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# Outside My Bedroom Window

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# Outside My Bedroom Window

by

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Senior Honors Thesis  
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*Thanks to all the writers and dreamers who have been my inspiration and encouragement. And thank you to everyone who believed in me even when I was beginning to doubt myself.*

*I want to say a very special thank you to Dr. Pat Carr and Ammia Johnson for your time spent reading and rereading.*

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## *Author's Introduction*

### Fireflies

Held captive by a smiling child  
Who forgot to put holes in the jar.

*While the collection of writing may be fiction, the meaning behind this book is the greatest reality I have ever known. The process of writing "Outside My Bedroom Window" began when I was nine years old and just beginning to experience the freedom of*

the imagination. I wrote poetry without understanding the full impact of its healing quality. I felt the overwhelming sense of freedom but was not yet mature enough to give name to it. I now know that I have become addicted to that freedom, that escapism.

As a young teenager, I would sit in my room for hours staring out the window at the people and the cars that passed along my suburban street. The world outside that window became one of my own creation. It was a way for me to separate myself from everything else that was happening in my life. I could imagine myself in control of the lives of others. That is, in fact, what being a good writer is all about: imagining oneself in control of the characters, and then gradually letting the characters take control of their own lives.

Writing is a world in which we hope for the opening of windows rather than doors. In the physical world, a good opportunity might be referred to as an open door, but in the creative world one looks for an open window through which to observe life at its most real, most passionate, most simple, most bizarre....

*Through writing this thesis, I have learned that there is never an end to the process. What I see through my window in the day may exist in an entirely different shadow at night. An appreciation of these differences has helped me to grow as a writer and has led me to a place in time at which I am finally ready to share the world to which I escape. I'm finally able to open my window so that others might appreciate my view.*

*Back when I was nine and began laying the groundwork for "Outside My Bedroom Window," and when at age twelve I settled on the title, I believed this would be the first of many masterpieces. Perhaps I was wrong, but I can certainly say it is the foundation on which I may someday build a masterpiece. And it is certainly the first of many milestones.*

*Nicole Hodson*

*January 1997*

1

*Independence Day*



**Birthright**

My sincerest apologies  
for having left you  
as the white picket fence  
grays and  
rots.

I've come home  
for as long as it takes  
to tear it down  
post by post.

### Painted People

We looked at each other with apprehension, both of us seeming to say, "Should we go in?"

This was a decision we had made together, and we would see it through not because we were so full of determination, but because we were stubborn. Too many people laughed when we announced our plan, thinking we would never go through with it. The excitement of proving them wrong got the better of us. We set off like two little children defying their parents for the first time, praying we wouldn't get caught, but secretly hoping that the whole world would find out just how daring and independent we could be.

I took the first step toward the door, giggling as I reached to push it open. My partner in this great mission of defiance lagged a step behind.

"I really don't think this is anything to laugh about. Are you sure we should be doing this?"

"Of course," I said, but of course I wasn't sure. I was laughing out of an intense need to hide my fear. I wanted her to buy into my confidence, because I was

certain that I if she changed her mind I wouldn't have the nerve to do it alone.

The door was pulled from my hand as a voice from the other side asked, "Can I help you?"

Overflowing with false confidence, we dared to step into the dimly lit lobby. Voices barely audible over the buzz of equipment were heard from behind the counter that ran the length of the opposite side of the room. I stood silently. I looked to my companion for encouragement. This time, she let out a giggle and I followed her lead

The hostess touched my shoulder reassuringly and ushered me across the room. Works of art lined three of the four walls. Along the fourth were two barber shop-like chairs and a counter standing so high as to remind me of my vulnerable position. I chose my favorite work of art and headed for the counter where the woman from the door was waiting. She smiled and nodded and began talking with one of the artists. He nodded.

"OK, we're ready," he said.

I took a deep breath and looked over my shoulder at my companion. She raised the drawing she had picked out to reassure me that we were doing this together. I shrugged my shoulders, smiled, and said, "Let's do it," and followed the young artist to a back room. Here I was, alone in a room with a man only a few

years older than I was who had artwork covering all visible parts of his body.

“This really doesn’t hurt that bad. I mean, it’ll only hurt for a second. Well, anyway, I guess we should get started. You’re going to have to take off your pants.”

Since he was as uncomfortable with my half-nakedness as I was with climbing into a dentist chair in a back room with a total stranger staring at my thigh, I decided maybe it wouldn’t be anything to worry about. “Relax,” was his only warning. Then the sound of the machine was heard. The pain as it touched my skin was almost unbearable. Almost. For an hour, I lay in a model pose while my skin became the canvas upon which Joe needled the symbol of drama, the masks of comedy and tragedy.

The green and purple faces stared up at me with rosy cheeks. “It’ll only bleed for a couple of hours. Just keep this over it ‘til you go to bed tonight,” he suggested as he began to tape the protective gauze over the bleeding faces.

The hostess stuck her head in the room, “Before you cover that, you might want to let your friend see it. She’s finished, too.”

In walked my mom, both of us looking as though we had accomplished some great mission. Then the reality of the next mission hit me. “How are we going to explain what we’ve done to Dad?”

### A Sestina for Mother

"It's time to say good-night," said Mother.

The routine was the same every night.

She'd place water on the nightstand for me to drink.

Then she'd tuck me into bed.

The sheets, at first, were uncomfortably cold.

So, she'd lie with me until they warmed and I went to sleep.

Sometimes, if I just couldn't go to sleep,

She'd tell me stories about her mother.

Most of her memories were happy, but sometimes the stories were bitter cold.

Mom would lock herself in her room later in the night.

When she was sure I was asleep, she'd pull the bottle from beneath her bed...

The bottle from which she'd drink.

