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Tricks Are For Kids: Comedy in a Technologically Saturated World

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Tricks Are For Kids:
Comedy in a Technologically Saturated World

by

Edward Stenson

A THESIS

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Abstract

TRICKS ARE FOR KIDS: COMEDY IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY SATURATED WORLD

By Edward Stenson

The following manuscript and the accompanying artist's statement examine the process of creating and developing the play *Tricks Are For Kids*. This play examines themes of alienation and disconnection within the modern home, using technology as an entry point to explore these concerns.

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Introduction

I began work on my thesis project believing it would develop in a specific direction, however, over the course of two years, this direction changed several times, taking my work into unexpected territory. This new territory was far from what I initially had in mind, yet, when I look back, there is a through-line connecting my interests. This seems to be common in the process of writing. Sometimes, a story idea translates easily to the page; protagonists, antagonists, goals, desires, the fundamentals of story, appear seemingly unbidden. Other times, initial inspirations are not so easily reconciled into a dramatic form. In this case, a more esoteric path to creation is followed. Every writer has likely encountered this second circumstance, in which a story idea resists easy interpretation on the page. Likewise, each writer likely has different strategies and techniques to aid in the development of this story idea. Developing these strategies and techniques was a large part of my thesis project. This process was at times frustrating, as it seemed my story idea refused to coalesce no matter which tactic I employed, yet this experience has helped me develop tools and insights regarding writing and the creative process which will be invaluable as I continue with my career.

Despite the unexpected transformations my thesis play would undergo, several concerns remained constant. From the beginning I was interested in the concept of family, specifically the relationship between parent and child. This parent-child relationship would contain the central conflict, an inter-generational differences in values. The second constant was the issue around which the familial conflict would take place: technology. While technology, as an overt presence, would mostly disappear from the story, the idea of materialism, and the modern or “new,” would remain.

The result of my inquiries is *Tricks Are For Kids*, a comedic investigation of alienation and dehumanization within a middle-class household. Martha and Paul Richtig are a stuffy middle-class couple, maintaining a civil, yet stilted existence. Their world is turned upside down when their seventeen year old daughter Lisa asks them to help pay for a trip to Los Cabos, Mexico. Spurred on by an absurd desire to be “parent-y,” Martha and Paul go to extreme lengths to fulfill their daughter's wishes. However, Martha and Paul ultimately discover that being “parent-y” is simply too much work, and decide to pawn Lisa off on their bookie, Tank. Despite this upheaval, Martha and Paul quickly return to their normal routine, revealing apathy and a disconnection from natural processes.

Tricks Are For Kids suggests that, in a modern first world increasingly oriented around materialism, and increasingly cut-off from tangible, concrete interactions, relationships, even at a family level, have become insular, solipsistic, and apathetic. The result of this is, not only a disconnection from friends, families, and lovers, but an absurd dissonance between perception and reality. The characters in my drama attempt appropriate or expected behaviours, yet, removed as they are from natural processes, pervert these actions and precipitate dysfunctional, even violent, outcomes. My aim is to suggest a connection between materialism, the modern family, and a growing existential distantiation.

This artist statement will detail how, from initial inspiration to final draft, *Tricks Are For Kids* evolved from a play about technology to a commentary on modern alienation and disconnection. In the first chapter I will discuss creative process, specifically how, through a consideration of alternative artistic approaches and a re-examination of the relationship between protagonist, goal, and theme, my perspectives on subject matter and technique evolved. The second chapter will examine my research into human-robot interaction,

illustrating the influence of this material on the final play, even after it moved away from an overt engagement with technology. The third chapter will discuss the decision to move to an absurdism paradigm, suggesting a relationship between subject matter and style, as well as drawing connections between the historical period this movement originated and present day. In conclusion, I will consider the connection between my initial goals and the final play, discoveries made along the way, and the process by which I got there.

Chapter One: The Evolution of an Idea

The path from inspiration to final draft is rarely straightforward. Each writer uses different techniques to develop story. These techniques may include making charts, outlining, writing character monologues, improvising. Often, through these techniques, the building blocks of narrative are uncovered, and writing can begin. However, sometimes these techniques fail to reveal the necessary information. At this point it becomes incumbent to move beyond the familiar strategies and seek answers elsewhere. In developing my thesis play I was forced to reconsider my usual practices. My preconceptions and expectations of story proved insufficient as I attempted to shape my narrative. Accordingly, I was forced to adjust. This experience was often difficult, lacking the security and familiarity of routine, I often felt lost, uncertain I would be able to write a play at all. However, in the end, I have completed a play, as well as developed new strategies and techniques to aid me in future projects.

While this process of experimentation helped me develop new strategies for writing, it also pushed my narrative into unexpected places. At times, this was difficult to accept. Not only did I feel a sense of commitment to my original concept, I also felt disappointment in my seeming inability to make those ideas work. Part of the experience of developing *Tricks Are For Kids* was letting go of initial expectations. Writing is not a linear process, mistakes and missteps must be allowed for, and ideally, embraced. This exploration forced me to reflect on my creative process, leading to a consideration of intuition, chance, and adaptation. This chapter will examine this creative process; how, from initial inspiration to final draft, my idea evolved, leading me to unexpected, yet, ultimately, rewarding, conclusions.

I began with a simple idea: the introduction of a sentient robot into a middle-class household. This robot, a representation of the “new” and the commercial, would act as catalyst for a familial conflict, one that would ultimately result in the robot replacing the parent as authority figure. This construction, essentially a love triangle between parent, robot, and child, seemed dramatically sound. The Daughter, as protagonist, had a clear goal: the obtaining of the robot. The antagonist, the Mother, similarly had a clear goal: trumping the robot for the Daughter's affection. In between would be the robot, a gadfly disturbing notions of family, home, and inter-personal connection.

This idea was inspired by personal experience. Growing up, my Mother and I held different, even oppositional, views on materialism. I was a brand baby, hyper aware of trends and marketing. Whatever was new and cool, advertised on TV or in magazines, I wanted it. My Mother, like many parents, viewed these various items with skepticism, seeing them as “spurious offerings of today's consumer culture” (Bloch, Lemish, 284). Predictably, I would beg for these items and, predictably, I would usually be rebuffed. This conflict remained a constant through my upbringing. Though the battleground would change (from video games to toys to CDs to clothes), it was usually defined by my embrace of the commercial and my Mother's converse hostility.

Though my interest in video games and toys has waned, I have remained fascinated by the phenomenon of mass culture. As I get older, video games, toys, clothing brands, and TV shows seem to be an important point of connection in my generation. Many of my friends contextualize their childhoods through interaction with these various trends. It seemed to me that, possibly even more than school, my generation has been educated or informed through our engagement with mass culture. This idea, that, as much as my

parents, mass-produced culture had raised me, became the basis for the story I wanted to tell. It was from this insight that I posited a robot (a representative of this mass culture) as a potential replacement for a parent.

