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450 Seventh Ave, Suite 809
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toll-free phone: 1-866-NEW-PLAY
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Cast of Characters

TODD PAULSON, American, white male, 20s

BRYAN, American, white male, 20s

AGNATHA MILLER, American, white female, 20s
also plays: TESS, Agnatha's identical twin sister.

MS. MWANDO, African, black female, 30s

EMMANUEL, African, black male, 30s
also plays: HOMELESS MAN.

Setting

New York City and a remote village in Zambia.

Punctuation

"—" is an interruption

"..." is a short pause

"//'" is the point at which the next line of dialogue should begin, creating an overlap in speech.

Transitions

All should happen fluidly, as if turning over a postcard; no black-outs unless otherwise noted. Set pieces should be minimal and suggestive only.

Acknowledgments

Letters to the End of the World was produced by At Hand Theatre Company (Daniel Horrigan, Artistic Director; Justin Scribner, Executive Director) at Theatre Row in New York City in Spring, 2010. The cast, in order of appearance, and crew was as follows:

TODD PAULSON	Charles Socarides
AGNATHA & TESS MILLER	Shannon Burkett
BRYAN	Peter O'Connor
EMMANUEL.....	Tyrone Mitchell Henderson
MS. MWANDO	Francesca Choy-Kee
Director.....	Anton Dudley
Set Designer.....	Eli Kaplan-Wildmann
Lighting Designer.....	Ryan Bauer
Costume Designer.....	Nicole Wee
Stage Manager.....	Donald Butchko
Associate Producer.....	Laura A. Wright

LETTERS TO THE END OF THE WORLD

by Anton Dudley

Part I:

Question

Into Summer, 1998

America / Africa

TODD. Dear Ms. Miller, I have never written a fan letter before, if indeed that is what this is, so please forgive my unnatural tone. I woke up this morning and looked out my window on this new day. The sun was rising over Central Park and I couldn't remember ever seeing the city this way. It seemed the sun was being born. Here in Manhattan: the center of the universe! But that's silly to say isn't it. Manhattan's just an island. *Broadway* was once just a footpath. How silly to say that Central Park is the womb of the universe when, there you are, in Africa, birthplace of the human race. It's summer here, muggy and hot. Do you think I'm simple? What's the weather like in Africa? Sincerely, Todd Paulson.

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, I think you need to travel more... Thank you for your letter, I don't know how you found me over here in Zambia, but you've made the world seem slightly less large, I am grateful for that.

America

(TODD and BRYAN on a subway car. BRYAN drinks from a bottle in a brown paper bag. TODD reads a woman's fashion magazine. A HOMELESS MAN comes down the center aisle.)

HOMELESS MAN. Excuse me ladies and gentlemen—

BRYAN. Here we go.

TODD. Don't be rude!

HOMELESS MAN. —I know you are tired and trying to enjoy your ride home from work in peace. Please forgive me for disturbing you.

I have nowhere to live. I was recently released from the hospital after being treated for AIDS and am very hungry.

(TODD buries his face in his magazine.)

BRYAN. What're you doing?

TODD. Shut up!

HOMELESS MAN. Anything at all would help as I am very hungry. Thank you for your kindness and God bless you... *(He starts to walk down the car.)* Spare some change? Spare some change? Spare some...?

(He passes by them with a hat.)

BRYAN. Uh, Todd, sticking your head in Cosmo // doesn't make you invisible.

TODD. Vogue! ...I didn't say it did.

BRYAN. Great superhero power: "Vanishing Boy in Ladies' Magazine!"

TODD. Stop it.

BRYAN. Why didn't you give him anything?

TODD. I don't have anything. And put that bottle away before someone thinks *you're* homeless. There are open-container laws in this city, you know.

BRYAN. You got a twenty out the ATM.

TODD. And I spent nine forty-three at the drug store—on beer and condoms for you—nine is for the movie, and a dollar-fifty to get home: happy now, Mr. Calculator?

BRYAN. You still got seven cents?

TODD. I can't give him seven cents—he'll think I'm cheap!

BRYAN. He's gone: you can put the magazine away.

TODD. I'm reading something.

BRYAN. Taking a quiz?

TODD. 'An article.

BRYAN. In Vogue?

TODD. I like this writer, she isn't pretentious. She isn't trying to say anything more than the truth.

(Pause.)

BRYAN. Since when were the condoms just for me, anyway?

America / Africa

TODD. Dear Ms. Miller, your article was published today in Vogue, but I'm sure you know that. Any reason you switched from Cosmo? It's better placement this time, only page 326 instead of 369. There were five pictures, but none of you. I have to admit, I'm beginning to wonder what you look like. Yours sincerely, Todd.

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, I'm not a trained journalist so I take what I can get. Ball gowns and bulimics aside, I must be getting through to someone. And please, call me Agnatha. I have a strange feeling we're about the same age.

TODD. Dear Ms. Miller, it's sort of fun writing letters, no? I feel like I'm in a Merchant-Ivory picture.

America

BRYAN. Todd? I'm leaving. I gotta go to work.

TODD. How now brown cow?

BRYAN. What?

TODD. What if someone pushes you in front of the subway on your way there? What if this is the last time we see each other alive?

BRYAN. I kissed you, didn't I?

TODD. Yeah?

BRYAN. ...You liked it.

America / Africa

AGNATHA. Dear Todd. Rain today. The dust has turned to mud. I'm in trouble again with the school mistress. My American mouth. It's how I earn a living, what would I do if it were ever closed?

TODD. Dear Agnatha, do you see how I'm calling you Agnatha?

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, please forgive my lack of writing: three in a row with no response from this end! I hope no one's keeping score, I'm not a // very good loser.

TODD. Finals are upon us and I haven't taken a test since undergrad. PS, it was great to hear from you after so long: sometimes I feel like the world is shrinking, other times // perhaps it's just me who is shrinking.

AGNATHA. Grad school was never for me. The world is my school. Does that sound // pretentious?

TODD. Dear Agnatha, I'm coming up on my two-year anniversary with Bryan. I think he's your type, but you can't have him. Do you like my new stationary?

AGNATHA. How did finals go?

TODD. Where are you today, // I wonder?

AGNATHA. Write soon, sincerely—

TODD. Yours sincerely—

AGNATHA. PS: teaching today in the small school the Canadian embassy has built here. I asked of my thirty students, what they wanted to be when they grew up. One of my favorites, a young boy named Kondani, immediately raised his hand and replied, "A Tourist."

America

(BRYAN enters the space. TODD is reading a letter. When he hears BRYAN, he stuffs the letter into a fashion magazine, hiding it.)

BRYAN. There was traffic in the tunnel. Is it still our anniversary?

TODD. Do you ever think about Africa?

BRYAN. Huh?

TODD. All those people in Africa. The ones who are dying?

BRYAN. Uh, can I grab a beer?

TODD. Don't take the imports, you know how punishing my Dad can be, he'll notice if you take an Elephant or one of the Vietnamese—

BRYAN. Vietnamese make beer?

TODD. Why does that surprise you?

BRYAN. I don't know, 'want one?

TODD. Don't drink too much okay?

BRYAN. Are you kidding? Your parents are gone for the week. I'm going to party like it's 1999.

TODD. Can't you wait a year like everyone else?

BRYAN. Life happens now Todd. N. O. W. Oh look: here it is!

TODD. Do you think they hate us?

BRYAN. Your parents?

TODD. The Africans.

BRYAN. Bob and Tammy African, from down the hall?

TODD. Bryan, I'm serious.

BRYAN. 'You been reading your Mom's Cosmo again?

TODD. Vogue! It's more relevant than my frickin' grad school texts. I was looking at my book for my Trends in West African Culture class? It was printed ten years ago. I mean, ten years ago AIDS was just something that happened to people in San Francisco, right?

BRYAN. Why can't you be normal and stress about Y2K, huh?

TODD. Because I'm not 'normal' and though you don't believe me: there's real information in these articles.

BRYAN. Uh-huh, so what *are* the ten best ways to please your man?

TODD. I don't read those parts. I was reading about Africa.

BRYAN. Too bad. Happy anniversary.

