

HOME, OBLIVION

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HOME, OBLIVION

Linda, early 50s, Chet and Nadine's single mother. Insane with grief.

Chet, 30s, Nadine's older brother. Doesn't resemble his mother--should have a diverse ethnic background--not all Caucasian. "Fought" in Afghanistan and is now trying to be a cop.

Maureen, 40s, African-American, dear friend of Linda's and her family. Grew up here and knows almost everyone. Increasingly feeling like an outsider.

Will, late 60s, a coroner who has a special bond with the dead. Linda's sometimes boyfriend, even though he's almost twenty years older.

Matt, 20, a young man with his nerves on edge. Appears put together like a Latter Day Saints kid who might show up at your door. Nadine's soul mate.

Nadine, 20, was vibrant, quirky, and creative. Now deceased.

There should be a surreal and dreamlike quality in this play. At first this quality seems to represent that euphoric high that accompanies any type of opiate/opioid. It's really there to indicate Linda's helpless madness, that bizarre trippy fog of intense grief. The "magic" in the play is Linda's tenuous grip on reality. Time is smoky. The flashback scenes that feature Nadine are seen through a gauze or smudged lens.

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ACT 1

The stage is divided into several spaces with the kitchen of Linda's house at center. It is the most fully realized. Most often occupied. The kitchen table is where conversations naturally occur. A door from the kitchen leads to a back two-stair stoop and part of the humble Midwestern backyard.

But before we see all that, in the dark, we hear the sound of laughter.

Then lights come up on the kitchen.

Linda, Maureen, and Chet are leaning/sitting around. Empty beer bottles and leftover food from neighbors litter the table and counters.

LINDA

She casually explained to her Principal that it wasn't about witnessing the destruction of anything.

Simpler than that, she said. More innocent.

It was all so she could smell the smoke, and encourage the dancing of the flames.

MAUREEN

(Tasting it)

"Dancing of the flames."

LINDA

The transformation that accompanied them. Her words.

That there was a beauty in it.

CHET

Mr. Austin is like, "transformation and beauty in dancing flames don't make any difference with me. The simple fact is, you're lighting shit on fire."

LINDA

Trash cans. Notebooks. Austin didn't say "shit."

CHET

Some stuffed animals. A pair of Converse.

MAUREEN

And Angela Rabourne's hair, apparently.

They laugh.

MAUREEN

Poor Angela. That girl's always had troubled hair. Nadine did her a favor.

LINDA

I don't remember Angela.

MAUREEN

Hair-on-fire-Angela? Troubled hair, troubled everything, troubled-looking. Homely, to say the least, bless her heart, even prior to her hair getting all burned.

CHET

Mr. Austin didn't know how to handle a case like Nadine.

LINDA

But Nadine wasn't a *case*.

MAUREEN

Gerald Austin never knew how to handle any girls. Even back when I was in school *with* him. I don't know why he'd think he could grow some balls around his most complicated students like Nadine.

CHET

That's the thing. He knows what to do with regular old discipline cases. Things like fights, cheating, mouthing off to teachers.

LINDA

Truancy.

CHET

General misbehavior, or like ditching school.

MAUREEN

You know what truancy is, right?

CHET

Like the stoneys, or those hoods that shoot craps behind the gymnasium.

LINDA

Or you back then.

CHET

Right, just like me.

MAUREEN

Don't worry, Chet. You've cleaned up fine since--

CHET

Oh, but Nadine confused Mr. Austin--

LINDA

Because she was *never* a bad student--

MAUREEN

Not a bad bone in that girl--

LINDA

Always likeable.

MAUREEN

To everyone.

CHET

. . . *Lovable*, really.

LINDA

--Even to her own principal, apparently.

Wait, lovable? To us she was, of course, but I mean . . .

CHET

What, you don't think folks around here found her generally--

LINDA

Don't be dim, Chet. Nobody saw her the way we did, we're family.

MAUREEN

What's important is how caring Nadine was. I don't think Angela's hair-fire was intentional. So, what's a school supposed to do with a straight A student who *bleeds art*, shows a genuine deference for fellow students *and* teachers?

LINDA

. . . And also happens to have this little arson curiosity?

MAUREEN

She always knew how to pull me outta my funk.

CHET

Which is why he let her choose her own punishment.

LINDA

She said she'd accept a Time Out, first of all, and then promised she'd write a song about the whole ordeal.

