

As the Night the Day: Two One-Act Plays

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ABSTRACT

As the Night the Day

Elise Newman

The two one-act plays presented here explore the lengths to which one will go to justify one's worth.

Through acts of emulation, the characters in *Virginia* and *Raven for a Lark* attempt to discover their own identity and rationalize their questionable actions. Following in the footsteps of childhood heroes or fictional figures, they cling to unrealistic images. Nevertheless, they push themselves to physical, moral, geographical, and artistic limits in the view of discovering and justifying their place in the world. Through intertextual allusions to Shakespeare, picture books, and travel accounts, these plays explore the sources and forces of inspiration, motivation, and agency.

Loneliness and yearning for connection are expressed through monologue form; the speakers reach out to the audience and to absent characters but are ultimately alone on stage, observed and judged.

To thine own self be true,
and it must follow, as the night the day,
thou canst not then be false to any man.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (I.iii.78-80)

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VIRGINIA

Virginia Aldridge, grade 1, stands in front of her class:

VIRGINIA. Mary Kingsley is my hero because she was brave and did things no one else did. By Virginia Aldridge, room 104.

In 1895, Mary Kingsley the Great Explorer collected fish and reptiles in West Africa for the British Museum. A reptile is a cold-blooded vertebrate that has scales and no hair. Example: crocodiles. There are twenty-three species of crocodiles.

Mary's parents died tragically of old age in 1892. That made her free from family responsibilities and so she could go to Africa and collect specimens and see places no European had seen before and she got typhoid and changed the world's view of Africa.

Blackout.

Lights up on a hotel room in Douala, Cameroon. On the nightstand, there is a phone (and price list/dialling instructions). Inside the nightstand drawer there is a Bible and a can of insecticide spray. Above the bed hangs a mosquito net tied in a knot.

Virginia, now in her early 20s, lies facedown on the bed.

I should have gone to BC and planted trees. That would be just as...

She sits up and wipes the sweat (and tears?) off her face.

There'd be just as many mosquitoes there probably. And I'd have to wait for spring.

And *everyone* goes to BC. Besides, that's Greg's thing. Makes him feel so...tough, coming home in the fall all burned and buff and smug. With stories.

So no. Africa! And not Egypt. *Jungle-Africa*. *Sub-Saharan Africa*. Like I wanted when I was six and mum gave me the picture book of Mary Kingsley the Great Explorer.

(Unconvinced) This is awesome.

I'm going to do what she did. Climb Mount Cameroon. Paddle along lagoons in pirogues. Tackle a crocodile.

Free from family responsibilities. Collect fish. Go places. Get typhoid. Change the world's view of Africa.

I can do that. Without the typhoid bit, if the vaccine works. Live attenuated strain salmonella typhi Ty21a.

I doubt they have typhoid in Douala, anyway. Do they? Douala. The city of vowels. Douala Cameroon. Dooooaaaaalaaaa. Caaaamerooooon. Sounded pretty before I got here.

I've got to get out of here.

Because this is not how it was supposed to be.

Right now I'm supposed to be in a mangrove swamp or... I should be sleeping right now, resting up for my adventures.

She swats a mosquito and gets up to untie the net above her bed. It doesn't give.

She finds her malaria pills and pops one. She reads the script:

“Take one tablet daily for three days, then once weekly thereafter. At any signs of mental distress or aggression stop immediately. Mefloquine 250 mg.”

Soon I'll be... I could be on the Coanza river. In a convenient canoe.

Paddling along in my pirogue, paddling down the lagoon...

She sings:

“I wish I had a river I could skate away on. I wish I had a river so long I could fly...”

Pause.

“They're putting up reindeer and singing songs of joy and peace... Oh I wish...”

She collapses.

Maybe Dad was right. I should never have come here.

She curls up and tries to sleep. It's too hot and she's too upset. She tries to pull herself together.

Why are tears hot? If they're going to dehydrate you, they should at least work to cool you down. It's too hot.

Beat.

I don't think it's ever been so hot in February anywhere ever before. Twenty-four hours ago I was freezing my butt off just running from my front door to the cab.

At home it's pelting snow. Got out just in time. Got out of frozen February.

Blowing snow. No visibility. Black ice and wind chills.

Nothing can survive in this cold. Hearts freeze solid and roads become slick frozen rivers and everything is still and quiet and out of control at the same time.

February is good for recklessly breaking hearts. Greg, you couldn't be more obvious or lazy: Valentine's Day. And there's that breaking something frozen, like frozen right through, is easy. It just splinters and shatters into pieces. Here, Greg, take it.

She takes her 'heart' and smashes it on the floor.

Schling! Maybe you couldn't handle the stillness. If it was this hot in February at home, no way would you have thought I was boring. We wouldn't have been forced apart by flannel PJs and you would have felt me. Feel this sweat? See? Something's

going on. If it hadn't been so damn cold, maybe you would have noticed. And I wouldn't have had to buy this plane ticket and Mum wouldn't have picked me up and skidded down the highway frozen river and crashed the car and ended up head-first in a coma. I wouldn't have had to leave. And I wouldn't be here.

Beat.

Here where it's hot. Where things can move. Where the molecules aren't frozen cold solid trembling waiting to shatter; here they move and jump and change. Here no one's even heard of zero visibility due to blowing snow. Here things are clear and bright. Here you can see things clearly.

In a Douala street. She blinks into the sun.

Except the sun is blinding and there's heat shimmering off of cars and the pavement so you can't make anything out. My skin is winter-pasty-white. And the dust (blows into my eyes). This air is just... rude. And my sweat is like glue.

– Excuse-moi, excusez-moi, je... cherche la station des policiers?

I look like an idiot in my new Texas.

– S'il-vous-plaît ?

This woman rushes past me with her gaggle of children following like ducklings in the dust. (*Under her breath*) A group of ducks is... a team. A paddling. A raft of ducks.

– S'il-vous-plaît, la gendarmerie?

The biggest boy looks back at me: *(points)* That way.

—This way?

His mother grabs him: don't talk to strangers! —the international rule of suspicion, of self-preservation.

I'm the stranger...

Virginia looks around, lost.

This can't be normal. The chaos and rushing... The rushing *away*. It's the middle of the day and the streets are getting emptier. The stands along the road, where they sell things, maybe, they're all shut up behind corrugated tin. All this screams: "not normal!"

But I have to be responsible. I have to find the gendarmerie. They said in the guidebook, they said I need to register with the police. I have to fill out this form and they will stamp it and put it in a folder and put it in a file cabinet and keep me safe.

Stamp the form and put it away.

—Excusez!... Monsieur? La gendarmerie?

Right there?

I cross the street and go into the police station, right into a hornet's hive. Policemen squirming around, yelling, sweating, in and out, in and out, shooting me stinging glances.

They've all got massive guns.

A policeman approaches.

He seems to say:

(as policeman) – No time for you.

She holds out a piece of paper.

– J'ai besoin... validation.

He puts my form on his desk. Not in a folder. A paper among papers. He doesn't stamp it. It's not even stamped. I pay the administration fee and he sends me off.

(as policeman) – Go to hotel, miss.

It's so hot but I run. It's too weird. I run and try to look unsuspecting. Because they have guns and they seem... suspicious.

But running is a very suspicious activity. Running away, especially. Dad would have something to say about that. Running away. Running. In the heat.

She can't breathe properly.

I'm running away. I am not, I am not, I am not. The hotel. The lobby smells like laundry. Hot and humid and fresh. And my room smells like...

She is back in her hotel room, she vomits.

Maybe dad was right.