In developing the character of the robot, I immediately thought of the 1990s' toys the Furby and the Tamagotchi. These toys were exactly the type of mass-produced item my Mother railed against. I remembered, as a junior high student, how these toys had sparked debates about the infiltration of consumerism into the classroom. I remember hearing that Tamagotchis had even been banned in schools. These toys featured flashy ad campaigns, saturating the media with images of beaming kids joyfully playing with these devices. Investigating these two toys, representing mass-production and generational schism, seemed like a perfect starting point for my project.

Beyond being generationally divisive and mass-produced, there was another aspect to Furby and Tamagotchi I found interesting. Both of these toys engendered an empathetic response, one of caring and nurturing, that transcended the typical engagement with mass-produced products. The Furby and Tamagotchi, seemed different than simply toys, they were digital or robotic creatures, “a character which is essentially cute, innocent, lovable and 'good'” (Bloch, Lemish 287). As “characters” they blurred the line between inanimate toy and animate, living thing. The research of Sherry Turkle, which I will discuss in-depth in Chapter 2, revealed that children considered these toys “sort of alive,” different than a teddy bear or action figure (“Authenticity” 505). This alternative state of being spoke to the unique (at the time) technological space these toys occupied. Both toys engaged the user, requiring care and nurturing for survival and development. For the Furby this care and nurturing was required to “teach” it, so it could learn language, for the Tamagotchi it was to

sustain its life, as if it were a biological entity. This aspect of nurturing and care, as well as empathy, demonstrated most palpably when a Tamagotchi got sick or a Furby suffered an injury (“Authenticity” 508), seemed noteworthy, as it transcended the typically dispassionate relationship between user and object. It was in the guise of these “creatures” that I began fashioning my robotic character.

Initially, I imagined the robot as a sort of sophisticated Furby, one with expanded powers of language and physical mobility, yet with the same “cute, innocent” appearance. This robotic creature would compete with the Mother for the affections of the Daughter, and out of this conflict I envisioned my drama taking shape. As soon as I began writing, however, problems emerged. In theory, I viewed the Daughter as the protagonist, yet, on the page, the Mother seemed to take over. Furthermore, both of these characters felt one-note in their approaches. The Daughter would beg and the Mother would refuse. Beyond this, they seemed to have few abilities. However, the biggest problem lay in the characterization of the robot. I was intent on modelling this figure after the Furby, yet, I quickly realized, this posed problems. One of these problems was practical. How could you effectively stage a mobile, furry, three foot tall robot with very specific vocal cues? I considered using a puppet but that seemed too artificial. The thought of somehow using an actual robot was enticing yet far-fetched, it was likely that such an expensive and intricate requirement would impede the likelihood of production. In the interests of the story, I tried to forget about practical considerations, and focused only on fashioning the narrative in the most truthful manner.

Despite allowing myself this freedom, the story failed to coalesce. The robotic character felt like a wrench sticking in the gears of the narrative. I was having difficulty

generating any tension with this character. It seemed as soon as the robot entered, all narrative trajectory ground to a halt. My supervisor suggested that perhaps the story would fare better without the robot, that the true heart of the story lay in the conflict between Mother and Daughter. I suspected that he was right, but still felt compelled to incorporate the idea of technology. My insistence was borne partly out of stubbornness, but also from a belief that somewhere in my inspiration lay a key to unlocking the story, one I simply hadn't found yet. I continued to write, experimenting with the form of the robot character, changing it from a Furby-like toy to a humanoid android to, later, a simplistic robot. I also tinkered with setting, reoriented the forces of antagonism, protagonism, anything that might instigate the impulse to move forward. None of these changes helped. Finally, I decided to take my supervisor's advice and abandon the technological element.

Part of my decision to drop the theme of technology resulted from a changed perspective. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, my research into human-robot interaction altered certain beliefs I held about the role of technology. This changed viewpoint made it difficult to reconcile the narrative as constructed. Another motivating force was the growing sense that, as my supervisor had suggested, the heart of the narrative concerned the conflict in values between the Mother and Daughter. Repeated attempts at developing drafts had revealed this to be my primary curiosity. The robot had refused to integrate into the narrative, it was not sufficiently “adding to the conversation” (Martini 14). At this point, needing to clarify my creative intentions, I stripped the narrative to its bare essentials. I needed to understand the fundamental building blocks of my story, before building it up into a fully fledged piece. Anything extraneous needed to go, for, as Aristotle states: “A part that does nothing by being present or left out is no *part* of the whole” (qtd. in Atherton,

Baxter 81). I still had hopes that, through a pared down construction, I might understand how to integrate technology, yet I understood the need to set it aside, at least momentarily. Even with this change, I wasn't sure what direction the project would go, but it seemed important to trust my instincts, and to pare down the story as much as possible.

The creative act can be fickle. Sometimes, as the saying goes, a story “writes itself.” Other times it takes more work, deeper investigation. My initial inspiration had proved mercurial, yet, rather than abandon it altogether, I sought to understand it. Allowing for change within the creative process, I would come to realize, can be tricky. It is important to avoid preconceptions and remain open to insight and discovery. Part of this is allowing for the possibility of divergence. I have never been a highly structured writer. I don't generally depend on charts or even detailed outlines. While I believe in the necessity of story structure, in the past that structure has generally evolved from a sense of character or theme. In this instance, however, my story idea resisted interpretation and I was left to seek new strategies.

INTERVIEWER: How does the idea of a novel come to you?

NORMAN MAILER: I don't know that it comes. A more appropriate image for me might be that I start with the idea of constructing a treehouse and end with a skyscraper made of wood. (qtd. in Marcus)

Artistic creation is not always straightforward, conscious, or wholly rational. Many projects falter mid-way or change in radical, unexpected manners. The act of writing itself may instigate these changes, characters on the page may behave differently than in the writer's head. Similarly, conflicts conceived through outlining or diagrams may not generate the expected tension. The crucible of the page is different than that of the mind,

accordingly adaptation is often necessary as imagined drama takes tangible form. This adaptation may come as a result of an increased clarity or may reflect changed perspectives. Author Norman Mailer describes the shift in his political perspectives during the writing of *Barbary Shore*:

“I started *Barbary Shore* as some sort of fellow-traveller, and finished with a political position that was a far-flung mutation of Trotskyism. And the drafts of the book reflected these ideological changes so drastically that the last draft of *Barbary Shore* is a different novel altogether and has almost nothing in common with the first draft but the names” (qtd. in Lennon 85)

The possibility of “ideological changes” can complicate the artistic process. Expectations are likewise altered and the resultant product may be vastly different than expected. These changes in perspective or process may evolve through writing, research, or simply reflection. They may also be a result of rifts in artistic intention. The resultant conflict can be difficult to reconcile, yet, if embraced can produce interesting work. In the following quote, Mailer acknowledges a division between conscious and unconscious intent in the motivation to write *Barbary Shore*:

“*Barbary Shore* was built on the division which existed then in my mind. My conscious intelligence, as I've indicated, became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters: murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in *Advertisement*. Since the gulf between these conscious and unconscious themes was vast and quite resistant to any quick literary coupling, the tension to get a bridge across resulted in the

peculiar feverish hothouse atmosphere of the book. My unconscious felt one kind of dread, my conscious mind another, and *Barbary Shore* lives somewhere between. That's why its focus is unearthly. And of course this difficulty kept haunting me from then on in all the work I did afterward.” (qtd. in Lennon 86)

Mailer's acknowledgment of “difficulty” suggests this is not a pain-free process. Reconciling dissonant intents, as Mailer points out, does not lead to “quick literary coupling.” In this gulf of understanding, as conclusions seem incompatible, it can be difficult to proceed. As I considered my thesis project I felt a similar rift between conscious and unconscious intentions. My stated objective had failed to harmonize with the more subliminal act of writing. I was left to consider my intentions, as well as new artistic approaches.

