

TREE

by

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CHARACTERS

MRS. JESSALYN PRICE, 60's. African-American. Retired elementary school principal with dementia. When Mrs. Price is lucid she's a force to be dealt with, when she's out of her head, she's uncontrollable.

LEO PRICE, 40's. Mrs. Price's son. Chef at Oscar's Grill, south side of Chicago. He's moved in with his mother to care for her in her illness. Lost his way in life a bit.

JJ PRICE, 20's. Leo's daughter. An artistic college student. JJ helps out with the care of her grandmother. A rocket of a girl with a bright future.

DIDI MARCANTEL, 40's. Caucasian. Professor of Gender Studies at LSU in Baton Rouge. Headstrong, willing to dissemble to get what she wants. More lost than Leo, less able to admit it.

TIME

Early 2000's

PLACE

Southside Chicago and various memories in Louisiana

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Mississippi delta of Mrs. Price's mind and Didi's boat filled with letters are as critical to the visual world of the play as the home filled with boxes tied in string.

The play should be performed without intermission.

A cloudy sky, long low, flat horizon. Delta.

Suspended in this gray-green world, **MRS. JESSALYN PRICE**, Black, 60's, rasps an old tune in Creole French, *AUX NATCHITOCHESES**. Unaccompanied, she taps her foot to keep time, sitting in a wooden chair in her second-story heavenly room, which has no ceiling, no walls-- it is the delta in her mind, of her memory. Her version of the song is ancient, wounded, bastardized. She transports herself on the raw notes, calling to a lover long lost.

MRS. PRICE

*Aux Natchitoches ya vais un brun
A qui je veux mi faire fortun
J'ai mais dimanche pour la les la voir
J'ai mais dimanche pour la les la voir*

*Et pars an beau matin je ne ful traillez
Je les trouvé sous son lis couchez
Darlin' belle, sonnez y et vous
Belle a nos amour, je le pense q'ua vous.*

SCENE ONE. LIGHTS RISE on the tidy rowhouse with a porch below Mrs. Price. Chicago, Southside, early 2000's. The house is not unusual except there are cardboard boxes tied with twine, tucked all over the place. **LEO PRICE**, 40's, fit and neat, sits at a table paying bills.

Mrs. Price taps her foot.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

I think I'm dead. I believe I done died.
Hey, now...
(louder)
I think I'm dead over here.

Leo ignores her.

In another part of the stage, **DIDI MARCANTEL**, White, 40's, androgynous, sits in the ruins of a small decrepit wooden BOAT FILLED WITH OLD LETTERS. Didi reads from a fragile, yellowed letter.

DIDI

'Remember the lake?'

Mrs. Price turns her head as if she's heard a ghost from the past whispering to her.

DIDI (CONT'D)

How'd you get in that tree without me hearing? Magic.'

MRS. PRICE
Remember the lake?

DIDI
'You say...

MRS. PRICE
Hold on!

DIDI
'...and I do and we leap-- into the
night, into the water, plunging to the
deeps, clutching each other, gasping,
laughing, wild.'

Didi lets the letter fall, rifles through others.

DIDI (CONT'D)
Who is this boy? I want to be his child.

As LIGHTS FADE on Didi, Mrs. Price loses the memory.

MRS. PRICE
Check me, boy!
(louder)
I think I'm dead over here.

LEO
You don't sound dead.

Leo walks upstairs to Mrs. Price, his mother.

MRS. PRICE
What does dead sound like?

LEO
What?

MRS. PRICE
I'm dead, I died over here, I'm pretty
sure. Check me.
(offering her wrist)
Feel this. I'm dead.

Leo takes her pulse.

LEO
Pretty steady for a dead woman.

MRS. PRICE
I could a swered it.

LEO
68 beats a minute.

MRS. PRICE
I been dead. Born dead, matter of fact.
Dropped in a field, th'owed in the dirt,
been scratching at it ever since.

LEO
Yeah?

MRS. PRICE
Hard to remember ever living.

LEO
I know. You remember your kid?
Flicker of something in her eyes, but---

MRS. PRICE
I remember the day they drilled a hole in
the top of my head, stuck a tube in my
brain that came out my dick--- all that
piss flowing out.
There is a KNOCK at a door.

LEO
Okay, I'll see you later.
Mrs. Price thrusts her wrist at him again.

MRS. PRICE
Check it, boy! Do what I say!
Leo rubs the old woman's wrist, does not take her pulse.

LEO
I'll come back and check it after while.
She yanks her hand away, disgusted. As if to students--

MRS. PRICE
When will you children learn?
Another KNOCK at the door as Leo crosses to answer it.
Mrs. Price rocks, taps her foot.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)
There is a time...
(tap, tap, tap)
There is a place...
(tap, tap, tap)
And this is it.

Leo opens the door, finds **Didi** on his front porch.

DIDI
Leo Price?

LEO
Who's asking?

DIDI
My name is Didi Marcantel.

She hesitates, maybe expecting something more, then--

DIDI (CONT'D)
From Louisiana.

He holds her gaze, steady, blank.

LEO
You're a long way from home.

Mrs. Price shouts out--

MRS. PRICE
I'm waiting!

DIDI
Yeah.

LEO
What can I do for you?

MRS. PRICE
I'm not crazy, I'm dead. When you coming home?!

LEO
(to Didi)
Excuse me, I have to--

Leo starts to close the door. Didi stops him, thinking fast, talking faster.

DIDI
I wondered if I could talk to you for a few minutes.

LEO
Talk to me about what?

DIDI
I'm writing an article on African-Americans from the South who fled to the North.

LEO

Fled?

DIDI

Okay, moved. North.

LEO

I was born here in Chicago.

MRS. PRICE

Damn it, boy, you forgot me already?

DIDI

Is that your mother? Jessalyn Jeffries Price? I believe she was from St. Martinville, Louisiana, and she moved here in the fifties. Isn't that right?

LEO

You want to talk to my mother?

DIDI

Yes. And you.

LEO

How'd you get our name? Who you writing this for?

DIDI

I'm a reporter for the Times Picayune in New Orleans.

MRS. PRICE

Check me!!

DIDI

I'm interviewing several families in Chicago. So your mother was Jessalyn Jeffries?

LEO

She's not feeling well right now and I'm getting ready to go to work, so maybe another time.

DIDI

Tonight?

(he looks doubtful)

I'm only in town for a couple of days.

LEO

I don't know anything about her coming to Chicago.

MRS. PRICE

Leo!

DIDI

Ten minutes.

LEO

Alright. Ten minutes.

DIDI

That's fine, that's great.

LEO

Around seven. Out here on the porch.

DIDI

You call it 'porch' like a Southerner---
don't most people up North call it a
'stoop'?

LEO

If it was a stoop, I'd call it a stoop.
This is a porch.

He goes inside. Didi walks a few steps, pulling a letter from her pocket. When Mrs. Price speaks, she stops.

MRS. PRICE

'When I think it can't be true...'

DIDI

(pressing the letter to her)
*'I look at your eyes in his face-- and I
remember.'*

Leo makes a phone call. Didi looks in the direction of Mrs. Price, who utters part of the letter.

MRS. PRICE

*'When I wonder 'Did you love me or did I
dream that?'*

DIDI

*'I touch his hands so much like yours
and, I know, it's true...'*

MRS. PRICE

'It was true.'

SCENE TWO. Leo crosses to meet Didi on the porch with two glasses of iced tea.

DIDI
How's your mom feeling?

LEO
She won't be able to join us this evening.

DIDI
Maybe I can come back tomorrow.

LEO
So you're a reporter?

DIDI
Yeah.

LEO
For the Times-Picayune.

DIDI
Magazine section.

LEO
Can I read one of your articles?

DIDI
Sure. I'll send you one.

LEO
Can I find it online?

DIDI
I don't think that's available...

LEO
The Times-Picayune never heard of you.

DOD
You probably talked to the wrong guy.

LEO
Really?

DIDI
I'm not--- I'm writing this on spec--

They sit in silence for a long moment.

DIDI (CONT'D)
I didn't think you'd talk to me if I told you the truth.

LEO
Which is?

DIDI
I'm Ray Marcantel's daughter.

LIGHTS RISE on Mrs. Price, who suddenly thinks of Ray.

LEO
Is that supposed to mean something to me?

DIDI
I think it'll mean something to your mother.

LEO
I wouldn't be so sure about that.

DIDI
I found some letters.

Didi's presence conjures memories in Mrs. Price-- or has Mrs. Price's spirit drawn Didi to this house? Either way, the old lady inhabits her seventeen year old self, Jessalyn.

JESSALYN
Dearest Ray, My article for the Panther Printz came out today and everybody liked it a lot. There are a few things I would change if I could, but I can't, so I won't! Better luck next time! I think they'll give me another story to do-- if only because they're short-handed. HA! I'll get it by hook or by crook, that's how dedicated you have to be. No one wants me to be a career girl, especially not momma and daddy, and I think Mr. Topham only gave me the story because I bugged him so much. Unstoppable, that's me. As you know. Remember the lake? Do you still feel the same way? Write me soon.

Jessalyn.

LIGHTS SHIFT back to the porch.

DIDI
She was in high school. He had just enlisted in the Marine Corps.

LEO
He kept letters from my mother...?

DIDI
I found them in his office.

LEO
Does he know you have them?

DIDI
He died. Nine days ago.

LEO
I'm sorry.

DIDI
Did she ever mention him?

LEO
No.

DIDI
He never spoke of her either. I had no
idea.
(beat, then)
You look like him.

An almost unbearable silence. Finally--- Leo gestures to
her bag.

LEO
You going to let me see these letters?

DIDI
Oh, they're not in my bag, there's
hundreds of them.

LEO
(taking that in)
Hundreds...?

DIDI
They're in the car, I'll get them.

She goes.

UPSTAIRS Jessalyn recalls the end of her letter.

JESSALYN
*P.S. Every time I have a spare minute I
think of that night at the lake, but I
really don't know, and I won't until I
see you, then I'll tell you the truth all
the way.*

P.S.Jr. I will never forget the lake.

LIGHTS REVEAL Didi and Leo in the living room. He
watches her open a suitcase and display some of the
letters on the coffee table.

DIDI

I put them in chronological order, as best I could. Some of the stamps are worn out and impossible to read. They start when she's a junior in high school. I'm sorry, I'm rambling.

Leo picks up a letter, opens it gingerly.

LEO

It's her handwriting.

DIDI

You might want to just--

He reads silently.

DIDI (CONT'D)

Get used to the idea.

LEO

Have you read them all?

DIDI

Oh, god, no. It's not easy-- the ink is faded and her handwriting's kind of fancy. I read the beginning and the end, pretty much. As best I could. Anyway, a lot of it is just, you know, girlish chatter.

He looks at her, then picks up another letter to read.

UPSTAIRS Mrs. Price is lost in the memory of Jessalyn, the girl she was.

JESSALYN

Oh, and I must tell you, I now have some green paint from a 1950 Buick fender on our car. From Mr. Loeb's car. It was his fault, so he didn't call the cops, but if he'd known I had no license, I would really be in a mess. So far, he hasn't done anything about it and I certainly don't intend to.

Jessalyn/Mrs. Price goes silent, stares off.

DOWNSTAIRS--

DIDI

Is your mom feeling better? I'd love to share these with her.

