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### The Velvet Ditch

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#### Recommended Citation

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The Velvet Ditch

by

Kate Leslie

B.A. in Theatre Arts, University of the South  
2008

Presented in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting

Hollins University  
Roanoke, VA  
May, 2022

Director of Thesis:

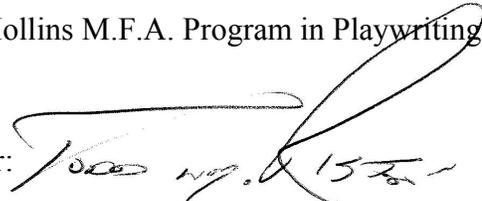


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*This is the party house. The door's always open.*

Fiona finds herself living in her hometown after graduating from college. So she spends her weekends like everyone else, attending late night house parties after all the bars shut down. But no matter how much fun each party might be, Fiona eventually must face her past and her future.

A play about nostalgia and what it feels like to be lost.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Kate Leslie is an M.F.A. Playwriting candidate at Hollins University. She currently works in Chicago as a director, playwright, and teaching artist. Her ten minute play, *Ashes to Dust*, was a national finalist for the Gary Garrison Award at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in 2019. In 2020, her full length play *The Love Code* received the David L. Shelton Award as well the National Partners of the American Theatre Playwriting award.

CHARACTERS

FIONA MCDOWELL	Hometown girl; went away to college (22 - 28)
CHARLIE HARRISON	Fiona's ex boyfriend; a hometown hot shot(22 -28)
MARY JO	Fiona's best hometown friend (22 - 28)
DUKE	Charlie's roommate and friend. down to party (22 - 28)
PARTY CHORUS:	An ensemble of actors who step in and out of different characters as needed. They are always present at the party to provide a party atmosphere unless otherwise indicated. Characters played by the Party Chorus are listed below, although you may choose to add additional characters to the Party Chorus.
	WILLOW/AMBER
	TOMMY/BURKE
	STEVEN
	JAMIE/ ROBERT
	ANNABELLE/ KENDRA
	NATALIE/ SARAH JANE

## SETTING

Multiple house parties in a small college town in Mississippi.

The kind of town where everybody knows almost everybody, and the bars are closed on Sunday.

## TIME

A number of parties taking place from Spring 2008 to Spring 2014

### A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

This play takes place at a party. Many scenes are heightened - stay away from realism.

// - indicates when the next line should start speaking.

While I have indicated some specific overlaps in the text, I encourage you to find the natural and casual rhythms of conversation at the party. Things should accelerate from moment one

I have not indicated race/ethnicity for these characters. The Mississippi I grew up in was diverse, and I would expect the cast of this play to reflect that. My hope would be that at least 50% of the cast would be BIPOC.

The sounds of a Mississippi summer night. Crickets and cicadas roar. The stage is illuminated by fireflies.

Fiona enters with an empty mason jar. She removes the lid and looks through the holes she's already punched there.

She catches a firefly in her mason jar and closes the lid.

Fiona is lost in a memory. The company begin to enter - slowly at first. Their voices competing with the cicadas.

MARY JO

We should late night!

NATALIE

Duke - where we goin'?

DUKE

Late night at my place! Tell everybody.

WILLOW

I'll bring tequila.

STEVEN

Late night!

DUKE

Who's doing the beer run?

JAMIE

Last call!

Fiona takes her mason jar and finds a place to set it onstage.

TOMMY

I'll text Charlie.

ANNABELLE

I gotta close out my tab!

WILLOW

Mary Jo, you're coming, right?

MARY JO

Hell yeah!

Mary Jo pulls out a flip phone from 2007.

MARY JO

*(while texting)* Late night at Duke's! You should come!!

Fiona's cell phone beeps.

FIONA

Late night?

The lights snap into focus. The fireflies are gone.

Fiona stands in the middle of a party.

Now we are in Duke's living room - the living room of guys in their early 20s. It's disgusting.

DUKE

Fiona! What are you doing here?

FIONA

Hey *(they hug)* Mary Jo texted and said to come by - I knocked on the door // but I guess no one heard ...

DUKE

It's the party house! The door's always open.

STEVEN

*(Interjecting from across the room)* Late night!

DUKE

*(In response to Steven)* Late night!

FIONA

I thought maybe ... you wouldn't want me to come because --

DUKE

What? No way. You want// a drink?

FIONA

But is Charlie here?

DUKE

He's doing a beer run.

FIONA

Cool. *(beat)* ... I just don't want things to get like ... weird // cause I'm here ...

DUKE

No, no. You're good! Not weird.

Mary Jo comes forward and hugs Fiona aggressively.

	MARY JO
Fi Fi! You're here!	
	FIONA
I've been looking // for you ...	
	MARY JO
Duke look who's here!!	
	DUKE
I // can see.	
	MARY JO
Fiona has returned! ( <i>to Fiona</i> ) Back for a week and I've barely seen you. I was starting to think you were ignoring me// me or something ...	
	FIONA
I'm not // ignoring you ...	
	DUKE
Whoa. You're back-back? Like to to live?	
	FIONA
For the summer. I have an internship.	
	MARY JO
She's working with Lindsay's dad at Magnolia publishing.	
	DUKE
This town has a publishing company?	
	FIONA
A very small one.	
	DUKE
Fancy.	
	MARY JO
This summer is going to be amazing. Easy jobs. Fiona is here. We graduated!! // I'm so over school.	
	DUKE
Class of 2008.	
	FIONA
Woo!	

Willow comes forward with shot glasses.

WILLOW  
*(to Fiona)* Want a shot?

FIONA  
 I'm good ...

MARY JO  
 Don't be a pussy, Fiona!

WILLOW  
 Yeah, don't be a pussy, Fiona. Sorry. We just met - I don't usually yell pussy at a stranger. *(She pours Fiona's shot.)* Just have one.

MARY JO  
*(to Willow)* Fiona went to high school with us.

WILLOW  
*(as she pours)* I'm Willow.

FIONA  
 Do you have any limes?

DUKE  
 Maybe ... // in the kitchen.

WILLOW  
 Don't need 'em.

MARY JO  
 Eventually you have to learn how to do shots.

FIONA  
 I've taken shots // before.

MARY JO  
 Really?

FIONA  
 Everyone does limes with tequila. That's like, how you shoot tequila.

WILLOW  
 Just open your throat - toss it back.

Mary Jo raises a shot glass to toast Fiona.

MARY JO  
 You're done with school - we have to celebrate.

DUKE

Fuck yeah.

WILLOW

Fuck yeah!

They all drink. Fiona tries to hide a sour face.

DUKE

*(Passing Fiona his beer)* Here. Take a sip.

MARY JO

You're so bad at that!

FIONA

I have a sensitive gag reflex.

MARY JO

That's a real shame.

WILLOW

*(To Fiona)* You just graduated?

FIONA

From Northwestern.

WILLOW

In Senatobia?

FIONA

Northwestern University. It's outside of Chicago.

MARY JO

Fiona's a real smartypants.

WILLOW

Chicago. That's far.

MARY JO

So far! But she's back. Best friends since the third grade. Right here.

WILLOW

That's sweet.

MARY JO

It's gonna be so great. Home for the whole summer. Just like high school.

DUKE

Better than high school.

WILLOW

*(to Fiona)* What happens at the end of the summer?

MARY JO

I'll get a teaching job or something - I'll be, like the best third grade teacher in town. And Fiona will go off and do something cool and interesting and I'll always come to visit, right.

FIONA

Yeah.

MARY JO

Let's do another shot!

WILLOW

*(pouring)* On it!

FIONA

I don't think I can drink more tequila.

DUKE

We'll find you something else.

The sound of a car pulling up outside.

STEVEN

Car! Car!

DUKE

*(overlapping)* Shhh--shhh--shhh!

The music cuts off.

ANNABELLE

I thought your neighbors // were cool?

STEVEN

Is it the cops?

WILLOW

If you're under 21 - follow me to the kitchen!

Willow and a few members of the party chorus exit.

MARY JO

You don't really think it's the cops, do you?

TOMMY

They're coming to the door.

Everybody waits in tense silence.

Charlie enters holding two cases of beer.

CHARLIE

Who killed the party?

DUKE

Look who decided // to show up!

ANNABELLE

We thought you were the cops.

PARTY CHORUS

Hey! Charlie! (*ad lib, etc.*)

CHARLIE

You said we needed beer!

DUKE

That was like an hour ago.

CHARLIE

After midnight. I had to drive to the next county.

TOMMY

You better have ice.

CHARLIE

I got you.

Willow and other members of the party chorus enter with empty coolers.

Tommy grabs ice from off stage.

MARY JO

Charlie, look who's here!

Charlie sees Fiona.

Time stops. The only sound is Fiona's heartbeat.

Slowly, sounds of the party begin to layer on top of Fiona's heartbeat.

Tommy throws a bag of ice on the floor and creates a rhythm. Someone else drums on a cooler. Solo cups slap a table. The party chorus stomps their feet.

The rhythm continues to build until --

CHARLIE

Hey Fiona.

Time restores to normal. Music plays.

Fiona turns to Tommy.

FIONA

Do you have cigarettes?

TOMMY

Yeah...

FIONA

Can I bum one?

TOMMY

Okay...

Fiona and Tommy move away from the group.

CHARLIE

Where's the music?

The music comes on and party continues.

Tommy and Fiona are now on the porch outside the party.

Tommy hands Fiona a cigarette.

FIONA

Thanks. I just ... (*a lie*) ran out.

TOMMY

Sure thing.

FIONA

I'm Fiona.

TOMMY

Tommy. But I think we've met before.

FIONA

Maybe... I went to high school with Mary Jo and Duke -

TOMMY

And Charlie?

FIONA

Yeah...

A split scene. Inside the party.

DUKE

Took you long enough!

CHARLIE

Stop complaining.

JAMIE

Hey Duke! I put a couple a beers in the freezer to get cold faster. Don't let me forget!

On the porch.

TOMMY

Uh oh. Did I stick my foot in my mouth? I do that sometimes.

FIONA

It's fine. Ancient history.

TOMMY

High school sweethearts?

FIONA

We broke up a while ago... You know Charlie?

TOMMY

Everyone knows Charlie. We're both theatre majors //

FIONA

Oh yeah! I **do** know you!

TOMMY

*(continuous)* that's how I met him //

FIONA

Mercutio! You were Mercutio. Two years ago? You were really good.

Inside the party.

STEVEN

How come they say it's a dry county if they still sell booze?

JAMIE

Do they call it // a dry county?

DUKE

They can sell it - just not cold.

STEVEN

So, it's just a room temperature county?

JAMIE

So dumb. People in this town love to drink.

CHARLIE

*(mocking)* Except on Sunday! Sundays are for church. And it's officially *(looking at his watch)* 12:45 so ... Praise the Lord.

He raises his drink.

DUKE

Amen.

On the porch.

TOMMY

Are you a theatre major, too?

FIONA

No way. I haven't been in a play since high school. I just graduated. English major.

TOMMY

Oooh. Are you a writer?

FIONA

Maybe ... We'll see. My dad wanted me to study accounting or something. But I insisted on English. I'll be poor forever.

TOMMY

Hello! I'm studying acting.

FIONA

But you're really good ...

TOMMY

You're sweet.

Inside the party.

DUKE

Isn't Sunday the day of rest? If you ask me, it's the perfect day to sit back, crack open a Bud, and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

CHARLIE

What 'labor' have you ever done?

DUKE

It's not easy being me.