Fate, if embraced, can become a powerful ally of the artist. Random occurrence, and resultant epiphany, plays a part in many famous artistic revelations. French author Marcel Proust's epic seven novel series *In Search of Lost Time* (or *Remembrance of Things Past*) was apocryphally inspired by the “episode of the madeline,” in which a flood of childhood memories was triggered by the taste of a cookie. Japanese author Haruki Murakami alleges to have discovered the “secret” to writing novels while watching a baseball game. Sometimes, fate intervenes later into the creative act. Filmmaker Terence Malick, mid-way through the shooting of the 1978 film *Days of Heaven*, “switched his schedule around so most of the shooting was done during what we called the 'magic hour'” (Gray 2). This choice was made to take advantage of the unique light effects in the prairie environment where they were shooting. Cinematographer Nestor Almendaros, who would win an Oscar for his work on the film, said that, “[Malick's] intuition and daring probably made those

scenes the most interesting ones visually in the film” (qtd. in Gray 2). This choice, now considered a stroke of artistic genius, was, at the time, viewed as disastrous, reducing the available shooting time to little more than an hour a day. This choice was based on little more than “intuition and daring,” yet produced a film now considered a monumental cinematic achievement (Gray 2).

I have always been attracted to the intersection between creativity and chance. In the first year of my MFA, for my final project in DRAM 607, “Methods in Theatre Research,” I collaborated with a programmer friend to develop a random text generator called the “script_bot.” The “script_bot” used a scene from the film *Casablanca* as a basic template for a dialogue between two characters. Most particulars were removed from the text, making it as neutral as possible (while still somewhat coherent). The resultant script looked like this:

_CHARACTER_1

Hello, _CHARACTER_2_NAME.

_CHARACTER_2

Hello, _CHARACTER_1_TITLE _CHARACTER_1_NAME. I never expected to see you again.

(He sits down and is ready to play.)

_CHARACTER_1

It's been a long time.

_CHARACTER_2

Yes, _CHARACTER_1_FORMAL. A lot of _NOUN under the _NOUN.

_CHARACTER_1

Some of the old songs, _CHARACTER_2_NAME.

_CHARACTER_2

Yes, _CHARACTER_1_FORMAL.

These generic fields (_CHARACTER_2, for example) would be filled randomly from a data pool. The following is the CHARACTER data pool:

CHARACTER,NAME,TITLE,FORMAL

ASTRONAUT,Buzz,Commander,Sir

SPACE_MECHANIC,Larry,Mr.,Sir

FLIGHT_SURGEON,Benny,Dr.,Sir

SPACE_COWBOY,Jim,Mr.,Sir

Each time the program ran, a slightly different iteration of this simple dialogue would be produced. Though the “script_bot” had only rudimentary capabilities, it represented an

attempt at introducing randomness into the writing process, one I believed could be expanded upon to interesting effect. Part of the aim of the project was to challenge the idea of “formula,” the notion that some writers do little more than plug new data into existing formulas, producing ready-made scripts. This was an attempt to suggest the complexity of successful narrative structure, even if, like many Hollywood narratives, it relied upon cliché or convention. I also believed that, if further developed, a text generator such as the “script_bot” could create unique, unexpected texts. The “script_bot” represented a desire to pursue alternative avenues towards narrative creation, avenues less dependent on the conscious, analytical mind, something I would ponder as I looked for answers pertaining to my thesis project.

The “script_bot” was partly inspired by the sonic experiments of the music producer, Brian Eno. Eno, considered the creator of ambient music, and a producer for musical acts such as U2, the Talking Heads, Paul Simon, and Roxy Music, has designed unique processes to allow chance and randomness into his creative process. In 1975, Eno, along with artist Peter Schmidt, published *Oblique Strategies*, a deck of cards containing aphorisms such as, “Make an exhaustive list of everything you might do and do the last thing on the list” (“Oblique”). Based on the Tarot and the ancient Chinese system of geomancy the I Ching, Eno used these cards to overcome creative roadblocks and inspire new directions and insights (Taylor). If, during the process of recording a band, momentum stalled, or ideas seemed slow in forthcoming, Eno would have a band member randomly select a card from the deck. Whatever instruction was on the card, for instance, “state the problem in words as clearly as possible,” would be undertaken, the results hopefully breaking the creative deadlock and inspiring new directions (Eno, Schmidt).

Facing a block of inspiration, Eno's ideas seemed liberating. Having struggled to diagnose the problems facing my play using analytical methods the possibility of finding inspiration in more esoteric practices was exciting. I still felt that, in my initial inspiration, lay a story I wanted to tell. This feeling was based on intuition, and a trust in the subconscious impulse of creativity. One aphorism in *Oblique Strategies* spoke to this instinct, as well as the role of failure in the creative process: "Honour your error as a hidden intention" (Eno, Schmidt). The concept of "hidden intention" felt emblematic of my journey to this point, as I still viewed my initial inspiration as containing something yet unrevealed. Keeping this message in mind, I attempted to understand my inability to incorporate technology as, not a dead end, but a diversion towards a more focused creation.

However, before I moved forward, I needed to contend with the issues remaining, namely, who the true protagonist was. Lacking this knowledge, I knew it would be difficult to proceed. Defining the hero, as well as the hero's goal, is generally the starting point for a drama: "That which the hero requires *is* the play" (Mamet 22). The goal comes to define the hero, shaping theme, plot, essentially the whole of the drama. In my earlier drafts, the Daughter was theoretically the protagonist. However, though she had a clear goal, the obtaining of a robot, this goal was quickly, and fairly easily, obtained. A major reason the robot had been ineffectual was this construction. The robot *was* the goal, not an impediment or implement towards the obtaining or achievement of a goal. Thus, the robot's entry effectively terminated the dramatic tension, after which, there was no story to tell:

"Everything we learn in a theatrical narrative we learn as characters act upon their very specific, very selfish, sometimes conscious, but often unconscious, desires.

