

# ***Into the Gobpile***

**a play about lost connections and shifting landscapes  
by Jennie Webb**

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## ***Into the Gobpile***

### **Characters:**

**MEG**, early 30s, white – from Los Angeles, has come “home” to a place where she never actually lived. So she doesn’t quite belong here, but feels a connection.

**REGGIE**, early 30s, white (with a bit of Native American blood, but probably not enough to count) – from here, but maybe doesn’t want to belong here. Anymore.

**HELEN**, 70s/80s, white – Meg’s paternal grandmother. A transplant.

**CLAUDETTE**, 70s/80s, white – Meg’s maternal grandmother. Born and raised.

**ESSIE**, mid/late 40s, black – Helen’s friend. Claudette’s acquaintance. No relation to Reggie, or Meg. At least none that we know of.

### **Time:**

Fall, 1992

### **Place:**

Various locations in and around Perseverance, a very small town – a village, really – in Southern Illinois

### **Note:**

In staging, settings and properties are partially or wholly suggested, or indicated through lighting, projections and sound. It’s probably all a bit surreal. Kind of like life.

### *Dialogue:*

— *Indicates a character’s dialogue is interrupted, by another character speaking, an event or a character abruptly shifting gears within a line of dialogue.*

... *Indicates a character is searching for words, does not complete a thought or leaves a line of dialogue open.*

### *Pronunciation:*

PerSEVerance

MURphysburg

BARNett

ABsalom

COLbert (short i, as in COAL; long ə, as in her + hard T)

GALilee

CARbonboro

HEBron (short ε, as in BED and ə, as in run)

SHAWneeville

## ***Into the Gobpile***

### **SYNOPSIS**

Unsettled by the LA riots, a young woman goes "home" to heal in a place she's never lived: a small town called Perseverance, in the heart of Southern Illinois Coal Country.

*Into the Gobpile* is a play about lost connections and shifting landscapes.

### **SPECIAL THANKS**

to the following artists and advocates  
for their roles in the development of *Into the Gobpile*:

Director Laura Stribling, Kimberly Alexander, Chelsea Gonzalez, Jennifer Finch, Patricia Herd, Michelle Gillette, June Carryl, Judith Moreland, Donna Simone Johnson, and the Road Theatre Summer Playwrights Festival—Scott Alan Smith; Carlyle King, Taylor Gilbert, Sam Anderson and the Road Theatre Company; Hannah Prichard, Eve Sigall, Hersha Parady and the Playwrights Union; Kyle T. Wilson and Elena Campbell-Martinez. Heather Helinsky, Dramaturg.

## ***Into the Gobpile***

*In the darkness, we hear a low rumble, like distant thunder or the roaring of flames, far away. A large crowd moving through the streets. As the sounds build, we suddenly hear a woman scream... as if she's waking up to something she could never have imagined. Then, just as suddenly, silence. And we begin to hear the sound of kids playing.*

*We see two women, standing on the front porch of a large house. It's early afternoon and they're looking straight ahead of them. They're both in their early 30s, but one seems older. This is Reggie. She's white, with imposing features. She doesn't have to try to be strong. She may be holding a baby, or there's a baby in a carrier on the porch. The other is Meg. She's also white. A bit awkward. And has a softness and openness about her that she's probably not aware of, and tries hard to cover up. But it's like an open wound.*

MEG:

Is that one word or two?

REGGIE:

Gobpile?

MEG:

Yeah.

REGGIE:

Gob— I don't really know. It's just... I don't know. Something we say. I don't know if I've ever read it. Or written it. A gobpile is just...

MEG:

A pile of gob?

REGGIE:

Ha ha. Yes, it is.

MEG:

I mean, technically. And gob is... coal waste?

REGGIE:

Or waste coal. Technically. It's mostly still coal.

MEG:

Really?

REGGIE:

If you dig down into it. So you can burn it. I mean, it's nasty. You wouldn't want to. I mean, *you* wouldn't want to. But some people do.

MEG:

Burn it. For like...

*Very short pause.*

REGGIE:  
Heat?

MEG:  
Oh. Sure!

REGGIE:  
I mean, it's covered in dirt. After all these years, and all. But underneath, that's what it is. Other stuff too, but a lot of coal.

MEG:  
From the mines.

REGGIE:  
Strangely enough! There's new laws mucking everything up, but a few years back they opened a new one, out in Hebron. No getting around it, that's where we are: Coal country!

MEG:  
Coal country?

REGGIE:  
Right. Welcome to coal country! Not all of Illinois, but in these parts, definitely. And down here it's the best coal. That, everyone knows.

MEG:  
I guess I never— I didn't.

REGGIE:  
No? No miners in your family?

MEG:  
I don't think so. Mostly teachers.

REGGIE:  
Don't like to get their hands dirty? Ha ha.

MEG:  
And farmers. I think my mom's family owned a store, in town?

REGGIE:  
This town? Perseverance?

MEG:  
I'm not— It was long time ago. My grandmother was a little girl; I've just heard stories.

REGGIE:

This place is full of stories, for real. How long since you've been back? Not for a while, right?

MEG:

We were here when my Grandpa Mack died.

REGGIE:

That's been almost ten years. I remember: I was pregnant with the twins, which makes it '82, because they turned nine in—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* Then my other grandfather. Last year, for the funeral.

REGGIE:

Last June.

MEG:

But that wasn't a visit, visit. He was buried up near Indianapolis, so we didn't really spend time any here.

REGGIE:

My goodness, why ever not?

MEG:

We had to—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I was joking. If you lived here it would be hilarious. We did wonder, though, whether Helen was going to bury him in the backyard.

MEG:

What?

REGGIE:

Another joke? Because of the old Barnett graveyard back there? Ha ha. I know it's kind of... insensitive but even your grandma laughed about that one. That's what we do, down here.

*Very short pause.*

We all liked your grandpa. He was a very smart man; helped a lot of people.

MEG:

Yeah. That's nice. I suppose I didn't really know him all that well?

REGGIE:

No?

MEG:

But I remember lots of little things. Growing up. His projects in the basement. He had a dark room down there, for a while. The strange, mysterious objects—to me, anyway—he kept in his study. Maybe I was a little frightened?

REGGIE:

Of your Grandpa?

MEG:

As a kid... You know. I think I was just scared, in general. And, okay: I stayed here so many summers. I'm looking around now and of course I remember those old gravestones—there was a pond and a garden right next to the fence, and that wooden bridge that used to be over there and other bits and pieces I'd completely forgotten are coming back to me and it's... great. Things have changed but they haven't really changed?

REGGIE:

You got that right.

MEG:

But what is weird is that I don't at all remember... *(pointing out front)* That. Which is ridiculous because it's been there. Right? Right there? Like from before I was born.

REGGIE:

You didn't remember me, either.

MEG:

Oh! I—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I'm kidding. I think we played together like once or twice. Ms. Claudette always sent you to that daycamp in Shawneeville.

MEG:

Yeah, that was stupid.

REGGIE:

"Indian Acres" You all wore little headbands.

MEG:

But how many times have I been out here, on this porch, and you can't help but see it. This huge... gobpile.

REGGIE:

Honestly? With all the trees, from here you have to try to see it. I mean, they're all around these parts. We don't think much about 'em.

MEG:

That's what Frieda Mae said.

REGGIE:

Why were you—? Oh. Right. She's your family.

MEG:

She picked me up from the airport and wanted to stop at the cemetery.

REGGIE:

Which cemetery? Her people are all over.

MEG:

I don't— The one where a... gobpile runs along the entire edge?

REGGIE:

Hickory Wood.

MEG:

And I asked her what it was and she looked right through it. This big, unnatural hill made of coal. That no one sees.

REGGIE:

The kids play on 'em. We used to.

MEG:

We did?

REGGIE:

Well no, not *you*. It's not a very good idea, anyway. Sometimes they just burst into flames.

MEG:

What?

REGGIE:

I mean, that's what they say. Hey! Helen still has that old stove, doesn't she? It's an old coal stove. She's got it on the back porch?

MEG:

As far as I know. I think it has plants on it.

REGGIE:

She likes old things.

MEG:

And plants.



REGGIE:

I'll bet it still works, though. The stove. You could use it if you needed to while you're here like in a storm or something and there's no power. That happens.

MEG:

A lot?

REGGIE:

No, but some. You really don't know about winter, right? In California. You don't have it.

MEG:

We have winter. But not... snow. Except in the mountains. It gets cold, though.

REGGIE:

What's cold?

MEG:

50s? No, 40s. In LA, anyway.

REGGIE:

Okay! You live by the beach?

MEG:

No.

REGGIE:

Helen said you live close to where the riots were, but I wasn't sure if that was close to the beach.

MEG:

The riots were all over LA. In different parts. Including right where I live.

REGGIE:

Because I didn't see the beach on TV but I don't know how it all fits together, there. Los Angeles is close to Hollywood, I know. But on TV it was kind of weird because it didn't look like a city, city. Some places they showed looked a lot like towns here. Bigger, I mean. With more police and different kinds of people. But still, that must have been crazy. Scary.

MEG:

It was.

REGGIE:

So that's why you're here?

MEG:

I... I'm here for my grandmothers! I thought I could help out; spend some time with them.

REGGIE:

I don't know if Helen told you, but in August there were these black guys who escaped from prison—the one in Franklin County—and they broke into a bunch of buildings on Van Buren Street and two of them got shot.

*Very short pause.*

Probably sounds like nothing.

MEG:

No! That sounds scary.

REGGIE:

It was! Specially if you have kids. Cause you know, here, they're just running around all the time. Even at night and that was summer so specially at night. Who knows what coulda happened! Usually around here, it's families or people who know each other are the ones shooting each other.

MEG:

What?

REGGIE:

But that's for real, sad to tell ya.

*A chilly breeze hits them and she picks up her baby or holds it closer; we hear the kids shouting.*

Woosh! Feel that? They say it's going to get cold early, this year. I mean, down here winters are mild compared to Chicago. Or that's what they say. Have you been to Chicago?

MEG:

Yeah! A few times.

REGGIE:

Oh. Well, here it's more like St. Louis. Sometimes we don't even get snow at all. Or we don't get snow until spring. It doesn't last long, but the kids have fun. Snow is snow and they love snow.

MEG:

When I was little and we came here for Christmas, I always remember there being snow.

REGGIE:

I doubt it. Are you staying until Christmas?

MEG:

I— I don't know. I could...

REGGIE:

You don't know how long you're staying? You don't have a ticket home?

MEG:

No. I just— I just thought I'd get here and see what happened.

REGGIE:

That must be nice. Take time off work like that.

MEG:

I'm sort of in a place in my life that... I guess I'm between jobs?

REGGIE:

Oh! Helen didn't—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* I was trying to get a business going.

REGGIE:

That's tough. Businesses going bust, we know all about that in this town.

MEG:

I still am. Trying. I'm just setting it up, right now. So maybe— Maybe I will stay. Through the holidays.

REGGIE:

You don't have anyone, back home, to...

MEG:

No. Not really.

REGGIE:

Well. I should probably warn you. Christmas used to be better, here. At least that's what *I* remember. Probably always sucked.

*We hear more shouting from the kids, now further away, and a white woman in her 70s or 80s comes out onto the porch; she has an easy air and carries a light jacket. This is Helen.*

MEG:

*(to Helen)* Hi!

HELEN:

Hello. And Reggie—I thought I heard you out here.

REGGIE:

Heard *me*? Or my three monsters? *(to the kids)* Hey! Boys! Get back here—we're taking off, soon!

HELEN:

*(to Meg)* I thought you might want your jacket.

MEG:

You didn't have to—

HELEN:

*(interrupting, re the jacket)* I know you haven't unpacked, but do you have anything heavier?

REGGIE:

For those freezing LA winters. Ha ha.

HELEN:

I was thinking, I'm sure I have an old coat of your grandfather's, if you want. Or we could go shopping, if you want to take a trip into Murphysburg.

REGGIE:

Tell me if you do; maybe I'll go with. They say it's going to get cold early this year.

HELEN:

I believe it.

REGGIE:

Anyway.

HELEN:

Would you like some cider? It's in the fridge; I bought it from the Orchard out by Absalom a few weeks ago. I could heat it up.

REGGIE:

I gotta get going. It's a school night and I open up the store tomorrow. Nice to talk to you, Meg!

MEG:

Nice to meet you.

HELEN:

Thank you for stopping by!

REGGIE:

Let me know if you need anything!

HELEN:

I'm sure we'll be fine.

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* See you around, I'm sure. Specially if you stay through Christmas!

MEG:  
Oh, I'm—

REGGIE  
*(interrupting)* And we should grab a drink in the next few. Close by, there's basically only one bar, in town. Helen wouldn't mind, would ya?

HELEN:  
Not at all!

REGGIE:  
Okay, then! *(to the kids, heading off the porch)* You all! Come're! We're goin! Say bye! *(to Meg and Helen, joined by the voices of the kids)* Bye!

*She is gone.*

HELEN:  
Thank you! *(to Meg)* You're staying for Christmas?

MEG:  
I hadn't really gotten that far.

HELEN:  
I just didn't know. And I'd love to have you. We would, your grandmother and I, but...