When Dad left, it was more than one drink.  
It took half a bottle before she could sleep.  
And she no longer stored liquor under the bed.  
She kept it on her dresser, next to the picture of her mother.  
Somehow she made it through the night,  
Awakening often, tremulous and cold.

The house I shared with Mother was cold.  
I began to warm myself by joining her for a drink.  
And I found it difficult to be alone at night  
I missed the nights she'd lie with me until I went to sleep.  
I missed my mother.  
So, I found others with whom to share my bed.

We no longer said "good-night" before bed.  
"Good-luck" was better to prepare for the evening's cold.  
Was it luck I, too, became a mother?

Where was the father when, still in the womb, my baby tasted its last drink?

I put the baby to sleep.

I couldn't give birth to a child of the night.

Morning wouldn't follow that dark night.

I was ready for bed.

The only peace I knew was sleep

There could be an end to the cold.

This would be my last drink.

It's time to say good-night to Mother.

"Good-night, Mother. Please lie here beside me as I go to sleep.

Take one last drink with me before I go to bed.

I'm sorry. I can't make it through the cold night."

## Elixir

"But dad, I don't want to go.... You're hurting my arm, dad. Let go of my arm."

"Just shut up and come on." He dragged the little boy behind him.

Denny stumbled, his feet unable to carry him as fast as his father yanked on his arm. Then he regained his footing and began a slow jog to keep up. At the age of five, Denny was quite familiar with the sting of leather against his skin, and this was no time to disobey his father's law.

Denny was smart for such a young kid. Not just street smart, but smart in school, too. Already he could read and write quite well. He was ahead of the other kids in his kindergarten class. Miss Sweetan often called on him to demonstrate how to write letters of the alphabet, which provoked his classmates to call him "teacher's pet."

And every now and then, Miss Sweetan would come upon Denny alone on the playground watching the other kids with sad eyes. When she asked why he didn't join them, he always answered with the same puzzling response: "I don't want to be smart. I want to be a baseball player."



It was clear Denny's family didn't have much money. In a conversation with one of her colleagues, Miss Sweetan suggested that Denny's sadness probably stemmed from his parents' financial inability to buy him a ball and glove. She couldn't afford much either, but she gave him a set of glossy flash cards, brightly colored and full of information about the United States. She gave him the cards in an effort to encourage him to "want to be smart," and he did express some interest as he began memorizing their content. Before long, he could name the capitals of all forty-eight states. His father seemed to want him to learn, too. Or maybe he just wanted Denny to know things. He didn't seem to care how the boy learned them. Denny certainly never told his father about the flash cards out of fear that his father might take them away.

During the day, Denny went to school to learn the things Miss Sweetan wrote on the chalkboard. At night, his father took him by the arm and led him to a different kind of school. The two walked along the street as dusk settled on the run-down homes of Price Hill, giving them a gray, melancholy appearance. The road reached its summit, and father and son began the descent into town, away from the last, gray shadows of sunlight and into the black shadows of the city.

Night was when the homeless men and abandoned children walked the streets. It was when the city smelled of the day's trash from the local businesses,

reeked of car exhaust trapped in the valley during rush-hour traffic...and when it smelled of alcohol. The odor of intoxicating beverages reached the top of the hill, and as Denny and his father approached the bottom, the foul stench was choking.

His father always warned him, "Stop that coughing. Don't make a sound until I tell you to. Do you understand me?"

Denny tried to answer with an obedient "Yes," but all he managed was to cough and nod.

Father and son arrived at their destination -- a run-down, dirty building with iron bars on all the windows and a large, statue-like man guarding the door. The stone figure nodded his okay to Denny's father, who started inside. As he gripped the door knob, he gave Denny a threatening glare. The boy followed him closely, and a smell even worse than that in the streets smacked him in the face as the door gave way to a dark, smoke-filled room. He crinkled his nose and squinted his eyes to suppress a cough. When the need subsided, he let out a breath and stared around the room as if seeing it all for the first time.

The only light radiated from the beer advertisements hung randomly on all four walls. There were no more than a few feet to walk among the assortment of tables, both round and square. Directly across the room, a platform awaited a band that was never booked to play. Jim was standing behind the bar, pouring drinks for

his customers, mostly businessmen who needed a nightly reminder that their lives hadn't gone to shit. Jim didn't need to worry about booking musicians in order to draw a crowd. His bar would always be full because there would always be men who were willing to settle for a beer and a jukebox tune. So, there would never be a band, there would never be anything but sorry men, cheap beer, and cheaper women.

Jim walked from behind the bar, reached under Denny's arms, and hoisted him up onto a bar stool. "So, what are you going to teach us tonight, little man?" The men in the bar never called Denny by his name. Maybe they didn't even know his name.

Whenever Jim spoke to him, the boy looked to his father, his young eyes asking if he should answer. His father answered for him. "Tonight Denny's gonna give us a little geography lesson, aren't ya, boy?"

Denny nodded.

As the other men at the bar began to realize that the father/son team had entered, attention gradually focused on them. Denny's father soon had a beer in one hand and men's money in the other. He was already making bets with the drunk men who were already laughing at what the man proposed.

"That kid's pretty damn smart, but no kid his age knows that much."

"It's your money," responded Denny's father. "Do what ya want with it. I say the boy can do it. If you're so sure I'm wrong, put a few bucks on it."

All Denny could do was sit there, waiting for his father's command. "Denny," his father grabbed his arm. "Tell these men a little something about the United States."

All eyes focused on Denny. "Come on, little man. Your dad tells us you can name all the states and you even know the capital cities."

"Yeah, little man, you really know all the states?"

His father's grip tightened. It was time to begin. Denny was no stranger to such barroom entertainment. He squeezed his eyes shut for just a second, then opened his mouth to recite the information he had learned from the shiny flash cards. The men grew quiet. The boy started with Washington and worked his way toward the east. Somewhere near Michigan his voice softened, grew faint. The men yelled at him to speak up.