When these desires have been fulfilled, or perhaps to the contrary, these desires

have been well and truly rebuffed, then there is nothing left to write.” (Martini 26)

My early drafts suffered from several things, but this too-early satisfaction of desire was likely the most detrimental. In lieu of a goal, there was no narrative. Thus, as I moved forward I realized the importance of defining the sources of protagonism and antagonism, and giving clear, obtainable goals to both forces.

“The protagonist is someone who is defined by their desire” (Martini 114). The interrelationship of character, desire, and plot was typified for me by Shakespeare's *Richard III*. I had studied *Richard III* in DRAM 671, “Selected Problems in Playwriting,” a course with a focus on character and goals. Richard III has a clear goal: power. Through his clear, direct pursuit for power he reveals an astonishing range of ability. From the battlefield to the bedroom, Richard is revealed to be a consummate strategist, malevolent, malicious, and often myopic. He pursues his aim with single-minded determination. Eventually, his strategic brilliance gives way to bloodthirsty paranoia, yet, even as he is going down, his relentless desire for power continues to motivate his actions. Richard's dextrous and cunning capabilities are perhaps best displayed in his initial scene with Lady Anne. In this scene, Richard woos Lady Anne, an impressive feat considering he has just murdered both her brother and father. Richard, manages this feat through his use of poetry, rhetoric, and courage. Richard rhapsodizes upon Lady Anne's charms, positing her beauty, incredibly, as the true cause of his murderous behaviour:

Your beauty was the cause of that
effect;
Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep
To undertake the death of all the world,

So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom. (Shakespeare 256)

Later, after he has won Anne's hand in marriage, Richard gloats over his impressive feat of persuasion:

To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
 With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
 The bleeding witness of my hatred by;
 Having God, her conscience, and these bars
 against me,
 And I no friends to back my suit withal
 But the plain devil and dissembling looks,

And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! (Shakespeare 257)

Richard's joy at this feat reveals not only his gluttony for power (the wooing of Anne being another cog in his plan to usurp the throne), but his enthusiasm for competition. Richard loves the opportunity to best another, even if this other is to be his future wife. This brazen lust for competition, and lack of remorse for the consequence, defines the theme of the play: live by the sword, die by the sword.

In the case of *Richard III*, every aspect of the play, from plot to character to theme, emerges from Richard's pursuit of his goal. The action of the play unfolds in an organic fashion, but only because the hero's goal has been clearly and logically stated. Keeping this in mind, I set about defining, not just the protagonist, but their goal.

Speaking about the “MacGuffin,” a euphemism for the hero's goal, David Mamet says the following:

It is sufficient for the protagonist-author to know the worth of the MacGuffin. The

less specific the qualities the MacGuffin are, the more interested the audience will be. Why? Because a loose abstraction allows audience members to project their own desires onto an essentially featureless goal. (Mamet 29)

Richard III's goal is effective because it has both a concrete and abstract, symbolic aspect. Usurping the throne of England is a specific desire, while power is an abstract, symbolic one. The authoritative qualities of the throne make it, literally, a seat of power, thus the usurpation of it imbues the usurper with both symbolic and literal power. In assigning goals for my characters, I faced the challenge of representing abstract, symbolic goals, with concrete, tangible ones.

I decided to position the Mother as protagonist. In earlier drafts, she had dominated the action, emerging as the more powerful, more clearly defined force. I trusted this instinct and chose to situate the narrative around her. Although the Mother had come to dominate the action in these earlier drafts, I had struggled to create a concrete goal for her. She had an abstract desire, to obtain the affection of her Daughter, but I needed a concrete way to represent this.

With the goal of the Mother in consideration, I decided to momentarily step away from my thesis project and work on a different play. This play, entitled *Walter and Claire's Life Together* (then *The Family Facsimile*), was not intended to be a substitute for my main project, but a sort of ur-thesis, an exploratory piece, allowing me to experiment and pursue divergent interests. *Walter and Claire's Life Together* centred around similar concerns: the domestic space, a family unit, materialism. Dealing with these related issues in a manner tangential to my thesis helped open up possibilities and outcomes I hadn't previously anticipated, and helped take some of the pressure off the creative process.

Walter and Claire's Life Together concerns the plight of the titular characters, a pair of vacuous yuppies, as they attempt to create a cookie-cutter life together. Piece by piece they build their “life,” starting with IKEA bookshelves and ending with a baby. However, consumed by material pursuits, they fail to adequately take care of the child and it dies. They respond to this tragedy with apathy, seeing it as little more than an opportunity to buy more things.

In lieu of a fully-formed thesis play, I directed a staged reading of *Walter and Claire's Life Together* at Taking Flight, the University of Calgary's festival of student work under its then name *The Family Facsimile*. It was staged twice and both readings received intriguing responses. Of particular interest to me was the response to the death of the child. In both readings, this event elicited gasps from audience members. Given the satirical, even absurd, tone of the play, I found this surprising. I had been struggling with the dramaturgical placement of the death and had even considered not including it at all. However, the strong response caused me to reconsider its value.

The death of the child, and the parents' milquetoast reaction, was a representation of disconnection. The parents, consumed by material pursuits, were alienated from parental instincts. This tragedy represented only a different avenue towards material consumption. Although I had consciously sought to illustrate the isolating, dehumanizing effects of materialism in this play, I hadn't conceived it as a conflict between parents and child. The daughter in *Walter and Claire's Life Together* was a minor character, another “acquisition” made by the parents. However, the strong reaction to her death in the staged reading caused me to consider whether her role might not be amplified, making her a more active participant in the narrative. It was from this perspective that I returned to writing my thesis

play. This insight, that materialism created alienation and a desensitization towards the value of life, with the daughter representing the natural, and the parents the material and artificial, helped establish a basic opposition around which to develop my narrative.

I returned to what would become *Tricks Are For Kids* with renewed confidence and insight. Working on *Walter and Claire's Life Together* had helped to clarify the interests and perspectives I wished to communicate in my thesis play and provided me with some objective distance. I began writing, positioning the parents as protagonists and a daughter as antagonist. After working on *Walter and Claire's Life Together*, I decided to use a Mother and Father as dual protagonists, as opposed to a single parent. This was to make my commentary more generic, as well as to suggest a traditional, “normative” conception of family. The parents, representing material, artificial desires, would be the protagonists, while the Daughter, a representation of the natural, would be the antagonist. The instigation for conflict remained a material desire, a crass “MacGuffin,” suggesting conspicuous consumption. It was around this idea, that materialism causes disconnection from natural processes, that my play took shape. The parents, pursuing their goal with absurd, often dangerous tactics, precipitate violence and eventually, separation from their daughter. This separation is, like the child's death in *Walter and Claire's Life Together*, treated with apathy and indifference, suggesting a complete break with the process of parenting. Finally, with this more concrete understanding of character, goal, and theme, the story began to coalesce and I was able to realize my play.