MEG:  
But?

HELEN:  
I'm sure you have friends, and a life, that you want to get back to.

MEG:  
I just got here. But, I mean, it's a possibility. If I did, would that be okay?

HELEN:  
Of course! We don't usually do much...

*Short pause as they look after Reggie and her family.*

Those boys are certainly growing up fast.

MEG:  
How old is she?

HELEN:  
About your age, I think. Maybe a bit younger?

MEG:  
Really? She's younger?

HELEN:  
I think so.

MEG:  
And she's got four kids?

HELEN:  
And two husbands.

MEG:  
Currently?

HELEN:  
In one form or another.

*The women both smile, and look straight ahead.*

MEG:  
Ha ha. "God pile."

HELEN:  
What?

MEG:  
This morning. That's what I thought Frieda Mae said that was. A "God pile."

HELEN:  
"God pile."

*Very short pause.*

To tell you the truth, I forget to notice it, anymore.

*Darkness.*

*We hear what sounds like a low moaning, or a body rolling over in its sleep. A giant, otherworldly body in pain. Maybe we also feel a sort of shifting. Like the ground moving, sinking.*

*We see Meg in one of the house's bedrooms; next to her is a small-ish rolling suitcase and a large carry-on bag. With her is another white woman in her 70s or 80s with sharp edges. This is Claudette. She is making up a single bed.*

CLAUDETTE:

I don't care what you say, you must be tired! That's a long flight. You had to have gotten up very early. Oh, I hate flying. Especially now. It used to be very elegant. Everyone dressed up...

MEG:

I slept on the plane.

CLAUDETTE:

But still. And then the drive from the airport...

MEG:

I'm okay. I'm tired, but I'm okay. It's good to be here. Feels like home.

CLAUDETTE:

This house?

MEG:

And Perseverance.

CLAUDETTE:

Why would you say that?

MEG:

Why wouldn't I?

CLAUDETTE:

Honey, you have never lived here.

MEG:

I mean... It feels familiar. Comforting. Like family, home. Deeper.

CLAUDETTE:

I suppose. Hand me those pillowcases?

*Meg does.*

You know, I told Frieda Mae you could have taken a bus. To the college, anyway. I could have picked you up from there. There's really no bus that comes here, anymore. Not one you'd want to ride in.

MEG:

It was very nice of her.

CLAUDETTE:

She insisted. She has family in St. Louis. But it's just a mess getting to the airport, now.

MEG:

There wasn't any traffic.

CLAUDETTE:

Not compared to where you live. I expect she invited you church on Sunday? You can make an excuse this week, but you'll have to give in, eventually. She did pick you up.

MEG:

Ha ha.

CLAUDETTE:

After I make up this bed, you can take a little nap before supper.

MEG:

I'm okay. *(re the bed-making)* You don't need to—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* It's fine. I want to. We'll have to eat early, though. So I can get home before dark. I brought some sandwiches: BLTs. I love them, but I never make them for just me. Are you still a vegetarian? But you eat bacon, don't you?

MEG:

Not really.

CLAUDETTE:

No? I don't see how anyone could not eat bacon, but you can take it out. Not that there's anything worth eating left, with no bacon. I told your grandmother I'd bring something. She always has a lot on her plate, anyway, all alone in this house and she's still hasn't straightened out your grandfather's affairs—me, I couldn't stand that hanging over me; when Mack died I just wanted to be done... Are you unpacked?

MEG:

Oh. No. But can I help with the bed?

CLAUDETTE:

I'm fine. You unpack.

*Meg rolls her suitcase to a dresser.*

Well, look't! What's that suitcase got, wheels? That would make life easier, wouldn't it?

MEG:

Traveling, anyway.



CLAUDETTE:

You know you're welcome to stay with me, if you'd like. She has more space, here, but I do have an extra bedroom.

MEG:

Thanks! I know. I feel like I want to sort of settle myself, first.

CLAUDETTE:

You still don't know how long you're staying?

MEG:

I just got here.

CLAUDETTE:

I'm not rushing you. We're just happy for the visit.

MEG:

Me, too.

CLAUDETTE:

Between you and me, I don't know why she's stayed in this big old place. And in this town; there's nothing here, anymore. She should move closer to the college; she's still got friends there. But I think, for her, the thought of moving is too overwhelming. She's got such beautiful things but she's got... so much. When you get to a certain age, you just don't need that much!

MEG:

I love this house!

CLAUDETTE:

Of course you do! And I've always admired it, even before your grandparents bought it. John Crenshaw built it, you know. Had it built. That was before the Big Slave House.

MEG:

I don't think I did know.

CLAUDETTE:

He had a lot of money. This is a beautiful house.

MEG:

Everything smells the same as I remember it.

CLAUDETTE:

Well. It's an awful lot to keep up. And your grandmother is not getting any younger.

MEG:

She's not?

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, hush. You know what I mean.

MEG:

And that's why I'm here.

*With some effort, she sets her carry-on on a small table.*

CLAUDETTE:

Goodness! What have you got in there?

MEG:

It's a word processor.

CLAUDETTE:

I have a typewriter you can use. It's not fancy, but it works. You didn't need to—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* It's not really a typewriter. It's more like a small computer. For my business.

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, yes. Your business. And what was that, again?

MEG:

Desktop publishing.

CLAUDETTE:

That certainly sounds professional. I know your mother's very excited. And they don't mind if you take a little time off?

MEG:

There's no they. It's me.

CLAUDETTE:

But someone pays you. If it's a business.

MEG:

I'm just getting started.

CLAUDETTE:

But you're taking time off?

MEG:

I can work from here.

CLAUDETTE:

You expect someone from this town to pay you?

MEG:

I'm still figuring things out.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, I'm sorry. It's none of my business; I'm just concerned. You're a single girl, and believe me there's nothing wrong with that!

MEG:

Thanks.

CLAUDETTE:

We just have to work harder, is all. You are capable of doing that; you can do anything you set your mind to do, and I don't even know what "desk publishing" is. Your mother explained it to me, but it's a different world. And I don't mind saying it makes me feel very old sometimes.

MEG:

I'm willing to bet that you will never actually get old.

CLAUDETTE:

It's not in my plans. But sometimes you can't help things. They just happen.

MEG:

Yes. They do.

*There's a crash offstage.*

HELEN:

*(offstage)* Oh...

MEG:

Grandma?

CLAUDETTE:

Helen, are you—?

*She's interrupted by Helen walking in with a tray; on it, a full and an overturned tea cup.*

HELEN:

I'm sorry. I was bringing up some cider—I got it from the Orchard, and—

MEG:

*(interrupting, hurrying toward her)* What happened?

*She takes the tray as Claudette moves into the hall.*

Are you okay?

HELEN:

I'm fine. I just lost my— *(pointing to the full cup)* Will you drink that? It's still hot.

*Claudette comes back in with a broken cup, adding it to the tray.*

CLAUDETTE:

Well, this is one sticky mess you've got here. Towels?

HELEN:

In the hall closet.

MEG:

I'll do it.

*She sets the tray on the table.*

HELEN:

*(re the sticky tray on the table)* Oh. No...

MEG:

*(heading out)* It's fine! I can help—that's what I'm here for!

HELEN:

No, I didn't— There are rags downstairs. Under the sink. In the kitchen?

MEG:

Okay. I'll be right back.

*Meg leaves and Helen moves to pick up the tray.*

HELEN:

This table is very old.

CLAUDETTE:

It looks like it.

HELEN:

*(re the tray)* I don't want the wet to sit...

CLAUDETTE:

Of course not.

HELEN:

Cider? It's still hot.

CLAUDETTE:

I do love cider. Real cider.

*She takes the cup and looks into the hall after Meg.*

HELEN:

I went and got it a while ago, thinking she was coming. But really I was too early. It may have already started to turn.

*Stopped in mid-sip, Claudette sets the cup back down.*

CLAUDETTE:

*(lowering her voice)* How does she seem, to you?

HELEN:

Meg?

CLAUDETTE:

Yes, Meg! I didn't really understand, from what Ann said, what it was that happened. I don't think anything actually did happen. To her, anyway.

HELEN:

You mean— in the riots out there, or are you talking about before?

CLAUDETTE:

No, no. Of course, what happened before was terrible. But it was years ago. She's all better. She's over that.

HELEN:

So you do mean the riots.

CLAUDETTE:

Ann said where she lives she was right in the middle of everything. But she wasn't hurt.

HELEN:

Not physically.

CLAUDETTE:

No! So what's wrong with her? To me, she seems—

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* From what I understood it all affected her, more gradually. The sort of things that happened in the riots.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, it looked awful. The pictures on the news. Like the 1960s. Almost 30 years ago and it's happening all over again. Race riots. Those hoodlums dragging that poor trucker out into the streets, like that, just because he was white? Did you see that on the TV? People just don't know how to behave. But I don't understand how she could take it personally.

HELEN:

Ann said that all the violence... it triggered something.

CLAUDETTE:

“Triggered?” Like a gun?

HELEN:

It’s a word they use.

CLAUDETTE:

Who’s they?

HELEN:

In diagnosing PTSD. That’s what Ann said.

CLAUDETTE:

Ugh! I don’t know where my daughter comes up with these things. But you talk to her more than I do.

HELEN:

No, not at all. But I did speak to some of the people in the Psychology Department. About what happened to Meg, years ago, and they said the breakdown she just had—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* It was not a breakdown.

HELEN:

That’s what she called it.

CLAUDETTE:

Ann?

HELEN:

Meg.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, that sounds ridiculous. And “PTSD?” Isn’t that for soldiers?

HELEN:

Yes, but no: If you’re talking about “trauma,” it can—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Oh, would you give that tray to me?

*She takes it from Helen.*

*(re the broken cup)* I’d say you could ask Essie to fix this cup, but I think it’s beyond. Does she still come in for you?

HELEN:

She’s not cleaning houses, anymore. But she does help me out.

CLAUDETTE:

That's a shame. She was good. Got all of that awful black dust out of the corners like no one else. I wouldn't let any of the other girls come in, when we still had the house, here.

HELEN:

I think Meg will be fine. I talked to her awhile back but now, she seems like herself, again.

CLAUDETTE:

Of course, she does. She just needs some time away. According to Ann. Who's apparently become an expert in psychology.

HELEN:

Ann's been doing research, is all.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, the question is, "time away" from what? Did you ask why Meg didn't go stay with her, in San Francisco?

HELEN:

I didn't. It is much closer...

CLAUDETTE:

And she is her mother. Ann's the one who gave Meg the idea for her little business. I just don't know what she expects she'll accomplish here, of all places. Can you imagine? She said it felt like home.

HELEN:

Meg? Oh. That's...

CLAUDETTE:

I know. But I am glad she'll visit, for a bit. I worry about you in this big house. (*re the tray*) You should not be carrying things up those stairs. One fall, and it's all over!

HELEN:

(*re the tray*) Let me—

CLAUDETTE:

(*interrupting*) No. I've got it!

HELEN:

The light has never been good in that hallway. There are always shadows.

CLAUDETTE:

You need to get someone good to do those windows. They're too tall.

HELEN:

And today, I was turning the corner and saw, or thought I saw...

CLAUDETTE:

What?

HELEN:

This is going to sound silly, but my cat, Ebony... I swear I could feel her going through my legs, that's what happened when I...

CLAUDETTE:

That certainly would give me a fright. You haven't had a cat for years, have you?

HELEN:

Not since before Henry got sick. But I wasn't exactly frightened. More like... caught off balance?

CLAUDETTE:

All right. Here's some psychology for you. I don't think I've ever told anyone this, but the first few years after Mack was gone, I had some very, very strange... We get used to having someone around. And then we're alone. And it's almost as if there's something trying to make things feel less empty, only it doesn't feel much like help. So we just have to push it away. *(re the tray)* Where can I put this down?

HELEN:

*(looking around the room for an appropriate surface)* Oh...

CLAUDETTE:

I'll take it downstairs.

*She starts out.*

HELEN:

I can—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* I've got it!

HELEN:

Watch out for the spill! And there might still be pieces—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting, offstage)* Nothing to worry about; seems to be already taken care of!

MEG:

*(offstage)* Almost!



*Alone in the room, Helen waits for Meg—how much of the conversation might she have overheard? Then, she goes back to the table now holding the word processor. She tries to pick it up; it's very heavy. Meg comes back in with a small bowl of water and some rags.*

MEG:  
    *(re the word processor)* Oh! That's heavy!

HELEN:  
    It is!

MEG:  
    Do you want me to move it?

*She sets down the bowl and rags on the table.*

HELEN:  
    This table is very old.

MEG:  
    Sorry. Where should it go?

*She's picked it up and looks around the room, as Helen takes the bowl and rags and quickly wipes down the table.*

HELEN:  
    That chair, there? We'll bring something else in for you to use. I think there's a better table in the attic.

*Meg sets down the word processor.*

MEG:  
    Do you want me to move my suitcase?

HELEN:  
    It's fine.

MEG:  
    I'll move it.

HELEN:  
    This table's got very delicate legs. One broke, years ago, and when your grandfather repaired it he sort of whittled it down and made it even more... I really shouldn't use it.

