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Playscripts, Inc.
P.O. Box 237060
New York, NY 10023

Phone/fax: 1-866-NEW-PLAY (639-7529)
Email: questions@playscripts.com
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Cast of Characters

STEVEN, age 30, the son

JOHN, age 55, the father

LINDA, age 55, the mother and wife

HOW TO BE A GOOD SON

by Julia Cho

(Voices from the dark.)

STEVEN. How

LINDA. to be

JOHN. a good

STEVEN. son.

(Four rings of a phone. The sound of recorded voices.)

STEVEN'S VOICE. Hello?

LINDA'S VOICE. Steven. It's me.

(Lights up on STEVEN.)

STEVEN. So let's start with the Greeks. Why not, everything else in theatre does and this is no exception.

This was how the Greeks communicated via long distance:

When Clytemnestra, the Queen of Argos, wants to keep abreast of what's going on in the world, she sets up a chain of 24-hour watchmen from Troy all the way to Argos. When Troy is defeated, a bonfire is lit, and this sets off a chain reaction. Every watchman, when he sees the light of the pyre before him, sets off his own pyre. And these lights travel one by one across the land, until they reach the watchman on the roof of the palace of Argos. He runs and tells the queen and that's how she knows Troy has fallen.

You, on the other hand, do not have pyres.

This is how you communicate via long distance:

(The ring of a telephone.)

(STEVEN holds up a black cordless phone.)

It's a smallish thing. Not so poetic, maybe, but it fits in your hand.

Like most of the models your friends own, it is black. Sometimes, when you are cradling it between your head and shoulder, your face will accidentally push the buttons.

(Sound of a discordant bleeping.)

STEVEN'S VOICE. Oh, sorry.

STEVEN. This particular model comes with an answering machine.

STEVEN'S VOICE. *(Very actor-y:)* Hey. You've almost reached Steven. Leave a message and I'll get right back to you. Thanks.

STEVEN. When there is a message your machine blinks like so.

(He holds up the cradle for his cordless phone. There's a blinking message light.)

It is your twenty-first century pyre and these messages burn like distant lights that come at you one by one.

Pyre one.

You're twenty-two. You've come home after a long day of bad auditions. You see the blinking light and hope that it's your temp agency or a casting agent...

(A beep.)

LINDA'S VOICE. Steven?

It's Mom.

Could you give me a call? Tonight, don't wait for tomorrow, okay? I'll be up late. Even wake me up, that's okay. Call me as soon as you get this. I love you. Bye. *(Pause.)* You're going to call me, right?

(STEVEN holds up a length of rope. One end he holds in his hand. The other trails off into the darkness.)

STEVEN. Lesson One:

Take a piece of rope. Tie one end in a loop. Put it around your neck.

This is not a noose, although to all outward appearances, it may look like one.

This is a leash.

Your leash.

Someday, the leash will pull.

(Sound of a phone ringing.)

(Lights up on JOHN and LINDA. They hold the other end of the long piece of rope.)

And wherever you are, whatever you're doing, drop it. You could be on top of a mountain, on the Inca Trail, on a boat in the Gorges of China. Doesn't matter. Walk down the mountain. Take a car to a boat to another car to a plane, whatever you have to. Because the call has come. You must go home.

(Sound of a golf ball being hit.)

(Lights up on JOHN. He is standing at the edge of the stage, golf club in hand. He hits invisible golf balls towards the back of the audience. STEVEN sits in a white, plastic chair, lost in thought.)

JOHN. Why are you here?

STEVEN. What?

JOHN. Why are you here.

STEVEN. Because. Mom called. And you're.

JOHN. You only come because Mom called?

STEVEN. No. I wanted to be here for you.

JOHN. Why?

STEVEN. Because you're my father?

JOHN. What kind of reason is that?

(JOHN hits another golf ball.)

STEVEN. *(To audience:)* Your roommate once told you a story about how he went to get his driver's license renewed. They gave him the written test and it had all these crazy questions he'd never even seen before: what is the maximum weight for a commercial vehicle on the highway, how often must a vehicle be inspected. He did the best he could and then when he handed it in, it turned out they'd accidentally given him the test for a truck driver's license.

This is how conversations with your father make you feel. You're being tested, but it's like you never even knew the subject you're being tested on. You've walked in for a regular driver's test, but your dad is an eighteen-wheeler.

JOHN. Was the ticket expensive?

STEVEN. No. I mean. It's not a big deal.

JOHN. I'll reimburse you.

STEVEN. I can take care of it.

JOHN. Oh, you can?

STEVEN. Yeah. Listen, why don't you join a real club? Don't you get tired of just hitting balls at the driving range? Don't you want to play a real game of golf?