JAMIE

*(caressing the case of beer)* And God saw it. And God said 'it was good'.

On the porch.

FIONA

You taking classes this summer?

TOMMY

Nah. But I'll be around. It's better than going back home.

FIONA

I get that.

Inside the party.

JAMIE

No way. Jesus liked to drink **wine**.

Mary Jo interrupts them.

MARY JO

Where did Fiona go?

CHARLIE

Maybe she left.

MARY JO

Did you say something?

CHARLIE

No.

Mary Jo rolls her eyes and leaves.

CHARLIE

Did you know she was coming?

DUKE

Fiona? She's in town for the summer.

On the porch. Mary Jo finds Tommy and Fiona.

MARY JO  
Fi-Fi, I've been lookin for you!

TOMMY  
She's a big girl.

MARY JO  
Tom - Tom - Tommy Tom! (*She hugs him forcefully.*) I didn't know you were here!

TOMMY  
Where else would I be? I'm always here.

MARY JO  
Isn't Fiona the best?

TOMMY  
Uh huh. She was just about to fill me in on the Charlie drama.

FIONA  
No, I don't want to talk about him.

TOMMY  
Fine. Just tell me if he's a good kisser or not.

MARY JO  
Tommy! Don't be weird.

TOMMY  
I just want some insider info. That boy is so-cute but in a kinda dirty wannabe-hippie sorta way.

MARY JO  
And he's straight.

TOMMY  
Are we sure about that?

In the party.

NATALIE  
Steven - I can't take anymore of this sad white boy music.

STEVEN  
It's not sad white // boy music.

NATALIE  
You're killing the party!

CHARLIE

Steven, we've talked about this. Step aside young ones. I'll DJ.

Charlie pulls an iPod out of his pocket and changes the song.

Natalie and Annabelle start to dance.

On the porch.

TOMMY

What if I text Claire and ask. (*looking through his phone*) Claire, darling, would you say Charlie is 100% straight or is there still hope ...

MARY JO

Don't text her. They broke up.

TOMMY

Says who?

MARY JO

She was ready to move to New York and since he has to ... (*she cuts herself off*)

FIONA

He has to what?

MARY JO

I always thought she was kind of a bitch.

TOMMY

Shade! What'd she do to you?

MARY JO

She was kinda snooty. Like that one time we were all at Rosie's... it was Thursday // PBR and a shot of whiskey. Four dollars!

TOMMY

Yes! Love Rosie's on Thursdays!

MARY JO

And Claire ordered a glass of **red wine**. Like, who do you think you are?

FIONA

You don't drink wine?

MARY JO

No, I do// Sometimes. But like, not at Rosie's.

TOMMY  
For the right occasion.

MARY JO  
But like, not at Rosie's.

TOMMY  
Exactly.

Inside the party, a new song plays.

TOMMY  
Y'all hear that! This is my jam!! Let's go.

Tommy moves inside the party.

The party chorus cheers.

MARY JO  
Come dance with me.

FIONA  
Maybe I should // get going

MARY JO  
Uh uh. No way. // you are not leaving

FIONA  
But it's weird that I'm here, right? Did you see how he was looking at me?

MARY JO  
Fuck him! You're my best friend! I will not let him ruin our fun.

Mary Jo drags Fiona by the hand back into the party.

Music volume increases. The Chorus sways.

Everyone dances except Fiona. She is surrounded by party chaos.

After a moment, Mary Jo sees Fiona isn't dancing.

FIONA  
I didn't know it was a dance party.

MARY JO  
It just happens sometimes. Come on!

FIONA

Nah!

MARY JO

Just start dancing - Let's bust a move.

FIONA

Did you just say 'bust a move'?

MARY JO

I sure did.

Fiona dances stiffly. She feels inhibited by everyone around her, even though no one is looking at her.

MARY JO

What's going on with your shoulders?

FIONA

I dunno. That's just my shoulders. This is how they look.

MARY JO

ohmygod. Relax. Re. Lax.

FIONA

I suck at this.

MARY JO

Then you need another drink. (*shouting*) Duke!

Duke appears with a shot.

Fiona takes it.

The music gets louder. Everybody dances.

For one whole minute the ensemble live inside of the song. There is only bass, drums, guitar, and vocals. And dancing.

As the group moves, Fiona finds herself face to face with Charlie as others dance around them.

Time stops. The only sound is Fiona's heartbeat.

Charlie and Fiona look at each other.

CHARLIE

(*Shouting as if the music is still playing*) I THOUGHT MAYBE YOU LEFT.

I'm here. FIONA

I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE IN TOWN. CHARLIE

I miss you. FIONA

WHAT? CHARLIE

I think about you. FIONA

I CAN'T HEAR YOU! THE MUSIC -- CHARLIE

I think I still love you. FIONA

YOU WANT A BEER? THERE'S MORE IN THE COOLER! CHARLIE

Time restores and the music is back.

Fiona's heartbeat is gone.

(*shouting and nodding*) THANKS! FIONA

Fiona crosses to the cooler to get a beer while everyone dances.

Fireflies appear above the ensemble. Only Fiona can see them. The sound of crickets and cicadas compete with the dance music.

The song ends. Everyone collapses exhausted.

It's so hot. NATALIE

Open a window. STEVEN

No! You'll let the cold air out. DUKE

MARY JO

I'm so sweaty.

ANNABELLE

Mississippi heat in July is basically a crime.

WILLOW

I need a fan.

FIONA

It really feels like summer.

Fiona is lost in a memory.

Fiona watches the fireflies. She stands on the cooler to get a better look. She tries to catch one in her hand.

Charlie approaches Fiona.

CHARLIE

What are you doing?

FIONA

Tryin' to catch a lightning bug. (*She tries again. Nothing*) Did you ever do that? Like when you were little?

CHARLIE

I would put 'em in a mason jar.

FIONA

Me too.

CHARLIE

And sometimes, I would squish them and wipe that glowy goo on my shirt //

FIONA

Eewww!

CHARLIE

Or my face // so I could glow in the dark.

FIONA

That's gross. (*beat*) I liked to hold them in my hands - watch the light glow between my fingers. Like some kind of magic no one knew that I had. But I always let them go. Squishing them seems kinda cruel.

CHARLIE

They're just bugs. And I didn't squish all of them.

FIONA

*(teasing)* So just occasionally cruel?

CHARLIE

Right. Special occasions.

They both sit on the cooler.

FIONA

I used to be better at catching them.

CHARLIE

Maybe there's less of them now.

FIONA

You gonna miss me?

CHARLIE

Huh?

FIONA

When I'm back at school.

CHARLIE

Of course. Why would you ask that?

FIONA

*(she shrugs)* Why is it this hot at night?

CHARLIE

Mississippi summer.

FIONA

Sometimes I forget.

CHARLIE

What else do you forget? When you're not here.

FIONA

Don't be like that.

They kiss.

CHARLIE

I wish you could stay.

FIONA

Me too.

CHARLIE

You should. Stay. Transfer here. Finish school // with me.

FIONA

I can't do that.

CHARLIE

I never see you. I miss you.

FIONA

I miss you, too. (*beat*) You could visit me more.

CHARLIE

I have rehearsals.

FIONA

(*teasing*) Romeo, Romeo!- you're a leading // man now.

CHARLIE

Shut up.

FIONA

Wherefore art thou Romeo?

A beat. The sound of cicadas.

FIONA

Two more years. Then no more distance. We can go anywhere. New York, L.A., Atlanta, Oregon.

CHARLIE

What's in Oregon?

FIONA

I don't know, but we could find out.

CHARLIE

Question.

FIONA

Answer.

CHARLIE

You think we'll ever live here?

FIONA

Here? (*she thinks*) Maybe. But only after we've gone other places - only when we're ready to settle down.

Right. CHARLIE

First, we should have some adventures. FIONA

I like the sound of that. CHARLIE

Beat.

Hey Charlie ... I love you. FIONA

What? CHARLIE

I love you. FIONA

The fireflies disappear. Charlie rejoins the party.

Charlie? FIONA

The party chorus transforms.

Drinking games, people! Let's go. STEVEN

It's late. Let's call it. NATALIE

No way. It's not late. CHARLIE

(yelling) Fiona! Come over. We're fixing to play a drinking games. MARY JO

I don't know... FIONA

Uh uh - stop that. TOMMY

Everybody is playing - you too, Natalie!! DUKE

Duke grabs Natalie's hand.

JAMIE

Grab some beers.

Mary Jo whispers to Tommy.

MARY JO

*(re: Duke and Natalie)* Is that a thing?

TOMMY

I guess it is now.

MARY JO

Fi-fi! Will you bring me a beer.

Fiona grabs two beers from the cooler and joins the group.

TOMMY

Yay! Fiona's playing.

FIONA

When in Rome ...

MARY JO

Never have I ever ...

JAMIE

Fingers up!

NATALIE

I don't like this game!

DUKE

It's just for fun.

MARY JO

Okayokayokay! I'm going first. Never have I ever ... lived in Chicago.

FIONA

I mean, technically I lived // in Evanston.

MARY JO

I MEAN Evanston!

FIONA

Wow, okay.

Fiona drinks and puts a finger down.

MARY JO

It's only cause I love you.

ANNABELLE

Never have I ever ... gone skinny dipping!

DUKE

You should try it some time.

A few people drink and put fingers down.

TOMMY

Um... Never have I ever ... um ....

MARY JO

Come on, Tomtom!

TOMMY

I'm thinking! Don't put pressure on me.

JAMIE

You're taking too long. Never have I ever had my ears pierced.

All the women except Fiona drink.

JAMIE

Fiona ... you gotta drink.

CHARLIE

No, Her ears aren't pierced.

TOMMY

Really?

FIONA

I just never got them pierced. Is that weird?

MARY JO

Yep - you're a freak. Steven, your turn.

STEVEN

Never have I ever done cocaine.

A few people drink and put down fingers.

WILLOW

Never have I ever had sex in the kitchen.

CHARLIE

This kitchen? Or any kitchen?

WILLOW

Dealers' choice.

Charlie, Annabelle, and Duke drink and put fingers down.

DUKE

Never have I ever worked at Magnolia publishing.

Fiona puts a finger down.

TOMMY

People are really coming for you tonight, Fi.

FIONA

Never have I ever gotten my truck stuck in the mud at the lake!

DUKE

One time!

FIONA

Drink!

PARTY CHORUS

Drink!

Duke drinks and puts a finger down.

NATALIE

Never have I ever been in a Shakespeare play.

CHARLIE

Come on!

NATALIE

All right theatre people - drink! You too, Romeo.

TOMMY

It's just a game, Charlie.

Charlie, Willow and Tommy drink and put fingers down.

TOMMY

Never have I ever had a threesome.

Willow drinks and puts a finger down. Everyone reacts.

You are all prudes. WILLOW  
  
 Shhh! Shh! Never have I ever had a sister. CHARLIE  
  
 LAME! Come on. Don't hold back!! DUKE  
  
Fiona and a few other party chorus drink.  
Time begins to speed up.  
  
 Never have // I ever been ... MARY JO  
  
 Never have // I ever had ... ANNABELLE  
  
 Never have // I ever seen ... CHARLIE  
  
 Never have I // Never have I ... STEVEN  
  
 Shoplifted! WILLOW  
  
 Given a blow job! DUKE  
  
 Never have // I ever FIONA  
  
 I have never, never ... TOMMY  
  
 Had sex in a pool! NATALIE  
  
 Had sex in a hot tu! JAMIE  
  
 Had sex in public! MARY JO  
  
 Never have I ever ... ANNABELLE

Never have I ... CHARLIE

Been in a car accident. STEVEN

Blacked out. WILLOW

Walked in on my parents having sex! DUKE

Everyone reacts.

