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## **Cast of Characters**

CHESTER, a 28-year-old man with rodentophobia.

## **Setting**

A naked stage with a wooden chair, on the back of the chair hangs a black inner-tube. Or, maybe, there are several inner-tubes, several chairs, and an elaborately dressed stage.

## **Author's Note**

It is suggested the play take place without an intermission.

## **Acknowledgements**

*Circumference of a Squirrel* premiered at Zachary Scott Theater Center (Austin, Texas) and was subsequently produced by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and opened Off-Broadway at Urban Stages.

# CIRCUMFERENCE OF A SQUIRREL

## A RIFF WITH AN INNER-TUBE

by John Walch

### PART I: Bagels

*(A light comes on. CHESTER stands center stage with the inner-tube clenched between his teeth. The light goes out.)*

**CHESTER.** *(From darkness:)* Yesterday, I saw a squirrel carrying a bagel in its mouth.

*(Light on. CHESTER stands one step right of center with inner-tube clenched between his teeth. Light out.)*

*(From darkness:)* A squirrel carrying a bagel in its mouth.

*(Light on. CHESTER stands one step left of center with inner-tube clenched between his teeth. Light out.)*

*(From darkness:)* This story begins with a squirrel and a bagel.

*(Lights up on CHESTER with inner-tube. CHESTER also has with him a lunch bag, bottle of water, and an old National Geographic magazine.)*

I was on campus, but I'm not a student. I was, but I'm not now. I was in the U-Penn graduate program studying microbiology and virology, but I've taken a voluntary *leave of absence*. Not to embark on any grand micro-project, no, I'm no Louis Pasteur. I just stopped going to classes, lab. I was even teaching one of those big 101 undergrad lectures. I was "very promising" as my graduate advisor put it, but I wasn't living up to my promise and my advisor advised me to: "take some time, figure it out. Bacteria will be here when you get back. In fact, they'll just keep multiplying while you're gone." What can I say—the comic potential of microbiology is microscopic.

So, I'm not a student, but I still come to campus. It gets me out of my apartment. Since my wife—Dara—and I divorced, I like having all the people around me. The sense of community, family. It's a comfort. I bring my lunch and an old National Geographic magazine and pretend I'm still a part of the grand bustle of education.

That's what I was doing when I saw the squirrel with the bagel in its mouth.

It was a scrawny squirrel that hadn't yet matured into its adult body. And with the same youthful arrogance that the students lugged volumes of Proust and Schopenhauer across the Green, the squirrel held this huge bagel between its teeth. A behemoth of a bagel. A super-dense cinnamon-raisin bagel that pulled the scrappy squirrel's head down into a sagging bow—a boy at prayer. The weight of it must have been equal to the entire body-weight of the squirrel itself, but that didn't stop it from trying to take it up the tree. Up to a high-limb for safety. Home to its nest. Now, it was the hole—

*(Puts hand in pockets and finds a roll of lifesavers. This is a surprise, something he hadn't expected. He looks curiously at the roll.)*

Dad...?

*(He opens the roll and offers a lifesaver to an audience member.)*

Lifesaver?

Now, it was the hole in the center that allowed the squirrel to carry it in the first place. The empty center shaved off enough weight to make the struggle possible. Its mighty squirrel jaws locked on the cinnamon confection and its whiskey-colored eyes locked in determination.

I have a peculiar relationship with squirrels, a negative fascination—like auto-wrecks on the highway—I'm compelled and repelled by their unpredictable behavior, their squirrelly charms. Innocent, but vicious.

*(He pulls out a retractable pointer, opens it up, and points to imaginary charts in the inner-tube, or perhaps he has some real charts or slides.)*

Fact: a squirrel's teeth grow continuously through the rodent's six-year lifespan. The incisors alone grow six inches per year, but stay short due to constant wear. *Six* inches per year. A foot every two years. That means if a squirrel never used its teeth, it would have incisors three feet long. I am haunted by these three-foot squirrel teeth. Rodentophobia is what I call it.

*(He puts pointer away.)*

And yet despite my condition, yesterday I sat a mere ten feet from this squirrel—riveted and repulsed—and watched as it tried to carry the bagel. It'd struggle a little way up the trunk of the tree, come down, drop the bagel, re-sink its razor teeth into the boiled dough, and try again. Always it would try again. Determined to figure out how to carry the weight.

*(Shift. Put inner-tube around waist.)*

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Higher! Push me higher, Dad! Higher! Harder!

**CHESTER.** And my father pushed me, harder and harder. The branch the tire-swing was tied to jerked in crazy fits scattering shade in wild swoops across the backyard. Random leaves drifted down from above. I threw my head back; the sky whirled.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Higher!

**CHESTER.** His hands planted firmly on my shoulders—I remember the weight of them there. Then with a shove only my father could produce he pushed me out into the empty air. I sailed away from him, climbing higher and higher. At the end of my trajectory, there was stillness. A moment where I was neither coming nor going. I was just there—defined for a heartbeat of time...and then gravity took over. Down I hurtled towards my father at a speed that could only end in collision. But at the moment of impact, he was not there to catch me. He was screaming:

**DAD.** Crap! God-damn! Son-of-a-bitch!

**CHESTER.** As I swung past, I saw my dad lying on the grass, holding his foot—I swung out, unable to stop, caught in a dying pendulum, twisting in the air trying to catch another glimpse.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Dad?! Dad?

**DAD.** Holy-Mother-of-Christ! God-blessed-damn!

**CHESTER.** I saw blood around his ankle—And swung past again. Unable to stop. Unable to help. Incapable of understanding.

*(Shift. Inner-tube in front of face, stand on chair.)*

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Please, God, don't let him die. Please, God, don't let him die, don't let him die.

**MOM.** It's always good to pray, honey, but he's not going to die.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** If he does it'll be all my fault!

**MOM.** It's not your fault, CJ. Your father should have been wearing shoes. If he'd been wearing shoes that squirrel wouldn't have bitten him.

**CHESTER.** My mother has this way of contradicting whatever I say. It drives me crazy. I kick her in the thigh.

**MOM.** If you're going to squirm, I'm going to put you down.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Don't. Don't put me down.

**MOM.** Okay, sweetie, okay. But Mommy's arms are getting tired.

**CHESTER.** She held me, though, high enough so I could see through the emergency room window. Through that port-hole this is what I saw:

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Dad lies on a cold metal table. A nurse bandages his foot. I can't see the wound—only the bandage—but the bite must be huge. I didn't see how big that squirrel's mouth was, but at summer camp my brother Dan and I saw a snake let go of its jaw and swallow a mouse—whole. Squirrels can probably do the same thing—just like snakes. Squirrels and snakes are related: both begin with the letter "S." I squeeze my eyes shut and imagine the wound: three-quarters of Dad's foot is gone. Big squirrel teeth marks have snatched away the whole middle of his foot leaving only an isthmus connecting the big toe to the rest of the body. Isthmus is a word I learned in world geography.

My imagination is not running wild. Mom's always saying my *imagination is running wild*, and I think: "Well, of course it is, what better place for the imagination to run than the wild?" But this time, my imagination is just running around an indoor track; everything made perfect sense. Dad would never walk right again. He would limp for life because he was bitten by a squirrel that fell from the tree that grew the branch that held the tire-swing that I was swing-

ing from. I know he'll lose his foot, because I can see the size of the needle the doctor holds in his hand.