TODD. I made us dinner.

BRYAN. Cool.

TODD. Well, I commanded it made, but in Manhattan that's pretty much the same thing, right?

BRYAN. Yeah, whatever.

TODD. Do you love me?

BRYAN. I've been with you for two years.

TODD. And?

BRYAN. Actions speak louder than words.

(BRYAN *downs the rest of his beer.*)

You want a beer?

TODD. You're having *another*?

BRYAN. Please, I get a bigger buzz from smelling that new soap you use.

TODD. Hey!

BRYAN. Hey whatever, I like getting a buzz.

(BRYAN *unzips his pants, revealing brightly colored underwear.*)

TODD. What are you doing?

BRYAN. Wanna play superheroes?

TODD. Bryan.

BRYAN. What?

TODD. I was trying to ask you a serious question.

BRYAN. Come on you like it: pick my super powers and I'll pick your distress.

TODD. Not tonight.

BRYAN. It's our anniversary.

TODD. Yeah, I thought we might spend it discussing something important.

BRYAN. Africa? I don't want to talk about something I don't know anything about, that's how people end up making up shit.

TODD. Well you could learn something about it if you read these articles.

BRYAN. Give it a rest, Todd.

TODD. I can't give my heart a rest: I do and I'll die.

BRYAN. That's exactly what I'm saying! Come on: give me a super power. It's our anniversary.

TODD. Super heroes aren't real.

BRYAN. And your interest in Africa is?

TODD. Sometimes I don't think you respect me.

BRYAN. Yeah, well why don't you write your girlfriend about it.

TODD. Um— I'm not the one who identifies himself as "straight acting."

BRYAN. Whatever.

TODD. We don't talk about you. We talk about Africa. And she's not my girlfriend, she's my friend.

BRYAN. And what am I?

TODD. Gosh, Bryan I tell you I love you ten times a day.

BRYAN. I know. (*Of his underwear:*) That's why I wore the ones you say make me look like Aquaman. Yeah? (*He starts to take off his shirt.*) 'Wanna dive for pearls in your hot tub?

TODD. ...Why did you shave your chest?

BRYAN. (*You like it?*) Yeah?

TODD. You didn't suddenly join a swim team did you?

BRYAN. Fuck, Todd: whatever, okay?

TODD. I'm sorry, I just—I think about Africa a lot.

BRYAN. Why Africa?

TODD. AIDS, Bryan, I'm talking about AIDS.

BRYAN. I guess I'm stupid, I missed the memo that said Africa and AIDS are interchangeable.

TODD. I didn't call you stupid.

BRYAN. Whatever.

TODD. Don't bend my words.

BRYAN. Whatever.

TODD. Stop saying that.

BRYAN. Are we celebrating our anniversary or not?

TODD. You mean are we having sex?

BRYAN. That's what normal people do, Todd.

TODD. I don't think we should do anything until we both get tested, it's been a while and we should go in together. It'll be like a commitment, you know?

BRYAN. Grow up.

TODD. Why, because I said commitment?

BRYAN. No, because you meant the opposite.

TODD. I just want to make sure we're on the same page, Bryan, why is that so offensive to you?

BRYAN. Do me a favor and stop thinking you're smart 'cause you read fucking Cosmo, okay Todd? What, are jungle prints more relevant if they're like advertised next to an article about AIDS in Africa? Would you even know where to *find* the jungle on a map of Africa?

TODD. Why are you attacking me?

BRYAN. You know, you're asking me if there's someone else but you're the one who—I saw you hide that letter.

TODD. I knew it would upset you.

BRYAN. So why do you still write to her?

TODD. Because we have a lot in common, okay? I think she has answers to a lot of my questions right now—what are you doing?

BRYAN. (*Grabbing a beer:*) One for the road.

TODD. Where are you going, don't drive now, Bryan stop!

BRYAN. Now you touch me?

TODD. Well I don't want you in jail or dead now do I? Come on, I'm not going to let you drive now. We planned on you staying over this week while my parents are out of town.

BRYAN. Yeah, I guess I feel like they're still here.

TODD. Where are you going?

BRYAN. A friend's house.

TODD. You don't have any friends in this part of town.

BRYAN. How long do you think it'll be before you get over your bad boy complex and start dating in your own tax bracket, huh?

TODD. Look, I didn't mean it like that, I'm sorry I just—Bryan, I love you so much.

BRYAN. You got a fucked up way of showing it.

TODD. Or maybe you've just never really been loved before.

BRYAN. Why don't you relieve some of that upper class guilt and go read your Cosmo, Todd.

TODD. Bryan...do you love me?

BRYAN. ...You are such a shit sometimes.

(He goes.)

TODD. ...(Fuck)... Bryan!

Africa

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, Kondani has taken to holding my hand and accompanying me everywhere I go. Today as we passed the cemetery, we saw what seemed to be some sort of festival. Several children were selling makeshift wreaths, while a group of women were singing "Dance for the Lord, the world is at an end." I couldn't help myself: I began to cry. Kondani looked up at me and said, "Do not be sad, Ms. Miller, God is watching over us." Well. God may be watching, but I just wonder at what point he'll finally decide to stick his hands in and get them dirty.

America

TODD. Dear Agnatha, is reading *your* truth enough—do I really know what’s happening outside my own world of experience by simply *reading* your articles?

I think of you over there, in Africa, and I wonder what it was that made you leave the safety of your own home and travel to the bleeding heart of our planet—what gave you that strength? What kind of person are you?

Africa

(AGNATHA makes drop scones. She rolls flour with the balls of her hands. EMMANUEL enters.)

EMMANUEL. Agnatha Miller, look: it is from America—see? Swoosh! Next week I am going to buy the shoes. They also have swoosh!

AGNATHA. Put it on, let me see you in it.

EMMANUEL. No, no. I want to save it for a special occasion.

AGNATHA. Like what?

EMMANUEL. I do not know yet, but you will see. One day I will wear my swoosh! shirt and new swoosh! shoes, and you will know that day is a special day. And I will say a “whoomp there it is!”

(They laugh.)

AGNATHA. Hey All-Star, I like your hair!

EMMANUEL. Yes? This I think is very fashionable now. I have seen a man in this magazine you read with hair like this.

AGNATHA. Emmanuel! You shouldn’t be reading those: they’re for women only.

EMMANUEL. You write very much about your experience here.

AGNATHA. Does it offend you?

EMMANUEL. I wonder what the women who read your articles will do with the information.

AGNATHA. If they’re as changed by them as you are by the photographs, I’d say everything will be okay.

(They laugh.)

EMMANUEL. Do you need help?

AGNATHA. Always.

EMMANUEL. My sister would make scones like these every Sunday for the children.

AGNATHA. You never told me you have a sister.

EMMANUEL. Once, yes, but no longer.

AGNATHA. ...I'm sorry.

EMMANUEL. (*Don't be*) This is not for you to think about. Do you have a sister?

AGNATHA. Something else 'not for me to think about.'

EMMANUEL. Why is this?

AGNATHA. We're like chalk and cheese: after our parents died I took my share of the money and set out to make great things happen. She sort of became a drunk and now just wishes for great things to happen to her.

EMMANUEL. Do they?

AGNATHA. I wouldn't know. I haven't spoken to her in four years. You've got dough on your leg! (*They laugh as he wipes it off.*) Last I heard, she was living in New York City.

EMMANUEL. This is from where your letters are coming.

AGNATHA. Yeah. But the City's about all those two have in common.

EMMANUEL. Is it not also her blood in your veins?

AGNATHA. God, I hope not, tell me you're free Monday night.

EMMANUEL. Why is this?

AGNATHA. A surprise.

EMMANUEL. For me?

AGNATHA. Maybe.

EMMANUEL. What is this surprise?

AGNATHA. A surprising kind of surprise, I'm not telling you, just be at the school on Monday night.

EMMANUEL. How shall I dress for this surprise?

AGNATHA. You might want to think about getting those shoes sooner: I'm thinking a little swoosh! is in order.

EMMANUEL. Oh ho! I must return to the market!

AGNATHA. I can't wait to see you looking like an All-Star.