MEG:  
    It's beautiful. I'm sorry if I—

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* No! I should have thought of putting a desk in here. But I wasn't sure which room you wanted to use. That's why I didn't make the bed. I did clear out a couple of drawers, and we can move things out of the closet. I just didn't know...

MEG:

Everything is great! I love this room. Let me get those.

*She takes the bowl and rags from Helen, who sits on the bed.*

HELEN:

You remember Ebony?

MEG:

Ebony? Oh, your cat. Are you thinking of getting a cat, again?

HELEN:

Oh, no.

MEG:

No? We could—

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* No.

MEG:

Why not?

HELEN:

Cats live a long time. Old ladies shouldn't have cats.

*Darkness. We hear the sound of what might be the wind, shifting into a sort of wailing or moaning that we almost recognize as a woman's.*

*We then see Reggie, stacking boxes on a shelf—and cleaning black dust off the same shelf—in a small grocery store that's seen better days. She's wearing a smock or apron. With her is a passionate and very earnest black woman who is in her mid- to late-40s, but looks much younger. This is Essie. She holds a canvas bag full of fresh produce.*

REGGIE:

I don't know. I mean, it looks beautiful and all and I'm sure people around here have never even seen half this stuff—I haven't—but to most of us, "organic" doesn't mean a whole lot. Or not enough to pay more for it.

ESSIE:

I understand. That's what I told my friend. But I said I was coming over here and she wanted me to bring it by.

REGGIE:

Do you want to leave it for Mr. Colbert? It's not like I can make any decisions, really.

ESSIE:

No, sure. I'll leave him a note.

REGGIE:

Put down your friend's number. Best keep your name out of it.

ESSIE:

Oh, come on.

REGGIE:

Colbert's not a fan; you know that. His kid's working for Eagle Run for the last five years.

ESSIE:

Reggie, that mine's going to close, whether I have a say or not. It was already on the block before the new rules passed.

REGGIE:

Tell half the town that.

ESSIE:

Only half?

REGGIE:

I was trying to be kind. But I see you stopped wearing your "Clean Air Act" T-shirt.

ESSIE:

Ha ha. It was the right side to be on. And I got two of my boys working down in the pits, not up in the office like—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I know! Have you forgot who I'm married to?

ESSIE:

People here don't seem to realize, the world is changing. It has changed. Our entire landscape has changed, and this town's not going to survive if we refuse to see it.

*We hear an unintelligible male voice on a loudspeaker or from the back of the store.*

REGGIE:

*(to the offstage voice)* Got it! As soon as I'm finished here!

*Essie sets down the bag of produce.*

ESSIE:

*(pointing out some greens)* You should grab some of this for yourself. it's called Arugula. Kind of like spinach but spicy.

REGGIE:

Yuck. None of that for me. I like my spinach in a can or the freezer, thank you very much.

ESSIE:

You don't know what you're missing.

MEG:

Essie?

*Meg joins them, carrying a small shopping basket and setting down a larger plastic bag.*

ESSIE:

Yes...

MEG:

It's me. Meg. Helen's granddaughter.

ESSIE:

Meg! I'm glad you said something, I never would have recognized you!

MEG:

I— It's been a while.

ESSIE:

It has. And I'm sorry about your grandfather. I was out of the country...

MEG:

I know. Thanks. My grandma told me.

ESSIE:

She seems to be doing well. She's been talking about your visit; how long are you staying?

REGGIE:

Maybe through Christmas!

MEG:

Oh, I don't—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* She wants a white Christmas.

MEG:

I'm not sure how long I'll stay. I really just got here.

REGGIE:

Over a week ago. When are we going to get that drink?

MEG:

Sorry, I feel like I've been really busy, but then...

REGGIE:

Well, that's life in Perseverance for you. Whole days filled up with a whole lot of nothing.

*She returns to the shelves.*

ESSIE:

*(to Meg)* Why don't I stop by... early tomorrow?

MEG:

Tomorrow we're going to drive over to my other grandmother's apartment. There's a concert at the college.

ESSIE:

That'll be nice.

MEG:

You work on campus, right? Why don't you come with us?

ESSIE:

The afternoon, I've got my grandbabies.

MEG:

You're a grandmother?

ESSIE:

Thank you for that. I've got five. All girls; the oldest is 14.

MEG:

Wow. I'm sorry to seem— Wait: That math doesn't even work, does it?

ESSIE:

Oh, it does.

REGGIE:

Okay, then. I'll let you two professors figure it out. *(to Meg)* But I'm not messing around, because tonight David's home to watch my lot: You. Me. Jimbo's. Happy Hour goes to 9pm. I'll pick you up at 7?

MEG:

I— Yeah. Thanks. That'd be okay.

REGGIE:

Lower your expectations. *(to Essie)* I'll take that bag?

ESSIE:

Tell him there are people who drive to the Farmer's Market in Carbonboro for produce that's not even organic.

REGGIE:

I believe you. But even though I fake it, I got no power here!

MEG:

Arugula is really delicious.

REGGIE:

Uh huh.

*She starts to leave and Meg picks up the plastic bag.*

MEG:

Oh! Where do I put the recyclables.

REGGIE:

Recyclables?

MEG:

Bottles and cans? Some plastic containers?

REGGIE:

I know what recyclables are. But we don't do that, here.

MEG:

You don't—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Just put 'em in the trash. Or I guess you could take them back to Los Angeles with you. Fill up a suitcase, if you're on some kind of foreign mission, ha ha.

*She leaves.*

ESSIE:

There's no place to recycle. Not in this town.

MEG:

My grandma told me they'd take them at the market?

ESSIE:

She probably meant in Murphysburg. Or by the college.

MEG:

Oh! That makes sense...

ESSIE:

In a backwards kind of way. It's nice to see you, Meg.

MEG:

You, too!

ESSIE:

And are you... finding what you need, here?

MEG:

*(looking at the shelves)* Well, I wouldn't say the selection is—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* I meant more in a general sense. I hope you don't mind, but Helen mentioned... She was worried, that you'd been having some difficulties, after everything that happened in Los Angeles?

MEG:

Oh. Yeah.

*Short pause.*

But I'm fine!

ESSIE:

Glad to hear it.

MEG:

Being here is great. I know I just got here, but I definitely feel like I'm in the right place.

ESSIE:

That's good.

MEG:

It is! I mean, since I was a kid I've always loved my grandma's house, so now I can really spend some time with her, helping out...

ESSIE:

A lot to help out with!

MEG:

Right, well, I'm trying my best to get her organized. But the minute we start something, something else pops up, and then of course people keep stopping by. With food. And I keep trying to clean out the fridge!

ESSIE:

Helen's fridge is quite the time capsule.

MEG:

This whole town is. I mean, in a good way. Like everything's just there, waiting for you, only it's not in any hurry. And everyone I meet, it's like they already know me.

ESSIE:

Or they think they do.

MEG:

But maybe they're right! I'm kind of surprising myself: At home, I'm always having to run around and be somewhere else, but here I'm getting used to just sitting around, visiting.

ESSIE:

Perseverance can be a very nice place to visit.

MEG:

I'm taking a lot of walks, which I never have time to do. And all the flowers and the trees—the leaves are starting to turn! We don't really get that, in LA.

ESSIE:

I suppose not.

MEG:

Or the quiet. Something's much more solid, about it. The sounds at night somehow seem thicker and softer. Which sounds totally dumb...

ESSIE:

No, it sounds—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* Oh! We had supper at Leonard's yesterday. I can't believe it's still there. And this market, even—I used to come here when I was a kid to get candy.

ESSIE:

Plenty of candy at Colbert's!

MEG:

Talk about a time capsule!

ESSIE:

Have you ever been to Jimbo's?

MEG:

No. Wait. Yes! I think I went with my brother after my Grandpa Mack's funeral.



ESSIE:

A decade later, it probably hasn't changed much, either.

MEG:

Do you want to join us?

ESSIE:

I'm not really welcome there.

MEG:

Why? Wait. Is it... *(maybe she lowers her voice a bit)* because you're black?

ESSIE:

There is that, I guess. It's not a place I regularly frequent, let's just say that much.

MEG:

Then is there someplace... I don't know how to say this, "on your side of town?"

ESSIE:

There is no my side of town. I live over in Absalom.

MEG:

Really? Why did I not know that?

ESSIE:

A lot of reasons, probably. My family's always worked in town. It used to be there were jobs to be had here. But people have moved away. Those who could.

MEG:

Oh. Sure.

ESSIE:

And the truth is, after everything that's happened over the last few years I'm not all that popular a lot of places. I got my degree and became public enemy number one.

MEG:

Because you went to college?

ESSIE:

It's not *that* backwards. Because I started working in environmental legislation.

*Very short pause.*

ESSIE:

We're in coal country.

MEG:

Right!

*Suddenly, a box or boxes falls from a shelf. Followed by a stream of very black sand-like dust. We are quickly surrounded by darkness.*

*The sound of flowing dust grows louder until it morphs into music—Bon Jovi, Guns N' Roses or some 80s rock song that brings back mullets—and we hear the noise of a beer tap filling a glass.*

*We see Meg and Reggie at a bar. It's not crowded, but we get the sense that the guys at the end of the bar (whom we never see) are fixtures. Reggie moves to a pool table carrying a beer and a mixed drink, not their first round. Meg holds a cue and leans over the table strategizing a shot, not very confidently.*

REGGIE:

Well! That is certainly an ambitious move!

MEG:

Ha ha ha! I guess so...I keep hoping I'll suddenly get the hang of this.

REGGIE:

You've only been at it a few weeks.

MEG:

But I still think I'm going to break something. Or rip something.

REGGIE:

The worst you can do has probably been done. Time and time again. *(to the guys at the end of the bar)* Right, guys?

*The guys respond and Meg takes a terrible shot. No ball goes where it should. But nothing breaks. Laughter and encouragement from the bar.*

MEG:

Ugh!

REGGIE:

This one's on the house.

*She hands the mixed drink to Meg.*

MEG:

*(raising her glass toward the bar)* Thanks! *(to Reggie)* Who knew I'd become a regular at the local pool hall!

REGGIE:

I wouldn't exactly call Jimbo's a "pool hall" or you a regular anything!

*She sets down her beer and picks up a cue.*

MEG:

Why don't I just make that a goal!

REGGIE:

That bar is very low, no pun intended. Next time we really need to head into Murphysburg. They got a TGI Fridays.

MEG:

No! This is terrific! It just feels so... real. Is there a league, or something?

REGGIE:

For pool? Like bowling?

MEG:

Exactly! With Jimbo's shirts!

REGGIE:

No, I'm afraid not.

MEG:

We can work on that.

REGGIE:

Which makes me even more afraid.

MEG:

Well, thank you for introducing me!

REGGIE:

You do know there's no actual Jimbo, right?

MEG:

I mean to this place! Everything about it. I love coming here, and to me, it's a pool hall.

REGGIE:

If you say so!

*She takes a shot and sinks some key balls. The guys at the bar applaud.*

*(to the guys at the bar) Thank you! I'll be here all night.*

MEG:

Poor hand to eye coordination.

REGGIE:

Excuse me?

MEG:

That's what a roommate said in college. About me, I mean.

REGGIE:

Ah!

*Another ball in another pocket.*

MEG:

We were playing... handball? Or something. Some ball. She was very athletic. She was a cheerleader.

REGGIE:

Really!

*Another good shot.*

MEG:

No, actually. I mean, not in college. I mean, she wanted to be. I think she tried out. But she didn't make it. Honestly, she didn't have a cheerleader's body.

REGGIE:

No?

*The table is almost cleared.*

MEG:

I mean, not that I do. And she had a very nice body. She still does. Great legs. But she was kind of solid, you know. Straight up and down. Not a lot on the tits front. Whoops, did I say that?

*Yes and it was much louder than she intended.*

*(to the guys at the end of the bar) Sorry!*

REGGIE:

Don't worry about them. Especially when it comes to tits.

*The guys laugh and maybe whistle.*

MEG:

Anyway, she was very athletic. She is, very. I am very not. And in the middle of playing... something, sometime, she just turned to me and said: "Poor hand to eye coordination!"

REGGIE:

All right, then!

*She sinks the eight ball.*

MEG:

Hey! Where'd all the balls go!

REGGIE:

Funny how that happens. I'll rack 'em up again?

MEG:

I should probably be getting home.

REGGIE:

What? You have to work, tomorrow?

MEG:

Oh! Did I tell you? I did a couple of—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Just kidding. It's starting to rain. Wait until it lets up.

MEG:

Yeah, but—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* It's early. Don't tell me Helen's waiting up for you!

MEG:

She stays up later than I do. I'm not sure if she sleeps well?

REGGIE:

I sleep like a rock.

MEG:

You're lucky.

REGGIE:

Not even. One morning I woke up to the kids putting a squirrel in the blender.

MEG:

Seriously?

REGGIE:

It got away, but apparently there were many more attempts I did not wake up for. Involving various other creatures. And I'd crashed on the couch so they were maybe 10 feet away.

MEG:

I'm very impressed!

REGGIE:

Their dad was not. Ready? I'll let you break?

