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Saint Thea: A One-Act Play in Two Acts
By D.T. Arcieri

CHARACTERS

Father/Arthur, 53 medicated or...

Mother/Rita, 50 controlling and...

Benjamin, 17 unaware, yet...

Grandpa, 82 ancient, but...

Thea, 35 saintly or...

ACT I

Playing a hand held digital game, Benjamin sits in a chair center stage staring out into the audience. He is wearing a bright shirt. His mom enters wearing black and throws her hands up in a gesture of emotional discord. She rushes to hug him. He does not move.

MOTHER

Benjamin! Oh my God! There you are! Are you okay?

She hugs him. He rolls his eyes, smirks and continues to play the game.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I know. I know. It's heart-breaking. He was such a good man. I know you loved him very much.

He twists a bit until she breaks her smothering embrace. He continues to play the game.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

It's okay. It will be alright. We will carry on as his legacy, his living legacy. We will be strong in this time of great sorrow. We will... *carry on*. That's all. I mean, what else can we do?

Ben does not answer. He puts the game down and takes out his iPod. Ben turns it on and puts the earphones in his ears. She promptly takes them out. He stares straight ahead and frowns.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Denial, Benjamin, will not serve you emotionally in the long run. You have to face the truth. We are all mortal on this planet. Everyone and everything dies. It's a law of nature. And, really, a beautiful thing, if you think about it, this cycle of life... and death. (beat) Death and dying are an important part of living. You really need to face that.

Ben takes a joint from his shirt pocket, puts it in his mouth and attempts to light it. She promptly removes it from his mouth.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Is that marijuana? Oh, my God! Benjamin! *Self-medication*? Not a very good idea, young man. And I know, I know it hurts. We all need help with the pain. But that's why we have each other. That's why I'm here for you. I'm helping you. Can't you tell?

She hugs Ben's head and almost suffocates him. He breaks away, but does not answer.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

What are you thinking right now?

He takes a moment to answer while trying to identify the emotion he is experiencing.

BENJAMIN

I'm thinking... that I'm scared.

MOTHER

Oh, I know. But there's no reason to be scared. (beat) What *are* you scared of?

BENJAMIN

It's not fear, really. It's worry. (beat) I'm worried.

MOTHER

What are you worried about, honey?

BENJAMIN

Well, maybe it's not worry. I think it might be more like... *concern*.

MOTHER

(impatiently)

Fear. Worry. Concern. (beat) *Whatever!*

BENJAMIN

I'm concerned, Mom, because I share 50% of my genome with you.

MOTHER

I'm not sure what you mean, darling.

BENJAMIN

I mean that if your behavioral repertoire, you know, your *personality*, has a genetic basis, I mean, if its hard-wired into your DNA, then in fact, I may be fucked.

MOTHER

Why do you have to say things like that?

BENJAMIN

Express my concern about our genetic relationship?

MOTHER

No. (beat) I mean why do you have to curse?

BENJAMIN

Well I... I don't *have* to.

MOTHER

Exactly. That's my point.

She takes out a pamphlet and thrusts it in his face.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I bought a pamphlet from the funeral home. (beat) What do you think - mahogany or pine?

Benjamin looks at it in a disgusted fashion, gets up and exits. His mother calls after him.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Money is *not* an issue!

She peruses the pamphlet and talks to herself.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Although the pine box, I must say, is a *super* deal.

Lights up on Benjamin standing behind a body laid out on a table with a white sheet over it. Benjamin looks mournful and a moment goes by before he speaks. Mother watches him closely.

BENJAMIN

Grandpa, I've... I've come to ask you a question.

There is a pause here. Grandpa is under the sheet, but he is not dead.

GRANDPA

Do you wanna know how many women I've slept with in my life?

Mother frowns at them and shakes her head, then lights down on her.

BENJAMIN

No.

GRANDPA

Well, for your information, the answer is three.

BENJAMIN

That's all? *Three* women?

Grandpa pulls the sheet off his face and sits up facing the audience.

GRANDPA

Oh, what? Did you think I was going to say thirty or... or *three hundred!*?

BENJAMIN

I hadn't really thought about it, Grandpa.

Grandpa bounces off the table.

GRANDPA

They was different times, Benny! We didn't have sex willy-nilly like nowadays!

BENJAMIN

Willy-nilly?

GRANDPA

We had respect! We cared! We did the right thing!

BENJAMIN

I do the right thing.

GRANDPA

Oh, I know you do, boy. You're not like those other high school hooligans. You know, the teenage riff-raff prowlin' modern suburbia lookin' to deflower and defame sweet young nymphets in pony tails and tight cardigan sweaters.

Benjamin looks scared and worried about Grandpa's comment.

BENJAMIN

Thank you.

GRANDPA

But tell me, how many girls have *you* been with?

BENJAMIN

Four.

GRANDPA

Four girls? *Jesus Christ!*

BENJAMIN

What's wrong? Is that a lot?

GRANDPA

It's one more than me, God damn it! And I'm eighty two years old!

BENJAMIN

Does a hand job count?

Grandpa stares at him for a moment.

GRANDPA

Yes, a hand job counts!

BENJAMIN

Then it's *twenty* four. (beat) I've been with *twenty four* girls.

GRANDPA

Holy crap! (beat) Look, Benny, I'm not against promiscuity per se. Please understand that. Men, of course, have needs that... well, need to be expressed. (beat) I'm just...*disappointed*.

BENJAMIN

You're disappointed in me?

GRANDPA

No, son. You're a fine boy. Strong. Good looking. Bright.(beat) A regular chip off the old block.

BENJAMIN

So, you're proud of me.

GRANDPA

No. (beat) Well, yes, of course I am. You're my legacy. You're what I'm leaving behind. (beat) How many genes did ya say we share?

BENJAMIN

As my grandfather, you and I share 25% of our respective genomes.

GRANDPA

Good. That's good, Benny.

BENJAMIN

Then what *are* you disappointed in, Grandpa?

GRANDPA

(ranting)

What am I disappointed in? (beat) *Things!* All *kinda* things! Current events and trends! Art and fashion! Five hundred channels and not a God damn thing to watch! Fake boobs and bleached teeth! It's disappointin'! *All of it!* (beat) Have you looked down the produce aisle at the grocery store? Can you see that all the fruit is gettin' better and better lookin'? Those God damn peaches I've been seein' lately are beautiful! I mean so large and perfect. But ya know what? They don't taste good. They're not sweet and juicy like they use to be. In my day, peaches were not big and beautiful. They were small and nasty lookin'. But they were sure tasty! *They were sweet!* The way Nature intended. (beat) Now it's like these giant farm corporations are growin' better lookin' fruit, but they

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

are clearly *not* concerned with flavor. Their priorities are all screwed up! It's *all* image and *no* substance. Just like politicians and celebrities. And people, regular people. *No substance!* Fake boobs and bleached teeth!(beat) *These* are the times we live in, Benny. The *world* we live in. And here's the moral: Things are *never* what they seem to be. *That's* what you need to know. (beat) It's *all* disappointing!

Benjamin reflects on this but does not comment. Grandpa calms down.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, Benny. I'm gettin' grumpy in my old age. (beat) You got a cigarette for the old man?

BENJAMIN

I don't smoke.

GRANDPA

Why the hell not?

BENJAMIN

Well, I.. I'm not allowed to.

GRANDPA

Who says?

BENJAMIN

Mom. (beat) The State of New York. (beat) The Surgeon General. (beat) Common sense. (beat) The...

GRANDPA

(interrupting)

Oh, forget it!(beat) Didn't you say that you wanted to ask me a question?

BENJAMIN

Oh, yeah. I... I wanted to know why you sleep with a sheet over your head. It makes you look... *dead*.

GRANDPA

That's exactly right, Benny!

BENJAMIN

Then why do it?

GRANDPA

Just to screw with your mother. (beat) I really don't like her.

BENJAMIN

What about Dad? Do you like him?

Lights up on Father. He is holding a fishing net and wearing way too much fishing gear and paraphernalia. Grandpa and Benjamin look at him for a moment in shock. Ben smiles, but Grandpa frowns. Father gives them a

'thumbs up'. Lights down on Benjamin and Grandpa with their arms around each other. Father addresses the audience directly.

FATHER

You should see my aquarium. I have the most extraordinary fish tank. (beat) I stock it exclusively with fish and crustaceans I catch. Interesting stuff. Like the beautiful, but dangerous lion fish and the very rare empress angelfish.(beat) I know. I know what you're thinking: We live in a temperate zone. How can the relatively cool waters off our coast support such exotic, tropical creatures? That's what you were thinking, right? Well, the answer is that these fish float passively up to us, almost against their will, in tropical currents from the Caribbean. That's true. But, the thing is, because of the current these poor animals will never get back to the Caribbean. And because of the water temperature they'll never make it through the winter here. It gets too cold. So when they can't swim back home they freeze to death! (beat) I read this morning in *The Long Island Fisherman* that a whole school of Japanese puffer fish are hanging around the dock by the Fire Island Light House.(beat) *Japanese puffer fish!* (beat) I don't *have* a Japanese puffer fish in my aquarium. But I will by this afternoon!