No, I'm not running away from anything. What would I be running from? If anything, people are running away from me. They're dumping me or crashing into comas or just... being all different.

And I know, I know that the world has changed and that I won't find what the Great Explorer Mary Kingsley found there a hundred years ago. I know that. I know that Africa has changed. Several times.

Which is also the point: do something no one has done before. No one has seen *this*, exactly as this is right now. And what would be the point if it was predictable and reliable?

And I should see it for myself.

Besides, Cameroon's super safe. It's supposed to be. Except...

I wanted to see it for myself, the gorillas and crocodiles, the mountain. Mount Cameroon. It's meant to become soft green and gold at sunset. And it has indigo thunder clouds and rose vapours, depending.

But no rose vapours here. And all I'm seeing is...

Beat, as she looks around.

Adventure...

No no no, this is cool.

Ready for adventure. Ready to take on all these transport strikes and burning cars and contentious constitutional amendments. And...

She sees a cockroach on the floor near her bed. She freezes.

Cockroach!

She hides behind her big backpack. After a few moments, she looks up from behind it and rocks to one side to have a look at the floor. She stares for a moment, then gasps and snaps herself back upright.

Still there.

She freaks out and searches for something to kill the cockroach with. She finds the Bible in the nightstand. But she doesn't smash the cockroach with it—she opens it and reads it:

“Si vous aviez de la foi comme un grain de moutarde, vous diriez à cette montagne:

Transporte-toi d'ici là, et elle se transporterait; rien ne vous serait impossible.”

Aviez... avoir. To have. If you have...faith like a grain of mustard? Really?

You...you say to the mountain: transport you here to there. And she—it?—the mountain (right) will transport itself...

Holy.

If you have faith like a little bit of mustard, say to that mountain “transport yourself” and it will transport itself and nothing will be impossible.

To the cockroach:

Transport yourself!

Beat.

“Transporte-toi d’ici là!”

Beat.

Thanks for nothing, Matthew.

She jumps up on the bed and, standing, grabs the phone.

Je... Il y a... *(Looking for the word:)* cockroach cockroach cockroach... Insecte.

COCKROACH. *(a tiny voice)* Coquerelle.

Stunned beat.

COCKROACH. Cafard.

Silence. In the corner of her eye, she sees the can of insecticide on the nightstand.

Very slowly, she puts the phone down and, very quickly, grabs the can of insecticide.

VIRGINIA. Ah ha!

COCKROACH. Fumigène?

VIRGINIA. “Big blow super spray insect killer”!

COCKROACH. Non! Pitié!

She sprays the heck out of that cockroach. It coughs.

VIRGINIA. Die! Why won't you die? Give in!

One last spray. Cockroach coughs and faints.

VIRGINIA. What the hell am I doing here?

Virginia swats a couple of mosquitoes and runs to the bathroom to throw up, well avoiding the cockroach on the floor. She comes back out.

(Disappointed) But dinner was really good. I wanted to keep that in me.

The fish is good, grilled over coals like that. Dad would like it. It's really cheap.

She finds her journal.

Put that in the 'pro' column.

She writes:

"Dinner equals good."

Throughout the following, we can hear loud footsteps in the hall, some knocking on doors, some angry voices. "Non, mais tu l'as trouvé ou pas? Il est où ce mec? On va l'avoir."

I should have stopped in London. They have fish and chips. They speak English.

The fish is better here probably. At that little restaurant next door. It's really pretty good. That's a positive thing.

I should learn how to cook. I could become a cook; start a little restaurant back home on King Street. I'd make exotic recipes that I picked up on my travels around the world. And mum will be fine and she can make her Nanaimo bars...

Beat (and a precarious silence in the hall).

She'll be fine.

Beat.

Aren't fish supposed to make you smarter? With all their long-chain omega-3 fatty acids?

But everything is all wobbly and complicated. I can't break it down.

Why can't I sleep?

She checks her watch.

If it's 8:25 in Toronto, then it's (she counts on her fingers) nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen twenty-five... 2:25 in the morning... tomorrow. I'm stuck in the future.

There is a loud knock—is it at her door? She freezes and waits for the footsteps to become fainter and she relaxes a bit.

Maybe I just need to wait for time to catch up and then I'll actually be able to get off this bed, march out there and up that mountain and then back down again and find a river I can paddle away on. If the minibuses to the mountain start running again, if it's safe to go out, that's exactly what I'll do.

Definitely. Because there's no way I've come this far just to fumigate one cockroach and then... nothing.

No way.

Mary Kingsley did not spend weeks on a boat and then nothing. No, I'm fine. I may not have collected a great variety of fish or reptiles or changed the world's view of Africa. Not yet. But I do have... what do I have?

One film canister of dirt from the side of the road. Douala, Cameroon, 2008.

One flower, *Crinum humilis*. Maybe. Some sort of amaryllis. Origin: front garden, Hotel Elephant, Douala. Current condition: flattened and drying between the pages of Lonely Planet West Africa guide, copyright 2006. Not bad time-ratio wise.

I didn't leave everything and ruin everything only to...

I had to leave. Despite what Dad said.

(as her father) – You'll kill your mother if you leave now.

– Me leaving is insignificant.

(as her father) – You're a selfish needy bitch.

– She's in a coma. She's in a coma and even if she can hear us, even if she knows full well that I'm leaving and feels annoyed, what does it change? I've already done the damage. I already have my plane ticket.

And look: I can't be counted on. I am unreliable! Unpredictable!

Ha, see? I'm here! So Greg, that makes me less "boring and predictable," doesn't it?... I was spontaneous. Bet you didn't see it coming that I'd skimp out on rent and just *phit* fly to Africa. Who's so predictable now, Gregooey?

This is great... this is great... Following dreams.

She stands on the edge of the bed and announces to the world:

I'm following my dreams!

She goes to do a little dance but slips and falls off the edge of the bed and onto the floor in a pathetic heap.

Dance like no one's watching. Screw that.

Beat.

Mum said to always act as if she was watching. And just by saying that, she sort of made it true. Kept me from swearing and getting drunk off my face. Kept me thinking about when to say "stop" and "I don't need drugs, I'm high on life" or whatever... Kept me guilty, maybe.

She never helped me *do* anything. Just *not* do things.

(Very deliberately:) Hell. Fuck. Fucking Hell.

Beat.

And but now? Now that she's in a coma...in limbo no-man's-land... Maybe she really *is* watching. Maybe when all your other senses shut down, you develop the sixth one.

Extra-sensorial perception.

Is she watching?

Are you, mum?

Beat.

I'd call Dad. I would. But he has no idea how to act, you know? How're we supposed to be okay if you... You can't stay like this. Not alive, not dead. You have to pick one and go with it.

Dad thinks it's my fault. It is my fault. He blames me. For Greg dumping me on the coldest day of the year. For the cold, for the icy road. Mum? I wouldn't have called you if I knew the roads were so bad.

(On the phone:) – Mum? Can you pick me up?

I wouldn't have asked.

– I don't have any money for the train. I'm... no, I'm fine. No, it's maxed out, mum.

I'm not irresponsible, I just spent it all on a ticket to Africa. Mum! Come on!

Pathetic. I didn't even have enough quarters for the payphone. Had to use the travel agent's phone. Helpless. And you asked too many questions.

– I can't ask Greg. Because Greg and I... I can't. Because! ... Stop. I'm going to Cameroon. ... Stop, please, please, mum, I need you.

But I didn't know... I didn't mean all this to go like this.

February recklessly breaks hearts. It was so cold.

(As her mum, at the wheel:) My daughter is a selfish, needy bitch.