My path towards creation was unpredictable and at times confusing. It was difficult to trust that I was on the right path, keeping faith in process and not attempting to force square pegs into round holes. Eventually, I would arrive at my destination, even if this

destination was different than anticipated. Learning to accept and embrace oppositional, conflicting ideas became one of the chief obstacles of this experience. My difficulty in reconciling my initial inspiration was frustrating, yet forced me to expand my understanding of writing and the creative process. Dramatic writing is often represented as a straightforward, didactic process, the opposition of two forces, the hero's pursuit of a goal. While a clear definition of these elements is essential, the manner in which these conclusions are arrived at can be much less clear cut. My experience writing this play has both changed and reaffirmed my understanding of story and structure, helping me embrace conscious and unconscious processes of artistic creation. These processes reflect the necessity for critical investigation and openness in the act of creation. The development of my play reflects both of these impulses, illustrating the possibility for change, adaptation, and discovery.

Chapter Two: Transience and the “disposability of life”

“We are largely on our own in the postmodern world in general, and in our relationships with the new means of consumption in particular.” (Ritzer 132)

“We have become accustomed to a 'culture of the disposable.' We are referring here not only to a lifestyle consisting of objects that render life more 'convenient', through the use of paper plates, plastic utensils, disposable diapers and the like, but to objects which once had a value when used, and were even passed down from one generation to another.” (Bloch, Lemish 290 - 291)

I began this project with a focus on technology. This focus directed my research, and the content of my initial writings, however the findings were different than anticipated. These findings suggested alternative directions for my project, ones which, ironically, led me away from an overt engagement with technology. Eventually, I would abandon this overt engagement, yet the research I conducted on digital toys and human-robot interaction remained a major influence. This research suggested a connection between alienation, disconnection, and transient attitudes engendered by consumer culture. These attitudes represented a growing tendency towards the “disposability of 'life'” (Bloch, Lemish 292), a perspective that characterizes much of our engagement with the modern world. This insight directed the development of *Tricks Are For Kids*, positing a disposability, not just of the type of 'life' characterized by a digital pet like the Tamagotchi, but towards the value of human relationships and familial connection.

My research began focused on “smart toys,” in particular the Furby and Tamagotchi. I hoped that an investigation of these devices would inform the development of my technological character. Despite a familiarity with both of these devices, I sought to

better understand the impulses behind their creation and the effect they had on their user.

These iconic 1990s toys, were a then unique fusion of digital or robotic technology and traditional childrens' plaything. The Furby is a furry, volleyball-sized creature with large wiggling ears, originating from the titular planet Furby. The user interacts with the Furby, teaching it language (though it already speaks the strange, gibberish-like “Furbish” of its home planet), talking to it, and even spoon feeding it. This interaction helps acclimatize the Furby to the customs and language of planet earth. The Tamagotchi, (in Japanese, “Tamago” means “egg,” while “tchi” is an “endearing, diminutive” (Bloch, Lemish 284)) is a “handheld, egg-shaped digital pet,” (Ruckenstein 89) requiring the care and nurturing of its user to survive. Without the devotion and caregiving of the user, the Tamagotchi dies. Both of these toys were designed to create intimate relationships with the user, a friendship or dependency linking the user through empathy and a desire to nurture and care.

Both the Furby and Tamagotchi instigated “crazes,” becoming pop cultural phenomenons, selling out all over the world and sparking a dialogue about disposability, transience, and the nature of modern relationships (Bloch, Lemish 283). These toys suggested a growing inter-relationship between childhood and materialism: “consumption appears to have become a necessary and indispensable context in which children develop” (Ruckenstein 86). The indispensability of material consumption to childhood development sparked fears about kids becoming too dependent or influenced by the mass-produced offerings of the toy industry: “the Tamagotchi is the epitome of a mass produced article, whose purpose is to transpose relationships experienced in 'real life' to a preprogrammed item, divorced of all meaning in and of itself” (Bloch, Lemish 285).

Early in my investigations into the Furby and the Tamagotchi I was led to the case studies of Sherry Turkle, an MIT psychologist and specialist in human-robot interaction. In the 1990's, Turkle conducted studies with smart toys, (including the Furby, as well as the My Real Baby, and a robotic seal-like creature named Paro) giving them to elementary school aged children and elders in a care facility. These toys, which Turkle defines as “relational artifacts” (“a computational object explicitly designed to engage a user in a relationship” (“Authenticity” 502)), elicited fascinating, and often disturbing, responses from their users. One elder participant, Andy, found that his My Real Baby, “resembled his ex-wife Rose: “something in the eyes”” (“Authenticity” 509). Another senior user, commented about Paro, “I don't care if he's real or not. I love him” (“Relational Artifacts” 359).

In another study on the computer program “Eliza,” an early relational artifact which could “mirror users' thoughts and... seemed consistently supportive,” Turkle commented that “Eliza not only revealed people's willingness to talk to computers but their reluctance to talk to other people” (“Authenticity” 502). With the growing interactive and responsive abilities of technology, Turkle wondered “is there a chance that human relationships will just seem too *hard*?” (“Authenticity” 514).

Turkle's findings suggested a modern type of solipsism and disconnection not necessarily created by technology, but certainly drawn out by it. My original intention had been to understand the catalysing effect of technology, with the expectation that technology altered or influenced behaviours. However, Turkle's research implied that these tendencies existed with or without the intrusion of technology. Technology acted as conduit, not cause, for these tensions. This insight was surprising. I had expected research to illustrate the

influence and effect of interactive, characterized technologies such as the Furby, yet it seemed the suggestion was that this technology was largely benign. Relational artifacts were a mirror that reflected the user's inner life, but did not shape it. This finding made characterization difficult. If, as the research suggested, technology didn't act, but was acted upon, how could I suggest the agency that necessitated a dynamic dramatic character?

This insight complicated my attempt to develop a technological character. The suggestion that relational artifacts, much like the one I hoped to dramatize, were benign, seemed to contradict my thesis, that technology (representing mass culture) served a pedagogic purpose. Yet, while this obstacle seemed to complicate my anticipated thesis, it contained an intriguing suggestion. The tensions revealed through these one-sided interactions with relational artifacts seemed to often concern family. Furthermore, the caring, empathetic behaviour users exhibited towards their relational artifact, seemed to be the same qualities lacking in their interactions with family or friends. This connection between alienation and disconnection and family was interesting. The responses that relational artifacts elicited were representations, not of the influence of technology, but of a common feeling of alienation and disconnection. Take for example the user Melanie. Melanie, a grade three student, nurtures her My Real Baby and her robotic dog Aibo with great care and devotion and says that “they make me extremely happy” (“Relational Artifacts” 352). Turkle suggests that Melanie's “feelings that she did not have enough of her parent's attention led her to want to nurture a robotic creature” (“Relational Artifacts” 351). In another instance, Ruth, an elder recently estranged from her son, projects her depression onto Paro, stroking him and saying “Yes, you're sad, aren't you. It's tough out there. Yes, it's hard” (“Authenticity” 511). These users, lacking a caring, empathetic relationship with their

family, supplanted it with a facsimile relationship with a computational toy. While technology in these cases acted to tease out feelings of isolation or depression, the real problem seems to emanate from familial estrangement.

