a cold fall:
   the loss of my brother, and
   the sun rarely showed at our house.

2. The long moving truck backed into
   the leaf-ridden driveway on Maple Street

3. My mother had packed
   the whole house in boxes
   except for Johny’s room.

4. Johny was the star,
   he had trophies

5. Dad talked to the men: Ralph and Terrance
   moved Johny’s furniture
   because every time mother walked by
   his closed door
   she cried.

6. Everyone says "it will get better,"
   but we still have no tissues,
   and I have a cold.

Blair Stock
A kerosene lamp burns low
on a small wooden table,
guiding neighbors and relatives
in from the night
Some from town
some, just down the road.

They gather around
the lamp’s light and sing.
a child smiles
but quakes
against his mother’s breast
His body pays no mind to
Banda medicine, but
keeps burning as
hot as red coals.

Village radios crackle
and lovers secretly
stroll down a garden path.

But only the names gone before
    Ali, Karam, Balla, Mambouto
flow through the mother’s mind. She
holds him tight as if he was her
last child.

Steve Rhodes
BULLSHIT BABY

Last week, body warm above mine
you spoke
of love.
This week eyes avoid mine,
your tongue weaving
a tired tapestry of lies.
You build fires in the pit of my body
but there are dry ashes in my mouth.
Still you speak
of love, but
your love, honey, batters me
leaves me sore for days.

Shelley Stobbelaar
VISITATIONS

Here is the Street
(yes, I recognize that pothole)
and the slate-grey driveway
illuminated
by the side-light
on the house.

That house
where it all happened
Its warmth was home.
Home no longer,
I linger near unseen
and remember
that day
with the sun on my back (inside).
I turn up the heat in my car,
outside it’s sub-zero.

And icicles look misplaced
where the ivy
used to grow.
the headlights reflect
off splintered shards of ice
scattered and crushed on the street
like fragments of the sun
steaming down
to the green forest floor
where we sat and dreamed.
The harmony of this
crying-song
pounds
into my bloodstream.

The leaves curled around our feet
the air smelled of frost
and you smiled at me your
crooked, pleading smile
just
as I smile now
at memories.

Ironic, isn’t it,
that we
have changed so much
yet only now,
as I look back,
doi realize,
we never really changed at all.
When did we have time to?
Time has fallen away
like so much skin
new, then dry,
then sloughed off to be replaced
again.

Tricia Roush
LET’S GO DOWN TO CENTRAL PARK IN OUR MOON BOOTS

Let's go down to Central Park in our moon boots
We could get mugged together
'cause all the devils dancing in their dark suits
Can't get their acts together
Like a bunch of bonediggers
Dying in the night

What do you say we go out into the cornfield?
We could eat some cabbage after we roll in the hay.
Then we could say, "Boy, that sure was a good meal."
And we'd float away
Like a bonedigger
Dying alone in the night

Or we could go to Brazil and kill all the bugs
Living in my luggage next to where I store my onions
And then we'd cry because we're sentimental
But really we were crying 'cause we got around to cutting the onions
And on top of that,
We saw a bonedigger,
Dying like a shadow in the night

But right now let's go pick up my thinking cap from the laundromat
We could be in & out of there in no time
We'll probably meet a man with little or no body fat
And you'll run off with him in no time
And I'll be left a bonedigger,
Dying alone in the night

Don Rabideau
"Lisa, telephone!"
I rolled off my bed and closed my book, walking into the kitchen to see who was calling.

"It’s Tina," Mom whispered. "She sounds upset."
Tina was my best friend. We’d been friends going on fourteen years. She’d moved to Kalamazoo when I moved to St. Joe, but we spent many weekends at each other’s houses. This weekend it was her turn to visit me.

"Leese? I don’t have time to talk, but I just called to say I can’t make it down this weekend," she said in a rush.

When I asked her what was wrong she changed the subject and made a quick excuse to hang up.

"Leese," Tina whispered. "I love you." She’d hung up before I could say anything else.

Two days later I got a phone call from Karen, Tina’s mother. She told me Tina had committed suicide. I thought it was some kind of sick joke at first, but I could hear in her voice she’d been crying. I slammed the phone down in her ear.

"No, Leese! Ya gotta keep your ankles straight!" she laughed.

"Like this?" I asked over my shoulder, my ankles collapsing inwards.
She was teaching me to iceskate. Tina thought I’d be a natural, since my Pop was a hockey coach at the time. Unfortunately, I spent more time on my behind than I did on the blades of my skates.

We spent one hilarious afternoon trying to see who could wipe-out the best. My one and a half twist/flailing arms combo won me the dubious title of "Crash Queen of Iceland." Every once in a while after that she’d call me "queenie" when I did something stupid.

I sat up straight, sweat dripping down my back. Mom and Hank ran into my room.

"Someone catch her, someone catch her! Mom, she’s falling and I can’t reach, she’s too far and I can’t get her. Help! Oh, God, no, no, no. Help her, someone. She’s going to die!"

I was hysterical. Mom shook me, calmed me down, smoothed my hair back and held me tight.
I had the same nightmare every night for a month and a half.

A crisp autumn breeze blew through my hair and I pulled my wind-breaker tight at the neck. My hands were cold and my feet were cold and my nose was running but I didn't care. I was numb, void of all emotions, save for hate and frustration.

We sat on the beach, Tom and I, the sand beneath our feet a dull gray. The waves played games with the gulls, and awkward dodge and tag, and I smiled bitterly when they flew away from me as I stood up.

"This isn't going to help you any, shutting me out, all of us, like this. Damn it, Lisa, tell me. I want you to say it."

"Just leave me alone, Tom. Let me be. I don't give a damn about rules and what I should do, or cleaning my room, or being polite. It's all so trivial, don't you see that? Nothing really matters." I could feel my hold on my temper lessening.

He let out a long sigh, "I know how you feel, remember? I was there once--right where you are now."

"Give me a break. Is that supposed to make me feel better? Well, it doesn't. Save that for someone else!" I wanted to hurt him--no reason, I just did. He stared off into the lake and leaned forward, hands between his knees to stay warm.

"I saw him that night," he said quietly, remembering. "They wheeled him past me. I was waiting in the hall for the doctors to come back and they wheeled him by and I saw blood spots on the floor. His blood. He was going so fast--I called out his name. 'Mike,' I screamed. 'I'm here, buddy. I'm here, Mike. It's Tom. Mike, Mike?' God, I don't even know if he heard me, Leese."

He grabbed my arms.

"You're hurting me! Let go," I cried.

"No! Say it. 'She's dead. She's dead. Tina is dead.' You have to say it. It makes it true, and that's why you can't say it, right?"

He was hurting me. He knew, he knew. I slapped him hard, again and again. I couldn't stop anymore, I'd reached my limit. Jesus, the pain. Everything rushed in at once, bounced around, echoed, blurred.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you!" I screamed til it hurt, but I didn't care. "I hate you so much. You want me to say it? Will that make you extremely happy? Tina's dead. Killed herself. Blew herself away. There, satisfied? Oh, God, why--why?" The tears were streaming down my face now and my throat hurt. "Why did she do it? She left me so alone. I loved her, Tom, I did. She--I--did I tell her that? Did she know? She must've been so afraid, so scared, I should've been there, why wasn't I there? God, I want to die too. I want to die too..."

I collapsed, sobbing, into the cold sand.
"Jesus, Lisa, I'm sorry," he whispered. He rocked me back and forth in his arms and I held onto him for a long time. I don't know how long we sat that way.

"You were fantastic!" Tina grinned. "As usual, you stole the show. Here"--she handed me white rose. I smiled--always roses, always white. Her trademark.

"Thanks. I'm glad you could make it. I was hoping you'd be here," I said.

"Nah, wouldn't miss it for the world and you know it," she hooked her arm through mine and walked me to my dressing room through the crowd of well-wishers, parents, friends, and cast.

"Y'know--someday I'll be able to say I knew you when..."

"If I'm lucky enough to get my foot in the door," I reminded. She was always making big plans for my future.

"We'll see!" I mimicked and stuck out my tongue, only curling it at the tip the way she could never do. She swatted a hand at me but missed.

I stayed at the funeral home all day. I shook hands, thanked people for coming, listened patiently to people reciting the same words of comfort over and over--all running together, sounding sincere but making no real sense.

I never went far from her casket. I didn't want her to be alone anymore, or scared. After everyone had gone and it was just Mom and me and Tina's mom, I listened to my mom murmur those soft words to Karen as she handed her an umpteenth Kleenex. I couldn't stand to hear it anymore.

I walked up to the closed casket I had never quite brought myself to touch and bowed my head in my hands on top of the mahogany. I prayed to God to bless her soul. I knew inside I was too late, and my tears ran into the cracks, to be with her always.

"Hurry up, the movie's back on!"

"Just a sec, I'm on the toilet," Tina hollered from the bathroom.

"Hope everything comes out alright," I yelled back.

It was a stupid, overused joke, but we laughed anyway.

"I do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle Autumn rain."
When you waken in the morning bush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in arching flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there: I did not die."
Anonymous

I go there about once a month now. I make the drive up just to sit with her, tell her what’s going on. Sometimes Mom goes with me, or Karen does. But I like to go alone, mostly. It’s been almost two and a half years since the night she called me last. I still miss her. I still wake up from that nightmare every now and then, in a cold sweat. And I always bring her a flower--always a rose. Always white. It’s her trademark.

Lisa Wilson
Blue and white.

After I left my private world of dreams and floated in limbo, the first thing I saw was blue and white. My mind started its memory-journal at that point, and forced me to see where I was.

But I fought it, limbo was so relaxing. The white above me was swirling and falling, swirling and falling. The blue shook; it was square; it branched off in more blue, like an ice spider staring down at me... I tore myself away from that thought and drowned in the white again: a blanket, a very, very cold...

Cold? Where was I? Was I outside?
My body ached, so I sat up. I knew where I was now. "It's kinda cold in here. Could you turn up the heat?"

"So sorry, but I have to stay awake. You don't want to die, do you?"
"Well, no, not really." I looked out the car at the snow, and looked up at the roof of the car. Did I really think that was a spider?
"Look who's up," said my sister. "Had any fun getting high on NyQuil?"
"Not NyQuil," said my mom. "Dricsomine. It's for his ear."
"What, is it new?"
"Yeah."
"Hey, Mom," I said. "Where are we?"
"Near the border."
Which border, Siberia? "Which border?"
"Illinois-Indiana."
"That far already? I thought we'd have to find an apartment back there." We were lost... hopelessly. Stuck in a drift, we had to get towed away. And after they took most of our money from us, they left us to die in the cold. They had a reason when they decided not to call Chicago the city of brotherly love. "Actually, we could have stayed in a hotel."
"Not enough money."
"Of course."
"Besides," she added, "we'll make it home alright."
"What, you mean it's going to be like this all the way home?"
"That's what the weatherman said."
"Yeah, one word: cold." (That was my sister.)
"Be quiet from now on, okay. I have to get us past the Skyway." We OK'd.
We drove: "we" as in my mom drove and my sister and I were nervous. To me we were driving on a sound stage--technicians blew snow around us and they were probably filming it for some comedy show. "Looks like we're driving on a sound stage," I said.

"Shhh."--"Shhh."
I think my dreams were more satisfying.
There was no doubt we were driving, but whether or not we were driving on a road was hard to tell. Mom even said it was the freeway.
"Hyperspace, OOOOOHH! Look at the stars go whizzing past!" (That was me.)
"Shhh."