EMMANUEL. Whoomp there it soon will be!

(MS. MWANDO *has entered to hear the end of this.*)

MS. MWANDO. Emmanuel? The coffins will not build themselves. Have you forgotten the dead?

AGNATHA. How could he? There's no more room in the cemetery.

EMMANUEL. Agnatha—

MS. MWANDO. Pardon me, Ms. Miller, I am speaking to Emmanuel.

EMMANUEL. I was resting, I will return to the work now.

MS. MWANDO. Do not stop until you have fifteen.

EMMANUEL. Fourteen.

MS. MWANDO. Fifteen.

EMMANUEL. But earlier—

MS. MWANDO. Time moves forward, Emmanuel. That which is the future becomes the present, and that which was the present is now the past ... and now there are fifteen coffins to be made.

(EMMANUEL *leaves.*)

I have approved your request for a celebration at the school, Ms. Miller.

AGNATHA. Thank you.

MS. MWANDO. You sound surprised.

AGNATHA. I am. No offence, but, I didn't think you'd be one for music and dancing.

MS. MWANDO. (*Not smiling:*) I will be thankful to see so many smiles.

AGNATHA. ...Okay.

MS. MWANDO. Will you dance with Kondani?

AGNATHA. I thought you wanted me to stay away from him.

MS. MWANDO. I cannot see how dancing with Kondani will hurt him. Dancing is a safe sort of dream.

AGNATHA. I didn't mean to offend you, Ms. Mwando, Kondani showed an interest in a world beyond his own; I wanted to encourage that.

MS. MWANDO. I have seen countless foreigners offer the children dreams, only to find them wake up and the one who offered the dreams is no longer there.

AGNATHA. I have said before, I am committed to this village, why can't you believe that?

MS. MWANDO. Ms. Miller. Before you teach a child to live out his fantasy, you must first teach him to live. You confuse a child by offering a fantasy of what the world could be in a place where you know no such thing may occur. I have much more interest in my students' survival than to see them kill themselves trying to jump to the moon.

AGNATHA. I guess I think life is more than just survival.

MS. MWANDO. We are in agreement, Ms. Miller. And so I have approved your celebration.

AGNATHA. I'm glad we see eye to eye on something.

MS. MWANDO. Will you dance with Emmanuel?

AGNATHA. Why would you ask that?

MS. MWANDO. You like him, do you not?

AGNATHA. He is my friend.

MS. MWANDO. Yes, but you like him very much.

AGNATHA. Are you trying to imply something?

MS. MWANDO. I do not know many men and women who are such good friends without having a deeper connection.

AGNATHA. Is there a deeper connection than true friendship?

MS. MWANDO. It does not bother me, Ms. Miller.

AGNATHA. I don't see how it could, since "it" does not exist.

MS. MWANDO. Perhaps not, but if it did, I wish to say to you that it would not bother me.

AGNATHA. Why are you saying this?

MS. MWANDO. Perhaps you think it would and I want you to know it would not.

AGNATHA. All right.

MS. MWANDO. Yes.

(Pause.)

Oh, I had forgotten: this came for you.

(MS. MWANDO hands AGNATHA a letter.)

It is from America. New York City. Perhaps after you have opened the envelope you will give the stamp to Emmanuel—he very much enjoys things from your country.

AGNATHA. (*Suspiciously:*) Thanks. I'll consider it.

America

(TODD sits on a large map of Africa. BRYAN enters; he is past the point of being very drunk, a quiet exhaustion has settled in.)

BRYAN. The doorman let me up. Apparently he doesn't know we're fighting. Apparently he's cool with us playing house in your parents' apartment while they're out of town...new rug?

TODD. I'm trying to broaden myself.

BRYAN. How *now*?

TODD. Brown cow?

BRYAN. Huh?

TODD. Hangover?

BRYAN. No. I'm still drunk.

TODD. There's some aspirin in the bathroom.

BRYAN. Mm, at this point 'hair-of-the-dog' is better.

TODD. Anyway that pleases you—this way; that way... *Heming way.*

BRYAN. I won't take any imports, I promise.

(BRYAN goes out of the room and re-enters later on with a beer.)

TODD. I've been sitting here all night. Like a junkie with this stuff. What else was I was going to do—you were MIA. It's funny really, I think it's the first time I've ever really been alone in this apartment.

Come here, I want you to see something. The Northern part of Africa is mostly a low plateau. Almost like a wall to the West, up here in Morocco and Northern Algeria, Spain and the Mediterranean are blocked from view by the Atlas Mountain range. The rest of the northern third of Africa is mostly flat, until you get to the Northeast section where, once again, the Ethiopian Highlands rise up to heights of fifteen thousand feet to block the Sahara's view of Yemen and the Middle East. It's almost as if Africa wants to hide itself by jutting up mountains every place it comes near to touching another continent. Even Mount Sinai pops up where Egypt might otherwise brush up against Jordan and Israel. What begins here in

Egypt, and runs all the way south to Mozambique is a section of the Rift Valley—it's the planet's longest geological depression. Like a scar slashed right down through the continent. The Sahara is also the largest desert on Earth. But the region's not completely dry, directly south is the Sahel, here, a dry grassland region that rolls into savanna and thick forest.

The center of Africa on this map consists of twenty-six countries and is book-ended by two island nations: Cape Verde and the Seychelles. The Equator—Nature's only true straight line—shoots right through this section, directly through the planet's second largest rain forest: this is the area we are talking about when we speak of the African Jungles.

Almost mirroring its northern sister the Sahara, the Kalahari dominates Southern Africa. The southern most point of the Rift Valley contains Lake Malawi. Again like a mirror reflection of its northern sister, forests and savanna are found bordering the central section of the continent, while the south is dry grassland. All of this dances timidly around a high saucer-shaped plateau which is home not only to the Kalahari semi-desert, but also the Namib Desert, one of the driest places on Earth. She's gorgeous. Massive. Ecologically symmetrical. Fold her in half, put her in your pocket.

BRYAN. I met a girl.

TODD. She is exquisite: a microcosm of the world. Though there's nothing micro about her.

BRYAN. I left here and went to a bar.

TODD. It's almost frightening how massive and beautiful Nature can be if you let it.

BRYAN. I slept over at her place.

TODD. Was she that good or am I just that bad. Either way I think you've betrayed both of the planet's officially recognized sexualities.

BRYAN. Say something meaningful—please.

TODD. I've just given you the most brief, yet awkwardly complete introduction to African topography. That's not meaningful? How many people in the world truly know where Lake Malawi is?

BRYAN. You know what I mean.

TODD. Have another beer, Bryan. Have an Elephant for all I care. I'm sure my Dad can't be that precious about them.

(TODD gets up and walks out of the room.)

BRYAN. I don't mean to hurt you. You don't deserve to be hurt.

(TODD steps back into the room. He hands BRYAN a beer.)

TODD. Fuck, Bryan, if you're going to betray me, at least do it with a cold heart and don't insult me by feeling sorry for me afterwards.

BRYAN. You'd like her. She has a sister in Africa.

TODD. Is she black?

BRYAN. No.

TODD. So she's an imposter: a fake lover and a fake African.

BRYAN. I said her sister was in Africa, not that she was African.

TODD. Did that make it more palatable for you—you thought I wouldn't mind so much if she had an African connection?

BRYAN. I wasn't really thinking about you when it happened.

TODD. That's funny. I think about you all the time.

BRYAN. Don't be so punishing, Todd. I'm open here. It's not easy for me.

TODD. The Rift Valley grows a quarter of an inch a year: *it* will eventually tear the continent in two.

BRYAN. What?

TODD. Did you do it?

BRYAN. Come on, we're not Twelve.

TODD. Sorry—let me use the age-appropriate vocabulary—did you fuck her?

BRYAN. You don't have to be so coarse.

TODD. Oh—I'm sorry. Am I tingeing what was something pure and beautiful with my sordid syntax? Perhaps opera played in the background and the windows were open which let in a soft breeze, in turn coercing the white lace curtains to dust softly over your back as you humped in the warmth of the early morning sunlight.

BRYAN. I did something wrong, I know that.