"He can't do it... You owe us money... Your son's not so smart tonight." Voices were raised, and beer mugs waved in the air showering the boy.

His father glared at him with fiery eyes.

Denny stood frozen on the bar. He was illuminated by the glow of black light shining on his white t-shirt and gym shoes. Then the state of Michigan formed once

again on his lips. His eyes shone with a fearlessness he had never before exhibited with the men at the bar.

He leapt down from his slippery stage of spilt beer and peanut shells. As his feet hit the floor, he ran for the door, making it past the stone guard before the men in the bar even realized what had happened.

He heard his father yelling for him. Then the voice of Jim, "Hey, little man, what's wrong? Come back, little man "

Jim's final words followed Denny as he ran. And he kept on running until the only sound was the pounding of his feet against the pavement and a voice that repeated over and over, "I never wanted to be smart. I just want to play baseball."

**Boxes**

The family room is in boxes now  
wrapped in yesterday's headlines:

Picture frames with photos of  
that same family smiling  
in every style and every size,

A ceramic boy tangled in a strand of Christmas lights.

Silverware, a pepper shaker,  
napkin rings,  
a diamond ring,

Towels that matched the bathroom years ago before it was redone.

Not exactly the kind of family  
you'd expect to see living in a cardboard box.

2

*Cornflakes*

### Nick's Flowers

A young boy might dream of meeting such a lady. She had been there many times before, on the sidelines. One can assume she came to watch her brother participate in the games. Whatever it was that drew her to the field some Saturdays, she captured as much attention as the game. She was beautiful, dressed in a long, blue skirt with white polka dots and white sandals hidden beneath the hem. She wore a white silk blouse and a hat to protect her eyes from the sun. She stood tall and proud and independent; she didn't even hold her mother's hand.

He dared to approach her in hopes of offering his gift. He had carefully selected the prettiest of flowers, the bright yellow and white ones. As he drew near to her, he extended his arm waiting for her to accept...praying she would accept the flowers.

She looked out from under her hat, squinting in the sunlight. She took the flowers with a soft "Thank you" that seemed to echo in the boy's ears. His smile was wide as he turned his back to walk away.

She held the gift in her hand for a moment then opened her palm and let the flowers fall. She stared at them laying on the ground, the yellow already beginning to fade, and she seemed grateful he didn't look back.



**Unwelcome**

His eyes study the surface.

His hands examine slowly,

patiently.

He strokes the smooth

tenderness of every curve.

A dampness seeps over the specimen

passionately lingering.

Nothing is left untouched,

undiscovered.

He delves on,

faster,

deeper,

harder.

His specimen lies helpless.

He stabs the soul of the object before him.

As he gains depth,

the pain intensifies,

becomes unbearable.

He reaches a point of satisfaction,

removes himself carelessly,

heartlessly.

The object lies invaded,

stripped of being

permanently altered

... As he walks away unchanged.

**Absolutly Mine**

Glass curves

Reveal temptation

Begging with liquid eyes

For another burning swallow

of promise

Fill my salacious cup

so I may taste

the heat of passion

Your emptiness

Is now mine.

### Talking to Elvis

According to the people at  
Long Distance Information,  
On the "average" day  
four people call Graceland  
asking to speak  
with Elvis.

Calendar full of  
obligations I have  
no time to keep.

Phone calls to friends  
with whom I've lost touch  
making plans for  
lunch we'll never have.

A disappointing attempt  
to write a line  
worthy of an audience.

A disheartening last look  
at my calendar  
to see I've accomplished  
nothing  
as I set my alarm  
to wake me again.

I think I'll make  
an appointment  
to speak  
with Elvis.

### Do You Like Cornflakes for Breakfast?

Audiences continue to search for drama that brings the reality of living to the stage. Why, then, when a playwright successfully achieves such a goal, is the work rejected? Perhaps, Marsha Norman's play night, Mother is too realistic for today's audience. Many fail to recognize it as a drama that depicts human aloneness in both the positive and negative light that it deserves. Critics have rejected Norman's play, calling it a tool for forwarding the feminist movement, an anti-feminist drama, an awakening, and a poor attempt at horror.

Some critics have attempted to determine the play's worthiness to be included in the canon of great dramas. The most outspoken of all the critics are the feminists who feel night, Mother is a "[presentation of] female entrapment in a male-centered ideology." The opposition to such a claim is, of course, the anti-feminists who feel that the play portrays a "defeatist resolution in the face of that [female] entrapment." Both groups condemn Norman's use of the realistic format to further her ideological message. Norman, according to some critics, is allowing "the feminist message to

be subordinated to a restrictively dominating, male-constructed mode of presentation" (Demastes 109).

Amid such masculine construction is one critic's feeling that Norman led her audiences into the middle of "a ferocious battle over nothing less than the validity of life" (Coen). While the statement remains true to Norman's message, perhaps "meaning" would be a better word than "validity." And even if Coen's choice of words is entirely justified, she follows it up by saying that before Jessie can be ready to die, she must unlock her past. How can anyone so blatantly ignore Norman's assertions (by way of Jessie's words) that the past is not what her decision to commit suicide is about.