Um .... Never have I ever FIONA

Never never TOMMY

I Never EVER NATALIE

If I ever -- JAMIE

Never have, never will -- MARY JO

Never ever, ever -- ANNBELLE

Never have I ever been in love. CHARLIE

The game stops. Fiona has only one finger left.

The sound of Fiona's heartbeat.

I didn't hear what you said. FIONA

It was dumb - let me do another one -- CHARLIE

No, what did you say? FIONA

CHARLIE

Never have I ever been in love.

Fiona's heartbeat gets louder. Everyone is watching her.

She drinks and puts her finger down.

Heartbeat sound stops.

FIONA

I guess I lose.

A tense beat.

DUKE

But it's a drinking game - so everybody wins!

PARTY CHORUS

Yeah!

ANNABELLE

Time for a new game.

The scene transforms. The same people, a different party.

Fiona moves away from the party to the porch.

Fiona she pulls cigarettes out of her pocket and lights one.

The ensemble plays a drinking game with a deck of cards.

WILLOW

Okay, the name of the game is Captain Asshole. Where's the cards?

CHARLIE

Here.

Charlie tosses a deck of cards to Willow. She shuffles.

Mary Jo leaves the party to join Fiona on the porch.

MARY JO

Smoking? Without me? ... *(she gestures towards the cigarette Fiona has)*

FIONA

You know I smoke sometimes.

MARY JO

I didn't think you like, bought your own.

FIONA

Well, I do.

MARY JO

Okay, Joe Cool. Give me one. (*beat*) You owe me for like, years of bumming cigarettes to you.

Fiona gives Mary Jo a cigarette.

In the party Natalie flips over a card.

NATALIE

Four! Whores! Drink up, ladies.

The party chorus women drink.

TOMMY

(*choosing a card*) Nine. I can never // remember what that is

WILLOW

Truth or Dare! Truth or Dare!

TOMMY

I hate that one.

STEVEN

You gotta do it.

TOMMY

Okay .... Steven // Truth or Dare?

On the porch.

MARY JO

Remember when we used to just ride around // and complain about guys

FIONA

Sure. Yep.

MARY JO

(*continuous*) And I would give you my cigarettes and we would watch the little orange embers on the end blow away out the window.

FIONA

(*looking at her cigarette*) It kinda looked like a sparkler or something. Like the Fourth of July.

MARY JO

Yeah.

FIONA

*(studying her cigarette)* You can't see it in the daylight. Just gray ash.

A beat.

In the party.

JAMIE

*(pulling a new card)* That's an Ace! New Captain Asshole.

The Party chorus groans.

ANNABELLE

You're the worst.

JAMIE

Just for that - everyone drink!!

TOMMY

Look at what power has done to you.

JAMIE

Drink, Tommy!

The Party chorus all drink.

FIONA

Do you ever think about high school?

MARY JO

Like what?

FIONA

Like how we used to just drive around? Like that's what we did // for fun

MARY JO

We did other things.

FIONA

Like what?

MARY JO

Um ... we hung out in the Jitney parking lot, thank you very much.

FIONA

Parking lots! The lake. The spot. We were so cool.

MARY JO

We've really moved on from that.

In the party.

JAMIE

Whose turn is it?

DUKE

My turn, my turn.

He chooses a card.

On the porch, Mary Jo and Fiona are laughing at a story.

FIONA

Your face. I'll never forget your face!

MARY JO

You just let me dance with a stranger!

FIONA

How would I know him? We were at some random bar?

MARY JO

I don't know ... I thought you knew him.

FIONA

How? How would I know him?

MARY JO

And then he dipped me!

FIONA

Oh my god! The dip. Your eyes // were so big!

MARY JO

Like who fuckin' does that? (*reliving the dip*) Whoop! My life flashed before my eyes.

They keep laughing

In the party, Charlie gestures to Duke for a smoke. They get up from the game.

NATALIE

(*flips over a card*) Eight that's waterfalls!

TOMMY  
*(to Charlie)* Where you goin'?

DUKE  
 We'll be back!

JAMIE  
 You heard her! Waterfalls!

The chorus stands up and chug their beers.

On the porch.

FIONA  
 But I **did** rescue you!

MARY JO  
 Nuh-uh. I rescued myself!!

FIONA  
 I helped!

Charlie and Duke enter the porch.

DUKE  
 Hey.

Duke lights another joint. Charlie has a cigarette.

CHARLIE  
 Fiona McDowell! Are you smoking?? Your mother was right - we are a terrible influence.

FIONA  
 You've seen me smoke before.

CHARLIE  
 I don't think so.

FIONA  
 Well, things change.

MARY JO  
 She's a grown ass woman. She can do what she likes!

CHARLIE  
 I know, I know. I just meant - I'm just surprised.

In the party, Steven flips a card over.

STEVEN

My choice. And I say ... Tommy! You have to drink.

TOMMY

Y'all are pickin' on me!

JAMIE

Do it!

On the porch.

DUKE

What were you two laughing about?

MARY JO

When I went to visit Fiona in Chicago.

CHARLIE

When was that?

MARY JO

Before Thanksgiving. *(to Fiona)* We should go back!

FIONA

I don't live there // anymore

MARY JO

But you'll go back. Don't you think?

FIONA

I dunno.

MARY JO

Or maybe you'll go somewhere else - like San Francisco or Seattle //

CHARLIE

Get out and stay out.

MARY JO

San Diego or ... South Carolina ... someplace that starts with S ...

DUKE

Charlie is counting the hours until his escape.

FIONA

You're done with school. Just go.

CHARLIE

... I need more credits. I have another semester. At least.

DUKE

*(offering a high five)* That's right. Super seniors!

FIONA

Oh, I didn't know ...

MARY JO

Ohmygod! Fiona! Idea!! Let's move to Chicago. Together! // You and me.

DUKE

Whatcha gonna do in Chicago?

MARY JO

Well... I do have a teaching certificate. People need teachers. There are schools // everywhere ...

CHARLIE

There are restaurants everywhere.

FIONA

What about the snow?

MARY JO

Ohmygod, the snow! // The snow!

DUKE

Yeah, it gets cold up there.

MARY JO

Duke, you don't even know! When I was there - it was November, right? And I was not prepared // not at all

FIONA

I told her to pack a coat.

MARY JO

Yeah, well, I learned my lesson, didn't I? It was freezing // absolutely freezing.

CHARLIE

You got that Mississippi // blood, girl.

In the party. Annabelle flips a card over.

ANNABELLE

Social! Cups up.

The party Chorus raises their solo cups.

ANNABELLE

To ... late nights at Duke's.

PARTY CHORUS

Late nights!

They all touch their cups to the table then drink.

NATALIE

Wait, where is Duke?

On the porch.

MARY JO

We were out one night - two a.m. on Saturday - well, technically Sunday! **Sunday morning!** // I could not believe it.

CHARLIE

*(mocking)* You mean you drank on the Lord's day?

DUKE

*(teasing)* I hope you went home and said your prayers!

MARY JO

You're interrupting my story! Anyway, Fi and I are out late at this bar, it's like 2 am // on Saturday ... wait, I said that.

FIONA

And Mary Jo was dancing with a really handsome guy!

MARY JO

Shut up! I'm talking about after. So, we're walking to the train and //

FIONA

No - we were walking to IHOP!

MARY JO

Right! The IHOP. I wish we had an IHOP.

DUKE

I fucking love // pancakes.

MARY JO

And it started snowing. SNOWING! In **November**. Like these big fat flakes, and my feet got so wet. It snowed sooo much.

FIONA

It was just a few inches.

MARY JO

It was too much for me. I had to buy a new coat! Cause what I wore did // not cut it. At all.

FIONA

Your new coat! It was so cute.

MARY JO

So cute! But I'll never wear it again.

CHARLIE

Move to Chicago. Wear it there.

DUKE

I bet I would like the cold.

MARY JO

Don't be // so sure.

DUKE

I could grow a beard. Wear lots of flannel. Chop down some trees with an ax.

FIONA

Like a lumberjack?

DUKE

Could be fun. Learn to ski or some shit.

Natalie stumbles to the porch.

NATALIE

Hey!

DUKE

(to *Natalie*) Do you know how to ski?

NATALIE

I don't think so ...

Natalie stumbles a little and Duke catches her.

DUKE

Uh oh. You okay?

NATALIE

I'm good. I'm so good.

She flirtatiously touches his arm.

I was just lookin for you ...

NATALIE

I'm right here.

DUKE

Is the game over?

CHARLIE

I guess so...

NATALIE

Are folks leaving?

DUKE

Not me.

NATALIE

Natalie pulls Duke back towards the party.

So party's over?

CHARLIE

Y'all do what you want.

DUKE

Natalie leads Duke inside. They sit close together with the Party Chorus.

(to *Charlie*) When did that start?

MARY JO

I just live here.

CHARLIE

What about Willow?

MARY JO

I can't keep up.

CHARLIE

Sounds like some drama.

FIONA

It never stops.

CHARLIE

A beat.

FIONA

So, Mary Jo's gonna be a teacher, Duke's gonna be a lumberjack. What's your big plan, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Take over the world.

FIONA

Seriously. You gonna be a famous actor or something?

CHARLIE

*(teasing)* Who could resist this face?

MARY JO

Barf.

CHARLIE

Doesn't matter. As long as I'm not here.

MARY JO

What's so bad about here?

CHARLIE

The velvet ditch.

MARY JO

What's that? A song?

CHARLIE

It's what they call this town.

FIONA

I've never heard that.

MARY JO

I don't get it.

CHARLIE

The velvet ditch. Someplace where people can get too ... what's the word... cozy? Comfortable. People get comfortable. Never want to leave.

FIONA

The velvet ditch?

CHARLIE

Easy to fall into. Hard to climb out.

Tommy comes to the porch.

TOMMY

Mary Jo - Annabelle's puking in the bathroom.

MARY JO

Uh oh.

Mary Jo and Tommy leave Fiona and Charlie on the porch.

CHARLIE

What about you Fiona?

FIONA

What **about** me?

CHARLIE

If Mary Jo's a teacher -

FIONA

Right now she's a waitress.

CHARLIE

Right, now doesn't count.

FIONA

Doesn't it?

CHARLIE

Nah. Right now is like ... limbo. In between. Like the moment before something big. The moment before your life really starts. Nothing but potential and possibilities.

FIONA

Is that what this is?

CHARLIE

Oh yeah.

FIONA

It doesn't feel like that. But if this is limbo with possibilities ... that's intriguing.

CHARLIE

Intriguing. Good word.

A beat.

CHARLIE

So what about you. Magnolia publishing and then .... ? Back to Chicago? Or move to New York? Be a big publisher? Editor? Writer? What's your next adventure?

FIONA

Yes. Maybe. All of the above?

Charlie moves closer to her.

The sound of Fiona's heartbeat grows louder.

CHARLIE

Or you just stay here for a while?

FIONA

I honestly don't know.

CHARLIE

Why didn't you tell me you were coming back to town?

FIONA

I didn't think you'd care.

They are very close now. Charlie kisses her.

The sound of Fiona's heartbeat grows louder.

After a moment, Fiona pulls away.

The scene transforms. The same people, a different party.

Fiona enters the party.