We drove, to me always in the middle of a nuthouse rubber room washed with Clorox. Our lights bounced off the walls. The windows were too cold to lean against.
We slowed suddenly, went along at a putter, and speeded up again. My mom muttered something like "Close call."
"I'm ... dreaming ... uvvawhite ... Christmas..."
"Please be quiet, I'm trying to drive."
"Sorry."
The car lurched a little and slid a little, and by some stroke of luck we drove off the road on our own, by way of an off ramp.
Away from the freeway, my mom relaxed a bit.
I was going to ask her where we were, but my nose knew right away. "Gary? Why Gary?"
"Cuz it's there ... Check my purse for the gas card, will you?"
I grabbed her wallet from the cave and looked at her credit cards. "Not in here," I said.
"Damn!" she whispered to herself, and then after a pause: "Okay, look in the glove compartment for a little folded-up piece of beige paper with phone numbers all over it."
"As long as you're not kidding." "Would I kid you?"--"She'd kid you."--(my sister)--"the paper exists."
"Then I'll search for it until I'm swallowed by the Glove-Box Monster."
"How melodramatic; not much chance of that happening."
I rummaged a second. "What's it have on it?"
"Addresses of instant tellers that take my card."
"Don't they all?"
"I wish."
I rummaged a bit more, and then stopped dead in my tracks. "Wait a minute," I said. "Why do we need a cash box?"
"Look at the gas."
Quite the suspenseful answer—I looked at the gas. Empty. "So what are we running on?"
"Fumes."
"Oh, that's cute. And I take it we don't have any money for gas?"
"Ninety cents."

***

I wondered what people thought when they saw us out there at one in the morning, if they saw us out there. It wasn't exactly a good time to be driving around. Cities scare me during blizzards. All the streetlights are on, but nobody's home. There aren't even cop cars roaming around; the whole place is bare. "Where is everybody?" I asked. "I thought this was a big place."
"It is. But we're still in the boonies."
Guess so, but the Twilight Zone would've been closer. ("The loonies?" said my sister—"Boonies," corrected my mom. They both laughed.) We couldn't see more than five feet; snow was all around us, but the roads were neatly shovelled out. And all of it mixed in with that smell. Oh, God, that smell: like burning refried beans (it came from the factories). I buried my head in my pillow to escape it.
"Smaily? Vutt choo collink smaily?"
"Huh?"—The smell of refried beans in the air was the first thing I noticed on entering the village. It grew stronger as we approached el loco capitano's hacienda. In tense form, I dismounted my horse, wondering how in hell they could fit a ferris wheel into a health food store. "Brando," said the policeman. "Marlon Brando. Or, in your case: breaking up is hard to do. I said . . ."
"... waking up. Oh, good," said my sister to herself, and then to me: "How was Dreamyland, you old drug addict?"

My eyes and back ached. I hate sleeping in cars. Why was she watching me? Were we stopped? I guess so. Where was my mom? "It was dreamy. What time is it?"
"Two thirty-five."
An hour? "God, what did we do?"
"Bought some gas and--"
"I thought we didn't have any money."
"Ninety cents, remember?"
"Yeah, I remember."
"We bought a gallon of this really cheap stuff. Burpinol, or something like that."
"Bet it thrilled the attendent, getting ninety cents. Good thing those guys don’t work on commissions."
"Yeah . . ." She paused. We had run out of meaningless things to say.
I said: "Gas and . . ."
"Huh?"
"Bought some gas and . . .?"
"Oh. Gas and we went to all sorts of weird places trying to find an automatic teller. That’s where Mom is now."
I looked out the window. We were at a bank with some Revolutionary War name.
"Think she found one?"
"Could be . . ." Pause.
Another lack of babble.
She said: "I wonder if hotels take Visa."
"Why?"
"So we can stay in one."
"Oh."
"So, what do you think?"
"Oh, yeah, sure."
"Are you being serious?"
"Of course I am. Why wouldn’t they take Visa?"
"Cuz all the honest card-holders have homes."
"We’ll tell them we’re on a weekend vacation."
The door opened and my mom got in. She looked very tired.
"Any luck?" I asked, knowing the answer.
"None."
A glimmer lit up in my eye. I started my speech. "Well, you know, since it’s dark and all . . ."
". . . No Visa. We cut the card up, remember?"
I felt tired now, too. "Oh, yeah . . ." Well, I thought, that was a pisser, and a quick one at that.
"Oh, well, let’s keep going."

***
Unable to sleep, I offered words of wisdom and navigation for the next two hours. During that time, we crept along at 25 (in an attempt to save fuel), and eventually we passed Michigan City and came into Michigan. Only fifty miles left.

I make it sound simple, but it was really hard. We counted inches, every inch was a new knot in our stomachs, and we sure passed a helluva lot of inches. All three of us were fried by the time my mom made the Executive Decision for our crisis.

Her hope was that we’d run into the State Cophouse if we got off at the next exit, since she thought there was one “around here.”

I sadly bid Freeway adieu. It felt like the last time I’d ever see it again.

After that, it was worse than my dreams. Vivid and coherent, but strangely similar. The scene set for us in the real world was much too much like the unreal world. A blur of dark, covered with snowflakes, drifts on the windshield, the unreasonable fear all three of us had of getting buried alive if the car stopped moving.

We found the state police, but whatever they said to my mom while she was in there, it made her look all the more helpless. Whatever they did, they didn’t help. (Coherent and vivid ... a thin line between reality and ... falling asleep again. I had to stay away from that.)

In their tiny parking lot, we read a map by headlight because the dome light was broken. We saw names we’d never even heard of. Was this Michigan?

We crept along the road again. Why did it all seem funny three hours ago?

We crept.

"So what do we do now?"
"Don’t ask me that."
"Why don’t we go faster?"
"Because it conserves fuel."
"Damnit, Ian, just shut up. I’m not in the mood."

I looked at her. She couldn’t look at me because of driving, but I knew she was looking in her mind.

"Sorry," she said. "Just don’t make it any harder than it already is."

I OK’d, and tried to curl up and get some sleep; but I already knew that was impossible by now.

"Gas station should be coming up," my mom announced quietly.
"You just know this?"
"Police told me I’d find one around here."
"Helpful ... " I paused. I had nothing meaningful to say.
"Wait a minute, Mom," I said. "Gas stations don’t take checks, do they?"
"No."
"Sorry, just a thought . . . What are you planning on doing?"
"Writing a check, even if I have to cry for them."

***

"So you think she’ll get it?" I asked my sister.
"Go in and see for yourself."
"Why bother. Gas stations don’t take--"
"I heard."
"Oh."
I thought for a second about how cold it was. "I hope we don’t get stranded here."
"I thought you wanted to live the life of excitement."
"Changed my mind. I hate freezing."
"Wouldn’t happen, we’re such great campers." That was a surprise. Sarcasm from my sister at five in the morning.
"Not much of a night left anyway."
She didn’t say anything about that. Disappointed me.
"You think there’s bears around here?"
"Oh, yeah, sure. Bears and farmers."
My lips were shaking. "I don’t care about being here. I just want to be home in bed."
"You can forget that."
"Yeah . . . So what did we learn from all of this?"
"What, you mean a moral?"
"Yeah."
"Never wish you could spend the night in some strange place, cuz it’ll come true."
"Words of wisdom," I said. "From a ten year-old, no less."
"Here she comes."
I looked over. There she was--crying. The side of our car clicked and a pump started up.
Suddenly I hated my dreams, because dreams never have happy endings.

Ian Rastall
VARIABLE FOR HIRE

A young boy once asked his father, a mathematician, to explain algebra to him. "It's like a game of spies," explained the father. "The spy, X, disguises himself by hiding with other numbers. By tracking him down step by step, with fixed rules, we can unmask him and learn his true identity."

* * *

The name's X. I used to be 2746, but that was when I was an Even number. Now I'm a Variable.

I always felt out of place when I was an Even. Like all Evens, my family was poor, but we managed. In a crazy Matrix like ours, you have to.

Now, the Odds, on the other hand, they had it all together. They were rich, powerful, and secure. Not like us Evens.

I always wanted to be an Odd, but I knew, ever since my Value was increased from 1478 to 2746, that the only way for a down-and-out Even like me to ever reach Odd status was to be a Variable. So I joined the Variable Corps.

I still remember the Variability tests. First, the competency tests: they rounded up all the prospective Variables in a room, and tested our counting. A series of Values would be shown to us; we had to tell their sum. Piece of cake.

Next came the "cleverness" test: they gave each of us a 9 and asked us how we would disguise ourselves if we were on a mission. I tried to use it exponentially, like they do on TV, and almost Devalued myself. I ended up doing simple multiplication, and ended up passing by the skin of my Bit.

After all the testing was done, they rounded up all those who passed in the induction center, where we took our oaths and were stripped of our Values. I still remember that moment: one second I was 2746, your run-of-the-mill Even; the next, I was X, a Variable.

It was the proudest moment of my life. If only I knew what lay ahead.

* * *
Of course, the first few missions are just practices. My first was a little addition number. My assigned Value was 6, and I was to hide myself with a 3. I chose to do a little addition, and ended up making the equation $3 + X = 9$. Of course, it was solved immediately; but that’s not the point of a practice run.

From there I went to the upper echelons: division, multiplication, exponents, the works. I was ready for my first big mission as a Variable (grade A). And then I resigned my commission.

Why? Because the Odds were against me, that’s why. While on leave, I had a short fling with a cute little Number named 8083. Boy, did she have some curves on that Figure!

Anyway, it turned out that she was the daughter of a high-ranking Odd, and it was hinted to me by my superior officer that if I didn’t resign quietly, I would be court-martialed. So I quit.

There I was: an out-of-work Variable. So I did the only thing I could do.
I became a Private Variable--an 'X' for hire.

*  *  *

When she walked in, time stood still. A big, beautiful blonde with a Figure that wouldn’t quit. And she needed my help.

She came right to the point. "I want you to transport a Value for me," she said. I was stunned; the voice was as beautiful as the figure.

"That’s what Variables are for," I assured her. "Of course, I’ll need some details."

There was hesitancy in her voice. "How much do you need to know?"

"Well, for starters, what is the Value?"

She thought about it. "All right. It’s--you’ll keep this confidential?" Seeing my nod, she continued, "It’s a Universal Truth."

(If you don’t understand Variable jargon, I’ll have to explain this one to you. A Universal Truth is a Value that relates in some way to the nature of the Universe--like the number of atoms in the cosmos. They are usually delivered by government Variables to a Person, who then "discovers" them. I knew why she was hesitating.)

I let out a low whistle. "That’s more like a government job, isn’t it?"

"I don’t have time for red tape. Besides, you’ve got a good reputation."

I wondered where she had heard about me. Probably from that cute little Number who got me kicked out of the Corps. Of course, it didn’t really matter.

"What about the fee?" I asked.

"You’ll be taken care of." I could interpret that as either a threat or a promise. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.
I took a deep breath, and replied, "You've got yourself a deal. Where and when?"
She handed me a card. "Go to this address at five o'clock. Knock on the door three times, then ring the bell. Knock four more times and wait. Someone will come out and give you the Value, along with further instructions."
"It's 4:30 now. I'd better get going."
"Goodbye, Variable."
"Call me X."
She smiled for the first time since she walked into the office. The room lit up with her sheer beauty. "All right, X. You can call me 4739."
An Odd! I'd have been stunned, but I was all stunned-out. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad...

* * *

The address was a Home for Irrational Numbers. I went through the Knock-ring-knock-and-wait routine, and was greeted by a hunchbacked servant who let me in. I began to feel like I was in a movie—and a bad one.

On the way to the office we passed an old, old woman. Her Value must have been something like 96400. I mean, this woman was OLD. I could tell she was Irrational by the way she kept babbling, on and on, never terminating, never repeating.

"You can call me Grammaw call me Grammaw call me that but if you call me Grammaw remember I'm not your Grammaw no no not yours not yours but I'm somebody else's Grammaw someone else's and I'm in a Home for Irrational Numbers and I like it here except that nobody ever talks to me never ever never..." I walked away, leaving her babbling.

I entered the office, and a man at the desk handed me the Universal Truth. It was sealed; I couldn't tell what its Value was.

"For this mission, you will need to change your Variable Designation from X to M." I was put off a bit by his brusque manner, but I could adjust. After all, sergeants in the Variable Corps aren't known for their sweet dispositions, either.