She 'drives', angry, teary for a moment. There are sounds of whistling winter wind, squealing breaks, then a car crash.

Black ice. Breaks. Into the truck. Black ice. Black out. And not waking up. And not waking up. And not waking up.

She squashes the cockroach into the carpet. The sounds stop.

You have to wake up. You've got to.

Beat. She tries to untie the net: the mosquitoes are getting annoying.

Maybe I can bring this heat back to Ontario. In my luggage, bring the heat and the sun and warm you up and wake you up.

Ergh, (*she grabs her throat*) that taste... The orange juice on the plane...

You know those mini plastic cups of orange juice covered in aluminium foil—I didn't know they existed anywhere but in the hospital. They have them on planes, though.

For 3 am breakfast.

Stomach pH all fucked up. SPAFU.

Beat.

You know Nurse Have-A-Juice? Every time I visited you she forced those on me like I was a hypoglycaemic six-year-old. She felt so nauseatingly sorry for me.

She has that voice... "Oh, you poor poor darling. Have a juice. You're such a good daughter to come visit all on your own every day."

I'm not a good daughter. You know that.

But I had no choice. Dad wasn't there.

And you're my mum. Even if you're lying there half-dead (*correcting herself*) half-alive, with like, bits of car shrapnel in your face, you're still my mum...

And it's not that Dad doesn't care... He would have come right away but he didn't know. There's no phone up at the lodge.

He's hunting down little snow birds and you're lying there, dying. Perpetually dying and not dying. You have to pick one.

Helpless.

(as nurse Have-a-Juice:) – Everything will be fine!

Liar. Nurse Have-a-Juice never actually said “everything will be fine.” But she could have. She would have said something fake and liarish like that if it wasn’t so obvious that not everything would be fine.

And it’s not that I don’t care.

Mum? You’ll be fine. Mum?

Beat.

Never mind

Over and out.

Beat.

I’d feel it, if she were dead.

She gets up on her bed and tries to un-knot the mosquito net that hangs above the bed. She swats away a mosquito, finds her malaria pills and takes one.

Fuck you malaria. Get away!

Argh, mosquitoes. So tiny and delicate, they probably don't realise that a tiny pinprick, a little gulp of blood can kill an entire person. I bet they'd keep sucking even if they knew what they were doing. I bet.

Probably the most terrifying thing, malaria-mosquitoes. More than a scorpion. More than a hyena, even. More than a gorilla, definitely. Mary Kingsley thought gorillas were the more terrifying animal. She said it was because of their hideousness of appearance. I feel sorry for ugly things, not afraid of them. Ugly-looking things. Gorillas, they're very human. And humans...

I want to see a gorilla. A massive one. Ten feet tall. Ugly.

She is still trying to unknot the mosquito net.

Anopheles gambiae. A malaria-yellow-fever-dengue-fever-mosquito. A human in a hot humid climate comes across hundreds of deadly mosquitoes every day without even thinking about it. They aren't ugly. But they are pretty deadly. We should be afraid.

So cockroaches are... relatively magnificent. Relatively.

She goes to her cockroach and crouches down. Her disgust and fear melt away, replaced by fascination (morbid or scientific- hard to tell).

Just like a gooey dried leaf. Exoskeleton. Vestigial wings. Easily crushed.

COCKROACH. Je suis foutue.

Beat.

VIRGINIA. Her face was crushed. Bits of glass and metal bits cutting into her skin. I would know if she was... She's my mum. I'd know, I'd feel it if she died.

To the cockroach.

I could have let you be... I'm sorry I fumigated and crushed you. And now you're going to be missed and... I'm sorry. I thought cockroaches couldn't die. I thought it was scientifically proved. But of course you can.

She scoops the carcass into a film canister and pops on the lid. The cockroach sings a few bars from an African funeral song.

You are gone but not forgotten. *Requiem in pace.*

A moment of silence. Virginia slides the coffin under the bed.

I would feel it if she was dead... I would.

I should call Dad. He might be worried. He's probably sitting there, in that sickly green chair, looking at her disfigured, half-dead... "keeping vigil," embracing the burden.

He might be wondering if I'm still alive too. Maybe he thinks I've been attacked by a gorilla already.

But what would he say if I called? All he'll have to say is "I told you so" and I'd say... what would I say? And then he'd say "You're killing your mother, you selfish needy bitch" or... I don't know. Maybe he'd say: "Go and climb that mountain!" Or "Come home." Home.

She picks up the phone. There's a price-list on the nightstand. She checks it out.

13 500 CFA is like (*she calculates*) \$30. Per minute. For the USA. Probably the same for Canada.

She puts the phone and price list back. No way she's spending that much on her first night. There are noises from the hallway: they are back. There is banging into walls and rushed footsteps, a few swear words.

If I believed in God... Right now would probably be an appropriate time to pray.

She sits, petrified, until a door slams and it is quiet again.

I wonder if... I wonder if I did pray, even if I don't believe, I wonder if my prayers could still be transmitted... Would Dad be able to hear if I prayed... into like, thin air? Or would it be like a tree falling in the forest with no one there to hear it timber? Prayers might actually need that God-mediator-middle-man. Although telepathy... that might make more sense, scientifically. Like ESP.

She goes into a 'meditative' position, cross-legged, eyes closed...

Dad? Father? Heavenly Father. Are you there, God? It's me Virginia. No, seriously. Daddy, if you can hear me, can you um, can you call me? I need to talk to you. The number here is...

She opens her eyes, peeks at the hotel card, and is about to read out the number when the electricity fails and the lights go out.

Oh my god. It's ok. It's ok. *(trying to calm down)* Breathe. Interphase prophase metaphase anaphase telophase. Interphase prophase metaphase anaphase telophase. King Philip Came Over for Good Sex. Kingdom Phylum Class Order Genus Species. $p^2+2pq+q^2=1$ Um. "Species don't evolve, populations evolve." Interphase prophase metaphase...

The lights flick back on.

Thank god.

Beat.

Species don't evolve...

So no way in hell can an individual evolve. I know that, no matter what Lamarck says.

And still I expect people to evolve as, just as human beings. Greg won't ever grow out of being so... self-centred. He won't, I don't know, grow some sort of backbone.

Natural selection should really *unselect* you if you're the kind of guy who can be totally devoted to someone for three years and then just not say a word when someone's mum is in hospital... even if you're broken up. Even if you just broke up, you say something.

Greg... didn't.

And Dad too. Not a word. Mum's supposed to be the one in the coma. But he's become like a shell-less mollusc. And mute. What is that? Devolution? Regression? Because by definition evolution can't go backwards.

He doesn't even have a survival instinct now. Not for himself, anyway. I know he can't suddenly grow a new shell, but just, like, a thicker skin would be...nice.

Beat.

I'm sure he worries. He must. I mean, he's supposed to protect me. Fix my fuck-ups.

He shouldn't *need* me.

The lights flicker.

Hey! No!

They stay on. Yelling and loud noises come from the hall. Someone bangs aggressively on her door. Panicked, she grabs the price list (for the dialling instructions) and phone and dials a (long) series of numbers. She waits, swatting mosquitoes away then:

Dad? Hi... One sec... This is costing me thirty bucks a... I... Dad. Stop. Dad! Lis—
Dad!...

She hangs up.

I'm fine!

She pops another malaria pill and starts packing a daypack decisively, quickly, muttering:

I'm fine here... Thanks for asking. Besides, things always look better in the morning, don't they? "Tomorrow is a new day with no mistakes in it." No, you're right, I should be at home. But listen, I've got things I've got to do here. I'm catching a bus at the first

light. First sign of morning, and I'm catching a bus to the mountain. And if the transport strike is still on, I'll just, I'll just hitchhike. No problem.