*The balls are in the rack.*

MEG:  
But they don't all have the same dad. Right?

REGGIE:  
Yes and no.

MEG:  
Ha ha ha, what does that mean?

*She awkwardly approaches the table.*

REGGIE:  
Loosen up on that cue, there! Let it go—trust yourself!

MEG:  
I'm trying! It's harder than it looks.

REGGIE:  
Story of my life. I was married to Jimmy Jack when I had the twins.

MEG:  
What? Oh. He's not their father?

REGGIE:  
Well, he's their...

*Meg shoots. Nothing.*

Biological father. Hate to say it, but the cheerleader was right.

MEG:  
Yeah.

*She wipes her hands on her pants, and in the process gets black dust on them.*

So that means right after the babies, you guys...?

REGGIE:  
Split up? No. But David moved in.

*She shoots. Lots of action on the table and the guys make more noise. Meg and Reggie ignore them.*

MEG:  
And David is...?

REGGIE:

My husband. Now.

MEG:

And the father of...?

REGGIE:

The baby and DJ. But he's everyone's dad. It's complicated.

*Another ball in another pocket. The guys are getting more enthusiastic. We hear the rain kick up outside and as Reggie studies the table, Meg notices the dust on her pants, tries to get it off.*

MEG:

He sounds great.

REGGIE:

He is. He's a great guy. I just— They're already letting people go at the mine and there's a part of me that wishes it would just happen. Get it over with, so we could all get the hell out of here, you know. But I don't really know where we'd go. With four kids. Or how we'd go. It's not like they'll be giving him any sort of anything that makes any difference... Maybe we'll just pack up and come visit you in Los Angeles! Or you can stay here, and if your place is empty, we'll move right in, ha ha! It's just you?

MEG:

Ha ha. Yeah, I have a housesitter.

REGGIE:

You do! How big's your house?

MEG:

Oh. No. It's an apartment. A small one.

REGGIE:

Uh huh.

*She shoots again. Applause.*

MEG:

So what happened to Jim? Is he gone?

REGGIE:

Jim. Jimmy Jack? He's a Pearce. Family goes way back; he's not going anywhere.

MEG:

Wait. Does that mean you're still...?

REGGIE:

Living together? Oh, no. He moved out past Murphysburg; got a job in the new mine in Hebron. I'd say *he's* one of the lucky ones, but like I said: He's a Pearce so not a lot of luck involved.

*Another good shot; the guys appreciate it far more than they should.*

*(to the guys)* This is a private game? Keep it down, there? *(to Meg)* If you want, I'll introduce you?

*Meg shoots a suddenly panicked look toward the guys.*

Hah! To Jimmy Jack, I mean.

MEG:

Oh. No. No no no no. That is not...

REGGIE:

Not what?

MEG:

That's not what I'm here for.

REGGIE:

Don't forget your *goal*, my friend! Nothing'll make you feel more regular than a guy like Jimmy Jack!

MEG:

I—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Sorry, that did not sound right. What I'm saying is you need to let go, have some fun!

MEG:

I am having fun!

REGGIE:

Then stop acting all wide-eyed like you're doing some social studies project!

*Another shot and another round of applause from the guys at the bar.*

MEG:

So I can't blend in with the locals if my plans here don't include dating?

REGGIE:

"The locals?" Hah! These parts, you're talking layers of local. Some of us, in it deeper than others.



*Hoots from the bar and despite her efforts at blending, it's getting under Meg's skin.*

MEG:

Who are those guys?

REGGIE:

Them? They're safe. They work with David at Eagle Run.

MEG:

Yeah?

REGGIE:

You could do worse. But lemme tell you: As long as you're just hanging around for awhile...

MEG:

I'm not just—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I wouldn't call my ex much of a destination, but he is a pretty good diversion, ha ha ha.

*Reggie leans over the table and ignores the enthusiastic reaction.*

Of course with him, safety's a whole other deal. Did I mention I have twins?

MEG:

Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I'm not interested in men, right now.

REGGIE:

In that case, you are totally hot, but I can't help you out.

MEG:

No, that's not what I...

*Meg is trying really hard to ignore the guys who are even more enthusiastic.*

REGGIE:

Joking! Hey, what's the matter?

MEG:

Nothing. I'm not ...

*The guys are getting out of control, now arguing with each other.*

REGGIE:

Don't worry about them. Another round?

MEG:

No. I don't—

*She's interrupted by the sound of the guys shoving one another; a barstool being tipped over, maybe. The storm outside escalates.*

REGGIE:

*(shouting to the bartender)* Bud Light and Seven and Seven, here!

MEG:

*(moving towards the door)* Reggie? I don't need another drink. Can we go?

REGGIE:

Don't be a spaz. It's just a bar fight.

MEG:

Yeah! And I think we should—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting, raising her voice to be heard)* You wanna fit in, Meg, just chill out.

MEG:

I can't—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* This happens all the time, it's not like—

*She's interrupted by the sound of a punch landing. It's amplified. Flesh on flesh. Bone on bone, It's a sickening sound and as we hear it, the world slows down. Maybe something very big opens up. Another punch. And another. Until Meg screams,*

MEG:

No! Stop! Stop stop stop stop STOP!

*Darkness. We hear the rain. The sound of unrelenting rain which transforms into the whistle of a tea kettle.*

*We see Claudette and Helen in a large, eat-in kitchen. There is a bakery box on a wooden table. Helen takes the kettle off of the stove and pours into two cups while Claudette stands with a container of half and half.*

CLAUDETTE:

I wasn't going to say anything.

HELEN:

I'm glad you did. I drink my coffee black, so I didn't know it'd gone bad.

CLAUDETTE:

Coffee?

HELEN:  
What?

CLAUDETTE:  
You said, coffee.

HELEN:  
I meant Sanka.

CLAUDETTE:  
I was wondering! Real coffee, I'd be up all night.

HELEN:  
I only drink Sanka, anymore.

CLAUDETTE:  
And Meg?

HELEN:  
Tea. She's got a fancy kind she drinks. Let me...

*She takes the spoiled half and half and Claudette moves to the bakery box.*

I have ice cream?

CLAUDETTE:  
For lemon meringue?

HELEN:  
I meant for the coff— Sanka.

CLAUDETTE:  
Ah. Because that's the one pie you don't want ice cream with: lemon meringue.

HELEN:  
Or lemon custard.

CLAUDETTE:  
Coconut custard! Any custard, really.

HELEN:  
You know something? Maybe it's frozen yogurt.

CLAUDETTE:  
What is?

HELEN:  
In the freezer. I thought it was ice cream, but maybe it's yogurt.

CLAUDETTE:

Ugh. Yogurt. Frozen or otherwise. I don't see how anyone can eat that. Tastes like sour milk.

HELEN:

I keep meaning to buy Coffee Mate. Or Sanka mate.

CLAUDETTE:

It's fine.

HELEN:

*(holding out two cups)* So... black?

CLAUDETTE:

I won't have any.

HELEN:

Are you sure? I always have a cup after dinner. It's just what—

*She's interrupted by Essie entering, strangely excited, carrying a large handbag and a beeper.*

ESSIE:

Thank you so much for letting me use your phone, Helen! You're a lifesaver!

CLAUDETTE:

I don't know how you can stand that, beeping at you at all hours.

HELEN:

Were you able to take care of whatever it was?

ESSIE:

I couldn't pick up my messages; there's no touch tone here!

HELEN:

They keep talking about putting it in...

ESSIE:

But I reached one of the guys I'm working with. Now there's another farmer off Highway 45 complaining. He's got acres of his fields have sunk down and entirely flooded with this rain!

HELEN:

By the new mine, out past Galilee?

ESSIE:

Yes, in Hebron: Deer Creek. This is all happening faster than anyone expected, but of course no one's bothered about it until it happens to them.

CLAUDETTE:

What happens?

ESSIE:

I was telling you! Subsidence!

CLAUDETTE:

Land sakes, sound like you've just won the lotto!

ESSIE:

What? No! It's disastrous! This longwall mining they're doing over there tunnels underground with no support to the land above it; leaves huge, permanent sinkholes.

CLAUDETTE:

Those farmers are always complaining about something.

ESSIE:

They should be! We all should be!

CLAUDETTE:

They got their money; they knew what they were getting into.

ESSIE:

But that's just it, they didn't. The guy I was talking to? His soybeans are eight feet underwater. He may lose his entire crop!

CLAUDETTE:

Then you should tell them to shut that one, and keep Eagle Run open. Don't you have people working there?

ESSIE:

Eagle Run is closing because there's not enough coal left to keep it open.

CLAUDETTE:

But we have the best coal, and from what I heard, if these new regulations—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* It would still close! Sooner or later! We stop now, we can do something about the damage from it and all our mines. If we don't start looking at the impact of our choices, the land will be ravaged, the rivers ruined, jobs decimated and this whole part of the country will be a ghost town!

CLAUDETTE:

You make it seem almost biblical!

ESSIE:

It is! And the only salvation in Deer Creek is that now people with money and standing are being hit and they won't put up with it. This is the kind of wake-up call we need!

HELEN:

Would you like some tea, Essie?

*Short pause.*

ESSIE:

Thank you. That'd be nice.

HELEN:

Plain Lipton all right?

ESSIE:

Fine. You know, there's a meeting in Murphysburg next week...

*She reaches into her bag to get flyers; a great deal of black dust falls out with them.*

HELEN:

Let me...

ESSIE:

I'll get it.

*She sweeps up the dust.*

HELEN:

*(re the flyers)* So that's what Meg's been working on?

CLAUDETTE:

What is?

ESSIE:

A new flyer.

CLAUDETTE:

*(reading the flyer)* "Coal: Dirty by Nature."

ESSIE:

That's my slogan.

CLAUDETTE:

That's a slogan?

ESSIE:

One of them. Meg put this together for us. And some mailers for the election: eco-endorsements.

CLAUDETTE:

I don't— Who said coal is supposed to be clean?

ESSIE:

That's the point. It's not. It can't be.

CLAUDETTE:

What if people think you mean dirty like, "dirty," dirty?

ESSIE:

That's exactly what I mean!

CLAUDETTE:

No, I'm saying dirty as in— Has Frieda Mae seen this?

ESSIE:

Why?

CLAUDETTE:

If the church thinks you're calling coal *sinful*, you're gonna ruffle a whole lot of feathers for the wrong reason.

ESSIE:

No one at my church said anything.

CLAUDETTE:

Frieda Mae does not go to your church.

HELEN:

I think, with the pictures, it looks very professional. Meg did that, all upstairs?

ESSIE:

Yes. She gave me a disc and I printed it on campus.

HELEN:

Can you imagine?

CLAUDETTE:

Well, I can imagine all sorts of things. (*to Essie*) I just don't understand why you have to get Meg involved in your personal causes.

ESSIE:

*My personal causes?* Like the future of the planet?

CLAUDETTE:

All I'm saying is that people in this town know who she is and everyone's already fit to be tied about the possibility of a Democrat in the White House.

HELEN:

With a Vice President who's an environmentalist.

ESSIE:

God willing.

HELEN:

I like him.

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, I don't. Talking down to everybody, scaring everybody, because he's so smart.

ESSIE:

We should be scared; that's why Meg offered to help us.

CLAUDETTE:

She offered?

ESSIE:

Yes!

CLAUDETTE:

That means you didn't pay her?

ESSIE:

I— No. She wanted to—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Because that is her business, you know.

ESSIE:

She was interested in—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* She can't be giving away—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* I know! She—

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* Hope it's not too hot.

*She holds a cup of tea out to Essie.*



ESSIE:

Thanks.

HELEN:

Or there's an extra cup of coffee, if you—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Sanka.

ESSIE:

This is fine.

CLAUDETTE:

I hope you drink it black.

HELEN:

Oh! I think I may have some Cool Whip! In the freezer!

ESSIE:

Hang on. How long has that Cool Whip been in there?

HELEN:

Cool Whip doesn't go bad.

CLAUDETTE:

Who's ready for pie?

ESSIE:

Helen. *Everything* goes bad.

CLAUDETTE:

Where is Meg? Shouldn't she be here, already?

ESSIE:

It may be awhile, if she's out with Reggie.

CLAUDETTE:

But it's a school night. *(starting to search)* Are there any paper plates?

ESSIE:

*(moving toward a drawer)* Let me get a knife.

HELEN:

I like Reggie. She and Meg have been spending time together.

CLAUDETTE:

Doing what?

ESSIE:

They've been going to Jimbo's.

*She starts to cut the pie.*

CLAUDETTE:

That bar? It's still there?

ESSIE:

You're surprised?

CLAUDETTE:

That was a terrible place. I would never set foot in there. Do you think it's safe for Meg?

ESSIE:

As safe as anywhere else.

HELEN:

She says she likes it.

CLAUDETTE:

But do you trust her judgment? She thought Los Angeles was safe. And look what she let happen to her.

ESSIE:

"Let happen?" If you're talking about the riots—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* No, I'm talking about... before.

ESSIE:

What happened before?

CLAUDETTE:

It's not my place...

HELEN:

No...

CLAUDETTE:

But it is why she's here, after all!