"No trouble. But I really prefer X." A moment's concentration changed my designation. That's the great thing about us Variables: we're so flexible. "Now, what's the scoop?"
"That Value in there is of vital importance. You are aware that it is a Universal Truth. You also know that it is to be delivered to a Person. You are to deliver it to this address,"--he handed me a card--"without getting caught. Can you do it?"
"No problem. How much time do I have?"
"Six hours. Oh, by the way... try to resist the temptation to look at the Value, if you can."

Within fifteen minutes I was on the road.

* * *

When a Person--a Human Being, I mean--discovers a Universal Truth, watch out! The last one had been the time Sir Isaac Newton learned the Universal Constant of Gravity. The repercussions shook the entire Matrix; the sky lit up with fire, and everyone's Value temporarily increased by 1000. Nobody's ever seen a Person, of course, and People have never seen us Numbers... but they're real, just the same. As real as us.

I was on my way to the drop-off address on the card, when I noticed I was being tailed. By a real pro, too; the small Figure hid among the crowd well, blocked from my sight, but I've been trained in these things; I noticed him right off. I figured it was time to create a diversion, so I broke the seal on the U.T. to disguise myself.

The Value inside wasn't a Value at all; it was a Variable expression. I couldn't tell what it really was, but it was represented by a 'C-squared.'

It didn't look like much, but then you can never tell with a Variable. I ought to know. So I multiplied my Variable Designation (M) by the U.T. (C-squared). Together, our total Value was E. There was just one little hitch.

It seems that C-squared is worth something quite a bit more impressive than it seemed; its actual Value was approximately 9 x 10-to-the 20th. Next thing I knew, there were nine hundred sextillion (a nine and twenty zeroes) of me sitting around. My shadow would never be able to tell which was the real me.

Turns out he didn't need to. The 9 x 10-to-the-20th of me kind of blocked traffic. We were stuck.

I turned and found myself looking into the eyes of... Grammaw. Look, a Variable, of all Numbers, should know not to judge by appearances; Lord knows I've had my face rubbed in it enough. But then, I never said I was very bright. It took me a while to realize that Grammaw was now completely Rational--and that she had never been otherwise.

She hauled out a Divider-gun. I guess she planned to Divide and conquer, because she sprayed all nine hundred sextillion of us with Divider radiation. "Erg!" we moaned. It's hard to believe that one Grammaw could yield 900,000,000,000,000,000,000 "ergs," but that's what happens when E = M C-Squared. I didn't have time to think about all these things, though; suddenly the ground came rushing up at me very, very fast, and then everything went black.
* * * * * 

When I came to, I was in a cold, damp cell. I felt funny for a minute, but then I realized it was because (a) there was only one of me, and (b) my Variable Designation was X again instead of M.

"I wondered when you'd wake up." I swung around, and there was Grammaw, just out of reach. I ran through all my alternatives and finally came up with one I liked: I cussed her out.

"You illegal, unprintable, highly improbable, vulgar, biological impossibility," I said calmly. "I delete all over your censored." For good measure I went into detail on her ancestry, heritage, home and sexual habits. Unfortunately, I forgot to mention her personal hygiene, but I was a little bit preoccupied.

She took it in stride. "Not nice," she chuckled, "you'll make your neighbor blush. Bye now," and she left. I looked down the hall to the only other occupied cell to see who my "neighbor" was, and got the umpteenth surprise of the day. It was the blonde. "4739!" I called.

"X! Oh, what are we going to do? We've got to deliver the Universal Truth!"

It took me a while to remember what she was talking about; I had other worries on my mind. "We've got to get out of here first. Don't worry; I've got a plan." I did, too: I changed my Designation to Y, inserted my V-shaped upper half between the bars and shifted to T. As the V-shape straightened out, the bars spread; soon I was free. There are some advantages to being a Variable.

After I sprung the blonde, I was rewarded with a kiss that almost Devalued me. Like I said, there are some advantages to being a Variable.

* * * * * 

We searched the place up and down. Apparently our dear old Grammaw had decided that we were no longer any threat, and had gone out for the day--after destroying the Universal Truth. We found its charred remains in the fireplace.

"What are we going to do?" cried 4739 again. "The U.T. is gone!"

I laughed. "You don't know much about Variables, do you, Beautiful? Any Value that I come in contact with gets permanently stored in here," I said, tapping my head.

"But we're not clear yet," I added. "We've still got to deliver the blasted thing, and to do that we've got to find the drop-off point, and to do that we've got to find out
where we are... and I was unconscious when they brought me in. We could be right next
door to the drop-off or halfway around the Matrix."

"Oh, I know where we are!" cried 4739.

I surprised myself by proving that I still had the ability to be stunned: it had not
occurred to me that inside that beautiful Figure there could be a brain. "Huh?" I asked
intelligently.

"I was still conscious when they brought me in. We’re in the Home for Irrational-
Numbers."

It had a crazy sort of logic to it. I decided that Grammaw had a sense of humor.
"Let’s get out of here!"

And we did.

* * *

And that was that. We found the drop-off, made it in plenty of time, and left. On
the way back we met Grammaw, but when she realized that she was too late she decided
to let bygones be bygones... for now. Personally, I think she just didn’t want to risk a
murder (or attempted murder) charge.

4739 and I got hitched. We were wealthy (from my payment for the case) and
we were together. What more could we want?

Oh, yes, I finally made it to Odd status.

* * *

The young boy at the beginning of the story grew up to be
Albert Einstein, the world’s greatest physicist. His famed
equation, \( E = MC^2 \), which states that one gram of
matter can be converted into \( 9 \times 10^{-20} \) ergs of ener-
gy, brought his name into the public mind. Yet he was rela-
tively unknown... until his Number came up.

Michael Weiss
HAROLD

After all these years, I finally remember who stole my rubber ducky. It’s all coming back to me: the one story ranch-style home, the 7 kids my mother babysat, and the 7:00 baths she gave Katy, Harold, and me. We were all about 6 years old. We 3 always got our baths at 7 because we were the oldest. We always liked having the 7:00 baths because we would get the fresh bath water, and by the time the little ones got in, we had massacred all the bubbles, and it looked like a dirty bowl of water. Mom would always fill the tub with water and Mr. Bubble, and we could each bring one toy. Katy would always bring her Fisher Price Boat, which was so big it took up half of the tub. So me and Harold squished on the other side with our rubber duckys. We were content though, because Katy would let our rubber duckys be the passengers, and they could jump off of the diving board.

Anyways, one night before our bath, we were all in the living room watching Laverne & Shirley. Our stomachs were full of spaghettios, and we were waiting for our bath water to be ready. After a while, I looked around and didn’t see Harold. I just figured he had to go or something, so I didn’t pay much attention to it. Then came bath time. I got all ready, and I started looking for rubber ducky. I looked all over for it, but couldn’t find it anywhere. So I took my ugly baby doll Annie instead. Harold, of course had his ducky, which, thinking back I realize had a striking resemblance to mine. Jerk.

-Puey Luey-

That same year in the spring, I remember our lively mornings at our parking lot bus stop. The air was always crisp and fresh on those mornings, until Harold came around, that is. He no longer enjoyed baths. He was into old blue jeans and blue plaid shirts with cowboy buttons on them. We kids were positive that he wore the same duds every day. But he said he just liked blue plaid.

He smelled like the gym at school after it got all stinky from the kids’ sweat, mixed with old cigarettes. Nobody chased after him in tag, and nobody sat by him on the bus. I felt sorry for him, but I was a 6th grade girl, and 6th grade girls didn’t lower themselves to speak with Harold. The only kids who said anything were the first graders, and they called him Puey Luey.
Seventh grade was the year of the revolution. Girls started wearing make-up and, shall we say, 'holder-uppers' under their clothes. Boys actually started noticing girls. It was a great year for all male and female 7th graders shooting into adulthood, except Harold. He was still stuck on plaid, old blue jeans, and cowboy buttons. He felt that girls were still ugly goons, and he started hanging around the pencil-heads.

I still had to walk home with him after school because Mom thought it would be nice. Plus, she threatened to take my curling iron away if I didn’t. So I trudged home every day, dreading the giggles and cold remarks from my friends. I told them that Harold helped me with my homework in hopes that they wouldn't sneer so bad.

One day, Harold got fed up with my old stand-by fib and turned around and yelled to the whole bus stop--"Kim wears a 20 double-A!" After turning 8 shades of red, I ran home and cried. How did he know? Pervert.

Our first year of high school, Harold turned into a full-fledged geek. He was 5 foot 10, 150 pounds, had an Adam’s Apple bigger than his nose and pimples the size of craters. But unlike other years, the bus stop was a successful place for Harold. Kids were actually civil to him, as long as they got to copy his homework.

The kid was an absolute pencil-head. In fact his aroma had actually changed from smelly socks to pencils. With all that attention, I suppose he finally got up the nerve to sit by me on the bus. It wasn’t too humiliating at first, but then he stepped outside of his limits. He asked me to go to the movies. He said it was all arranged. His mom would pick us up, take us to Bambi and back home again after a romantic trip to McDonald’s. I told him "Forget it, I’m busy." "With what?" he persisted. "My nails!"

I got up the nerve to try out for cheerleading my sophomore year despite my small size. Okay, my short size. Anyways, I, surprisingly enough, made it. The problem was that everyone could hear me cheering, only very few could see. So our brainy instructor came up with the brilliant idea of having guy cheerleaders to lift us up on some of our cheers. No guys seemed interested until Harold and his friends heard about it. The inevitable happened. I ended up with Pizza Face looking up my skirt while I was yelling 'Go Team!', 'Score!' Harold seemed bored with the whole thing, but I knew what was clicking and ticking in his small mind. He was concocting the perfect accident.
could almost feel his sweaty palms slipping, his lanky arms unsteadying, and BOOM! Luckily, the only concocting he did was thinking of new and improved ways to ask me out. He tried everything from serenading from his yard to ad’s in the school newspaper asking me to the Valentine’s Dance. A love-sick puppydog couldn’t have acted more pitiful.

-The Rust Mobile-

The first day that Harold D. Okenmaker got his license, the whole city knew about it. You could hear the cattle-clunk-tick-boom from any 5-mile radius. And to believe he bought it with his own money!

He made several stops at my house that day, asking me if I’d like to be his lucky first passenger. I told him that I hated to miss the chance, but shining my saddle shoes was a duty of greater call. He took it well, and without a battle.

Harold stopped at nothing that day to find anyone of the female gender to be his one and only first passenger. I seem to remember that his little sister got to be the lucky girl.

-The Hunk Across the Street-

As the days approached for graduation in the spring of my senior year, I saw less and less of Harold. He always seemed to be working on some project or the other in his garage.

One simmering afternoon, I recall being stunned out of my sun-bathing state by loud clanks coming from the Okenbecker’s garage. ’Harold is probably working on his junk mobile,’ I thought, as I groggily fell back into my daydream of roasting on the beach, sipping lemonade as guys strolled by. When I finally woke up, the sun had already gone over the trees, and the wind started to stir through our maples. As I began to fold up my chair, I noticed a gorgeous guy standing next to a red camaro in the Okenbecker’s driveway. ’That’s strange,’ I remember thinking. ’If Harold had any good looking friends, I’d know about it.’ So I drug all of my gear inside, passing the handsome stranger off for a distant cousin. When I came out to retrieve my lotion, Harold yelled over at me to come see his new car. My heart leapt to my throat when I realized who the hunk was standing in the Okenbecker’s driveway. ’No Way. No possible Way!’ I about fainted. I knew it had been a while since I actually saw him, but this? This was not Harold. I moved in for a better view, but my curiosity took over. I crossed the street and admired the car. I remember our whole conversation to the word.

"So, how do you like my new car?"
"Uh, great. Where'd you get it, I mean, can I have a ride?"
"Nope. I'm saving my first passenger for Jennifer Denbaum."
"Oh, well, it's a nice car. You must have been saving up."