I'm no help to anyone back home anyway. Just sitting there, a sponge for all your blame.

A reminder of the reasons why she's lying there like a cyborg: half car shrapnel and ventilators, half my mum.

It should be easier to be lonely and alone here than lonely in that hospital room. I thought it would be...

First sign of light.

She goes to the window and opens the curtains. The dim light of sunrise streams in.

Already. Rose vapours...

She goes back to packing and finds a box of granola bars (she's surprise to find it— she did not pack it). She eats a granola bar, pops another malaria pill, and straps on her backpack. It will stay on her back for the rest of the play.

She goes to leave the room but she hears urgent, heavy footsteps in the hall and stops herself. Beat. She cautiously opens the door a crack. The cry of a massive (angry) gorilla sounds in the hall. Virginia slams the door shut.

No, I don't need to get out of here. I'm here! Douala Cameroon West Africa. I'm here.

And I don't need to get out of here to... have an adventure. No one will know.

She jumps up onto her bed.

Paddling down the lagoon. ... No, this is stupid.

Beat. She looks around.

But... are you watching? Mum?

She shakes off this idea.

(She sings:) "Wish I had a river I could skate (correcting herself) paddle away on..."

That's good.

Right. Paddling down the lagoon in my canoe. In my canoe, on the river, all by myself.

No one. No one looking at me. No one to crash into. I'll observe how the tide hides, then reveals, the riverbanks. See how the high-water covers the mangroves' roots, and then, when the water goes down, shows off the mangrove roots.

Like hands reaching into the watery ground. A tangle of fingers all spread out.

Reaching...

It begins to rain. Mosquitoes swarm her. She swats and slaps in an increasingly frenetic and panicked dance. We hear sounds of violence coming from outside: cars colliding, people yelling, gun shots...

Virginia finally manages to untie the mosquito net and wraps herself in it like a cocoon. Silence. There she stays, calming herself down.

Interphase prophase metaphase anaphase telophase. King Philip Came Over for
Good Sex.

A crocodile slides out from under the bed. After a beat, she peeks out.

Is that a crocodile?

She slowly comes out of the mosquito net.

It is! A fine specimen. Approx. four metres long. Dark olive brown. Probably
juvenile. You're way too close!...Get your paws off my canoe!

She backs off to one end of the bed, shooing the crocodile with the net.

Trying to keep the balance right. Trying not to faint.

She almost slips.

Shit! Ouch!

She tries to clip the crocodile on the nose.

There! Wham!

Get away! Why aren't you—? Get away!

Why are you still here? In the picture book, Mary Kingsley just had to clip you on the nose and you'd retreat.

Safe and free.

Get away!

Yeah yeah, don't look at me with those yellow eyes. Bug off! What do you want? You know, if you don't get the hell away, I'm going to destroy you. You and your scales and teeth and soft white belly. And your tears. Don't get any closer! It's ok, it's ok, don't cry. Don't cry. It's ok. It's normal to feel bad when someone hits you on the nose for just being there. Just for getting closer. Don't get any closer! I'll crush you.

No! Where are you going? Come back!

How was I supposed to know the roads were so icy?

I am *not* running away from my problems. No! I'm going places, tackling crocodiles, free from family responsibilities—

I'm sick of being reliable. And they still need me? I make mum crash the car and crash her face and I don't even recognise her anymore and dad's eyes go glassy and far away and... How can they both abandon me and still need me? That makes no sense! I'm the one who's allowed to need them. And I'm expected to just put everything on hold and sit by my mum and hold my dad's hand? And just absorb the blame like a blame sponge? They aren't supposed to need me. Not like that. But I can't... I couldn't see her like that. I felt like that spot of scaly paint, crumbling off

the wall next to her bed. Helpless. And scaly. And crumbling. No matter how much I wanted her to wake up, for her face to heal and become hers again... Doesn't matter. The packed bundles of sweaty guilty nerves in my stomach and my throat and my heart have nothing to do with anything. And I couldn't see her like that and I couldn't face all that silence. Heavy cloudy silence that smells of burned tyres and hospital formaldehyde.

During the above, the rain gets louder and louder. The sounds of violence from outside start up again. The phone begins to ring but Virginia does not notice it under the sound of the rain.

Now I'm here and... I shouldn't be here.

The rain and sounds stop; there is utter silence except for the song of morning birds outside. There aren't any mosquitoes anymore. Sunlight streams in from the window. Virginia breathes and is about to fall asleep when the phone rings. She answers.

Hello? Dad? Hi. How did you—oh. Thanks for the granola—No, no. ...

She drops the receiver and sits on the bed, lost, her backpack strapped on.

No, I'd feel it if she was... I'd *know* it. I'd feel it, wouldn't I?

The rain starts again and gets louder and more intense until it is the deafening sound of a waterfall. As the sound of crashing water escalates, one of the room's walls explodes. Then: silence. The sun's pinkish-gold light floods the room.

Virginia gets up off the bed and scales the mountain of rubble. When she gets to the top, she looks around and walks out of the room and off stage.

Blackout.

RAVEN FOR A LARK

Prologue

CHARLIE. She shivers like the wounded dove

That dreads the hawk's ravenous claws.

Raped, ravaged,

Her feathers soaked with her own thick blood,

She cries

NINA. If only you had slaughtered me

Before your perverted body ravished me

I should still be pure!

I will denounce your crime to the universe,

and announce my own shame to punish you!

CHARLIE. Her cries arouse the rapist's fury,

and frighten him.

Through his wrath and guilt, he seizes her hair,

forces her white arms against her back and binds

them with ropes. He unsheathes his sword.

NINA. When she sees his sword above her head.

Glinting and sharp, she desires only death,

and offers her bare throat. And while she screams,

CHARLIE. he catches her tongue with pincers,
And cuts it off with his sword. The mangled root
still quivers, but the bleeding tongue itself
falls murmuring on the bloodied ground.
The throbbing tongue writhes and wriggles

NINA. and, while it dies,
moves up to her, searching for her feet.

CHARLIE. And it is said

NINA. That after this foul crime,
he violated her again.

Nina and Charlie speak directly to the audience.

NINA. Opening night last night. I'm still buzzing.

Charlie sighs.

CHARLIE. Last night...

NINA. For an actor, there's nothing like an opening night.

CHARLIE. A bad opening means good run, right? That's what they say.

NINA. It was great. Can't wait to go on again.

CHARLIE. And I really wasn't sure about all this... before. Before, I wasn't sure.

Shakespeare in general just...

NINA. This play, it's so... bloody.

CHARLIE. I know I'm an actor and I'm supposed to worship him, but I don't get what all the fuss is about. And this is not *Hamlet*. It's not "To thine own self be true" or some other brilliant bullshit. It's *Titus Andronicus*. Who the hell's even heard of that?

NINA. But I get it.

CHARLIE. Shakespeare was a sick bastard.

NINA. I understand Shakespeare. We connect. Because with him, it's all about language, right? And I totally, like, it's cool right, that language can be so powerful?

Because I believe that words can change things. I do. And so saying words out loud, to a bunch of people? It's just... it can be transformative.

CHARLIE. Nina has this thing about the 'transformative power of words'. It's a problem for her since her tongue is ripped out for most of the play.

NINA. I only get, like, twelve lines—Leif, the director, he cut some of the more 'problematic' ones—and then my tongue's cut right out.

CHARLIE. But she never complains. She's never complained about her part. Even after all the cuts.