Lights up on Mother. He looks at her.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Oh, and by the way, when someone says "It's *not* about the money" or "Money is *not* an issue", what they're really saying is "It's *all* about the money" and "Money is *thee* issue". Father smiles at her. She gives him the finger. He points and winks at her.

Lights down on Father.

MOTHER

Grandpa? Grandpa! Where the...

Lights up on Grandpa laying under the white sheet. Mother walks up behind him.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Grandpa!

GRANDPA

Jesus Christ, woman! You could wake the dead!

MOTHER

Did I just wake *you*?

He sits up and takes the sheet off.

GRANDPA

No, Rita, you did not. But then, I'm not dead.

MOTHER

You're *not* dead, are you?

GRANDPA

No, I am not. Much to your dismay!

MOTHER

But how are you feeling?

GRANDPA

I feel like crap!

MOTHER

Well, that's something.

GRANDPA

I'm eighty-two years old. I am supposed to feel like crap!

MOTHER

The average life span of a white American male is currently seventy four years.

GRANDPA

Yes, I am considerably past my warranty, and completely obsolete. You really do need to upgrade, but what the fuck, I may live to be a hundred and twenty! Wouldn't *that* be a hoot?

MOTHER

Do you *have* to use words like that?

GRANDPA

Like what? (beat) *Hoot?*

MOTHER

I mean the *F word*.

GRANDPA

Well, I... I guess I don't *have* to.

MOTHER

That's my point - *you don't*. (beat) You've become a terrible influence on Benjamin.

GRANDPA

Diffusin' the F bomb, huh? (beat) Hmmmm... I don't think so.

MOTHER

That poor child. Look at what you are doing to him!

GRANDPA

He's not a *child*! He's a young *man*! When I was his age I was working in a coal mine, fighting a world war *and* bangin' broads left and right. I was dealing with reality, not *virtual* reality like kids today! (beat) I'm not a bad influence on that boy. If it weren't for me he'd be in his room staring at a TV or computer or video game all day! I a man excellent influence on him. I am teaching him to be a *participant*, not an *observer*.

There is a pause here.

MOTHER

You were *bangin'* broads?

GRANDPA

Of *course not!* And I never fought in a war *or* worked in a coal mine either! (beat) You are missing the whole God damn point! Which is, I did not spend my life lookin' out a window. Hell, we didn't even have a window when I was his age. We had a brick wall. There *was* a crack in it, so some light *did* get in, but that didn't matter 'cause I wasn't in my room! I was out somewhere makin' a few bucks and causin' some trouble. (beat) I was livin'!

MOTHER

Benjamin doesn't need to be causing trouble.

GRANDPA

Benjamin needs a life! A real one, not a virtual one! I am going to make that boy into a man. You just need to get out of my way.

She looks him up and down for a moment.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

What?

MOTHER

I was just wondering. (beat) Which suit do you like better --your gray suit or your blue suit?

GRANDPA

Well, the blue suit is double breasted, so it puts a few pounds on me, but.... wait a God damned minute! Why in hell would you ask me a question like that?

MOTHER

I was just wondering, that's all.

GRANDPA

Yeah, sure! You was wondering what suit to give the funeral director when they lay me out.

MOTHER

I was not! That's silly! I don't want you to die. Why... why would I want you dead?

GRANDPA

Well, *Jesus Christ*, woman - I can think of six or seven good reasons right off the top of my head! But I would say number one on that list is (now with an over-the-top Irish accent) *yer after me pot o' gold!*

He has a coughing attack. She glares at him in a knowing way.

MOTHER

Don't get so worked up, old man. You could put a big strain on that weak little heart of yours. He stops and holds his chest. He looks worried for a few seconds, but shakes it off.

GRANDPA

I have the heart of a lion!

MOTHER

Yes, you do. (beat) But it's a toothless, arthritic lion. With E.D.

GRANDPA

You can kiss my wrinkled ass, *Rita!* He exits. She gives him the finger. Lights up on Benjamin playing a videogame. Grandpa stands over him looking at the screen. Lights down on Mother.

BENJAMIN

So, the point of the game is to model a functioning ecological community where each player can manipulate the genetics of the animals and plants that inhabit this virtual world. So the whole idea is to experiment and create a self-sustaining ecosystem.

Grandpa looks at Benjamin for a moment. He has no idea what he just said and doesn't care.

GRANDPA

(insincerely)

Fascinating! And it makes me think. *Hmmmmmm*. Why don't we go over to happy hour at the Moose Lodge?

BENJAMIN

You want me to go to a bar? I'm only 17 years old, Grandpa.

GRANDPA

I was drinking at the Moose when I was 17. (beat) Of course, I had been three years already.

BENJAMIN

What year was that?

GRANDPA

I reckon, ah... 1939. Thereabouts.

BENJAMIN

Things are different now.

GRANDPA

Bull shit.

BENJAMIN

There are laws and rules.

GRANDPA

There's always been laws and rules. That ain't changed.(beat) But you know what *has* changed? *People!* They're a bunch of pussies nowadays!

BENJAMIN

I'm not a pussy, Grandpa.

GRANDPA

Good boy, Benny! That's what I want to hear! Now go get your jacket. We're going to happy hour.

BENJAMIN

Should I bring my cell phone and some money?

GRANDPA

You won't need either!

BENJAMIN

Okay. But I have to turn off the computer, DS and Wii game systems.

GRANDPA

In that case, bein' a little slower than you, I'm gonna get ahead start. Just meet me over at the Moose. After you've handled all this high tech... BS.

BENJAMIN

Sure. It's right around the block. I'll be there real soon.

He starts to exit and then stops and turns back to Grandpa.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

Should we ask Dad to come?

GRANDPA

Your father? Nah, he's not the drinkin' type. (beat) He's never been smart enough to self-medicate.

Benjamin exits. Lights up on Father. He is still over dressed for fish collecting, but is now holding a bucket and a small net. He is happy and proud. Grandpa doesn't notice him at first.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Besides he's out on the Great South Bay collectin' fish for that big ass aquarium of his. Father yells right behind Grandpa.

FATHER

Oh, yeah!

Grandpa jumps and holds his chest in a heart attack-like fashion.

GRANDPA

Jesus, Arthur!

FATHER

I've been collecting all right. I just saved three Japanese puffer fish!

GRANDPA

You mean you "caught" three puffer fish.

FATHER

No. They were lost and far away from home. I'm *saving* them.

GRANDPA

Sure, Arty. (beat) But does yer big ol' fish tank need three more fish?

FATHER

Yes. (beat) It does.

GRANDPA

You got, what, maybe four or five hundred other fish in that tank. You *really* think there's room for three more?

Grandpa wanders over to Father.

FATHER

There are thirty eight fish in my aquarium. It's a very large tank.

GRANDPA

Is that all? It looks pretty full, you know, kinda overpopulated. To me, anyway. (beat) But tell me this, Arty: How large is that tank compared to the Atlantic ocean? Do ya think it's fair to take fish outta the ocean and put 'em in a little tank?

FATHER

They're safe in my tank. And happy.

Grandpa reflects on this for moment.

GRANDPA

Safer, I guess. But happy? (beat) Look, son, this fish thing, what's it all about?

FATHER

Well, Dad, it's about... *fish*. Collecting them!

GRANDPA

Yeah, I... I understand that part. (beat) It's *why* yer collectin' 'em, that's what I don't git.

FATHER

I already told you. I'm *saving* them.

GRANDPA

The fish?

FATHER

Yes.

GRANDPA

From what?

FATHER

From their fate.

GRANDPA

And what fate is that?

FATHER

Things cruel and unnecessary.

I don't understand.

GRANDPA

They're *lost*.

FATHER

I think *you're* lost.

GRANDPA

Father considers this. Grandpa feels bad he said that.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)
 Look, Arty, I'm just tryin' to understand this activity of yers. It's ah... *meaning*.

FATHER
 My aquarium is beautiful.

GRANDPA
 Yeah, sure. I know. It's just that, well, you do it *all* the god damn time. In the old days, when you was workin', it was a part-time hobby and you had just a little aquarium. But the fact is, right now, you do nothin' else. Christ, every minute of your conscious life is dedicated to yer fish tank. And I guess if it were yer business I could understand it better. But it don't make any money. And a man yer age should still be workin'. So, clear as I can tell, collectin' fish fer yer aquarium has grown from a hobby, when you was a more functional type individual, to a major psychiatric type disorder! (beat) Sure, it's *beautiful*. Anyone can see that! But what I'm asking is a... what a...

FATHER
 (interrupting)
 It's a metaphor.

GRANDPA
 A what?

FATHER
 An allegory.

GRANDPA
 What is?

FATHER
 The *aquarium* is.

Grandpa considers this, but has no clue what Father is talking about.

GRANDPA
 (sarcasm)
 Well, thank you, Arthur. Everythin' is so much clearer to me now.

Grandpa looks closely at Father as if he is trying to figure him out. Lights up on Mother standing with arms folded. She looks at them in a disapproving fashion. Grandpa and

Father glance at her as lights go down on them. Benjamin enters and attempts to move briskly past her holding his jacket.

MOTHER

Whoa. Where do you think you're going? He stops abruptly.