"Since 2nd grade. Yeah, ever since my mom started telling me to save my money for college. But I was smarter than my mom, and now I have a full ride to Harvard and a new car. I guess moms aren't always right. So, do you want a ride some other time? I'm free Thursday after school."
"Well, I'm kind of busy and...."
"Your saddle shoes?"
"No, I didn't mean..."
"Your nails?"
"No. I sort of have a date with Steve Taylor."
"Tennis captain?"
"Yeah," I answered with hesitation.
"Well, Friday I'm....."
"Yeah, I'm free Friday." My heart leapt.
"I'm sorry, Friday I'm waxing my car."

Kim Mettler
Sheldon walked into the library clutching three overdue books on home improvement to his chest, unaware that he was about to become involved in one of the most violent reading incidents in history.

Sheldon nervously approached the 'returns' counter and tried to act nonchalant as he slipped the dilatory volume into the slot.

"Three-fifty," a stern voice shot at him from behind the counter.

"Excuse me?" Sheldon replied, meekly.

"Three-fifty for the books--they're two weeks overdue," the librarian stated, her eyes never leaving the text she was reading.

Sheldon disheartedly felt around in his pockets; knowing before he did so that he would find only lint.

"Ummm..." he began.

"Haven't got it, eh?" the librarian insinuated, swiftly slamming down the book on Romanian cooking utensils that she had been so absorbed in and swiveling her chair to face the computer at her desk.

"Lairdbunkel, S. isn't it?" she stated and quickly typed it into the computer. A huge profile on him suddenly scrolled onto the screen.

"Cheated on your income tax this year, eh? Doesn't surprise me, the way you were sneaking those books in," the librarian clucked.

"Well, I, uh..." Sheldon stammered.

"I see your wife is seeing a shrink. Huh, I don't see that I blame her--seeing that she's married to a toad like you," the librarian rationalized looking Sheldon up and down as she peered over her glasses.

"Now, see here--" Sheldon blurted indignantly.

"Never mind, let's take a look at your credit rating. Oooh, not too good, all your plastic's been canceled?!" she crooned, shaking her head.

"We lost all our traveler's cheques at Boblo this summer--" Sheldon tried to interject, to no avail.

"And your personal cheques are bouncing all over the place," she continued.

"I can explain," he pleaded.

"Well, it's obvious that you cannot pay; just one, please," the librarian said as she pressed a button on the inter-com on her desk.
"Marge, yeah. Can you send up Guido and Louie to the returns counter? Thanks," she said and turned back to the extremely anxious Sheldon.

"Someone will be with you in a moment," the librarian smiled. "Please have a seat." She picked up her book and resumed her reading.

Sheldon sat down on one of the cold, yellow, plastic chairs against the wall and nausea began to set in as he awaited his fate.

Heather Strubank
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

It was a nightmare. Not a puny little scary dream, but a nightmare. And the dreamer did not know it. There was a small child, a little girl of three, riding a local park "push" merry-go-round. This merry-go-round did not have horses for the children to pat and admire. It was just a piece of textured metal with handles to hold on to and to push with. The child was laughing as she fought the inertia that threatened to throw her off the merry-go-round. She was happy, and the dreamer smiled. Then slowly, the dreamer realized that the child could not have pushed the merry-go-round herself, and the dreamer had not pushed her. Who had put the little girl on the spinning carousel? And then the dreamer and the child were no longer alone. The dreamer tried to stop looking at the girl to see the other person, but she could not. Her vision was a fish-eye lens, blurred at the edges. At the center of the dream, the little girl was still laughing, throwing he head back and chortling in a strangely adult manner. She was unaware of the danger that now enveloped the dreamer and made her sweat. The dreamer panicked and ran to save the child from the unseen enemy, but she remained rooted to her place. She was helpless; she would see the child destroyed.

Then, there it was. A black dog bounded into the dreamer's area of vision and chased the revolving merry-go-round. It was not a big dog, and it did not look like a dog trained to attack. It was just a stray mutt, and it wagged its tail and panted amiably as it followed the girl around and around. The child laughed happily at the dog and took one of her tiny hands off the rail to reach towards it, pet it. The dreamer suddenly left her observing position and saw the dog from the little girl's eyes. But the dreamer and the child remained separate. The little girl did not know the things the dreamer knew. And now the dreamer, too, felt the pull of the merry-go-round as the child extended her hand to the dog. The girl stretched her arm slowly, to avoid losing her balance. But just as she came close enough to the dog to pet it, she saw the dog snarl and begin to snap at her fingers. And she lost her balance. The child and the dreamer both gave a little cry, but the child, but the child pulled back in time to avoid falling or being bitten. The dreamer jerked underneath the sweaty sheets, her movements coordinating with the dream. The child whimpered. She wanted to go home. The merry-go-round was beginning to move much too quickly, and there was a bad dog trying to bite her. But she was trapped. She held on to the handles, pulling away from the double danger of falling and being bitten. And the more knowledgeable dreamer thought about rabies shots. The child huddled around one of the handles. She was afraid. The merry-go-round went faster and faster until the child could no longer see individual shapes. The trees and the ground and the fence and the monkey bars that you don't climb because you might fall off all ran into one another and made the little girl feel sick. But she could still see the
dog. It couldn’t keep up with the merry-go-round anymore, but it was still following the child. She would see it chasing her for a few seconds, then lose sight of it until the merry-go-round passed it again. It was slavering, and the girl could see its ribs now. The dog was hungry.

Suddenly, a young man appeared, jogging directly behind the dog. He was a big boy, like the kind that the girl had seen pulling little girls’ hair on the playground at the "big kids" school." The dog and the boy paid no attention to each other as they ran. And then the boy called to her. "Are you afraid, little girl? Are you scared of the big bad doggie-woggie? Aw, poor baby. What a sissy! Aw, poor baby... What a sissy...Aw, poor baby...." And he became a part of the scenery. As the merry-go-round turned, the girl passed again and again the jogging boy and the snarling dog. She tried to close her eyes, but deep inside, the dreamer knew that if the little girl closed her eyes she would be snapped up by the dog, or even worse, open her eyes to find the contemptuous face of the boy right up next to hers. So she kept her eyes open.

And then a phenomenal thing happened. The girl began to grow up, right there on the merry-go-round, and she was eight years old by the time the dog and the boy were joined by an older man with a thin, wicked smile, who called, "You wimpy women are all alike...You wimpy women are all alike...." The dreamer realized now why the child was being attacked. She was female. And she was trapped. No one was helping her, and she was stuck on the merry-go-round. The girl grew older again, and this time she was thirteen. Another man joined the revolving entourage. He was tall, much taller than the girl, but he was only a few years older. He yelled to her "Hey, since you know so much about women’s rights and all, if your girlfriend leaves you for another girl should you open the door for both of them? Should you open the door for both of them...Should you..." The girl in the dream did not understand what the man meant, but the dreamer did, and the dreamer became angry. The girl began to cry, only increasing the volume of the calls around her.

She grew to the age of sixteen, and she looked just like the dreamer. She was the dreamer. Another man and another call. The girl had seen this man on a religious program on T.V. "Of course, no mother should work. They have to take care of their children. What if they’re single and can’t support their children? It was their duty to think of that before they became with the child...It was their duty to think of that before...It was their duty..." Finally, the girl was old enough to understand. She knew the men. She knew all of them, and what their calls meant. And now she was angry too. She cried because she could not avoid the men or the dog. And she knew that they would never stop calling after. Never. The dreamer screamed, and woke up, and sobbed into her pillow so that she wouldn’t wake the little sister in the bed next to her.

Nichole Klungle
A TOAST TO ART

Applause echoed off the arching gallery ceiling and drifted into silence as the speaker cleared his throat.

"And now we have come to the last set of paintings in the John Handler III Talent Exhibit. Before us we have the finest art work in the show, a collection entitled "Shadows" created by Mark Costlings, a senior from our very own Fairview High School." The stout man paused as he glanced at the crowd surrounding him with a pleased look on his face. Mark's hands felt sweaty and his heart beat drummed against his stiff suit.

"After reviewing hundreds of applicants from all over the state, the judges have selected this collection based on a vigorous criteria including design, style, artistic expression, originality, and professionalism and found it to their unanimous choice in excellence..." His deep voice continued in a seemingly endless drone of praise, but the words floated past Mark's ears. His eyes averted the looks of the people he knew must be looking at him and centered on his favorite painting. A morose girl sat huddled under a barren tree crying in the rain. With one foot hanging limp in the gloomy brook and her painful eyes staring right back at him. It was done almost entirely in grey undertones. He remembered all the nights he had spent in his room studying her face trying to get every detail just right. Nights spent with a bottle of Vodka stashed behind his easel, his radio cranked, and his mother pounding on the door. He looked to his left at his mother now standing beside him in her favorite light blue dress, her hands clasped. Her calm face beamed in a maternal smile--for once she looked proud. His thoughts were interrupted by a wave of thunderous applause and he jerked back into reality. The mayor was stepping down from the platform, his plump hand extended and grasped his in a firm handshake.

"Congratulations, Mark!" His politician's smile froze on his face for an instant as the press snapped pictures and blinded Mark's somewhat bewildered eyes with flashes. "So, how does it feel, Sonny-boy?" the mayor winked. "Just think--your works exhibited at a gallery in Chicago. Not bad, eh? And the scholarship should help you get into the Art Institute!"

"It feels great," Mark managed to mumble out. "Just great."

After the eternally long reception filled with artists, spectators, and big-wigs milling around chatting with wine glasses in hand, it felt good for Mark to be in the solitude of his room. He could wipe off his "Yes-I'm-Mark-Costlings-Why-thank-you-for-the-compliment" smile and replace it with a sincere one. The reality of his good luck started to sink in. He now had a real chance of getting into the top art school and being able to
afford it. Finally his future seemed certain, his dreams possible. Maybe things would keep on getting better for him—it was the only direction to go. He recalled his worst points at the bottom, in his junior year. He had been drinking a lot at parties. In fact, he drank all the time with friends, before school, even by himself. The turning point came the day after a wild Sunday night party when he attempted to go to class and had passed out in the hall. There was so much of that year he couldn’t remember. He could recall fragments sitting in English class, working on his paintings, throwing up at a homecoming party, his mother nagging him to death. But mostly it was blank. Mark knew he didn’t really have a drinking problem. He wasn’t a dirty, unshaven wino, he didn’t go around running down people in a car or having violent rages or anything outrageous like that. He would just get a little stressed out about his mom and her attitude (“Where have you been?” “Why don’t you ever talk to me?” “Clean that room!”), or grades, or just things that got on his nerves. There was nothing wrong with going out and drinking with the boys. They always had a great time and it made him feel better.

He flopped down on his unmade bed and a smile of happiness spread across his face. His paintings had won first place. And he, Mark Costlings, from a nowhere smalltown, was going to have a showcase in Chicago. He immediately understood the high a writer feels when he gets published or when an actor makes Broadway. His work had touched other people and been acknowledged. He hadn’t felt this good about himself in years. He was going somewhere; finally, he was going to be a somebody. Mark sprang off his bed, into his closet and slid into his faded jeans, a sweat-shirt, and punched out Andy’s number on the phone. He was going to celebrate.

"Hey, can I have a word with man of the hour?" Andy yelled jovially over the blaring rock beat and loud chatter and laughter. Through the mass of people partially blurred by clouds of cigarette smoke and the effects of eight beers, Andy spotted Mark sitting with his arm around Christie talking to several people. Christie saw him looking from the kitchen doorway. "You mean this artist guy?" she joked. She nudged Mark, "You’re wanted in the kitchen."

"I’ll be right back, Chris." Mark stood up a little unsurely and made his way towards Andy who was downing number nine.

Andy, Carl, and Steven stood somberly in the kitchen amidst empty beer cans and potato chip bags.

"What’s up?" Mark asked, wary of their attempt to seem serious.

"We, your dearest friends," Andy said in mock dignity, "have come together to present these to you for your outstanding abilities."