NINA. Because I have twelve lines, right? That's something. And you know? When the audience leaves the theatre, I'll bet I'm the one they're talking about. But on stage—it's like you're not yourself anymore. And at the same time, you're more than yourself.

CHARLIE. My part... Well it's work, right? Even if it's not a lead part.

NINA. Oh my god the audition—I was so nervous. With Leif Taylor there? Really nervous. I never thought I'd get it. I mean, I just graduated. And now I'm Lavinia in a professional show.

CHARLIE. It's definitely not a lead. But there are no small parts. Only small actors. That's crap. There are small parts and smaller parts.

NINA. *Vivien Leigh* played Lavinia.

CHARLIE. And we're in this rusty theatre in the middle of the industrial district.

NINA. I think we have a great space.

CHARLIE. A gutted warehouse, for Christ's sake.

NINA. All these secret corners.

CHARLIE. But I guess they see it working with it being dark and echo-y and with all these wires and beams and hidden corners.

NINA. So I'm really committed to this project. And I'll admit: I have something to prove. But like, to myself. And agents and casting directors come to everything Leif directs.

CHARLIE. Leif Taylor. Mister Director. Spent all rehearsal working with Harold. All rehearsal time. It's true that Harold did need the most *guidance*. And I guess you've got to get the title character right. But it would have been nice to get some sort of direction.

NINA. Leif was pretty hands-off. Leif is pretty (*'hands-off' gesture*). Harold, though, he was pretty hands-on with me. ... That came out funny. I mean, he coached me through a couple of scenes. Harold's so experienced and he's playing Titus, my father, so it seemed natural or whatever.

CHARLIE. I know it's not all about me. It's about the fall of an empire and one man's—how did they put it on the poster? Something like—I can't remember. All I know is my name's not on it.

NINA. I'm going to say it: I think the reviews got it right.

CHARLIE. Harold. Look, he plays the title character and he pretty much sucks—sucks the life right out of the play. And his name is on the poster. Bastard.

NINA. You're not supposed to even admit you read reviews.

No one's talked about them. They came out this morning and no one's said a word. But the critics...they're right: Harold—he just doesn't have it. I mean, Sir Laurence Olivier had it. He did. Probably. But Harold he...he was miscast. The Globe said he has the "emotional depth of a puddle." (*She laughs.*) I mean, he takes himself for some big stage legend like Olivier or, um... And he's just so above it all. Like he thinks that his presence is so great that he can just stand stiff as a board and say the words without any expression whatsoever. He gives nothing. Like—"I don't need to try, I'm brilliant."

But obviously, he should try. But I mean, what do I know? I only have twelve lines. Not that I'm counting.

CHARLIE. Nina steals the show with her twelve lines. We counted them one time during rehearsal, during one of the boring scenes. Well, one of the many we're not in.

NINA. But I think the supporting cast is really solid. They said—this is in *The Globe!*—they said I “exude luminous pathos.” So I'm pretty happy about that. Not sure exactly what they mean but yeah...

CHARLIE. I mean... she's cute as hell, eh?

NINA. They didn't mention Charlie in the reviews, obviously. But he's really good. Chiron is a small part but he's really committed. He wasn't at first, I think. But now? Totally.

CHARLIE. It always helps to have someone like her. To help get through the process. The ‘creative process.’ And all this pseudo-artistic political bullshit that's been going on.

NINA. He won't admit it, but he was pretty upset when they told him he was Chiron. He was cast as the other brother, Demetrius. They are pretty much the same, really. But Demetrius has a couple more lines. So Charlie was, um, bumped down or demoted or I

forget how he phrased it. Anyway. It was rough for a bit. He was grumpy. And always late. But he's over that. He's ok now.

He's pretty surprising. Pretty amazing.

CHARLIE. It really helps to have Nina around. And it doesn't hurt that she's probably the hottest girl I've been with...

NINA. You're going to think I'm naïve. But things have changed, even just during the thirty-eight days we've been together—

CHARLIE. It's been three weeks already.

NINA. I knew something'd happen the first time I saw him. At the first read-through. You just get this energy, you know?... Really hot, like, scorching from the start. And so the first rehearsals were—

CHARLIE. First, thrash the corn, then after burn the straw.

NINA. O, do not learn her wrath,—

CHARLIE. What, wouldst thou have me prove myself a bastard?

NINA. 'Tis true, the raven doth not hatch a lark.

But...

Show me then thy worse than killing lust...

Fuck...

Keep me from their worse than killing lust, keep me from...

Sorry, sorry I'm just—

CHARLIE. She's great. Sexy and... But— things can get complicated.

NINA. Since all this started—amazing things. Not just with him. *Titus* has changed everything. But it's a difficult play. I mean, I have to take two showers—two!—during each performance just to get the blood off me. There's I don't know how many murders. And lucky me, I get "ravished," my hands get chopped off, and my tongue torn out. Cut off. My neck snapped... I think it would be harder if Charlie wasn't there. He is, though. There. Around. "Every move I make." I mean, he doesn't really watch me, but he's there.

CHARLIE. Every night and twice on Saturdays I rape her. In the darkness of the wings. I drag her off stage. I've got bruises all over from her kicking me. Once we're off, she just stands there and whimpers and yelps pathetically, just loud enough so the audience can hear. And I watch her. In the dark.

NINA. He can't seem to watch me.

CHARLIE. I watch her. Sometimes she smiles at me. Then she closes her eyes and wriggles her body. It's like she's reaching right inside her, like she's going through her guts looking for a scream. And when she finds it, god knows where, she prods it until it rises and tears people's hearts right open. She's managed that scream every night. I don't know how she does it. Then she opens her eyes and winks at me. I can't smile after that. She screams and it exhausts me.

NINA. He never seems to be able to look at me when I make the sounds. They're horrible. It took hours of rehearsal to get to them. To discover them. I didn't know I could do that with my voice. Because it's not my voice. It's like... it's like these sounds come from beyond my vocal chords and beyond my stomach and my skin. My mind just kinda goes blank. That's hard to do, not think about anything. But I've got to 'cause it's not like anything bad's ever really... Bad things have happened, but I have no idea why I'm so—where I get this scream from. I'm like more than myself at that moment. I'm someone else. That's what acting is, I guess. Anyways. He doesn't watch me. I try to include him. I mean, he's the one raping and mutilating me, right? The hardest part is getting me ready to go back on stage dripping with blood. Leif wanted to make it realistic. So I've got my dress all torn up and blood gushing from everywhere.

CHARLIE. It's pretty sick. The girl comes on stage raped, with her hands and tongue chopped off, bleeding—blood all over the place...

I mean, that's why most of my friends are coming to the show.

NINA. When Vivien Leigh played Lavinia... There are these pictures of her in costume with streamers flowing from her hands. She's in this elegant pose with a hand at her mouth and just streamers all over the place. The pictures are black and white. It was probably way more disturbing in colour. Red, so that the ribbons looked like blood... But in the photos she just looks like a dancer. Gorgeous.

CHARLIE. I don't want to sound vulgar, but I mean she's half-naked and she's got all this blood streaming down her *thighs*...

NINA. I'm not Vivien Leigh. Not even close. My father says I'm a better actress than she ever was. Maybe. But I know for a fact I don't have her... well, her beauty. She was pretty. I don't look anything like her. Leif wanted it more... No streamers. No pretty poses. More real.

CHARLIE. In this disturbing way—I'm not saying I think this is true. I'm just saying someone might look at Nina, who, really, is pretty hot... I mean, someone might look at her all torn up, and bloody and—

I'm going to sound like a psychopath... But some people might get turned on by that. Not me. I'm just saying.