LEO
She's asleep.

DIDI
For the night?

LEO
She's on medication.

DIDI
I'd. I'd like to meet her. Talk to her
about my dad.

LEO
She's ill.

DIDI
With what?

LEO
She'll have no memory of your father.

DIDI
Your father, too, right?

LEO
What.

DIDI
I'm sorry, but you know, right?. I know
you know. Right? When I said you looked
like him I could tell you knew. She was
pregnant. You--

LEO
My father lived in this house until he
died two and a half years ago. He is
buried on a plot I pay for every month.
My father, Charlie Price, worked for the
city of Chicago for forty-five years and
was a rock this family depended on.
Nothing you or anybody else has to say
will ever change who my father is. Let's
be clear about that.

DIDI
Of course, I understand.

LEO
If you came here to talk to my mother
about her past, it's a trip in vain.

DIDI
I see.

LEO

She can't help you and these letters
won't mean anything to her.

UPSTAIRS Jessalyn recounts her letter, as Leo reads.

JESSALYN

*Momma was in the car and she had six kind
of fits. Do you know what I did? I
laughed like a fool-- I was laughing at
momma and the way she was acting-- like
we were going to jail. She acts like
it's 1853 instead of 1953! Thank you for
your last letter. I'm glad you made the
baseball team. Any news on a trip home?*

DOWNSTAIRS--

Didi turns to a painting of Mrs. Price--

DIDI

This is Jessalyn?

LEO

That's from a yearbook picture. She was
an elementary school principal.

DIDI

A 'career girl' after all.

LEO

What?

DIDI

In one of the letters she said nobody
wanted her to be a career girl, but she
was bound and determined. It seemed like
she wanted to be a writer or a journalist
or something.

LEO

Really.

DIDI

She was writing articles for the school
paper and it seems like she was pretty
good. Her letters are so vivacious.
You'll see. You really get a picture of
quite a girl.

LEO

Are you going to leave them-- or what do
you want to do?

DIDI

I was thinking I would make copies. I wasn't sure if you would want to... I didn't know exactly what to expect.

LEO

I'd like to read them.

DIDI

Good. Yeah. Good. I think you'll--

A moment, then--

DIDI (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for barging in on you and lying. That was inexcusable. I didn't know how to handle this... when you started to close the door... I... I hope you'll forgive me.

A beat as Leo makes a decision.

LEO

You hungry?

DIDI

I can always eat.

LEO

Supper's already made and I happen to have a little extra. You're not a vegetarian, are you?

DIDI

Hell, no.

He leads the way into the kitchen.

LEO

You want a beer?

DIDI

I'd love a beer.

UPSTAIRS Mrs. Price squeezes her hands, the spirit of Jessalyn long gone. The cloudy sky and delta horizon surround her.

MRS. PRICE

I musta killed somebody, else how could I feel this good?

(MORE)

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

I remember squeezing his neck-- I thought my fingers were going to break-- fleshy man-- fleshy gurgling and his eyes on me-- I remember feeling so-- so god damn victorious-- I just can't remember who he was. The dead man. He dropped like a cat. His soul ran in through my hands and made me hard-- like he was trying to escape through my dick back into his limpcat body on the floor.

She strokes her hand.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

Nah, I thought, I'm o'keep your soul. You mine now.

She rocks, looking around the room as if maybe there's someone else to kill.

LIGHTS SHIFT to the kitchen.

LEO

We went to Louisiana in the summers, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins-- everybody was there. I didn't look like anybody.

They finish their food, sip their beers.

DIDI

Did you ask?

LEO

No.

DIDI

(devouring the tasty meal)
This is amazing food.

LEO

That's what I do for a living.

DIDI

You're a cook?

LEO

A Chef. Oscar's Grill on East 75th Street. It's a neighborhood steak joint. I get to do specials on Monday night-- whatever I feel like. Got a little following.

DIDI
How long you been there?

LEO
Fifteen years.

DIDI
(licking her fingers)
You have a calling, man. You ever think
about opening your own place?

LEO
Thought about it, but--
(the thought drifts away)
What do you do? When you're not free-
lancing for newspapers.

DIDI
I teach at LSU in Baton Rouge.

LEO
What do you teach?

DIDI
Gender Studies.

LEO
(nods)
Gender Studies. Why'd you decide to go
into that?

DIDI
Oh, you know, wanted to figure out the
social and cultural constructions of
masculinity and femininity-- how that
interacts with class, race, geography.

He takes that in, sizes her up for a moment.

LEO
But how'd you come to it? As a kid you
were thinking I want to... what?

DIDI
Understand things, I guess...
(dodging his question,
playful)
The Pope denounced gender studies for
blurring the differences between men and
women, leading to the self-destruction of
the human race. That appealed to me.

LEO

Destroying the human race or being on the Pope's shit list?

DIDI

Challenging limited ideas of who people are, who we can be.

LEO

I see.

DIDI

You do?

LEO

Theoretically, you're in favor of people being real-- but still you lied when you first got here.

DIDI

I didn't plan to.

LEO

(not buying it)
Really.

DIDI

I thought you'd recognize the name Marcantel.

LEO

You wanted to find out if we were crackheads and criminals before you claimed us. Professor.

DIDI

No, I got nervous--

LEO

And how'd you plan to break it down if I hadn't caught you? 'Just kidding about the article, my daddy screwed your momma during Jim Crow, so we're kin and I just wanted to say hi.'

DIDI

It wasn't like that. I think they were in love.

LEO

How would you know?

DIDI

Read the letters.

LEO

Okay, teen-age girl in love with a white boy-- then what happened?

DIDI

From what I've read so far, when her parents found out she was pregnant they sent her here to stay with--

LEO

Uncle Louis and Aunt Doe.

DIDI

Right.

LEO

And your father never knew where she was?

DIDI

He knew.

LIGHTS on Jessalyn/Mrs. Price recalling a letter.
(Jessalyn's words in *italics*, Mrs. Price's in **bold**.)

MRS. PRICE/JESSALYN

*I don't know if you're getting my letters. **Ra-a-a-ay!!?** I've been sending them through the Marine Corps, but I'll send this one to your parents house and hope they don't open it. **Can you hear me!!? Where are you?***

(controlled again)

*I won't put my address on the envelope, but here it is so you can write me at my aunt's house. 2487 South Whippoorwill Street, Number 3, Chicago, Illinois. Don't send anymore letters to my house back home, my parents won't give them to me. **Hateful, hateful, hateful!***

(then)

My Aunt Doe's on our side, so she'll keep it from Uncle Louis if you send me a letter here. You have to write and tell me what you want to do. I'm only four months--

(she **wails, long and loud,**
then resumes her thought)

So we have some time. Do you have any leave coming up?

(whispered)

Are you abandoning me? *I keep thinking you'll walk through the door and everything will be okay.*

(MORE)

MRS. PRICE/JESSALYN
 (she **embraces herself,**
stroking her own cheek)
*We couldn't live in St. Martinville, but
 I see mixed couples here in Chicago
 sometimes.*

LIGHTS SHIFT to the living room as Leo and Didi enter
 from the kitchen.

LEO
 Did he answer her?

DIDI
 Her letters keep coming as if she hasn't
 heard from him, then stop around the time
 she would have had the baby.

LEO
 Me.
 (she nods)
 How long did it take him to marry your
 mother?

DIDI
 About two years later.

Leo says nothing. Didi can't read him, she presses--

DIDI (CONT'D)
 Did your mom ever talk to you about any
 of this?

LEO
 No. So what can I do for you?

DIDI
 What do you mean?

LEO
 What do you want?

DIDI
 I don't want anything.

He lets that sit for a moment.

DIDI (CONT'D)
 I just wanted to meet you. And your
 mother. Make contact.

LEO
 Then what?

DIDI

I don't know. I think it's terrible what my father did to your mother and... I just wanted to say that and maybe see if we can... I don't know... get to know each other or something.

LEO

So what I can do for you is... knock out some guilt?

DIDI

I don't have any guilt.

LEO

Sure you do, that's why you're here. Gender Studies. Are you gay?

DIDI

What's that got to do with anything?

LEO

So, that's a yes. Which means you're probably liberal, definitely white, more than likely feeling some guilt about your racist ancestors. Dad. My dad. Did he use the word 'nigger'?

(no answer)

Another yes. Do I really look like him?

DIDI

Yes.

LEO

You have a picture?

DIDI

I brought some.

LEO

Just in case.

DIDI

I didn't know what you'd... I didn't know how this would go.

LEO

He died less than two weeks ago?

DIDI

Nine days.

LEO

What's your mother think about you coming here?

DIDI

She passed when I was fifteen. Breast cancer.

LEO

Ah. Any siblings?

DIDI

No.

LEO

So it was just you and the old man. Close. Very close you and he.

She doesn't say anything.

LEO (CONT'D)

And now there's nobody to turn to in your grief, so you throw yourself into cleaning out his house and you discover... letters. A half-brother. A black woman your daddy wronged, so now you have a mission. You buy a plane ticket, rent a car, trump up some story about a newspaper article, because you don't want to be stupid about this, but-- it's just so fascinating and important. And all this activity powered by the massive energy of avoiding your grief.

Silence.

LEO (CONT'D)

I ask you again. What do you want?

DIDI

I wondered if she kept his letters.

LEO

Why would she?

DIDI

Why'd he keep hers?

Loud KNOCKING on the wall.

MRS. PRICE (O.S.)

Check me! Am I dead in here?

LIGHTS UP on Mrs. Price.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

That cloud keeps trying to get into my dick.

DIDI

She's awake. What'd she say?

MRS. PRICE

How am I supposed to keep a cloud out of my pants?

LEO

She'll quiet down in a minute.

MRS. PRICE

Goddammit, mothafucka, CHECK ME! Don't leave me locked up in here with the dread coming after me. My dick's in jeopardy!

DIDI

She sounds scared.

LEO

Yeah. She's worried about her penis.

DIDI

Her penis...

Loud BANGING continues.

MRS. PRICE

I'm in hell, I'm in hell, I'm in hell.

Mrs. Price wails, forlorn. Her voice weakens and she slumps over in silence as the LIGHTS DIM on her.

DIDI

How long's she been like this?

LEO

(shakes his head)
It's getting worse.

DIDI

Is she ever lucid?

LEO

Once in awhile. But she won't be able to help you. Okay? I better...

He stands, ready for her to leave.

DIDI

Okay.

LEO
What do you want to do about these
letters?

She gathers them, packs them into her suitcase.

DIDI
I'll make copies and send them to you.

LEO
Alright.

DIDI
I could drop them by tomorrow.

LEO
Just mail them.

DIDI
Okay. Okay, then. Thanks. Thanks for
dinner. Can I give you my card?

LEO
Sure.

DIDI
I'll write my home address and phone on
the back.
(as she does)
Do you ever get back to Louisiana?

LEO
No.

DIDI
Okay. You know, if you ever, find any
letters-- from that time-- from my father--
- I would be most grateful.

LEO
I doubt it, but if anything turns up,
I'll be in touch.

DIDI
Thank you. I appreciate that. I really
do. And Leo, I'm happy to know you.

LEO
Thanks.

He opens the front door to let her out and finds his
mother standing on the porch, in her nightgown.

LEO (CONT'D)

Ma! What are you doing out here?