BENJAMIN

Ah... *out?*

MOTHER

Out where?

BENJAMIN

(sotto voce)

Happy hour at the Moose Lounge.

MOTHER

Where?

He turns back to her and speaks clearly, but not convincingly.

BENJAMIN

To the library. To get a book. A history book. From the nonfiction section.

She stares at him.

MOTHER

Are you lying to me?

Benjamin fakes a sneeze which obscures his words. The audience hears him, but Mother does not.

BENJAMIN

(fake sneeze)

Of course!

MOTHER

What was that?

BENJAMIN

A sneeze?

MOTHER

Do you have your wallet and your cell phone?

BENJAMIN

I... certainly do.

She stares at him for a moment.

MOTHER

Where's your father?

Working on his aquarium.

BENJAMIN

Of course.

MOTHER

Good-bye, Mother.

BENJAMIN

He attempts to leave. She stops him.

And where's your grandfather?

MOTHER

I... I don't know.

BENJAMIN

She continues to look closely at him, seeing if she can detect a lie.

MOTHER

You have two of the most pathetic male authority figures possible in your life. *One* should be put to sleep and the *other* should be put away. With role models like them, your chances of becoming a successful human being are ah...*remote*. And I'm not saying this to hurt your feelings or to scare you, Benjamin. I'm just making an objective appraisal of your situation. *But...* it is not impossible for you to make something of yourself, in spite of the challenges placed before you. So try your best, and this is quality advice, try your *very* best, to avoid contact with either of them. *Close* contact. Where they talk to you and tell you things. Hard to believe things. *Crazy* things. You know, where their distorted perceptions of reality might rub off on you. Avoid *that* type of contact. Don't do things like... hmmm, have conversations with them or ,say, look them in the eye. Because you can't believe either one of them. One's senile and the other's insane. The only thing they share with you is your genes. And that's because I can't do a thing about it. (beat) Do you understand what I'm telling you?

He pretends he wasn't listening.

What's for dinner?

BENJAMIN

She glares at him, then holds up Father's bucket and small net.

Fish.

MOTHER

The intro to Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life" comes up loudly. Mother and Ben look up for its source. Lights up on Grandpa. He is dancing next to a table with a bottle of Jack Daniels and two glasses on it. Ben sees him and sneaks over and joins him. Mother misses this and is still looking around. Lights down on her. Ben and Grandpa do a funny

dance, but are both quite good. Music fades. Grandpa plops into a chair.

GRANDPA

That is how ya do it!

He has a coughing attack and holds his chest. Ben joins him at the table.

BENJAMIN

Nice moves, Grandpa. But you better take it easy.

GRANDPA

Take it easy? (beat) *Why?*

BENJAMIN

Because... Well...

GRANDPA

Well, *what?* You think my ticker is gonna explode?

BENJAMIN

I didn't say that.

GRANDPA

Or I'll break my hip or have a stroke or some crap like that, right?

BENJAMIN

Yeah, some crap like that.

Grandpa points at Benjamin and looks like he going to get mad, but doesn't.

GRANDPA

You are... absolutely correct. I am an old man. I should take care. (beat) But, the thing is, I only know how to dance *one* way. And that was it. So it's kinda hard to tone down. In fact, it's impossible. I guess the choice then is to either dance or *not* dance. And given *that* choice, I choose to dance. (beat) Waddaya gonna do?

BENJAMIN

I understand your point.

GRANDPA

And besides, a dance floor would be a beautiful place for an old man to die. Don't ya think?

BENJAMIN

You're not trying to kill yourself, are you?

GRANDPA

Dance myself to death? That's a good one! (beat) Boy, if I wanted to kill myself I would take that big ol' 44 magnum pistol out from under my pillow, and it *is* big, hell, I can hardly pick that sucker up, but, if sufficiently motivated, like if I really wanted to *kill* myself, I would put the cold barrel of that big gun against my forehead, say a small

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

prayer of thanks to the Almighty for given me such a good go, and I would *then* pull that trigger... ruining that God-awful wallpaper your Mother put up in my bedroom. (beat) *That's* what I would do if I wanted to kill myself. What I wouldn't do is *dance* myself to death.

Ben looks closely at Grandpa for amoment.

BENJAMIN

You have a large handgun under your pillow?

GRANDPA

Doesn't everybody?

BENJAMIN

No.

GRANDPA

Is that so? Hmmmm.

Grandpa gestures to the Jack Daniel's bottle.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

You wanna do a shot?

BENJAMIN

I'm underage.

GRANDPA

I don't even know what that means. He pours two shots.

BENJAMIN

And obviously no one else around here does either. (beat) I didn't get proofed or carded or questioned when I walked in the door.

GRANDPA

You wouldn't. Not here. You're with me. This is the God damn Moose.

BENJAMIN

Doesn't anybody care?

GRANDPA

Care? *Are you serious?* They're serving you *because* they care! This is a bar room, Benny! It is an honor and privilege to be in this room. This is where *real* things happen. Not *virtual digital computer-type* things! You need to pay attention in a place like this. You might learn a thing or two. (beat) Did ya know that Romeo met Juliet at Happy Hour?

BENJAMIN

What?

GRANDPA

And that the Magna Carta was signed in an English pub?

BENJAMIN

Really?

GRANDPA

The Spanish-American war was fought in a bar room! Did ya know *that?* (beat) And... and when that astronaut Neil Armstrong walked on the moon... *it was in a God damn bar!* Benjamin stares at his Grandfather. *What?* Are ya worried that my arteries might be hardenin' and my brain is gettin' starved fer oxygen? (beat) Oh hell, I'm just screwin' with ya, Benny! (beat) But I hope you do understand what I'm tryin' to tell ya...

BENJAMIN

Yes. Well, I think so. (beat) Ah...you're telling me that interesting and important things happen in bar rooms... That a young man can learn a thing or two in a place like this. That maybe I should get off my ass and out of my room and into the real world sometimes.

GRANDPA

Damn straight!

BENJAMIN

So I... I should pay attention.

GRANDPA

That's right. *Exactly.*

Benjamin scans the bar.

BENJAMIN

Pay attention to ah... what, though? *Really.*

Grandpa lifts his shot glass.

GRANDPA

La dolce vita!

He downs the shot and shivers in response. Then slaps the table with his hand.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Oh, yeah, baby!

BENJAMIN

What does "la dolce vita" mean?

GRANDPA

It's Eye-talian and means "the sweet life". (beat) Benny...

Grandpa pours another shot.

BENJAMIN

Yeah, Grandpa?

GRANDPA

Benny, my boy, there's lots to pay attention to here. Lots of smart and interestin' people. (beat) You see those two guys drinking beer over there?

BENJAMIN

Yeah. They're ancient. One has a cane and the other has a walker. They look like they both just escaped from a minimum security nursing home. (beat) *Slowly* escaped. (beat) They seem kind of... *fragile*.

GRANDPA

Fragile, my ass! They'd chew you up and crap you out! Those two sons of bitches are warriors.

BENJAMIN

Warriors?

GRANDPA

Benny, listen to me. Back in the day, when they was as old as you are *right now*, those two boys were carrying rifles and hand grenades in other parts of the world, very nasty parts where you *needed* guns and grenades... just to cross the street. (beat) Bob Williams, the short guy, he was on Omaha Beach in D Day. You know what happened there?

BENJAMIN

I saw a movie...

GRANDPA

Fuck the movies! (beat) Except that Spielberg movie, *Saving Private Whoever*. That looked ah, you know, kinda real, like maybe what it mighta been like. *Because it was hell!* Ol' Bob there said it was raining lead into puddles of blood. The blood of brave young men! He fought hard there and saved a bunch of fellas, too, because the only thing bigger 'en Bob's balls is his heart. Won the Silver Star that day back in '44.

Grandpa lifts his glass.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Skoal!

He drinks the shot, shivers and bangshis hand on the table.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Bring it on!

BENJAMIN

What does "skoal" mean?

GRANDPA

It's a traditional Scandinavian toast that comes from the word for 'skull', because that's what Vikings used back in the day for drinkin' cups: *a human skull*. (beat) Benny...

BENJAMIN

Yeah, Grandpa?

Grandpa pours himself another shot.

GRANDPA

See that other guy there? Bob's friend. That's Ted Graham. A US Marine Corp infantryman with massive testicles. (beat) Killed three Japs on Iwo Jima with a sharp stick.

BENJAMIN

A stick?

GRANDPA

A *sharp* stick! (beat) He ran out of bullets and grenades, but he didn't run outta guts! Teddy won the Navy Cross and three Purple Hearts. (beat) *Three*.

BENJAMIN

He *killed* people?

GRANDPA

Yeah he *killed* people. What kind of question is *that*? It was a *fuckin'* war! You might of read about it in your history textbook. They call it *Dubya Dubya Two*!

BENJAMIN

I mean 'killed with his bare hands'?

GRANDPA

He did what he had to do, Benny. Fer freedom. Fer this great country. And, when it comes down to it, fer you and me.(beat)These great warriors here are all about courage and bravery.

BENJAMIN

They look like little old men.

GRANDPA

Well, there's a good lesson here: People are *never* who they seem to be.