NINA. Leif's got me there with more blood coming from between my legs than from my mouth. You'd think cutting out a tongue would produce a lot of blood. More than

getting raped would. Or cutting off your hands—like cutting them right off. I mean, that’s how people kill themselves, right? By slicing their wrists? Lots of blood must come out of there.

Point is, though, for ten solid minutes in act three, I have to sit there, just *sit* there on the edge of the stage while the men have some silly argument behind me. “My hand shall go. By heaven, it shall not go!”...

CHARLIE. Seriously though.

NINA. I sit there trying not to draw focus.

CHARLIE. How can she not draw focus sitting downstage bleeding like a maniac, looking as hot as she does?

NINA. So I pretend I’m invisible. I mean, I put a pained look on my face and every so often I bite down to burst a blood capsule. They taste disgusting.

CHARLIE. She just sits there bleeding while four guys have an argument. “My hand shall go. By heaven, it shall not go!” Guys, hello, wake up! Call 9-1-1!

NINA. It’s amazing to have an audience. Last night, they were fantastic. There’s nothing like an opening night. The energy... I like to see faces I recognise in the

audience. You'd think it would be distracting. But it makes me feel... connected. That's stupid. But it's really like I'm not on my own, up there.

CHARLIE. I see her there, so (*he searches for an adjective*)... and I can't help but be kind of proud, you know? That my character did that. Just in terms of advancing the plot. My character has the power to do that. To her. So it's not as small a part, really, as one might think at first.

NINA. It's like we're all part of something. Together.

And you can only be in the moment for so long. I can fake being in the moment pretty well if I do say so myself. But that one scene, looking out at the audience, it gives me something to do—look for people I know—my ex-boyfriend was at one of the previews. And one girl who works at Beans Coffee Bar. She's always there humming Stevie Wonder while she froths the milk. She was there at opening.

CHARLIE. Shakespeare was a bit of a sick bastard. But he knew what he was doing, I guess.

NINA. I know it's all about... I know it's all about being in the moment.

CHARLIE. Nina gives a lot of herself. She won't admit that.

NINA. But there's only so much of yourself you can give.

CHARLIE. It's like those people in high school who'd get 90% on their math test and be all like "I didn't study at all." I bet Nina was like that in high school.

NINA. You can only give some of yourself. The rest has to come from somewhere else. I still need to talk to Charlie about that. I kind of want to ask him if... I need to know for sure where he's getting his... like, his *inspiration*... Oh I don't know. But sometimes, just saying something out loud, even if it's just a question—that can change everything. It can destroy... And besides, who wants to be the nagging girlfriend, right?

Pause.

I tried cutting myself.

She takes a knife.

I tried cutting myself. To see what it was like. Get some sense-memory to work with, you know? Of what it would be like to have both hands cut off and—

She bites her tongue.

Shit! Bit my tongue.

The knives in the rehearsal space—the ones from the little kitchenette—they're not very sharp. I had the same ones all through theatre school. Ikea, plastic handles. Come in a pack of four. Painfully dull. It's bad enough trying to cut carrots with those. But cutting through my arm? Turns out I'm very *sensitive* to pain. Turns out I don't like it. I mean, I didn't like it. Before. But as I said, everything's changed.

CHARLIE. Nina cut herself. Probably a week into rehearsals. We hooked up that day.

NINA. I didn't slice off my hand. Obviously. I barely nicked myself. There was blood—a teeny tiny bit—and I didn't like it. But when Charlie walked in—

CHARLIE. I've read about girls cutting themselves. It's something they do. Like anorexia.

NINA. When he walked in, I felt pretty stupid standing in the kitchenette with that knife in my hand...

CHARLIE. It was like she'd mistaken her arm for a sausage or something but couldn't decide if she wanted to eat it or not. Obviously, she wouldn't eat a sausage. Or her arm. She's vegetarian. But it was totally weird, seeing her frozen like that.

NINA. I don't eat meat anymore. Not since *Titus* started.

CHARLIE. She's into this New-Age diet thing.

NINA. Everyone thinks it's because I'm an actress—actor—that I'm into this raw food thing. After all, it's trendy and trippy and it keeps the instrument clear and clean and ready to give give give. But really it's because I can't stand the sight of meat anymore. The thought, even, reminds me of the pie in the banquet scene. The one made of human flesh—actually, it's funny right, but Charlie is supposed to be in that pie. Well, his character, obviously. But cannibalism puts me off.

CHARLIE. I've been eating a lot better since we've been dating. I do sneak a juicy burger once in a while... She claims she can taste the blood on my tongue. But that's bull. It's gotta be.

NINA. Sometimes even kissing makes me gag... because if you think about it, kissing is really close to cannibalism.

CHARLIE. Anyway, she laughed when I caught her with the knife.

NINA. When he walked in... I just told him the truth.

They speak directly to each other:

NINA. I just want to see how it feels.

CHARLIE. How does it feel?

NINA. I don't know. I haven't... Don't laugh at me.

CHARLIE. Come on, Nina, *you* don't need to feel what she feels as long as the audience buys it.

NINA. But that seems so disingenuous.

CHARLIE. So do it.

NINA. It'll hurt.

CHARLIE. No kidding. You think it will help?

She tries but can't bring herself to cut her skin. She looks up at Charlie.

CHARLIE. You want me to?

Nina nods but she doesn't move. He raises his eyebrows: "Are you sure?"

NINA. I want to be good at this.

Nina gives Charlie the knife. He takes her hand and slowly drags the knife across her wrist. When he is done, he licks the wound full-tongued, slowly, then releases her hand.

CHARLIE. So?

Nina kisses Charlie on the mouth, takes the knife from his hand, and retreats to cut herself throughout his next lines (spoken to the audience).

CHARLIE. So I just have to believe her—that it's for the play. I don't know if I do, though. I see her do it. Often. I shouldn't have helped her that one time. Minded my own business. Thing is, it's not healthy to get into the habit. You lose the intensity. You get used to pain—she says she does it to get into character but I bet she's lost any sensory sense of it. I'm sort of worried.

NINA. He watches me pretty closely now. It's sweet.

CHARLIE. I've done a lot for the play too. I'm ready to do what needs to be done. I haven't cut myself or anything. My character doesn't do that.

NINA. Really, I shouldn't joke about all that silly cutting stuff. Because—it's kind of, we have to be pretty discreet, right? But the girl working in the costume shop? Actually, I think she's Harold's niece. She's interning in wardrobe. I don't really know her. She's not from here.

And she...

She mimes slashing her wrist.

Not totally. She's ok. But yeah, she does it. For real, I mean. She cuts herself in the dressing room. Not for research or anything—which is why I do it, right? For her, I guess it's a cry for help. It usually is, I think. It's a problem. I'm always afraid I'll walk in on her again, sitting there with gauze and peroxide and these gigantic fabric scissors just going at her leg. It was upsetting.

CHARLIE. I've never been method. The idea of doing in real life what your character does? I think method is shit. But I couldn't help... I was curious. And you've got to grab opportunity if it comes along. It came along. And I just wanted to figure out what this guy Chiron was thinking. Why he'd do that to a girl, you know?

NINA. The poor girl.

CHARLIE. I just wanted to figure out what he was feeling. Why he did it. How he could live with himself. That does not make me method. Just a responsible actor.

NINA. When I caught her with the scissors, she looked up at me with these watery eyes and glared. She glared at me! Didn't seem embarrassed that I'd seen her. More like angry. Angry at me for no reason. So I don't really know what to think. Maybe she

wasn't mad at me. Because I'm sure it's not easy for her here. Not speaking English, really. And I think she lives with her uncle. And he can be a real... creep.