*(He pulls out pointer and slowly begins extending it.)*

Even Mom lets out her little Mom gasp when she sees the size of the needle.

*(MOM gasps.)*

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Is Dad ever gonna walk again?

**MOM.** He'll walk, sweetie.

**CHESTER.** We watch the nurse swab Dad's stomach.

**MOM.** It's not his foot they're worried about.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** But the squirrel bit his *foot*.

**MOM.** They're worried about his blood. Squirrels are dirty animals, dear. They have dirty blood and when that squirrel bit your dad, it might have given him the dirty blood. Rabies. And it could kill your dad. But there's no way of knowing whether he got it or not. To be sure to keep his blood clean, they've got to give him these shots.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** In the belly-button?

**MOM.** It's a rabies shot. It has to go into his stomach to keep it clean.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** The doctor holds the huge needle in the air and taps at the syringe.

**MOM.** Let's go now, we'll see him after.

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** What is she crazy? Leave now? Right before the best part? I wanna watch.

*(Slowly pushes pointer into his stomach.)*

Watch as the doctor presses the needle into Dad's stomach. The veins in Dad's arms pop as he grips the hand-rail. His face looks like it did when Grandpa died. And still the doctor is pushing that needle into his stomach...

**CHESTER.** The rabies shots were administered to my father on a daily basis. Fourteen shots in the stomach over fourteen days. My

father did not die and he did not get rabies...at least not in the conventional sense.

*(Shift. Open pointer, put inner-tube on chair and again point to imaginary charts or slides therein.)*

Rabies: a disease as old as the human race. The word's origin is traced to 3000 BC where it's found in the Sanskrit, "rabhas" which means: *to do violence*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rabies provoked such terror that when bitten by a rabid animal, patients killed themselves or were killed by a fear-gripped public. Once the virus establishes itself in a host, there is no cure for rabies; the disease always has a lethal outcome. In developed countries, rabies has largely been controlled thanks to the efforts of Louis Pasteur. Developed in 1884, Pasteur's vaccine for rabies is still regarded as his most spectacular achievement. Founding the whole field of micro-biology? Figuring out how to pasteurize milk? Forget it—all these curdled in comparison to his rabies vaccine.

What Pasteur found, and where my mother was wrong, is that rabies infects the nervous system, not the blood. A disease of the brain, not the body. The virus is transported through the saliva and makes its way through the central nervous system eventually reaching the brain and triggering: abnormal behavior, delirium, viciousness, and hydrophobia.

Thanks to Pasteur, my father was physically healed, but inside he was squirrel-bit.

*(Put pointer away.)*

When he saw a squirrel on the same side of the street, he would run across four lanes of traffic to avoid crossing its path.

When he saw one while mowing the yard, he would just step away from the mower. Sometimes when we came home, we would find the mower running out back and Dad in front of the television, drinking a beer, blankly watching the game.

My father developed no hydrophobia. In fact, he would stay in the water for hours on end and developed a strange passion for floatation devices. Rafts, water-belts, life-preservers, sea-biscuits, pool

noodles, whatever. If you could float on it, he bought it. His favorite though was a simple black inner-tube. *A classic*, he would say.

**DAD.** When I die just put me in one of these and float me out into the big blue. Nothing more peaceful than floating in one of these...

**CHESTER.** Fish could be trusted, squirrels could not.

*(Beat.)*

Rodentophobia.

*(Shift. Set inner-tube in corner and move as far away from it as possible.)*

Now, my dad loved the game of golf and he had a good swing, but after the rabies shots he added at least 14 shots per game and his handicap soared. His putting was ruined, and he developed a classic case of the yips. For those who have been fortunate enough *never* to play the game of golf, a *yip* is not just the sound a squirrel makes. No. A *yip* (or *the yips* as it is commonly referred to in medical journals) is the phenomenon that happens as you're standing over your golf ball about to make a putt. You bring your club-head back and somewhere in the middle of your downswing you—*twitch*—and the ball goes nowhere near the hole.

After his shots in the stomach, my father's yipping evolved to a modern dance form. When he drew back the head of the putter, somewhere deep in his sub-conscious he saw the doctor pulling the plunger back and filling the syringe. And so, as he was about to make contact with the ball, he inevitably would—

*(Twitch.)*

He bought more putters than any man I ever knew and carried three in his bag at any given time. Anything to help relieve the yips. The putter he preferred most was a giant of a putter, something that John Henry could have used, as tall as a boy and heavy as a sledgehammer. He bought it off the TV one night: *The yipless putter! Scientifically proven to take strokes off your game.*

He had to grip it funny. His left hand holding the top against his chest and his right swinging the shaft across his navel. An easy pendulum.

But fear still gripped him. A golf course is, after all, nothing but a playground for squirrels. During the course of 18 holes, skirmishes with squirrels were frequent: golf tees were thrown, curses shouted: *Leave me alone you goddamn squirrel!* Carts driven at break-neck speeds.

All that changed one spring afternoon as he stood paralyzed over a putt while I tended the pin. Sweat dripped from his nose. Before I could ask what was wrong, I saw the squirrel crouched on the fringe of the green eyeing my father's golf ball like it was some exotic nut. With all eyes fixed on their own object of fascination. (My father on the squirrel, the squirrel on my father's ball, me on my father.) I watched as he backed away from the ball and made a broad circle around the fringe of the green slowly moving closer and closer. His footsteps hit the neatly trimmed grass without a sound as if he'd been taught in a former life by the Indians how to walk when approaching his prey. He stood over the squirrel like it was a championship putt that he had to, had to drain.

Evenly, he drew back the head of the mighty putter and—without a twitch or a yip—brought it cleanly across the squirrel's skull.

*(Click tongue. Pause. DAD smiles.)*

Rabhas—to *do* violence. The massacres of my youth had officially begun.

*(Shift. Pick up inner-tube. Use as steering wheel.)*

**CHESTER.** While driving, my father swerved to hit squirrels, not to avoid them. Every time he hit one, he kissed his hand and hit the roof of the car. He bought a little pump-rifle and sat on the porch, defending the bird-feeders.

*(Spin inner-tube and let it fall.)*

He gave me and my brother Dan a silver dollar for every squirrel we killed. Elaborate traps involving milk crates, fishing line, and sharply whittled sticks were made. Slingshots were great for knocking squirrels out of trees, but the blow usually only stunned them. An empty Coke bottle was needed to finish the job. But it didn't matter how we did it, just as long as we brought him some

proof. I slept in the same room as my brother Dan, and at night we'd sit in the dark dreaming up new ways to kill squirrels.

Squirrel slaying tactics.

1: Uhh...inject poison in an acorn.

2: Umm...drop a brick on its head.

3: Rig an electric cord to the bird-bath: ZAP!

I was eight; Dan was ten. We swapped stratagems until we drifted off collectively dreaming of massacre and malice. For our dreams, our father rewarded us with encouragement, support, love.

*(Shift. Suspend inner-tube horizontal to ground.)*

The massacres might have gone on to this day had it not been for one night. It was early fall after a long summer of slaughter. My piggy-bank was so full of silver dollars that I had to put the extras in a sock that I hid under my mattress.