MRS. PRICE

It's my house, isn't it?

LEO

Yeah, but-- come inside. Come on.

She resists, not violently, but definitely.

MRS. PRICE

How long has it been since I've seen the night sky, Leo?

LEO

I don't know.

MRS. PRICE

Too long. I'll stay here awhile.

Didi's not shy.

DIDI

Good evening, Mrs. Price.

MRS. PRICE

Good evening. You're coming from inside my house and I don't know you.

LEO

It's okay, Ma.
(to Didi)
You have to go.

Mrs. Price sits, Leo covers her with a throw, which she accepts. Didi ignores him, focused on Mrs. Price.

DIDI

I'm Ray Marcantel's daughter.

MRS. PRICE

Ray Marcantel's daughter.

LEO

She doesn't remember--

MRS. PRICE

How is Ray?

Or does she? Still not clear if she's just being polite.

DIDI

He passed away a little over a week ago.

MRS. PRICE
What took him?

DIDI
Heart attack.

MRS. PRICE
At least he went quickly. Not like me.

LEO
Ma.

MRS. PRICE
I'm all right, Leo. Won't you sit down,
Miss Marcantel?

LEO
She can't stay, Ma.

Didi sits.

DIDI
Thank you.

MRS. PRICE
What brings you to Chicago?

Didi hands a letter to Mrs. Price, who examines it
briefly without opening it, recognizing the handwriting.
She holds the letter in her lap and stares at the sky.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)
You came here on your own?

DIDI
Yes, ma'am.

MRS. PRICE
Did Leo tell you Ray wrote him when your
mother died?

Didi looks at Leo, who looks away. Covering for him--

DIDI
Yes.

They sit in silence for a moment.

LEO
Ma, it's getting cool out here.

MRS. PRICE
I can breathe, Leo.

LEO

Yeah.

MRS. PRICE

I love breathing.

LEO

Yeah.

MRS. PRICE

But those sixth-graders need their tests back tomorrow, don't they?

LEO

You know they're counting on it.

MRS. PRICE

All right.

(getting up)

Here I go.

LEO

(helping her)

Okay.

MRS. PRICE

Young lady it was a pleasure to meet you. Anytime you want to observe my class, you are quite welcome.

DIDI

I read one of your articles. In the Panther Printz.

Mrs. Price laughs a little. It's impossible to tell what she remembers... but she quotes one of her articles.

MRS. PRICE

'A green so green it defies description-- I watched a vine grow a foot a day across a telephone wire. I measured it. A foot a day.'

DIDI

Yes, ma'am.

LEO

Here we go, ma.

Leo takes her inside. She has the letter with her.

Didi stands, unsure what to do. She decides to sit and wait. After a beat of that, she gets up and goes inside.

When she returns to the porch, she has two more beers.
She sets one down for Leo, then sits and sips hers.

Eventually, Leo rejoins her.

DIDI
(holding up her beer)
I hope you don't mind.

LEO
(grabbing his)
I think these are the last two.

DIDI
I can go get more.

LEO
How long you planning on staying?

DIDI
Now we're even.
(he waits)
I lied to you, you lied to me.
(no reply)
You have any sisters or brothers? Did I
ask you that already?

LEO
No, you didn't ask. No, I don't have
any. And, you probably knew that before
you came here.

DIDI
I did. What do you know about us?

LEO
What do you know about us?

DIDI
It's not a contest.

LEO
You came knocking on my door.

DIDI
You talked to my dad?

LEO
Yes.

DIDI
Why didn't you say so?! Would that have
been so hard? God.
(MORE)

DIDI (CONT'D)

(then)

Sorry, I'm sorry, I have no right...

LEO

Drop the white liberal guilt thing or you really will have to leave.

DIDI

Sorry. Fine. Fuck you.

LEO

Fuck you, too.

They clink beer bottles and drink.

DIDI

Okay, so who's going to tell what first?

LEO

You.

DIDI

You first. You lied most recently. When did you talk to him?

LEO

There's nothing in it for me, I know the whole story.

DIDI

No, you don't.

LEO

Name one thing that would surprise me.

Good question. She thinks.

DIDI

My dad always wanted a son like you.

LEO

Christ. What a hell of a thing to say. He had a son exactly like me.

DIDI

I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.

LEO

All he had was a butch daughter and a black son, poor bastard. Is that what you're saying? Maybe he wanted a son-- but not like me.

DIDI
I'm sorry.

LEO
And quit saying 'I'm sorry.'

DIDI
Okay.

LEO
He wanted a son. You were a girl and that wasn't up to par for him? I hate this guy.

DIDI
Your mom said he wrote you after my mother died. What'd he say?

LEO
My mom's out of her gourd. Didn't you get that?

DIDI
She was clear when she said that.

LEO
Yeah.

DIDI
So.

LEO
He wanted to put me through college.

DIDI
So he did try to do something.

LEO
I turned him down.

DIDI
Why?

LEO
Didn't need it. Didn't need him.

Beat, then she realizes--

DIDI
You didn't want to betray Charlie Price.

He doesn't say anything, but maybe that was part of it.

DIDI (CONT'D)

I understand. Leo, I just want to---

She touches his arm. He looks at her hand on his arm.
She removes her hand.

LEO

I know what you just want to do. I'm not
so inclined.

DIDI

I don't have a plan, all I know is I want
to have a relationship with you.

LEO

I don't think so.

DIDI

Hate him, but why hate me?

LEO

You assume we will be grateful for your
attention. As if we've been waiting for
you to restore us to a rightful place.
Implying we need you. We don't.

DIDI

I'm not saying you need me, but isn't it
a good thing if we connect?

LEO

Why? Your father is a sorry footnote in
my mother's otherwise dignified life.
When he contacted me, he was attempting
to buy salvation for the price of a
community college tuition. I denied him
that, and he didn't like it. I think he
didn't hear the word 'No' very often. So
he sent a check for five hundred dollars.

DIDI

What'd you do with it?

LEO

We returned it to him and asked him to
please leave us alone.

DIDI

And did he?

LEO

Yes.

DIDI
Well, I'm not going to.

LEO
(amused)
You will if I say you will.

DIDI
I will not leave you alone. I haven't done anything wrong to you, you are my half-brother and I'm going to have a relationship with you.

He kind of laughs her off.

DIDI (CONT'D)
I don't think you like the sound of 'no' anymore than he did.

LEO
Really.

DIDI
And I actually have a lot of experience dealing with that quality in him. So if your strategy is to freeze me out, pretend you have no feelings, act all manly and tough and judgmental-- it won't work. I will not react like you think, and I will not give up.

LEO
I could kick you off this porch and never see you again.

DIDI
He kicked me out of the family three times.

LEO
Three times? You kept coming back? That's funny.

DIDI
I'm telling you, I'm not easy to get rid of.

LEO
Why'd he kick you out? Cause you're gay?

Her turn to smile.

DIDI

First-- taking his car for a joyride;
second-- sleeping with my boyfriend in
Ray's house. Ray didn't care what I did,
as long as I didn't do it where the
neighbors might notice.

LEO

He caught you and a boy in bed?

DIDI

We fell asleep and next thing you know
it's morning and Ray's looming over us
telling me I have thirty minutes to get
out of the house and never come back.

LEO

What'd your boyfriend do?

DIDI

He was from Long Island. He thought Ray,
being a Southerner, was going to shoot
him, so he hid behind me. I was the only
one who saw the humor in the situation.

LEO

And what was the third time? You
introduced him to your life partner.

DIDI

I went out with a black guy.

LEO

Not that.

She finishes her beer.

DIDI

Okay. Should I go get another six-pack
or what? You decided yet whether to kick
me off the porch? I warn you, I'll come
back, so you might as well surrender and
let me buy you some beer.

He studies her. She studies him back.

DIDI (CONT'D)

He's weighing his options...

LEO

No more lying.

DIDI

Deal.

LEO

What about when you're so shit-faced you can't drive back to your hotel?

DIDI

Never happen.

LEO

Because you're so macho.

DIDI

Because I'll sleep in the car. Let's go.

LEO

We don't have to go anywhere.

DIDI

You been holding out on me?

LEO

I've got gin, if that'll do.

DIDI

Gin. You are Southern at heart.

She follows him inside.

LIGHTS SHIFT to Mrs. Price's cloudy bedroom. She opens the letter like a talisman, like a prayer remembered.

MRS. PRICE

We stroll the backroads at night--

She wanders her delta, climbing the furniture, going to the lake, to the tree.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

Cannot walk in daylight, you a slim-hipped boy so shy to hold my hand. I never say your name and you not mine, more intimate than that. We speak when no one looks-- not your mother fierce and watchful, not the old men downtown. Not my parents, unaware, so proud a white boy carried groceries to our door. We slip onto the backroads and talk of school, yours and mine, how different, how the same-- I fall in love with your hands-- elegant, capable. Leo's hands are like yours. I watch him do things and think of you fixing your bike, lifting me into the tree. Hands on my waist. Hands on my hands. We never talk of skin, never, ever, not once.

(MORE)

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

We rarely touch in daylight, maybe that's why, at night we are the same. You kiss me and I am kissed. Not a black girl kissed by a white boy, but me kissed by you. Remember the lake?

I want to see you graduate but no, I wait in the branches over the water, dreaming of a time to come. You climb up like a ghost-- how'd you get in that tree without me hearing? Magic.

LIGHTS RISE on Leo and Didi, drinking gin. Didi checks the CD's.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

You say, 'Hold on,' and I do and we leap-- into the night, into the water, plunging to the deeps, clutching each other...

Didi puts on Etta James. LIGHTS FADE on Mrs. Price as Didi starts to sway to the music. Leo watches her. She touches one of the boxes tied with twine.

DIDI

What are all these?

LEO

(not answering the question)
You don't dance gay.

DIDI

What?

LEO

You don't dance like a lesbian.

DIDI

How does a lesbian dance?

LEO

I don't know.

DIDI

(softly, making a point)
With other women.

She reaches for him to dance with her. He declines.

DIDI (CONT'D)

Don't be a baby.

She pulls him up and they're dancing. Awkward, ever so brief-- then he backs off.

DIDI (CONT'D)

What?

LEO

No, thanks.

He turns off the music.

DIDI

Don't freak out.

LEO

I'm not freaking out.

DIDI

You look like you're freaking out.

LEO

What are you doing?

DIDI

What do you mean?

LEO

Why are you snaking in here, getting all involved with us.

DIDI

I'm not trying to put the moves on you.

LEO

Oh, I'm not worried about that.

DIDI

Really? I'm not gay, FYI.

LEO

You simply enjoy impersonating a gay woman?

DIDI

I enjoy rejecting socially constructed gender markers.

LEO

Your students must be impressed.

DIDI

Does gender ambiguity always disturb you?

LEO

I'm not the one confused.

DIDI

I'm not the one who can't cut the apron strings.

LEO

What?

DIDI

I see you're taking care of your mother in her illness-- laudable, a good son. But I get the feeling you've always been a mama's boy, is that right?

Leo stares.

DIDI (CONT'D)

How come you're not married, Leo? Can't find a woman to measure up to Jessalyn?

LEO

Get out.

DIDI

Right. Wouldn't want to get too personal and analyze you the way you've been analyzing me.

LEO

You threw yourself in here-- I didn't ask for this--

DIDI

Yeah, okay. Thanks for the drinks.