According to critic Douglas Watt, Marsha Norman offers an uninteresting, clinical account of one of the most profound mysteries of life. He suggests that "the final cap-pistol report from behind a bedroom door is as weak as the play's premise." In making such a statement, Watt denies the very scene that defines both the helplessness as well as the hope that is so implicit in Norman's words. Watt's review implies that Norman's intent when writing night, Mother was to instill in the audience a sense of horror. In his eyes, she failed in this attempt. Norman clearly did not intend to turn this drama into one that horrified her audience; rather, she intended to create a sense of familiarity by way of the common, everyday

experiences of the main characters. Frank Rich was present to critique the same staging of ‘night, Mother; however, he gave credit to Norman’s ability to “perfectly capture the intimate details of two individual, ordinary women...locating the emptiness that fills too many ordinary homes.” Although he credits Norman with success, he praises her for the wrong reasons when he goes on to say that “the more loneliness that is exposed, the more we realize that the most horrifying aspect of ‘night, Mother is not Jessie’s decision to end her life but her mother’s gradual awakening--and ours--to the inexorable logic of that decision.” The play is not about Thelma’s gradual awakening; it includes, but is not centered on, her *sudden* awakening at a point when it is too late. And Norman does not ask us to see the logic in committing suicide; she asks us to realize the universality of Jessie’s suffering (not her decision to die) and encourages us to find our own individual solution.

Marsha Norman has realistically captured the aloneness that every human being is born into. ‘night, Mother addresses the universal fear that life has no purpose. She doesn’t condone Jessie’s actions, nor does she condemn Jessie for her selfish solution. The reality of the play is that Norman provides the audience with no solid answers, just an array of potential solutions to the issue of being lost and confused. The language which Norman uses both in dialogue and stage directions



tells more about her search for meaning than does the action of the play. The audience comes to understand the play by paying attention to the deeper meaning behind the words and actions.

There is a double meaning within much of the dialogue of the play. For example, in the opening scene of the play, Jessie plans to look for the shoebox in which her father's gun is kept. Thelma's response to Jessie's search is that "We don't have anything anybody'd want...I don't even want what we got." Jessie responds by saying, "Neither do I" (717). At this point, Jessie has not yet announced why she needs to find the gun, but her simple statement alerts the audience that a quiet desperation exists. Another example of double meaning occurs when Jessie discusses with her mother the proper way to do laundry. Her mother suggests that all one can do is wait once "you put the soap in" and "you turn it on." Norman tells her audience, "You do something else. You don't just wait." When Thelma tells Jessie that "the waiting's the worst part of it," she makes the suggestion to pay someone else to do it. Marsha Norman is not talking about washing clothes. She is telling the audience not to sell themselves short. Above all, she is urging the audience not to just wait for someone else to find the answers.

A crucial passage of dialogue occurs near the end of the play when Jessie shares with her mother a thought about what makes life worth living:

I had this strange little thought, well, maybe it's not so strange. Anyway, after I decided to do this, I would wonder, sometimes, what might keep me here, what might be worth staying for, and you know what it was? It was maybe if there was something I really liked, like maybe if I really liked rice pudding or cornflakes for breakfast or something, that might be enough. (731)

Thelma has been suggesting reasons why Jessie might be suicidal from the time Jessie first announced her plans. Finally, Jessie offers her an explanation, and Thelma overlooks its meaning. The two characters reduce life to a simple taste or distaste for rice pudding or cornflakes. Norman is telling us that the simple things in life are worth living for. Not rice pudding itself, but the ability to feel whether one likes it. Some sensation is better than feeling nothing at all.

In addition to an explanation about feelings, Jessie attempts to help Mama understand the logic behind her decision. Placed among the superficial conversations about candy, garbage bags, and manicures are metaphors such as bus stops and falling off a horse. Jessie offers a comparison to riding the bus. Here,

Norman gives the least romantic in the audience a look at the practical side of Jessie's decision. Jessie states:

I know you used to ride the bus. Riding the bus  
and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy  
and more than anything in the world you want to  
get off and the only reason in the world you don't  
get off is it's still fifty blocks from where you're  
going? Well, I can get off right now if I want to,  
because even if I ride fifty more years and get off  
then, it's the same place when I step down to it.  
Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've  
had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough.

The metaphor of horseback riding is less explicit than the bus stop. Jessie explains to Thelma that it was her father's idea to go horseback riding; therefore, he could be blamed for the accident, but she admits, "I fell off the horse because I didn't know how to hold on." A simple comment, yet one that encompasses the ideology of aloneness. For many audiences, the simplicity of the dialogue is what drives home the meaning of the play.

The timing of the play is as integral to its meaning as the dialogue. A director must carefully consider this issue before choosing to bring 'night, Mother to the stage. The scene in which timing is most crucial is the final one. The stage directions must be carefully read, for it is among these directions that Norman gives the audience its only indication that Jessie reconsiders her decision to end her life. The climactic finish begins when Jessie "vanishes into her bedroom and we hear the door lock just when Mama gets to it." Mama pounds on the door, screams, and pounds again. She stops, hears nothing, and pleads with Jessie. Then "we hear the shot and it sounds like an answer." Seconds elapse between Jessie's locking the door and pulling the trigger. The audience knows that behind Jessie's closed door, she has everything ready to take her life without hesitation. Why, then, is there so much time devoted to Mama's helpless screams? The key to this scene is not what is visible to the audience, rather what goes on behind the locked door of Jessie's bedroom. The time lapse is necessary to establish that Jessie does not want to die, but she knows no other way to lead the life of simplicity and meaning that she longs for.

The audience is made aware that Norman shares its confusion in the final stage directions of the play. Until then, the directions are mere statements of action to be addressed by the director. At the end, the directions become first person plural

as Norman includes herself among the members of the confused audience, announcing that "we hear the door lock," and "we hear the shot." Even the playwright is unable to control or alter the final result. All she can do is become a witness, as the audience members are, to the inevitable, a victim of her own aloneness. Norman seems to concede that although she is willing to address the issue, she, too, is searching for some kind of answer. Marsha Norman has succeeded in writing the first suicide note to capture the meaning of meaninglessness. She has written a cry for help that is both uttered and heard by all humankind.

**Intermission**

The curtain opens  
to a stage set for life with  
no intermission.

3

*Missing Persons*

### **Take me out of the ball game**

I planted my feet firmly on the ground. I raised my arms, weapon in hand. I bent my knees and peered out from under my disguise. I had to get him before he got me....