JOHN. Join a club? Do you have any idea how much money that costs?

STEVEN. That doesn't matter, you could—

JOHN. WHAT? Of course it matters. Money matters. You just think it doesn't because you don't *make* any of it.

STEVEN. Look, I'm just saying, you've got the money so why not just enjoy it? Anyway, Mom says there's been some problems with trespassing at—

JOHN. That's a lie.

STEVEN. *(To audience:)* For the record, since taking up this new hobby, he has been arrested for trespassing twice. The Belmont Country Club accused him of climbing over the fence by the fourth hole and playing golf at night with glow-in-the-dark balls.

JOHN. I was just looking for the golfer who broke our kitchen window.

STEVEN. Uh huh. *(To audience:)* It was 9pm.

JOHN. You know how much a club membership costs? I'm not throwing my money away—truth is, the golf course owes *me* money. A lifetime supply of free golf rounds, that's what I should

get. You know how many times they break our windows? YOUR window, Mom's window, the kitchen window...

STEVEN. Well then, maybe you could get lessons—

JOHN. LESSONS? Pros just rip you off! All you need is to go to the range and watch the other golfers. You can watch them for free. *That's* the best lesson.

STEVEN. Fine.

JOHN. See what I've learned? These arrows on the handle. That's where you line up your hands. And you hold it like this. Legs, about a foot apart. Just line up the ball. Right hand at 45 and your left arm straight. Firm, but relaxed. All the power is in your left arm, not your right. Watch, watch—you're not watching.

STEVEN. Yes, I am.

JOHN. Are you paying attention?

STEVEN. Sir, just hit the goddamned ball.

(Pause.)

(JOHN stops golfing.)

JOHN. Mom said she bought the ticket for you. She called the travel agent and they FedEx'd you the ticket.

Your mother has so much on her mind, and you can't even buy your own ticket?

STEVEN. Look, will you just get off my back? She offered. She knows I'm busy; it's hard to find a good travel agency in New York and my credit cards—

JOHN. So you're here because Mom brought you here. *That's* why. *That's* why you're here.

(JOHN hits a ball. He follows the trajectory of the invisible ball with their eyes.)

(It lands in a bad spot. JOHN makes a sound of disgust.)

JOHN. See what you made me do?

(Lights out on JOHN.)

STEVEN. Lesson Two:

Make a small place inside yourself and admit no one.

Seal it like you sealed your room when you were in high school.

Remember: it is in rooms such as these, all across the country, that bombs are built.

That night, go out. Go out and stay out.

Go out with friends you haven't seen since high school. There is a whole *scene* that you didn't even know existed back when you were just a wee, naïve, drama club member. Go to a club called The Works—every small town seems to have a gay club called The Works—which is conveniently located behind a 24-hour Jack-in-the-Box. Grind hips with some shirtless go-go dancers; this will ensure you are capable of withstanding yet another night in your little house on Pleasant Street.

You come in just before dawn and see your mother, who is sitting in front of the TV. You try to get past her. You won't.

(LINDA appears sitting in front of a TV.)

LINDA. Steven.

Come see this.

STEVEN. What is it?

LINDA. It's your father.

STEVEN. On TV?

LINDA. They made a tape.

STEVEN. Is that—?

LINDA. Of him. Inside.

STEVEN. They stuck a camera up him?

LINDA. It's amazing...

STEVEN. They stuck a camera up him and they made a tape?

LINDA. You look at him and he doesn't even seem sick. Then you see this.

STEVEN. What is this, the movie of the week? Turn it off.

LINDA. You have to see this.

(STEVEN sits next to LINDA. The TV casts a glow upon their faces.)

STEVEN. You sit there with your mom and watch your father's vital organs palpitate.

Inside, your father is bleeding. He is rotting from the inside out.

And that, that is the closest you ever come to discussing the fact that he is ill.

(Lights out on LINDA.)

Lesson Three.

Talk as little as possible.

If you do talk, only say what you mean.

Never assume you will be understood.

(A hospital room. JOHN is lying in the bed, asleep. STEVEN sits as far from the bed as possible, across the room. He's reading a magazine.)

(JOHN wakes up, but doesn't move.)

JOHN. Where's your mother?

STEVEN. How do you feel?

JOHN. Where is she?

STEVEN. She just went downstairs to get some lunch.

JOHN. Why are you reading that magazine?

(STEVEN puts it away.)

STEVEN. Can I get you anything?

JOHN. Come. Come here.

(STEVEN *slowly walks towards the bed.*)

Touch my stomach.

STEVEN. What?

JOHN. I want you to see.

STEVEN. Sir.