(gathering her things)

I'll send copies of the letters for you and your mom. We can talk then if you feel like it.

LEO

Talk about what?

DIDI

Right, nothing. We have nothing to talk about.

LEO

Leave--

DIDI

I'm trying to be a fucking responsible, caring human being. With my eyes open.

LEO

Unlike the rest of us.

DIDI

You can say whatever you want-- the guy was your natural father, you look like him, you act like him.

She pulls something out of her bag-- a photograph of Ray.

DIDI (CONT'D)

You can say my coming here offends you, makes you a victim, I get it, I get the socio-political implications, the cross-cultural trespass-- and I want to deal with it, but--

LEO

Victim?

She holds out the photograph, which Leo ignores.

DIDI

Look at his face-- it's like looking in a mirror for you. This is what you're going to look like in twenty years. Don't you want to know, don't you want to deal with it--

His voice is quiet, intimate, potentially violent.

LEO

Deal with this-- you piss me off so deep in my gut I want to smash your face in-- eyes dripping pity, mouth full of 'I'm sorry's.' I want to feel my knuckles against your teeth. Want to get to know me now? Want to have a drink and talk about our dad?

She doesn't shrink from him.

DIDI

It's him you hate, not me.

LEO

You'll do.

DIDI

Coward.

LEO

Get out of my house.

DIDI

So you can pretend I don't exist-- go back to hiding from the truth? What are you so afraid of?

He turns on her--

LEO

Actually, it is you I hate-- he means nothing to me, but you've stuck yourself in my face, all self-righteous and--

DIDI

Arrogant? Don't know my place? Heard that before-- have you?

(she's at the door)

My dad remembered you in his will, I'll have the lawyer contact you.

LEO

Oh, that's the big Ace. I'm supposed to be humbled because he's sending me that \$500 check after all.

DIDI

It's more than that, but it doesn't matter. You're so much like him it reminds me how much of an asshole he was and what the hell am I grieving for.

She exits to the porch, SLAMMING THE DOOR which disturbs Mrs. Price. LIGHTS RISE UPSTAIRS.

Numb, Leo doesn't move. Didi stumbles to the boat, drunk and despairing.

MRS. PRICE

Check me, I think I done died over here! I can't find my dick, I can't find my washrag, I can't find my pulse. How's a person supposed to know if she's alive? Feel me, feel me, goddammit, feel me. I'm spinning in a vacuum cleaner--

LEO

Vortex.

MRS. PRICE

I'm spinning in a vortex and I got no feet.

AT THE BOAT--

DIDI

I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.
I don't care, I don't care, I don't care,
I don't care, I don't care... I don't
care.

She sits among the letters, dropping them over the side.

SCENE THREE. FOLLOWING MORNING. Leo cooks breakfast.
Mrs. Price sits nearby watching him.

LEO

Not easy to make a perfect omelet, my
friend.

MRS. PRICE

You come pretty close, son.

LEO

Practice, practice.

MRS. PRICE

Was there a white woman in my house
yesterday or did I dream that?

Careful, not sure what she remembers--

LEO

What'd you dream?

MRS. PRICE

A white woman talked to me about high
school.

LEO

What about high school?

MRS. PRICE

Leo, I know my mind is going, I know
that. You know I know that. But whether
I'm in my good mind or not, I can tell
when you're lying, so don't even try.

LEO

Ma, sometimes you're so gone I could tell
you we live in a gingerbread house and
you'd chew the walls.

MRS. PRICE

I can tell when you're lying.

LEO
You think you can.

MRS. PRICE
I can.

LEO
Here's your omelet.

MRS. PRICE
Looks perfect.

LEO
It'll do. Eat. I got to go to work.
JJ'll be here by nine.

MRS. PRICE
Always late.

LEO
I know.

MRS. PRICE
Who was that woman? You lied so she must
be real.

LEO
I got to go to work.

MRS. PRICE
Don't think you can disrespect me because
I'm sick. This is the time you must
respect a, a, human being the most, when
he is weak and vulnerable, unable to
force you. I taught you this. If you
are forced to do something, out of fear,
it has no value; when you can walk away,
anonymous, unaccountable and yet you
choose to stay and work and give-- that
is a life. That is a moral person,
Jeffrey. Now sit back in that desk and
write a hundred times, 'I will respect
people when I don't have to, because I
want them to respect me.' Write it. I'm
forcing you to do it now, but I hope it
gets through your thick head-- you must
develop moral strength. Practice it,
exercise it daily. So when the world
comes to judge you not by your skin but
your character there is actually
something there. Do you read me, little
man?

LEO

Yes, ma'am.

MRS. PRICE

Now, back to your desk.

LEO

Yes, ma'am. Eat your breakfast.

She digs into her eggs.

MRS. PRICE

I love mushrooms. Did I tell you that?

LEO

Um-hm.

She sprinkles Tabasco sauce on her eggs.

MRS. PRICE

Avery Island. You been there? To the Tabasco factory?

LEO

No.

MRS. PRICE

The very air in that town burns your eyes. Mrs. Yolanda's husband climbed up the ladder to the vat-- I'm talking a vat of boiling Tabasco sauce the size of this house-- and he held me over it, like a joke. What kind of man was that? Terrifying a child like that? I had just about enough of men at that point and I was only seven years old.

LEO

Ma. You have any letters packed away?

MRS. PRICE

What kind of letters?

LEO

Letters you may have saved. From when you were younger, before you met Daddy.

She has no idea what he's talking about.

MRS. PRICE

Letters. Cursive?

LEO
It's okay, never mind. I'm going to work.

MRS. PRICE
JJ's late.

LEO
You'll be alright.

Leo gets ready to leave, Mrs. Price goes to the porch.

LIGHTS RISE ON DIDI AT THE BOAT, outside the house looking in, watching, letter in hand.

DIDI
'Dearest Ray, I wish I could see the world as you are doing. Of course, I'm too big a chicken to think about enlisting-- anyway I'd be the worst kind of nurse. Why do they call them WACs?'

FROM THE PORCH--

MRS. PRICE
Are there reporters in the Women's Army Corps?

FROM THE HOUSE, not paying attention--

LEO
What?

DIDI
'Although the uniforms are pretty cute. I like the hats. Are there reporters in the Women's Army Corps?'

Leo brings a glass of iced tea to his mother, who sits in a chair on the porch.

LEO
Here's your iced tea. JJ'll be here in a little while. I'll call in about an hour to check in.

She's silent, almost catatonic now.

LEO (CONT'D)
You want your tea?

No answer.

LEO (CONT'D)

Ma? Ma.

He puts the tea near her, checks the street to see if JJ's in sight. She's not. Worried about his mother--

LEO (CONT'D)

Okay, you know what, I changed my mind, you have to go inside.

MRS. PRICE

No!

He tries to get her up, she resists violently.

LEO

I can't leave you out here like this. You can come back out when JJ gets here.

MRS. PRICE

No! My porch! My sky!

She nearly falls but this doesn't stop her from continuing to attack Leo.

LEO

Ma, stop! Come on, give me a break!

MRS. PRICE

I will dick-slap you into next week!

LEO

Yeah, okay.
(backing off)
Calm down, calm down.

MRS. PRICE

Don't tell me to calm down--

LEO

I'll get fired if I'm late again.

MRS. PRICE

So, go. You think the sun revolves around your asshole?

LEO

Man, you are just a kick in the pants.

MRS. PRICE

Don't get sardonic with me, Greasy, I got a gun. I'm armed. I will Uzi you full of holes, smoke rising out your...

LEO
Would you care for some iced tea?

MRS. PRICE
Yes, thank you.

He hands her the tea, she drinks, instantly pacified. He looks for JJ.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)
Oooh, that feels good on my dick.

LEO
Here she comes.

MRS. PRICE
Good for nothin'.

JJ
Morning, everybody.

JJ PRICE, 21, eases on. She is full of grace and smiles, a college student, artistically dressed. Leo grabs his backpack and hurries off.

LEO
If I get fired for being late, you're in deep shit.

JJ
Is it after nine?

He's gone. JJ kisses Mrs. Price on the cheek.

JJ (CONT'D)
Mama-dear, how are you this morning?

MRS. PRICE
Get off me.

JJ
No way--

Teasing, JJ kisses Mrs. Price's other cheek, her forehead.

JJ (CONT'D)
Feel the love, mama-dear, feel the love.

MRS. PRICE
Suck my dick.

JJ

Another time, sweetie. Did you have
breakfast? I'm starving.

(no answer)

I'll be right back.

JJ goes inside.

Mrs. Price stares at the sky for a beat, then Didi steps
out. She's been watching, waiting for Leo to leave. She
walks over to Mrs. Price.

DIDI

Good morning, how are you?

Mrs. Price looks at her with a brief flash of recognition—
then she loses the thread. She looks to the house,
about to call for JJ. Then can't remember JJ's name.
She's lost, becoming afraid. Didi walks closer.

DIDI (CONT'D)

How're you doing, Mrs. Price?

MRS. PRICE

Mrs. Price.

DIDI

That's you.

MRS. PRICE

That's me.

DIDI

How are you this morning?

Mrs. Price knows how to answer that. It calms her.

MRS. PRICE

I'm fine thank you, and you?

DIDI

Good, I'm good. I'm happy to see you.

MRS. PRICE

Why?

DIDI

I'm Ray Marcantel's daughter.

MRS. PRICE

How is Ray?

DIDI

He passed away a little over a week ago.

MRS. PRICE

Aw, Ray's too young for that! What took him?

DIDI

Heart attack.

MRS. PRICE

You never know what day's got your name on it. The bookend to your birthday.

DIDI

Mrs. Price, I gave you a letter yesterday and I'd like to get it back.

MRS. PRICE

Yesterday? We just met.

DIDI

(revising)

I gave the letter to Leo and he gave it to you. Maybe it's in your room.

MRS. PRICE

What letter?

DIDI

A letter you wrote to Ray.

MRS. PRICE

I wrote a lot of letters to Ray.

DIDI

This one is when you were pregnant with Leo and trying to get in touch with Ray.

MRS. PRICE

(remembering)

Oh.

DIDI

I have all your letters. I'm going to make copies and give them back to you.

MRS. PRICE

I don't need all that. I know what happened.

DIDI

Do you have any letters Ray wrote to you?

MRS. PRICE

Ray was a Marine.

DIDI

Yes, and he wrote you letters. You have them somewhere?

MRS. PRICE

I met Charlie at church.

DIDI

Not Charlie, Ray. Letters from Ray.

Mrs. Price is silent, in her own world. Didi moves on--

DIDI (CONT'D)

Anyway, I'd like the one letter back.

MRS. PRICE

You can have it.

DIDI

Thank you.

MRS. PRICE

Don't mention it.

Didi wants to get it, but--

DIDI

I saw someone go inside, a young woman.
(at the door)
Should I just knock?

MRS. PRICE

That was a terrible trick they played.

DIDI

Who?

MRS. PRICE

Our parents. I wrote letters he never received, he wrote letters I never received. That was one thing blacks and whites could agree on in the fifties-- they should stay apart. And they certainly didn't want their daughter messing around with a skinny white boy who delivered groceries for ten cents an hour. I was headed for Howard University-- that was planned when I was about three or four days old. Ray Marcantel was not going to stand in the way of my mama and daddy's dream for their only daughter. But we up and pulled a shrewdy on them.