ESSIE:

*(to Helen)* I thought you told me she'd been traumatized by the—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* "Traumatized?" You don't need to make it sound so dramatic.

ESSIE:

I think trauma is inherently dramatic!

HELEN:

It was a while ago, but the riots were a “trigger” and she hasn’t wanted to talk about—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Of course not! What’s the point?!

ESSIE:

Because some things need be talked about!

CLAUDETTE:

She’s not here to wallow, she’s here to get over it!

ESSIE:

People don’t just—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Well, our people do!

ESSIE:

Whatever it was that happened is not just going to—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Listen to me! There’s no trauma, no triggers, no drama. She’s doing just fine!

*We hear a loud crack of thunder and Meg bursts into the kitchen, dripping wet; her jeans are covered in black. It’s pretty damned dramatic.*

HELEN:

Meg!

CLAUDETTE:

Well, for heaven’s sake!

MEG:

*(re water)* Sorry...

HELEN:

It’s all right.

ESSIE:

I’ll get a towel.

*She leaves.*

CLAUDETTE:

Looks like you got caught in quite the downpour!

HELEN:

Where's Reggie? Why didn't she come in?

MEG:

I didn't want her to.

HELEN:

Did something happen?

CLAUDETTE:

Did you go to that bar?

MEG:

Yes. I mean, no. Not really. I just...

*A flash of lightening and the lights in the house go out.*

Ahhhhh!

CLAUDETTE:

Goodness!

HELEN:

I'm right here!

MEG:

Noooo!

HELEN:

Sometimes the electricity just does that.

CLAUDETTE:

Which is ridiculous, in this day and age! Helen, this house is—!

*The lights flicker and come back on; Helen is holding a very distraught Meg.*

HELEN:

Shhhhhh. It's okay. Sit down. Let me... You are wet through and through.

*She guides Meg onto a kitchen stool.*

CLAUDETTE:

Sweetie, there's nothing to be afraid of. Thunderstorms come and go around here.

HELEN:  
I'll make you some tea? The water's still hot.

MEG:  
Thanks.

CLAUDETTE:  
Now tell us what happened to you, honey.

MEG:  
There was a fight at the bar.

HELEN:  
Are you hurt?

CLAUDETTE:  
Who was fighting?

MEG:  
No. Some guys.

CLAUDETTE:  
They should not let guns in that bar.

HELEN:  
*(giving Meg a cup of tea)* There were guns?

MEG:  
I said "guys."

CLAUDETTE:  
If there are guys in that bar, I'll bet you a dollar they have guns. People have died in that bar.

HELEN:  
They have?

CLAUDETTE:  
I've heard stories...

*Essie comes in with a large towel which she drapes around Meg.*

ESSIE:  
Here you go. You look better, already.

MEG:  
I feel...

*The rain has stopped. Perched on the stool, clutching her mug, Meg looks rather like a small child.*

ESSIE:

You know what? The rain's let up and it's getting late. I should take you home, Ms. Claudette.

CLAUDETTE:

We haven't had pie.

HELEN:

You take a piece. Or take the pie, leave us a piece.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Meg)* It's lemon meringue. From the Jewel by my apartment.

ESSIE:

We should get in the car before it starts coming down, again.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Meg)* Let me hug you. *(holding her quickly but firmly)* You are just fine.

MEG:

Yeah.

CLAUDETTE:

I'm leaving you two pieces.

*She puts them on paper plates.*

ESSIE:

All right, then. See you both, soon!

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Meg)* You come over this weekend. I'll make fried catfish and you can spend the night.

MEG:

I don't— Okay.

CLAUDETTE:

Good!

ESSIE:

*(to Helen)* Don't you stay up too late.

HELEN:

We won't...

ESSIE:

Goodbye, then!

CLAUDETTE:

Bye!

HELEN:

Thank you!

*The women are gone and there is silence. The pieces of pie sit alone on the table. After a moment,*

Why don't I get a couple of forks.

*She moves to a drawer.*

And look: It's after 10, already. Mind if I turn on the news? Almost time for Carson.

*She turns on a small TV on a stand at the end of the table. Maybe we just hear it, or see the light coming from it. It's election coverage, Clinton and Bush Sr.*

All about the debates. It was the last one, tonight. Your grandmother likes that Ross Perot. But we got to talking and forgot all about it.

*She gives Meg a piece of pie and a fork.*

MEG:

Thank you.

HELEN:

You don't want to change?

MEG:

Yeah. I mean... No. I... I don't. I just want to sit here.

HELEN:

All right.

*She sits at the table.*

MEG:

And eat pie.

HELEN:

All right!

*They do just that. The drone from news coverage continues. Then,*

MEG:

I am fine.

HELEN:

I know you are.

MEG:

It just caught me off guard.

HELEN:

What did?

MEG:

The fight.

HELEN:

Who was fighting?

MEG:

I'd never met them. They work with Reggie's husband at the mine, she said. I don't know their names.

HELEN:

Probably wouldn't mean much to me. Your grandfather and I moved here after he got the job at the College, 35 years ago. We're still new in town.

MEG:

Yeah.

HELEN:

Maybe you and Reggie could go somewhere else?

MEG:

Maybe. But it wasn't really the fight. Or it was, and it wasn't. I don't even think it was a bad fight, but I just couldn't... After that first punch. Seeing and hearing fists into flesh; it's like I was going along, everything was okay here and then I was somewhere else, entirely.

*Very short pause.*

It's what was happening to me in LA.

HELEN:

During the riots.

MEG:

Because of the riots.



HELEN:

It must have been a terrible time.

MEG:

It— It was! It was like the entire city was a war zone and I was in the middle of everything—where I live, in Koreatown; there were shopkeepers with machine guns on their roofs protecting their stores and the whole city had a curfew and we were all told to stay at home.

HELEN:

It does sound like a war to me.

MEG:

But at the same time, I watched most of it on the TV. From the very first day, when things started after the verdicts and it looked like everything was going to burn to the ground. All of LA. So it was really, really scary but somehow I also felt protected from it. Some friends and I even drove up to Santa Barbara on the weekend. Which was weird and kind of a blur, actually.

But when we drove back into town and I woke up on Monday morning it almost seemed like... some kind of nightmare. There were parts of my neighborhood that were completely destroyed, but everyone was going back to work and sweeping things up and on the TV, they kept playing the footage. Fires and looting and angry mobs... but all I kept seeing was people being beaten, by the police and each other. Heads literally being cracked open.

HELEN:

That truck driver. Being dragged out into the street.

MEG:

Yes. In South-Central. And after a while it was like something in me cracked open. It got to the place where I couldn't... I couldn't function. For the first time in my life I understood why people call it a "breakdown." I felt broken. I couldn't...

HELEN:

No.

MEG:

And I started talking to people and kind of put it all together in a way that made sense. That the violence, all that violence, took me back to...

HELEN:

Yes.

MEG:

I thought I was fine with what had happened. Not fine, but...

HELEN:

It was not your fault.

MEG:

I know that!

HELEN:

Of course you do!

MEG:

It was nine years in September. For nine years I'd been going along, and I was fine!

MEG:

But there was also this big un-fine part of me that's just been... on hold. Waiting.

HELEN:

You don't remember what actually happened, do you?

MEG:

No. I don't. But when I... Tonight. And before. It's like I've gone down into an impossibly deep and dark place where something in me does remember. But it's a kind of remembering that's more real than you could ever imagine and it grabs hold of me and becomes such a complete and total blackness that, for that moment, as long as it lasts, I don't think I'll ever be able to escape.

*Short pause.*

And then I do.

HELEN:

Memories are strange. The way they connect, and the places you keep them. Especially when you get old... Life was very hard, when I was growing up.

MEG:

Hard?

HELEN:

Not like for most of the people, here, who... have a hard time. We had a farm, and money. Not a lot of money, but enough money. This was before the depression. But my father was always terrible with money. We should have had a lot more; my mother was always so angry at him.

*Meg moves from the stool to sit with Helen at the table.*

MEG:

That's what was—?

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* No, that was just how it was. My parents argued. That's what they did. They loved each other. They were good parents, I think. But back then, nobody really talked about things. And I had a very hard time understanding why things happened. Hard things. Like my baby brother dying. My favorite aunt died. I was devastated. A lot of people got sick and died back then, it seemed to me.

And there were things like... fires. All the time. Our house burned down, once entirely and after that it was re-built and half of it was destroyed again. And floods. Down here, the river flooded and took out Shawneeville. They had to move the entire town; it's not where it was, now.

And people got into accidents. My cousin lost both legs in a tractor accident. A boy I liked at school stopped speaking after he ate something he wasn't supposed to. My teacher went blind. No one knew why.

When I sit down and think about it, my memories of my childhood are full of an awful lot of loss. Of course I remember other times, good times. But somehow I mostly remember being alone with this feeling of people and things being taken away from me, of an emptiness I didn't understand, as if I was being punished and didn't know why.

MEG:

Grandma...

HELEN:

That's very selfish of me, isn't it.

MEG:

No. I mean, I don't know.

HELEN:

Because terrible things happen to all of us. There's no sense and no one to blame and we just keep going. Most times, that's all we can do.

*Darkness. We start to hear the rain again, along with sounds that resemble screams, as if the rain is hurting the earth when it lands.*

*We hear a car along a road. We see Essie and Claudette, riding together. Their silence is not very comfortable but neither of them acknowledges it.*

CLAUDETTE:

Well, that was too good to be true.

ESSIE:

What was?

CLAUDETTE:

The let up. We'll be stuck in this rain for the next I don't know how long.

ESSIE:

It's not that bad.

CLAUDETTE:

I'm glad you're driving. I don't drive at night, anymore.

ESSIE:

I don't blame you. These roads can be tricky.

CLAUDETTE:

I've lived here all my life.

ESSIE:

So have I.

CLAUDETTE:

Of course you have, I didn't mean...

ESSIE:

What?

CLAUDETTE:

Anything.

*Very short pause.*

ESSIE:

Of course not.

*Short pause.*

CLAUDETTE:

How well do you know Reggie?

ESSIE:

Pretty well. She works at Colbert's, now.

CLAUDETTE:

That's right.

*Short pause.*

But do you think she's good company for Meg?

ESSIE:

What are you worried about?

CLAUDETTE:

I'm not worried, I'm concerned. There's a difference.

*Very short pause.*

CLAUDETTE:

Has Meg talked to you about how long she's staying?

ESSIE:

She doesn't seem like she's in any hurry to leave.

CLAUDETTE:

But why?

ESSIE:

Why?

CLAUDETTE:

She's been here nearly a month, already.

ESSIE:

It hasn't been—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Nearly.

ESSIE:

She seems to be finding her way; she says she needs to be here.

CLAUDETTE:

She needs to get on with her life, is what she needs. There's absolutely nothing to find here and what's in the past should stay in the past.

ESSIE:

Whose past are you talking about?

CLAUDETTE:

Well, there are plenty of things I wish I could forget. People try, here. Try their best. But people are people and they do very strange things when no one's there to hold them accountable. Or when they think no one's there, and the truth comes out later and all twisted up so that no one recognizes it. All I will tell you is that there are plenty of things I remember and want to leave far, far behind me.

ESSIE:

What is it that happened to Meg? I'm sorry, I know I should ask her...

CLAUDETTE:

Yes. I shouldn't say anything...

*Very short pause.*

But it was awful. Ann, my daughter—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* I know your daughter.

CLAUDETTE:

She was living back east then and had to fly out to California. We thought we'd lost her.

ESSIE:

Wait. Meg? Lost as in—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Oh, yes. I'm telling you, it was terrible. Apparently she was in a car in the wrong side of town.

ESSIE:

In Los Angeles?

CLAUDETTE:

Or maybe it's all like that, the whole city—the wrong side. And I blame the boy she was with. It was late at night and she was where she probably should not have been and they beat her to a bloody pulp.

ESSIE:

The boy was involved?

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, no, he went and left. Left her alone in the car—apparently he ran out of gas—and some... gang showed up and dragged her out of the car. For no reason at all. Just like that trucker in the riots.

ESSIE:

But this wasn't in the riots.

CLAUDETTE:

No, it was the summer of 1983. I remember because I'd just moved into the apartment and the phone was not hooked up yet, so Helen's the one who told me.

ESSIE:

I'm so sorry. I had no idea.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, it's not something you advertise.

ESSIE:

No...

CLAUDETTE:

Meg doesn't remember a thing. Thank god, that's what I say. At first they thought she wouldn't make it, and then they thought she'd be a vegetable for the rest of her life, then retarded or crippled. Then one day, weeks later, she just... she snapped out of it. Everything that had happened, knocked clean out of her brain.

ESSIE:

But she seems fine. I mean—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* She is fine! Of course she's fine. It took time. But today? You'd never even guess what she went through.

ESSIE:

And what happened to the boy?

CLAUDETTE:

What boy?

ESSIE:

The boy that Meg was with the night she—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing. They spit up after that. He was not someone she needed in her life. And I'll tell you something else: What she doesn't need, now, is to be spending late nights in dirty old bars full of people who are going to give her PTSD!