It was just so hot, standing there in the country sun. I felt exposed to the world, that space of earth known as Independence, Kentucky, one of those small towns where everybody knows everybody, and everyone is content to live that way. And I had accepted it until that summer day, the day I was attacked in front of the entire town and no one came to my rescue. Perhaps it wasn't their fault. They didn't mean to leave me there to suffer. They didn't even realize my life was in danger. I guess I can't hold them responsible. I can't blame them for laughing; they simply didn't understand. That's the way life was in Independence -- simple.

So, there they were in their usual meeting spot. Moms and dads, friends and neighbors, all crowded on and around the bleachers awaiting the first pitch. The Saturday morning Little League season would be over in just a couple of hours, and it was time for the Independence Braves to win first place. Sure, the team had a few



players that weren't cut out to play ball, but not to worry, Coach would just put them in for an inning or two and then leave them on the bench so the baseball stars could win the game.

I was certain the first inning would be the last I'd ever have to play. But to my great astonishment, Coach left me on the bench until the very last inning. The spectators were furious. How could he save a player who struck out every time at bat for the most crucial inning of the season? My cheeks were burning. My shoulders ached.

It was no great secret to my parents that baseball terrified me. They continued to encourage my athletic efforts, knowing that I felt under attack every time that stitched, white ball flew towards me. One more inning and it would all be over. They promised they'd never make me play again, although it would be devastating to the family's Saturday social schedule.

I stepped up to the plate, hiding under my helmet, still having to squint as I looked toward the pitcher. Just as he had all season, Coach yelled at me to relax and concentrate. And as before, it did absolutely no good. I gripped the bat tighter than anything I had ever held. I bit down hard on my tongue. I just stood to one side of the plate with legs slightly bent. I raised the bat to the sky, prepared for one, final, humiliating battle.

As always, my eyes closed as the ball came speeding in my direction. My arms swung the bat without my mind's awareness. I was graced by the familiar breeze of bat and ball cutting through the air.

Twice in a row I heard the sound of the little white demon as it safely landed in the catcher's mitt.

"Strike two!"

It was almost over. One more pitch and I'd never again stand as a target for that ball. I would no longer be the subject of disappointment for hopeful parents and sports fans. I was prepared to strike out one last time.

I knew it would be a struggle to walk away from baseball with my chin up and my jaw firm. I never anticipated that at a Little League baseball game, in the eyes of all those in my five-year-old world, even my pride would be taken from me.

Why was Coach calling a time out? Couldn't we just get this over with? The pressure of being a child athlete was more than I could bear, and I just wanted it to be over. Let's just end this as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Coach carried the devil with him as he walked toward me to give me his last words of advice. He looked to the worried parents who began to smile as they realized what he was about to do.

... Coach knelt in front of the plate. He lifted his right hand, balancing his elbow on his knee, offering the sacrifice. His only words of encouragement sounded more like a plea. He said, "Please be sure to hit the ball and not my hand."

I squinted to avoid being blinded by sunlight. As my arms began to move, my sight blurred completely.

I felt the impact.

I had struck the little demon.

I began to run, and with each step the floods came.

### Is Billy Joel A Hemingway Fan ?

Billy Joel once spoke of a remarkable woman, a woman who "takes care of herself...she never gives out, she never gives in, she just changes her mind."

Perhaps, he read Ernest Hemingway's novel The Sun Also Rises and was inspired to write a song about Brett Ashley. Regardless of his motivation, Joel sings "She's Always A Woman" as though he could be singing about no other. The verses describe Brett's relationship to the men in her life, including what she expects from them, as well as what she takes from them. The song even depicts her inability to give something back to them.

She can kill with a smile

She can wound with her eyes

She can ruin your faith with her casual lies

She only reveals what she wants you to see

She hides like a child, but she's always a woman to me

In this first verse, Joel sings about Brett's relationship to Mike. Hurt by having to witness her lustful behavior toward Pedro Romero, Mike yells obscene remarks about Brett's desires. Brett, untouched by words, ignores Mike and continues to stare at Romero. Upon asking about "the drunken one's" occupation, Romero is told that Mike hasn't got one. He just drinks away his time as he waits to marry his lady. Because Hemingway chooses to leave the emotions of his characters up to the reader, it is fair to assume that Mike realizes just how helpless he is. Brett has killed what love he may have once had for her, and he uses alcohol to care for the wound of her indifference. Mike stays with Brett despite his pain, because he has lost all faith in the beauty of love. The childlike hiding Joel refers to is apparent in Brett's behavior as she makes only a slight effort to conceal her extra-marital activities. Children tease people with their secrets, even dare people to discover them; thus, Brett torments Mike.

She can lead you to love

She can take you or leave you

She can ask for the truth, but she'll never believe you

She'll take what you give her as long as it's free

She steals like a thief, but she's always a woman to me

Joel certainly didn't overlook Brett's relationship with Robert Cohn. Upon Cohn's first meeting Brett, he is immediately taken in by her beauty. She takes advantage of his infatuation, leading him to an affair that has no potential for romance. She is accepting of his attention but gives none in return, for her sights are set on other men. With the affair behind them, Brett goes out of her way to indicate to Cohn that he is not wanted. She asks her companions, "Was I rude enough to him? My God! I'm so sick of him!" (181). Clearly, Brett disregards his love and steals his dignity.

She'll promise you more than the Garden of Eden  
 She'll carelessly cut you and laugh while you're bleeding  
 She'll bring out the best and the worst you can be  
 Blame it all on yourself 'cause she's always a woman to me

Jake Barnes is the love of Brett's life, the object of her cruelty, the self-sacrificing man who sings the song in her defense. He suffers more than any of Brett's men because she tells him she loves him, takes him right up to the edge of a life together, and then breaks his heart. There seems to be no question that Brett's love for Jake is sincere, although none of the other characters seems able to see this.