DIDI
What do you mean?

MRS. PRICE
We got married.

Didi sits down, taking this in. Silence.

DIDI
You got married.

MRS. PRICE
Yeah.

DIDI
When?

MRS. PRICE
In Chicago.

DIDI
He was here.

JJ comes out, munching toast. Didi stands.

JJ
Mama-dear, what you feel like today?
(seeing Didi)
Oh, hello there.

DIDI
Hi. I'm a friend of Leo's.

Mrs. Price looks askance--

MRS. PRICE
Why're you lying?

JJ
Take it easy, mama-dear.

MRS. PRICE
She's lying, look at her.

DIDI
I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply...

JJ
I'm Jessie.

MRS. PRICE
Ray Marcantel's daughter.

DIDI

Didi.

JJ

What's going on? You know my dad?

DIDI

You're Leo's daughter?

JJ

I am.

MRS. PRICE

Go get that letter. She left something here and she wants it back.

JJ

What letter?

DIDI

I met your father yesterday.

MRS. PRICE

I'll get it.

Mrs. Price starts to cross inside. Didi's not sure how much JJ knows, how much she can say. Testing--

DIDI

(to JJ)

I'm here from Louisiana.

(to Mrs. Price)

Does Jessie... Has Jessie been to the south to visit?

MRS. PRICE

I'm Jessie.

JJ

They call me JJ, for Jessie Junior.

LIGHTS SHIFT, going with Mrs. Price to her bedroom. In the half-light on the porch, JJ and Didi talk.

MRS. PRICE

The long line of the dead stand guard behind me, watching every god damn move I make. And the unborn children in front, begging, 'Do it, do it for me.' Everybody's awake except the living. Looking, hoping... I feel y'all wanting this, wanting that... too bad you don't have a body and I do! Go breathe down somebody else's neck.

IN HER BEDROOM, she picks up the letter.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

Ray, you sent her? Or is she rocking
your passage, disturbing your sleep?

(reading from the letter)

'2487 South Whippoorwill Street, Number
3.' Whippoorwill Street. Whippoorwill.

(her mind gets stuck in the
soothing sounds of--)

Whippoorwill, whippoorwill, whippoorwill.

Whippoorwill, whippoorwill, whippoorwill,

whippoorwill, whippoorwill---

As she repeats, she tears the letter into tiny pieces.

LIGHTS SHIFT back to the porch.

JJ

She said they were married?

DIDI

Yes, just now.

JJ

I don't know if I'd believe her.

DIDI

She seemed clear-minded.

JJ

Um-hm.

DIDI

Had you heard any of this before?

JJ

No.

JJ sits in Mrs. Price's chair, finishing her breakfast.

DIDI

I wasn't sure if I should tell you...

JJ

Your father is my biological grandfather.

DIDI

Yes.

JJ

So you're my aunt.

DIDI
I guess that's right.

JJ
Crazy.

DIDI
You've never been to St. Martinville?

JJ
(shakes her head, no)
What's it like?

DIDI
Very green. Incredible old trees. A bayou runs through the middle of town. You know what a bayou is?

JJ
Brown water with alligators?

DIDI
(smiling)
Yeah, I guess. I haven't seen that many alligators-- they're further out in the marsh really. Not so much in town.

JJ
Not so much.

DIDI
The town is lovely, it's historic-- I mean, I don't want to sentimentalize the Old South--

JJ
Definitely wouldn't want to do that.

DIDI
No.

JJ
Was my grandfather one of those-- Old South type guys? You know, was he like--

DIDI
He ran a supermarket. Didn't own guns, liked to fish-- had a small boat he took into the Atchafalaya Basin every weekend. I think that was religion for him. He never caught much, but he went out there faithfully. When I was little I went with him. He taught me how to bait a hook, how to work a rod and reel--

JJ
Did you like him?

That's a complicated questions. No answer. Finally--

DIDI
You like yours?

JJ
He'll do in a pinch.

She likes him..

DIDI
Where's your mom?

JJ
Lake Forest. She's a nurse, remarried.
I have three younger brothers. She's
cool, she and my dad help me with
tuition.

DIDI
Where you going to school?

JJ
CSU, Fine Arts with a minor in Business.
I'm going to open a gallery with a studio
in the back where I paint and do collages
or whatever and then in front I'll show
local artists. And I'll do like a web
network so we can sell our work in The
Netherlands and shit.

DIDI
You're a painter?

JJ turns to the painting of Mrs. Price--

JJ
Yeah, this is one of my first ones. I'm
kind of into collages now.

MRS. PRICE (O.S.)
*No, I'm telling you the sky is huge.
There's a lot of looking up for a kid.*

Mrs. Price appears in the doorway, naked.

JJ
Oh, Mama-dear--

JJ tries to stop Mrs. Price from going to the street.

MRS. PRICE
Flyin' grays in the afternoon rain--

JJ
Stop it, now, come on, you have to get
inside.

MRS. PRICE
Weird orange hurricane skies so deadly
you can't take your eyes off.

JJ
Grandmama, you're naked, come on! I'm
not playing.

Didi helps JJ strong-arm Mrs. Price back into the house
as she begins to despair.

MRS. PRICE
The sky here is filled with pus!

JJ
It's okay, it's okay, mama-dear.

MRS. PRICE
Give it back, give me back!

JJ
You're okay.

MRS. PRICE
I don't want to go inside!
(weeping)
Please don't make me get small. I beg
you. I beg you. I don't want to be
small anymore.

They get her inside the living room.

JJ
You're not small.

JJ sits, pulls Mrs. Price onto her lap, holding her like
a child, consoling her as she cries in utter surrender.
Didi covers her with a blanket.

JJ (CONT'D)
You are big and safe and we love you.
Look how big you are, feel how big you
are.

MRS. PRICE
I'm tiny, you made me tiny, I'm tiny
again.

JJ

I love you, mama-dear, we all love you so much.

MRS. PRICE

(calming)

You made me take my eyes off.

JJ

Let's get you some clothes and then you can put your eyes on again, okay?

MRS. PRICE

Okay.

JJ gets Mrs. Price up and takes her into the bedroom.

JJ

(to Didi)

I'll be back, make yourself at home.

Didi watches them go.

MRS. PRICE

I want a dress. I want to wear a dress.

JJ

Okay.

Alone, Didi looks around the room, sees the boxes tied with string packed into every available opening.

She pulls down a box, unties the string and opens it. She finds a package inside, held together with an old rubber-band. She unwraps it-- first a plastic bag, then aluminum foil, finally wax paper-- to discover a large, opened half-eaten bag of potato chips.

JJ re-enters. Seeing what Didi's doing, she's wary.

JJ (CONT'D)

If you're hungry, I can offer you better than that.

DIDI

Sorry. I shouldn't have pried, but...

JJ

What are you looking for?

DIDI

Is she okay now?

JJ
She'll take a nap.

DIDI
How long do you think these chips have
been in there?
(reading the bag)
Sell by June 4, 1997.

JJ
What are you looking for?

DIDI
Are all these boxes filled with old food?

JJ waits for an answer.

DIDI (CONT'D)
I was thinking maybe Mrs. Price kept a
letter or two from my dad.

JJ
What difference does it make?

DIDI
None. I just want to know.

JJ
Why?

DIDI
The boy who married Jessalyn is daring
and decent and alive in ways my father
was not. I need to hear his voice-- from
then-- before he--

JJ
Lost his nerve and ran off...?

JJ takes the bag of potato chips, re-wraps it and returns
it to its box.

DIDI
I'm afraid I would have done the same
thing.

JJ
I might have, too, if I was him.

DIDI
It's ugly.

JJ
It's real.

DIDI

Can we look to see if she saved any of his letters?

JJ

Not my house, not my stuff.

DIDI

I have nowhere else to search.

JJ

I can call my dad.

DIDI

He didn't want me to come back. I waited until he left.

JJ

Anyway, I think these boxes are all filled with stupid shit.

DIDI

I've come a long way, can we just look?

JJ

You ought to go home, Ms. Marcantel.

Long beat. Didi doesn't handle "no" any better than anyone else in the family, but she can't get around this implacable girl. She resorts to claiming her property.

DIDI

I would like to get the letter your grandmother took yesterday.

JJ

Oh, right.

JJ reaches into a pocket, pulls out the confetti that was once the letter. She offers the torn pieces in her palm.

JJ (CONT'D)

She tore it up, I'm sorry.

Stunned, Didi starts to breathe heavily.

JJ (CONT'D)

She's not responsible for her actions.

Didi reaches for the bits of paper.

JJ (CONT'D)

Maybe we can piece it together or something.

DIDI
Motherfucker.

JJ
I'm sorry.

DIDI
I don't have a copy of it.

JJ
Look, we'll put it on the table here,
we'll put it together like a puzzle and
then we can glue it or tape it...

DIDI
No. NO.

JJ
I can put it together, it won't be hard.

DIDI
Give it to me.

JJ
Really, I can make it whole.

DIDI
Give it to me.

JJ
Fine. Here.

DIDI
Did you get all of it? Is there more up
there?

JJ
I don't know. I'll check. Okay? I'll
get all the pieces for you, okay? Calm
down.

DIDI
Motherfucker.

JJ
I'll get you the other pieces. She
didn't do it on purpose, she's like a
child.

DIDI
Right. You all hate me, I'm an idiot for
coming here, for even trying.

JJ
Nobody hates you.

DIDI
Is it this fucking impossible to have an equitable relationship with black people?

JJ
Okay, you're tripping--

DIDI
I got news for you, I'm not the enemy-- there are enemies-- but not me.

JJ
You sure about that?

The two women stare at each other for a hard moment, then JJ calls a truce--

JJ (CONT'D)
No doubt you have a lot on your mind, but let's keep it together, okay? I'll get the rest of your letter and you be cool.

JJ exits to Mrs. Price's room, leaving Didi alone. Almost immediately, Didi rips into more boxes, searching for evidence of her father. She unwraps box after box after box, gaining momentum as she finds nothing but worthless objects and old food.

As she tears through the junk she starts to cry, her grief comes in gusts.

JJ RE-ENTERS, takes quick stock of what's happening and intercepts Didi, taking a box from her hands.

JJ (CONT'D)
Hey! Stop this. Stop it right now.

Didi stops the action, but continues to cry.

JJ (CONT'D)
You can't come in here when your father dies and expect us to console you, we're not your family.

JJ gathers all the pieces of the torn letter into an envelope and hands it to Didi.

JJ (CONT'D)
You have to go now.

Unstrung, Didi takes the envelope and leaves.

LIGHTS RISE on Mrs. Price in her rainy delta sky communing with her spirits from her bed, as JJ explores the boxes in the living room.

MRS. PRICE

Calling, calling-- who keeps calling at me?

AT THE BOAT Didi tucks the bits of old letter into her clothing, her hair, her shoe; she smells them, rubs them on her skin... undone, nowhere else to turn.

DIDI

This whispering, this feather sense of you--

Eyes closed, Didi listens.

MRS. PRICE

I hear the dirt calling, the dead calling-- awhile-- come home in bed awhile.

DIDI

Don't leave awhile more...

Mrs. Price perks up, suddenly aware--

MRS. PRICE

Who's calling my name?