ESSIE:

I don't—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* I'm not sure she should be staying with her grandmother in that big old house, either. I don't know how anyone could live there, with that old graveyard in the back, and all. It's John Crenshaw who built it, you know.

ESSIE:

Yes, I—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* John Crenshaw had the Big Slave House, out by the Salt Works?

ESSIE:

I know.

CLAUDETTE:

And I know you've heard the stories.

ESSIE:

The Big Slave House stories? Oh, yes. I've heard them.

CLAUDETTE:

But I don't think it was that bad. Or it was bad, but most of the stories are made up, pure fiction. My husband Mack came up with a lot of them, when he was younger before his cousin opened it as a tourist attraction. His family lived out there—in the house—awhile.

ESSIE:

That, I did not know.

CLAUDETTE:

His dad bought it then lost it, at some point.

ESSIE:

Not any karma attached to that deal, I suppose.

CLAUDETTE:

I—

*There is, again, an awkward silence between them.*

Thank you again for picking me up. I know it's out of your way.

ESSIE:

I was working on campus today, so it really wasn't.

CLAUDETTE:

But going home. You're in Absalom, right? How do you like it, there?

ESSIE:

I like it fine.

CLAUDETTE:

Isn't it funny, I don't know if I've ever been over there.

ESSIE:

No?

CLAUDETTE:

And I've lived here all my life.

ESSIE:

Yes. You have.

*The bright light of oncoming headlights as we hear the sound of a truck speeding past them, then darkness.*



*We see Meg holding a few envelopes, peering into a window of a small building. The sun is high, overhead. Meg tries the door with no luck. She knocks. Nothing.*

REGGIE:

*(offstage)* Hey! Meg!

*Reggie, dressed for work, comes running up to Meg.*

I saw you from down the street.

MEG:

Hi...

REGGIE:

Where've you been? You haven't—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* Do you know if it's a holiday?

*Very short pause.*

REGGIE:

What?

MEG:

I need to mail some things and the sign says they're supposed to be open. But no one's in there. The door's locked.

REGGIE:

It's lunchtime. Carrie's at lunch.

*Very short pause.*

Carrie. The woman at the counter? For like, 50 years?

MEG:

Oh! I didn't know her name.

REGGIE:

Talk about job security, huh? You work in a post office, it ain't goin' nowhere!

MEG:

Right.

*Very short pause.*

REGGIE:

Okay. Seriously: What have you been up to? I haven't seen you since our last night at Jimbo's.

MEG:

Yeah. I've—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* That sounds like a book. “Our Last Night at Jimbo’s.” Maybe you can desktop publish it.

MEG:

That’s not what—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I know. I was kidding. But it’s been over a week. I’ve tried to call. A few times.

MEG:

My grandma doesn’t have an answering machine.

REGGIE:

I know this. Which is why I didn’t leave a message. I’m sharp, like that!

MEG:

Sorry, I—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I just wanted to make sure you were all right.

MEG:

Thanks. I’m fine!

REGGIE:

Oh, I know. So... you call *me*! If you want to do something, one night. We can go someplace where there’s not as much bloodshed, ha ha ha.

MEG:

Listen, I’m sorry I got so freaked out.

REGGIE:

It’s okay.

MEG:

It’s hard to—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I get it. For some of these guys, hellacious behavior’s kind of a hobby. We learn to develop a thick, protective coating here in Perseverance.

MEG:

Yeah?

REGGIE:

Oh, this whole part of the country has a long history of outlaws. Lots of “hunting accidents,” if you know what I mean.

MEG:

Do not tell me that.

REGGIE:

It gets worse. My people? We’re basically wild Indians, a bunch of savages, that’s all there is to it.

MEG:

Reggie!

REGGIE:

Oh, I’m allowed. My great, great, great grandmother was a full blooded Cherokee. Or that’s the story, anyway. But on my dad’s side, it’s all pirates.

MEG:

Pirates?

REGGIE:

Honest to god, river pirates! For years, there was a hideout in that big cave down by the river, the hole in the rock? Then the mobsters moved in. Robbing, raping, pillaging, there’s no getting away from it around here.

MEG:

Are you trying to make me feel better?

REGGIE:

Not working?

MEG:

Ha ha ha, thank you. I guess. But the truth is—even though I am quite the pool shark...

REGGIE:

I knew you were playing me!

MEG:

I don’t think I’m really up for... the kind of nightlife Perseverance has to offer.

REGGIE:

Wait. Are you serious? That was a little roughhousing, that’s all. Everyone’s forgotten all about it. We can go into Murphysburg, next time.

MEG:

I don’t—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* And I'll introduce you to Jimmy Jack! We'll go on a double date!

MEG:

No. I mean, thank you. That sounds like fun, but...

REGGIE:

But you're dumping me?

MEG:

No! Reggie! I— I think that you're... I love that you're you.

REGGIE:

Okay...

MEG:

You know exactly who you are and you just do what you have to do, no questions asked.

REGGIE:

I don't know about that.

MEG:

That is totally the way it seems to me. You remind me of one of my girlfriends back in LA. Works where I get my coffee beans. She has kids, too!

REGGIE:

Great.

MEG:

*(holding up a piece of mail)* This card is actually for another girlfriend. She's having a baby shower next week and I'll miss it.

REGGIE:

Too bad. Baby showers are a blast. It's all downhill from there.

MEG:

Don't say that!

REGGIE:

Okay, I'll just live it. Anyway. I gotta get back to work. But promise me I'll see you soon. Just because you're hanging out with your grandmas doesn't mean you should turn into an old lady.

MEG:

You sound just like Essie.

REGGIE:

Essie?

MEG:

Yeah. I was telling her about the sad state of my love life.

REGGIE:

I thought you didn't want a love life.

MEG:

I don't, I just— We had dinner last night—she's a great cook!

REGGIE:

She had you over?

MEG:

Yeah. Her house is small, but so cute. She seems perfectly satisfied being single. I admire that.

REGGIE:

Uh huh.

MEG:

What an incredible woman. She just decided, after she'd had kids, to totally turn her life around and do something with it. Something important.

REGGIE:

Your grandparents helped her.

MEG:

I think they did.

REGGIE:

I know they did.

MEG:

She should be here soon. You've seen the flyers around town?

*She takes one out of a large envelope.*

REGGIE:

That's you?

MEG:

This is the new one.

REGGIE:

"Best Coal. Worst Case." I don't even know what that means.

MEG:

I don't really, either. But I like it, graphically. We're putting them up in store windows wherever they'll let us. Next to campaign posters.

REGGIE:

This close to the election?

MEG:

There's definitely some resistance.

REGGIE:

I'll bet.

MEG:

It's funny, though—you don't realize how many places are out of business until you pass them, one by one.

REGGIE:

Hilarious.

MEG:

I didn't mean—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I know you didn't. I was kidding! Want me to take that?

MEG:

Take...?

REGGIE:

Your mail. I'll run it over when Carrie gets back from lunch.

MEG:

I don't know if I have enough postage.

REGGIE:

Right! You want to make sure it gets there.

MEG:

And on time!

REGGIE:

Neither sleet nor snow!!

MEG:

Yeah!

*Reggie starts out, then turns back.*

REGGIE:

Or you could just go, yourself.

MEG:  
What?

REGGIE:  
To the shower. Get on a plane, and go. I mean, think about it! It could totally turn your life around!

*She quickly leaves.*

MEG:  
*(calling after Reggie)* Wait! Did I—? What did I...?

*Essie joins Meg.*

ESSIE:  
That was Reggie? You should give her a flyer to put up at Colbert's. She's heading to work?

MEG:  
No. I mean, yes. But Colbert's not going to—

ESSIE:  
*(interrupting)* She might be able to convince him.

MEG:  
Really?

ESSIE:  
Oh, yes. You do not want to underestimate Reggie.

*We hear the prolonged honking of a car's horn as it passes the women.*

*In darkness, the horn transitions into church bells. The sound of men laughing in the distance, in a slap themselves on the back way. Closer, the sound of clattering dishes.*

*We see Claudette and Helen approaching a large table or tables, Helen carrying a dish.*

CLAUDETTE:  
Have you ever seen so much food at one of these?

HELEN:  
I don't come all that often. But it was a lovely service. *(re her dish)* Do you see any place to—

CLAUDETTE:  
*(interrupting)* Let me take that.

HELEN:  
No, I've got it. Where's Meg?

CLAUDETTE:

I think she's still with Frieda Mae.

HELEN:

Oh...

CLAUDETTE:

It's fine. A little dose of the good word will stop the palaver about her and Essie and... any other nonsense.

HELEN:

Meg did mention she's been getting more than a few sideways looks.

CLAUDETTE:

Well, what did she expect?

*Reggie joins them, carrying a baby who's larger than last we met him.*

REGGIE:

Look at this! I'll bet it's a potluck record.

HELEN:

Hello, Reggie!

CLAUDETTE:

*(re Reggie's baby)* And look at that. He's a big one, isn't he!

HELEN:

You have a beautiful family, Reggie.

REGGIE:

Thanks. And we're all here, today. Serving witness, to Perseverance eating away the pain.

HELEN:

From?

REGGIE:

Our new President, for one?

HELEN:

Ah!

REGGIE:

You know you can't hide that smile, Helen.

HELEN:

And you know I'm not the only Democrat in town.



REGGIE:

I wouldn't say that too loudly in here.

HELEN:

I won't.

CLAUDETTE:

*(re the dish)* Why don't you set that down over there?

HELEN:

I could, but the table's all covered in—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Who's afraid of a little coal dust.

*She shifts her baby to one side and takes the dish from Helen.*

So where'd Meg go to? I saw her earlier; didn't scare her off, did I?

HELEN:

Of course not.

REGGIE:

I think she's trying to hide from me!

HELEN:

What? No. She's been keeping very busy.

REGGIE:

And fitting right in, I hear! Making all sorts of new friends!

CLAUDETTE:

Yes. *(re the dish)* Let me have that.

*As she takes the dish from Reggie, Meg joins them.*

HELEN:

Meg!

CLAUDETTE:

There you are!

REGGIE:

Hi!

MEG:

Hi!

REGGIE:

It's been a while, huh?

MEG:

Yeah...

*Short pause.*

REGGIE:

We've been talking about the election.

CLAUDETTE:

Well! Let me tell you ladies something, if it stays between us: *(lowering her voice)*  
He doesn't seem all that bad, to me. Very charming.

HELEN:

And we have a woman senator, now.

CLAUDETTE:

A black woman. From Chicago. Just when you thought you'd seen everything.

MEG:

California has two women. It's the year of the woman.

REGGIE:

The what?

MEG:

That's what they're calling it. Four women elected to the senate, for the first time.

REGGIE:

The year of the woman.

CLAUDETTE:

And isn't that generous. For them to give us a whole year?

REGGIE:

*(pleasantly surprised)* Why, Ms. Claudette!

*Claudette is still holding Helen's dish.*

CLAUDETTE:

Where can I...

MEG:

I'm sorry, let me take that.

CLAUDETTE:

Is that something new, Helen?

HELEN:

It's called a Chinese Chicken Salad. I made it for Meg and she liked it. Without the chicken.

MEG:

It was delicious.

REGGIE:

Chicken salad without chicken?

HELEN:

That one has chicken. I thought there'd be other things for her to eat. I hope there are.

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, I'm sure there are. And you shouldn't have gone to all that trouble...

*She and Helen start to examine the dishes. Reggie moves to Meg.*

REGGIE:

So! Life in Perseverance has been good, lately?

MEG:

I guess!

REGGIE:

Meeting a lot of new people?

MEG:

Mostly through Essie. We're going out to Eagle Run, Friday, to take photos for a brochure.

REGGIE:

Won't that be grand!

MEG:

Would you like to join us?

REGGIE:

So Essie's what's keeping you busy, then?

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, look! Here's some Ambrosia.

MEG:

*(to Reggie)* It's really interesting work.

REGGIE:

I'll bet. You two gals. Not a man in sight.

CLAUDETTE:

I do love a good Ambrosia.

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* But wait: You *are* taking some time off to get ice cream over in Galilee?

MEG:

I... Yes...

CLAUDETTE:

I think those are nuts, though.

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* And I thought you were all wrapped up in saving the planet. Next thing I hear, it's you and Jimmy Jack going at it under the covers!

MEG:

No...

CLAUDETTE:

I don't see how anyone could put nuts in Ambrosia.

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* No? Oh, that's right, there were no covers involved!

HELEN:

Here's potato salad!

CLAUDETTE:

Meg: You eat tuna, don't you?

MEG:

Wait. *(to Claudette)* No. *(to Reggie)* I mean... What did he say?

HELEN:

And lots of macaroni salad.

CLAUDETTE:

No?

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* Oh, Jimmy Jack didn't need to say a thing.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* Wasn't that a tuna melt she had last night?

HELEN:

*(to Claudette)* Grilled cheese.

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* There are no secrets around here. Not from me, anyway.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* Ah.

MEG:

*(to Reggie)* It wasn't a secret.

REGGIE:

Sneaking off to another town and making out in the Dairy Queen parking lot?

CLAUDETTE:

Bean salad. Which I don't much care for.

MEG:

It was only a couple of times, and we didn't—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* So sweet. Just like two high school kids. In the back seat of Camaro, not a care in the world between you.