Benjamin looks suspiciously at his Grandfather.

BENJAMIN

Are you making this up?

GRANDPA

No sir, I am surely not.

BENJAMIN

Is any of it exaggerated?

GRANDPA

I don't think so. But, I guess it just might *sound* exaggerated because... this is just how I *tell* stories. You know, I tend to underscore the *important* parts with an increase in volume and lots of arm wavin' and hand gesturin'. Benjamin considers this.

BENJAMIN

You're trying to make a point, aren't you?

GRANDPA

That's right, Benny. I am indeed.

He raises his shot glass to toast.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

L'chaim!

He does the shot, shivers and bangs the table.

GRANDPA

Help me, Lord!

Benny is just about to ask what this means, but Grandpa doesn't wait.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

It's Hebrew, you know, *Jewish*. It means "to life!"

Ben raises his shot glass to toast.

BENJAMIN

L'chaim!

He drinks the shot and then coughs his brains out.
Grandpa helps him calm down.

GRANDPA

Take it easy, boy! You'll be okay. I had it tough too, you know, the first time I drank whiskey. Of course, I was in third grade, so it was a little less embarrassin'.

BENJAMIN

Who did you drink with?

GRANDPA

My grandfather.

BENJAMIN

That I believe.

GRANDPA

Listen to me, Benny. I have something to tell you. A... a *story*.

BENJAMIN

Fiction or non-fiction?

GRANDPA

Non-fiction.

BENJAMIN

Okay.

GRANDPA

And like the brave men in this room, you'll need some courage. You'll need courage to hear what I'm gonna say.

Benjamin considers this for a moment.

BENJAMIN

What's the story about?

GRANDPA

Well, Benny, it's a... a story of deception, conflict, emotional blackmail, infidelity and...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting)

I've heard your Boy Scout stories, Grandpa.

Grandpa bangs the table with his fist.

GRANDPA

And murda! *M-U-R-D-A!*

There is a short pause here as they stare at each other.

BENJAMIN

You mean somebody killed somebody else?

GRANDPA

Of course that's what I mean! (beat) It's just that, well, it ain't happened yet.

BENJAMIN

So somebody is *going* to kill somebody else.

GRANDPA

Yes, I am speakin' in the future tense. Someone is *goin'* to die. Of unnatural causes. Like from, say, a gunshot wound to the head or possibly some kinda exotic poison.

BENJAMIN

But we don't know because the story's not finished yet.

GRANDPA

That's right. I'm gonna tell you all the parts that I know. *Except* the end. Because that ain't happened yet. But I am gettin' a very strong feelin' that we are pretty darn close to the final chapter.

BENJAMIN

How many characters are in this story?

GRANDPA

There are five characters.

BENJAMIN

Do I know any of them?

Lights up on Father and Mother under a tinted special, suggesting this is the story that Grandpa is telling. They are looking out into the audience. He is dressed in his fish

collecting outfit and she is holding the fish pail. Grandpa looks over at them.

GRANDPA

Oh, sure. Yeah. Absolutely. *Uh huh.*

BENJAMIN

Okay. Just start at the beginning. Can you do that?

GRANDPA

Ah... *no.*

Lights down on Grandpa and Benjamin.

FATHER

I'm missing the three fish I collected today.

MOTHER

That's interesting.

FATHER

Is it?

MOTHER

Not really.

He turns to her.

FATHER

Do you know anything about it?

She turns to him.

MOTHER

No.

He takes the pail from her and looks at the fish in it.

FATHER

What's wrong with you?

MOTHER

(sarcastic tone)

What's wrong with *me*? (beat) You're kidding, right?

FATHER

You know, I remember a time when you were a sweet and thoughtful person.

MOTHER

Seriously?

FATHER

Yes.

MOTHER

That's a delusion, caused, no doubt, by an over-active imagination having a head-on collision with long-term memory loss.

FATHER

What are you saying?

MOTHER

I'm saying that you're suffering from a number of side effects of the medication you're taking.

FATHER

But you're also saying, I think, that you were *never* sweet and thoughtful.

MOTHER

That, too.

FATHER

Well, for your information, I do *not* take medication.

MOTHER

Hmmm. Short term memory loss, too. *Interesting.* (beat) You know, I remember a time when you made money *and* sense.

FATHER

Oh, yeah? Well, I remember a time when respect was the foundation of a good relationship. (beat) A time when a man's pride and dignity weren't used so readily as a doormat. (beat) And a time when love, not money, was the glue that held a family together.

There is a short pause as she ponders this.

MOTHER

When was *that*?

FATHER

A long time ago.

She takes the pail back from him.

MOTHER

You see, the thing is, and I don't think you can argue with me about this, it's that you don't bring home the *bacon* anymore. All you bring home is *fish*. And so it just makes sense that from now on we're having *fish* for dinner!

He takes the pail back.

FATHER

My father pays the bills.

MOTHER

Sure, the phone works, the lights are on, and the refrigerator's full of generic diet cola and Velveta cheese. *Sure.* (beat) But I still feel, I don't know, like something is missing.

FATHER

What are you saying now?

MOTHER

That Grandpa is a cheap bastard!

FATHER

My father is a wealthy man.

MOTHER

That's the part, I think, that hurts.

FATHER

He knows who you are and what you want. And he's not going to give it to you.

She takes the pail back.

MOTHER

Then I'll have to take it!

FATHER

Look. You *can't* cook those fish.

MOTHER

Come to the kitchen with me. But let's stop by the pantry first and get some of the bargain bread crumbs and out-dated vegetable oil I bought on sale yesterday at the Try 'n Save.

FATHER

You can't cook them because... they aren't fish.

She looks into the pail.

MOTHER

Then what are they?

FATHER

They're... they're a metaphor.

MOTHER

A metaphor?

FATHER

They're... *symbols*.

MOTHER

You *aren't* taking your medication are you?

Father looks past Mother and points.

FATHER

Put that gun down, Grandpa!

As she turns to look he grabs the pail and runs. She turns back and watches him exit, then shakes her head in dismay. Lights up on Grandpa and Benjamin. They are not at the bar anymore. They're sitting together in two chairs. She talks to them.

MOTHER

(re: Father)

I taught him that.

Lights down on Mother. A brief pause as Benjamin processes his Grandpa's tale.

BENJAMIN

Well, *that* was interesting.

GRANDPA

I am glad you think so.

BENJAMIN

But was it true?

GRANDPA

Of course it was true! Every blasted word, every mean look, every *hos-tile* gesture!

Benjamin considers this for a moment.

BENJAMIN

Are you rich?

GRANDPA

I have put a few bucks away.

BENJAMIN

Is Mom going to kill Dad?

GRANDPA

Oh, I don't know about *that*.

BENJAMIN

So, it's Dad. He's going to kill Mom.

GRANDPA

No, no, I don't think so. He won't be around by the end of the story. I believe your Mother has *plans* for him.

BENJAMIN

So, it's you. (beat) Mom's going to kill *you*.

GRANDPA

Well, Benny, it's hard to know exactly what's gonna happen when and to who.

Benjamin looks closely at Grandpa.

BENJAMIN

Sometimes, Grandpa, it's hard to believe you.

GRANDPA

Boy, I haven't even got up to the part of the story that's hard to believe.

BENJAMIN

And what part is *that*?

GRANDPA

That part of this story is all the way in the beginning.

BENJAMIN

What part did you just tell me?

GRANDPA

That conversation between your Mother and your Father? That just happened this morning. So it's darn close to the end. But the thing you need to remember is that the ending has not *happened* yet. You know, the climax, the finale, the... the...

BENJAMIN

The part where somebody kills somebody else?

GRANDPA

Yeah, *that* part.

BENJAMIN

(frustrated)

But you *always* exaggerate! How can I believe you?

GRANDPA

I may be dramatizin' but I am *not* exaggeratin'. There *is* a difference!

BENJAMIN

How did you know "every blasted word" Dad and Mom said to each other? Did you eavesdrop?

GRANDPA

Of course I didn't! I wasn't even there. But your father *was* there and he told me everythin'.

BENJAMIN

And you believed him?

GRANDPA

Of course I did! (beat) Yer Daddy's got some problems, boy, but bein' a liar ain't one of 'em.

Benjamin ponders this remark.

BENJAMIN

Grandpa?

GRANDPA

Yeah, Benny.

BENJAMIN

What *is* my father's problem?

GRANDPA

That is an excellent question. And leads me directly to the next part of this dramatic narrative.

BENJAMIN

The beginning?

GRANDPA

Ah... *no*. But certainly closer to the beginning. *Much* closer.

BENJAMIN

You're telling this story backwards, aren't you?

GRANDPA

(unsure)

It would seem so.

A tinted special comes up on a much younger Mother and Father, dressed in full 80s regalia. They are kissing passionately. Grandpa and Benjamin look over at them.

BENJAMIN

Oh, come on, Grandpa! Are you *serious*?

GRANDPA

I said you would need courage, Benny. Ya gotta be brave!

Lights down on Benjamin and Grandpa. They kiss some more, then Father breaks his embrace from Mother. He seems upset.

MOTHER

I know. I know. It's heart-breaking. She was such a good woman. I know you loved her very much.