The problem is that Brett appears unable to express love in any way that might contribute to a lasting relationship. She is too fickle to settle down, especially with the man she truly loves, for fear it might ruin the fairy tale that she might one day love and be loved. All the while he accepts this, even loves her for it all the more.

Chapter XIV best describes Joel's sentiments when Jake says,

Women made such swell friends. Awfully swell. In the first place, you had to be in love with a woman to have a basis for friendship. I had been having Brett for a friend...I had been getting something for nothing...I thought I had paid for everything. Not like a woman pays and pays. (148)

Although he is not a weak man like the rest, Jake is still willing to accept the blame for the couple's inability to come together. Like Billy Joel, Jake demands that even the cruelest of women can be lovable because she carries with her a sense of adventure, a willingness to conquer the world, a passion to live to the fullest. It is this attitude, not any streak of evil, that causes her to "carelessly cut you." She is simply willing to leave people behind in order to move on to new adventures. She grows attached only to what is vibrant and alive, and she brings out that desire in others. Jake is the one man willing to accept the lows in exchange for the wonderful highs Brett offers.

Both Billy Joel and Ernest Hemingway have a way of saying, "Here she is...see her how you wish." Both artists believe that in order for the audience to get to know a character, they must be free to develop their own opinions. Joel's *Woman* and Hemingway's *Brett* are strong women who seem to be daringly sexy, loving, and emotional, and first-class bitches all at the same time. Even *Brett* herself says, "I do feel such a bitch" (184). So, see them how you wish, but they're always women to me.



## A DIFFERENT FACE IN THE MIRROR

### Cast of Characters

James Spencer:

a man in his mid 20s.

### Scene

In the living room of James and Candace's house in the suburbs.

JAMES

(very deliberate speech, slowly pacing around room)

I need some time to think about what I want. The last thing we need is our parents trying to solve this for us. We need to work it out on our own. I'm just not prepared to make a decision right now. Maybe we should spend some time apart. I still love

you; I just don't want our 25th anniversary to come along... and look back and blame you for all the things I think I missed out on...all the chances I wonder if I should've taken. I'm tired. I feel like life's passing me by and now's my chance to really live it. I never took the time to grow up. The drugs and the drinks just aren't doing the trick. I still wake up in the morning and wonder...

(pause)

Well, to be honest, I saw a young...beautiful face last night. And don't get me wrong, this is not about another woman. But she is only a few years younger than we are and still so full of life. And I began to see all that's missing from *my* life. I can't keep convincing myself that I'm just burnt out right now and this really *is* the best life for me. I've gotta do something. You're my best friend. I know you'll understand. I won't end my marriage for a pretty face, but when I look at *my* face in the mirror I just don't like the man I see.

(in anguish)

Please, say something. Tell me you understand. Tell me you hate me -- something.

Don't just sit there and stare at me like I'm some stranger.

I'll always feel guilty for hurting you. But we can't live like this. I'm sure I'll

always wonder if I'm making the right decision. But can you understand that this is

the best way? I need you to say something. We *both* got lazy. We're just not making

this marriage work anymore. I know I don't have the answers, but I'll never forgive myself if I hold you accountable for my lost goals. I thought I knew what I wanted. I keep trying to convince myself there's hope. And maybe, there *was* a time when we could've reached our goals together, but I think we missed our chance.

What happened to us? What do we do now?

(takes a deep breath and yells into the next room)

Candace, can you come in here for a minute?

**'Til Death Do Us Part**

Behind closed eyes I replay the image of  
two lovers offering promises in exchange for  
circular symbols of a golden future.

Passionate eyes gaze upon one another in  
faithful surrender of soul and body to  
fairy tales of happiness ever after.

Turned cold long before death are  
the roses, rainbows, and sunsets under which  
we closed our eyes to separate lives.

**After Arthur Miller's Fall**

You loved us all  
And gave us willing  
to failure  
and to death  
that you might live  
as we gave you  
and gave each other  
with a word,  
a trick,  
a truth,  
a lie —  
and all in love!  
I don't want what you've given me.

Take your love,  
your wisdom.  
Leave me to *my* people  
that they might follow me  
when I give *myself* to death.  
Death doesn't threaten  
those who live  
in true love.  
Your love is black  
and cold,  
invading  
hearts and minds,  
conquering  
the passionate surrender  
of truth  
replacing them with empty words.  
Tricks and lies --  
that is your love.

I didn't ask for you to love me.  
It was you who told me  
Being loved  
"Is like owing for a gift  
You didn't ask for."  
I didn't ask.  
I owe you nothing.  
The gift of betrayal  
is not one I wish to return.  
How could I ever repay you  
for placing in my hand  
the weapons  
with which a heart  
turns cold?  
So, I too, may be a murderer  
of passion  
and love.  
In return for the life

you have offered,

I offer you this --

I dare you --

Take your own advice --

"Do the hardest thing of all --

See your own hatred and live!"

adapted from Arthur Miller's After the Fall



4

*The Day After  
New Year's Eve*

### Is It Worth Dying For ?

They're making me write this. I told them it was stupid. I have absolutely nothing to say to a piece of paper that I can't just say out loud.

"No, you can't skip this activity. You'll appreciate it later when you have a better understanding of your life and where it's going."

This is such b.s. My life is going nowhere and I'm stuck in this hospital like some kind of psycho. All I can say is, I'm just sorry I screwed up. If only I'd taken a few more pills or found some that were a little bit stronger.

They keep telling us to try to answer the questions our families first asked, "Why would you want to kill yourself? You have everything. What's so bad that it's worth dying for?"

How in the hell am I supposed to answer a question like that? All I know is I want to get out of this damn place. We're supposed to date the pages each time we write in this stupid book, but why bother? I don't plan on writing much anyway.