PARTY CHORUS

Fiona! Hey! (etc.)

Steven has a forty ounce beer taped in one hand.

STEVEN

Fiona! Edward forty-hands!

JAMIE

You're supposed to do both hands!

STEVEN

Well, clearly I need help to tape the other one.

A song starts playing.

Steven drinks from the forty and dances.

JAMIE

I'm hungry. Is anybody else hungry?

NATALIE

What time is it?

JAMIE

I'm gonna order a pizza. Anybody want pizza?

WILLOW

Are they still delivering?

DUKE

They deliver until 2 a.m.

JAMIE

You gotta chip in if you want pizza. No cash, no pizza. I mean it.

Jamie takes out a cell phone to make a call.

NATALIE

What time is it?

STEVEN

Is there any more beer?

WILLOW

There's a forty taped to your hand.

STEVEN

Right.

Charlie and Willow laugh at Steven.

CHARLIE

*(to Willow)* You need a drink?

WILLOW

Sure.

Charlie and Willow walk away together. Fiona sees.

Steven picks up a roll of duct tape.

STEVEN

Fiona, can you help me with this?

FIONA

What if you have to pee?

Mary Jo walks over supported by Tommy.

FIONA

Oh no. What happened?

MARY JO

Did I throw up?

TOMMY

You sure did.

MARY JO

I'm sorry ...

TOMMY

It's okay. Let's sit down, yeah?

They sit. Mary Jo touches her hair. It's in a ponytail.

MARY JO

Did you put my hair in a ponytail?

TOMMY

I did.

MARY JO

I love you so fucking much.

TOMMY

I know.

MARY JO

So. Fucking // Much.

TOMMY

I know. I love you, too.

MARY JO

Like ... if you weren't gay ... // if you weren't

TOMMY

I know.

MARY JO

I think I wanna lay down for a minute.

Mary Jo passes out on the couch.

FIONA

Hey, Mary Jo ...

CHARLIE

She'll sleep it off.

JAMIE

Pizza's gonna be here in twenty minutes.

CHARLIE

*(to Willow)* Let's go to the porch.

Willow nods and follows Charlie to the porch.

Fiona watches them leave.

The party chorus are all subdued.

FIONA

Tommy! Let's take a shot.

TOMMY

You want this? I made it for Mary Jo.

Fiona takes a sip of the drink.

FIONA

What is it?

TOMMY

An old fashioned.

FIONA

Like this town.

Tommy chuckles.

FIONA

The party feels kind of dead tonight.

TOMMY

Eh, it happens. They can't all be ragers. *(beat)* You ready to go?

Fiona looks over at Charlie and takes another sip of the drink.

FIONA

Maybe in a bit.

A long beat. The party chorus is still quiet.

FIONA

So .... Classes starting soon?

TOMMY

Yep. Getting ready for fall auditions.

FIONA

Y'all doing any exciting shows?

TOMMY

Not really.

FIONA

Oh.

TOMMY

I don't mean to negative - it's just the same kind of stuff we've been doing. Shakespeare and Arthur Miller and some musical from the 60s.

FIONA

You don't like that stuff?

TOMMY

I'm ready for something different. This year can't go fast enough. Next summer, I'm moving to New York.

FIONA

Wow.

TOMMY

My friend Claire is there already. She's liking it I think.

FIONA

She played Juliet. Right?

TOMMY

Oh yeah - I shouldn't have mentioned --

FIONA

Oh, it's fine. Totally fine. That was a long time ago.

TOMMY

Anyway, she likes it and she's going to help me find a place and all that stuff.

FIONA

My boss offered me a job today.

TOMMY

Don't you have a job?

FIONA

An internship. But ... they like me. hooray. And they want me to join the team. Part time for now. Maybe full time eventually.

TOMMY

That's good, right?

FIONA

It's great. For now.

TOMMY

You don't sound excited.

FIONA

I am. I should be. I guess I was just expecting for things to be different. After graduation, you know? But this is good. It's a great step. And I can just work this job for a year or so and then go somewhere else.

TOMMY

Yeah. You'll have experience.

FIONA

Exactly. I'll have experience. And here, they like me here. So ... there's that.

She takes a another drink. She's getting drunk.

TOMMY

Maybe you should be done?

FIONA

No. I can't be done. It's still a party, right? We're having fun. (*she tries to stand*) Should we play some drinking games?

TOMMY

I don't know.

Fiona tries to wake up Mary Jo.

FIONA

Mary Jo! Do you want to play drinking games?

Mary Jo just rolls over.

JAMIE

I still need a little more cash for the pizza.

FIONA

Steven! Let's get a dance party going!

STEVEN

Yesss!

Steven gets music playing.

Fiona pulls Tommy to dance with her.

FIONA

Let's have fun!

Fiona stumbles slightly.

TOMMY

Whoa. You okay?

FIONA

I'm great. I'm so great.

DUKE

Fiona! It's kinda late.

FIONA

No! Don't be a buzzkill. Come and dance with me. *(she finishes her drink)* Have you ever had an old fashioned? It's really delicious.

DUKE

I think you should sit down.

FIONA

Let's do tequila shots.

TOMMY

Here's some water.

FIONA

Ugh - no thank you.

Fiona looks at Duke. She kisses him.

DUKE

Whoa. What are you doing?

FIONA

I'm having fun. That's why we're all here, right?

DUKE

Yeah ... but ...

Fiona kisses him again. This time Charlie sees.

Tommy pulls Fiona away.

TOMMY

You should drink this water.

FIONA

I'm fine!

CHARLIE

What's going on?

DUKE

It's cool.

FIONA

Steven and I are starting a dance party.

STEVEN

I think I should sit down.

Charlie takes Fiona's arm.

CHARLIE

You're drunk.

FIONA

No, you're drunk!

DUKE

*(To everyone)* We're all drunk!

Party chorus cheers half-heartedly.

CHARLIE

I think you should go.

FIONA

No! Stop. Get away from me.

We hear Fiona's heartbeat.

TOMMY

I can give you a ride home, if you want.

FIONA

No thanks.

CHARLIE

At least sit down.

The heartbeat gets louder.

FIONA

Don't tell me what to do!

CHARLIE

Okay. Okay --

The heartbeat gets louder. Fiona sways a bit.

Mary Jo wakes up on the couch.

MARY JO

Have I been asleep?

FIONA

*(covering her ears and screaming)* Just stop!

The heartbeat grows louder.

Everyone looks at Fiona.

FIONA

I think I just need to ... um ...

Fiona looks like she may be sick.

The doorbell rings.

JAMIE

Pizza's here.

The scene transforms to suggest a bathroom. This could be represented with just a five gallon bucket.

The heartbeat stops.

Fiona leans into the bucket moaning.

After a moment, Charlie enters the bathroom.

CHARLIE  
You okay?

FIONA  
*(holding back tears)* I drank. Too. Much.

CHARLIE  
It's okay. Did you puke?

FIONA  
*(moaning)* Not yet ...

CHARLIE  
It happens to everybody. Come here.

Someone from the chorus hands Charlie a wash cloth.

CHARLIE  
Here.

He presses the cloth to her face.

FIONA  
That's nice.

Someone from the chorus hands Charlie some water.

CHARLIE  
Water?

Fiona takes a sip.

FIONA  
Thank you. *(beat)* I'm so stupid.

CHARLIE  
It's not a big deal.

FIONA  
Never have I ever been this drunk ...

Fiona laughs a little.

CHARLIE  
Feeling better.

Fiona nods.

Question. FIONA

Answer. CHARLIE

Was it true? FIONA

What? CHARLIE

Never have I ever. FIONA

Come on, Fiona... I don't want // to talk about this now CHARLIE

I would like to know the truth. FIONA

It was a game. CHARLIE

Right. Just a game. FIONA

Beat.

I've never seen you like this. CHARLIE

There's lots you don't know about me. FIONA

I think I know you pretty well. CHARLIE

You did. Two years ago. But then you fell in love with someone else. Or maybe it wasn't love - whatever, it wasn't me. And now I'm different. I have a tattoo now! FIONA

Good for you. CHARLIE

And I'm not going to tell you where it is! FIONA

CHARLIE

Is it your lower back?

FIONA

Whatever. That's where everybody gets them. But you always said you hated tattoos. But I don't care because we aren't together!

CHARLIE

I know.

FIONA

And you know what else? I got offered a job today?

CHARLIE

You did?

FIONA

Yeah. Mr. Gilmore wants me to work for him full time. He says I'm doing really well.

CHARLIE

I'm sure you are.

FIONA

So ... all I have to do now is find a place to live - Mary Jo said we could live together. And we're going to have so much fun - it's going to be so awesome.

CHARLIE

If that's what you want, I think it's great.

The Party Chorus start to get up.

ANNABELLE

It's almost time. Hurry.

FIONA

Yep. That's what I want.

JAMIE

Get ready for the countdown.

The Party Chorus ready themselves.

CHARLIE

I'm glad you'll be around. It's been nice having you back.

FIONA

Don't do that.

Ten ... nine ...	PARTY CHORUS
What?	CHARLIE
Don't be ... nice or cute or whatever.	FIONA
Eight ... seven ...	PARTY CHORUS
What did I say?	CHARLIE
You know -- things are much easier when I hate you.	FIONA
Six... five ...	PARTY CHORUS
You hate me?	CHARLIE
Fiona nods.	
Five ...	PARTY CHORUS
I just want you to be happy.	CHARLIE
Well, I want you to be happy too.	FIONA
Four ...	PARTY CHORUS
Fiona --	CHARLIE
You're a liar.	FIONA
Three ...	PARTY CHORUS
I know you used to love me ....	FIONA

PARTY CHORUS

Two ...

FIONA

And it's over now, which is perfectly fine. But I know you did. You had to --

PARTY CHORUS

One.

Charlie kisses Fiona.

PARTY CHORUS

Happy New Year!

The party chorus kiss and cheer.

Charlie kisses Fiona again.

The party transforms.

MARY JO

*(calling)* Fiona! Charlie! Get in here! We have champagne.

CHARLIE

Happy New Year.

FIONA

Happy New Year.

The party chorus throw streamers and have noise makers.

CHORUS

Happy New Year!

CHARLIE

Can we talk?

FIONA

Now?

CHARLIE

I can't stay here.

FIONA

You want to leave already?

CHARLIE

I'm moving.

What? Where?  
FIONA

New York.  
CHARLIE

You're moving?  
FIONA

You knew I just had a few more classes to take.  
CHARLIE

I thought you wanted me // to stay ...  
FIONA

I can't stay here forever.  
CHARLIE

What's in New York?  
FIONA

I've been talking to my friend, Claire.  
CHARLIE

Your ex ...  
FIONA

She told me about a job. She knows the city. It's perfect timing.  
CHARLIE

Are you running away from me?  
FIONA

I'm not ready to settle down here.  
CHARLIE

Fiona's heartbeat starts beating loudly.

You knew this would happen eventually.  
CHARLIE

I'm so stupid ...  
FIONA

We couldn't do this forever.  
CHARLIE

The heartbeat gets even louder.

CHARLIE

I'll see ya.

Party chorus waves goodbye to Charlie.

CHORUS

*(Overlapping/ad libbing)* Bye Charlie! Good Luck!

Charlie exits.

The heartbeat gets louder and faster.

Fiona grabs the bucket from earlier and throws up in it.

The heartbeat stops. Charlie is gone.

The entire party chorus are standing apart watching Fiona.

FIONA

Is the party over?

TOMMY

We're still here.

FIONA

What time is it?