She attempts to embrace him again, but he won't allow it.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

It's okay. It will be alright. We will carry on as her legacy, this *family* will be her living legacy. We will be strong in this time of great sorrow. We will... *carry on*. That's all. I mean, what else can we do?

FATHER

But poor Benjamin, he's so little. Just a tiny baby.

MOTHER

And that's a good thing.

FATHER
What?

MOTHER
 He'll never miss her. He'll never *remember* her.

FATHER
 He's motherless now!

MOTHER
 Not really.

FATHER
 What are you saying?

MOTHER
 Well he doesn't *have* to be.

FATHER
 She was breast-feeding him.

MOTHER
 I know. But I've been breast-feeding Benjamin, too.

FATHER
 Really?

MOTHER
 Yes.

FATHER
 But why?

MOTHER
 (unsure)
 Because... ah, he seemed hungry?

FATHER
 He did?

MOTHER
 (sure)
 Of course he did! Why else would I do something so inappropriately intimate with another woman's child?

He looks closely at her for a moment.

FATHER
 I... I'm sorry. Yes, of course. I understand. Thank you for being so generous with my son.

He begins to sob quietly.

With *our* son.

MOTHER

He looks up.

What did you say?

FATHER

I said "you're welcome".

MOTHER

He begins to sob again. They hug. Lights up on Grandpa and Benjamin now sitting on a couch on another part of the stage. Grandpa watches Benjamin. Benjamin watches his parents kiss. Lights down on Father and Mother. There is a moment of silence now as Benjamin reflects on what he's just heard.

GRANDPA

Now don't tell me that somehow, in some way, deep in yer heart of hearts, that you didn't know this already.

Know *what*?

BENJAMIN

GRANDPA

That woman married to yer father, she ain't yer mother! Not yer *real* mother! Yer, you know, *biological* mother.

Benjamin just hangs his head. Grandpa puts his arm around him.

GRANDPA

Benny, Benny, Benny, Benny, Benny...

Benjamin looks up more annoyed now than sad.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Benny, be brave. I... I know learnin' this is hard. But I want ya to be takin' it as, well, *good* news. *Very* good news.

BENJAMIN

Why is it good news?

GRANDPA

Because that woman is a bitch! (beat) She's a nasty, selfish, money grubbin', no good, sack o'...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting)

I know, Grandpa. I know what she is. (beat) Well, I thought I did anyway.

GRANDPA

And you don't wanna be sharin' yer ah, you know, yer genes...yer genetic *genome* with her.

BENJAMIN

It wasn't my *whole* genome. It was only 50%.

GRANDPA

Yeah, well, now it's *zero* per cent! And *that's* damn good news!

BENJAMIN

(angry)

But... but why didn't they tell me this before?

GRANDPA

Yer Father thought he was doin' the right thing. Makin' sure you had a mom and all. I mean, you *was* little. And if things worked out, then maybe he *was* right. You didn't *need* to know about yer real mom.

Grandpa seems uncomfortable.

BENJAMIN

What? What else?

GRANDPA

Well, ya might have noticed that they was... kinda close.

BENJAMIN

Close? Mom and Dad? Yeah. But if she wasn't my mother then who *was* she? (beat) Who *is* she?

GRANDPA

She *was* the housekeeper and...

BENJAMIN

Mom was the *housekeeper*?

GRANDPA

Yeah and...

Grandpa pauses. He is still uncomfortable.

BENJAMIN

And...

GRANDPA

And yer dad was bangin' her! (beat) Jesus, Benny, do I have to draw you a God damn picture? (beat) Yer mom, yer *real* mom, and dad were married, had a beautiful home and a beautiful baby, which happened to be you, he had a great job, with *my* company I might add, and well, on the side he was...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting)

What? Having an affair with the housekeeper?

GRANDPA

Yup. *Rita*. Let's call her Rita. I mean, it *is* her name.

Benjamin looks suspiciously at him.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

That *is* the truth, I am sorry to say.

BENJAMIN

Did *you* know about the affair?

GRANDPA

(remorseful)

Yes I did.

BENJAMIN

Did my mom know? My *real* mom?

GRANDPA

No, she did not. She was happy. And the thing was, so was yer father. He was happy, too. Happily married.

BENJAMIN

How happy was he... if he was sleeping with the housekeeper?

GRANDPA

It's complicated, Benny. Just like the rest of life. Relationships are complicated. (beat) But believe me, yer father *loved* your real mother. And so did I. (beat) She was so beautiful, so kind, so pure, so... ah, so...

He can't find the words to describe her loveliness.

BENJAMIN

What did she look like? What was her name?

GRANDPA

Her name?

Ethereal music begins to play. The a slowly materializes under a tinted special, almost as an apparition, dressed in white with a halo. She is glowing and clearly nine months pregnant.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Thea. Her name was *Thea*. (beat) She was a saint.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

Ethereal music plays. Lights up on a glowing and radiant Thea with a halo. Then lights up on Benjamin and Grandpa. Benjamin seems overwhelmed by this vision and goes to see her. He walks slowly around her and examines her closely, tries to touch her but can't.

Lights up on Mother.

MOTHER

What the fuck is *this*!?

The music grinds to a halt with a needle skipping across a vinyl record. Thea evaporates.

BENJAMIN

Did you just *curse*?

MOTHER

(insincere sweetness)

No. Of course not, sweetie. (beat) What are you two doing?

GRANDPA

We was talkin', ya old witch.

MOTHER

Old? That's a relative term, don't you think, *Grandpa*?

GRANDPA

Age is a matter of attitude. And you got a bad one.

MOTHER

What were you two *talking* about, Benjamin? Is he filling your head full of hard-to-believe things? (beat) *Crazy* things?

BENJAMIN

I... I don't know. It's hard to tell sometimes.

GRANDPA

(to Benjamin)

Waddaya mean 'hard to tell'?

BENJAMIN

Like what's the truth and... and what's not. It's just hard to tell... with you!

MOTHER

(insincere sweetness)

Here's something that might help you, darling. Do you know how you can tell if Grandpa is lying?

BENJAMIN

No. How?

MOTHER

(sincere anger)

His lips are moving!

Grandpa laughs until he coughs.

MOTHER

What?

GRANDPA

That was the first time, in my entire life, that I heard you say somethin'... *anythin'* even remotely funny.

MOTHER

Was that funny?

GRANDPA

Remotely.

MOTHER

What was he telling you, Benjamin?

BENJAMIN

(struggles)

Well, he... ah, said that... you weren't my real...

MOTHER

(interrupting)

Okay, that's enough. Go to your room.

BENJAMIN

Do I have to?

MOTHER

(insincere sweetness)

Yes, honey, you do.

BENJAMIN

But I don't want to...

MOTHER

(sincere anger)

Now!

Benjamin exits. She calls after him.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

And no more of those stupid video games! (beat) I left your history textbook *on* your bed. *Study!*

GRANDPA

Well there's somethin' we agree on.

MOTHER

That Benjamin should be studying history?

GRANDPA

No. (beat) That all those electronic computer digital games he plays are useless. (He calls to Benjamin) And I left a copy of Playboy on *top* of the history book! *Check out Miss October!*

MOTHER

You're buying pornography for your grandson?

GRANDPA

Well, no, not exactly. (beat) That would be the October 1991 issue. It was a good one from my collection. A *very* good one. I'm just sharing.

They stare at each other intensely for a moment and move as if they were sumo wrestlers about to engage each other.

MOTHER

Do you really think it's a good idea to be telling Benjamin lies?

GRANDPA

Lies? I was there.

MOTHER

I know.

GRANDPA

And I remember everything.

MOTHER

Are you *sure* about that?

GRANDPA

I'm not senile, Rita. I know who you are. Who you *were*. What you *did*.

MOTHER

People remember what they want to remember. Their minds, overtime, edit the prose of their memories.

GRANDPA

Well put. Well put *bull shit*. (beat) Look, the fact is that *all* history is revised. Or at least written from a point of view.

MOTHER

Then how can it ever be the absolute truth?

GRANDPA

No history can. (beat) But one history *can* be truer than another.

MOTHER

What if an individual reads two history books, how does that person know which one *is* truer than the other?

Lights up on Father and Benjamin sitting on Ben's bed.
She looks at them.

GRANDPA

Well, the fact is, that person might not. In which case they oughta go to the non-fiction section of the local library and pick up a *third* history book. Then sit their ass down to read it. (beat) *Carefully*.

Lights down on Grandpa and Mother. Father, in fish collecting attire, is thumbing through the old Playboy. Benjamin is looking in the fish bucket.

BENJAMIN

Does Grandpa keep a large caliber handgun under his pillow?

FATHER

I don't know.

BENJAMIN

You don't know if he has a gun?

FATHER

Oh, sure, he has a gun. And it *is* under his pillow. (beat) I just don't know how large the caliber is. They are quiet for a moment.

Father unfolds the centerfold.

BENJAMIN

Are you on drugs?

FATHER

Do you mean psychiatric medication?

BENJAMIN

Yes.

FATHER

I've been prescribed certain pharmaceuticals.

BENJAMIN

Do you take them?

FATHER

No.

BENJAMIN

Is *that* a good idea?