DIDI

A boy, a shy and daring boy--

MRS. PRICE

Come home in bed awhile.

DIDI

I want to be *his* child.

MRS. PRICE

Who's calling my bed again?

DIDI

How could you leave us...

Mrs. Price turns to Didi's voice.

MRS. PRICE

It was kill or be killed.

DIDI

I'm dead over here. Been dead.

MRS. PRICE

Born dead.

DIDI

Where'd you go?

A moment as the two women listen for more, hear nothing.

DOWNSTAIRS, JJ opens a box, pulls out an old shoe.

Mrs. Price crashes out of bed, surveys her room as if there's an intruder in the night, then fiercely demands--

MRS. PRICE

Who's calling at me?

No answer. Mrs. Price crosses downstairs.

IN THE LIVING ROOM JJ finds more useless junk wrapped in wax paper in her grandmother's boxes. Mrs. Price stops cold when she sees what JJ is doing.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

(imperious)

I'm going to slap you into next week.

JJ

Mama-dear, there's old food in here, there's-- this is not healthy.

MRS. PRICE

Do I rifle your prayers, your ammunition?

JJ

No, ma'am.

MRS. PRICE

Put that down.

JJ shows a group of nubby pencils held together with a tightly wound rubber-band and a used small notebook.

JJ

Mama, this is a grocery list from 1997. There's moldy bread hard as a rock. You've got fossils in here.

MRS. PRICE

If you mock me, young lady, I will bar you from the premises.

JJ

I'm not mocking you.

MRS. PRICE
Bury them where they live.

JJ
(no)
I'll put back some of it if you want, but
not the food. It's a wonder you don't
have rats in here.

MRS. PRICE
I wrapped it well.

JJ
Yes, you did. And what is this?

She holds up the old woman's shoe crusted with dirt.

MRS. PRICE
Give me that!

Mrs. Price rushes to grab the shoe, JJ lets her have it.
The old woman shields the shoe, emotion rising.

JJ
Okay. What...? Whose shoe is it?

MRS. PRICE
You let her out!

She looks at the shoe, overcome with emotion.

JJ
I'm sorry.

MRS. PRICE
(rocking)
Forgive me...
(weeping)
I want to go back, I want to take it
back. Please, Jesus, please Lord, let me
take it back.
(falls to her knees)
I beg you, I beg you, please let me take
it back. I'm sorry, I'm sorry--

JJ puts her arms around her, tries to calm her.

JJ
Mama-dear, mama-dear... it's alright.
You're alright.

MRS. PRICE
I killed her.

JJ
Who?

MRS. PRICE
My mother.

JJ
You didn't kill your mother.

MRS. PRICE
Yes I did!

JJ
You didn't kill anybody.

MRS. PRICE
Me and Ray and Doe, but I'm the one she
loved so it's on my soul.

JJ's getting upset, she shakes her grandmother.

JJ
You tell me right now, what you're
talking about.

MRS. PRICE
He buried my mother before I got home!
I begged him to wait but he wouldn't. He
shouldn't have done that!

JJ
Your father?

MRS. PRICE
Out of spite--then he wouldn't let me in
the house and I had a baby with me. I
slept in the shed-- found her shoe--
that's all I had. That was my mother.
(weeping, grieving)
Maaa...

IN THE BOAT, Didi hears the call as if in a dream.

Rocking with her shoe, the weight of her sins presses on
her, Mrs. Price slides into an abyss, moaning, near
catatonic with memory.

JJ
Mama-dear, you didn't kill anybody.

MRS. PRICE
You don't know.

JJ

Tell me.

Mrs. Price doesn't answer.

JJ (CONT'D)

You have Ray's letters in these boxes?

Mrs. Price shakes her head-- hard to know what she means.

JJ (CONT'D)

No? No letters?

MRS. PRICE

I never wanted Charlie to see them, it would have hurt him.

JJ

You got rid of them.

MRS. PRICE

At the bank.

JJ

At the bank? The letters are at the bank?

MRS. PRICE

In the silt-deposit box.

JJ knows exactly what her grandmother means.

LIGHTS FADE on them, and then on Didi at the boat.

SCENE FOUR. Leo enters from work, carrying a newspaper and a six-pack of beer in a grocery bag. He crosses into the living room.

LEO

What happened here?

As JJ left it-- junk, open boxes, wax paper. Grandma's shoe sitting in a place of honor.

LEO (CONT'D)

JJ? Mama?

(no answer)

Where are ya'll?

Nothing. He pokes through some of the junk, sees it is worthless.

He gets himself a beer and heads for the porch. Leo puts his feet up, opens the Sports section and swigs his beer.

JJ and Mrs. Price enter from the street.

JJ

Daddy?

LEO

Hey. Where you been? Don't you have to get to class? And what happened in there?

JJ

I took Mama-dear to the bank.

LEO

To the bank?

MRS. PRICE

I have silt.

LEO

What?

MRS. PRICE

Silt. Silt!

JJ

She has a safety-deposit box. Did you know that?

LEO

No. What was in it?

JJ holds up a cloth bag filled with paper.

JJ

Papers.

LEO

No diamonds, huh?

JJ

Didn't see any.

MRS. PRICE

I hid the jewels behind the numbers.

LEO

What numbers?

MRS. PRICE
 (grinning)
 Don't you want to know.

LEO
 (teasing her back)
 Yes, I do.
 (to JJ)
 You better get to class. Unless you're
 content to be late for every single
 thing, every single day.

MRS. PRICE
 (outraged)
 I am never late for class!

JJ
 That lady was here. Marcantel.

LEO
 She came back?

JJ
 Um-hm.

Mrs. Price removes her shoes.

MRS. PRICE
 Feet coming off. What's for breakfast?

LEO
 Dinner.

MRS. PRICE
 Where'd the day go?

LEO
 What do you want?

MRS. PRICE
 Chicken okra gumbo.

LEO
 Takes too long. How about a cutlet?

MRS. PRICE
 Why'd you ask if you didn't want to know.

Mrs. Price heads upstairs-- grabbing a box and wrappings
 as she passes through the living room.

LEO
 What'd the Marcantel woman want?

JJ holds up the cloth bag.

JJ

These-- letters from her father to Mama-dear.

He looks at the bag for a beat.

LEO

What'd she tell you?

JJ

There's a marriage certificate in here.

LEO

What marriage certificate, what?

JJ

Why didn't you ever tell me?

LEO

Tell you what?

JJ

Mama-dear was married to Ray Marcantel.

LEO

Let me see this.

She gives it to him. As Leo examines the marriage certificate, JJ opens one of Ray's letters.

JJ

Look at all this. The marriage certificate's real, right? State of Illinois. They got married here-- but where's Escondido?

LEO

Escondido?

JJ

Mexico? He was looking for a house for them to live in.

LEO

Escondido's in California. Where'd you get that?

JJ

Here, listen:

(she reads from a letter)

'Things are working out to perfection.

(MORE)

JJ (CONT'D)

This weekend I'm going to Escondido to find just the place. There are some cute apartments, but I hope to find a small house for us. '

Leo is close to being overwhelmed, but JJ's avid.

JJ (CONT'D)

Did you know any of this?

(he did not)

She said she killed her mother, maybe they were on the run.

LEO

Hey, hey, she didn't kill anybody, are you out of your mind!? Stop. Just stop.

JJ

Dad, don't you want to know what happened? She's got a whole life we don't know anything about.

(he turns away from her)

At least, I don't. Did you know?

LEO

I didn't know they were married.

JJ

What were they doing in Escondido?

LEO

There's a Marine Corps base near there.

JJ

He was a Marine. Ray. Ray Marcantel. And he loved her.

LEO

Um-hm. Then he split.

JJ

Listen:

(she reads)

'I'm no good at words, Jess, but in a lifetime I hope to prove my love to you by deeds.'

LEO

Well, he sure did that.

LIGHTS UP ON MRS. PRICE UPSTAIRS as she carefully wraps her purse in wax paper then puts it in a box.

MRS. PRICE

'Love you, yes you.'

JJ

(still reading)

'I'll sign off now. I'm going looking for a Northerner to get into an argument with. Love you, Yes You, Ray.'

LEO

This is junk.

JJ

'P.S. Sgt. & Mrs. Ray Marcantel sounds pretty good, doesn't it?'

(looks up)

How old was he, you think?

Leo shrugs.

MRS. PRICE

Nineteen.

JJ

'P.S. Jr.'

JJ holds the letter up, tries to read backwards.

JJ (CONT'D)

He wrote backwards, like a kid's code. I can't make it out.

Mrs. Price ties twine around the box holding her purse.

MRS. PRICE

'I love you backwards and forwards, I've known you forever and always will.'

JJ puts the letter back into its envelope. One of many.

JJ

He's just a guy.

LEO

Don't.

JJ

Don't what?

LEO

(pissed)

He's not just a guy-- he's a callous white man who took advantage of your grandmother then left her on her own with a baby. And now you're falling for his bullshit just like she did. Don't be an idiot.

JJ

Don't call me names just because you're scared to look at what's in front of you.

He grabs up all the letters.

LEO

What'd she say about all this?

JJ

She said she killed her mother.

LEO

Uh-huh.

JJ picks up the old shoe.

JJ

This is her mother's shoe she found in a shed when her father wouldn't let her in the house. He buried her mother before Mama-Dear could get there--

LEO

Hard to kill the woman if she wasn't in the area.

JJ

I don't know, Dad, shit was going on-- Mama-dear was wild. And then like for the rest of her life she was just like a school teacher with her nice little family. Crazy. What if she killed her mother and got away with it?

LEO

JJ. In Mama-Dear's messed up mind she thinks she killed her mom by going off with a white man.

JJ

You knew your father was white?

Leo's had enough of this conversation, goes to the kitchen, carrying the letters. JJ follows him.

LEO
I'm making chicken okra gumbo.

JJ
I want to read these letters.

LEO
No-- it's a bunch of lies and I don't want you running around here trying to convince me it's not. 'He's just a guy.'

JJ
What's wrong with you? Why are you shutting down? Your father was white, big deal.

LEO
You quitting school or what? Your mama and I are paying tuition, so if you're not going I want my money back.

JJ
I'm going. But I want to read these letters, I need to know this stuff. It's my history, too.

Checks his reaction, there is none. He prepares to cook.

JJ (CONT'D)
Daddy?

LEO
Try to be on time tomorrow.

JJ
If you do anything with those letters-- I won't forgive you-- and neither will she.

She points up to Mrs. Price's room.

LEO
JJ, go on.

JJ
I don't trust you--

She goes for the letters, he turns on her, strong--

LEO
Don't touch them.

She backs off. He prepares the gumbo. After a beat, she leaves.

SCENE FIVE. Upstairs in her room Mrs. Price sings, raspy, low, like a saw dragging across a fiddle. She wraps a bathrobe over her clothing and carefully places her shoes on the bed pillows.

MRS. PRICE
*Aux Natchitoches ya vais un brun
 A qui je veux mi faire fortun
 J'ai mais dimanche pour la les la voir*

Leo climbs the stairs to his mother's room, carrying a tray of gumbo for her.

LEO
 I got a surprise for you.

MRS. PRICE
 Smells like gumbo.

He sees she's wearing her bathrobe over her clothes.

LEO
 What are you wearing?