They laugh.

MAUREEN

Austin musta been all like, "you go do your art, girl, and then think about all the damage you've done."

LINDA

That's what she chose.

CHET

Her choice. He easily could've called the cops.

CHET

So she goes and writes another amazing song.

LINDA

And the kicker--

CHET

Right, the kicker is when Nadine asks Mr. Austin if the song could be performed at the spring choir concert.

LINDA

Choir nerds belting it out!

MAUREEN

Including poor ugly Angela Rabourne I guess.

CHET

This gloomy little ditty wedged right in with, what "Blow Bugle Blow" and "Man in the Mirror."

They laugh.

CHET

(Half-inging, dancing)

The splendor falls

On castle walls

(making up Nadine lyrics)

I scorched her hair

Which wasn't fair

(singing Michael Jackson)

That's why I want you to know

CHET & MAUREEN

I'm starting with the man in the mirror. . .

I'm asking him to change his ways

MAUREEN

And no message could've been any clearer . . .

I assume, Mister Principal vetoed that proposal.

LINDA

Those weren't anything like Nadine's lyrics.

CHET

Man, she could've been running the school if she wanted.

MAUREEN

Burning down the school was a legitimate concern.

CHET

So, instead of the choir concert, she sharpies the lyrics to her own locker. But not as an act of defiance.

LINDA

Inadvertently pissing off the custodian, not registering the vandalism aspect, but spreading her message.

CHET

Everyone else embraced it as an artistic statement.

MAUREEN

Even Hair-on-fire Angela forgave her?

They laugh.

LINDA

That's the kind of thing she gets away with.

They laugh a little more.

CHET

Got.

MAUREEN

Got away with.

CHET

Damn, come to think of it, Nadine did run that school.

*Maureen and Chet laugh a little more.
But it dies.*

LINDA

Got away with.
What did I say?

CHET

Gets.

LINDA

No, shut up.

MAUREEN

I think you did say gets. But it's . . . you know, a slip of the tongue . . .

There is a sound . . . not loud, but like the sound of something breaking. The lights flicker slightly and dim to a more amber tone. Linda is the only one who notices.

CHET

Doesn't matter.

Linda breaks down. She sinks to the floor.

MAUREEN

(Going over to comfort her)

Oh good God, Linda. Come on. Where's my stupid brain? We shouldn't be doin' this . . .

CHET

That was totally my fault, Mom.

LINDA

Don't hug me right now.

CHET

It's my bad, really.

MAUREEN

We should be more careful how we talk.

CHET

It's easy to slip up and forget.

LINDA

No, I haven't, though. I said don't touch me.

MAUREEN

We know. Not forget, but your mind is used to one thing and then that one thing just isn't. We gotta find you your happiness again.

CHET

I was saying present-tense shit like, "she sharpies it to her locker . . ."

LINDA

You said it. I thought it.

MAUREEN

It's still so damn fresh.

LINDA

I didn't forget that she died.

MAUREEN

Get on up. We don't wanna see you on the floor.

CHET

Go to your living room and lie down.

LINDA

I don't wanna lie back down. I've been sleep waking.

MAUREEN

We shouldn't have been laughing.

LINDA

(Picking herself up from the floor)

I didn't say that. Of course we should laugh; she was funny.

CHET

Funny as shit.

MAUREEN

I laugh so I don't cry.

LINDA

I didn't forget that she died. I forgot that she's not alive.

CHET

It's cause we're drinking, whatever.

MAUREEN

Hell, I *drink* so I don't cry, too.

CHET

I shouldn't have kept getting us drinks.

MAUREEN

I put on my makeup in the morning so I don't cry. Shit, sometimes I even cry so I don't cry.

Linda has a strange new manic energy.

LINDA

Everyone back off.

I can't be in this . . .

I have to do different. Jesus, what's the opposite of lying down? Chet?

CHET

I don't know, flying? What are you doing?

LINDA

I was about to . . .

MAUREEN

We can't help that we haven't accepted . . . It's only been a week. Oh, Christ on a goalpost, is that all? No wonder . . .

Linda picks up a plate of the perfectly good food from the counter.

LINDA

In the middle of it all there, I had this tingling urge to . . . call her or text her to see if she still had that song she wrote about the fire.

MAUREEN

You haven't adjusted and won't for a long time.

LINDA

How are we supposed to keep on eating and breathing, smoking, carrying on when . . .