Melanie's statement that she is “extremely happy,” despite the discord with her parents, suggests not only loneliness and disconnection, but a rupture between perception and reality. This disconnect between reality and statement seemed to be indicative of a disconnect between desire and need. In a society in which seemingly all needs have a material solution, what use are human relationships? Turkle's research illustrates the tendency to rely on “things,” even when a human relationship could provide the same function. For Andy, the aforementioned elder, his My Real Baby is safe and trustworthy, unlike his family and friends who he feels don't visit enough. The My Real Baby will never abandon Andy, and thus he feels a level of security endearing him to the object, a level of security a person could perhaps never provide (“Relational Artifacts” 356). In another respect, the desire of children to nurture and protect these relational artifacts, and their quick insistence on doing so, suggests misplaced desire, a yearning to care and connect, yet a lack of appropriate places to place such desire. Upon being introduced to Kismet, a robot from the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, one child remarks “I'm going to take care of you and protect you against all evil” (“Authenticity” 508). In another study, children worry over the robot Cog's “wounds” after one of its arms breaks (“Authenticity” 504) This “Eliza effect” as Turkle dubs it, suggests not a lack of empathy but a perverted application of it.

“Perverved application” would become a key point of interest as I moved forward. These studies on human-robot interaction revealed a longing for inter-personal connection, yet a paucity of opportunity in which to do so. As such, interactive, responsive toys fulfilled

the gap created by isolation and alienation. In lieu of humans to interact or connect with, many of the users in the study created deeply intimate relationships with their respective relational-artifacts. Often, the qualities and desires the users projected onto these objects mirrored the very same things they felt lacking in their relationships with family or friends. The objects then functioned as surrogate friends, lovers, brothers, parents, to the point that when given an option between their real families or the relational artifact, they would choose the latter. All of this suggested a disconnection from natural processes and, in the desire to rely on technology to facilitate once human functions, a tendency towards dehumanization.

The early smart toys, like much of the modern robotics industry, originate from Japan. The Tamagotchi was created (apocryphally) by a Mother because she did not have enough space to get her children a real pet (Bloch, Lemish 284). The replacement and transposition of biology with technology is a reflection of pressures created by an increasingly urbanized, mechanized world. Smart toys, and consumer robots like the Sony “dog” Aibo, are a response to these pressures, representing solutions to the stresses of a hyper-consumptive market economy:

The tropes of ‘healing’ and ‘soothing’ (iyasy, iyashikei) are common in the marketplace of toys and both children and adults are offered relief from the stresses caused by consumer capitalism in the form of playthings. Toys encode and produce intimacy and belonging, which is otherwise missing from everyday lives; intimate relations with digital pets, techno-intimacy, are said to provide children and adults with fun and release from the everyday stresses of market society. (Ruckenstein 90)

The “encoding” of human emotion as a function of market society further pointed to a

process of dehumanization. I began to consider how this process, which served to substitute natural processes, functioned within the home. Turkle's case studies revealed individual responses that suggested alienation and disconnection, yet did not provide a window to how these tensions might play out inter-personally. The interaction of a family, alienated and disconnected through their engagement with material culture, seemed an interesting point of entry. Although, this construction excluded a technological aspect, the themes I wished to explore were connected.

In March of 2013, I attended a performance of *Sayonara* and *I, Worker*, at the Canadian Stage in Toronto. These plays, presented as part of a showcase of Japanese theatre and dance, are examples of “Android Robot Theatre,” featuring android and robotic “performers.” *Sayonara* and *I, Worker* are the brainchild of Oriza Hirata. Hirata, a playwright and director, works in conjunction with the Osaka University robotics lab to create his work. Hirata's work responds to similar concerns as the Tamagotchi, foreshadowing the introduction of widespread robotic technology into everyday life. In particular, Hirata's plays are a response to his belief that “within 10 years, robots will live with the elderly as caretakers” (qtd. in Doherty). *Sayonara* and *I, Worker* anticipate this entrenchment of robotic technologies into the home, suggesting possibilities for friendship, even compassion, asking how “when a robot comes into our life or society, how that will change the perception of people” (qtd. in Doherty).

Sayonara concerned a conversation between an android and a near-catatonic patient, who, due to nuclear exposure, is dying. The android, named Geminoid F, is a caretaker to the dying woman, who has been abandoned by her parents. The play ends with Geminoid F reciting a poem to the woman as she slips into death. *Sayonara* leans heavily on the

juxtaposition between human and android. Everything about the play, from the symmetrical staging to the monotone inflection of both performers, invited a comparison between the two characters. I found this juxtaposition disturbing. The comparison between a dying human and a barely animate (yet highly lifelike) android seemed to me suggestive of a thinning boundary between human and technology, as well as the metaphorical extinction of humanity. However, Hirata claims that his aim is not dystopian but an attempt to acclimatize humans to the presence of sophisticated robots: “the most important thing is that most of the audience feel that the robots or androids actually have a soul” (qtd. in Doherty). I did not feel like the Geminoid F had a soul, in fact, “her” presence was highly unnerving.

The second play of the evening was the more lighthearted *I, Worker*; about two small worker robots (similar in appearance to R2-D2) employed with cleaning a young couple's apartment. Eventually, one the robots becomes depressed and no longer feels like working. At the same time, the young husband also becomes depressed and takes to skulking around the house, even hanging out with the depressed robot. Just as in *Sayonara*, Hirata creates an overt link between human and robot, mirroring the behaviours of the young man and depressed robot. However, in contrast to *Sayonara*, where the human seemed to assume robot traits, in *I, Worker*, the robot assumes a traditionally human trait, depression.

Hirata's attempt to create juxtapositions seemed to extend to the content of the plays themselves. *I, Worker* was comedic and the characters more vital (despite being depressed), while the tone of *Sayonara* was sombre and the characters cold and reserved. In packaging these plays together, Hirata presented two possibilities or perspectives on the potential for

human-robot interaction. Both plays invited comparisons between human and robot, yet, in showing two sides to this dichotomy, did not suggest a solitary outcome. Despite this balanced approach, I came away from these performances unsettled.

I had gone to Toronto with the hope that these performances would clarify possibilities for the dramatization and possible utilization of robotic technology. However, these plays seemed to point more towards the dehumanizing quality of modern life. Despite Hirata's calmativ aims, I saw in both plays bleak outcomes for the future. In *Sayonara*, this future suggested death and abandonment, while in *I, Worker*, the outcome was depression and isolation. Furthermore, while the utilization of robotic technologies in these plays was novel, it was far from dynamic. The Geminoid F in particular felt lifeless. Despite the strikingly human appearance, the Geminoid F's presence was cold, isolated, and alienating. Although her function in the play was in aid of humanity, I could not read the narrative as anything but apocalyptic. Similarly, *I, Worker* seemed to forecast a hermetic, isolated future, for both mankind and technology. The comedic depiction of depression, afflicting human and robot alike, underscored serious expectations of disenchantment and existential crisis.