She looks down at herself, noticing nothing amiss.

LEO (CONT'D)
 I'll help you change--

MRS. PRICE
 I'm hungry.

LEO
 Okay. Eat your gumbo first.

MRS. PRICE
 You said gumbo took too long.

He sets her up in bed with her tray.

LEO
 I changed my mind. Your shoes don't belong on your pillow.

MRS. PRICE
 Walking in my dreams, mothafucka, walking in my dreams.

LEO
 Okay, okay, no curse-words, okay.

MRS. PRICE
Mothafucka, mothafucka, mothafucka--

LEO
Okay, okay... gumbo!

MRS. PRICE
Gumbo!

LEO
Careful not to spill. Let me put this on you.

He ties a bib around her neck, she allows it, docile.

MRS. PRICE
Now I lay me down to sleep--

LEO
Is that the right prayer? Are you going to sleep?

MRS. PRICE
Bless me, Father for I have sinned...

LEO
Bless us O Lord and these Thy gifts...

MRS. PRICE
Which we are about to receive from Thy Bounty in... in...

LEO
Christ...

MRS. PRICE
Christ, can I just eat.

LEO
Yes.

She does, delicately.

LEO (CONT'D)
You tired?

MRS. PRICE
Yeah.

Trying to just slide into it without jarring her--

LEO
Remember when you got married the first time?

MRS. PRICE

Ray, poor Ray. My Daddy and Uncle Louis
beat him up when they found out.

LEO

They didn't want you to go with him.

MRS. PRICE

Oh, Lord, no. But I was hard-headed.
(about the gumbo)
This is good.

LEO

So you went with Ray-- to California.

MRS. PRICE

We drove across the country in his little
blue Ford Victoria. You can't remember
that, but we saw the Grand Canyon, we had
such dreams.

LEO

And what about Escondido?

MRS. PRICE

That's where the married couples lived.
Not at Pendleton.

LEO

Uh-huh. How long were you there?

MRS. PRICE

Thirty-three days. Then mother died--
(instantly upset again)
He wouldn't let me sit with her! That
old man-- he hoarded her dead body and
beat me with it--

She rocks and wails going down that dark path again. Leo
distracts her by waving bread under her nose.

LEO

Eat your bread. Dip it in the gumbo.

She does, coming out of distress like turning a page.

LEO (CONT'D)

What happened with Ray?

MRS. PRICE

Ray was a Marine, he had to do what they
told him.

LEO
He was shipped out.

MRS. PRICE
I didn't see him after that. Poor Ray.

LEO
Why do you keep saying 'poor Ray?'

MRS. PRICE
I broke his heart.

LEO
You broke *his* heart?

MRS. PRICE
I turned my back, took his son.

Leo takes that in for a moment, as she eats.

LEO
What do you mean you took his son?

MRS. PRICE
It was the only way my father would
forgive me. And I needed forgiveness,
need it still...
(lost)
What am I trying to say?

LEO
It's okay, mom.

MRS. PRICE
(stern, insisting)
What am I trying to say?!

LEO
Why you divorced Ray Marcantel.

MRS. PRICE
There was no divorce.

LEO
But you both remarried.

MRS. PRICE
We just went on-- pretended it never
happened.

LEO
Oh, ma.

MRS. PRICE

When I met Charlie he was already an old man and I couldn't forget Ray-- I had to squeeze him out of my mind-- squeeze his fleshy neck, his limpcat soul dripping through my fingers-- he wanted what he wanted like young men do but I was ruthless. I had to be.

LEO

What did he want-- to take you and your son-- to live some place-- ?

MRS. PRICE

It was kill or be killed, that's how it was.

LEO

Did you love him?

MRS. PRICE

Who?

LEO

Ray.

MRS. PRICE

(bright)

How is Ray?

Leo knows the moment is gone.

LEO

He's alright.

MRS. PRICE

Please give him my regards. I was sorry to hear about his wife.

LEO

Eat your gumbo.

She pushes the bowl away.

MRS. PRICE

I'm done.

LEO

Come on, you can eat a little more.

MRS. PRICE

I'm done I said.

LEO
 (clearing the tray)
 Alright. I'll be back to help you change clothes.

MRS. PRICE
 Don't you touch my dick!

LEO
 Don't worry about that. Ma, do you know who I am?

Mrs. Price holds out her wrist.

MRS. PRICE
 Check me, I'm dead over here.

LEO
 I'll check you in a minute, okay? I'll be right back. You rest for a bit.

As he descends the stairs, she calls after him--

MRS. PRICE
 We called the rain-- and now it's calling us back.

IN THE LIVING ROOM Leo puts down the tray, picks up the sack of letters. As Mrs. Price rants, he wraps the sack, puts it in a box and ties it securely with string.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)
 (forlorn)
 I don't know how to surrender, my dick gets in the way-- but I'm scared to be dickless. I'm calling the water to teach me, I'm calling on Charlie. Teach me surrender, Mr. Charles, take me in your arms again-- don't be mad-- you are the husband, you, you are the father, the only one who knows how to do it right. Man of grace. Take our son in hand. Give him courage to be stronger than me. Give him courage.

When it's done, Leo sits with the box on his lap.

SCENE SIX. LIGHTS UP on Leo sitting in precisely the same position, holding the tied box. There is a KNOCK at the front door. Didi's on the porch. Startled out of his reverie, he doesn't say a word or get up.

Didi KNOCKS again.

DIDI
Leo, it's Didi Marcantel.

He doesn't answer, looks around the room.

DIDI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry to bother you, I won't stay long, I promise. I'm on my way to the airport.

He stashes the box with the letters among other similar boxes. Didi KNOCKS again.

DIDI (CONT'D)
Leo?

He opens the door to Didi, says nothing.

DIDI (CONT'D)
I didn't want to leave mad and horrible and have a lawyer contact you and have years of strained relations again.

LEO
Again?

DIDI
I didn't speak to my father for several years before he died. I seem to be pretty good at pissing people off and creating hard feelings and I'd like to be different with you.

He says nothing, stares, waits.

DIDI (CONT'D)
He says nothing. Okay, I'll just plow ahead.

LEO
Is there any way to stop you?

DIDI
If you want me to stop I will, that's what I'm trying to say. I want to quit forcing things. I embarrassed myself with your daughter yesterday, I wanted to apologize--

LEO
Why would a lawyer contact me?

DIDI
My dad left you his supermarket.

LEO
In Louisiana?

DIDI
Yeah. Can we sit?

She gestures to the chairs on the porch. He doesn't sit, walks to the bannister, looks out.

LEO
He left me a grocery store in a southern town.

DIDI
That's all he had to give.

LEO
And you came here and didn't say this.

DIDI
I tried to tell you. Twice.

LEO
You can have it. I don't want it.

DIDI
I don't want it either, that's not the reason I came.

Trying to end it--

LEO
I don't care about your reasons. I'll sell it, split the profits with you. There, done. Now please, leave me alone.

She starts to go... but can't.

DIDI
I want to know why he did this, why he was like he was-- if I go home now, like this, I will never escape.

Leo takes a beat. It is not in him to be cruel.

LEO
She left him. Her mother died, her father threatened her and she caved in.

DIDI
How do you know?

LEO

There's a marriage certificate, they got married here in Chicago. She also said they never bothered to get a divorce.

Didi cocks her head like a bird hearing a strange sound.

DIDI

I beg your pardon?

LEO

She said they went on like it never happened.

DIDI

No. My parents have wedding pictures.

LEO

Mine, too.

DIDI

Oh.

(taking it in, then--)

I wonder if she knew? My mother.

LEO

I doubt it. White families never know.

DIDI

But your dad...?

LEO

When I was eleven he and my mom told me, said she was young and made a mistake.

DIDI

I'm illegitimate. And you're not. That's funny.

LEO

Didn't mean anything yesterday, doesn't mean anything now.

DIDI

My poor mother. He never loved her, and now-- he never even married her. Never loved me, never loved anybody, sorry bastard--

LEO

He loved my mother.

DIDI

He abandoned her.

LEO

She said *she* walked away.

DIDI

Really. Before we let Ray off the hook, let's ask why didn't he come for you? When you were little. Imagine if it was your son-- could you not talk to him for 17 years then send a check for \$500.

LEO

No.

DIDI

Leo, I grew up in the same house with him and he ignored me. I went months without him looking at me or saying a word.

She turns away, ashamed, exposed, emotion escaping against her will.

LEO

Take it from me, you got to let that shit go.

DIDI

Let go, let go, let go, NO! Don't think because he was-- young once-- because he was in love that-- don't think--

LEO

What?

DIDI

Don't think he was a good man.

It is a shameful admission. Then--

DIDI (CONT'D)

And I'm afraid I'm exactly like him.

(stripped)

I piss people off, prefer being alone, hold grudges, can't take no for an answer. I've never had a relationship for more than a year. I push my way into your house desperate for I don't know what--

(turning on him)

And what has he done to you? We can say it doesn't matter-- but it does--

(then)

Sorry, I'm sorry, I really am. This is completely inappropriate.

(MORE)

DIDI (CONT'D)
 (turning to leave)
 I will not bother you anymore.

Leo decides.

LEO
 Wait.

He crosses into the living room, picks up the box of letters he tied with string, and brings it out.

DIDI
 You found his letters?

He nods, opening the box.

LEO
 I have to keep them for JJ... but you can read them.

He hands letters to Didi, who examines them.

DIDI
 Oh. It's his handwriting.

She opens one, reads--

DIDI (CONT'D)
'Hello doll, how's my girl tonight?'

Didi's surprisingly moved. She looks at Leo.

DIDI (CONT'D)
 It's his handwriting, but it doesn't sound like him.

Leo nods imperceptibly, so unsure of this.

DIDI (CONT'D)
 (reading)
'I found out the G.I. Bill pays \$167.50 a month for a serviceman, wife, and baby-- that's not very much money, is it? But if you can learn to fry potatoes and peel them without cutting yourself, we can get by perfect. With my new job I stand a chance of getting a sergeant's stripe.'
 (checks the letter's date)
 August 17, 1953. When were you born?

LEO
 February, '54.

DIDI
 She was just a few months pregnant.
 (reading)
'You and I together can figure it out.'

UPSTAIRS Mrs. Price finishes the sentence--

MRS. PRICE
'You and I together can do anything.'

Didi sits, opens another letter. To Leo--

DIDI
 Come on. Read one.

He looks at an envelope.

LEO
 Korea. April, 54.
 (reading)
'Dear my sweet, we've made so many mistakes already, but we'll catch up with ourselves. The way our deal went off I didn't have time to think, I was snowed, and time was working against us. One blunder followed another. But I'm sure I've learned a few things from it all and have had time to think now.'

UPSTAIRS, Mrs. Price rises, lost.

MRS. PRICE
 (paranoid)
 Who said that? Where am I?

BOTH UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS REMAIN LIT, PARALLEL WORLDS.

LEO
'I've been considering going AWOL just to see you in person because I know then I could convince you we can make it. But I don't know how I'd get out of Korea, and anyway then we'd just be in more of a jam than we are now.'

DIDI
'If we knew what the future held there'd hardly be any fun in living.'
 (beat)
 I don't recognize this person at all.

LEO
 (reading)
*'Jess, I know you're upset about your
 mother...'*

Mrs. Price wanders, climbs furniture.