JOHN. They used staples. Just like the kind you'd use for paper. Can you believe they can staple skin?

I want you to count how many there are. How many staples.

STEVEN. No.

JOHN. I want to know how many.

STEVEN. Then you do it.

JOHN. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17.

18, 19, 20.

21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27...27.

I have 27 staples in my stomach.

STEVEN. Good for you.

JOHN. This is life. It is ugly and it is brutal. But you have to look. And you, you've always been too weak to look. Just like your mother, you're your mother's son.

STEVEN. Don't.

JOHN. Don't tell me "*DON'T.*" The night before my surgery, YOU go out with your friends. Selfish. Just like your mother. I'm DYING and you...

STEVEN. You are NOT dying. You'll outlive everyone. *The bitter ones always do.*

(*Immediately regretting what he just said:*) Sir, I—

JOHN. Get out.

(LINDA *enters holding a tray of food.*)

LINDA. (*Trying to be bright:*) Steven, I brought you something—
(*She notices JOHN is awake.*) John, you're awake! How do you feel?
I'll get the doctor. I'll—

(*She notices the steel staring contest going on between JOHN and STEVEN.*)

What is it?

Steven?

John? What's going on here?

(STEVEN *leaves.*)

(*Calling:*) Steven? Get back here, where are you—?

What happened? Where's he going?

Somebody tell me what's going on.

Somebody TELL ME.

(*Lights out.*)

STEVEN. He goes home to recover from his surgery and so do you. You go back to New York, back to trying to be something or someone. Go on a rampage and try to press yourself out of existence with the bodies of everyone, anyone.

The surprising thing is how little life changes. You hardly called home before he was diagnosed. You hardly call home after. He seems fine now, anyway. Incredibly, the surgery and chemo seems to have worked. Mom says he's just the same.

But you change. You become despicable. You tell prospective lovers and fuck buddies that your father has cancer, and you watch their eyes fill with pity as they put their arms around you because, God bless them, they want to *help* you, they want to *save* you.

Except this backfires eventually, because it turns out absolutely everybody has a father, mother, sister, aunt or uncle, who has or had cancer. And nothing quite dampens the flames of lust more effectively than comparing chemo stories.

Start thinking we're all eventually going to get it. It's just a matter of time. In your lifetime, either you or someone you love *will* develop some kind of cancer. You start to believe that someday, cancer will just be the way everybody dies.

You start smoking.

A lot.

(A ringing phone.)

Pyre two.

(The click of an answering machine going on.)

LINDA. Steven?

It's Mommy.

I hope you are eating well not just junk food. You have to eat right and I know you just eat whatever is easy, but maybe, if you don't want to cook, you can buy a nice meal, okay? I want you to spend the money. And I don't want you to worry, but...

Can you give me a call?

STEVEN. His tri-monthly test has shown positive.

His remission has ended and a new round of treatment begins.

Your father has lost his appetite and only pushes the food around on his plate at dinner.

Your mother sits at the kitchen table. She is the best cook in the world in a house where no one wants to eat.

(Lights up on LINDA sitting at a kitchen table. She sits with her hands flat on the table and she looks at them through the next scene.)

STEVEN. Lesson four:

Remember that the kitchen is the place where love reveals itself and food is the currency of familial love. Eat everything on your plate. Once in a while, offer to refill a water glass or fetch a napkin. When your father pushes all the good things to eat your way, what he's saying is: "See what I do for the love of you?"

(STEVEN sits down at the table.)

LINDA. You hardly ate a thing. Between the two of you, I don't even know why I bother to cook.

STEVEN. I'll do the dishes.

LINDA. Just sit. Listen to me. I want you to go over to him, he's in the study, and tell him you're sorry.

STEVEN. For...?

LINDA. For everything.

STEVEN. Oh, is that all.

LINDA. You know what I mean.

STEVEN. Oh come on, for *all* of it? Years and years of offending him? I think you overestimate the power of "Sorry."

LINDA. If you say it, then it will be better. He'll *feel* better—

STEVEN. No, he won't. He would hate it, don't you understand? If I just say "I'm sorry," it will make him angrier because he'll know that I'm just doing it because *you* put me up to it.

LINDA. I'm not making you do anything—

STEVEN. Then don't make me go in there. He doesn't even look at me, do you understand? He hates the sight of me. You've been married to him for thirty years. How is it possible that you still don't understand what makes him angry?

LINDA. My friend, she tells me about her son and her husband. They don't get along either. The father used to hit the son, not abuse, I'm not talking about abuse. I'm talking about discipline. The way your father disciplined you. The son hated it, like you hated it.

The father had such a temper, much worse than your father's. And this son, he was maybe fifteen and he did something very bad—stole something, or drank, I can't remember. And the father, he had to discipline him.