**CHESTER.** The air was cooler and what my mother called: “sweater weather” and after dinner she wanted—

**MOM.** Our first fire of the year.

**CHESTER.** Dad gave my brother and me a lifesaver to get wood from the pile while he stuffed newspapers and kindling under the grate. Lifesaver...?

*(Offer audience member lifesaver.)*

We dropped the pile of wood on top and as my father was about to light the whole mess, Mom reminded him.

**MOM.** Don't forget to open the flue.

*(Lights go out except one tiny piece of light that illuminates CHESTER's hand as he reaches up through inner-tube.)*

**CHESTER.** My father reached way up into the chimney. His hand groping the darkness for the iron handle. With a clank, he released the flue door—

*(Lights restore to full.)*

**DAD.** Jesus-Christ-on-a-roller-skate. Boys! SQUIRREL!

**CHESTER.** A squirrel had fallen out of the chimney, onto the split logs, and was skittering wildly around the living room. My father held the fire-poker in his hands and bellowed:

**DAD.** Seal the doors, boys! Abbey get in the den!

**CHESTER.** Like Patton reacting to a late-night surprise-attack, my father knew exactly what to do. He armed my brother with the tiny shovel and pitched me the tiny brush from the fireplace set.

**DAD.** Let's get 'em, boys.

**CHESTER.** Armed with our fireplace lances and spears, we went about hunting the squirrel in our living room.

**DAD.** Careful boys, he's a tricky son-of-a-bitch, but he's gonna suffer.

**CHESTER.** The hated thing had invaded his home and fanned my father's hatred into an all-consuming rage. Rabhas.

We overturned the couch, the chair, the table, the display case that held my grandmother's bible. Every object was systematically overturned and from underneath each object the squirrel squirted under the next, until the last place left for it to hide was crammed under the coils of the hot-water radiator.

Dad touched the top of the radiator and quickly withdrew his hand: "Hotter than snot." A smile spread across his face and he let several deliberate moments pass before giving his next command. This was when I realized the difference between the executioner and the torturer.

*(Pause.)*

**DAD.** CJ, get down there and flush him out. Dan you get on that side and stand guard, I'll get on this.

**CHESTER.** I must not have responded right away, because he poked me with the poker. Neither hard nor gentle, it was a poke that felt like a half-bite from a dog. A bite where the dog puts his teeth around you, but doesn't clamp down. That's what my father's poke felt like. A poke that said: "Go on, or else."

I got down on my hands and knees, but still I couldn't see. I put my head down—one ear to the ground—and let my eyes adjust to the dark band under the radiator. Crouched back against the wall, I saw the squirrel shivering, his eyes darting around, searching for a way out. Had there been a way through the wall that squirrel would have found it, but it knew it was trapped. It looked at me with eyes as wide open as the two O's in the word "horror."

*(Scratch floor.)*

It nervously scratched the floor with its claws. With my ear pressed against the floorboard, I could hear that squirrel trying to communicate with me in some sort of squirrely Morse code.

*(Translate scratches.)*

*Please. Help me. Life is sacred. Let me live.*

*(Translate scratches again.)*

*Please. Help me. Life is sacred. Let me live.*

**DAD.** Come on, CJ.

**CHESTER.** I could hear the impatience in my brother's voice. The squirrel kept scratching: *Please. Help me.*

**DAD.** You see the dirty son-of-a-bitch, CJ?

**CHESTER JUNIOR.** Yes, sir.

**DAD.** Well chase him out here. Do your duty, son.

**CHESTER.** Reluctantly, my brush slid towards the squirrel. As the bristles approached, his fur bristled. Then, with a *twitch* of my wrist, I swept him from under the radiator. *Swish.*

All around me was the clank of metal hitting floorboards and the sound of something else, something much softer. Throughout I lay there staring at the empty spot the squirrel had left behind. With every clank, every smack, and every "Atta boy, Dan!" I filled that empty space with hatred for my father. To keep from screaming—"Stop! Stop!"—I bit my arm. I clamped down harder and harder until I broke the skin and felt the hatred enter my body—spreading through the motor nerves and accelerating as it headed towards the brain...

The squirrel was beaten, flattened, and then pitched on the wood pyre. Mom and I turned all the furniture back over, but nothing in my family was right side up ever again.

My father reasoned correctly:

**DAD.** A whole nest of squirrels must have made a summer home in our chimney. We'll teach 'em who's boss of this house.

**CHESTER.** More wood was brought in, more paper stuffed underneath the grate. The logs were soaked with lighter fluid.

*(Light a book of matches, lights dim.)*

**DAD.** Stand back, boys, this is gonna be some kind of fire.

**CHESTER.** He threw the book of matches on the logs. Like a dragon, the fire-pit took in a huuuuuge gasp of air and then blewwww a column of flames up the chimney.

**CHESTER.** We sat on the couch and watched it burn. You could smell the charred leaves from the nest caught in the chimney. Occasionally, above the crackle of the fire, you could hear the yip from a squirrel as flames touched its fur and it ran up the chimney wall scratching: *Please. Help me. Life is sacred. Let me live.*

My father sat ablaze with satisfaction at a job well done. As the fire died down and, after Mom had gone off to bed, my father put his arms around me and my brother. He pulled us roughly into his chest and held us tight:

**DAD.** Hitler was a crazy son-of-a-bitch, but he sure knew how to kill Jews.

*End Part I*

## PART II: Donuts

*(Light on inner-tube, hanging mid-air, with CHESTER's face framed inside it.)*

**CHESTER.** Delightfull Donuts had a huge sign in which a freckle-faced boy stood inside the hole of a giant donut. The boy in the hole was munching on a smaller donut and lived in a world in which he was perpetually eating donuts while being protected by the mother of all donuts. He knew nothing about ambivalence, bigotry, hatred—all he knew was donuts.

Delightfull Donuts was a dozen blocks from our home and a place where there were no squirrels or unpleasant smells—only confection and the comfort of warm donuts. A haven we visited every Sunday after church. The glass cases were higher than I was tall and filled with frosted delights: glazed, powdered, sprinkled, filled, fritters, Long Johns, Bavarian Kreme. Delightfull. And my father—my father—instructed us to order anything we wanted:

**DAD.** Go ahead, boys. Get three of everything you like.

**CHESTER.** The drive home was too much too bear. The smell of fresh donuts filled the car and my brother and I could hardly wait to get home and tear into the box. “Faster, Dad, drive faster!” My father glanced in the rear-view mirror, smiled, and then handed back a wax-paper bag. “This ought to tide you over.” In the bag, there were always two glazed donut holes—one for me, one for my brother. I never saw him order the donut holes, but he always had them. And as I grew up, I came to love and rely more on the donut holes than the whole donuts.

*(Shift. Pull down inner-tube and drive.)*

It's Christmas break and my girlfriend Dara and I are driving from Philadelphia to Kansas City. Dara has a fear of flying and so, even though we've dated since college and just moved in together, this will be the first time she will meet my parents. That her own phobia has kept them separated has been a happy stroke of luck for me. For the last three years, I've been the freckle-faced boy living in a world where a lover doesn't get dunked in the bitter coffee of my past.