March 02, 1991

Sure, I'll humor them. I'm sick to death of getting bitched at about this damned journal. This is the worst time of my life. Why the hell would I want to write it down? I don't want to read and reread about how I was a total failure. But unless I'm willing to deal with my problems, they can't help me solve them. What bullshit. If I couldn't help me, what makes them think they can?

May 18, 1991

I don't know when I last wrote. It was some time back in the beginning of March. I've been in this place since the first of January. That's when it happened. New Year's Eve. The beginning of a brand new year. I just didn't think I could face another year of the same hell.

Maybe they're right. Maybe I am learning something about myself. We had another group session this morning, but this one was different. I really opened up for the first time. Somehow, just talking about the loneliness made it hurt a little less. I know that feeling won't ever go away, but they say they can help me find "more constructive ways to deal with it."

June 20, 1991

Great news! I'm getting out of here! On July 1st, I get to go home. I think I'm ready to face the real world again. They really encourage continuing the journal after we get out of here. They say it's a good release of emotions and I hate to admit that I'm beginning to agree. I don't try to take my emotions out on my body like I used to. And somehow everything is safe when I write it down. No one has to read it, so no one will laugh or be worried or anything. My friends are what's on my mind most. It's still hard sometimes to resist the temptation to blame them for my being here. If only they'd paid a little more attention to me or something. I know it's not their fault, but it's easier to think that way than to analyze my emotions in search of an answer I can't find. How can I answer people when they ask "Why?" if I don't know myself?

June 31, 1991

My parents are sending me to the country to live with my grandparents for a while. They agreed that this is the best thing for me even though the doctor said I'm ready to go back to living my life. Of course, nobody asked me how I feel about it. Sure, I'm scared. I'm not sure I really want to face my classmates or anyone else. I'm not positive I'm ready for all the questions, but I need to go home. Even if psychiatric care helped me cope in a lot of ways, it didn't give me the answers to the questions or give me any guarantee that life will be easy when I get out. But I still want to go home.

All I know is that I will need lots of support and I'm not sure who to expect it from. I spent six months under constant supervision because I couldn't handle being alone, and they send me out to the middle of nowhere. They expect me to spend my new freedom, my new life, completely cut off from the world I knew. Am I the only one who realizes the world isn't going to change? I'm finally ready to live in it the way it is. They're just not ready to stop protecting me and let me try again. Don't they understand how lucky I am to get a second chance? If I've learned anything, it's just how precious and short life is. I don't want to waste any more time hiding from it.

July 15, 1991

Writing is the only way to preserve the progress I made until mom and dad let me come home. My favorite place to write is a small island out in the middle of the deepest part of the lake. It's about a five-minute walk from my grandparents' house

through the woods and out to the old whitewashed bridge that leads to the island.

My grandparents don't like me going out there. They think it's dangerous, "especially for someone who doesn't care if she lives or dies. I thought they taught you something at that hospital, and now you're just daring that bridge to give way..." They also complain that the island is too secluded and they can't keep an eye on me from the front porch when I wander so far away. "Wouldn't you rather stay where you're close by, in case you need anything?"

But I come out here anyway because I've finally found a place that's special to me, where no one will bother me. Where people aren't always waiting for me to mess up or watching for signs that indicate I'm falling back into old patterns. How can I not show signs of loneliness when I'm not allowed to be near anyone but my grandparents anyway?

July 21, 1991

On days when the sun shines bright, there is one small spot where it shines through the trees and sparkles on the olive-green water. There is one plank on the bridge that makes a perfect place to sit and watch my reflection in the green glow. I could spend hours just watching the water and imagining what it would be like to fall in love and go to parties and dances like other teenagers. I never had a problem attracting guys; it's keeping them that's the problem. The slight ripple of the water reflects things a mirror never could. I was unsteady, unsure of what I wanted. But now, those green eyes that blend right into the water are so much more sure of themselves. I'm no longer scared to go on. I'm ready to try again -- to make the best of another chance at living.

August 3, 1991

Yesterday, while I was sitting on the bridge, a startling noise sounded in the woods. In my fright, I fell into the water but was able to swim a few strokes to the shore. A strong, gentle hand reached down to pull me ashore. Shivering in the shade of the trees, I suffered mixed feelings about this strange young man who had invaded my island. But before I could deal with my irritation, I first had to overcome the unrelenting cold of the water. It had been so comforting as I watched it from the bridge, and now it turned against me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was anyone out here. Not too many people crazy enough to use this old bridge."

I quickly accepted his apology and asked what he was doing there. He offered an explanation about how his parents think it's such a nice vacation for him to spend some time with his aunt and uncle for a week or two every summer.

"Given a choice, I don't think this would be my vote for best vacation spot ever, but I like to blow up my raft and float around out here where it's so quiet and peaceful. A guy needs some time to be alone and think once in a while."

I knew eventually I would have to tell him why I was visiting the lake, but I put off mentioning my emotional problems because I wasn't quite sure how to work that into a conversation with a total stranger.

I soon discovered that we were a lot alike. We both felt so alone and came to this little island to find the strength to keep going. We talked and talked, and it wasn't long before I found myself talking freely about the events that brought me here. It was so comforting to find someone other than a doctor who seemed truly interested in what I had to say. In this one stranger, I feel like I have found a big

part of what was missing just a year ago when I was surrounded by people.

When we parted for the day as the sun began slipping over the trees, I felt that life has finally begun again. I don't feel so alone anymore.

August 7, 1991

Yesterday was darker than usual, so I started for the island early. I hoped to have some company before the storm came. I don't really know what happened. All I can remember is being out in the boat when it tipped over and my foot got caught in the rope tied around it. I tried to yank my foot free until I just didn't have any energy left to pull. The next thing I remember is waking up with half my body on the island while my legs dangled in the cold water. I looked up and first saw her notebook on the bridge; then I saw...in the water... I recovered what little energy I could and pulled the body onto the island. Then I ran for help.