TODD. Remarkable—the wet brain can still decipher right from wrong!

BRYAN. Do you want me to go?

TODD. Do you have money for a cab?

BRYAN. It's like thirty bucks if I went all the way home.

TODD. I guess you're stuck then.

BRYAN. You can afford it if you really don't want me here.

TODD. Bryan, we pay to have the trash removed, not my boyfriend.

BRYAN. Am I still?

TODD. I think you're going to have to answer that one yourself.

(Pause.)

BRYAN. Did you really sit up all night with Africa?

TODD. I sat in the central section, facing West—watching the sunset—my right hand pressed flat on the Sahara and my left hand stretched firm onto the Kalahari—a great heat entered my body and rose up through my arms into my torso. I felt a great peace in this warmth. I didn't understand it, because actually what I was touching were places of great chaos. But then, I realized that heat isn't necessarily a comforting thing: a hot temper, for example, or a fever. But that's the magic, right? That strange marriage of good and bad. Fire brings destruction, yet it also brings light. Fear is debilitating, yet, eventually, provokes action.

BRYAN. What are we going to do?

TODD. Do you like her?

BRYAN. I'm gay, Todd.

TODD. I've known vegetarians who still eat fish.

(Pause. TODD gets up and leaves the room.)

BRYAN. Where are you going?

TODD. *(Offstage:)* I've been thinking a lot about that seven cents.

BRYAN. Todd.

(TODD reenters with a six-pack of imported beer—four bottles remain.)

TODD. Here—just finish them off—punish my parents for going out of town and not taking me with them. When you're done, we can just put a drip cup under your pores and drink that. Anyway, the seven cents has been in my head, and I was thinking you're right—you know—you are—

BRYAN. Todd—

TODD. No you are—please, most people want to hear with great detail about how they're right, why should *you* be any different. I was thinking how ridiculous and fucked up and bourgeois it was of me to think a sick, homeless man would be offended by receiving my spare change. You're right. If everyone on that train car—including

yourself—had given him seven cents—he would have had about two dollars to his name—add that to what he might have gotten from the other cars and he might have walked out of there with almost ten dollars—you and I know of places where *we* can eat for ten dollars. And you know how *we* eat.

So last night, after you left, I got hungry: you know I stress-eat. I was about to eat that Chinese I commanded, but then I go back to my magazines, where I've read that the average income for most Africans is one American dollar a day. The *average* is a dollar. And suddenly every thing I looked at became a human life—a human life I could've saved if I just hadn't ordered it. In my pocket—thirty, perhaps forty human lives. I thought I was going crazy. Everything in my house had a face. Forty shivering bodies where once there sat a chair. Twelve emaciated orphans where just minutes before had sat a bouquet of flowers someone had sent to my mother. Everything in this house: dying people, looking at me, pleading for my help. I wanted to poke my eyes out, cut off my fingers—throw out everything I own. Not that it would make any difference—distance I think is the great evil. Our inability to connect. I can put my money in an envelope but who do I send it to? And what would they do with it if they did receive it? It's not edible.

And that seven cents that I was embarrassed to give—was now the life of some poor individual, halfway 'round the world whom I'll never meet; their sweat and pain, sitting heavy amongst the lint in my pocket.

(Pause.)

BRYAN. *(Barely able to keep his eyes open:)* You talk so much.

TODD. Yeah. I do, don't I. It's a sickness.

BRYAN. And you're very punishing.

TODD. Well. That's just hereditary.

(Pause. They both start laughing.)

BRYAN. How can you not throw me out? After what I did?

TODD. You're an absolute bastard...but I love you.

BRYAN. You scare the shit out of me. All the time. Rub my back?

TODD. You gonna pass out?

BRYAN. 'That or throw up.

TODD. Take your shirt off.

(BRYAN takes off his shirt and lies down. TODD rubs his back.)

BRYAN. Can I stay here?

TODD. You'll have to now. I'm not strong enough to throw you out. And I can't call the doorman: think of the rumors that would spread. So.

Was she pretty? Did she remind you of me? Only not as punishing?
Was she close to her sister? The one in Africa?
...Did you tell her you loved her?

(BRYAN has passed out. TODD continues to rub his back.)

I want you to love me.

Why can't you love me? Why can't you love me, why can't you love, why can't you just say it, can you say it? You've never once said it.

Can you? Can you say this to me? Can you tell me this—can you please—I want so much—can you please just say—I want more than anything to be—say this: for me, to me, about me, within me, behind me—I want so much...

For God's sake, Bryan...how could you?

Africa

(A blast of music: percussion and bells. Handmade instruments. In the distance, sounds of children screaming with joy and people cheering and dancing.)

(MS. MWANDO and EMMANUEL fall into a dark corner of the stage, away from the offstage chaos. They are exhausted and sweaty. EMMANUEL wears his "swoosh" T-shirt and new "swoosh" shoes.)

MS. MWANDO. Emmanuel, you dance as though a sorcerer's spell is on your shoes.

EMMANUEL. It is the swoosh! Anyone who wears it becomes unstoppable.

MS. MWANDO. Perhaps you will buy a pair for me.

EMMANUEL. The celebration is a success. It was good of you to allow Ms. Miller to organize it.

MS. MWANDO. The children are enjoying themselves. So am I. But don't tell Ms. Miller I said that.

EMMANUEL. I am glad you found it in your heart to have some fun.

MS. MWANDO. ...It is so hot this evening; perhaps it is the bonfire or the dancing or...I am hoping for the rain.

EMMANUEL. All living things need water.

MS. MWANDO. You make us sound as though we are flowers.

EMMANUEL. Some of us, perhaps.

MS. MWANDO. Are you enjoying yourself?

EMMANUEL. Tonight we live in clouds; do you feel at home among the angels?

MS. MWANDO. Emmanuel...if I connect dots, I think perhaps you are flirting with me.

EMMANUEL. How is this?

MS. MWANDO. You have only danced with me this evening, although I can see Ms. Miller desperately wishes to have a turn with you: dot. Your language is soft and complimentary, more so than usual: dot dot. You have purchased new shoes: dot dot dot; and...for the first time, you are wearing your swoosh; I think, therefore, this is a special evening.

EMMANUEL. If I connect dots, I think perhaps you are flirting with me, Ms. Mwando.

MS. MWANDO. What dots are these?

EMMANUEL. You have left your children to spend time with me alone: dot; you accuse me of flirting with you when it is you who are attempting to beautify your language: dot dot; and you are, for the first time, wearing make-up on your face: giant boulder size dot!

MS. MWANDO. ...I find it amusing, Emmanuel. We are black. Yet in this light, you are red. Like a sunset. Or a flower. Or—

EMMANUEL. A heart. As if I have taken my heart and put it on my face. For the purpose that my heart may smile at you.

MS. MWANDO. Are you too tired to dance?

EMMANUEL. Never!

(EMMANUEL kicks up his feet once more. After several moments of their dance, MS. MWANDO's legs buckle and she falls to the ground.)

EMMANUEL. Rebecca!

MS. MWANDO. Perhaps it is I who am too tired.

EMMANUEL. What is it? Your legs.

MS. MWANDO. Do not shrink your face, Emmanuel. I am only tired... The ground is soft. Sit with me here for a moment.

(He does. Silence.)

EMMANUEL. Do not scare me.

MS. MWANDO. Do not tell yourself stories that are not true. I can see pages turning inside your head. All the stories you are telling yourself now. I am only tired, Emmanuel, do not be concerned.

EMMANUEL. Shall I stroke your hair? You like when I stroke your hair.

MS. MWANDO. It is pleasant to feel soft, yes.

EMMANUEL. I wish you were not so rough with Ms. Miller.

MS. MWANDO. I do not like what she says to the children. She is too much concerned with the strength of the individual, in doing this she ignores the strength of the community.

EMMANUEL. She means well.

MS. MWANDO. She has no skills other than her ability to dream. We need action, Emmanuel, not thoughts of action.

EMMANUEL. She organized the celebration.

MS. MWANDO. I have never known a celebration to save a life.

EMMANUEL. No? You have much life in you this evening.