Yes, my parents know it's serious. Yes, they've spoken to her on the phone. Yes, they've given her gifts. Yes, they know she works for an

advertising firm. No, they don't know we've moved in together. No, they don't know she's Jewish.

**DARA.** Maybe...maybe it won't come up.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) Dara, it's Christmas. *Christ-mass*. I think it'll come up.

**DARA.** Well, I don't know why you haven't told them, it's not like I'm a vegetarian like your brother's girlfriend.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) I know. I should have. I meant to—I just—I was—I—

**DARA.** Jesus, Chester, slow down!

**CHESTER.** The speedometer read 80; my pulse raced even faster. Dara gave me a reassuring pat.

**DARA.** It's going to be all right. You've warned me about them. Told me about the squirrels—

**CHESTER.** It's true. I had told her the squirrel in the chimney story, but I had left out his remark about Hitler. His anti-Semitism was a shadow I wouldn't—couldn't—own up to. So Dara was optimistic, cheerful even.

**DARA.** It'll be great. Trust me, there's nothing to worry about.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) I'm worried about his mind. One of the things about rabies is that once introduced the virus has an eclipse phase in which it cannot be detected in the host—

**DARA.** Don't start with the rabies. Your father does not have rabies.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) It's of a different order.

**DARA.** He was bitten like 20 years ago, he does not have—

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) It's a complicated virus that we don't know much about. They call it an "incurable wound."

**DARA.** What? Is he going to bite me?

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) He might. He can be very vicious at times.

**DARA.** This is—you're being ridiculous. We're not one of your lab experiments, we don't live in a petri dish, Chester. What will happen, will happen. If he bites me, then fine, but you cannot control him...or me.

**CHESTER.** The car falls silent and we hurtle towards the moment of impact. Throughout the 18 hour trip, Dara has seen a part of the country she's never seen before. Her fear of flying (combined with her own father's fear of long car trips, roadtripophobia or RTP) has kept her tethered to the East Coast. Although inconvenient, I secretly like this fear of flight. I think it will keep her close to me.

Kansas City rises out of the plains like an ape standing for the first time on two legs to see over the tall prairie grass. From the highway, downtown looks drab and depressed. Every time I come home, I arrive in a fine *mist*. It's never storming or snowing or (God forbid) sunny, it's just—

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) Hey, Dara, let's pull off for the night, get a hotel.

**DARA.** Pull off? We're there, here—I mean what are you? Pull off?

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) I just...I never get to be in this city without this mist.

**DARA.** *What?*

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) It's this mist. I just want to see this city before seeing my parents, to see if there's still this mist. Let's pull off, get a hotel, and see what happens to this mist.

**DARA.** They're expecting us.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) So, we'll call and tell them we had a flat.

**DARA.** If we're going to stay in a hotel here, then we're going to be honest with them.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) No, not honest. No.

**DARA.** Then we're going to your parents. I'm not going to lie.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA.*) *You* don't have to lie, *I'll* do it for you. Come on...let's just get a hotel. Please?

**DARA.** I don't understand why—

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) The mist. It's the mist. I have to see about this mist.

**CHESTER.** I hoped that if I said *mist* enough, the power of the word alone would persuade her. It didn't.

**DARA.** Chester, if you can give me one good reason, then I'll—

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) I can't make love in my parents' house!

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** The sounds of the tires hitting the road spans went: flalump, flalump, flalump. I pulled off at the next exit and went into the Adam's Mark Hotel to get a room. All they had was a honeymoon suite. It was going to cost \$275 for the night but, since it was after five, they said they'd let it go for \$150.

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) Please? I'll beg if I have to.

**DARA.** You really want this?

**CHESTER.** (*To DARA:*) One night of freedom and then we'll go to my parents.

**DARA.** O...Kay... But you're making the phone call.

*(Shift. Phone rings.)*

**CHESTER.** The phone rings as I approach the door to my apartment. It's dark out and I'm unfamiliar with the keys, the quirks of the lock, and the recent changes in my life. Dara has asked me to give her a divorce. I'd give her anything, but I can't give her a divorce. I suggested a trial separation and moved out of our townhouse into an apartment of my own. I've been here for a total of two weeks.

*(The phone continues to ring.)*

I struggle to find the exact position the key needs to be in to trip open the lock.

*(The phone continues to ring.)*

It must be Dara. She's the only person I've given this number to. I hope I'm running to catch her. I hope she has changed her mind. I hope she says the divorce was a mistake, a big joke, a test of my love for her.

*(The phone continues to ring.)*

The lock clicks open. I fall through the dark opening, running towards the ringing phone.

*(Phone rings.)*

Now, I'm sure it's Dara and that my life is about to return to its expected course—SLAM! into the coffee-table. The furniture, what little there is, is who knows where. Boxes are all over. I'm running in circles, unable to even answer my own GOD-DAMN PHONE! Ah.

*(Phone rings. Answer phone.)*

“Hello?” *(Catching breath:)* “Hello?” *(Catching breath:)* “Dara?” Damn! I missed the call—that one moment when Dara had seen some hope. That moment when the tide is low and exposes the isthmus that still connects us. There are no moments like that though. The receiver is inches from the cradle when a thin voice slips through the handle.

**MOM.** Chester? Chetie? How quick can you get home?

**CHESTER.** *(To MOM:)* Mom? What is it?

**MOM.** It's...he's dying...your father...you better come quick.

**CHESTER.** Suddenly—click, as if speaking that sentence utterly drained her. I held the phone to my ear, listening to the emptiness. There is no lonelier sound in the world.

*(Shift. Possibly, test the inner-tube for firmness, as if it were a mattress.)*

**CHESTER.** *(To MOM, in phone:)* No, Mom. We're fine. We just blew a tire. We'll be there tomorrow.

**CHESTER.** Dara lies on the biggest bed I've ever seen. It's circular in shape and she arches her back and wonders: “Where do you get sheets for something like this?”

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) It was just a tire, Mom, not the whole engine. It's no big deal.

**CHESTER.** Dara rolls over to watch how I perform a lie.

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) I don't know, it got a hole in it...a bottle. We hit a bottle. We stopped, put on the spare, got the tire fixed, but now it's too late to finish for the night.

*(Stage yawn.)*

We're tired, so we stopped...I don't know exactly where we are Mom. Some hotel in the middle of Missouri...a Motel 6, a Super 8, I don't know, you do the math, Mom...no, Mom, I'm not being *flip*, it's very nice. Don't worry. It's a Motel 6, okay?

**CHESTER.** Dara raises her eyebrows confirming that she caught the telling detail—a Motel 6. A lie is made up of nothing but Achilles' heels. The smallest thing can trip you up.

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) Mom, we're adults. Of course, we're sharing a room... Yeah, two beds, Mom.

**CHESTER.** Dara rolls her eyes as she watches me perform a lie within a lie.

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) Separate beds, sure Mom. I'll even keep one foot on the floor.

**CHESTER.** Suddenly, in my other ear, I feel the warmth of Dara's whisper:

**DARA.** Tell her we're going to—

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) No hanky-panky, Mom.

**DARA.** —all night long.

**CHESTER.** (*To MOM:*) Yes, Mom, we'll go right to bed.

**CHESTER.** My head feels like an old fashion sink with two water taps. In my left ear ran the hot suggestions of Dara; in my right ear ran the chilling voice of my mother.