Carl stepped forward and handed him two bottles of Cold Duck and began to laugh. "And we expect you to share with us in your good fortune!" The boys grinned.
"Easily done, my friends." Mark obliged by popping the cork. Each toasted "To Art!" before guzzling out of the bottle. Soon a dozen other party-goers had joined in the toasting and the wild dancing.

Two bottles later plus a fifth of Jack Daniels, the party had thinned out and Mark felt fairly numb. It was nearly 3 a.m. The phone was in a container of melted vanilla ice cream. The chess players held court in teeming ashtrays. Someone had thrown up in the fireplace. Steven had long since passed out on the couch. Mark felt close to joining him. Christie had said goodbye to the last of the guests, leaving Mark, Chad, Andy, and herself as the only ones, conscious, anyway, in the house.

"You know, it's really a shame that I didn't get to see your paintings in the show. They get shipped off to Chicago tomorrow, don't they?" Andy mumbled from an easy chair.

"Yeh, it's too bad. I can't believe that my work is going to Chicago." Actually, Mark couldn't believe how drunk he was.

"Hold on," Carl said as he tossed cigarette butts into a bowl on the coffee table. "I never got to see them either. The exhibit is at the Auditorium, right? All we'd have to do is drive over and I could kick in that old back door the janitor uses..."

"You've got to be kidding!" Christie interrupted.

"No, I'm not joking. It'd be easy. Sneak in, take a look--no harm done."

Carl grabbed his coat quickly as if afraid he might lose his inspiration and pulled Mark to his feet. Andy already had his car keys in hand. "Let's go!"

"You guys are crazy!" Christie laughed in utter disbelief. "As least be careful driving..."

But they were gone. Andy gunned the engine of his old Buick and sped off. Mark sat in the backseat trying not to let himself fall over. Was this real? He heard his voice join in with Andy and Carl as the radio ground out a tune. Street lights zoomed past his head.

The car had stopped. Andy pulled him into the night air. "Come on, man, wake up or you're gonna miss out!" Carl had kicked open the door and disappeared in the darkness. Mark and Andy followed. "Hellloooo" Andy's howl bounced throughout the huge room. "Anybody home?" Someone turned on a flashlight. Mark concentrated on following the spasmodic circle of light. Their footsteps scraped against the tile floor. Someone was running. Carl's laugh swirled around him. Soon Andy was running, pulling Mark along in and out, weaving like skiers on a slalom course. Mark's hands reached out as if to grab something. He laughed. His arms knocked against things. Long strips of wood. The shatter of ceramics and the hollow sound of canvas ripping. "What was ripping?" floated in his mind. Carl had punched a painting; he held a piece of it in his hand. Mark stared. Andy lit an end with a lighter. They laughed. Mark knew it must be a dream now. He held a sketch in his hand, twisted into a kind of torch. Each of them
had a torch. Their halos of orange light followed them on their rampage. Figures thrown, ribbons pulled. Up the stage, down again. Mark breathlessly halted, his torch burning low, in front of his pictures. The gold lettering on his ribbon still sparkled. His smile faded. Andy jogged up behind him. Carl followed with one last screeching cry that grated against their ears long after they were silent. His evil grin faded when he saw his friends' expressions. They were pale in the flame. They stood for a moment, huffing and wheezing, looking into the sad girl’s eyes. "For shame, for shame you cruel, drunken boys," she seemed to mock.

Carl coughed uneasily. "So, this is really excellent, Mark. It looks, um, really real."

Mark did not move. Andy shuffled his feet, "What are we doing? What in the world have we done?" He ran his fingers through his spiked hair.

"We came to see Mark’s paintings." Carl stated dryly. "Now we’ve seen them. Let’s get out of here." Tossing his torch aside he walked angrily towards the door like a spoiled child having his day at the zoo ruined by a sudden thunder-storm. Andy stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. He was debating on whether to cry or not. "Jesus, look what we’ve done!" he whined over and over to himself. "We’re gonna get caught, I know it!"

"Shut up, Andy, it’s too late now." Carl stood in open doorway. There was a slant of sky behind him and the night stars shone. He lit a cigarette and turned away. Andy followed, head bent, to avoid seeing the wreckage. Mark tried to turn away from her sunken watery eyes but couldn’t. She was crying but not tears of sadness. They were bitter, angry, resentful tears that must have stung her cheeks. To escape, Mark closed his eyes for a moment and hummed as though it were all a nasty bad dream. He would open his eyes and it would be all gone....

He heard a crackling sound. Like snapping twigs. What was Carl doing now? He didn’t want to see. The noise changed, and he smelled smoke. His eyes sprang open to see a whole section on his left in flames. "Carl’s torch," he thought. The flames lapped in waves over frames, stands, canvases. They nibbled at the stand near his feet. Soon the frame, the girl was surrounded in an inferno. The pouring rain and her tears were not enough to drench the red tongues ripping at her calico dress. And still her eyes looked at him. "I’m sorry," he heard himself say. "I’m so damn sorry I couldn’t save you, little girl." But her hands, her face, even her searching eyes had turned to black ash.

"Oh my God, Mark!!" Andy yelled as he ran towards the transfixed figure. "Get out!!" He roughly grabbed his arm and dragged him out. Andy’s heart began to panic. Cops. Police. Firemen. They would be here. I have to get out. His thought of action was confused.

"Get in the car!" Carl screeched in desperate anger. "Get us away from the scene!!"
In the car. Start the car. Drive. Drive. Slowly, Andy returned to his senses. He pulled off near the city park. Carl sat in the passenger’s side staring out the window. Andy ran his hands through his hair and wiped his mouth.

"We’re safe," Andy sighed. "Are you okay, Carl?"

"Yeah," he grunted.

"Are you alright, Mark? Mark?"

"Oh, great. I think he’s, like, gone into shock or something," Carl sneered.

Andy leaned over the back seat and looked at Mark. He looked at his feet. Concern turned into a stifled laugh. He snickered.

"What’s so funny?" asked Carl.

"Look...look at his shoes. They’ve melted." Andy laughed out loud. "He looks like he has jelly shoes!"

Carl looked. Both of them laughed. The tension eased off their faces. "That was quite a scare, man," Carl said. "But not enough to go comatose, Mark. Can’t you see it’s all right now?"

Mark couldn’t see anything but eyes. Her deep hateful eyes.

The boys had unwound. "Wasn’t that one hell of an experience?" Carl marvelled.

"It sure was," Andy agreed shakily.

Carl had found another bottle of JD in the glove compartment. He took a swig and passed it to Andy.

"Want some, Mark?" he asked.

Mark only wanted to stop seeing her eyes. He wanted to erase forever the flames he saw raging over the canvas. Burning the river, burning her delicate face. Burning his dreams.

Carl and Andy were laughing.

"Nothing like good ol’ JD to soothe the nerves," Andy said.

"I agree one hundred percent!" Carl raised the bottle and toasted, "TO ART!"

"Yes, to art!"

Mark leaned weakly to one side, opened the door and vomited into the gutter.

Liz Lents
Josh woke up with a familiar feeling in his head. Not the pounding hammers or the nice, quiet comfort of a child awakening on a summer morning, but the feeling Josh was getting more and more every morning of this his seventeenth year. He felt hatred. He hated to get up and come to the realization that he had to arise and get out of bed and into the world. He told himself, just as he did every morning, that he should have a better disposition. He told himself that today he would actually see good in things and try to help others in need. Maybe contribute to some charity. In fact, he'd get a job and donate half his salary to a charity and keep the rest for college....

College. F----- college applications gave him a pain. Why was it that whenever he tried to feel good, something bad had to come up in his mind. He also realized that he had English homework due today that he didn't do. He hated the dreaded feeling of not having work done, but he still couldn't bring himself to do it on time. Today, he would actually do homework that was assigned (just like every morning, right?). To quote Shakespeare, he thought, "Methinks thiseth will bequeath a new day and not a night and if nay, then nay and nayeth again...." Maybe I should study that stuff better. That doesn't sound right. Hell, who needs Shakespeare, anyway. Willie, Wild Bill, Billiam, Billy. He smiled to himself. Real funny, but it won't get you on T.V.

His father called him down for breakfast. "Dead chickens ready, Josh!" What couth. The man has some concept of life. I'm a tax write-off until I'm eighteen so I can't commit suicide, and we can eat dead chickens every morning, and not feel guilty about throwing away seventy-five dollars for a pair of shoes. Such is life, he thought in conclusion.

He had to get to school. He had to see his girlfriend. He had to face the world again for another day. He didn't like the idea at all. He hated the fact that somehow he knew he would get through the day without dying of some terminal disease (somehow you just know you won't), and no unusual accident would happen (somehow you just don't know but since nothing unusual happens usually, you just know, you know?). So off he went.

He sat in his car in the school parking lot at 9:27 a.m. He stared at the blue sky outside and wondered about a cartoon he saw last night. What did Dr. Seuss get his Doctorate in anyway? Rhymology? Is he a rhymocist? I wonder if I could study that in college. Nah. I never could rhyme or write any kind of poetry. I never think deep thoughts like "Green eggs and Ham, Sam I am." He laughed to himself.

He felt the heat from the sun through the windshield and wondered how dumb he would look if he spread a towel on the hood and lay out right there. He stopped think-
ing about that when a gorgeous girl walked past his car. She had a deep, dark tan. The last few months had not been very sunny so she obviously went to a tanning salon. What stupid things, those salons. It makes you wonder how much people are willing to pay to look good; they're also paying a lot of money to get skin cancer. People are dying of cancer and some are paying to die for cancer. So who's sane?

He thought about making out with the girl and feeling her blonde hair with his feet. He thought about slowly putting his hand under her sweater and feeling up her stomach. Then pulling his hand away just before he reached her breast and finding a load of dead peeled skin all over his hand. Not only did this scare him, it also made him realize that he had a girlfriend and shouldn't be thinking these things 'cause he was supposed to be in love with her.

What is lo-...what a goddamned cliche. Should I ask, he thought, "define love" instead? Anyways, do you know you're in love when ____? When you get the strange urge to rip her clothes off when she's around? No. Is it when she's the only one who listens to you and understands you? Maybe. Is it.....when you're around her, you think about how sad you'll be when she's dead? YES! That's it. I've found love! What's love got to do with it, Tina Turner asks? It's got to do with death! He turned on the car radio. Billy Joel sang, "Tell her about it, let her know how much you care, when she can't be with you, tell her you wish you were there..." He decided to go to his girlfriend's house.

Josh hated ringing doorbells. He thought he looked stupid whenever he stood by a doorway. Just standing there with no fake personality to hide behind. He felt naked and open to the world. Pretty crazy, he thought. He was afraid of someone opening the door and cracking up. "You just look so stupid standing there, c'mere honey, look at this kid. Doesn't he remind you of Goofy?"

Her mom opened the door and said, "Upstairs." At least if she was laughing she would have said more. Which is worse? He went "upstairs" into her room. She looked sick (obviously, she had stayed home from school for that reason). He thought about crawling under the covers and messing around and then he cursed himself for thinking dirty thoughts every time he saw her. After all, he loved her and he should think more about her dying....

"ARE YOU OKAY?" She said yes and why do you sound so worried and he replied 'cause I love you honey and she said thanks. Silence. He hated silence between them. He felt like maybe they weren't right for each other if they didn't have things to talk about all the time. But then he thought of his parents. They don't talk all the time. It's mostly, "What's wrong?" or "What's for dinner?" type talk between them. But then again, he thought, I don't hear them in the bedroom. Maybe they talk there. We are in the bedroom! I have to think of something. Then she said something about breaking up and she was sick of him not talking and it was too late.
He went home feeling terrible. He felt like he did when he was young and his mom threw away his Pink Panther doll because she thought it was dirty. He wanted those times back. The Pink Panther times. That sounds like a newspaper. He lay in bed, and fell asleep. Dreaming about sunglassed Christ figures skateboarding on crucifixes...

Keith Ellis
SUBURBAN IMAGES

Stage Design: The stage has a runway that starts from stage left, extends out to the audience, circles around to stage right and connects there. The lighting mainly shows time of day. The scenery should be basic and abstract; no actual pictures or outlines, just shapes.