MS. MWANDO. Her America is the land of ideas, but I think many things die while these ideas are being discussed and refined.

EMMANUEL. ...I love the way that word feels in my mouth. America.

MS. MWANDO. I used to feel so about Africa.

EMMANUEL. They are similar. When you say them together: America; Africa. Not so different at all.

MS. MWANDO. Yes this is strange.

EMMANUEL. Why do you say "used to"?

MS. MWANDO. The woman in town, the one from whom I buy the cornmeal. She has three children. And another along the way. She has sores around her mouth and she complains of diarrhea. All her children are ill and their father, I found out, became demented before he died. I saw her the other day with a man—her lover, she says. I ask if they will get married. She says, "no. He is already married, but he wanted to have children with me. If I have his children, he will help support me." What else is she to do? She is a young

woman with no access to real employment, and soon she will have four mouths to feed.

I asked her if she knew that she could infect him, if she hasn't already done so, and if he, in turn, could infect his wife? "People were jealous of my husband, so they got a witch to put a curse on my family," she says, "HIV is a family disease now. All of this country will soon disappear. We are cursed, you see." I felt the breeze blow right through me, as if I had lost my skin.

EMMANUEL. You think she is not larger than this moment in her history? She has seen trouble before. She will see it again. Though she is old, she is immortal. Time will move on and time will change her again. She is sick now, but give her time. Trust that eternity will last forever. Africa was there in the beginning, she will be there in the end. Always think yourself blessed that you are, even in the smallest way, a part of her story.

(Pause.)

MS. MWANDO. Ms. Miller likes you, does she not?

EMMANUEL. She would like you, if you allowed her to.

MS. MWANDO. No, I am saying she likes you as a woman likes a man.

EMMANUEL. Perhaps. How could she not?!

MS. MWANDO. Do you like her?

EMMANUEL. You know where my heart is.

MS. MWANDO. Yes, but there your heart will soon be homeless and I will not allow that to happen.

(Pause.)

Marry her, Emmanuel.

EMMANUEL. Marry?!

MS. MWANDO. Marry her and have her keep you from sadness.

EMMANUEL. You do not mean this.

MS. MWANDO. I think I do. I want you to be happy. Safe and happy for the rest of your long, long life.

EMMANUEL. You think I can only do this with Ms. Miller?

MS. MWANDO. I do not want you to struggle. You do not deserve to struggle.

EMMANUEL. And you do?

(Pause.)

One day you will love me the way I love you.

MS. MWANDO. Ms. Miller and her impossibilities. Do not speak of things that can not happen.

(Pause.)

The holes in the roof: do you feel it? It is beginning to rain.

EMMANUEL. Aha! Ms. Miller is right: sometimes our hopes do come true.

MS. MWANDO. ...Do not cry, Emmanuel.

EMMANUEL. These are not tears, Rebecca: they are drops of rain. Fallen on my face.

MS. MWANDO. When I am in the sky, Emmanuel. When I am clouds looking over you. I will always send you rain. To cool and cleanse and inspire you. Africa is so hot. She needs the rain. Her heat comes from everywhere: the sun, her history, the confusion and pain. All of it is so hot: so very, very hot. I think, perhaps, she is like us: all she needs is the rain.

EMMANUEL. I love you, Rebecca. I know you do not wish me to, but I do. I shall never stop loving you.

(They embrace. The sound of rainfall.)

America / Africa

TODD. Dear Agnatha. Raining today, both outside and within my heart. Do you think it's possible to love someone you don't really know?

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, I'm sorry to hear about your finals. It must be hard to concentrate in New York City.

TODD. Dear Agnatha, have you ever done something so irrational, so impulsive, 'you knew it must be true?

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, you make me feel like an advice columnist sometimes, I don't // know how to answer you.

TODD. Dear Agnatha, thank you for the picture. Are you really that pale?

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, nice picture: you're cuter than I imagined.

TODD. Dear Agnatha, do you feel it's coming: the end of time?

AGNATHA. Dear Todd, I don't wear a watch, I don't know what Time is.

TODD. Dear Agnatha—

AGNATHA. Dear Todd—

TODD. Agnatha—

AGNATHA. Dear Todd—

TODD. Dear Bryan. Not too long ago my Mom and I were walking uphill. Up this steep sidewalk—it was concrete and a bit strenuous for us both. My Mom—who is almost always quite the queen of poise and balance—tripped. She fell directly forward like a plank falling down. And then I heard a huge crack! Like someone whacking a baseball bat against a melon. She had broken her nose. There was blood all over the street. I can still see her falling, in slow motion—my mind—in my brain: all voices screaming—“grab onto her, take hold of her arms, stop her from falling!”—but my body, I couldn't get it to move, I was completely immobile. Fear, or something. She said, “Darling, can you just help me up?” And my eyes filled with tears and even then I couldn't move. Hours passed in what must have only been a few seconds, and she pushed herself up and rose to her feet. And suddenly—I found I could move again. She was standing. The fear was gone.

The stain's still there on the street—her nose is still slightly crooked—and I think: I am responsible for her imperfection. And I thought, at that moment, one would have to be a superhero to have courage in the face of that sort of danger. It might seem laughable to some, but I just could not face the fact that my mother was in danger or—in pain—*that* emotion was too enormous to feel. Almost as if I would have to just deny the fact the universe existed if I was to witness that sort of tragedy.

But I am not proud of being this sort of person—the sort of person I think many of us are. So, I've decided to go to Africa. My parents have given me the money and I'm going. The woman who writes the magazine articles has offered to house me and I am going.

I love you, Bryan, but right now I need this more. I hope you will understand and I look forward to seeing you when I return. Yours...
Todd.

(The sound of an airplane flying overhead.)

End of Part I

Part II:

Response

Through Winter, 1998

Africa

(TODD writes a letter.)

TODD. Dear Bryan, it's weird here. I don't know what I thought it would be, but it's definitely weird. Agnatha Miller is nice. And I've made friends with a man named Emmanuel.

I started assisting at the small school where Agnatha works, helping her with the children. It also functions as a community center and in the evenings there are prenatal classes for the women. My first day on the job, I was sitting in the doorway, just trying to take it all in: my reality as it now stands, when this woman approached me. She walked right up to me with militant determination and pushed this small wad of rags into my arms, then turned around and walked away. I thought it was something for the school or—I don't know what I thought, but then it moved.

I can't tell you how that felt. You know how we sort of know that our bodies are in constant motion, even though we can't feel how busy our insides actually are?—well, right then, it was like someone pressed pause and everything inside me just froze. I finally got the courage to put my hand into the rags. Bryan... I thought I had cut myself. That's how little flesh was on this body. A sharp bone, loosely wrapped in the most dry and wrinkled skin I have ever felt. It didn't even look human, it had no curves whatsoever and its fingers were curled into its hands like a dead claw. Its eyes glistened. Then it opened its mouth but no sound came out.

I don't know what came over me, but I ran, with this creature in my arms, I ran after that woman. "Stop!" I yelled. "You can't leave this here! It needs you. This child needs its mother." I caught up to her and tried to get her to take it. She screamed at me: "No! No! No!" I couldn't hold on to it any longer I forced it into her arms, she pressed it back into my chest, repeating with such force, "No. No. No." "You're killing it," I said—I could feel its skull smothered into my chest—"You're killing it!" And then something happened, I fell or was knocked over and the woman was gone. And I was holding death: wrapped up in rags, the future of the human race, dead: right there in my arms.

I think fear makes people go deaf.

(Pause.)

I think about you a lot, Bryan. I go to the mailbox in town every week and it's my secret wish that there will be a care package from Elizabeth, New Jersey. I realize that would be impossible since I haven't sent you my address, but I still hope for one. I think of us: and I can't comprehend what it is tore us apart. I do love you. I know I say that and you don't and I know that you think my language is just speaking and your silence is truth, but know this: regardless of how we might communicate, the truth is I do love you. Even now. And I hate you. Be with me, Bryan. And never come near me again. I guess I don't really know what I am saying other than I feel extreme emotion for you. Please write. One day I'll pluck up the courage to let you know where I am. Or maybe I'll call. Or maybe I'll just...