**MOM.** Chester, I'm serious. No hanky-panky.

**DARA.** We've never done it in a circular bed before.

**MOM.** You kids need a good night's rest.

**DARA.** You be the radius—

**MOM.** The libido is something to control.

**DARA.** —I'll be the diameter.

**MOM.** You know premarital sex is a sin.

**CHESTER.** *(To MOM:)* STOP TALKING LIKE WE'RE TEENAGERS MOM, WE'RE ENGAGED!

**CHESTER.** The water shut off immediately. Not at the faucets though. This was a main-line shut-off. Somewhere in there I meant to imbed the word *practically*. We're *practically* engaged.

Mom let out one of her little Mom gasps.

*(MOM gasps.)*

Dara sat straight up, alarmed, maybe we really had just blown a tire. Clearly, this was not the way I had planned to propose.

The lie had taken on monumental proportions now. Inspired by mist, an impulsive stop at a hotel 15 minutes from my parents' house had now become a defining moment. All I wanted to do was talk to Dara, who now orbited the bed in a nervous circle, but first I had to get rid of my mother of the thousand questions:

**MOM.** Have you set a date? Have you told her parents? Are you going to get married here or Philly? Are you going to wear your grandfather's tuxedo? Have you—

**CHESTER.** *(To MOM:)* We'll talk about it tomorrow, Mom. *Click.*

**CHESTER.** Dara looked at me.

**DARA.** So we're getting married, huh?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* I meant to say *practically*.

**DARA.** But you didn't.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Well, we *are* in the honeymoon suite—

**DARA.** HOW CAN YOU BE SO FUCKING CAVALIER ABOUT THIS?!

**CHESTER.** I was making a joke—

**DARA.** FUNNY, IT'S VERY FUNNY CHESTER! ALMOST AS FUNNY AS TELLING YOUR PARENTS WE'RE ENGAGED BEFORE YOU EVEN ASKED ME! HOW DO YOU THINK THAT MAKES ME FEEL? DON'T I COME BEFORE YOUR PARENTS—DON'T I MATTER MORE?!

**CHESTER.** She fled to the bathroom. After a moment, I heard the shower. Whenever Dara gets really mad, she showers. Eventually she emerged from the bathroom, hair wet, and the anger scrubbed from her face:

**DARA.** Do you, do you really want to marry me?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* I...yes. I do. If you want to marry me.

**CHESTER.** The answer was a long time in coming. We invoked the word *crazy* a lot. "It would be *crazy* to get married." "This is *crazy*." "This is the biggest decision of our lives and we're making it like *crazy* people." And the ever popular: "You're *crazy!*" We even made *crazy* love there in the Adam's Mark Hotel on the circular bed. And finally she said.

**DARA.** I know I'm *crazy*, but yes, Chester. I will marry you. Yes.

*(Shift. Roll inner-tube to a different part of the stage.)*

**CHESTER.** Dara will take me to the airport, but I have to meet her at our, her townhouse. This is the first time we've seen each other since she gave me the divorce papers to sign and I moved out.

**DARA.** Just sign, Chester, so we can get this process going. Don't drag this out.

**CHESTER.** I stand in my former kitchen, clutching the handle of my rolling suitcase while she rushes around upstairs. My eyes dart from familiar object to familiar object: the tea-kettle Mom gave her for her last birthday. It's painted like a sheep; when it whistles it bleats. The wine glasses we got for our wedding hang from their rack like a row of silent bats. There on the counter is the water-purifier we installed together.

I wonder if she remembers that when installing it I dropped a washer on the floor and it rolled under the kitchen table. We got on hands and knees looking for that washer. We had always made fun of those movies where couples are so seized by their passion that they must make love there on the kitchen floor. And, as we were crawling around hunting for the washer, Dara gave me a Hollywood hump-me stare, unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, and giggled rapidly.

**DARA.** Well, lookie what happens when you drop a washer, big fella.

**CHESTER.** She unbuttoned another button.

**DARA.** It's a solid premise for a porn flick, don't you think?

**CHESTER.** She unbuttoned another button.

**DARA.** Maybe somebody should call a plumber.

*(Beat.)*

**CHESTER.** As I look at the water-purifier now, I wonder if she remembers that. Or if, as she's filling up her glass of memories, the filter removes all the sediment—both good and bad.

My eye ricochets from object to object, trying to find a non-stimulating place to rest. But then all I see is conspicuous absence. The pictures of us are removed from the refrigerator. The throw-rug that I always put in front of the sink is gone. She never liked that rug: "It just bunches." Is that why she wants this divorce? Because I insisted on a bunchy throw-rug?

My eye lands on a yellow Post-it note stuck above the phone. I notice something familiar written on the tiny yellow field. I take a step closer and see it's my name:

Chester—731-1274

This is all of me that remains here.

Seeing myself now shrunk down to a microscopic square of paper stuck to the wall seems impossible, *crazy* even. Crazy.

When Pasteur first formulated the philosophy behind microbiology many called him crazy. How could something so small kill something so large? How could microscopic bacteria bring down a whole sheep or cow? “*Crazy!*” skeptics shouted.

Crazy, maybe, but true. In times of stress and distress that virus begins to rapidly replicate and circulate through your body—

*It’s...he’s dying...*

—Infecting each cell it encounters—

*...Your father, you better come quick.*

—And you have to put a stop to it, because if you don’t it will kill you.

*...Your father, you better come quick.*

*(Shift. Hang inner-tube vertically in air.)*

**CHESTER.** Dara and I checked out of the Adam’s Mark Hotel at 11am and made our way towards the suburbs.

*(Move upstage of inner-tube.)*

We stand in front of my parents’ door, gathering our strength before knocking. A wreath my mother made hangs proudly on the door. My mother loved making wreaths and every Christmas our home was infested with wreaths, each with its own special theme.

**MOM.** This one is evergreen with miniature sleighs woven into it. I made the tiny toboggans with curled popsicle sticks and used toothpicks for runners on the Flexible-Fliers. On top of the whole thing I sprinkled iridescent snowflakes.

**CHESTER.** I pointed: *(To DARA:)* It’s a winter wonderland.

**DARA.** You didn’t tell me your mother was a Krafty macaroni and cheese.

**CHESTER.** Even there, tense and worried, Dara could make me laugh with a cheesy pun.

*(Move downstage of wreath.)*

I imagined my parents crowded behind the other side of the door peeping out at us and elbowing each other out of the way like two vaudevillians trying to grab center stage.

**MOM.** Why aren't they coming in? Lemme see!

**DAD.** There's nothing to see, Abbey. They're just standing there in front of the door.

**MOM.** What does she look like?

**DAD.** Not bad, not bad. Taller than she sounds over the phone! Dark hair. Eyes the color of a squirrel...

*(Move back upstage of wreath.)*

**CHESTER.** Before he could pass judgment, I shot my hand through the wreath and knocked.

*(Shift.)*

**CHESTER.** The door to the hospital opens automatically as if the building itself expects my arrival. Inside, the hospital is quiet. My mother leads me through a maze of hallways like a lab-rat hunting the cheese. I'm tired. My plane was late and we had to circle Kansas City for an hour because of heavy fog. *Heavy fog.* That's the airline's euphemism for *mist*. When I got in, I wanted to go home and rest, but Mom insisted we stop by the hospital warning.