PRELUDE

Setting: Burger King. Downstage right stand Joshy and Jenny, two six-year-olds. Behind them seated at a table is Philly, Robby, and Casey (also six years old). Downstage left is another table with Julie’s mom and Seth’s mom seated. All the children are wearing Burger King crowns.

SETH’S MOM: Hi, how are you?

JULIE’S MOM: Goodness, I didn’t even see you standing there! I’m fine, how ’bout yourself?

SETH’S MOM: I’m fine -- away from the kids! How is your daughter Julie?

JULIE’S MOM: Oh, we’re all just hanging in there.

SETH’S MOM: Yes, I know what it’s like to have kids drive you up the wall. Seth drives me up the wall all the time. Kids in general are all annoying, and my Seth is no exception to the rule. I’m sure you know what I am talking about.

JULIE’S MOM: Well, I can’t say I do.

SETH’S MOM: You’re a kidder!

Seth’s mom laughs. Julie’s mom feels uncomfortable.
SETH'S MOM: So you're just hanging in, huh? What's your daughter Julie doing to you?

JULIE'S MOM: My daughter Julie is doing nothing to me. (There is an awkward pause.) My husband's mother died just a couple of months ago.

SETH'S MOM: Oh! I didn't know...I mean I knew she was sick, but I didn't know she kicked the bucket. Poor guy. How's your family taking it?

JULIE'S MOM: Obviously Frank is really upset, coming up with the move and all. It was a pretty hard blow to us, especially Frank because he is such a loving person, but we were all expecting it.

SETH'S MOM: I guess so, she was really dead six months before she died anyway.

JULIE'S MOM: Yes, yes she was; she was sick for a long time.

SETH'S MOM: How is your daughter Julie taking it? I bet she's only adding to the aggravation.

JULIE'S MOM (disregarding the last comment): Well, it all takes time. Last night she came home crying. When I opened the door for her, she had forgotten the key, I saw that someone had walked her home. It must have been a very kind boy, but she wouldn't tell me who it was. I asked her if she wanted some warm milk, and some cookies so we could talk, but she said no and went to bed.

SETH'S MOM: How is the move coming along?

JULIE'S MOM: With the death, I think Frank is more eager to move, to start over again. The transfer is only a few hours out of the state, but I guess he... we all need a change of pace.

SETH'S MOM: A break from the kids! That's what you need, a break from the kids.
JULIE’S MOM: No, I don’t think so. Julie is our only child, and we are trying to make the most of it the last few years before college. I always want to be there for her, when she needs us.

They talk silently as attention shifts to stage right.

JOSHY: What time is your mommy picking you up, Jenny?

JENNY: I don’t know. I don’t know time yet.

JOSHY: Time? Time is the thing between two other things.

JENNY: I don’t understand.

JOSHY: It’s like, how long does it take to go from there to there.

JOHNNY: I don’t care.

JOSHY: But you have to. What happens if you don’t go from there to there?

JENNY: I don’t know.

JOSHY: You don’t have time.

JENNY: You don’t have time?

JOSHY: You don’t have time.

JENNY (after a pause): I thought that was an excuse not to do something.

JOSHY: No, an excuse is when you say you have a headache.

JENNY (flirtatiously): You’re so smart, Joshy! How do you know these things?

JOSHY: I know ’cause I saw my parents do it. It works every time. Hey! Look, Jenny! There’s your mommy!
JENNY (calling out): Hi, Mommy!...I can’t go home....Why can’t I go home?...’Cause I have a headache, Mommy, that’s why!... Ok, I’ll come. I thought you said it works every time.

JOSHY: I thought it did.

Joshy walks over to Philly, Casey, and Robby.

SETH’S MOM (already in conversation): Oh, my boy is fine. He stays to himself, the way I like it. He’s a real quiet kid. He came home late the other night. We told him if he came home late again we would send him to his grandmother’s house for Easter vacation. We are going to do that whether he’s bad or not. It really doesn’t make a difference, does it?

JULIE’S MOM (avoiding the question): Is Seth usually a bad boy?

SETH’S MOM: No, but this will make sure he stays in order.

JOSHY: Hi, dooods.

PHILLY: Y’know what would be really neat?

ROBBY: What?

PHILLY: If this place was blown out of this world.

CASEY: Yeah!

ROBBY: Every place?

CASEY: Yeah!

PHILLY (hitting Casey): No, stupid, just this place.

CASEY (pausing cautiously): Yeah!
JOSHY: Just this spot?

CASEY: Yeah!

JOSHY: I don't think you can do that, Philly. And besides, it wouldn't be good.

Casey looks confused.

ROBBY: Yeah, I don't think it would be good either. My mommy said that she would be upset if I was gone.

CASEY: Huh?

ROBBY: 'Cause...well...I...well... I don't know.

Philly climbs up on the table.
He looks like a six-year-old doing Shakespeare.

PHILLY: Just imagine, the entire world living, except me, and a few others. I wonder if they could go on without me? (Pausing.) Nah!

JOSHY: What time would that be, Philly?

PHILLY: There wouldn't be any time, Joshy, there wouldn't be any time!

CASEY: Yeah!

JOSHY: Oh.

ROBBY: I still don't think that would be neat.

PHILLY: What do you know?

ROBBY: I know how to tie my shoe!

Everyone is flabbergasted!
PHILLY: Uh, so?

CASEY: Yeah...So?!

ROBBY: I can do anything I want.

PHILLY (feebly): Oh, yeah?!

CASEY (now taking Robby's side): Yeah!

Robby undoes everyone's shoe laces and runs off stage. Philadelphia chases after him, but falls down.

PHILLY (to Casey): Well, just don't stand there! Chase him.

CASEY (gesturing wildly): But...I...well... okay.

Casey exits with Philly following.

JOSHY: I still don't think you can blow the world up.

SETH'S MOM: Well, all I can say is a good vacation away from everyone will do you a lot of good. (Joshy has approached) What do you want?

JOSHY: By any chance, do you know what time it is?

SETH'S MOM: Get out of here, kid.

JOSHY (gracious that she didn't hit him): Thank you very much.

Joshy exits.

SETH'S MOM: Just get a vacation away from the kids, or better yet, get rid of your kids like I'm doing. Which reminds me, I have to get the tickets to the train to get Seth out of here. Take care.
JULIE’S MOM (sarcastically): Yeah, and thanks for the advice.

BLACK OUT

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

There is a blue background which looks like the sky. There is a light shining into the audience, so all actors and actresses are silhouettes on stage. There is a baseball placed stage left. There are five children on stage right: Brent, Amy, Julie, Pam, and James. They are basically in a circle, some standing, some sitting. Their voices can be heard, and so can laughs, and some shrills. Seth enters from stage right. He is carrying a suitcase. He tries to get their attention but nobody notices. He walks past them, stops, looks, waves, and exits stage left. They continue talking for a while. The sound of a plane crash is then heard. The children do not hear it. Then Pam, who is wearing a mini-skirt notices the ball. She walks over to the baseball, and tosses it into the air a few times. Nobody notices that she has left. You then see her throw the baseball off stage. An “OUCH!” is yelled off stage. Brent, Amy, Julie and James look up. Everybody’s head turns slowly upward (Pam hit a tall person).

AMY: Wait, wait, I’ve seen what that guy is wearing before--that’s a...

JAMES: Duh, duh, duh...

Pam has not moved an inch. Suddenly she looks at the audience and slinks back in the group.

BRENT: Say it...

AMY: ...that’s a, well, it’s a, well, there are lots of TV shows about them.

JAMES: Duh, duh, duh...

JULIE: No, it’s not the smurfs, Amy.
BRENT: Say it, just say it, please...

AMY: Well, they are wearing blue.

JULIE: True, true, very true.

JAMES: Duh, duh, duh...

PAM: Woops!

BRENT: Come on, just say it, damn it.

JULIE: They carry guns, Amy, come on.

JAMES: A COP! DUH! DUH! DUH!

AMY: Wait, I got it, I got it... A COP!

_Pam runs off stage, everyone but James follows._

_There is a total black out._

COP’S VOICE FROM OFF STAGE AS IF COMING FROM A WALKY TALKY: Zero o one nine. Emergency, Emergency, I’ve been attack-ed by fifteen malicious kids, I’ve been hit by a baseball, I said I’ve been hit by a baseball...

SECRETARY (voice over): An emergency? Oh, no? Why couldn’t I have started this job next week, I don’t know what to do!

_LIGHTS FADE OUT._

COP’S VOICE: They all escaped, all but one that is, and he is screaming obscenities...

_James’s DUHs become apparent again._
SECRETARY: Okay, okay, just take a deep breath, Louise, that’s it. Now what do I do, call the national guard. Now, where’s the phone... oh no, oh my... oh, here it is; da, do, da doo, doo, da, do (dialing a phone). Mr. President, this is an emergency. There are Russian soldiers, armed, armed, armed with baseballs and they’re throwing them at our policemen, and screaming obscenities...

_Sirens and marching soldiers (noises) become apparent._

_SOUND FADE OUT._

**SCENE TWO: THE COURT ROOM**

_When the lights turn back on, we find ourselves in a courtroom._

_The judge’s bench (a chair and large desk) is center stage._

_The jury sit stage left on chairs they have brought on themselves._

_A stenographer sits on the right side of the desk._

_All witnesses, defendants, prosecutors, etc., stand downstage right._

JUDGE: Hear ye, hear ye, order in the court, order in the court. Please proceed.

SECURITY COP (Bailiff): The Judge William Bentley Orax Charles Bartholomew Expurn the Seventh would like order in the court. If he has to ask again, he will sentence each and every one of you to stand in a corner for thirty minutes. The trial will proceed.

MAN: And then that cop came right up to me and arrested me without reading me my rights. It’s not... (his voice is fading while the judge speaks.)

JUDGE: Stenographer, strike that from the notes.

MAN: ...fair that he just comes up and arrests me like that. I’m telling you it’s illegal to...

JUDGE: Stenographer, strike that, too, from the notes.

MAN: (voice is fading) arrest a man just like that... What?
CALLIOPE

SILENCE.

JUDGE: Continue.

MAN: What? That's not fair! Everything you don't like said you have striked from the writings.

SILENCE (While the judge considers).

JUDGE: Strike that from the writings.

MAN: See? You did it again. Stop that.

JUDGE: Stop what?

MAN: Everything you don't like said you have stricken from the writings.

JUDGE: That's not true. (Sideways to the secretary.) Strike what he just said from the writings again, Ms. Penelope...

MAN: You see, HE DID IT AGAIN!

JUDGE: Mr. Thoringood, the court has found you guilty on the charges that you did run the stop sign at the corner of...

MAN: That's not true! I did not stop. I mean I did stop. And then...

JUDGE: Strike what he said, Stenographer, thank you.

MAN: You did it again!

JUDGE: Therefore, you will be sentenced for life-time imprisonment with no parole.

MAN: Wait, listen. Just listen to me, please, you gotta listen to me. The worst thing I have ever done is dropped a piece of dental floss off the Empire State Building to see how long it takes to fall...
JUDGE: Oh, wonderful! Double his sentence. Send on the next trial.

MAN: Well, well, well, it ain’t over till the fat lady sings!

STENOGRAPHER: *(She lets out a loud note in song!)*

SECURITY COP: Well, there’s about five children on trial next.

JUDGE: Good heavens! What on earth did they do?

SECURITY COP: Uh, it says here, *(reading)* uh, they almost caused a third world war, they ran away from home, and it says here that Amy forgot to feed the dog.

JUDGE: My word. That’s terrible! Has the dog been fed?

SECURITY COP: It doesn’t say...

JUDGE: Oh, my, well send them in then, send them on in.

*The children enter.*

SECURITY COP: Please raise your right hand.

*The children raise their right hands, however, they are handcuffed so both hands raise!*

JUDGE: The court has found you guilty of contempt of court. Fine: $100.00.

BRENT: But we’ve got handcuffs....