CHARLIE. Nina told me what Harold did.

NINA. Harold—he brought up Vivien Leigh.

CHARLIE. I don't like him much.

NINA. I don't know how he knew about my thing for her.

CHARLIE. I don't like him at all.

NINA. He showed me the picture with the streamers and her pouty mouth. Maybe he thought he was being original.

CHARLIE. Can you blame me? Just...

NINA. I don't know why, but it felt invasive. Like Harold was taking this gorgeous image and fingering it and making it all greasy.

CHARLIE. The way he looks at her...

NINA. I mean, that's unfair, right? It's just an image and it pretty much belongs to anyone who sees it. I know that. I guess it was more when he—

CHARLIE. He said things.

NINA. He started talking about how Vivien Leigh played Lavinia in, like, the '50s.

CHARLIE. Nasty things.

NINA. And he talked about me looking like her. Which I don't, obviously.

CHARLIE. Still pisses me right off.

NINA. It seems nice, him comparing me to her, right? But it was more that he thinks of himself as Olivier. And he was going on about how they were lovers. How we could emulate their passion or something gross. All the while he was trying to—well, he was inappropriate. Suggesting things.

CHARLIE. Saying things you do not say.

NINA. His fingers all over my face and...

She runs her hand over her face and down her body.

CHARLIE. He could be her father.

NINA. It made me ugly.

CHARLIE. And he knew—he knows she's with me.

NINA. Nowhere close to Vivien Leigh.

CHARLIE. Nina's with me.

NINA. Because she was beauty.

CHARLIE. His ego's this big.

NINA. And I—So I felt pretty bad about that.

CHARLIE. He doesn't care about much.

NINA. He made me feel pretty bad.

CHARLIE. But he does care about his niece. The only time he stops talking about himself is to talk about his precious little girl who flew all the way from Austria to learn

about theatrical costuming bla bla bla. The way he calls her his “little girl.” It makes me want to hurl.

NINA. Charlie got mad when I told him about Harold. He said he’d talk to him. Made me feel... protected.

CHARLIE. His niece is interning in the costume shop and I figured... I don’t know what I was thinking—not much probably. I can’t remember.

NINA. I know, I know: I am woman hear me roar. But still. I can’t help what I feel.

CHARLIE. I had a costume fitting one night after a rehearsal the first week.

NINA. And I feel safe with him.

CHARLIE. They’d lost my measurements—typical. Shit like that always happens to me. So I had to go down to the costume shop after rehearsal.

NINA. He talked to Harold about it.

CHARLIE. So just to say I didn’t plan it.

NINA. Charlie can be pretty aggressive when he cares about something, though—I doubt they, you know, ‘talked.’ Like sat down with peppermint tea and discussed their feelings. No way.

CHARLIE. Everyone was already at the bar down the street. The Black Boar. I went down to the costume shop and Harold’s ‘little girl’ was waiting all quiet with her tape measure.

NINA. Charlie figures Harold didn’t like being told—he figures he didn’t take it too well. Apparently Harold got Leif to change Charlie’s part. Lost some good lines. But I don’t know. Seems like a strange thing to do.

CHARLIE. We were alone in the shop... There was costume-girl with her little face. I was pissed off at her uncle for hitting on Nina. I was pissed. About my part. About the play. It’s always about the play. That’s the thing.

NINA. But Harold’s niece? She’s—she’s not OK. She’s from Europe or Germany or somewhere. So she can’t even speak English that well. And I catch her with the scissors and being all angry and full of pain. You can’t help but feel sort of bad. Like... empathy. Even for Harold, because he’s got to deal with her.

CHARLIE. You know, she was measuring my inseam. On her knees, there. I watched her in the mirror. She didn’t say a word. She kept readjusting my pant leg. I watched

her ponytail kind of bob up and down in the mirror. And when she was done with all the pins, she asked for the pants back... She asked. And I figured—it was way too easy... Right there, in front of the mirror. The floor was pretty dusty.

NINA. Thinking about her, how she must be so unhappy (and who can blame her, eh? With an uncle like that?), it helps me get to the darker places inside Lavinia. The way her face seems so innocent and pissed off at the same time...

CHARLIE. And really quietly, she screamed. Sounded like Nina's screams. And I finally understood what the hell the play's about.

NINA. Leif says that Lavinia is just a symbol by the end. That once her hands and tongue are cut off, she's just a symbol. He didn't say for what.

CHARLIE. Through those first rehearsals, I would drag Nina off stage and she would play her part. Off in the wings she would whimper and scream.

NINA. He says she loses all sense of personhood.

CHARLIE. Nina would do her thing and I would watch. But I could never participate—I could never play my part. I'm the one supposed to be acting, doing it, you know? She's just being done. But in the wings, it wasn't like that.

NINA. Why isn't she a person anymore, just 'cause she can't talk and fight back?

CHARLIE. But after I—the costume girl—after, I got it. It clicked. I'm going to sound like such an actor, but I finally understand my character and I get to be part of the play. I feel—important.

NINA. I think that playing her as her, as a person, that makes my performance better. Hopefully deeper than a puddle, anyways!

CHARLIE. Suddenly, the words mean something. They actually do something. Lame but true.

NINA. And Charlie—

CHARLIE. I think I get what Nina was saying about the 'transformative power of words.'

NINA. He seems to be really discovering the text.

Beat.

CHARLIE. After, in the costume shop, I thought about cutting off her hands. A flash, like that: cut off her hands—see what it's like to go all the way.

NINA. He's got this look in his eyes, now. Intense.

CHARLIE. I got a taste of what it's like to go insane. Pretty powerful stuff. I'd never go all the way...

NINA. I like how he watches me.

CHARLIE. But every time I see that costume girl, I think about cutting off her hands. Is that weird?

NINA. I don't know if it's just that we're more in synch or something now because we're— now that we're together, but he's gotten really good. Except that...

CHARLIE. Leif said I'd never been more 'on.' I was finally there. I totally got it. Just like that. He noticed.

NINA. He's getting to the passion of the text. He told me I'm the one helping him get to that but, well, yeah... Corny, eh?

She giggles.

So I don't know what happened with him in yesterday's performance, though.

CHARLIE. So when costume-girl wasn't there the night before opening, I... she totally fucked it up for me. She wasn't there so last night's performance was shit... Of all nights, costume-girl goes and screws up opening for me.

NINA. He was off. And it's not because it was opening night. Or maybe it was. I don't know. I don't think he was nervous. He just wasn't there.

And then at the opening night party....

CHARLIE. I had to find her. I couldn't let this happen again.

The lights change to indicate a shift in time and location.

NINA. The opening night party, we're all at The Black Boar. Charlie's late. ... But it's just so... great. To be at our bar. Like a real company. Everyone's so together. And I've got to say, it's totally awesome having a boyfriend on opening night. ... Even if he's late. Again. I need to talk to him. Something's up. He's been so on. And tonight—maybe he was just nervous. I don't know if I should bring it up. It might just make things worse. But dragging me across the stage—he seemed angry. Different-angry. I don't know what he was playing at. It's not that I mind, really. Because when you get into it, you're into it. But he really shoved his hand... More than usual. The pain surprised me. It wasn't the good pain that usually comes in that moment. It felt... wrong. Usually, being raped in the play... well, for that moment, every time, seriously, every single time we rehearsed it, and all through the previews, every time that moment comes,

I lose my sense of character. I don't *feel* scared. I act it. What I feel is... I'm probably totally disgusting. But I feel alive. Images flash through my head. Charlie's face and the blood from my arm that first time. His eyes. And for some reason I see that wardrobe girl with her scissors... And as I'm screaming, as Lavinia's trying to protect her honour and all that, screaming, "keep me from their worse than killing lust," all I really want is for Charlie to... you know. I want him so much, it feels like I'm bleeding. The hurt, the wanting him, it's like... it's like someone's hit me in the gut. And all I want is to be hit again and ripped right open. I want him to rip me open with his nails and his teeth and ...