**MOM.** He could go any minute. You'll want to see him.

**CHESTER.** And so she leads me through the hospital hallways—sniffing the antiseptic air at every juncture—what I expect to find at the end is a molding piece of cheese. Something so decayed by years of hatred that it should just be thrown away.

*(Sound of "Wheel of Fortune" theme song.)*

But when we arrive, the room is bright and filled with fresh flowers. My father sits up in his hospital bed, happily playing along with what he calls "Wheel! Of! The! Fortunate!" The wheel comes to rest on the \$500 wedge.

**DAD.** An "S." Ask for an "S"!

**CHESTER.** A shot of the puzzle fills the screen. The clue is: “A phrase.” The player asks for an “L.” A cube lights up and Vanna White saunters over and begins the striptease of language.

As I watch my father sitting up in his death-bed happily watching his “Wheel of the Fortunate” spin, I think: *shouldn't he be in pain? Suffering? Foaming at the mouth with open sores and broken bones sticking out of them and his blood boiling so hot that he can't sleep?* My mother whispers:

**MOM.** He's on a lot of morphine.

**CHESTER.** At that same moment, my father yells:

**DAD.** It ain't necessarily so!

**CHESTER.** The puzzle is solved; the real mystery now begins. I step fully into the room. “Dad? It's me. Chester. I've come home...”

*(Shift.)*

**CHESTER.** *(To PARENTS:)* Dad, Mom, I'd like you to meet Dara.

**CHESTER.** My parents stood looking at her. My father in front, my mother slightly behind him as if using his body as a human shield. Standing in the open doorway I was prepared to glaze any disconcerting remark my father made with a jolly laugh. “Ha-Ha-Ha!” If a walrus had leapt out of my father's mouth, I was prepared to explain it away. “My father has the worst habit of walruses coming out of his mouth! Ha-Ha-Ha!” I was thus prepared and every muscle in my neck tightened when he finally did open his mouth:

**DAD.** What a delight to finally meet you, Dara, we've heard so much about you.

**CHESTER.** Gracious?! My father? Gracious? I watched as he extended his hand to Dara. His palm was turned up—an offering. I was as confused as a man in a grocery store holding a list for a hardware store. The only thing that matched up was: *nuts*.

**CHESTER.** As soon as my father shook Dara's hand, my mother broke out from behind him. What I had perceived as a shield, was really a human blockade. A dam that had kept the waters of my mother's excitement temporarily in check:

**MOM.** WELCOME! WELCOME!! WELCOME!!!

**CHESTER.** She actually threw her arms around Dara. My jaw hit the floor.

**MOM.** Welcome to the family! Welcome to the family. Are you tired? Can I get you some coffee? Tea? Nog? How was the drive? Oh, that's just terrible about the tire. I hope the motel wasn't too awful.

**DARA.** It was fine. A Motel 6, right, Chetie?

**MOM.** You call him Chetie, too! I love that. Chester told us you were great, but he didn't tell us you were an angel.

**DARA.** Oh, thank you...What a lovely house. Chester says you made that great wreath on the door.

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** Dara could not have delivered a more decisive compliment. After years of enduring ridicule and suffering in silence for her arts and crafts my mother was gloriously redeemed.

**MOM.** I make all sorts of wreaths: dough wreaths, rag wreaths, pine-cone wreaths, holly—

**DAD.** —Toilet-paper roll wreaths, cat food tin wreaths.

**MOM.** *(To DAD:)* Bah humbug to you, Mister Scrooge. *(To DARA:)* These two jokers live to tease me about my wreaths.

**DAD.** Anything she can get her hands on she's making into a...

**CHESTER.** My father hesitated and I knew he was about to say "god-damn wreath" but he skipped over the phrase like an expert hopscotch player skips over the stone and landed on a question instead.

**DAD.** It's awfully nice of your parents to let you come here for Christmas, won't they miss you?

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** I braced myself. Dara looked at me, took a breath, and smiled at my father.

**DARA.** I'm Jewish, so it's not anything we've ever celebrated.

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** I studied my father for a reaction—*Come on, say something, I'm ready*—but he said nothing. He nodded, put his hands in his pockets, and dropped his gaze.

My mother broke the strange silence and slugged me on the shoulder.

**MOM.** Chester! It would have been nice if you had told us that earlier, I would have gotten a menorah or something so she would feel more welcome. Honestly, you can be so thoughtless, your head's always in that microscope.

**CHESTER.** I kept focused on my father. Zooming him in, challenging him to say something—*come on*—ready to jump down his throat at any minute. But instead, he just pulled his hands out of his pockets and said:

**DAD.** Would you like a lifesaver, Dara?

**CHESTER.** Dara took one—perplexed. I stood—dumbfounded.

*(Pause.)*

**MOM.** Come on, Dara, I'll give you l'grand tour.

**CHESTER.** Mom looped her arm around Dara's as if she was weaving a human wreath. I think they might have skipped off together...Finally: a daughter. As I watched them disappear through the archway, I felt very sad for my mother. How different her life would have been if she had had a daughter? Would my father have paid my sister to kill squirrels?

As their voices trailed off, my father moved so close to me I could feel his breath on my neck:

**DAD.** So, you're marrying a Jew.

**CHESTER.** It was more statement than question. A nip with enough force behind it to break the skin of my certainty. The virus worked its way into my system and I felt...right at home. My love

for Dara stronger than ever. And then his words bit into me again, harder this time.

**DAD.** It'll never work out.

**End of Part II**



### PART III: Lifesavers

*(CHESTER gets a lifesaver from his pocket.)*

**CHESTER.** Lifesavers. My father always carried a roll of wint-o-green lifesavers in his pocket. He doled them out as largess for small tasks done: taking out the trash, getting wood for the fire, helping clear the dishes...and...occasionally just for no reason at all. Sometimes I'd fake being sick, act like I had a *cough*, just waiting for Dad to notice: "*You need a lifesaver, Chetie?*" When I was in college, he never once sent me a letter, but every once in awhile, I would get this brown, bubble-wrapped envelope in the mail that said: FRAGILE in big red letters on the outside. FRAGILE. And inside, wrapped to an inch of its life in toilet paper, was a roll of wint-o-green lifesavers. No note, no check, nothing—just a roll of wint-o-green lifesavers.

*(Holding out lifesaver to audience.)*

FRAGILE.

*(To himself.)*

Fragile.

*(Shift.)*

**CHESTER.** The eight days surrounding my father's death was an eternity. The routine was set. Go to the hospital, the funeral parlor, the hospital again, the lawyer, the hospital, the bank, the hospital, the hospital. Always back to the hospital.

For his part, my father was not playing the role of dying man well. He was chipper. Happy almost. A boy home sick from school. When I arrived, in addition to "Wheel of the Fortunate," he insisted we play card games: Go Fish, War, Spit in the Ocean. After tiring of these, he demanded board games.

Nothing quick and easy, he wanted those interminable board games: Monopoly, Risk. My mother and I spent one afternoon driving from mall to mall searching for Battleship.

At first I thought he was playing the long games in an attempt to extend his life. Who could die sitting on the brink of world domi-

nation? Who could die just after locating the coordinates of my cruiser?