WILLOW

Late.

ANNABELLE

Early.

MARY JO

I got this for you.

Mary Jo hands her a shot glass.

FIONA

What is it?

MARY JO

Tequila. And a lime.

Mary Jo produces a lime slice.

Fiona takes the shot and bites the lime.



After a minute, fireflies appear to illuminate the stage.

The music fades out as the sound of cicadas grows louder.

Fiona is distracted by the fireflies.

FIONA

*(shouting)* Wait!

Time stops. The dancing stops. Everyone looks at Fiona.

FIONA

I had a ... a ....

She gestures about the mason jar.

Someone throws Fiona a plastic cup. She looks at it for a moment.

The lights change. The fireflies disappear.

The party chorus stare at Fiona

DUKE

Flip cup!

FIONA

Mine's empty.

PARTY CHORUS

Flip cup, flip cup.

MARY JO

Here.

Mary Jo pours some beer into Fiona's cup. Duke has set up a row of cups on two sides of a table.

Everyone plays. Fiona is the last one her team.

Duke and Mary Jo hold their solo cups.

FIONA

On your marks! Get set ... GO!

Duke and Mary Jo cheers their cups, then drink.

The actors should play a real game of flip cup. Complete with shouting and cheering. It doesn't matter which team wins.

When the game is over ....

DUKE

Fiona!

Fiona and Duke high five.

DUKE

Hostess with the mostest.

Duke grabs a deck of cards and addresses the entire party.

MARY JO

New game!

Cheers from the party chorus.

MARY JO

Captain Asshole.

Mary Jo hands Duke a deck of cards.

DUKE

I am Captain Asshole. And I have the (*he pulls a card from a deck*) Queen of Diamonds!

FIONA/MARY JO

Drink!

All the women drink.

DUKE

I am Captain Asshole and I have the (*another card*) eight of diamonds.

CHORUS

Waterfalls!

The party chorus line up to drink.

Duke finishes his beer and crushes it on the ground.

DUKE

We need more beer. Kendra!

Duke passes Kendra the deck of cards and exits .

KENDRA

Okay ... Now, I am Captain Asshole! And I have the ... (*she draws a card*) six of clubs. Six for dicks! Drink!

ROBERT

I hate this game.

FIONA

This is our house, so we say everyone must play.

MARY JO

DRINK!

All the men in the chorus drink.

STEVEN

*(Calling offstage)* Duke, we need those beers.

Duke enters with a case of beer to refill the coolers.

KENDRA

I'm still Captain Asshole and the next card is ... *(draws a card)* the two of spades!

FIONA/MARY JO

Face off!

Shelly picks two people *(any two people)* onstage. Those two people play rock, paper, scissors. When one of them loses

CHORUS

Drink!

The loser drinks. The chorus cheer.

The game continues. Amber approaches Mary Jo. This should be the same actor who played Willow earlier.

AMBER

Mary Jo! I'm here.

MARY JO

Am-ber! Ama-bama.

Mary Jo gives Amber a big hug.

KENDRA

Four of hearts!

FIONA/MARY JO

WHORES!

All the women except Amber drink.

FIONA

You have to drink.

Duke appears with a beer for Amber.

DUKE

Beer?

AMBER

Thanks.

DUKE

My pleasure.

Duke goes back to the coolers.

MARY JO

Fiona, have you ever met my --

FIONA

Willow? Right?

AMBER

What?

KENDRA

King of Spades! My choice.

MARY JO

*(to Fiona)* Oh my god! Willow! I haven't thought about her in a hot minute.

AMBER

I'm Amber.

KENDRA

And I choose ... *(Pointing at Amber)* you!!

The whole party looks at Amber.

FIONA

You have to drink.

KENDRA

Because I'm Captain Asshole.

AMBER

What?

MARY JO

It's a game.

CHORUS

DRINK, DRINK, DRINK!

Amber hesitantly takes a drink from the beer Duke gave her.

The chorus cheers. Amber makes a sour face.

AMBER

I don't really like beer.

MARY JO

Amber works at Shenanigan's with me.

AMBER

I just started.

FIONA

Welcome! This is the party house. Our door's always open.

STEVEN

Ace of diamonds! New Asshole!

Mary Jo rushes forward.

MARY JO

Me! Me! Me!

Mary Jo takes the deck.

MARY JO

And my first order of business - no more Captain. I am Queen Asshole!

CHORUS

All Hail the Queen!

FIONA

*(raising her drink)* Long live the queen!

Everyone drinks except Amber.

MARY JO

Amber! You must drink. Your queen commands it!

AMBER

*(to Fiona)* is this part of the game?

CHORUS

DRINK!

Fiona nods. Amber drinks.

MARY JO

Thank you, Amber. The next // card is ....

AMBER

What game is this?

FIONA

Captain Asshole.

MARY JO

Jack of Hearts! // Jacks are for ... a toast!

CHORUS

Toast! Toast! Toast!

FIONA

*(overlapping)* You'll catch on.

MARY JO

Let's see *(looking around)* Duke! Give a toast.

Duke raises a beer.

DUKE

All right. All right. Quiet down. A toast. To Fiona, Happy Birthday!!

AMBER

It's your birthday?

FIONA

I guess so.

MARY JO

Happy Birthday!

CHORUS

Happy Birthday!

FIONA

*(to Mary Jo)* How old am I?

MARY JO

Girl, are you that drunk?

Fiona tries to laugh it off.

FIONA

What? No - I'm fine.

Kendra appears next to Fiona.

KENDRA

Birthday present for Fiona. (*She presents a joint*) Burke hooked me up. (*Yelling across the room*) Thanks, Burke.

Burke smiles and waves. This should be the same actor who played Tommy earlier.

FIONA

Tommy?

KENDRA

Burke. Burrrrrrke.

She lights the joint. The stage fills with haze. And smoke.

Mary Jo and Steven come over.

MARY JO

Birthday girl is having a good time!

Kendra passes the joint to her.

FIONA

Is Tommy coming tonight?

STEVEN

I miss that guy.

MARY JO

Tommy moved to LA.

FIONA

What?

MARY JO

You were at his going away party. Oh my god, we were so hung over the next day.

FIONA

Right.

MARY JO

Oh my gosh, did I tell you about Maggie Jackson?

KENDRA

Who's that?

MARY JO

You remember - two years behind us in high school. She was a cheerleader.

STEVEN

Uh huh. She drove that white Jeep?

FIONA

Oh yeah.

MARY JO

Well my mom was telling me that Maggie and Clark McKenzie just got married.

FIONA

He was nice.

STEVEN

He was an ass.

MARY JO

And she's knocked up.

FIONA

Did you really say 'knocked up'?

MARY JO

What's wrong with that?

FIONA

It's so ... crude.

STEVEN

I can't believe Clark is going to be a dad.

MARY JO

Believe it.

FIONA

Maybe they'll be really happy.

KENDRA

If I was marrying someone from high school, I do not think I would be happy.

Duke and Amber join them.

DUKE  
Can Amber use your bathroom?

MARY JO  
Sure - no problem.

AMBER  
It's this way?

KENDRA  
I'll show you.

Amber leaves with Kendra.

MARY JO  
Did you hear that Clark McKenzie is going to be a dad?

DUKE  
No shit? So weird that people we know are having babies.

FIONA  
Yeah. Like making whole new humans where there used to be no humans.

DUKE  
You know who I saw the other day was Molly ... Molly ... really short. Big teeth?

STEVEN  
Molly Rainey?

DUKE  
Rainey!! Yes. She was with her **two** kids with her in the grocery store.

STEVEN  
That's too many kids.

DUKE  
They were being little assholes.

MARY JO  
Don't say that!

DUKE  
You weren't there. You didn't seem them.

FIONA  
Molly made a new human -- two new humans -- and what are we doing?

A beat.

DUKE

We are drinking.

MARY JO

*(raising her glass)* Hell yes we are!

Amber and Kendra return.

AMBER

Ummm.... I think someone's having sex in your bathroom.

FIONA

What?

MARY JO

// Who is it?

KENDRA

I didn't stay to listen.

DUKE

*(Laughing)* At least it's not your bedroom.

MARY JO

Duke - make them stop!

DUKE

What am I supposed to do?

MARY JO

Knock on the door. Tell them to stop!

Fiona is disoriented.

Duke knocks on something.

DUKE

*(knocking)* Hey! Stop ... doing that. It's not cool.

Other members of the party chorus knock on different places - walls, doors, chairs, etc.

BURKE

*(knocking)* Hey! Can I come in?

KENDRA

*(knocking)* I'm here - and I brought wine!

Mary Jo's phone buzzes. She checks it.

MARY JO

*(to Fiona)* Is it okay if more friends from work come over?

AMBER

*(knocking)* Sorry - but do you have more toilet paper?

ROBERT

*(knocking)* Is it cool if I just crash on the couch?

STEVEN

*(knocking)* I'm just gonna change the music --

SARAH JANE

*(knocking)* Hey, is Mary Jo here?

FIONA

Hey Natalie!

The scene transforms. A different party.

SARAH JANE

Fiona!

Lights snap into focus.

SARAH JANE

Do you live with Mary Jo?

FIONA

Oh my god ... Sarah Jane?

They hug stiffly.

FIONA

What are you doing here?

SARAH JANE

I ran into Mary Jo at the bar - she told me to come over.

FIONA

What brings you to town?

SARAH JANE

I live here now ... or again.

FIONA

You moved back? That's great --

SARAH JANE

Yeah. So fun. I just started Law School.

FIONA

Law School. Wow. And you were in Memphis?

SARAH JANE

Nashville. Just working at some coffee shop with no direction. Just wasting time. It was time to get serious, so here I am.

FIONA

Yeah. That's // great.

SARAH JANE

We're not getting any younger! So - Law School! (*beat*) And what about you?

FIONA

I live here. With Mary Jo.

SARAH JANE

I know... I meant are you working?

FIONA

Oh yeah, Magnolia Publishing. (*when Sarah Jane doesn't recognize it*) I've been there for a while. It's small. You remember Lindsay Gilmore's dad?

SARAH JANE

Oh yeah! What a sweetheart.

FIONA

I work for her dad.

SARAH JANE

Good for you! That's so great.

FIONA

It is. It's great. It's really // great.

A long pause.

Mary Jo approaches.

MARY JO

Sarah Jane! You came.

SARAH JANE

I'm here!

MARY JO

I'm opening more wine! Should I do red or white?

SARAH JANE

White for me.

MARY JO

(to Fiona) White okay?

FIONA

Sure.

Mary Jo leaves to get wine.

An awkward moment.

SARAH JANE

Oh my gosh, I was actually thinking about you the other day.

FIONA

Really?

SARAH JANE

I was reading something - An article maybe? Something online? Anyway, it was about Queen Elizabeth - the first - and I thought about that report you did in Ms. Stone's class // in tenth grade --

FIONA

Ms. Stone!

SARAH JANE

(continuous) -- and you put on that crazy make up for your presentation --

FIONA

Wow - I completely forgot about that. I loved Ms. Stone!

SARAH JANE

Me too! She was my favorite teacher.

FIONA

So sad when she died.

SARAH JANE

What?

FIONA

Ms. Stone... last // May, I think ...

SARAH JANE

*(getting upset)* Don't.

FIONA

Sarah Jane... I'm so sorry. You didn't hear?

SARAH JANE

Stop. Don't tell me.

Sarah Jane tries not to lose it.

FIONA

I didn't mean to --

SARAH JANE

No. It's ... it's fine. I'm just surprised no one told me, you know?