Where is he?

CHARLIE. I find costume-girl. She's doing laundry. Guess she couldn't get out of it two nights in a row.

Beat.

She doesn't flinch when I put my hand on her. Maybe she heard me come in. Washing the entire cast's sweaty shirts. Dirty job, eh? But as they say, someone's got to do it. ... She's light as a bird, that girl. It is easy to lift her onto the washing machine. The sound of the machine covers up her stupid little noises. It's like washing away the shit performance I just gave on stage. Setting the slate clean again.

NINA. I tried talking to her once. She's impossible to find. But I tried talking to her when I did find her.

CHARLIE. You won't throw things out of whack again. It won't happen again. It won't happen again. Not again. Again. Again.

NINA. Hey. Hey. Are you ok? Can I get you something?
Do you—can you understand me? Hey, are you ok?

NINA. I tried to get to her. Like, saying: "Are you ok? You can tell me." I think she was jealous. So I just asked her: "I mean, you have a crush on Charlie, right? I won't tell. I get it: he's totally charming. But he's like that with everyone. Don't take this the wrong way, but he's really just like that with everyone. You can talk to me, you know. You don't have to look at me like that. Seriously, what's wrong with you?" ... I tried to be nice. I told her "don't be embarrassed about the whole scissors thing. I totally understand. Totally. I—um... Don't be mad. You just have to realise that I'm like, with him, and well, that's that." ... But yeah, I told her she'd have to help me with the costume change in act two. She's supposed to. ...

The lighting changes to indicate we are back at the bar. Charlie 'enters'.

NINA. He's late.

CHARLIE. No one noticed, eh?

NINA. He's all flushed. He looks like a little boy, with his pink cheeks. And the way he practically runs to me. We both have the insane energy that comes from—that you get from performing. And I swear it's existentially higher on openings. I mean, exponentially.

Why is he always late?

CHARLIE. I'm psyched for tomorrow's performance. I know I'll be on.

NINA. Why are you late?

CHARLIE. Come on, not now. "Nay I'll stop your mouth." I kiss her.

NINA. His lips are scratchy dry.

CHARLIE. Her neck.

NINA. His mouth's all limp. It's... I want to tell him to shred my skin with his splintered lips. I want him to use his teeth. But his strength seems... he seems weak.

CHARLIE. She's a good kisser. But I need a drink.

NINA. I see Harold watching us.

CHARLIE. Harold's watching. No way his niece said anything to him. No way. No, it's that he knows I was crap. One performance I screw up.

NINA. He's looking at me. And I can't decide what he wants.

CHARLIE. Whatever, he sucks. I'm getting a drink.

NINA. Harold comes towards me.

Nina backs away.

CHARLIE. Harold's talking to Nina.

NINA. He leaves me there with him.

CHARLIE. Harold's talking to Nina.

NINA. What is he saying?

CHARLIE. Harold's talking to Nina and she's just standing there. He's got her too close. She's leaning in too close. I guess the music is kind of loud. She's got her ice-queen face on. Frozen in an unreadable pout.

NINA. Charlie?

CHARLIE. She's leaning in, listening. Harold glances in my direction and at the very same moment she turns her head to look at me. Her expression doesn't change but her eyes are sparkly.

They speak to each other:

NINA. Charlie?

CHARLIE. Yeah.

NINA. You just left me there with him.

CHARLIE. We needed drinks... Did he try anything?

NINA. No, he—Just, you know, congratulations on opening and all that. He said that you—

CHARLIE. What?

NINA. He was asking if we'd seen his niece.

CHARLIE. She's coming to the party?

NINA. I don't know.

CHARLIE. I'm sorry I sucked tonight.

NINA. No, you... That's ok.

CHARLIE. So you noticed?

NINA. Charlie?

CHARLIE. What.

NINA. Harold said—Is it... is it true?

CHARLIE. What?

NINA. That you... Is there someone else?

Charlie laughs.

NINA. Don't make me feel stupid. Just... answer.

CHARLIE. Let's just enjoy ourselves. Opening night party, come on!

NINA. Charlie. Seriously. You screwing around?

CHARLIE. No.

NINA. With that German girl?

CHARLIE. Austrian.

NINA. Harold's niece.

CHARLIE. No.

NINA. Harold said she—

CHARLIE. She helped me—she's sort of helping me with my character.

NINA. She doesn't even speak English.

CHARLIE. It's not like that. What did Harold tell you?

Nina looks at Charlie resolutely and decides to go along with him.

NINA. Nothing. Get me another drink.

They turn back to the audience. Back to 'present' lighting.

NINA. Opening night last night and I'm still buzzing.

CHARLIE. I can't wait to go on again.

NINA. I hope we can go on again soon. But I doubt it because of...

CHARLIE. The janitor found her this morning. Wrists slit in the dressing room.

NINA. She obviously knew how deep to cut to go deep enough.

CHARLIE. No one is talking about it.

NINA. No one is saying a word.

CHARLIE. There are whispers. But if no one says a word... /Words can change everything.

NINA. Words can transform everything. Freaky note she left. Charlie's name. That's it. Charlie's name on a scrap of loose-leaf paper. I haven't seen it.

CHARLIE. They'll think she was just very unhappy. It happens.

NINA. Maybe she was in love with Charlie. Maybe. She seemed sort of jealous... And to tell lies like that? She told Harold a bunch of... she said stuff about Charlie and her... Which I guess might be wishful thinking or something. But then to go so far as to—well, you know... kill herself? Because of a crush? That'd be totally demented.

CHARLIE. I think I'll still be able to get into the part without her help now. I'll just have to really remember. Any one of those nights. But maybe especially last night's, the last time, on the washing machine, with its added shadow... Maybe I'll just have to picture that from now on.

NINA. I don't think we're going on tonight. I don't know... There are rumours Harold's leaving and that Leif will take his part.

CHARLIE. Maybe we get a few days off.

NINA. I'm sure Leif's a way better actor than Harold. So that could be a silver lining there.

CHARLIE. The note she wrote? It was my name on her bloody note. My name. ... To do something, to actually do something... Actions, consequences. That's more than just spitting up 400-year-old words that no one understands. But to do something that

changes something? That can be really...powerful. So maybe I don't have that many lines. So I play a "small" part. But I'm not bitter. See? 'Cause, I did something that changed something, moved things.

Epilogue

CHARLIE. See, even Shakespeare didn't make it all up by himself out of nowhere. He got it from that myth.

NINA. The one where the guy rapes the girl and catches her tongue with pincers, and cuts it off with his sword. Where the mangled root still quivers, but the bleeding tongue itself falls murmuring on the bloodied ground.

CHARLIE. (Yeah) that one. Shakespeare reads this Ovid guy's myth and he goes and writes *Titus Andronicus* in which the rapists learn from their mistakes. So that instead of just cutting off her tongue, they also cut off her hands so she can't even weave her story into a tapestry. And they don't turn into birds at the end. They die. You learn, you grow, you get bloodier.

Charlie and Nina look at each other and smile. Fade to black.