FATHER

Yes, it's a great idea. A fabulous idea. Probably the single best idea I've had in years.

Benjamin takes a joint out from his pocket and attempts to light it. Although perusing the magazine intently, Father is fully aware of Benjamin's actions.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Don't do that.

Benjamin studies his Father studying the Playboy.

BENJAMIN

What? Smoke pot? Are you going to stop me?

FATHER

No. I won't stop you. (beat) I did stupid things, too, when I was a young man.

Benjamin looks closely at the joint then puts it back in his pocket.

BENJAMIN

It helps me to relax.

FATHER

I understand. (re: Playboy) Have you seen this issue?

He hands Ben the magazine.

BENJAMIN

No. Grandpa left it up here for me.

FATHER

Yeah, he did that for me, too, when I was your age.

Benjamin looks closely at the cover.

BENJAMIN

October 1991. That's when I was born.

FATHER

Yes, you were.

Benjamin puts the magazine down.

BENJAMIN

What was it like then?

FATHER

In the world?

BENJAMIN

In *your* world.

FATHER

Well, I... I worked a lot then.

BENJAMIN

For Grandpa.

FATHER

Yes. He was very successful. I managed his business. We worked very hard together.

Father stops talking and begins to reflect. Benjamin needs to pry more, but does so gently.

BENJAMIN

Did you have your big aquarium then?

Father takes the small net out of the bucket on Benjamin's lap.

FATHER

No, but I did have a small fish tank in my office. Like 10gallons. With just a few neons and swordtails in it. You know, pet shop fish. Nothing fancy. A couple of plastic plants and this little model of a pirate's treasure chest.(beat) It was kind of simple, really, maybe even dumb. But pleasing. And... *relaxing*. I found myself staring into it. Quite often.

BENJAMIN

Were you happy then?

FATHER

In many ways.

BENJAMIN

When did the fish tank get bigger?

FATHER

Slowly. Over time. (beat) It got bigger and bigger... as I got smaller... and smaller.

BENJAMIN

You became unhappy.

FATHER

In *many* ways.

BENJAMIN

Were you glad *I* was born?

He hugs Benjamin who puts his head on his father's shoulder.

FATHER

Yes! It was difficult for us to have a family. We had waited many years for a baby. (beat) So when you came along, we were *thrilled*.

BENJAMIN

Mom was happy?

Father lets go of the hug. Benjamin looks at him deeply for a moment, seeking the truth about his Mother.

FATHER

Your Mother? Oh, my God, she was so...

Ethereal music begins to play. She slowly materializes under a tinted special, almost as an apparition, dressed in white with a halo. She is holding an infant. It looks just like Thea at first, but then we see it is Rita, a much younger Rita. Father seems hypnotized and doesn't notice her.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Your Mother was a saint.

The music continues as Benjamin is overwhelmed by this vision and goes to see them. He walks slowly around them and examines her and the baby very closely. He makes a gesture to touch them, but can't. He is clearly confused that his father's vision is of Rita and not Thea. He exits in an angry and frustrated.

Father just sits, seemingly hypnotized. Lights up on Grandpa.

GRANDPA

What the fuck is *this*!?

The music grinds to a halt as if a needle skips across the record. Rita and the baby disappear abruptly. Father comes out of his trance.

FATHER

What?

GRANDPA

Where's Benny?

FATHER

He was here just a minute ago. Asking questions.

GRANDPA

Oh, yeah? Which questions was he askin'?

FATHER

The important ones.

GRANDPA

Well, son, you see, the thing is, he already has the answers... to the *important* questions.

FATHER

But which answers does he have?

GRANDPA

The *real* ones! The *true* answers, God damn it! I told him the truth, so there are no more lies.

FATHER

Sometimes the truth *can* be a lie.

Grandpa reflects on this.

GRANDPA

Now that there's a bit too deep for me, Arty. But I will say this: sometimes you can live with a lie so long that it *becomes* the truth.

FATHER

I'm not talking about time. I'm saying a lie can become the truth immediately. You just have to leave out a few important facts.

GRANDPA

That's true. Like, say, if a history book was mysteriously missin' a chapter or two.

FATHER

Yes. Like that.

GRANDPA

Well, in that case, think of it this way: I'm *pasting* those missing *pages* back into that historical textbook. I'm... I'm *squeezing* those facts right back in there and that ah... that rearranges the picture a might bit.

FATHER

What if those facts don't fit anymore?

GRANDPA

I'll *make* 'em fit, God damn it! (beat) I mean they *are* facts.

Lights up on Mother and Benjamin. She has her arm around him. They stare out into the audience. She holds a pamphlet and he holds a hand-held video game.

FATHER

Then *that* will distort the picture.

GRANDPA

Distort the distortion? Ha!

They look at Mother and Benjamin.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

(re: Mother and Benjamin)

No, no, Son. That will *correct* the current distortion.

Lights down on Grandpa and Father. Mother is showing an uninterested Benjamin some printed information. He is playing the game.

MOTHER

I brought a pamphlet from the Little Flower Rest Home for the Emotionally Impaired. (beat) What do you think - a private room, painted mint green, with a private bathroom and a large window with a wonderful view? Oh, and a fully stocked mini bar.

Benjamin puts the game down and attempts to put his iPod earphones in his ear. She removes them immediately.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Money is *not* an issue! (beat) Well, it shouldn't be anyway. But of course it *is*.

Mother lets Benjamin go. She rips up the pamphlet and throws it like confetti.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

That's why it will have to be a large, dirty public psychiatric hospital with lots of inmates, *err* patients, and the paint will be, hmmm... chipping off in large flakes. There'll be one toilet in the middle of the room, which is certainly convenient, but in terms of privacy, a bit compromised. Oh, and the windows will be small and dirty with rusted bars. (beat) But that said, your father will at least be getting some kind of... *help*. Of course, if I could afford it, like if your Grandfather would cough up some dough, then maybe your Father...

BENJAMIN

(interrupting)

Is Dad *really* crazy?

MOTHER

What do *you* think?

BENJAMIN

Are you going to *kill* Grandpa?

MOTHER

What kind of question is *that*?

BENJAMIN

Are you my mother?

MOTHER

What does that even *mean*?

He looks *very* closely at her.

BENJAMIN

You're not giving me any answers.

MOTHER

I would. If you asked me a *real* question. Something firmly based in, say... *reality*. I mean, you're not making any sense, honey. You've been listening to your father and your grandfather, and they've put some rather silly notions in your head. Clearly they both have mental problems. And I asked you *not* to listen to them. But you *did*. (beat) Look, Benjamin, you *are* at a genetic disadvantage. But please don't have nature *and* nurture issues. I mean, if you share your genome *and* your world view with them, you'll be as lost as they are.

She begins to exit and then turns back to him.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I'm not going to kill your grandfather. But he *will* die. And pretty soon, I imagine. He is a *very* old. I'm sorry. I know you love him. I'm just preparing us for what's inevitable. (beat) And I'm not going to commit your father. But he *does* need help. And he *will* have to get it. Soon. I'm sorry for that, too. I know you love *him*. (beat) I apologize for sounding so cold sometimes. I know I'm often impatient and mean to them. *Incredibly* impatient and *very* mean. You've probably noticed that. But... but we just don't get along, all of us. We don't *like* each other. (beat) And things *are* going to change, Benjamin, but not because I'd like them to. They just *are*.

There is a pause here as they look at each other. Lights up on Grandpa upstage. He is sitting on a couch with a bottle of Jack Daniels on his lap. They don't see him.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I know I haven't been the best mother. Actually, I've done a pretty crappy job. And for that I'm the *most* sorry.

She exits. Grandpa claps loudly in applause.

GRANDPA

Damn, she is good!

BENJAMIN

What?

GRANDPA

You know... those *lines*, that *delivery*. She is just so...

BENJAMIN

Sincere?

GRANDPA

Yeah, exactly! She should get a Tony nomination or somethin'. What a great performance! In a comedy, of course, because that was a God damn joke! (beat) Yeah, she comes off as so *sincere* that you could almost...

BENJAMIN

Believe her?

GRANDPA

Almost, Benny. (beat) *Almost*.

Benjamin hangs his head.

BENJAMIN

I... I'm not...

GRANDPA

Come over here and sit with me. I gotta talk to ya.

Benjamin reluctantly goes and sits with his Grandfather.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

You know, there *is* a part of the story that I didn't tell ya yet.

BENJAMIN

Oh yeah, which part is *that*?

GRANDPA

The beginning, Boy! The *very* beginning!

Lights up on young Thea and Arthur under a tinted special. She is holding a small fishbowl with a goldfish in it. Grandpa offers Benjamin the bottle. He does not take it.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

A shot of courage?

BENJAMIN

Will I need one?

Grandpa does not answer, but his look suggests that Benjamin just might. Their attention turns to Father and Thea.

FATHER

What is this?

THEA

It's a present... for you.

He takes the fishbowl.

FATHER

A goldfish?

THEA

Yes. Do you like it?

He looks carefully at it.

FATHER

It's... it's so beautiful.

They embrace. Benjamin takes the bottle from Grandpa and the lights go out on them. Thea and Father kiss for moment. He almost spills the fish bowl.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Oops! Oh, Jeez!