FIONA

I'm really sorry.

SARAH JANE

Not your fault ... you don't have to be sorry.

Beat.

FIONA

So, do you like law school?

SARAH JANE

Um... it's good, you know. Lots to read. I'm ... gonna help Mary Jo with the wine.

FIONA

Okay.

Sarah Jane disappears into the party chorus.

FIONA

It was really good to see you!

Fiona listens to other conversations around her.

AMBER

Due this summer.

BURKE

That makes two, right?

AMBER

That's right.

BURKE

Wild. Do I have to get them a present?

Another conversation.

STEVEN

How have you been holding up?

KENDRA

I'm all right. As good as expected I guess.

STEVEN

I'm so sorry. The funeral was nice.

KENDRA

Yeah. I think dad would've liked it.

Another conversation.

DUKE

I couldn't believe it.

ROBERT

How old was he? Twenty-seven?

DUKE

Yeah. Doesn't seem fair.

ROBERT

By the time they caught it, there was nothing they could do.

DUKE

So sad.

Mary Jo returns with wine for Sarah Jane.

SARAH JANE

You had Mrs. Stone, right?

MARY JO

For history?

SARAH JANE

Did you know she died?

MARY JO

Oh yeah. I think my mom told me when that happened.

SARAH JANE

I can't believe it ...

MARY JO

I guess I forgot about it.

The party chorus all talk at once. Fiona can no longer make out what they are saying

Mary Jo walks up to Fiona.

MARY JO

Got your wine.

Fiona drinks it quickly. The party chorus quiet down.

MARY JO

Guess who I ran into!

FIONA

No idea.

MARY JO

Charlie Harrison.

FIONA

You're joking.

MARY JO

He just moved back to town! I told him to stop by.

FIONA

No you didn't.

MARY JO

What? It's ancient history, right?

FIONA

Right.

Fireflies appear everywhere.

Fiona steps away from the party.

The Chorus all turn their backs. Fiona's on the porch.

She takes a breath. Finally quiet. She watches the fireflies.

Charlie enters with a case of beer. The fireflies disappear.

Hey. CHARLIE

Me? (*she looks around*) FIONA

Yeah. What are you doing? CHARLIE

I thought I saw a lightning bug. FIONA

You gonna catch it? CHARLIE

I don't know. FIONA

I think there aren't as many as there used to be. Lightning bugs. Like when we were little, it seemed like there were thousands. CHARLIE

Maybe you can't trust your memory. FIONA

Maybe you're right. CHARLIE

Is this then? Or is it now? FIONA

I got a text from Mary Jo ... said you were having people over. CHARLIE

It's the party house. Door's always open. FIONA

But you're all alone. CHARLIE

A beat.

I heard a rumor. FIONA

What's that? CHARLIE

FIONA

That you moved back to town.

CHARLIE

The rumors are true. Charlie Harrison! The prodigal son has returned!

FIONA

Back from New York.

CHARLIE

I drove over to Chaney's today --

FIONA

Yeah, they closed.

CHARLIE

It's a Walgreen's. I was so surprised.

FIONA

Yeah (*beat*) Anything else different?

CHARLIE

Other than that? Nope. It's all the same.

Beat.

FIONA

New York? How long were you --

CHARLIE

Five years.

FIONA

Wow.

CHARLIE

Long time, right?

FIONA

Yep. So ... you glad that you're back?

CHARLIE

Yeah. I think so.

Beat.

CHARLIE

Question.

FIONA

Answer.

CHARLIE

When you were gone - like, when you were away at school - did you miss it?

FIONA

Miss what?

CHARLIE

This town. Your friends. All of this.

FIONA

Oh. Um ... that was a while ago.

CHARLIE

Nevermind. It was a dumb // question

FIONA

No, no. I just need to think about it. Did I miss it? I missed ... people, of course. Like when we dated, I always missed ... And my family. And I hated feeling like I was missing out on the stuff everyone here was as part of....

CHARLIE

Like life goes on without you?

FIONA

Yeah. I guess that was always hard.

CHARLIE

Right. Like ... what if I hadn't left?

Beat.

FIONA

This one time, I think it was spring break of my sophomore year, and it must have been a really long winter or something... But my mom and I were driving down Bent Tree Road and the trees were so green, and the flowers were blooming and the air smelled so good. And I just started crying. And my mom thought something was wrong, but I was just crying because it was spring. All the trees in Chicago look dead until May. Sometimes June. And I didn't know I was missing spring until it was right in front of me.

CHARLIE

Yep. I know what you mean. (*beat*) I will not miss the snow. Not at all.

FIONA

I do love the snow. Most of the time.

Beat.

Charlie looks up.

CHARLIE

I missed the stars. You can't see them in the city.

FIONA

I wouldn't think so.

CHARLIE

And I missed my family. And I missed this dumb town which was a shock to me.  
And I missed you.

The distant sound of Fiona's heartbeat.

FIONA

That does surprise me.

CHARLIE

I did --

FIONA

What about Claire?

CHARLIE

We broke up like two years ago - and I have ... not been doing so great since then.  
Could never really catch a break - it's been years since I went to an audition

Duke comes out to the porch.

DUKE

Charlie! I thought I saw you!

Fiona's heartbeat fades out.

CHARLIE

What's up, man!

DUKE

Get in here.

The chorus transforms. Back inside at the party.

CHARLIE

*(holding up his case of beer)* Hey!

The chorus looks up at him. They barely react.

DUKE

*(shouting)* Mary Jo! Look who's here.

CHARLIE

Where is she?

DUKE

She's around here somewhere... *(shouting)* Amber! Come meet Charlie!

Amber joins them.

DUKE

This is my fiancé, Amber.

CHARLIE

Nice to meet you.

AMBER

This is New York Charlie?

CHARLIE

Used to be.

AMBER

I've heard a lot about you.

DUKE

What have you been up to man?

CHARLIE

Just living at home and saving some money. Working for my dad.

DUKE

Nice. *(beat)* You need a drink.

AMBER

Let me get you some wine.

All the party chorus have wine glasses now.

CHARLIE

Come on, man. It's a late night. Let's do some shots.

DUKE

It's not even midnight.

CHARLIE

Right - but like - for old time's sake.

I have some tequila.

FIONA

That's my girl.

CHARLIE

A chorus member brings tequila shots for Duke, Fiona, Charlie.

Thanks, man.

CHARLIE

Just like old times. Right, Fi?

DUKE

*(raising his shot glass)* To old times.

CHARLIE

Yeah.

FIONA

They all take their shots.

Fiona takes the glasses and walks away.

Hey, Burke!

FIONA

Yeah.

BURKE

Where's Mary Jo?

FIONA

Maybe in the bathroom?

BURKE

Charlie is plugging his iPhone into a speaker.

Who's phone is this?

CHARLIE

That's mine.

ROBERT

I'm gonna take over for a bit. You don't mind, do you?

CHARLIE

ROBERT

Sure.

The music comes on loud, the same song from the beginning of the play.

AMBER

What song is this?

DUKE

Classic!

The scene transforms.

The lights snap into focus.

The bathroom. Mary Jo pukes into a bucket.

Kendra holds her hair back.

KENDRA

There you go. That's it. You're okay.

Mary Jo moans a little. Fiona enters.

KENDRA

Fiona. Thank god!

FIONA

Get a wet wash cloth.

Kendra does and presses it to Mary Jo's head.

KENDRA

There you go, sweetheart. Does that feel better?

Mary Jo sort of nods, but she moves like a rag doll.

FIONA

What happened?

KENDRA

She just said she felt sick all of the sudden.

FIONA

Mary Jo? Mary Jo?

Mary Jo moans a little more. Fiona pets her reassuringly.

MARY JO

Oh no ... Did I ruin the party .... ?

Mary Jo whimpers.

FIONA

No. Not at all. Everyone's having a really good time. Right, Kendra?

Fiona gives her a look.

KENDRA

Yep ... it's always a great party here.

MARY JO

I'm so sorry ....

Mary Jo throws up into the trashcan. Fiona watches.

FIONA

There. Do you feel better now?

KENDRA

Yeah ... she looks better already.

Kendra starts to leave.

FIONA

Wait - do you know how much she drank?

KENDRA

Nope. But I'm guessing, a lot?

Kendra joins the party chorus.

MARY JO

*(mumbling)* I gotta lay down.

FIONA

*(overlapping)* Where you goin' honey?

MARY JO

*(flopping/falling over)* I need to lay down.

FIONA

Watch your head ...

MARY JO

Ow.

Mary Jo lays on the floor.

FIONA

Yeah, okay. I guess you can - lay down there. *(beat)* What did you drink? Huh? You never puke. *(beat)* I'm kinda mad at you right now. You invited Charlie and he's taking tequila shots with Duke like no time has passed at all ... which is insane because a lot of time has passed... and I want to say that things have changed but I'm not really sure that they have. Not for me.

Sometimes, I feel like I go into this trance or something. Like, suddenly I'm driving to work and I won't remember leaving the house or getting in the car. Or if I brushed my teeth or not. Autopilot or something. And I don't know how long it goes on like that. Just on autopilot. Going through the motions and ... well, that's really fucking scary. Because all this **time** has passed and I don't know why I'm doing any of it.

She looks at Mary Jo. Mary Jo doesn't move.

FIONA

Okay, sit up. Let's clean you up.

Fiona tries to pull Mary Jo up to sitting but she can't.

FIONA

You can't sleep on the bathroom floor.

Mary Jo doesn't move.

FIONA

Mary Jo? Can you open your eyes for me? Huh? Can you wake up for me?

Duke comes in.

DUKE

Everything okay?

FIONA

Duke - she's // not talking.

DUKE

*(overlapping)* Mary Jo, shit. What the hell?

FIONA

She's puked // a couple times.

DUKE

How much did she drink?

FIONA

I don't know (*gently tapping Mary Jo's face*) ... Mary Jo, honey. Time to get off the floor.

DUKE

Do you think she took something? Or is // she just drunk...

FIONA

What // would she take?

DUKE

Mary Jo. Get up.

Duke tries to pull Mary Jo's arm.

MARY JO

No. Nono.

FIONA

Mary Jo. You have to get up.

DUKE

Just hang on.

Duke leaves.

MARY JO

I wanna sleep ...

FIONA

No. Time to get up.

Charlie appears in the bathroom.

CHARLIE

Oh no. Jo-jo! What happened?

FIONA

I've never seen her like this.

CHARLIE

She just needs to sleep it off.

Mary Jo moans a little.

CHARLIE

Come on, I can help you take her to her room.

Charlie goes to help Mary Jo off the floor.

FIONA

Charlie, what the hell?

Duke returns with a prescription pill bottle.

DUKE

These were in her room. Did she take some tonight?

FIONA

I've never seen those.

CHARLIE

Y'all are overreacting.

FIONA

*(tapping Mary Jo's face)* Mary Jo, open your eyes. Please, you're kinda scaring me.

Mary Jo moans slightly. Still dead weight.

DUKE

Did you take something? MJ, did you take these?

FIONA

Can you throw up anymore? Huh?

DUKE

You gotta tell us.

MARY JO

*(head lolling from side to side)* I can't. I can't.

FIONA

Should I call 911?

CHARLIE

Mary Jo - get up.

DUKE

I don't know ... I've never seen her like this.

FIONA

I don't know what to do.

No one wants to make a decision.

Red lights flash. Sirens sound.

The party chorus move towards them and surround Mary Jo and Fiona.