HELEN:

How about macaroni and cheese?

MEG:

It wasn't—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Well, that looks good!

REGGIE:

*(to Meg)* Where'd you meet him?

MEG:

At the mine, where he works. You said you wanted me to.

REGGIE:

And you said you had no interest in dating hillbillies.

CLAUDETTE:

And of course there's Jello!

MEG:

*(to Reggie)* What? I never—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I was going to introduce you, anyway, but I must have I got bogged down with work and childcare and putting food on the table, or something.

HELEN:

*(re the macaroni and cheese)* Wait: Is that ham?

MEG:

*(to Reggie)* I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind!

REGGIE:

Then why have you been hiding over in Galilee?

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* Is what ham?

MEG:

*(to Reggie)* We haven't—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I mean, I know all about the lure of intrigue, how far a little bad boy charm can go, especially in a place like this.

HELEN:

*(to Claudette)* In the macaroni and cheese.

MEG:

Reggie, I didn't—

REGGIE

*(interrupting)* He's no Prince Charles, but if Jimmy Jack's got anything, it's charm.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* Just a little, maybe.

REGGIE

*(to Meg)* And a few good tricks to help you sleep at night.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* She can pick it out.

MEG:

Reggie, I am so sorry! This thing with Jim—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Jimmy Jack.

MEG:

It's not even a thing! It's just—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* It doesn't matter! You should have told me. You should have let me know what was going on. You can't just come and do whatever you want, take whatever you want, like in Los Angeles. That's not what people do, here.

HELEN:

Reggie! Are these your potatoes?

*Very short pause.*

REGGIE:

No, I brought deviled eggs.

HELEN:

Oh!

REGGIE:

With bacon.

*Short pause.*

MEG:

*(re the dish)* I'm going to go and put this—

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* Honey, would you tell them to come and clean off this table?

MEG:

All right.

REGGIE:

What time Friday?

MEG:

What?

REGGIE:

I'm not still invited? On your little field trip to the mine?

*Very short pause.*

MEG:

Oh. Yes. But I'm not sure exactly what—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* I get off work at 4:00.

*Very short pause.*

MEG:

Okay.

*She quickly leaves with the salad.*

REGGIE:

Okay, then! I should try to track down my boys. Probably over with the men folk.

CLAUDETTE:

Sounds like they know which side their bread is buttered on.

REGGIE:

But I keep reminding them who butters it.

CLAUDETTE:

*(to Helen)* I'll go get us some seats. You be careful on those stairs, will you?

*Claudette and Reggie start out in different directions, then Reggie turns back.*

REGGIE:

"The year of the woman." Did they really say that?

HELEN:

They really did. And they're talking about Anita Hill, again.

CLAUDETTE:

Why? She made all that fuss about nothing, for nothing.

HELEN:

They're saying it changed things, the attention she got.

CLAUDETTE:

The day we get a woman President. That's when *I'll* start paying attention!

*We hear a burst of male laughter from the next room. The laughter echoes into darkness and is underscored by the sound of an ambulance. Then we hear a clock chiming the hour.*

*We're in the living room of Helen's house, in disarray; there are piles of canned goods on various tables. We see Essie—her coat on, with her handbag—taking stock of the chaos. Then Meg enters, her arms full of food.*

MEG:

Okay. I think I have half an hour, at most, before she wakes up. I doubt I'll even get to the freezer.

ESSIE:

I've never known Helen to be one for naps.



MEG:

She was exhausted. Being at the hospital took a lot out of her, I think.

ESSIE:

When did you all get home?

MEG:

Late yesterday afternoon. They kept my grandmother overnight, which she wasn't very happy about.

ESSIE:

She's lucky it was only her ankle. And only a sprain, after a fall like that.

MEG:

They said she should use a wheelchair for at least a week. I set up a room down here, but nothing quite fits...

ESSIE:

It's only temporary.

MEG:

I do love this house.

ESSIE:

Helen will give it up when she's ready.

MEG:

I suppose.

ESSIE:

Speaking of ready, our plan today was to head out towards Shawneeville, hit some of the houses off Highway 13.

MEG:

The only thing is, I've been trying to clean out the fridge since I got here. And now, Thanksgiving...

ESSIE:

Is two weeks away.

MEG:

There's no room for a turkey.

ESSIE:

You're going to cook a turkey?

MEG:

It's Thanksgiving! I don't have to eat it!

ESSIE:

You don't want to wait until things settle down? Especially with the new living arrangements?

MEG:

I just felt like... I had to do something!

*We hear crash in the next room, and Meg sets down the food.*

CLAUDETTE:

*(offstage)* Oh, for the love of Pete...

MEG:

*(to Claudette)* Grandma? You shouldn't be—

*She's interrupted by Claudette coming into the room, hobbling with a crutch and hanging onto the furniture.*

CLAUDETTE:

*(interrupting)* I have had just about enough of people telling me what I should and shouldn't be. I'm fine!

MEG:

Where's your wheelchair?

CLAUDETTE:

Don't you bring that thing near me. Once you sit down in a wheelchair, you never get out of it.

*She moves to the couch.*

MEG:

I'll help you.

CLAUDETTE:

*(settling in)* No, no, no. You're just in my way. Your grandmother's still asleep?

MEG:

I hope so. Did you get any rest?

CLAUDETTE:

I've got plenty of time to rest once I get back home. *(re the cans)* What's all this? A food drive?

MEG:

I started to go through the pantry. Look at the dates; they're all expired.

CLAUDETTE:

Oh, honey, that's just the government. Canned goods are canned goods.

ESSIE:

How're you feeling, Ms. Claudette?

CLAUDETTE:

Hello, Essie. Like some foolish old woman took a wrong step and everything's twisted around sideways.

MEG:

I'm so sorry I wasn't there, Grandma!

CLAUDETTE:

Why? What would you have done?

ESSIE:

Just what Helen did. She said the ambulance got there in no time.

CLAUDETTE:

I wish everyone would stop making such a fuss. I'm fine!

MEG:

What were the two of you doing at the Dairy Queen, anyway?

CLAUDETTE:

We wanted ice cream. And I wasn't about to let your grandmother forage in that overgrown freezer.

*She catches sight of the clock.*

Now, would you look at that: It's past time for my program. Why does Helen have the TV in the kitchen? The TV belongs in the living room.

MEG:

Do you want me to move it in here?

CLAUDETTE:

I don't want to be a bother. She should get one with a remote, though.

*She extracts herself from the couch.*

MEG:

*(moving toward Claudette)* Let me—

CLAUDETTE:

I've got it! And what's all *this* mess?

*Starting out of the room, she's found the food Meg set down earlier.*

MEG:

Oh. From the fridge...

CLAUDETTE:

Well, I applaud your motives. But you'd best put everything right back where you found it if you want to stay on your grandmother's good side!

MEG:

I was just trying to...

*Claudette is gone.*

ESSIE:

So. Can we head out, now?

MEG:

I... I don't know.

ESSIE:

I think we could get away with taking *some* of these cans, ha ha ha.

MEG:

Or maybe I should wait. Like you said.

*We hear the sound of a TV soap opera coming from the next room.*

ESSIE:

Meg? What's going on? With you.

MEG:

Nothing! But I really should stay here today.

ESSIE:

We have people meeting us in Crossroads.

MEG:

Yeah. It's just I've been gone so much, with the work we're doing, and I thought maybe this was like, a sign.

ESSIE:

This being... Claudette's ankle?

MEG:

Telling me I should take a break, spend more time with my grandmothers.

ESSIE:

Your grandmothers are going to be just fine.

MEG:

I know they are.

ESSIE:

And you said you wanted to be part of something bigger, something you can believe in.

MEG:

I do! And I like helping you, but Essie... nobody wants to hear what we're saying.

ESSIE:

That's not true.

MEG:

It is true! People slam doors in our faces!

ESSIE:

You can't let that stop you.

MEG:

You have no idea, the looks I'm getting, around town.

ESSIE:

Oh, I think I do.

MEG:

Maybe I'm just not very good at this. Maybe there's something else I should—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* Look. Meg: Come with me. We need to get out there before it gets any colder.

*She produces a map.*

There are quite a few houses in this area, here—all people we haven't been able to reach.

MEG:

But what difference will it make? I mean, after the election...

ESSIE:

Especially after the election! We have to let people know that *we're* not the ones they should be scared of. If they have questions, we have answers!

*Short pause.*

MEG:

You really want me with you?

ESSIE:

Out in the country? I really do.

*Meg looks at the map.*

MEG:

Who are you meeting in Crossroads?

ESSIE:

People from the local 4-H Club. Could be a great resource, so if we leave now, we'll have enough time to—

MEG:

*(interrupting, looking at the map)* Wait. On the way to Crossroads. Isn't that where the Big Slave House is?

ESSIE:

Why yes, as a matter of fact.

MEG:

Is it still open? I know they were talking about closing it...

ESSIE:

Last I heard, Little George Lackey was still giving tours, summers.

MEG:

Could we drive by? I used to love to go there, when I was a kid.

ESSIE:

The Big Slave House.

MEG:

I mean, there weren't really slaves. The slave part was all made up.

ESSIE:

Who told you that?

MEG:

My mom. Her dad's family lived there. He's the one that made up most of the stories. And I know Little George is related. Somehow.

ESSIE:

Really.

MEG:

That's what my mom said.

ESSIE:

All right then. You should know something about that house. John Crenshaw most definitely owned slaves, and at one point or another they were in that house, legally and illegally.

MEG:

But this is Illinois! There were never any—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* This may be Illinois, but it's Southern Illinois. Crenshaw got a special slave dispensation so he could open the Salt Works by the house, and when that expired, he became a criminal, selling free black men and women "down the river" before and during the Civil War.

MEG:

No.

ESSIE:

Yes!

MEG:

That's not possible. Abraham Lincoln slept in that house. There are photos. There's a whole room set up. I've seen it!

ESSIE:

I've no doubt you have. This part of the country, there's a whole lot to hide and everyone down here does a very good job seeing just what they want to see!

*Pause. Then Meg suddenly lashes out and knocks over a stack of cans.*

MEG:

Ahhhhhhh! Why is everything happening like this?!

ESSIE:

Because slavery happens?

MEG:

No, what I meant was—

*She's interrupted by the TV blasting soap opera drama from the other room.*

CLAUDETTE:

*(offstage)* Ohhhhhh I didn't want that...

*Volume down and we hear the channel changing.*

MEG:

Right. I should go help her.

ESSIE:

I think Claudette can figure out the TV on her own, Meg.

MEG:

I know. I'm sorry, but I just can't do this, today!

ESSIE:  
Is this just about today?

MEG:  
I don't know. Am I really doing anyone any good, here?

*Short pause.*

ESSIE:  
Why don't you get some rest. I'll talk to you soon.

*She gathers her map and prepares to leave.*

Do you still want to go to Eagle Run, Friday?

MEG:  
Do you still want me to take pictures?

ESSIE:  
If you're up for it.

MEG:  
Definitely!

ESSIE:  
Good! I'm glad. There's nothing like seeing, first hand...

MEG:  
And you know, I think Reggie wants to come with us. Or that's what she said.  
Unless she's still mad at me.

ESSIE:  
You're not still...

MEG:  
No. I don't even know what that was about.

ESSIE:  
Great! Then I'll see you Friday!

MEG:  
Right! Thank you...!

*Essie is gone and Meg looks helplessly around the room. She picks up a few cans, then moves to the pile of food from the fridge. As she picks it up, unidentifiable, oozing shapes coated in black dust start to fall out onto the floor.*

Shit!



*Darkness. The sounds of big machinery, groaning and overburdened. Ratcheting up toward... something.*

*The sounds grow more distant as we see Essie and Reggie, standing on what appears to be a hill. Both are bundled up and talk over the machine noises.*

REGGIE:

Well, this is fun. I actually didn't remember it being this high up.

*She takes out a flask.*

ESSIE:

Careful they don't see us.

REGGIE:

What? No drinking on the gobpile?

ESSIE:

We're not supposed to be up here, period.

REGGIE:

This time of day, the guys are getting off work and no one gives a crap.

*The machine noises start to shut down and we hear men's voices in the distance. Meg joins them, carrying a camera. She is covered in black dust.*

MEG:

Wow. Just wow.

ESSIE:

What did I tell you? It gives you a whole new perspective.

MEG:

It all looks different, down on the road. From here, it doesn't even seem... real.

ESSIE:

Oh, it's real. There are at least three surface mines you can see, including Eagle Run.

MEG:

Those deep, angry gashes...

ESSIE:

And the damage spreads out much further and deeper than what's torn open.

MEG:

What's that? In that stream. It's almost... glowing?

ESSIE:

Mercury run-off.

MEG:

And those weird, black pyramids...

REGGIE:

Yup, all the wonders of the world as we know it.

MEG:

That's not— No. None of this is...

REGGIE:

What? The picture perfect postcard you were looking for?

MEG:

What does that mean?

REGGIE:

What does what mean?

*Very short pause.*

MEG:

Nothing...

*She moves to snap a photo.*

ESSIE:

Be careful where you step.