SECURITY GUARD: Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

*Answering one at a time.*
JULIE: Yes.

AMY: What?

JAMES: YEAH!

BRENT: Yo.

AMY: Julie, what did he say?

PAM: I suppose so.

SECURITY GUARD: Uh, please just answer 'yes' or 'no.'

Answering all at once.

JULIE: Yes.

AMY: NO!

JAMES: YEAH!

BRENT: YES.

PAM: Sure, why not?

AMY: Well, I really don’t care, if you just give me a few minutes to visit the ladies room...

Brent smacks her.

AMY: Yes.

JUDGE: Thank you. Let us see. It says here you are being charged with attempting a nuclear war. Is this true?
ALL BUT AMY: NO!

AMY: So what?

JUDGE: Young lady, I wonder if you would like to spend a night in jail?

AMY: What’s for breakfast? I must have a muffin.

*Brent nudges Pam.*

PAM: I’m responsible, sir.

JUDGE: What? But you’re only a girl.

PAM: So I knocked the cop’s front teeth out...

BRENT: Let me explain, it was only an accident. She found the ball and...

JUDGE: Bailiff, please get me some coffee. And what is this about you children running away?

BRENT: I can explain that, too. Seth and us all used to... well, there used to be six of us. *(Pause)* His name was... Seth...

_All but the children fade away, taking away their own props._

_The judge has help taking away his desk._

_Brent does not stop talking; the dialogue goes straight into scene three._

**SCENE THREE: OUTSIDE JAMES’S HOUSE**

_Seth enters and joins the group._

_The group takes off their handcuffs, and then they freeze._

_The freeze breaks after Brent stops talking._

BRENT: I never really liked him until, he... until he was already gone. I don’t know why I really hated him so much. He was always so...so kind when it came to
things. I guess I hated him because I envied him so much, but even then I was glad I wasn’t him.

SETH: So, what’s for tonight, Brent?

BRENT: I don’t know Seth, why don’t you ask one of the others?

SETH: I...

PAM: Hey, Seth! Guess what?

SETH: I don’t know, Pam.

PAM: I learned to play baseball today.

SETH: That’s good, Pam. Who taught you?

PAM: James.

JAMES: I couldn’t believe it. I tossed her the ball, and she hit it out of the yard.

AMY: However, my mom and dad weren’t so pleased.

JAMES chuckles.

PAM: I hit the ball and it landed in Amy’s yard.

AMY: And...

PAM: And, uh...Well, it uh...

AMY: It kinda smashed through the window and into my dad’s bowl of soup. He thought it was a matzo ball.

JAMES: When he found it was a baseball... (he stops talking because he is laughing so much).
PAM: He ran outside, saw James and chased him all the way home!

_They all start to laugh except Julie._

JULIE: I visited my grandmother’s grave....

_Brent cuts Julie off by accident, but does not notice._

BRENT: Let’s get something to eat.

_They all start to walk stage right_

_They enter on the runway and walk to the middle,_
_where the rest of the action takes place._

_Julie leaves reluctantly._

_Seth seems to make motions as to talk to Julie,_
_but doesn’t know what to say._

JAMES: And they set off down the road in search of a place to eat. Meanwhile an old wicked lady hid behind the tree to scare the innocent children.

JULIE: Enough, James.

JAMES: What?

SETH: She said ’enough,’ James.

BRENT: Hey, Seth, I heard your mom talking about you when I was working at the supermarket today.

_There is silence. Seth doesn’t answer._

BRENT: I heard her say she caught you masturbating in your bedroom.

_Everyone but Julie laughs._
SETH: What?

BRENT: You heard. Don’t try to deny it, Seth.

SETH: That’s not true!

BRENT: Liar! Go ask the other mothers. One of them was your mom, Julie.

JULIE: Shut up, Brent.

AMY (trying to change the subject): Hey, have you heard that new song by The Psychopaths, "Dance with a Catatonic?"

Silence.

Julie’s expression of disgust of the topic becomes apparent.

JAMES: My ma asked me if I was on drugs today.

PAM: Oh, really?

BRENT (laughing): Can’t imagine why.

JAMES: Well, I had to lie. I said ‘yes.’

BRENT: You said what?

JAMES: I told her I was on drugs.

AMY: I don’t understand.

PAM: Why?

JAMES: Now I have an excuse for my low grade point.

SETH: Wasn’t she mad?
JAMES: I don't know. I asked her. She said she had to talk to my dad first.

AMY: Oh, I understand.

BRENT: You do?

AMY: Yes. She had to ask his father first because their house is a bi-partisan democracy. We studied that in Government. Imagine Congress as a housewife with blonde wavy hair, and the House as a cigar-smoking husband. Together they can....

JAMES: So, how 'bout them Tigers....

JULIE (cutting off James): I think I'll be going home now.

PAM: Why--don't you feel well?

JULIE: Sure. I...don't feel so hot right now.

_Julie turns and heads the other direction. They both split with the kids looking very confused over Julie._

SETH: I'll go with her.

_Seth runs to the other side of the stage to where Julie is._

_The group exits. Seth and Julie remain._

They start to walk.

SETH: You're not very talkative tonight.

_No answer._

SETH: You're not very talkative tonight.

JULIE: Why do you say that?

SETH: Is something wrong, Julie?
JULIE: No.

*Pause.*

SETH: Are you sure?

*Julie looks at Seth.*

JULIE: How come you take so much from Brent?

SETH: What?

JULIE: You heard.

SETH: I don’t understand.

JULIE: Why do you let Brent treat you the way he does? Why do you let him *PUSH* you around?

*Pause.*

SETH: I never really noticed he was that mean to me.

JULIE: Then you’re incredibly stupid. Can’t you see him laughing at you? Can’t you see him make us laugh at you?

SETH: I always try...

JULIE: He’s always laughing at you...

SETH (*patiently*): I always try to...

JULIE: ...talking behind your back...

SETH: I said...
JULIE: Is it true, then...what Brent said.

SETH (embarrassed): I can’t lie to you, Julie....Yes.

There is an awkward silence.

SETH: Jeez, all the blood in my face is making me so hot I feel like I just went swimming in a frying pan of grease.

JULIE: Well, at least you’ve got your sense of humor, Seth.

SETH: I don’t know if ’sense of humor’ are the correct words. I think maybe, "At least your insanity keeps you living’ would be a much better choice.

JULIE: You’re not insane, Seth.

SETH: Oh, yeah? Sometimes I have to question myself. You’d be surprised at the things people do when they get home. I mean, I usually act fine, but how do you know I don’t go home and grind our collection of hamsters in the blender. Do you ever look at people and just say, ’I bet that person goes home and just cries all night’?

JULIE: I can’t say I have.

SETH: Open your eyes Julie, look around. Have you ever seen Amy and Pam upset? No, they are always smiling. That means they have to get upset sometimes... they must do it at home.

JULIE (defensively): Well, some people think it’s not good to show your emotions and feelings in public.

SETH: And others, like myself, can’t help but do that. (Pause.) And you, what do you think about hiding your emotions?

Julie doesn’t answer.

SETH: What are you thinking about, Julie?
JULIE: It's been a long week.

SETH: Tell me about it.

JULIE: You've been having a bad week, too?

SETH: Not any worse than it's been my whole life...

JULIE (quietly): My grandmother died.

SETH: What?

JULIE: My grandmother passed away.

SETH: I, I, I'm sorry.

JULIE: That's why I haven't been around so much lately.

SETH: You haven't hung around us in over a month and a half.

Julie faces Seth, looking for comfort, looking for trust.

JULIE: Six months ago my grandmother had a stroke.

SETH: God, I didn't know, why didn't you tell anyone? I'm sorry. If I had known I...

JULIE: Listen to me! I've been wanting to get this off my chest for a while. Let me... Just let me speak.

Pause. Julie takes a deep breath to go on with.

JULIE: Last month my grandmother had a stroke. She never quite fully recovered from it, and spent the rest of her days in bed.

Grandmother was always kind of a wild one, wild for a grandmother, that is. Mom said that she loved to dance. On Thursday nights there was always a big dance at the club. It would be a ritual. She would come down the stairs and ask my grandfather if
he would want to go dancing. He would say 'No, I'll watch the kids.' Grandma would go back upstairs. A few minutes later she would descend the stairs wearing lots of jewelry and her dancing clothes. Her friends said she looked like a gypsy.

Pause.

JULIE: She loved to dance.

After the stroke she was in bed. She lost control of her left side, and her mouth. She had to be spoon fed, and she couldn’t talk; all she could do was make little moaning noises; she sounded so painful.

Pause.

JULIE: My mom said she was the last one of her friends. The last of that generation.

Last time I saw her she looked like she was in so much pain. Her breathing pattern was irregular, she would give four short breaths, and then a long one. (She imitates.) It was the first time I’ve seen my father cry, I think. A week after that she passed away.

It’s strange. (She laughs nervously.) I saw her in the coffin—she was beautiful, as if she was really at peace. Her face was no longer contorted, but relaxed. She was beautiful; she was dressed in white, with a veil over her face, as if she was going to be married, not buried. I guess she had been engaged to death for a long time.

Brent and company show up. They eavesdrop.

SETH: I am really sorry, honestly, Julie.

JULIE: I go outside to see if I can feel her in the air, to see if she is part of the universe, but I never feel any different. All I know is that she is dead. My grandmother is dead. I just wish everything would stop.

SETH: Don’t keep saying....

BRENT (calling out): The world doesn’t stop for your grandmother, Julie!

JULIE: No, but I take a break from the world!
SETH: Leave her alone, Brent!

BRENT: Shut up, Seth.

JULIE: I’m leaving.

SETH: Julie! Wait!

Julie Exits.

SETH: Brent...

Not knowing what to say he shuts up. Seth exits from a different side.

BRENT: Wimp.

JAMES: Why don’t you cool it a little bit.

BRENT: Shut the heck up, James.

PAM: I didn’t know.

AMY: Why didn’t she tell anybody?

JAMES: I guess she didn’t want the attention.

BRENT (to Amy): What the heck do you know?

PAM: My cat died last year.

Brent gives her a cold look. She turns her back to them and continues.

Brent stares out into the distance.

PAM: She climbed into our neighbors’ garage, while they were pulling out. She crept in. The garage door closed and she was trapped. Our neighbors had gone on vacation, for a month. That whole month I looked all over the place. I swore I heard pur-
ring noises at night, but my mom told me I was imagining things. When the neighbors came back their garage was smelling putrid.

AMY: I can’t say I’ve had any problems.

JAMES: Well, not in the usual sense.

AMY: I once...I once...I once dreamt I was lost in a supermarket. All the cans were popped open, and the strange thing was, they were all filled with...TUNA FISH!

Everyone gasps!

JAMES: No! Stop! Don’t go on.

PAM: I hate tuna.

JAMES: Horror! Horror!

AMY: And not only that, they were still alive!

JAMES: I hate live fish.

PAM: I once dreamt I was a tuna fish.

BRENT: Shut up. Let’s get out of here.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT 2

SCENE 1--COURTROOM

There is noise.

JUDGE: Silence! Order! Order!
BAILIFF: Shut up!

JUDGE: Bailiff, you are being fined for contempt of court.

BAILIFF: But I...

JUDGE: Continue.

BRENT: So after they left us, we decided to go out for ice cream.

JUDGE: Ice cream?

BRENT: Ice cream.

_Judge confers with stenographer, stenographer gets excited._

AMY: So we were in the middle of this great friendship crisis when...

JUDGE: Due to the...uh...lack of time to decide upon the precedents of...uh, running away...the tribunal will recess until further ice cream is eaten... uh...until about an hour from now.

_Judge bangs gavel
_The jury cheers!_

BAILIFF: Let's eat!

_Everyone exits taking their props and seats, etc._

**SCENE TWO - Outside courtroom**

_Amy and Pam are on either side, looking out. Brent and James, center stage
_Julie walks the long way off._
BRENT: I'm going for a smoke, anyone coming?
JAMES: Smoke?
BRENT: I said I'm going for a smoke. Anyone want to come?
JAMES: But, Brent...
BRENT: I said I'm going for a smoke. Coming?
JAMES: But, Brent, you don't smoke.