She dumps the food into the sink, grinds it in the garbage disposal.

LINDA

In that kitchen chair that she was eating breakfast in, fuck, two weeks ago!

MAUREEN

Linda, knock it off!

Maureen switches off the disposal.

MAUREEN

You have to hold it together better than this. Do it for--

CHET

Don't you think Nadine would want us to . . .

LINDA

Don't *start* that shit. Where is she?

She doesn't *want* anything; she's gone and alone.
She died alone, deteriorated in the basement of that *house* alone . . . Then sank into that
cold morgue all alone. But what led to her lonely . . .

CHET

Lonely death.

LINDA

How did that happen?

CHET

Nobody knows.

MAUREEN

She had a sickness.

LINDA

Oh, fuck sickness. I can't be here anymore, or I'll . . . I really am about to . . .

MAUREEN

I think you're hyperventilating.

LINDA

Have to get out.

Maybe knowing more would help me breathe. Reminiscing doesn't work.

*She is gathering up things she realizes she doesn't need, then putting them back
down.*

MAUREEN

Let me leave, I know how too much I can be.

LINDA

There's too much *here*. The donated food and the fabricated warmth and the already-
moving-on. It's insulting. I need to be on a different side from it.

CHET

It's not fabricated. This is your home.

LINDA

No, the air is too thick here.

MAUREEN

Linda, it's understandable for you to lose your mind a little. But take a step back. You're in no condition to be all by yourself.

CHET

It's cold and dark . . . Mom, please don't . . .

LINDA

Don't you "Mom please don't" me, Chet.

*Elsewhere, Coroner Will is in his morgue.
His light is faintly angelic.
A gentle but burdened man in his late 60s.
He has just finished examining a body.*

WILL

Trumbull County. Warren, Ohio. 44482.

Twenty three year old Caucasian male . . .

Jackson Bennet

I am sorry to see you here, Jackson. I should've mentioned I listen to music while I work. I also record my side of our "conversation"; I hope you don't mind the Brahms.

Back in the kitchen

LINDA

(Already leaving through the back/kitchen door)

If I don't get away from this and you and this, I don't think I'll hold it together. I may not anyway, so at the very least know it's real and that you shouldn't get in my way.

*The Kitchen goes out.
In the morgue, the body (not Nadine) is on the metal table beside him.
Brahms plays soothingly as he works. Sometimes he instinctively conducts to the gentle music as he speaks into a microphone connected to a small recording device.*

The music warps when Jackson is "responding" to him--only Will hears what he's saying.

(The indented moments of his dialogue are less cononer and more when Will is conversing with Jackson's body)

WILL

Son of Bruce and Sharron.

71 inches, 180 pounds.

Blond hair. Blue eyes.

Cobalt.

(The Brahms music warps like a cassette tape left out in the sun)

Steel? Sure, we can go with steel blue.

Tattoo sleeves on both arms. Depicting . . .

A big-eyed cartoon cat playing a circular rockabilly guitar. Not Tom or Sylvester, so he must be more recent.

More recent than the 1950s? Apparently. Likely related to a rock and roll band that I'm not familiar with. Which is the majority of them at this point.

(The Brahms music warps again)

Stray Cats. Ah. Never heard of them . . .

A Celtic design of vines and thorns wrapping around.

A rose, outlined but not filled-in. Was it too expensive to fill it in all at once?

(The music warps)

Understandable.

Two inch scar above the right eye.

I'm guessing hockey.

(The music warps)

A street fight is just hockey without the ice.

4 to 5 needle wounds on each arm.

The music warps even more than before . . .

Dim blue lights come up on Linda climbing a big magnificent tree.

Clumsily at first, then surprisingly elegantly for a woman her age.

WILL

Constellations of pinhole scars concurrently separating and connecting and dark green and crimson tattoo ink. Smoothed over scars and recently weeping.

An autopsy . . . was performed.

Linda settles at a branch where she can sit and cling to the trunk like a koala bear. Cling like she has more of a reason to cling than the distance between her branch and the hard Ohio ground below her.

Elsewhere, in the back yard, in the past, in early spring. Nadine reclines in a lounge chair wearing sunglasses, long-sleeve t-shirt, and bikini bottoms. Chet and Maureen are getting ready for a lunch.

NADINE

But nobody can see me. Neighbors wouldn't even care if I sat out naked.

CHET

You'd better not sit out in the nude. Have you lost your mind?