The scene transforms.

The ensemble slowly exit the stage.

Fiona is left alone onstage wearing a coat.

Fiona is lost in a memory.

The sound of an elevated train. Cold light. We are no longer in Mississippi.

Mary Jo enters, also in a coat.

MARY JO

I can't believe that guy dipped me! Has that ever happened to you before?

FIONA

Never!

MARY JO

*(overlapping)* What a night.

FIONA

Your face!

MARY JO

My life flashed before my eyes and you stood there laughing.

FIONA

I saved you.

MARY JO

Sure. Whatever.

Beat.

MARY JO

It is so fucking cold!

FIONA

That coat is too thin.

MARY JO

You don't like it?

FIONA

It's cute, but it's not warm. I said 'pack warm clothes'.

MARY JO  
I thought I did ... I mean, it's November!

FIONA  
Are you hungry // I'm hungry.

MARY JO  
Starving!!

FIONA  
There's an IHOP on Halstead. You like pancakes?

MARY JO  
I fucking LOVE PANCAKES!

FIONA  
Ok, let's walk.

MARY JO  
Walk?

FIONA  
It's not far.

Mary Jo stops her before she can walk off.

MARY JO  
I'm having a really good time.

FIONA  
Me too.

MARY JO  
It's nice to get away. I'm so glad I came to visit.

FIONA  
Yeah?

MARY JO  
Except that it's too fucking cold! (*looking at the sky*) Holy shit!

FIONA  
What?

MARY JO  
(*overlapping*) Is that snow?

FIONA  
Oh wow. yeah. I didn't know // it was gonna snow.

MARY JO  
It's snowing. In November.

FIONA  
I love the snow. It's pretty.

MARY JO  
I think my teeth are chattering.

FIONA  
Shhh --shhh. Listen.

MARY JO  
What am I listening for?

FIONA  
It just sounds like ... snow. (*she listens*) There's a kind of quiet when it snows.

Beat. They listen.

MARY JO  
That's great, but I cannot feel my toes.

FIONA  
(*looking down*) Yeah, those shoes are going to get soaked.

MARY JO  
My shoes!!

FIONA  
We'll put them by the radiator when we get home.

MARY JO  
You're lucky your my best friend. I don't ruin my shoes for just anyone.

FIONA  
Tomorrow, we can get you a new coat. So you don't freeze your ass off.

Beat.

MARY JO  
This place really suits you.

FIONA  
What? I don't know what I'm doing // I'm just ...

MARY JO  
Well, duh. I certainly don't know what I'm doing. I'm twenty-one and do my laundry at my parents house. What the fuck do I know?

FIONA

I think about home sometimes... A lot. What you and Duke and --

MARY JO

*(interrupting)* And Charlie?

FIONA

Yes, and Charlie - think about what y'all are up to. Like maybe I'm missing out on something.

MARY JO

You aren't missing out. You have an IHOP that's open at two in the morning!

FIONA

I just thought everything would feel different...

MARY JO

I'm really proud of you.

FIONA

Shut up ...

MARY JO

No, I mean it. And yes, I'm drunk, and I say things like this when I'm drunk.

FIONA

You say lots of things when you're drunk.

MARY JO

But I mean it. You're here. You aren't back home. You're figuring things out --

FIONA

I don't have anything figured out --

MARY JO

Who cares. You're trying. Not everybody does that.

FIONA

I'm terrified I'm messing everything up.

MARY JO

We all are. Cause it's scary. Look, lots of people back home stay in town, get married, have a family, blah, blah, blah. That's the life they always wanted. They're the lucky ones.

FIONA

You think they're lucky?

MARY JO

Yeah, cause they're happy. They got what they wanted. They're not like us. They don't have that thing inside that's screaming that there's something more for them. So we can listen to that voice. We can try to do something different. Go away to big fancy college in Illinois for example.

FIONA

Shut up.

MARY JO

Or we can be like everyone else. Do what's expected. Never take a risk. Try to be happy with some kind of picket fence fantasy. But we'll always wonder what could have been. What we could've done different.

FIONA

I just want to be happy.

MARY JO

You seem happy here.

FIONA

Maybe.

They stop and look up.

MARY JO

You're right. Snow can be pretty.

A quiet moment between them.

The snow falls.

The sound of crickets and cicadas fade in slowly.

The chorus reenter. Mary Jo is pulled away.

The snow stops.

FIONA

Never have I ever ...

Mississippi night. Crickets. Cicadas.

Fireflies everywhere.

Fiona tries to catch one.

The chorus surround her, softly speaking.

CHARLIE

Right now is like ... limbo. In between.

AMBER

What game is this? I don't know the rules --

MARY JO

Duke look who's here!! Fiona has returned!

STEVEN

Don't you have to say something you haven't done?

DUKE

Just like old times. Right, Fi?

Fiona closes her hands. She looks inside. She caught nothing.

TOMMY

I'll be around. It's better than going back home.

SARAH JANE

Just wasting time.

KENDRA

Everyone's having a really good time. Right, Fiona?

FIONA

I'm having fun.

CHARLIE

Like the moment before something big. The moment before your life really starts. Nothing but potential.

MARY JO

So, is the party over?

The fireflies fade out. Only the light in the mason jar is still lit up. Fiona retrieves the jar.

The Party Chorus begin to exit slowly.

MARY JO

What should we do tonight?

SARAH JANE

You having people over?

Should we late night?  
STEVEN

I have wine.  
AMBER

We have beer, too.  
DUKE

Fiona studies the mason jar.

It's last call.  
ROBERT

I gotta close out my tab!  
KENDRA

Mary Jo, you coming?  
BURKE

Just a second.  
MARY JO

Mary Jo types a text on her phone.

Fiona gets a text message on her phone. She reads it aloud.

Late night?  
FIONA

Fiona types a response.

MARY JO  
(*reading the text*) Not tonight. Catch you later.

Mary Jo smiles and exits.

Fiona opens the mason jar and releases the firefly.

She watches it fly away.

Fiona looks out into the audience. She takes a breathe, then walks out of the theatre.

END OF PLAY

## AFTERWORD

### *Introduction*

As an MFA candidate at the Hollins Playwright's Lab, I found myself asking similar questions again and again: What kind of plays do I want to write? What productions am I dying to be a part of? What stories am I eager to show an audience?

Over the past five years, I've participated in productions large and small, from delightful entertainment to depressing drama. Whether it was Summer Festival in Roanoke or another stage manager gig in Chicago, I kept wondering what *excited* me. My theatrical tastes have always been varied and eclectic, and the plays I wrote in the Hollins MFA program were just as wide-ranging. My first summer at Hollins, Bonnie Metzgar told us, "As an artist, find what you are interested in and run towards it." One of the first lessons I learned in graduate school, but arguably the most important.

I spent my time at the Playwright's Lab learning about structure, analysis, and theory. But after the countless writing assignments, assigned readings, and workshop presentations of so many plays, the most important discovery I made was my own voice as an artist. My thesis play is the culmination of my entire experience at Hollins. *The Velvet Ditch* is a play I can honestly say represents my individual voice as an artist; a voice that I will continue to refine and question for the rest of my artistic career.

### *The Idea*

I have always had a love/hate relationship with my hometown of Oxford, Mississippi. Family and hometowns have given countless writers inspiration that can fuel an entire career. So, maybe it was inevitable that I would write about it in a play. In *The Secret Life of the American*

*Musical*, Jack Viertel posits that many writers of plays or musicals cultivate their own memories for writing:

Andre Bishop, Lincoln Center Theater’s artistic director, began his career running Playwrights Horizons, which was dedicated to discovering and producing important new writers. Bishop said in an interview that every young playwright has a play in him that could be called *The House I Grew Up In*. In this sense, *The Music Man*, which could have been called *The Town I Grew Up In*, is a close cousin of works as diverse as *The Glass Menagerie* and *Ah, Wilderness!* (Viertel 2017 42)

*The Velvet Ditch* in many ways is my own *Town I Grew Up In* play. I found myself coming back to the original idea for the play time and time again. I remembered a time when I was living in Oxford and teaching at the local middle school. My social life revolved around the local college football schedule and late-night parties after every bar in town was closed. I was out of college and thought I should feel more like a real ‘grown up’. The truth was, I was trapped in life that I wasn’t sure was mine. The future seemed inevitable: I would teach until I retired, maybe marry a local guy, and most people in town would know me as my parents’ daughter. I saw that life stretching out in front of me, and I was absolutely terrified.

While I always knew that elements of the play would be inspired by my life experiences, I had to write many different versions of the play to hone in on what I was trying to say. To date, I have written at least three different first drafts that were an attempt at writing *The Velvet Ditch*. None of these plays lived up to my initial inspiration, but each draft got me closer to what I was trying to say. After each failed draft, I would take some time away from the project. But the idea

stuck with me, and eventually I would pull the mediocre script from a drawer to scavenge for inspiring bits before writing the next version.

### ***First Drafts***

I first explored my *Town I Grew Up In* play in Todd Ristau's First Drafts class. The structure of this class meant every week you were given a prompt and then allotted only 72 hours to write an entire first draft of a play. My assignment was to write a play that ended with an unanswered question. Based on the short story "The Lady or The Tiger" by Frank R. Stockton, Professor Ristau asked me to create a certain tension in the narrative that is never released.

The question posed in this play was whether or not the main character will risk leaving her hometown or stay to pursue a relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Would she stay for the possibility of a relationship or leave for herself? The entire play took place at a house party in a small Mississippi town, much like my own hometown of Oxford. Ultimately, I do not believe this play was very successful especially regarding building tension. Many of the scenes were meandering and involved long, drunken conversations over cigarettes and group drinking games. I thought about this play, originally titled *Late Night*, many times after I completed my First Drafts class. I kept imagining putting a party on stage and the possibilities a production could have.

Almost a year later, I returned to this party when I was a part of a workshop series with The New Coordinates (formerly known as The New Colony) in Chicago, IL. The New Coordinates is a theatre company that creates new work in a very specific way. There is always a playwright creating the script, but actors or other company members play a larger part in bringing the characters to life; a style that could be described as a marrying of devised and scripted work. This time, I made significant changes to the play's structure. *Late Nights* was now

a play in two acts: the first taking place in Spring of 2008 just before many of the main characters graduation from college and the second act would take place in Spring of 2014 after the main characters' 10-year high school reunion. Both acts would take place in the same small house six years apart.

This second attempt was closer to the play I was hoping to write. My protagonist, Fiona, was a young woman who desperately wanted to belong and willing to ignore her own best interests to achieve that feeling. In many ways Charlie, her ex-boyfriend, is just like Fiona and is seeking outside validation on all his life choices. Mary Jo, Fiona's friend from high school, took on an important role convincing Fiona to stay in town, get a job, and become a part of the townie party culture, giving Fiona a false sense of belonging.

This two-act draft added the element of time. What would happen to characters who remained trapped in their hometown for years and did not grow or change? Each act presented two very realistic portrayals of a late-night party. The first act had the inciting incident while the second act had the climax. The problem was there was no rising action. The main character was changing but there was no indication why she had learned what she learned – the most interesting part was happening during intermission. The seed of this play was still haunting me, and I knew there were more bones to be scavenged before attempting to write it again.

### ***Script Analysis***

When the time came to choose a subject for my thesis play, I knew that what I was most interested in writing was *Late Nights*. But it was clear neither of my first attempts at this play were right. I needed to examine what I had already written and evaluate what elements were

drawing me in and what could be left behind. I needed to look at my plays with a more objective eye.