THEA

Here, let me...

She takes the goldfish from him.

FATHER

Thank you, Thea. Thank you for this present. It's wonderful. I never had a fish before. I'll treasure it.

THEA

What should we call him?

FATHER

A name? I don't know.

THEA

Do you think he'll be okay in this little bowl?

FATHER

He looks healthy and safe. (beat) Actually, he looks *happy*.

THEA

You're right. He does!

FATHER

And he has so little... to be happy about.

THEA

Do you think so? I mean, what does it take for a goldfish to be happy?

FATHER

A couple of rocks and a plastic plant, it seems.

THEA

That's not much.

FATHER

But it might be a palace to a goldfish.

THEA

True!

There is a pause here.

FATHER

What does it take for a *person* to be happy?

THEA

I guess it depends on the person. Some people need more than others. And some, no matter how much they have, will *never* be happy.

FATHER

Why *is* that?

THEA

Maybe some people really don't want to be happy. Maybe they're more comfortable with being *unhappy*. And so they stay unhappy even when they get everything they ever

THEA (CONTD.)

wanted.(beat) Of course, there *are* people who are happy in spite of having nothing. Nothing at all.

FATHER

So maybe happiness is genetic.

THEA

A happy gene?

FATHER

Sure. And some people have it and some don't. I know it's simple, but that could be part of it. You know, a person's innate... *nature*.

THEA

I think it's more about *nurture*. You know, about where a person comes from. About what they're taught. I think ultimately being happy depends on what they believe happiness *is* and what it takes to get it.

FATHER

That makes sense.

THEA

But who really knows? I mean, people are what they are. Some get what they want and some don't. Some are happy and some never will be.

There is a pause here.

FATHER

You're happy, Thea, aren't you?

THEA

Yes. *Very*. (beat) I have everything I've ever wanted.

FATHER

Don't say that.

THEA

Why?

FATHER

Because that's not true.

She caresses his cheek and then kisses him in an attempt to comfort him.

THEA

I have you. That's enough.

FATHER

I... I'm trying the best I can.

THEA

Of course you are. It *will* happen for us. (beat) If it's meant to.

FATHER

I know how much it means to you. I'll do anything I can to make it happen.

THEA

It's not just a *baby* I want, Arthur. It's *your* baby.

Thea hands Father the fishbowl. She begins to exit, but stops and turns to him.

THEA (CONT'D)

Your baby.

Lights out on Thea. Father stands considering the fishbowl. Lights up on the young Rita.

MOTHER

Benjamin.

Father comes out of his daydream.

FATHER

What?

MOTHER

Benjamin.

FATHER

Who's that?

MOTHER

The fish. You need a name for him, right?

Father hands Mother the fishbowl. She looks closely at the goldfish.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Let's call him Benjamin.

FATHER

Benjamin? That doesn't really sound very... *fishy*.

MOTHER

You mean like a name a fish should have?

FATHER

Yes. That's what I mean. Benjamin is a human name. It's the kind of name you would give a... a...

MOTHER

A baby?

FATHER

Yes, a baby.

Mother pauses as she considers her next comment fully.
They both look in the direction Thea exited.

MOTHER

She's *not* happy. You'll *never* make her happy. You *can't*. You know *that*.

FATHER

Her happiness is... not your concern.

MOTHER

But your happiness *is*.

Although he seems reluctant, they embrace and kiss. But he then pulls away and exits. She watches him leave, then holds up the fishbowl, rotating it, looking at the fish from different angles. Lights up on the couch where Father is sitting in between Grandpa and Benjamin.

He is now wearing fish collection attire. All three are watching Mother examining the goldfish. Father then looks at Benjamin in an annoyed fashion, takes the Jack Daniels bottle from him and hands it back to Grandpa. Benjamin and Grandpa look at Father, who gestures to Mother.

FATHER

And *these* are the facts? The... the little truths that you're reinserting into the picture?

GRANDPA

Yes, sir, they most surely are.

Grandpa takes a big tug on the bottle. He is getting drunk. Father gets up and takes a very close look at young Mother who stands like a statue.

FATHER

First of all, she was *never* this good looking.

BENJAMIN

That was *eighteen* years ago.

FATHER

Which is obviously too long ago for Grandpa to remember what, ah, what *really* happened.

GRANDPA

Look, Sonny, this is *not* a documentary. (beat) The dialogue is paraphrased and the blocking ain't entirely accurate. So in that respect I guess you could say this *is* a fictional rendering. You know, like what folks call a... a *docudrama*.(beat) But make no mistake - I am attemptin', in broad strokes, to convey to Benny here, the facts, the... the *truth*, thematically and emotionally.

FATHER

What truth?

GRANDPA

The truth about where he came from... how he got here... *who this crazy bitch is!* (beat)
And I *do* think I am capturing *that* in the telling.

Grandpa takes another slug from the bottle.

FATHER

(re: Mother)

This is revisionist history.

GRANDPA

All history is revisionist. That's already been established.

FATHER

(angry)

This never happened!

Father snaps his fingers and Mother disappears.

BENJAMIN

Which part, Dad? Which part never happened?

GRANDPA

Didn't you have a goldfish named Benjamin?

BENJAMIN

Thea? Was she real?

Father is overwhelmed and cannot answer for a moment.
He delivers these lines as if he is thinking out loud.

FATHER

There *was* a goldfish in a small glass bowl.

GRANDPA

What ever happened to that fish?

FATHER

It got flushed down the toilet.

GRANDPA

Oh, yeah. (beat) *Accidentally.* (beat) By Rita!

BENJAMIN

What about Thea? What happened to *her*?

GRANDPA

The very same thing!

Lights up on Mother wearing a pink apron and holding a cook book and the fish bucket. They turn to look at her as lights go down on them. She addresses the audience directly.

MOTHER

(re: bucket)

How'd I get the fish back? I took them back. *That's how!* (beat) But, seriously, a very important question remains: How To *cook* them? I think I made this fish once years ago, but I forgot the recipe. Did I bake, broil, poach, grill or fry them? *Hmmmm....* (beat) How hard can it be to cook a fish?

Lights up on Benjamin holding a large history textbook.
She asks him this question.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

BENJAMIN

They're *puffer* fish. Chefs in Japan need a special license to cook them. If prepared incorrectly they're full of potent tetrodotoxins.

MOTHER

What does *that* mean?

BENJAMIN

I think it means we're coming to the end of the story.

MOTHER

The climax? The finale? The... the...

BENJAMIN

The part where somebody *kills* somebody else.

MOTHER

Oh, *that* part. (beat) I have no idea what you're talking about, Benjamin. And honestly, I don't have time right now to chit-chat. I've got to get to work on our special family dinner. (beat) Oh, did I tell you we're having lima beans on the side?

BENJAMIN

Did *I* tell *you* that someone ripped three chapters out of my history book?

MOTHER

Three chapters? I am so sorry, honey. Bye-bye!

Lights down on Mother smiling insincerely. Benjamin stands alone looking depressed and confused. Lights up on Father in full fish collecting regalia. He takes off the various elements of his fish accoutrements as this scene progresses. By the end of the play he is dressed normally for the first time.

FATHER

It's symbolic in a metaphorical way.

BENJAMIN

What is?

FATHER

The chapters being torn out of your history book.

BENJAMIN

But why would she tear pages out of my textbook?

FATHER

She didn't. Not literally.

BENJAMIN

Then Grandpa...?

FATHER

No, not really. (beat) *I* did it. (beat) But if you think about it, it *was* all three of us.

BENJAMIN

What? (beat) *Why?*

FATHER

To leave gaping holes in the historical narrative that could be filled with exaggerations or distortions or deceptions or...

BENJAMIN

Or all three?

There is a pause here.

FATHER

I miss her terribly. I always have. That never went away. The aching. Actually, it only got worse. I couldn't get past it. I couldn't find my way around it. I couldn't find my way at all. I... I got lost.

BENJAMIN

I never thought... I mean, there were no indications or any signs that...

FATHER

It would be as if Thea never existed. We all agreed on that. It was... *understood*. *You* would never know about her. (beat) And that was a lot of work. *Emotionally*. But we did it. *For you*. To protect you. From the pain. (beat) All three of us ripped those chapters out of that book.

BENJAMIN

So Mom...

Lights up on Grandpa with the Jack Daniels bottle a table and a very large pistol in his hand. He does three shots of bourbon during Father's next line. They don't notice him.

FATHER

Well, Benny, that's the thing. There are authors of your history book that seem to have their own unique versions of those missing chapters. Very creative and self-serving versions of the story.

BENJAMIN

And Rita...

FATHER

(hesitant)

You see, for you to, well, it's just that...

GRANDPA

Jesus H. Christ, Arty! Just tell yer boy the *God damn* story! He's strong. He can take it.

Grandpa has a coughing attack.

FATHER

(angry)

But what about you, old man? Can *you* take it?

He picks the gun up and begins to load it, fumbling with the bullets because he is weak and drunk.

GRANDPA

Oh, I'll be fine. Don't you worry about me. I *know* the story. I've heard this one before. (beat) Hell, I *wrote* this story!