(He crumples up the letter and hurls it away.)

(Darkness.)

Africa

(MS. MWANDO sits and weaves a small blanket. She is singing to herself.)

(The song continues for several moments in peace. Then, suddenly...)

(EMMANUEL runs in laughing, looking over his shoulder.)

EMMANUEL. Catch me! Come on!

(He stops when he sees MS. MWANDO. He notices her weaving.)

EMMANUEL. Eugenia?

(MS. MWANDO shakes her head "no.")

Where is Catherine?

MS. MWANDO. Gone with Mr. Phiri to buy a coffin.

(Without sadness, MS. MWANDO continues her song. EMMANUEL joins her. They sing together for a moment, then...)

AGNATHA. *(Offstage:)* Emmanuel! Look! It's flying!

(AGNATHA and TODD run in laughing, they are flying a hand-made kite. EMMANUEL jumps up and runs to them.)

EMMANUEL. —You have to go faster // or it will fall!

AGNATHA. I can't! I can't!

EMMANUEL. Yell for the wind! // Yell for the wind!

AGNATHA. Give me the tail—

TODD. Look out!

AGNATHA. No, I've // got it, I've got—!

EMMANUEL. The wind!

(They collapse onto each other. Laughter.)

AGNATHA. You are such a schmoo.

EMMANUEL. “Schmoo?”

(They laugh. MS. MWANDO does not.)

MS. MWANDO. That is a very attractive kite.

EMMANUEL. We tore up Agnatha's fancy dress to build it.

AGNATHA. I don't know where I was thinking I was going to wear it.

MS. MWANDO. It is not all ugliness here, Ms. Miller.

(Pause.)

TODD. Um, if you still want to go into town to pick up the medical supplies today, Ms Mwando, you can go now.

MS. MWANDO. How is this? The van is broken.

AGNATHA. Not any more. Todd fixed it.

MS. MWANDO. Mr. Paulson?

TODD. Yeah, my—uh—girlfriend, back home, she likes to repair things. When we first started dating I would spend every Saturday morning in—uh—her driveway while she repaired cars. It was either learn how or be bored every week.

AGNATHA. Your “girlfriend” repairs cars?

TODD. Well, she is from Jersey.

(TODD and AGNATHA laugh.)

MS. MWANDO. These are skills we can use. Perhaps Ms. Miller you may learn something from your friend. Thank you, Mr. Paulson, for making a difference.

AGNATHA. Come on, let's run down the street, see if we can't make it fly again—

TODD. Would you like to join us?

MS. MWANDO. I stopped running a long time ago, Mr. Paulson.

EMMANUEL. Ms. Mwando used to *be* a kite, but now she is a tree. And the children are like little birds: she holds many of them in her great, strong branches.

MS. MWANDO. You tell the strangest stories, Emmanuel. ‘People are trees’—Ms. Miller will think you primitive.

AGNATHA. (*Taking offense:*) Come on, let’s fly the kite.

EMMANUEL. The sisters are fighting. They hate having so much in common.

TODD. Wow, that’s gorgeous—what are you making?

MS. MWANDO. A shroud. A mother in the prenatal class has just lost her son.

(*Pause.*)

AGNATHA. (*On the verge of tears:*) And?

MS. MWANDO. I do not understand what you are asking.

AGNATHA. Who was it?

MS. MWANDO. Kondani.

AGNATHA. ...Just like that—you’re just going to say it just like that?

EMMANUEL. Agnatha, the child is not yours to mourn.

MS. MWANDO. I do not know // what you—

AGNATHA. God, Ms. Mwando, would it kill you to feel an emotion?!

MS. MWANDO. Ms. Miller!

AGNATHA. I’m sorry, but it really is too much! You walk around here and nothing touches you. You can’t laugh or smile or show the slightest bit of affection to anyone no matter what they offer you and now you say a child has died and I don’t see the slightest bit of sadness in you at all! You’d think you’d at least be able to summon up one single tear, Ms. Mwando, I mean, so Kondani wasn’t *your* child—he was at least your friend, wasn’t he? Or do you just not know what those are?!

MS. MWANDO. You should not talk about that which you do not understand.

AGNATHA. I’m sick of being told what I do not understand. How can you say Kondani is dead with a blank face, what kind of cold-hearted, thankless—if it’s all people like you in the government, no wonder this place is so fucked!

MS. MWANDO. (*Sharply:*) Do not tell me I do not know what it is to be overcome by an emotion, because I know how painful it is to

dream and to have that dream sit in the safety of my arms and then to lose it. Think before you speak, Ms. Miller.

(Pause.)

It is a fancy kite, Emmanuel. I do hope the wind is strong for you. Good day to you...Mr. Paulson?

TODD. Yes?

MS. MWANDO. Are you driving me into town or not?

(MS. MWANDO collects her things and exits.)

TODD. I guess I'll—...later, then?

EMMANUEL. *(Agreeing:)* "Later."

(TODD runs off, shaking the van keys in his hand.)

AGNATHA. I'm sorry, Emmanuel, I didn't want to offend you, I just—

EMMANUEL. I have wasted time. There are coffins to build.

AGNATHA. I never got gifts when I was younger. We weren't that kind of family. I wanted to give this kite to Kondani. As a Christmas present. Christmas is coming soon, you know?

Kondani was my favorite.

EMMANUEL. They are all my favorites.

(EMMANUEL goes. AGNATHA stands alone. She looks down at the kite.)

America

(TESS and BRYAN in Todd's apartment. They drink champagne.)

TESS. Merry Christmas.

BRYAN. I'm Jewish.

TESS. Then you know how to celebrate in excess.

BRYAN. I don't practice.

TESS. So it won't matter if you wish me a merry Christmas. You're going to Hell anyway.

BRYAN. Jews don't believe in Hell.

TESS. Fuck, Bryan—

BRYAN. What?

TESS. Merry Christmas?

BRYAN. Sorry. My head's somewhere else.

TESS. Do you love me?

BRYAN. No.

TESS. Remind me to tell you something later.

BRYAN. Tess. I don't love you.

TESS. I never said you did. I'm glad to know you're Jewish, I didn't buy you anything; we should put some milk and eggs in this champagne. Have ourselves some egg nog.

BRYAN. Be my guest.

TESS. I like this: your boyfriend and his parents are away, we have somewhere ritzy to crash for the holidays. Pretend like we're successful, at least in our careers.

BRYAN. I didn't invite you for the holidays.

TESS. No, but you haven't sent me packing either, huh?

BRYAN. Why did you ask to come over?

TESS. Why do we always love the ones who leave us and never the ones who stay?

(Pause.)

Did they leave eggs in the fridge?

BRYAN. Probably. It's practically a super-market in there.

TESS. Wait. No, we can't put them in our drinks—what would I make you for breakfast? Remind me to tell you something later.

BRYAN. Okay.

TESS. It's snowing.

BRYAN. Yeah.

TESS. I love the snow. My sister and I used to play in it.

BRYAN. Todd and I make snow angels in the park.

TESS. Doesn't make you special. 'You sure you don't love me?

BRYAN. 'Pretty sure.

TESS. How can you tell?

BRYAN. I miss him.

TESS. How much?

BRYAN. Too much.

TESS. That must be nice. For him. Remind me to tell you something later.

BRYAN. Okay.

TESS. I'm glad you told me about him. At least the rejection isn't personal.

BRYAN. I didn't notice I had rejected you.

TESS. Well, I was hoping you would say yes.

BRYAN. Sorry.

TESS. No one ever says 'I love you' to me. My sister never did. She can say I love you to thousands and thousands of sniveling, starving, third-world kids with flies nesting in their tear-ducts, but to me? No.

BRYAN. You talk about your sister a lot.

TESS. That's because I want something from her. Fuck, who am I kidding—I don't get much from no one: case in point.

BRYAN. Do you deserve to?

TESS. Of course I do.

BRYAN. Why?

TESS. Because I am human. I am entitled to receive human emotions.

BRYAN. So, why does she give it to those kids and not you?