But as we moved into a game of Trivial Pursuit, the games took on a sinister quality and we pursued trivia at all costs:

Question #1: “How many Balkan Wars were there?”

Question #2: “What sport does the term hat-trick come from?”

Eventually, I had had enough. I picked up the card, but instead of reading the question, I asked:

*(To DAD:)* Which son of yours is in the process of getting divorced?

He gave me the sourest look...a look that said: “Why’d you have to go and spoil all the fun?” The look hung there while his eyes filled with fatherly disappointment.

**DAD.** I told you *that* would never work out.

*(Cough.)*

**CHESTER.** He began coughing. Violently. Cataclysmic coughs that sent the trivia flying. Game pieces scattered. I should have called for a nurse, gotten him some water, given him a lifesaver, something. But I just stood there watching him cough, praying he would die so I wouldn’t have to strangle him.

*(Cough.)*

I wanted to scream: “It’s because of you that it didn’t work out!” But I didn’t say anything, not even there, then. I just stood there watching—

*(Cough.)*

Every cough caused him visible pain. Every cough took days off his life. Every cough filled me with inner-joy. Watching him suffer filled me with so much joy that it stopped up my ears to the language of the coughs.

**DAD.** *(Coughs slightly obscure words:)* Please. Help me...Life...

**CHESTER.** But I wouldn’t—couldn’t—hear it. All I knew was that this was what he deserved. I stood there, a fire-poker in my hand,

ready to smash him if he tried to escape. Rabhas—I learned it from you, Dad.

His coughing tapered off and he sat stone still with his hands cupped over his mouth, looking at me with disbelief.

That's right, I am my father's son. I am my father's son.

Slowly, he drew back his hands. The sleeves of his hospital gown were covered in blood. In his hands he held this mass of tumorous goo and in that mass I saw a...a baby squirrel...no bigger than the head of a putter.

And he held that baby squirrel out to me and said..."*Lifesaver...?*"

*(Shift. Hang inner-tube, light shines on it. Perhaps a bar of music from a pipe organ.)*

**CHESTER.** Jesus Christ stood above the altar, his arms open wide, and a halo of light shining up from behind his head. A symbol of pure love. It was his birthday and even as an icon he looked radiant. On my left stood my father, singing: "*Silent night, holy night, all is calm...*" On my right stood Dara. She didn't sing, but looked around and took in the Christmas scene. I told her we didn't have to go to Midnight services but she insisted.

**DARA.** It's a family tradition.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* It's their tradition, not mine.

**DARA.** Why do you have to be so...contrary...? Look, I'm going. I've never been and I'm curious to see what all the hoopla is about. If you want to prove a point and stay home, that's fine with me.

**CHESTER.** The hymn ended and the audience sat on cue. I was surprised how much I remembered the routine. When to sit, when to stand, when to bow my head. The whole service existed in my body. Dara knew none of the internal cues and was always the last to stand, sit, or kneel. Right before the Prayers of the People my foot shot instinctively under the oak kneeling rail and brought it squarely down on her shin. She bit her lip to keep from screaming.

**CHESTER.** *(Silently, to DARA:)* Sorry.

**CHESTER.** I slid my hand down her shin and rubbed the swelling bump. Her hand shot down and smacked mine away. My father turned and shook his head.

Maybe he was right, maybe this wouldn't work out.

*(Shift. Distant bells. Sneak across stage.)*

**CHESTER.** Later that night, after the bells announcing the birth of Christ had ended, I snuck past my parents' bedroom door and down the hallway towards my old room. *Creak.* Watch the floorboards. Even though we are now officially engaged, Mom still makes us sleep in separate rooms.

**CHESTER.** *(To MOM:)* But Mom, we're going to sneak around anyway.

**MOM.** I don't care what you do after I'm asleep, as long as I can go to bed with a clear conscience.

**CHESTER.** Carefully, I turn the knob and slip into Dara's room so silently that she doesn't even hear me. The bruise from the kneeling rail is dark purple and she massages moisturizer into her legs—delicately working the crème around the bruise. She bruises easily, much easier than I do—but that's only externally.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA, quietly:)* Looks bad...

*(Pause.)*

Umm...Sorry?

*(Pause.)*

So...other than the leg, how was your first Christmas service?

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** This is the first chance we've had to be alone since we arrived, but she won't even look at me. She keeps inspecting the bruise. Lightly touching its perimeter, establishing the circumference of pain.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* What'd you think of my mom?

**DARA.** She's nice.

**CHESTER.** She flips the cap back on the bottle of crème to emphasize her point.

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) What'd you think of my father?

**DARA.** God, it's cold in this house...

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) My father? You must have had some impression.

**CHESTER.** She hurries into her nightgown and jumps into bed.

**DARA.** He was quiet.

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) Quiet? My father? Quiet?

**DARA.** He said about three things to me all day.

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) Well, he said plenty to me.

**CHESTER.** *Swish, swish.* I hear her feet moving back and forth under the covers trying to warm up the cold sheets. *Swish. Swish.*

**DARA.** Chester, what did he say?

**CHESTER.** *Swish, swish.* His words swish through my body creating more and more friction. *Swish.* "Hitler was a crazy son of a bitch, but he sure knew how to kill Jews." *Swish.* "So, you're marrying a Jew." *Swish.* "It'll never work out."

**DARA.** What did he say?

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) Nothing, forget it. Let's just go to bed.

**DARA.** Oh come on, now you have to tell me.

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) I can't without telling you everything. About the squirrels, about today, everything.

**DARA.** You've told me about the squirrels, the rabies—

**CHESTER.** (To DARA:) But I haven't told you *everything*.

**CHESTER.** And so I begin to lay out the history, telling her the *whole* story. *Swish, swish.* Her eyes dart around as nervously as the squirrel trapped under the radiator, searching for a way out. *Swish, swish.*

**DARA.** He— he said that? Your father really said that?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* I wish he hadn't.

**DARA.** And what did you say?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Me? I didn't say anything.

**DARA.** You just stood there...? Come on, you must have said something. Anything...? Nothing?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Look, don't put this on me. He said it, I didn't say anything.

**DARA.** Exactly, Chester. You said nothing. You have to say something.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* I'll talk to him, when the time is right.

**CHESTER.** *Swish. Swish.* Her feet move furiously back and forth under the covers. *Swish, swish.* His words move through me. Pasteur learned that in the case of a rabies bite, timing is everything. If the vaccine is administered soon after the infection, the disease can be combated. But if you wait, even a day, there's no containing it, there's nothing to keep the virus from entering the brain. *Swish, swish, swish...*

**DARA.** Why didn't you tell me any of this earlier?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Like when, our first date? How does that work? "Hi, my father's a raging anti-Semite, how about a drink?"

**DARA.** What are you talking about? You didn't even know I was Jewish until—

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Maybe I did.

**DARA.** No, it was at least three months in. Remember? You told me that there was a grocery store in the Midwest called Schnucks and I thought that was hilarious 'cause in Yiddish a *schnook* means...

**CHESTER.** An idiot. A fool. I know. I knew.

**DARA.** Chester...what, what are you saying...? Chester, answer me.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* How could you love me, want to marry someone like me, someone with a father like mine?