FATHER

Well, then maybe *you* should be telling it.

GRANDPA

You're right, son. That there is a good idea. Let *me* tell it. Cause there's a few parts you don't know shit about.

BENJAMIN

Is this the beginning of the story or the end?

Grandpa gets up. He is shaky and waves the gun carelessly.

GRANDPA

Both, Benny. *Both*. (beat) But to put it all in some kinda context I have to tell ya somethin' important up front. (beat) I'm dyin'. (beat) And *that* is the truth.

Lights up on Mother in a pink apron and pink chef hat, holding a frying pan and a spatula. She listens closely to Grandpa.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

I have cancer. In my lungs, my brain *and* my colon. I am a dead man walkin'.

She has a big smile.

MOTHER

You're *sick*?

GRANDPA

I am sick as shit, woman! That oughta make yer day! (beat) So, the point is, there's no more pussy-footin' around the truth. And Arty, I want to apologize to you right now for the things I'm gonna say. Cause I've been a *bad* man. I've done some *bad* things. *Crazy* things. (beat) And Benny, pay close attention to this. You'll learn that things and... *people* are not what they seem to be. (beat) And, Rita... you can kiss my *broke* wrinkled ass! 'Cause I don't have a dime in the bank!

She asks this question as an aside to Benjamin and Father.

MOTHER

Is the gun loaded?

Benjamin and Father give big nods in the affirmative.

GRANDPA

Pay attention! (beat) I only slept with three women in my whole life. *Three!* Grandma, God rest her soul, she was the *first* one. A *good* woman. *Too* good for me. She's been gone, what? Twenty years now. Time sure does fly!

He gets lost in a memory for a moment.

BENJAMIN

Who was the second one, Grandpa?

GRANDPA

Huh?

FATHER

The *second* woman.

GRANDPA

Oh, yeah, right. (beat) Well, the second woman I slept with was ah... Rita here.

MOTHER

Oh, that is absurd!

GRANDPA

I agree. It is completely absurd. But it is also true.

MOTHER

That, too.

GRANDPA

Ya see, Benny, yer Dad here wasn't foolin' around with the help. I was!

Grandpa blesses himself.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

Grandma was gone, God rest her soul. And I was livin' herewith yer Dad and Thea and, well, I got pretty darn lonely so one thing led to another and I wound up bangin' the maid.

MOTHER

I beg your pardon!

GRANDPA

What?

MOTHER

I was the *housekeeper!*

GRANDPA

Jesus, woman! With yer skirt up over yer head what's the difference?

MOTHER

Do you have to talk this way in front of Benjamin?

GRANDPA

Of course I do! That's the whole point of this family discussion. We are now, at this very moment, finally telling the truth. Which is, Rita here is not yer natural birthmother. Yer dad, of course, did what he thought was the right thing. He married her so you would have a mom. But they was never a real husband and wife. There ain't a molecule of romance between 'em. It was just a practical arrangement. She got to take care of you, in place of Thea. And I got to poke her every once in a while, until my noodle gave out. *And* yer dad here got to hide in a very large goldfish bowl for almost two decades, while he nursed a broken heart that, well, could never quite heal.

He stops here, in a smug fashion, as if he is done with the story.

MOTHER

And...

GRANDPA

And what?

FATHER

And the third woman you slept with, who was that?

Tense silence for a moment. One filled with Grandpa's regret and remorse.

GRANDPA

I know *you* know who that was. It's been... *she's* been the real subject of every conversation in this house for eighteen years!

FATHER

You're going to hell.

GRANDPA

Sooner than ya think!

FATHER

You seem proud of it.

GRANDPA

I ain't proud of what I done. It was a mistake. I was not usin' my best judgement. I *know* that. But I know somethin' else, too: there is certainly a good side to it. A brilliant side. You just can't see that. Ya never could think about it in positive terms. That's yer problem, son! If you could get yer head outta that fish tank fer two seconds you'd see things more clearly!

FATHER

Tell me... tell me why it was a good thing.

GRANDPA

Oh, *Jesus Christ*, Arty! Look how it turned out. I mean look what we got. We got Benny Boy here! Can't you see that it made sense? It was clearly part of the Divine Plan!

BENJAMIN

I'm afraid to ask, but what are you guys talking about?

GRANDPA

Jesus, Benny, do I have to draw you a God damn picture?

FATHER

Your mom, Ben. We're talking about Thea.

MOTHER

It's kind of a good news - bad news thing, Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

What's the bad news?

MOTHER

Well, during one of his drunken binges the Old Man raped Thea when your Dad was at work one day.

Benjamin takes a moment to assimilate this.

BENJAMIN

What's the good news?

MOTHER

That event helped resolve your parents' fertility issue. Thea got pregnant. You see, Benjamin, your father here is sterile.

GRANDPA

Shootin' blanks! And we all knew it!

BENJAMIN

I'm... *confused*.

GRANDPA

(to Benjamin)

Now don't tell me that somehow, in some way, deep in yer heart of hearts, that you didn't know this already.

BENJAMIN

Know *what*?

GRANDPA

That I'm yer Daddy, boy! Yer natural, biological birth Daddy. I ain't yer Grandpa! Which means I share twice as many genes with you as you thought! Fifty percent of yer genome! You couldn't tell?

Benjamin points at Mother and then Father.

BENJAMIN

You're not my mother. And you're not my father.

GRANDPA

Yer catchin' on, Benny! Things are *never* what they seem to be. And it *can* be pretty disappointin', I know. But ya got courage, boy. You got a pair o' balls like yer ol' man. And that would be *me*.(beat) In time it will all seem less confusin'. It'll all make sense. And you'll... forgive me.

MOTHER

(crying)

And... and I hope that you will forgive me, too, Benjamin.

She uses the spatula as a big spoon and takes a few gulps of the fish from the frying pan. Lights slowly fade on her.

BENJAMIN

But Mom, don't eat... that's... I... I love you.

She is gone. Grandpa coughs harshly.

GRANDPA

How can she *eat* at a time like this? (beat) Look, I'm sorry, Benny. I'm sorry for the things I done wrong in this life. But things are the way they are. And that ain't so bad.(beat) Oh, and I *don't* have a dime in the bank... but there's shit load o' cash in that old trunk up in the attic. And I left all the important papers on the kitchen table fer you two. Because... I love you both. Very much. (beat) So that's it for me. *This* is the end of the story. The part where somebody kills somebody. Although, I must say, it's *not* exactly how I thought it would go.

Grandpa turns to face the audience and says a prayer.

GRANDPA (CONT'D)

I thank the Almighty for such a good go at things. Givin' mea good wife, these two good boys, a good livin' and mostly fer forgivin' me my trespasses. Which I hope You do consider.(beat) And fer Rita, too. I think she meant well. *Sometimes*.

He puts the large pistol to his head. Lights slowly fade on him.

BENJAMIN

But Grandpa, don't... that's... I... I love you.

He is gone. Then we hear a loud gunshot. Benjamin sobs for a moment. Arthur embraces him.

FATHER

Ben. Listen to me, Ben. I have a few things to say to you. Important things.

Benjamin looks up and stops crying.

FATHER (CONT'D)

First thing is that I...

Father hands Benjamin something.

BENJAMIN

What are these?

FATHER

They're Grandpa's bullets. I switched them. So *he's* the one shooting blanks now.

BENJAMIN

Really?

FATHER

Of course, I imagine, he'll be deaf in his right ear for the rest of his life. But he'll be fine.

BENJAMIN

Do you think he has cancer?

FATHER

No, I don't. Not at all.

BENJAMIN

Me, neither. (beat) I'll buy him some cough medicine.

FATHER

And your Mother, *Rita*...

BENJAMIN

She just ate...

FATHER

(interrupting)

The fish. Those three fish. I wanted to tell you that, too. They weren't Japanese puffer fish. They were American blowfish. You know, the same fish family, they *look* the same, but they're not poisonous. Actually, they're quite tasty! She'll be fine, too.

Benjamin reflects for a moment. Father has his arm around him.

BENJAMIN

Things *aren't* what they seem.

FATHER

You're right.(beat) The Old Man isn't the selfish bastard he seems to be and Thea wasn't a saint. She wanted a baby so badly that she slept with him to get pregnant. There was no rape. And I knew about it. I agreed to it. It was *my* idea. Because I wanted her to be happy. And she was. So was I. Grandpa was set up to do a job that he did very well. Maybe I should tell him. And Rita.

BENJAMIN

I think you should. (beat) How did Thea die?

FATHER

She fell down the steps when you were two months old. There was a broom she tripped over and...

BENJAMIN

And Grandpa blamed Rita?

FATHER

Yup. But then he blamed her for everything. They had kind of a love/hate relationship. Still do.

BENJAMIN

How are we going to live with them now?

FATHER

I think it will be alright. The social hierarchy will be rearranged, of course. But I think there will be an adjustment period. For all of us. We'll be fine. They sit for a moment and Benjamin gets up to exit.

FATHER (CONT'D)

Where are you going? Your room?

Benjamin looks deeply at Father for a moment.

BENJAMIN

No. (beat) I'm going to the attic. Want to come?

FATHER

I sure do.

Father gets up and they exit together.

END OF PLAY

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