MAUREEN

I'm a neighbor, and I know I would care.

NADINE

Minding my own business in my own yard.

CHET

It's like when Mr. Howard was over there sprawled on his lawn.

NADINE

I kept my shirt on.

CHET

But your shorts might as well be Victoria's Secret.

MAUREEN

Doesn't matter, Linda claims we're about to eat.

NADINE

It's a swimsuit, Chet.

CHET

What if some creepy homeless dude walks by in the alley?

NADINE

Let 'em. We get five days of sunlight per spring here. I have to take advantage when I can.

MAUREEN

You're not trying to get any sun on your arms?

NADINE

You know I think my arms are ugly.

MAUREEN

I do?

CHET

But "nobody can see you."

MAUREEN

Wait, *five* days of sunlight?

NADINE

If that.

CHET

I don't know where you got your statistics. Sunbathing isn't even healthy for you.

Nadine finally gets up to gather her towel and chair.

NADINE

It feels healthy, ok? It feels different. It feels fresh.

MAUREEN

All he's asking you to do is put on longer shorts.

NADINE

Why are you all of a sudden on his side all the time? You've seen me out here like this before.

MAUREEN

I'm out. It's not my fight. Not my skin, either. Burn away.

NADINE

Yesterday was a milestone. I slept late, but woke up to my one-hundredth consecutive overcast day. That number was a milestone.

(Packing up all her sunbathing gear)

I don't even remember why I started counting, but I was aware that it was Wednesday early afternoon and we'd reached one-hundred. A cloudy day is different. That would mean there were clouds throughout a backdrop of sky. This was another mantle of static interference for the one-hundredth day. Living in a black and white movie for that long corrodes the hypothalamus. I can't just rely on writing to get me out of my gloom.

She exits with her beach bag and the light in the yard fades.

Will continues.

WILL

Naloxone . . . was administered. To no avail.

Fentanyl toxicity is the cause of death.

Accidental?

Foam in the lungs.

Your swollen brain forgot to tell your body how to breathe, Jackson.

Accidental.

Under Ohio law, all other medical examiner data is considered private or nonpublic data.

Lights shift.

What we see is Linda still partway up in her tree.

But in actuality, she is home. That's where Chet sees her. We're back in the present.

CHET

It's my duty now more than ever . . . my privilege, but also my . . . to take care of you and of things . . . Why were you up in the . . . *How'd you get up there?*

LINDA

Don't start asking stupid questions, Chet.

CHET

You're a surprisingly good climber.

LINDA

Up. Yeah. Down, I realized too late, I'll have to work on.

CHET

Can we please be done "working" on that anymore? Let's chill here on the safe, safe ground for a while, ok?

(She looks around. On the ground?)

LINDA

Going up, you can see all the handholds and footholds right there in front of you. Going down, you forget where they are.

Start to doubt.

CHET

Are you gonna tell me *why* you were up in a tree?

LINDA

It felt healthy. Fresh.

CHET

At least you managed to get down without breaking your neck. You scraped your hands to shit.

LINDA

Buckeye bark ain't plush.

I was reaching out, and that tree was what I grabbed onto. Calmed the hornets in my brain.

CHET

C'mere. Let me clean those paws up for you, monkey.

With his back to Linda, he soaps up a wet washcloth. As he talks to her, Linda fully acknowledges where she is, and climbs the rest of the way down to join Chet in the kitchen.

CHET

If I wasn't so worried about your hornets, I'd be cracking up about this.

We're all in the going crazy phase of this, but now we have to reach for something else. More stable than an old tree. I need to know you won't lose it all together. Need you to come back to me.

LINDA

(Back in the kitchen)

I can't make that promise.

CHET

(Attempting to lighten it up)

Could you see our house from there?

LINDA

I saw some things. Orange poppy petals. Like someone else had put them there.

CHET

Was there anyone, I don't know, walking their dog while you did it? "Hey, Linda," "Hey, whoever" "Nice night" "Yeah, nicer up here. Hey, don't forget to pick up after your pooch."

LINDA

You're gonna have to let me be this crazy person for a while. It's safer.

He's cleaning her hands now.

CHET

You have a pretty valid excuse. Does it hurt?

LINDA

My hands will heal, Chet.

She sits at the table.

CHET

How come you don't let me do stuff for you? You were always doing stuff for us, but you never . . .

(Bad again at attempting to lighten things)