This rain-drenched notebook is all I have left. I can't thank her for saving my life, but I hope she found the answer to her question -- some things are worth dying for.

**EPITAPH**

Here lies the body of  
Nicole Hodson,  
fertilizer of truth:  
at times the consistency  
no more than mulch,  
other times specially  
blended for the ideal effect,  
sprinkled in clumps,  
evenly spread,  
used to sprout beauty,  
suffocated in vanity.  
Even now,  
nourishing the soil,



pushing up life  
to be experienced  
by those who reap  
that which has grown.  
born July 19, 1975  
...And again every day since

## **BUT HE NEEDS ME**

### Cast of Characters

Amanda: a woman in her mid 20s, living with her father in a northern city.

Ryan: a family friend, early 20s, from same city

### Scene

Amanda's house. The scene opens with Ryan following a very upset Amanda into the family room.

AMANDA

(trying to stay calm)

I need to be there for him. It'll only take a few hours to get there...

RYAN

(also trying to stay calm, for Amanda's sake)

A few hours?! Are you crazy! You know it's a 12-hour drive. Besides, there's no reason for you to go.

AMANDA

But, he needs me.

RYAN

This is exactly why we waited to tell you. I knew if I told you sooner, you'd've done something drastic -- drink yourself to death or get in your car and start driving down there.

AMANDA

I think I'm taking this rather calmly, don't you?

RYAN

Yes,...

AMANDA

(interrupting him)

But I still think I should be there.

RYAN

Maybe we should just have a drink. It'll do you good to relax a little.

AMANDA

Good idea. A double shot of vodka. So, how long have you known about this?

RYAN

About a week now. I tried to get your dad to tell you, but he thought you'd take it better coming from me.

AMANDA

Well, is he going to be okay? I mean how long will it be before I can go visit? Or at least call?

RYAN

The doctors don't know yet. It was such a freak accident that no one really knows what to expect.

(proceeds with apprehension)

But, I'll call every day and let you know how he is. I'll call as soon as he wakes...

AMANDA

Wait a minute. You mean you're going down there without me? Like hell! I'm going with you.

RYAN

Amanda, there's no need for you to go. Besides, I already got my plane ticket. I'm leaving tonight. They've got an awful lot of morphine in him right now, so he's not

fully conscious yet. And they're not letting anybody but his parents in to see him. You just don't need to be there.

AMANDA

(ignoring him)

I can't believe you guys weren't going to tell me. How the hell do you think I feel being the last one to find out? Are you sure I shouldn't be there? for his family?

RYAN

(turning from cautious to harsh)

Does his family even know who you are? No one knew you two were even...

AMANDA

(stung by his words, becoming defensive)

Okay. That's enough. You're the one who took me down there and introduced me to this wonderful friend of yours. You encouraged us. We fell for each other. Can you blame us for making the most of our time together?

RYAN

Is that what you call what you two have done? Making the most of your time? There's a wonderful little boy in there (he points to a room off stage)...I'm sorry I introduced you to Matt, I really am.

AMANDA

Well, you did. And he's Jordan's father. And as soon as he could save a little money and find a house he was going to...

(trails off as she begins to cry softly)

He needs me to be there. His parents -- they can meet their grandson. You know, a happy moment in the middle of all this suffering. Someone to carry on their name if Matt should happen to...

RYAN

Mand,

(pause)

he never told them he had a son. He never planned to. I don't think he ever wanted to play daddy. Never.

AMANDA

(in a quiet, deep voice)

I need another drink.

RYAN

I'm sorry, Amanda. Being a dad just isn't for Matt.

AMANDA

How can you sit here and defend him. You're telling me he doesn't love me or his son and you think that's okay?

RYAN

I'm not saying it's okay. It's definitely not okay. But he could be dying right now and we've been friends too long for me not to be there. But he doesn't need you. He wouldn't want you there.

AMANDA

(reacting bitterly to Ryan's meanness)

How the hell do you know? Or is this just one more thing no one had the courage to tell me? Damn it, I think it's time they know the whole story.

RYAN

Amanda, now is not the time. His parents are worried enough without you telling them about Jordan.

AMANDA

They need to know why he was up here last summer. They need to know he was with me, with his newborn son. I want Jordan to know who his grandparents are. I want him to believe his father loves him....And I need to see Matt.

RYAN

That's just it. *You* need to see Matt. Matt does not need to see you. And his family definitely doesn't need to see Jordan.

AMANDA

But what if he doesn't make it? I don't want to wait 'til his funeral...

RYAN

Don't. Just let me go down there.

AMANDA

(trying to move toward the door)

I'm going.

RYAN

(trying to restrain her)

No, you're not. Don't be stupid.

AMANDA

Get out of my way.

RYAN

There's no reason for you to be there...

AMANDA

He needs me.

RYAN

You can't help him. There's nothing you can do...



AMANDA

Jordan needs a father.

RYAN

(softly as though talking to himself)

Jordan has a father.

AMANDA

(ignoring his comment, getting past him and running out the door)

He needs me...

RYAN

(running out the door behind her)

Amanda, don't do this...Amanda, come back. I want to be Jordan's dad. Amanda, I love you. I love Jordan. Matt's always been one of my best friends, but he's no dad.

AMANDA

(turning back toward him with tears in her eyes, coming to a realization)

How could you possibly love me for all the things I've done? Matt and I deserve each other. We're the same kind of people, you know. We were just playing at being in love. But we don't deserve love. And Jordan...I'm not a parent any more than Matt. How will I ever take care of Jordan?

RYAN

(goes to her and puts his arms around her)

Jordan is not the only one who needs to be taken care of. I'll take care of both of you. Haven't I always?

**Raindrop**

On the window pane

A single drop of silver

Glistens in the gloom