STEVEN. He hit him.

LINDA. Not out of anger. For his own good. But the son used to fight back when his father hit him. He'd yell and try to fight off the

blows. *That* is what made his father angry, because when a soldier is reprimanded by a superior...

STEVEN. ...he is supposed to just take it.

LINDA. No matter what. Do you understand? This is how one honors himself. I'm not saying this is right or wrong. But this is the way it is.

And my friend's husband hit their son. This time, the son did not fight back. He fell to his knees. He did not cry. He did not flinch. He just sat on his knees and bowed his head. And he submitted.

The father never hit him again.

(Pause.)

STEVEN. That is the stupidest story I have ever heard.

(Lights out on LINDA and the table.)

Lesson five.

When he hits you, never cry.

When he counsels you on life, agree.

When you start feeling yourself pity him, leave the room. Don't re-enter it until he has grown back to actual size.

Learn simple things: how to mow a lawn.

How to make a good charcoal fire. How to fix a stopped drain. The things men do.

(Lights up on JOHN, hitting golf balls.)

Sometimes, many times, you imagine the other you.

The one whom your father would've liked to have raised.

The one you would've liked to have been.

He would be a good soldier, just like your father.

He would be butch.

He would be a crack shot.

He wouldn't be afraid of anything.

He would be a man.

More than anything, he would be a good man.

A better man than you.

Notice that every time you enter a room, your father leaves it.

This time, he does not take you golfing.

(Lights out on JOHN.)

You're supposed to be home for a week. You stay for three days.

Go back to New York and this time, don't call, don't try. Potential lovers see your sadness and flee; no one will touch you with a ten-foot pole. And you don't want to be touched, anyway.

You continue to work on your career, getting bit parts here and there. Once, you call home and leave a message that you are on a butter substitute commercial; it's your hand spreading it on the muffin and your voice saying, "It's not butter; it's Better Than Butter!"

This is how months pass. With bit parts, bit events, forgettable conversations. In the back of your head is the thought that someone important to you is going through something you cannot comprehend. You don't visit the back of your head very often.

(The phone rings.)

Pyre three.

(The phone rings.)

LINDA. Are you there?

Pick up.

Steven?

Okay.

It's your mother.

I need you to call me.

STEVEN. And just like that it's home again, home again, jiggy jog. You hear them say the word: "metastasized." This is a word like "banana." You're never quite sure where it ends. But unlike "banana," "metastasized" is not a word for a soft, somewhat phallic fruit. You might say that "metastasized" is not benign. You might say "metastasized" is something very, very bad.

(Lights up on a hospital room. JOHN lies in the bed, hooked up to an IV bag, with wires curling out of him.)

STEVEN. You watch him as he sleeps.

The staples are long gone.

(STEVEN closes his eyes and stretches out his hand. He touches JOHN's stomach.)

His stomach is surprisingly soft. It never occurred to you that any part of your father could actually be soft. Some religions believe in the healing touch. You know you cannot heal your father. But maybe, just maybe, the flesh of his abdomen, the place of his disease can heal you. If you want it. If you let it.

But you don't touch his stomach.

It's not because you find it ugly or repulsive.

It's because you don't know how.

(Lights out on JOHN.)

Finish reading a six-month-old People Magazine as your father sleeps and then go home.

Not New York-home. Home-home.

Go to sleep in a bed, not a chair.

(The phone rings again.)

You don't wake up until the fifth ring.

LINDA. Steven.

Steven.

Steven.

STEVEN. That's it. All she says.

You never knew your name could be said in so many different registers and tones.

(LINDA stands in the middle of a dark hospital room. One can barely see the outlines of the bed. She stands in the shaft of light coming through the open door.)

(STEVEN stands next to her and touches her on the shoulder.)

STEVEN. Mom. Come on. Don't stay here.

LINDA. Just a minute. I need a minute.

STEVEN. Was he...in pain?

LINDA. What do you think.

STEVEN. What can I do?

LINDA. Leave me alone.

STEVEN. Don't say that.

Mom. Mom.

LINDA. Why are you so selfish?

STEVEN. What?

LINDA. You expect too much. You've always expected too much.

STEVEN. What, that he should be nice? That a father should actually be nice to his son?

LINDA. How did it get like this? Did I do it? What did I do?

STEVEN. Nothing, you did nothing.

LINDA. Sometimes I try to remember it, how it started. Who said what, who did what. Where was I, what was I doing while everything between you two broke and fell apart?

STEVEN. It wasn't like that. It's never like that. There's not some moment.

LINDA. What was the argument? Do you remember? Do you even know?

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