MRS. PRICE
 I hear the long line of the dead calling
 me-- Ma? Is it you? Are you here?

Leo continues.

LEO
*'...but don't throw away our life
 together. It'll be hard and we can't
 live in the South but we could try
 California.'*

Did reads from another letter.

DIDI
*'Don't do this, wait for me. When my
 tour is over I'll come get you and my
 son.'*

They are both stopped by that.

Mrs. Price stands high atop a piece of furniture.

MRS. PRICE
 My son.

Didi puts the letters down.

DIDI
 How does it feel to be wanted, Leo? I'd
 really like to know.

LIGHTS FADE DOWNSTAIRS, EMPHASIS UPSTAIRS, where Mrs.
 Price inhabits a memory, unencumbered by reality.

MRS. PRICE
 Standing at the Grand Canyon with Leo in
 my belly, you and me felt like everything
 was possible, remember, like we could
 hold hands and fly. Laughing, kissing,
 carrying a baby, a divine son. We could
 see so far--- some few people ahead of
 us, cutting a path--- but behind us,
 behind us was the multitude, sweeping us
 forward, giving us courage. All the
 babies, all the mixed babies...

(MORE)

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

open-hearted, pushing, pushing like a mighty river and the dam's about to break, and we will flood the canyon. Water softening the edges of the rocks. Can't even hardly remember the fear as we swim and float to the other side. The perilous rocks and cliffs a tale told by an old woman. Toothless history. There's no stopping us. That's what we knew. Change was on us. It was 1954 and we were making the world a sweeter place, with our love, with our baby. You are strong, I am strong, Leo will be a lion.

(turning to Ray in the tree)

Ray! How'd you get up here without me hearing? Magic. Hold on...

She extends her arms like wings, suspended for a moment.

MRS. PRICE (CONT'D)

All we have to do is fly...

SHE LEAPS into thin air... and CRASHES TO THE FLOOR.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, Leo and Didi hear the fall and come running up the stairs.

LEO

Mama!

He's in his mother's room in two heartbeats, Didi on his heels. Leo finds Mrs. Price on the floor, dazed.

LEO (CONT'D)

Are you alright? What were you doing? Don't move.

MRS. PRICE

Get your hands off me, pinhead bastard!

LEO

No, no, don't move, we have to see if you broke any bones.

DIDI

I'll call 911.

MRS. PRICE

No! I'll shoot you both, I swear on my dick. No nines, no ones!

LEO

Okay, okay.

He backs off, raising his hands, not going far from her.

LEO (CONT'D)
Whatever you want, okay. Okay?

MRS. PRICE
Damn fuckin' A-right.

LEO
Alright, then. What were you doing?

MRS. PRICE
(obvious)
Flying.

LEO
Do you hurt anywhere?

MRS. PRICE
Head, legs, back.

DIDI
Everything hurts?

MRS. PRICE
(threatening)
My trigger finger's okay. Who the hell
are you? Get out, get out of my hair--

She tries to stand to chase Didi out of her room, but
collapses under her own weight.

LEO
Mama! Let me help you get into your bed,
alright?

MRS. PRICE
I ain't yo mama, mothafucka! Eat my dick
and see if I'm yo mama!

LEO
Okay, okay, let me help you to your bed,
badass motherfucker.

Unable to move on her own, she lets Leo help her onto her
bed. As she settles--

MRS. PRICE
Ants. Ants!

LEO
Where?

MRS. PRICE
My arms! Ants crawling on me!

LEO
No ants.

MRS. PRICE
They getting me!

Didi comes over, rubs Mrs. Price's hands and arms.

DIDI
I'll get 'em. Here we go. That better?

The old lady calms, goes silent as Didi rubs her arms.
Leo's not sure what happened.

DIDI (CONT'D)
She's probably got nerve damage which
feels like ants.

Leo heads for the door.

LEO
I'll call an ambulance--

MRS. PRICE
Leo, I'm dead over here. Check me.

Leo stops. Didi checks her pulse, not good.

LEO
I'll call the doctor and he'll check you,
alright?

MRS. PRICE
Already dead. You'll see.

LEO
I'll be right back, ma.

MRS. PRICE
My divine son.

LEO
What?

But that's all she has to say. Mrs. Price turns away,
exhausted, shutting down.

LEO (CONT'D)
Mom?

DIDI

Go call.

Leo hurries out of the room. Didi continues to rub the old woman's arms.

Near the boat **JJ SINGS** a capella-- *AUX NATCHITOCHEs*, the haunting elegy Mrs. Price sang before.

JJ

*Aux Natchitoches ya vais un brun
A qui je veux mi faire fortun*

As the song continues Didi stands, backs away. On the stairs Leo pauses, as if hearing a strange sound. JJ steps to the porch.

JJ (CONT'D)

*J'ai mais dimanche pour la les la voir
J'ai mais dimanche pour la les la voir*

*Et pars an beau matin je ne ful traillez
Je les trouvé sous son lis couchez
Darlin' belle, sonnez y et vous
Belle a nos amour, je le pense q'ua vous.*

After a moment of complete stillness, broken only by the raw voice of the singer, Didi covers the body with a cloth. Mrs. Price is dead.

JJ (CONT'D)

*On non ni ja dor ni jeune son meille
Tout, tout la nuit je sous privé
Mon chere amant, je le pense q'ua vous.
Mon chere amant, ti mari il ya nous?*

JJ begins to straighten the living room while she continues to sing. Didi crosses to help her. Only Leo does not move, caught as he was on the staircase, unable to take the next step.

JJ (CONT'D)

*J'irais mon faire batteil un hermitage
Eu mon mangé surreille de barre
Et ma boisson ce ces des pleurs.
Pour deux amours qui vicant longeurs*

The song bridges into the next scene as JJ and Didi place funeral flowers in front of the painting of Mrs. Price.

JJ (CONT'D)

*Et si qui vous avez un habits a brun,
Pernan la don couleur des sonnes,
(MORE)*

JJ (CONT'D)
Parce que ce la plus triste couleur
Por deux amours qui vicant longeurs.

SCENE SEVEN. THREE DAYS LATER. AFTER THE FUNERAL.

When the song ends, Leo has not moved from the stairs. Mrs. Price's body is gone. JJ and Didi work in the living room, avoid looking at each other.

DIDI
 How do you know that song?

JJ
 Mama-dear sung me to sleep with it when I was little.

DIDI
 My dad loved that song.

JJ nods, accepting that, but moving on.

JJ
 There's so much food in there--
 (then)
 I'll freeze some of it for you Dad, but I'll take the extra down to the homeless shelter. If that's okay...?

Leo nods, half-listening. JJ goes into the kitchen and packs up the donated food.

Didi stands in the middle of the room.

DIDI
 I should go.

She stands there, not going. After a silence--

LEO
 Did she say 'divine son?'

DIDI
 What?

LEO
 My mother. Were those her last words?

DIDI
 I think so.

LEO
 I haven't heard that since I was a boy.

DIDI

She called you 'divine'?

LEO

When people were cruel 'cause I wasn't black enough, or white enough, when I was afraid, when I cried that Charlie Price was not my real father, she said I was a divine child given to make the world better.

JJ comes out of the kitchen, carrying a load of food, heading for the front door.

JJ

I'll be back.

LEO

Okay.

They watch her leave.

LEO (CONT'D)

JJ is the divine one.

DIDI

Leo, come and sit--

He doesn't move from his spot on the stairs.

LEO

I am the opposite of a divine man, creeping around a house of women and boxes tied with string, scared to make a move. What am I afraid of-- I don't know. I don't even know who I am anymore. When did I get so small?

He weeps. Not moving from the stairs, maintaining his dignity, he weeps.

Didi goes to sit on the stair near him, not touching him, not looking, simply sitting with him in his grief.

DIDI

In her last letter your mom told Ray when she wondered if their love had been a dream, she looked at his eyes in your face and remembered, it was true. And despite their circumstances she believed everything was possible for their son. There would be no stopping him, that's what she knew.

(MORE)

DIDI (CONT'D)

They had made the world a sweeter place,
with their love, with their baby. She
said she was strong, Ray was strong and
Leo would be a lion.

LEO

Some lion.

DIDI

You're not small. Is your full name
'Leonidas'?

LEO

Yeah, what kind of crapass name is that?

DIDI

It's my grandfather's name. They named
you after Ray's father, Leonidas
Marcantel.

(She uses the French pronunciation: Lay-O-Ni-Dah.)

Leo did not know that, doesn't like it.

LEO

Great.

DIDI

Leonidas was a fur trader-- he'd go into
the swamps and buy skins from the Cajuns--
mink, stoat, nutria--

LEO

Nutria? That's a giant rodent, isn't it?

DIDI

(smiles)

Then he'd go to New Orleans to sell them.
I remember him driving up in his old
Pontiac filled high with stretched skins.
Always wore a hat, suspenders-- dapper.

LEO

In the swamps.

DIDI

He was a businessman. We had to drive
away from hurricane Betsy in the middle
of the night and he came with us, he was
probably in his 80's then. The wind and
rain got so bad, we had to get off the
road-- ended up at a school gym with
hundreds of people.

(MORE)

DIDI (CONT'D)

It was scary, sleeping on the floor with strangers, wind screaming like a train-- and then I saw my grandpa, Leonidas, standing at a big iron stove in the back making pancakes-- surrounded by kids, laughing, calming everybody down.

LEO

Food can do that.

DIDI

He made pancakes until the storm passed. He was a great cook, much better than any of the women in the family.

LEO

Not surprising.

DIDI

Is that a gender bias you have?

LEO

No, it's a fact-- men are better cooks.

DIDI

I can't debate that, it's always been true of the men in our family.

LEO

Our family.

The moment wafts away, they sit in silence.

DIDI

Leonidas. Good name for a restaurant.

LEO

(French pronunciation)
Leonidas.

DIDI

You should open your own place.

LEO

You should find a nice girl and settle down.

DIDI

Why are you harping on this?

LEO

I don't know, you seem gay to me.

Long pause.

DIDI
I'm just thinking about it. I haven't
done anything yet.

LEO
You should, why not. Someone you have
your eye on?

DIDI
Maybe.

LEO
Make your move-- what are you waiting
for?

DIDI
I don't know.
(a look, a breath)
What are we waiting for?

Leo and Didi, brother and sister, sit on the stairs for a
few beats, considering, wondering what comes next.

As MUSIC RISES and LIGHTS BEGIN TO FADE, the spirit of
Mrs. Price appears in the boat, looking into the
distance.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

END OF PLAY

* Translation of AUX NATCHITOCHEES (In Natchitoches)

*In Natchitoches there's a brunette
For her I want to make everything fine
I only have Sundays to see her*

*One misty morning
I found her lying on her bed
Sleep, darling, dream,
I only think of you and our love.*

*I can neither sleep nor doze
I can't sleep all night.
My dear love, I only think of you.
My dear love, will we marry?*

*I'll build a secluded hut
My food will be grass
And my drink tears.
For two lovers living only in longing.*

*And if you have to get a dress,
Get it the color of ashes,
For that's the saddest color
For two lovers living only in longing.*

From the CD "Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians"
Recorded by Dr. Harry Oster, on Arhoolie Records.
Recording Number 359, Song 14. Vocals by Bee Deshotel.