While these plays did not provide me with the inspiration I had hoped for, they enforced the themes of disconnection and alienation that would propel me forward. Again, technology seemed to act as a benign mirror for these existential tensions. In both plays, technology was the conduit through which feelings of isolation and alienation were revealed, yet there was no suggestion that technology was responsible for the creation of these states. Rather, like many of Turkle's case studies had suggested, these plays linked feelings of isolation or depression to an alienation from family.

Viewing these plays also served as a barometer for the performance capabilities of robotic technology. My disenchantment, even revulsion, at the presence of the Geminoid F, caused me to rethink my intention of depicting android technology. My experience at seeing “her” confirmed the prediction of early roboticists, who suggested an “Uncanny Valley,” in the appearance of robots. This “Uncanny Valley” described an effect wherein the appearance of a robot would become steadily more pleasing as it became more lifelike, until a certain point when, the resemblance becoming too close, the viewer would experience disgust and fear (Mori, MacDorman, Kageki 100). This experience chastened my hopes for compassionate engagement with a highly lifelike android, as well as the possibility for plausibly suggesting such a figure as a replacement parent. Furthermore, the obvious limitations of even this sophisticated android restricted the possibilities for dramatic characterization. After seeing these performances I would begin to move away from a direct engagement with the theme of technology. Research continued to suggest alternative directions for my project, directions inspired by technology yet not requiring its depiction. *Sayonara* and *I, Worker* confirmed these directions, again positing a sense of alienation and existential vacancy in modern “market society.”

I had hoped that an investigation of the Furby and the Tamagotchi, as well as my exposure to “Android Robot Theatre,” would help me to develop my themes of technology in my play. However, my findings in these fields proved much different than expected. I had anticipated results that highlighted positive aspects of engagement with these devices, yet all of the research spoke to qualities of solipsism and transience. It was this solipsistic, one-sided quality to the interactions between user and toy that was most surprising. Rather than revealing pedagogic or communicative dimensions to the user experience, research

suggested these toys acted mostly as mirrors for the users personalities. However, I would eventually see in this solipsistic, disposable tendency a window through which to re-imagine my narrative. I extended this notion of solipsism and disposability into the home, detailing a situation in which a set of parents, so concentrated on material concerns, are practically oblivious to the tragic fate of their young daughter. Through this lens of a pervasive and totalizing material culture, I envisioned a family for whom the abandonment of a child held equal weight to the finishing of a newspaper or an eBook. It was an understanding of this myopic attitude of disposability that would transform my drama from a piece concentrated on technology to one examining a modern family. This notion that, in the modern first-world, many people live desensitized, denatured, to tragedy, violence, pain, could not have emerged without my research into technology. Again, this journey illustrates possibilities of ideological, thematic adaptation over the course of a writing project. Though unexpected, my findings are connected to my initial impulse to investigate the connection between family and material culture. I now see in the impulse to explore technology, particularly domestic robotics, a desire to explore the modern or “new.” Although I would set technology aside in the final iteration of my play, it served as the thematic conduit through which I could engage these concerns. While this approach at times felt misleading or confusing, it is illustrative of the subconscious process of inspiration. In technology was the seed for different, related concerns. Through research these concerns revealed themselves, resulting in the final shape of this project.

Chapter 3: The Influence of Absurdity

As the focus of my play shifted from technology towards an investigation of disconnection in the modern family, so too did the stylistic paradigm. The writing and directing of *Walter and Claire's Life Together*, as well as a continued consideration of my research into human-robot interaction, clarified a fundamental concern with alienation, solipsism, and an inability to communicate in the modern world. In the wake of these new insights, the construction of my play became more absurdist in nature. This was not a calculated decision, but a gradual shift, yet in hindsight I can see the direct influence of several plays and the kinship between my project and the Theatre of the Absurd movement as a whole.

Absurdism was defined by Eugene Ionesco as something that “has no purpose, or goal, or objective” (qtd. in Esslin 4). This movement arose in the “vacuum left by the destruction of a universally accepted and unified set of beliefs” after World War II (Esslin 6). Factors such as the “decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic and biological progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrational and unconscious forces within the human psyche, the loss of a sense of control over rational human development in an age of totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction” all contributed towards the decline of traditional Aristotelian theatre “in which the action proceeds within a fixed and self-evident framework of generally accepted values” (Esslin 6). As a reaction to established systems of religion, science, politics, and art, Absurdism rejected logical, ordered interpretations of the world, suggesting instead a universe based on “imbalance and incongruity” (Lieberman 89). Dramatic representations of this universe tended to focus on alienation, disconnection, and the inability to communicate, and the “deep sense of human

isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition” (Esselin 4).

It is possible to imagine that we are living in a time of instability similar to, or an extension of, that from which absurdism emerged. The anxieties expressed in the work of Oriza Hirata and the case studies of Sherry Turkle suggest existential destabilizations similar to that following World War II. The emergence and proliferation of technology has complicated traditional understandings about what it means to be human. Events such as 9/11 and the 2008 stock market collapse, as well as escalating environmental concerns, have led to a distrust of core institutions and a rethinking of the status quo. On a less apocalyptic scale, the ever-growing mitigation of inter-personal relationships through technology and social networks has disturbed traditional means of communication and socialization, giving rise to fears about systematized insularity and disconnection.

Absurdism, as a response to instability and flux, suggests societal ill, but also cosmic imperative. The Absurdist's concern with isolation, alienation, and the inability to communicate is not remedial or prescriptive, but observational. The fundamental position of absurdism is not that the world (or by extension, man) is “bad,” but rather that it is illogical. This illogic cannot be fixed or righted, it is a law of the universe. “The theatre of the absurd does not so much present a simple problem as illustrate the incongruity of the world as it is” (Lieberman 90).

Absurdist playwright Arthur Adamov described an event that inspired the creation of his first play *La Parodie*:

“I began to discover stage scenes in the most common-place everyday events. (One day I saw) a blind man begging; two girls went by without seeing him, singing: “I closed my eyes; it was marvelous!” This gave me the idea of showing on stage, as

crudely and as visibly as possible, the loneliness of man, the absence of communication.” (qtd. in Esslin 4)

Adamov's observation, tragic and completely ordinary, summarizes the absurdist position. Here are two poles of existence: suffering, pain, destitution, and carefree joy, happiness, levity. Within this tableau the poles exist simultaneously, yet independent, almost unaware of each other. This description is not a commentary on social injustice, it is an acknowledgment of a fundamentally dissonant reality. The cause of the “loneliness of man” is not other men, but a cosmic imperative, something as natural as the setting of the sun. This view of cosmic imperative is central to the Absurdist worldview; this is not to say that man is above judgment, only that our actions can only affect so much. Likewise, in this construction, “the absence of communication” is not fingered as a societal ill, something to be remedied through government programs or community works, it is a condition of existence. This does not not make life un-tragic. The plight of the blind beggar is unfortunate, but the responsibility for this fortune is not placed upon the two carefree young women.