In my Playscript Analysis class, Bonnie Metzgar instructed everyone to read *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball. This book examines the action of a play, stating that a play's journey is contained within its actions and that every consecutive action should connect to the one before it. (*Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* by David Ball (1998–12-31) 9-10). The key to my next draft was there: every action in the play should somehow cause the following action, what Ball refers to as triggers and heaps. Nothing was really happening in my play. My protagonist was as passive as they come and there was no way to track her journey from her desire to belong to her need to escape her hometown. The images of the party that I once found exciting, threatened to become dull onstage. If every character is a twenty something playing drinking games and getting wasted, would that be a major turn off for an audience?

I was losing faith in my idea before I had officially started my thesis. My advisor, Professor Gogerty, reassured me, "There are no mistakes, only discoveries." I had already discovered that typical American Realism was not serving this play. Yes, it took place in a house and on a porch, but I wasn't interested in telling a slice-of-life story. Portraying a realistic party was not the goal. I was interested in the emotional lives of these characters, but I didn't know how to get there.

It was time to start over. I took what I had learned from the first attempts to write *Late Nights* and started with a blank page. The first draft of my thesis play had an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink quality. To get away from realism, I tried as many theatrical devices as I could think of. I wrote soliloquies and let characters reveal their inner thoughts to the audience. I played with

the passage of time using slow motion and fast forward sequences. The ensemble acted as a Greek Chorus representing the entire party, with actors playing multiple characters and even performing a “drunk ballet” in between drinking games.

After reading my first draft, Professor Gogerty reminded me of the five questions (adapted from Marsha Norman) that Professor Risteau introduced in Narrative Theory, taken my first summer at Hollins. Who was this play about? And what did the protagonist want? The problem was my protagonist *didn't know* what she wanted (art imitating life since I still wasn't sure what kind of play I wanted to write). But a protagonist without desire leaves the audience without an anchor.

I thought about my Script Analysis class when Professor Metzgar would often talk about the “Container” of a play versus the “Thing Contained.” I had my container: a play that takes place at a house party where characters are making questionable choices and ignoring their authentic selves. But what idea did the play contain? The problem was I had no idea what I wanted to say.

### ***Second, Third, And Fourth Drafts***

*Late Nights* was beginning to take shape, but ultimately the play was still a wandering journey with no destination. I thought back to my Advanced Tutorial class, taught by ND Seibel. Each week we analyzed and completed exercises examining a different element of tragedy from Aristotle's Poetics. We explored thought (or theme), music (or musicality), character, plot, diction (or language) and spectacle. During this class, I was in the process of rewriting *Shadow of the Son*, a script that encompassed multiple timelines and fought against the typical structure

of Freytag's pyramid. By analyzing the plot and structure of *Shadow of the Son*, I refined the script and created a piece that I am proud to have written.

It was time to look at the plot and structure of *Late Nights*, which was still a play in two acts happening six years apart. The plot of a play should be a map for the audience to follow, but where did I want the audience to end up? It was Professor Gogerty who helped me see what was already on the page. She pointed out that *Late Nights* was not a play about Fiona; this was a play about a town. The metaphor of the play is the party. The longer Fiona stays at this party, the more she is poisoned and unable to acknowledge what she really wants: to get out. I finally had the answer to the last of Marsha Norman's questions: The play is over when Fiona leaves the party.

This realization broke the play wide open and gave it a new title. Charlie describes the town as a place that's "easy to fall into, hard to get out." *The Velvet Ditch* was the place where Fiona was stuck, and if she tried hard enough, she could convince herself that she was comfortable there. A two-act structure no longer served the plot that was taking shape in the newest draft. Much like *Shadow of the Son*, it was clear that this play would benefit from having an unusual relationship with time; I already had the Party Chorus, so why not use this ensemble to push even further beyond the boundaries of realism. I didn't want to write realism anyway. This wasn't a play about plot, this was a play about what these people felt while sharing a specific place and time.

To get out of the realistic timeline and the two-act structure, I started blurring all the parties together. If the play is over when Fiona leaves the party, then Fiona is always at the party until the very end. The shifts in time would make the audience feel slightly disoriented, just like

the characters as they continue to drink. The characters of the play will be trapped in a never-ending party, just like Fiona is trapped in the velvet ditch.

### ***The Fear of Finishing***

In December of 2019, a friend from high school passed away unexpectedly. I was shocked and devastated. I was writing a play based largely on my own memory, and the act of remembering had become painful. Suddenly, writing about myself and my friends felt dangerous and risky. The Velvet Ditch was proving to be the most personal play I had ever written, and the reality of being so vulnerable was terrifying. The fear of writing my own story was holding me back. Luckily, in the summer of 2020, I took Memoir in Playwriting with Megan Gogerty. I could not have asked for a better class to take as I was completing my thesis. The class allowed me to explore a variety of different approaches to autobiographical work in the theatre and ultimately, allowed my play to take its final form.

The plays we read for this class all encouraged me to keep going, keep writing. I felt a certain kinship to Doug Wright when I read his essay following the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *I Am My Own Wife*.

“At first, the notion appalled me: depicting myself on-stage? It felt like the most flagrant act of narcissism a writer could commit. Furthermore, I was a playwright, not a memoirist; I hid my true self behind invented characters far more colorful and articulate than I.” (Wright & Mahlsdorf 2005 93)

*The Velvet Ditch* is not based on a historical figure, and I do not have interview transcriptions like Doug Wright. But I was dealing with the same insecurity and fear of depicting myself onstage. Maybe no one would know I had substituted the name Fiona for Kate, but I would

know. I needed to take the advice given to Wright by Robert Blacker, although its purpose would certainly apply to my play differently. I am an expert on myself and my own experiences. If I could focus on what my protagonist felt and experienced, maybe the truth of the play would shine through. (Wright & Mahlsdorf 2005 83-101)

The class discussed structures and strategies and read many different plays that utilize some form of memoir, but one lesson came up again and again: Don't let the facts get in the way of the truth. Characters are *characters*. Even if I perform a one-person show and use my real name, I am still playing a character. I was the writer, and I was in charge. I could choose what to share with the audience and what I kept to myself.

When my class read Lisa Kron's play *Well*, I was surprised that Lisa Kron had played herself in the Off-Broadway and Broadway productions. Over the course of the play, Kron's character struggles with telling the story of her own childhood and accurately portraying her memories with a company of actors. Kron (as a writer, and the character) is constantly redefining the relationship between the players onstage and the audience. Sometimes, she is an omniscient narrator looking back on the past, but occasionally the actors in her company are not responding as she expected and Kron the character is left without answers. My favorite moment came when the character of Lisa's mother removes her wig and admits to being an actress playing a part. Kron is immediately vulnerable and relatable because this is life as the audience knows it, unsure of what comes next.

In the Preface to *Well*, Kron writes:

... I would go to see their show and see something riveting. Of course most of the shows (including my own) were far from perfect. But what I remember about the theater I saw in those years is a series of the most extraordinary,

appalling, entertaining, *dynamic* moments, which left me eternally fascinated with what happens on a stage when you put someone there who does not know the rules. It began to seem to me that this was a key to viscerally feeling the power of theater ... (Kron 2006 9)

*Well* begins simply, a narrator will tell us about her mother and her youth, and the players will act it out for you. But what is simple at the beginning, is quickly complicated and the play the audience is experiencing goes off the rails. I loved this chaos. It felt very similar to what I wanted my audience to feel when watching my play. I had described the inspiration as looking back on a time in your life and everything feels like a blur. It was the blurry, disjointed chaos I wanted the audience to experience. Guided by Lisa Kron and the other playwrights I read in my memoir class, I was ready to infuse my party play with the haze of distant memory.

### ***A Memory Play***

I wasn't writing realism, and I wasn't writing memoir. After multiple drafts, I realized *The Velvet Ditch* is a memory play. Much like Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, my protagonist is looking back at certain time in her life to assess how she came to move on from her hometown. *The Velvet Ditch* is one long, drunken party that lasts for years and represents a time in Fiona's life when she felt out of control and lost.

In the production notes of *Glass Menagerie*, Williams defines the expressionistic nature of memory:

Being a "memory play," *The Glass menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. Because of it's considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part. Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one

valid aim, and that is a closer approach to the truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. (Williams 2)

I remember returning to my hometown during college breaks. I went away to school while so many of my high school friends stayed behind. I wanted to fit in so badly. I wanted to feel like I was a part of something, but those parties only made me feel like an outsider. I wanted the audience to experience what I had felt – being an outsider who was somehow a disappointment and a failure. If everyone around you seems happy and content, why aren't you? Of course, I know now that is an illusion; everyone is living through their own struggles.

Fiona would experience the entire play as memory, much like Williams' own Tom:

Tom: The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. (Williams 2)

Although Fiona never addresses the audience directly, every scene is from her unique point of view. The memory of catching lightning bugs haunts Fiona when she moves home after college graduation. She longs for the simplicity of her childhood but cannot manage to recreate it despite returning to her hometown. Like Tom's fiddle player, Fiona's memories are punctuated by different soundscapes. The sound of childhood is a symphony of crickets and cicadas in the Mississippi summer while the sound of new adulthood is filled with rock songs that fill a small

house and urge everyone to dance. The audience can even hear the loud beating of Fiona's heart every time she longs for Charlie, her high school sweetheart.

Every event of the play is from Fiona's point of view. The play itself is the act of looking back and reminiscing. Fiona is often confused about what is memory and what is the present, but it's all an illusion. It's all memory. And the moment she steps off the stage, the moment she leaves the play, that is the moment she is truly transformed. That is the moment she is free.

### ***A Play of My Own Creation***

That first full length play I wrote was inspired by a crime that occurred in Holly Springs, Mississippi (only 20 miles from my hometown of Oxford). I couldn't stop thinking about the story. *78 Miles to Graceland* allowed me to write about Mississippi and the unique characters I had known all my life, without having to write a play even remotely autobiographical. I was terrified to share that play with anyone, but ultimately, I submitted it as my writing sample when applying to the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University. A place where I've spent five years searching for my authentic voice as a playwright.

Every course, every professor, and every project asked me to examine the kind of theatre I wanted to make and pushed me to try a variety of styles and genres outside of my comfort zone. It wasn't until writing *The Velvet Ditch* that I found myself back in Mississippi, finally able to write a play that could hold many of my complicated, personal feelings about where I am from and the people who live there.

Every play is a challenge. There is a certain level of mystery that I feel whenever I begin a new project. But the Playwright's Lab has greatly demystified the writing process. With my foundational knowledge from Script Analysis and Narrative Theory, I have become a more

prepared writer and an infinitely more helpful audience member for the creators of other new work. Every class that I have taken at Hollins and every professor that I have worked with have shown me a different and valuable way to approach my own writing as well as the plays of others.

But the Hollins experience moves beyond the boundaries of the classroom. With my professors and fellow students, I have learned how to be supportive member of a creative community. My experiences directing and acting in the Summer Festival has given me the gift of working on a new play from a different perspective. I am leaving Hollins as a confident theatre artist and collaborator, and collaboration is truly the most magical and transformative element of theatre.

*The Velvet Ditch* is different from all the plays that came before it, and yet this play feels more me than any of the others. My Hollins community has exposed me to many ways to tell a story – as many ways as there are individuals in my program. And by sharing and exploring with that community, I am more open to other artists' points of view, while also feeling more secure in my own vision. I attended Hollins to learn how to write, but I am leaving as a theatre artist who found her voice.

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