*(Pause.)*

**DARA.** Chester, listen. You should have told me earlier, let me know what I was getting into. But I'm here now and I'm marrying you, not your father, okay?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* It *will* work out.

She reached over and turned out the light. We lay in the darkness like strangers, longing for sleep.

*(Lie down. Pause.)*

Finally, Dara said:

**DARA.** Tell me something kind about your father.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Something kind?

**DARA.** I need something to balance out his words. Anything. Come on, the first thing that comes to mind. I need to hear something kind about your father.

*(CHESTER sits up, gets a lifesaver from pocket.)*

**CHESTER.** Lifesavers...

*(Shift.)*

**CHESTER.** His eyes are wide open, pupils the size of two silver dollars. I stand over the hospital bed studying those pupils for a sign. Maybe, maybe if I look straight into them, straight into his eyes I will discover the mystery that will allow me to weep.

*(Pause.)*

But his eyes, those silver dollars, offer me nothing—nothing but a reflection of myself.

My mother slumps in a corner chair. She sobs in fits and starts. My brother puts away the board games. But he puts Risk pieces in with the Monopoly set and mixes the pegs of Mastermind in with the Battleship set. As he stacks the boxes on the window sill, he slams them together. A nurse stands patiently by the door.

On the bedside table, sits a role of wint-o-green lifesavers—one left. “Fragile.” I hold it, hoping to be saved. Hoping for something. But there’s nothing. I am 28 years old. My father has just died and I feel nothing. Neither pleasure or pain—nothing.

*(Shift. Sit down with inner-tube.)*

**CHESTER.** Five hours after my father died, Mom went on a wreath making binge. She came back from Hobby-Lobby with bags full of every type of craft material you could imagine: raffia, ribbon, Styro-foam molds, tiny plaster angels, dried flowers, fake ivy, and more baby’s breath than has ever been exhaled.

For the three days between his death and his funeral, she sat at the kitchen table and made wreaths. I envied her activity and longed for something to absorb me.

I started organizing...*stuff*. The closet in my old room was filled with nothing but old National Geographic magazines. I spent the first day cataloguing them by date, thumbing through back-issues, idly looking at pictures of people and places around the globe. Escape would be so easy.

The next day I went into the basement and straightened up my father’s workbench. He was a hands-off handyman and his work area attested to it. Drawers filled with random tools, spare sockets divorced from the ratchet-wrench, scraps of pipe everywhere, and finally one huge bucket of hardware. I poured the bucket onto the bench and sifted through the pile. There were a few nails, bolts, and brads, but most of what I found were washers. Tons and tons of washers.

**DAD.** Lookie here, CJ, every time you get a bolt and nut, you get a washer. The washer keeps the nut from digging into whatever you’re bolting together. You can use the washer, but you don’t need it. See? Without one it still holds together, it’s just a direct, rougher sort of bond.

*(The phone rings.)*

**CHESTER.** The main source of distraction is the phone. Mom won’t—can’t—talk to anybody, so I get used to telling the story

over and over and saying “uh-huh” as the person on the other end fumbles for words of condolence.

*(Answer phone.)*

**CHESTER.**

CONDOLENCE 1: “*His passing must be very hard on you.*”

CONDOLENCE 2: “*I was so sorry to hear of your loss.*”

CONDOLENCE 3: “*Your Dad is in a better place now.*”

*(Pause. Get National Geographic.)*

An article I found in one of the National Geographics about the Australian outback says that aborigines dramatize both sorrow and grief. They dramatize grief. When a relative dies, both men and women cry, dance, undergo ritual bloodletting. They carry on until they “become empty with grief.” Displays of sorrow are performed not only to express personal loss, but also to identify with the others who have experienced grief.

*(Echo.)*

“*Your Dad is in a better place now.*”

*(Beat.)*

Our culture has no language for grief: verbal, physical, ritualistic. We don’t know how to express it; so grief fills us so completely that it becomes too heavy to pick up, like a squirrel trying to carry a whole bagel up a tree.

*(Beat.)*

I guess that’s why I’m here now...

*(Phone rings.)*

**CHESTER.** I hold a fistful of washers in my hand, when she calls.

**CHESTER.** *(To phone:)* Hello...? Hello...?

**DARA.** Chester?

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Dara?

**DARA.** I...I’m sorry.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* How'd you know? My brother call?

**DARA.** I just had this feeling. Isn't that weird? Last night I was in bed and I looked up and the ceiling was suddenly gone. The whole ceiling gone and all that was left was an ocean of stars and sky.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Sounds like you were dreaming.

**DARA.** I guess, but it seemed—real. Your father came in and he was all ready to go swimming. He was wearing an inner-tube and he was standing on this diving board attached to the wall, looking at me. Then he bounced twice and dove into the stars. And as he swam out into the air, the stars got brighter and brighter...

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* And then he was gone?

**DARA.** Yeah, gone.

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* Now, will you come back to me?

**DARA.** Chester, don't—

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* But he's gone. We can start fresh.

**DARA.** Chester, you know that's not possible.

**CHESTER.** *(To DARA:)* But why?

**DARA.** Did you ever talk to him?

*(Pause.)*

**CHESTER.** I look at the washers in my hand and see that I'm still wearing my wedding band. I know our marriage is over, I know she's just waiting for me to sign the papers, I know that, but I'm still wearing my ring. One among the many washers I have tried to put between my father and me.

Loving Dara isn't the vaccine that will cure me of my hatred of my father.

As with the rabies vaccine that Louis Pasteur discovered, the cure lies in the thing itself. The cure for my father, is my father. I slip off the wedding band, but where do you put something like this? My finger aches with its absence. Our conversation lurches awkwardly

forward. The pauses between us feel as formidable as an open grave.

**DARA.** Well...take care, Chester. Call me if you ever need to talk.

**CHESTER.** *Click.* I mix the ring in with the washers and leave the whole pile sitting on Dad's workbench.

*(Shift. Grip inner-tube tightly.)*

**CHESTER.** I step up to the open grave and stare at the polished oak box that holds my father. I bow my head, knowing I'm expected to pray, pay my last respects, something. Mom made the wreath I'm holding. During the three-day holding pattern between the death and the funeral, she made a pile of wreaths. Last night she went through them all, methodically analyzing their strengths and weaknesses:

*(Inspects inner-tube.)*

MOM'S WREATH ANALYSIS 1: He wouldn't like this—too much pink.

MOM'S WREATH ANALYSIS 2: This one? No, he was no fan of raffia.

MOM'S WREATH ANALYSIS 3: Hmm...? This? Yes. This is the wreath for your father. This is the one.

**CHESTER.** I stand with a simple wreath woven out of daisies. A few long-stemmed roses are mixed in for color and for thorns.

*(Bow head, then step back still with inner-tube.)*

I threw in the dirt as expected, but somehow I forgot to lay the wreath at the foot of the grave. How could I forget? I'm standing next to my mother, still holding the wreath. How I could forget? The priest gestures to the ground indicating it's not too late.

But it is.

I won't lay down the wreath. There's something, something too final about it. It's not over. I squeeze the wreath harder, feel the thorns dig into my hands. Mom looks at me, her eyes say: "Please? I made that wreath for him." I shake my head, "No." I can't. I'm not ready. The priest gives a little nod to my mother, letting her know

## **THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!**

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