MEG:

I already fell; I'm covered in—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* It's not that, it's—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Danger! Spontaneous combustion!

MEG:

Really?

ESSIE:

Highly unlikely.

REGGIE:

But always a possibility!

MEG:

Are you sure this was a good idea?

REGGIE:

Wasn't it your idea?

MEG:

Yes! It was!

REGGIE:

Okay, then!

*Very short pause.*

ESSIE:

*(to Meg)* So have you seen enough?

MEG:

I don't want to see any more, but I kind of feel like I could never see enough.

REGGIE:

Like that movie with Jodie Foster where the guy tears people's skin off?

MEG:

You know something, it *is* like a horror movie.

REGGIE:

He made it into a suit, right? The skin?

MEG:

Or one of those dioramas we made in grade school, only toxic.

REGGIE:

I can't remember: Did he ever wear it?

MEG:

How can they let all of this happen?

ESSIE:

They, is us. All of us!

REGGIE:

No one asked my vote.

ESSIE:

Actually—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* They were right, though; it got cold, early! And it's not even Thanksgiving!

*Short pause.*

ESSIE:

The weather patterns are changing.

MEG:

What?

ESSIE:

Climate change. Global warming.

REGGIE:

It's getting colder, not warmer.

ESSIE:

It's affecting the weather in ways we can't predict.

REGGIE

Jesus, you sound like our new Vice President.

ESSIE:

Thank you. Now we can finally do something about it.

REGGIE:

The weather?

ESSIE:

Yes! These mines need to be shut down, all of them! (*gesturing towards the landscape*) This is the past, not the future.

REGGIE:

I would actually be pissed at you for talking like that, but I know there's too much money to be made here. We have the best coal.

ESSIE:

No, we don't.

REGGIE:

Don't what?

ESSIE:

Have the best coal. Not anymore.

REGGIE:

Because global warming suddenly changed it?

ESSIE:

Our coal is naturally high in sulfur, so it burns hotter.

REGGIE:

Exactly!

ESSIE:

*(to Reggie)* But sulfur contributes to acid rain. So the Clean Air Act makes it less... cost-effective.

REGGIE:

What in the hell does that mean?

ESSIE:

They have to install special machines to try to “clean” it before they can use it, so no one wants—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Wait! Was... Is that what— Is that what the deal was? Our coal is now dirty because of the Clean Air Act?

ESSIE:

It was always dirty; it's coal!

REGGIE:

But you made sure everyone's gonna be out of a job sooner rather than later!  
Fuck you, Essie!

ESSIE:

Reggie, there will be new jobs!

REGGIE:

Where? At the college? I heard your sons are all set, there!

ESSIE:

I— No! Right here, where we're standing!

REGGIE:

On the gobpile?

ESSIE:

Yes! Reclamation projects! Gobpiles and slurry and spoil from surface mines can all be made into recreational areas.

REGGIE:

Golly gee, where do I sign up?

ESSIE:

They've already started down in Shawnee Forrest, and renewable energy projects are in the works.

REGGIE:

That is years down the line. What about now?

ESSIE:

They'll need people here to build parks, trails, playgrounds.

REGGIE:

You're acting like it's some goddamn game of Candy Land!

ESSIE:

No, it's really happening! Twenty-five years from now, we won't even need fossil fuels!

REGGIE:

What's happening right now is this town is dying and you don't even care!

ESSIE:

Of course I care! Why do you think I chose to—

REGGIE:

*(interrupting)* Because you were given options. You could choose.

ESSIE:

I earned everything I've got! And you have a choice, too!

REGGIE:

To what? Go to college, go to Europe?

ESSIE:

I don't know, maybe!

REGGIE:

No, Essie, you do not know! You don't know and you're no better or smarter than the rest of us, here, they just let you think you are. For now.

*Silence. We hear a dog howling in the distance. It's a painful howl. Essie turns to Meg.*

ESSIE:

Are you ready, Meg?

REGGIE:

*I certainly am.*

*She drinks from her flask.*

MEG:

Why does everything feel so wrong, now? So terribly, horribly wrong?

REGGIE:

Are you telling me you had gobpile illusions?

ESSIE:

I think she had Perseverance illusions.

REGGIE:

Don't we all, that's how we get through the day.

*Suddenly, Meg starts to cry. Tears of frustration and anger and loss and self-pity and everything in between.*

MEG:

Ohhhhhh I'm sorry! At first everything was going so well! I was reflecting and connecting and healing and being productive! Finding myself!

REGGIE:

Here?

MEG:

Where else? I'm over 30 and I have nothing to hang onto and I just wanted to be somewhere safe.

ESSIE:

Not so safe for some of us.

MEG:

Coming here as a kid, all I remember is pretty hills and rivers and happy people who loved me and how green it was in summers, then snow in the winters.

REGGIE:

I told you, there probably wasn't—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* I know! But that's what I remember. That's what I came back for! I thought I'd— I almost died, you know!

REGGIE:

I— No. What?

MEG:

Yes! I could be dead, right now! I was nearly killed!

REGGIE:

What happened?

MEG:

I don't know, I was just sitting there, in his car.

REGGIE:

Whose car? Wait. Jimmy—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* No. No. Sorry! My boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend.

REGGIE:

What did he do?

MEG:

Nothing! He did absolutely nothing because he wasn't there. I was in the car and I guess someone broke in and dragged me out; bashed me up. They said they couldn't even recognize me!

REGGIE:

Oh! Just like that trucker on TV! Was yours during the riots, too?!

MEG:

No, I was fine in the riots. This was nine years ago.

REGGIE:

So you are fine?

MEG:

I am until I'm not!

REGGIE:

I don't understand.

MEG:

Right! It's like this huge thing happened to me that changed who I am and how I get through life and not only do I not understand it, I don't even— The last thing I remember was just sitting there. I wasn't even scared. And I'm sorry, but—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* It was not your fault.

MEG:

I know that, but I'm still sorry! I'm sorry for all us, living in a world where horrible things are allowed to happen and we just go on with our lives acting like everything's okay until WHAM! Something else happens? And then we pick ourselves up like we're all fine, again?

*Short pause.*

REGGIE:

Who else is going to us pick up?

ESSIE:

And how often is there an actual "wham?"



REGGIE:

Most times, it just sneaks up on you.

ESSIE:

And reminds you that it's been there, all along.

*Very short pause.*

MEG:

Well, that's fucked.

ESSIE:

*(preparing to leave)* Shall we go?

REGGIE:

Wait. Do I smell smoke?

MEG:

What?

ESSIE:

Smoke?

REGGIE:

*(looking around)* I don't see any flames, though.

MEG:

Oh, my god! What am I doing here?!

ESSIE:

Let's go.

MEG:

Yes! I need to go home.

ESSIE:

I'll take you.

MEG:

No. I mean home, home. To LA.

REGGIE:

But it does smell like smoke.

ESSIE:

*(to Meg)* To Los Angeles?

MEG:

Yes. I don't belong here.

ESSIE:

You—

MEG:

I tried, so hard, but I don't.

REGGIE:

Or maybe it's not smoke.

ESSIE:

*(to Meg)* And you're going to feel safe? In Los—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* I may never feel safe. But I need to feel like me.

REGGIE:

*(looking into the air)* But it's definitely *something*...

MEG:

I need my real life back.

REGGIE:

Something I can't quite—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* So why are we still here? What I *don't* need is to be consumed by flames before I get on a goddamn airplane!

*She quickly leaves. Essie starts to follow.*

REGGIE:

Hang on. What's that?

ESSIE:

What's what?

REGGIE:

You feel that?

ESSIE:

I don't— No. Are you coming with us?

REGGIE:

Yes, but... Wait! There! Is that really...?

ESSIE:

I don't know, Reggie! I really don't!

*She leaves.*

REGGIE:

Yes! Look! It is... It's snow!

*For a moment, there is a soft silence as we see Reggie on the gobpile, with snow starting to come down around her.*

*Darkness. Or maybe it's a grayness.*

*We see Meg alone, next to a very small graveyard with a fence around it. There's snow on the ground, partially covering some very old gravestones. Meg is wearing a men's winter coat, and is on her hands and knees, reading the gravestones. Maybe she picks up a broken piece of one gravestone. After a moment, she stands, wiping snow off her pants.*

MEG:

Hah...

*Helen joins her.*

HELEN:

Here you are! What are you doing out here?

MEG:

I was just wanting to take a last— Did you know it's a woman and three children?

HELEN:

Yes.

MEG:

Marie Barnett. She was only 21.

HELEN:

And her babies. Newborn, two and five.

MEG:

But no husband.

HELEN:

Not buried with her. I did some research. It was before the town was built. This was all country. Barnett had a small farm but abandoned it. I'm not sure why.

MEG:

Why have I never really looked at these, before?

HELEN:

When you were little, you never liked to play back here.

MEG:

But I remember being out here. You had a garden. And there was a pond.

HELEN:

Your grandfather made that for me.

MEG:

He “made” a pond?

HELEN:

He did.

MEG:

With fish! I remember one Christmas when I was little it had frozen over, and he came out and broke the ice because I was worried about the fish.

*Helen smiles.*

What? He did!

HELEN:

He broke the ice. Because the pond was leaking. He had to re-seal it.

*Meg smiles.*

MEG:

Well, that’s stupid.

HELEN:

Do you want some lunch? You’re not leaving for another—

MEG:

*(interrupting)* Is my grandmother up for it?

HELEN:

She’s who sent me out here.

MEG:

I should’ve guessed.

HELEN:

It’s been so nice having you here, Meg.

MEG:

I’ve feel like I’ve been kind of an idiot.

HELEN:

No. You’ve been wonderful. I’ve loved every minute of it!

MEG:

Really? I mean, me too. Mostly. But I know I was supposed to have—

HELEN:

*(interrupting)* I gave up on “supposed to have”s a long time ago. And whatever it was you were looking for... Sometimes we just have to sit with things before we know what we’ve found or whether they’re really ours.

*Meg wraps her arms around her grandmother as if she’ll never let her go.*

We’re very lucky to have you, Meg.

MEG:

Nooooo! I’m lucky!

*And at this point the hug gets a bit awkward. They separate.*

HELEN:

Well. I’m just making cheese sandwiches. I hope that’s all right. I had some bacon, but I’m not sure how long it’s been...

MEG:

Are you sure you’re okay with me leaving? I could totally change my flight.

HELEN:

Your grandmother and I, we can take care of each other.

MEG:

I know you can.

*Essie joins them.*

ESSIE:

Hello, there! Ms. Claudette said you two were back here...

HELEN:

Hello, Essie!

ESSIE:

*(to Meg)* Guess who’s taking you to the airport.

MEG:

Not Reggie?

ESSIE:

The baby’s sick. She called and I said I’d do it.

HELEN:

All the way to Chicago?

ESSIE:

I've been meaning to spend more time up there. Talk to some people. I'm early, I know.

MEG:

I'm all packed.

HELEN:

But you don't have to get in the car, just yet. Would you like a sandwich, Essie?

ESSIE:

Sure. Thank you.

HELEN:

Come inside when you're ready. Both of you.

*Helen goes into the house.*

ESSIE:

Look. The sun's peeking out. What's left of that snow will be gone in no time. Should be a nice drive.

MEG:

Is Reggie's baby really sick?

ESSIE:

I— assume so?

MEG:

I'm sorry. I mean, not that I'd want to deprive you of a six hour drive...

ESSIE:

Of course not!

MEG:

But I'd thought we'd have a chance to— It's funny how things work out. Or don't work out.

ESSIE:

This is true.

MEG:

Thank you. For everything. And I'm sorry if—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* No. You did good work. And I know you'll do more. Whatever it is.

MEG:

Can I tell you something? For years I've been going around in circles about what happened; not knowing. But the other night it just struck me: Do you know what the first thing I remember is? After waking up in the hospital, and getting my brain back? Wondering where *he* was. Asking "Where is he?"

ESSIE:

He being...?

MEG:

The only one I wanted to see after I came out of that darkness was my shitty boyfriend who ran out of gas, left me alone and fell asleep after he called Triple A.

*Very short pause.*

ESSIE:

Maybe that's something you can work on.

MEG:

Might be good, huh?

ESSIE:

And you know what I've been thinking about? That trucker.

MEG:

You mean, from the riots?

ESSIE:

That's what was all over the news, when it was happening. And still, at least here, you mention the Los Angeles riots and it's always about the trucker. Being attacked by a gang.

MEG:

Because it was a terrible—

ESSIE:

*(interrupting)* I'm sure it was. But what about the beating of the black man, the injustice that started it all? And weren't there over sixty people who died in the riots? Most of them black or Mexican? The entire city's in flames and a few months later, all anyone can remember is the white guy and his truck?

*Short pause.*

MEG:

I could change my flight. The only reason I'm flying out of Chicago is because of Reggie. She said she'd never been there.

ESSIE:

Maybe she'll go another time.

MEG:

Maybe.

*Very short pause.*

Gobpile willing.

*They both look back at where the gobpile stands. From here, maybe it's an unobstructed view. And again begin hear the sound of something very large moving, shifting. Waking up? Maybe.*

***End of Play***