TESS. Because they're not human. And Agnatha thinks her love will *make* them human. She thinks that'll save them. If she makes them human with her love, they'll rise out of their sub-human lives and live, humanly.

BRYAN. What about you?

TESS. What.

BRYAN. How will you rise up from your sub-human level?

TESS. Fuck you.

BRYAN. You just said love makes you human and before you said no one's ever loved you. So?

TESS. Well, I was hoping you would say yes.

BRYAN. I'm your only possibility at being saved?

TESS. Yes 'Jesus,' are you happy now?

BRYAN. I don't know what to say. I'm sorry you put all your eggs in one basket.

TESS. Fuck my eggs. You don't have to say anything at all. Here. Have another nut, it's Christmas. Why did you go home with me that night?

BRYAN. I could ask you the same thing.

TESS. I should have guessed you were gay, you have little swimming pools for eyes. Normal guys aren't as nice as you.

BRYAN. I'm normal!

TESS. Remind me to tell you something later?

BRYAN. I don't know how nice I am, but—

TESS. You were nice to me. You sure you don't love me?

BRYAN. Tess—

TESS. I know you're Jewish but, if you could have anything in the world for Christmas. Anything at all. What would you get?

BRYAN. Todd.

TESS. You can't ask for people: that's not allowed.

BRYAN. A superhero costume. One that actually worked.

TESS. That way you could solve problems instead of having to avoid them?

BRYAN. I guess. How'd you—?

TESS. You and I are *way* too alike. So, Super Guy, who would you be?

BRYAN. I'd be "In The Moment Man." With the ability to be whatever it is that's needed in the moment to make things all right.

TESS. Huh. I like that.

BRYAN. Yeah?

TESS. Yeah. But you don't need a suit. I bet you are him already.

BRYAN. No.

TESS. I bet you are: I'll test you. My problem: I need to see my sister.

BRYAN. Why don't you go to Africa?

TESS. She hasn't told me where she is.

BRYAN. So, what, you want me to be her?

TESS. No. I want you to be me.

(Pause.)

Are we playing?

BRYAN. ...Sure.

(She moves BRYAN into a position.)

TESS. I would sit like this. On some floor pillow in some African hotel. We'll say five star for now. I'm...slightly tired—yes, that's right, you've got it—I've just taken a direct flight across the Atlantic, but I still look gorgeous, because that's what I do. I'd sit there and wait. Patiently. And she'd come up to me. From working with her kids. Her hair would be up: like so. Her shirt always more buttoned up than mine: like so. Her voice, a little different from mine, not really in sound, but sort of in tone: something like this. And she'd stand here, in her stance, and she'd look at me. Deep into me. And she'd say, "Tess. You came. I'm so glad. You must have got my letter? I know, I'm sorry to send something so cagey: 'Tess. Come to Africa. I have something I have to tell you.' And then all that suspense. You must have been knitting yourself up the whole flight over. All the things that must've run through your head. We have such a history, Tess, you and I—there's really just too much to say—but—sister—I asked you to come here so I could tell you this: face to face. Tess... I love you." ...And that would be it. Those three words would be worth crossing the ocean to hear. She would kneel down on the floor, like so; look me deep in the eyes, like so; and she would say: "Tess...I love you."

(TESS, still in character, embraces BRYAN as herself.)

BRYAN. Would that be enough?

TESS. I'd never ask for anything else as long as I live.

(Pause. She releases the embrace.)

Look. You did it. You're a superhero.

(Pause. She tries to kiss him, he pushes her away.)

Promise you won't kick me out, at least not until after the holidays?

BRYAN. Say you have a super suit. Who would you be?

TESS. Me? I'm the villain. That's my identity.

BRYAN. No you're not. Come on, who would you be?

TESS. I told you: the villain. Do you love me?

BRYAN. Tess—

TESS. No, I know. Just a last ditch effort. Is it later now?

BRYAN. 'Later than it was earlier.

TESS. Remind me?

BRYAN. You have something to tell me.

(Pause.)

So, what is it?

TESS. Try to stay calm, okay?

Africa

(TODD stands still, half stunned, half numb. His hand is marked with fresh blood. He stares at it, sheltering it from the view of the world. AGNATHA enters, she carries a doll made of dried gourds.)

AGNATHA. There you are! I had this great idea in class today. We took these gourds and filled them with pebbles, and put little branches on each side, then stuck a smaller gourd to the top. We drew faces on the smaller gourds and wove some dry grass across them so they look like people. See? The children will get a rattle *and* a doll for Christmas. They're like snowmen.

(She shakes the rattle-doll, it makes a rattling sound.)

Todd, your hand!

TODD. It's not mine.

AGNATHA. What happened?

TODD. We were building a table. For the men's clinic? One of the young guys was using the saw, he...the saw slipped—he's okay. I bandaged him, he's okay. I took a first aid class one summer at the beach? I'm not a beach person, I...didn't want to sunbathe with my parents. They like that kind of thing, I like books. I like reading, I... I took a class? They were offering it, at the beach... I know CPR and I can wrap a bandage.

AGNATHA. You don't have any cuts on your hand?

TODD. No.

AGNATHA. It's okay, Todd. It doesn't travel like that. You're okay.

TODD. I know.

AGNATHA. You should wash it off though.

TODD. It's sort of funny.

AGNATHA. What?

TODD. It's like an open book, this blood in my hand. I can't stop reading it.

AGNATHA. Todd?

TODD. I can't get that woman out of my mind—from the first day I was here? I can't imagine turning your back on your own child. I want to believe I wouldn't do that, but...maybe I would.

AGNATHA. It's easier to help when you're not a part of it.

TODD. Aren't we?

(AGNATHA *hands him a bandana from her pocket.*)

AGNATHA. We shouldn't *want* to be.

(TODD *wipes his hand on the bandana.* EMMANUEL *enters.*)

AGNATHA. Where have you been, I taught class on my own; Ms. Mwando wasn't here today, do you know where she is?

EMMANUEL. Rebecca is in the hospital.

AGNATHA. What?

TODD. What happened?

EMMANUEL. She was feeling ill last night and so I drove her into town. They will keep her for a few days.

TODD. Is she okay?

EMMANUEL. Did you know she was married?

AGNATHA. What? ...What is it, Emmanuel? What's happened to her?

EMMANUEL. She was a virgin, then—and became pregnant by her husband. At the prenatal clinic, they told her she was positive with the virus.

AGNATHA. (Oh my god.)

EMMANUEL. When her son was born, the clinic gave him a dose of medicine. She had given birth to a negative child: he was negative. She is a very intelligent woman, she knew what to do to keep him that way. But her husband's family, they said the most terrible things. Things like, that if she didn't breastfeed, it is because she was more interested in sex than with her baby's health. People began to look at her and talk. So she did feed her son, occasionally; and in private fed him formula. A year later he was very sick. He had developed AIDS. The night she found out, she called her husband from the clinic to pick her up. He never came.

AGNATHA. Don't, Emmanuel—you don't have to tell us—

EMMANUEL. No, I want you to know. No more secrets. I want you to know why; why it is so hard for her. She had no one, so she went to live in a Salvation Army home far away from her village. This is

where I first met her. I got her into a clinical trial for both her and her son. But the baby—it was too late. The treatment completely failed. He rejected all the medicines.

She loved her son. I remember she did not believe he could die. Even on the last day of his life, she said to me, 'My baby's going to wake up.'

TODD. Did she ever see her husband again?

EMMANUEL. We called him on the telephone and told him what had happened. He traveled to where we were. He buried his son. Rebecca forgave him. He's never said that he was infected with the virus, but he knows he is. At the funeral he said to Rebecca, "It's real that my baby passed away because of this HIV?" She said, "Yes, exactly." He said, "I'm sorry. I never meant to kill my baby." She said, "No, neither did I."

And from that day on, she made a promise that she would never be that hurt again. She said she would work to help others not suffer the pain she had felt—but she would never let anything touch her like that again.

And it hurts me to see that you cannot communicate, because I love her. And I care for you very much. I have loved her since the first day I met her. It is so very difficult, but I do. How can I not? She's sick and she's wounded and she's been through this Hell—and I love her for all of this. Because inside—inside she is so very beautiful. So much pain, yet so much beauty.