Brent looks at him and leaves.

"THE CHANT"

JAMES: Can you believe that?
AMY: Hey, Pam! Guess what I heard!
JAMES: Brent smokes!
PAM: What?

JAMES: When did he start? Who has he been hanging around with? Why does he smoke?

AMY: John cheated on his girlfriend Nancy.
PAM: Nooooo! Not Nancy!
AMY: Yes, and Nancy just set her brother, Spike, out to get him.

Amy walks over to Pam. James walks forward.
JAMES: Why would Brent do this? Where does he buy his cigarettes? Does his dad know?

PAM: Hey, look! There’s Spike.

AMY: Really? What’s he doing, I don’t have my glasses on.

PAM: It looks like he is carrying a....

AMY: A?

PAM: ...a......a....

AMY: A what, Pam, a what?!

JAMES: I should have never let Brent out of my sight! Is this my fault?

PAM: A baseball bat!

*They both gasp.*

JAMES: Yes! It is my fault! I have let my friend turn into...A BURN-OUT!

PAM: Is John anywhere in sight?

AMY: I don’t see anyone.

PAM: Wait! Who’s that person over there?

AMY: Oh, that’s just the judge eating his ice cream.

PAM: And what is that in that tree?

AMY: Where?

PAM: There! Hiding on top of the tree?
JAMES: My life is ruined! Brent’s parents will never respect me again!

AMY: That’s John! And, hey, look! There’s Spike. Wait, that’s not a baseball bat Spike is holding, that’s an axe!

PAM: What’s he doing? I can’t see!

AMY: He’s shaking that tree! Yes, he’s definitely shaking the tree. There goes John, floating down like a feather.

PAM: Go on, go on, tell me what you see!

AMY: I’m trying, now, please. Oh my, oh MY, OH MY!

PAM: What! What! What! Tell me!

AMY: Wait! There’s a truck in the way! Get out of the way! Get out of the way! Get! out! of... it’s no use. It’s parked...

JAMES: Oh, woe is me! What am I going to do?

Amy and Pam look at each other, after hearing James.

PAM: What’s wrong with James?

AMY: I don’t know, maybe it’s stomach cramps.

PAM: But he’s, a boy.

AMY: Oh, yeah. Well, you can never be sure. We all thought you were a boy when you first came to this school. Your hair was so short!

PAM: Oh, that’s just like you to say something obnoxious on a nice day.

AMY: I was just telling you the truth, Pam.
PAM: Thanks, I’ll do without it, bitch.

AMY: What?

PAM: I said I have an itch.

AMY: Listen, I might be a bitch, but at least I don’t go around denying what I said.

PAM: You want to hear what I said? I’ll tell you what I said. Bitch! Bitch! Bitch! Now are you satisfied?

AMY: Oh, that does it.

*Amy and Pam start cursing at each other at the same time.*

*James speaks over them. It is imperative that the main focus be on James. However, Pam and Amy’s actions should be able to support the scene.*

JAMES (does not talk until Amy says counterattacking the...): What am I going to do? Is it my fault? Should I have watched him more? Am I my Brent’s keeper? Amy, Amy! Help me....(Amy grabs Pam’s hair and starts to pull)........What am I going to do?.........Pam! Pam? Are you listening? (Pam starts to claw Amy’s face while her hair is being pulled.) I can’t believe this! Is anybody listening to me? Hello? What am I? Just an atom floating around in a universe that doesn’t care about him? Is that how Brent is? Does anyone know who Brent is? Does anyone care who Brent is?

Bailiff enters

BAILIFF: Children, you’re late.

*Pam and Amy stop fighting. James watches them.*

PAM: Well, I’m glad I got that out of my system.

AMY: Me, too. Here’s some of your hair back.
PAM: Thanks. I think I have some of your skin under my nails. I'll give that back to you later.

AMY: Thanks. Are we ready?

Amy puts her arm out for Pam. Pam takes it. They walk backstage where the courtroom is coming back on.

JAMES: I don't believe this!

Brent, James, the jury, etc. take their places.

BAILIFF: The children are present, Your Honor.

JUDGE: I know, I know, I'm not stupid you know, I am a judge. (Mumbling) Where did I put my glasses? (Addressing a coat rack) Now, where were you?

Bailiff hands glasses to Judge.

JUDGE: Oh, terribly sorry. Now, where were you children?

PAM: We were busy.

JUDGE: Very well. Now, Julie, your parents said you were moving. Did you move?

JULIE: Yes, we moved a week later, after I had that talk with Seth.

JUDGE: Then how come, a week later, you were caught with them?

JAMES: We didn't even know she had left.

JUDGE: Did anyone know?

JAMES: No one knew!
JUDGE: Order! Please, Julie, answer the question.

JULIE: Seth knew. Seth was the only one that knew. Seth knew a lot of things he never talked about, like about Brent, and myself. I ended up with them because I ran away. I hitchhiked to Seth’s house. He was packing.

Courtroom fades - Julie walks to Seth who is stage right.
He is packing a suitcase.

JULIE: Why are you packing?

SETH: My parents are sending me to my Grandmother’s.

JULIE: Why?

SETH: I don’t know why. They said I was a bad boy.

JULIE: What did you do?

SETH: I don’t know why, they just said I was a bad boy.

JULIE: Seth, (laughs nervously) didn’t they tell you why? Didn’t you ask?

SETH: I did ask them.

JULIE: And what did they say?

SETH: Nothing.

JULIE: Seth, I know you aren’t stupid. You must have at least a vague notion why they are sending you away. Tell me.

Seth doesn’t answer.

JULIE: Seth, what’s wrong with you? You’re not like this.
SETH: What do you know? Everyone thinks they know me. They don’t know. You can’t know! I hate you! I hate you for what you stand for. I hate you for thinking that I never have a problem at home. You make me sick.

JULIE: Seth, what are you doing? You’ve never acted like this before. It’s not right! Tell me....

SETH: Right! What do you know about right and wrong? You ran away from home! What could you know?

_Julie exits._

SETH: How could she understand? Everyone talks, nobody says anything. Everybody talks, nobody listens. I listen. I am the only one who damned listens to things. How can she understand? How can she understand!? That bitch. Don’t come back, you hear? Don’t come back.

_Seth goes back to packing._

_Brent enters. He is outside_  
_This is symbolized by him walking on the runway._

BRENT: Okay, so it’s 12 o’clock now. Dad said if I wasn’t home by 12:15 he would kill me. I can stop by James’s until 12:10, it takes four minutes to get home, is that right, only four minutes? Yeah, so I’ll leave at 12:10; that will give me an extra minute. I can’t be home late, my dad will kill me.

SETH: Screw them! I’ll go to them tomorrow. I wonder if they’ll miss me? I’ll see tomorrow. I think... I think... I don’t think they care. I don’t think they care! They never talk to me anyways. Why would they care? They don’t like me. They don’t like me because of Brent.

_Seth finishes packing and slams shut the suitcase._

_Seth exits._

BRENT: Did I say 12:15? Maybe he said 12 o’clock. He did say 12 o’clock. By 12:15 I can find my pillow outside, he said. Woops.
Brent starts to run, but stops.

BRENT: Always! This always happens to me. I try my hardest to make it home on time, but every time I always screw up.

Crook enters.

CROOK: Stick it up kid. Give me all your money!

Brent bashes him. Crook runs away scared.

BRENT: Always me! Why me? Why not James? Or Seth! Why not someone I don’t know? (Pause.) 'Cause I deserve it. A divorced family and a step father that beats me. I deserve it. Couldn’t happen to anyone...nicer. But I try! Don’t I get anything for trying?

Beach ball flies into Brent’s head from offstage.

BRENT: I guess not. Nothing goes my way, until something goes wrong, and then it’s me. (He notices Seth’s house.) Seth’s house....The kid lives a perfect life, like Bambi in Vietnam. He deserves something bad to happen to him. He can handle a boxing father. HE can handle a pecking mother. He can take a few bruises...Seth...Who am I kidding? No one deserves that.

I deserve it! I deserve these punishments, these guilt trips! Like the time I hurt my brother. I should suffer because I made him a cripple! I should suffer for scarring him for life...Never mind the scars that will lay on my mind the rest of my life, never mind me. I meant to do it. I MEANT TO DO IT! .... in the kitchen there was a pot of boiling water...I didn’t see it. I DIDN’T SEE IT. I walked by to pick up a dish cloth for my mom, it must have fallen on the floor. I wanted to pick it up so... no one would slip on it or something. I didn’t want my mom to slip on it and fall down! I walked to the stove unaware my kid brother was behind me. When I bent down to pick up the dishcloth my bag slipped and hit the pot. The pot went flying. I heard a gong noise...I turned around and I saw the pot on my brother. There were shrills coming from him. The pot had landed on his head...The water was pouring down him, scalding him....his arms were waving in the air...as if it was a Three Stooges movie....but the screams, they kept coming, and coming,... and I couldn’t move.

My mom came in running, with her hands pulling out her hair. She blamed it on me. My brother had third degree burns on his face. Imagine your head being stuck in
BRENT: If I go home, I'll be killed.

JULIE: Ahhh, that's a good reason for not going home.

BRENT: You're beginning to sound like Seth.

JULIE: They don't care, do they?

Pause.

BRENT: How did you know?

Pause.

JULIE: They only care when you come home late, or when you do something wrong.

BRENT: Or when he needs a punching bag.

JULIE: You never talk, you never say what you're feeling. (Pause, as Julie waits for an answer.) It's okay, I suppose. We are all like that, in our own ways.

BRENT: That's not true. Pam and Amy talk.

JULIE: Do they?

BRENT (after a moment of thought): Ok, I guess you're right.

Lights change symbolizing break from night to dawn as Julie and Brent talk. James enters, and soon Pam and Amy; there is mumbling and laughter. This is a repeat of the first scene, until after ball is thrown.

Fade to courtroom.

JULIE: And that is what happened.
JUDGE: But what about Seth?

BRENT: None of us saw Seth before he left. Today we read the papers. There was a plane crash. We saw his face in the IN MEMORY OF column. He didn’t even tell us he was leaving.

*Julie looks off aside as there is silence.*

JUDGE: So that was a nice story and all, but what was the point?

AMY: Let me explain...

BRENT: The point was that we were all so involved in ourselves, we forgot to notice everyone else around us.

*Silence.*

JUDGE: Oh, in that case....Wait a minute. Bailiff, what is the charge for not caring?

BAILIFF: I don’t care.

JUDGE: What?

BAILIFF: Uh, jeez, I don’t know, Judge.

JURY MEMBERS: Make them pay! Throw them in jail! Lock them up forever!

*Judge bangs the gavel.*

JUDGE: Unfortunately, I think I’m going to have to let this one slide. I must admit that I don’t understand what the story has to do with the charges, therefore I will let you go. I hope you have all learned your lesson.

ALL: Lesson?

JUDGE: Why, yes, it’s obvious.
BRENT: What?

JUDGE: That you've all been ignoring each other. Excuse me, I'm late for my golf match.

PAM and AMY (together): Huh?

JULIE: Yes.

BRENT: Yo.

JAMES: What did he say?

JAMES: What did he say?

Pause.

BAILIFF (while leaving): Well, at least some of you learned a lesson.

PAM, AMY & JAMES: What?

(Together)

PAM: I'm tired.

AMY: Let's get outa here.

JULIE: I'm glad it's over.

BRENT: Thanks for everything, Julie.

JAMES: Let's eat!

Pause; they all laugh.

Seth appears in a strange light in the judge's seat.

They all turn their backs on him unnoticed and start to exit.

One by one they all turn around to get one last look at the courtroom.
They pay their tributes to their dead friend, Seth.
They exit (Amy and Pam first, then James, Julie and then Brent).
Seth turns his back and exits opposite direction.

The End.