Just now, when I left her at the hospital, she said to me, "Please ask Ms. Miller to watch over the school and prenatal classes until I am well." I asked her if she had any special instructions, she said, "no. Ms. Miller knows what to do."

We only hurt each other when we disconnect.

Promise me, Agnatha Miller, you must not disconnect. It takes work, but you cannot disconnect.

America / Africa

(A telephone call.)

TODD. Hello?

BRYAN. Todd, I can hear // you now.

TODD. Bryan, can you hear me now?

BRYAN. Brown cow?

TODD. Bryan, it's Todd, can // you hear me?

BRYAN. I know, yes, I can hear you.

TODD. Wait, wait // there's a few second—

BRYAN. I'm here.

TODD. There's a delay. A few second delay. Don't talk if you hear blank space, all right?

BRYAN. Okay.

TODD. Hi...Bryan?

BRYAN. I was waiting for you to finish your sentence.

TODD. Oh, no, I was just saying Hi.

BRYAN. Hi.

TODD. How are you?

BRYAN. Okay... How are you?

TODD. I'm // all right.

BRYAN. Are you okay?

TODD. I said, I'm all right—wait for my answer, right?

BRYAN. Right. Sorry. So, you're okay?

TODD. Yeah. You?

BRYAN. Yeah. // You've been gone a long time.

TODD. I've been gone a long time.

BRYAN. You think so too?

TODD. Yeah. Glad we still have something in common.

BRYAN. Yeah.

TODD. Hey, Bryan, I can't talk long. It's really expensive for the charity and I'm not actually on staff, you know, so—

BRYAN. No, it's okay, I understand.

TODD. Do you?

BRYAN. Yeah... // How much longer—

TODD. I think I'm—oh sorry, go ahead.

BRYAN. No, you first.

TODD. I think I'm coming home soon.

BRYAN. Yeah?

TODD. Yeah.

BRYAN. Did you find what you were looking for?

TODD. I don't know, yet; I'm more worried that I've lost what I had.

BRYAN. Me?

TODD. Maybe. Four months is a long time.

BRYAN. We don't talk a lot.

TODD. Sorry, what?

BRYAN. I said that // we don't talk—

TODD. Hey, Bryan, I sort of have to go, they're waving at me. Did you hear me?

BRYAN. Yeah, it's okay.

TODD. It's hard here, Bryan, I don't know what I expected. But we've gotten stuff accomplished. We've set up a men's clinic—like advice for men and stuff and we've found some men here who are willing to speak to each other about their problems. Now if I could just do this in America, that'd really be something, huh?

BRYAN. Yeah. I'm glad you're having an impact.

TODD. What was that?

BRYAN. I said I'm // glad you're having—

TODD. Hey, Bryan? I got to get off the phone now, they've stopped waving and they're actually coming towards me now. Okay?

BRYAN. Okay.

TODD. So, I'll see you soon?

BRYAN. Todd?

TODD. Did you hear me?

BRYAN. I—

TODD. I'm losing you, Bryan, can you speak up?

BRYAN. I love you.

(Pause.)

TODD. Bryan? I'm sorry, but if you can hear me, you're totally gone now. If you can hear me, I'll see you when I get back—a few days after the New Year. So, have fun and I'll see you soon.

(TODD hangs up.)

BRYAN. Yeah. Okay.

Africa

(AGNATHA has a backpack on her back. It is large. She is going somewhere some ways away.)

AGNATHA. Todd?

TODD. Hi!

AGNATHA. I didn't mean to scare you.

TODD. Sorry, my mind's still in America.

AGNATHA. Was that your 'girlfriend' on the phone?

TODD. Yeah.

AGNATHA. I'm sorry we're not better equipped for long distance communication.

TODD. 'You going somewhere?

AGNATHA. You came here to help, right?

TODD. Um...in theory, yeah.

AGNATHA. I'm going away for a few days.

TODD. What?

AGNATHA. I'm going to the Salvation Army home, the one where Ms. Mwando went for the clinical trial. It's...pretty far from here.

TODD. But the school—she's still in hospital.

AGNATHA. You're here.

TODD. I don't know what I'm doing.

AGNATHA. There's no precedent for any of this, look for one and you'll never be productive.

TODD. Have you asked her?

AGNATHA. What?

TODD. Have you asked her if you can tell her story? That's why you're going right? To research a story?

AGNATHA. Stories are like secrets. Unless they're told, they can be very dangerous. You can't be selfish with life and pretend you're the only one living it.

TODD. I feel like you're getting angry with me.

AGNATHA. And I feel like you're retreating, I didn't think you were that kind of person.

TODD. You're running away from her!

AGNATHA. I'm running towards her story!

TODD. Well, which is more important?

AGNATHA. You came here to help. I'm giving you that opportunity.

TODD. What about Emmanuel? Have you told him? You made him a promise. You can't just leave him, you made him a promise.

AGNATHA. Her story needs to be told. I do that and the better version of me: the richer, more educated, more capable version of me will come here and take my place. They'll have to. I'll write her story and make sure they do. Just take care of things here, and if you can't, then at least don't tell me...I want to leave here with the clearest conscience I can.

TODD. You're coming back.

AGNATHA. I have to feel like I'm doing *something*. Something more than making dolls and teaching English. Don't stop me from feeling that.

TODD. What makes you think I can do this?

AGNATHA. You helped build the men's clinic.

TODD. But is that enough?

AGNATHA. Nothing's enough.

(Pause.)

Why are you looking at me like that?

TODD. I feel like I'm looking in a mirror.

AGNATHA. So, smile.

(Pause. He doesn't.)

TODD. Have you *ever* been in love?

(Pause.)

AGNATHA. I'm sorry if I'm not the person you need me to be. You'll find that people rarely are. I don't know what the answers are, Todd. I guess I'm just hoping if I ask enough people, one day someone'll tell me. Fuck you.

TODD. What?

AGNATHA. I don't like having conversations like this. *(She kisses him quickly on the cheek.)* Tell your girlfriend she's a lucky man.

(AGNATHA goes. TODD stands for a moment. Alone.)

America

(TESS stands against a wall, a masquerade mask covers her face. BRYAN lies on the floor, his face exposed. Bottles around.)

TESS. I like the countdown. When everyone does that: ten nine eight seven...and for ten seconds it's like everyone in the world is the same person, having the same experience: five four three two... can you imagine having so many friends?

You could at least dance with me. I mean whatever's going to happen is going to happen: you could at least dance.

I love wearing masks. People are more willing to be nice to you when they can't see who you really are. We should have gone outside. All those people. The fireworks. It's not the same on the TV.

I can't breathe. The mask is too restricted. It's bright in here. A bright new year.

Do you think it's hot in Africa? Where my sister is? Winter there isn't the same as here, is it.

Well. You haven't kicked me out. That's hopeful. There's always hope.

(Silence.)

BRYAN. We met in the street. I know good people aren't supposed to do that. Good people are supposed to meet in bookstores or coffee shops, while at school or through friends or something. But what was I supposed to do? I'm from Elizabeth: it's named after the Queen of England or some guy's grandmother; either way, it's a shit hole. People keep saying there are nice parts of Jersey: parts where there are horses and farms and boarding schools, but I've never seen them. Elizabeth looks like one big factory—like: a big factory that makes pollution. Like Mexico City or LA or Eastern Russia phones up and wants pollution—well, Elizabeth probably makes it. What was I supposed to do? I'm in the street one night, it's raining: that black city rain like someone on the Upper West Side has just struck oil in the park and the whole city's getting covered in it. And there he is: this dorky, sort of hunched over, kinda scrawny, little white boy—with a quivering lip and these eyes: eyes that sort of scream out for the world to slow down so he can take it all in: rearrange it all so it works better. It was the stupidest thing. I felt like I could either drop kick this guy halfway across the city, or take him home and never let him out of my sight. I followed him until it felt like I was being creepy and then I finally stopped him and asked his name. He nearly jumped out of his skin but—then, I guess—something stopped him and made him feel safe. I don't know—I was more attractive then, I had just

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