This viewpoint seemed to confirm my research findings, that alienation and disconnection, despite being often made apparent through technological apparatus, were pre-existing conditions. In Adamov's construction, pain, suffering, and most importantly, miscommunication, do not emerge as the result of anything but represent the natural order of the universe. This inherent dissonance between happiness and suffering, and the young women's obliviousness to it, suggested a condition of apathy central to the modern world. In this dualism between need and unconscious apathy I saw a potential for dramatic tension around which the plot of *Tricks Are For Kids* would take shape. Extending Adamov's

tableaux, I posited the parents as the unseeing, self-consumed teenage girls, while (perhaps less sympathetically) their young daughter occupied the position of need suggested by the blind beggar. This tension would provide the basic conflict at the centre of *Tricks Are For Kids*.

In finding a model for this conflict, I looked to plays with similar concerns. The most prominent, and likely most recognizable, influence was Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. I was introduced to Pinter's play in DRAM 679, "Studies in Modern Drama II," as part of a unit on absurdism and had admired its obtuse blend of menace and humour. Like the story I had been attempting to write, *The Homecoming* situates its drama solely in a commonplace middle-class living room, and concerns a small family unit. This living room exists as metaphorical corollary for country, family, social class. Pinter, using a dark, oblique comedy, suggests that beneath the commonplace appearance of the home lies a dense entanglement of hatred, violence, and sexual malevolence (Bernard 116). These entanglements are revealed through "violent inversions of conventional morality," an upsetting of stereotypes and expectation that create an atmosphere of dread and disorientation, as expectations are undercut (Warner 351). Pinter employs this subversion to deliver a complicated commentary on the middle-class family as well as then contemporary England and America (Warner 349). I connected strongly to the themes of disconnection, alienation, and apathy in Pinter's play, feeling there was kinship to my research into human-robot technology.

Like the case studies of Sherry Turkle, *The Homecoming* suggested a vacancy and isolation at the heart of the modern home. Pinter's play, first produced in 1965, anticipates the experiential disconnect so apparent in Turkle's studies, suggesting that the family's

“spiritual poverty” is the result of a modern world ruled by “reason and science” (Warner 341). In this vacuum of religion and belief, an existential dread arises, defined in William Barrett's study of existentialism *Irrational Man* as a spiritual dislocation:

...man's feeling of homelessness, of alienation has been intensified in the midst of a bureaucratized impersonal mass society. He has come to feel himself an outsider even within his human society. He is trebly alienated: a stranger to God, to nature, and to the gigantic social apparatus that supplies his material wants. (35-36)

Pinter, ironically, presents this homelessness as being rooted in the home. Although the origins of this alienation are linked to a “gigantic social apparatus” their effects reverberate within the family unit. The source of this “homelessness” resides beyond lack of faith or “mass society.” Barrett identifies this epistemological crisis as resulting from a lack of tangible, experiential reality (6-7). Teddy, the prodigal philosopher “come home” from America, occupies, facilely, a position of intellectual authority, yet, lacking true engagement with the world beyond books and ideas, cannot offer opinions, and is only able to “operate on things and not in things” (Pinter 46). Barrett claims this inexperience with subjective reality leads people “away from the ordinary and concrete acts of understanding in terms of which man lives his day-to-day life,” (6-7) and down a path leading to alienation and solipsism.

The case studies of Sherry Turkle demonstrate people suffering from a distinct lack of “ordinary and concrete acts of understanding;” alienated from friends and family, many of the users in her studies substituted the facsimile companionship of a semi-animate toy. In place of ordinary relationships, the users engaged in one-sided, solipsistic interactions with their toy. The toys, while comforting, are a replacement or substitute for a longed for inter-

personal intimacy.

In *The Homecoming*, Teddy is the representative for America, and by extension, the new world (Warner 348). He is an academic, someone operating in the intangible world of theories and ideas. He is contrasted with his father, Max, who, despite his brutality, has tangible knowledge and experience:

Max has an "instinctive under-standing" of the horses that goes beyond the rational organization of knowledge according to the racing forms to a full experience of the horse itself, an experience that does not reduce the horse to some form of abstraction. (Warner 343)

Warner suggests that it is this abstraction that creates existential distantiation. Max's sons, and chiefly Teddy, have no true connection to reality, experiencing life second hand, mitigated by newspapers, books, or television.

Nearly fifty years after Pinter's play was first staged, the world has become infinitely more abstract. Relational artifacts such as the Furby (now an anachronism themselves) display the urge to mitigate the experience of friendship and caregiving through a "rational organization of knowledge," in this case a mechanized, digital pet. Ironically, in the case of the Furby, this means that even tangible, physical interactions are in a sense artificial. Social media networks, and the internet at large, are an even more sophisticated and all-encompassing representation of this desire. Many relationships and interactions now take place solely in the abstract environment of cyberspace. Within this environment, the user is free to create their reality, to engineer their relationships, interactions, even persona, tailoring experience and existence towards their specific, insular desires.

Tricks Are For Kids doesn't aim to suggest that the internet is responsible for the delusional, hermetic behaviours of the parents, however Martha and Paul, at least initially, experience reality second hand, through the newspaper and an iPad. Similarly, Martha and Paul's notions about relationships and proper behaviours seem unnatural, originating from vague notions of expectation or decorum. Even these vague ideas aren't fully acted upon, requiring too much effort or activity. Like Andy in Sherry Turkle's study, for whom the reliability and security embodied by a robotic doll was preferable to actual human contact, they enact predictable, rote behaviour. Parenting is one such rote behaviour, and Martha and Paul engage in it with a distinct lack of awareness. Alienated as they are from true interaction or empathy, they perform a facsimile of parenthood. These two representative middle-class parents, incapable of experiencing normative parental instinct, are divorced from experiential knowledge, similar to the characters in *The Homecoming* or the users in Turkle's studies.

This disconnection from reality is suggested in the opening dialogue between Martha and Paul. Paul reads Martha a story from the newspaper about the artificial insemination of a cow by computer. They regard this development with muted amusement, their mild responses betraying a stuffy, spaced-out reserve. I wrote this simply to be a bit of “odd” dialogue to open the play and illustrate the arid interaction of the Richtigs; however, as the play developed, I realized this interaction spoke to Paul and Martha's disconnection from reality and biological processes.

The Richtig's are disconnected from sex and natural parental desires. They speak about parenting and about its inherent expectations yet any performance of these acts is done from obedience to expectation. While the idea of a cow being inseminated by a

computer is perhaps not strictly realistic (at least, not to my knowledge), the transplantation of primary biological functions, like reproduction, by machines and technology is an ever increasing reality. The term “too posh to push,” a growing trend for mothers to have C-sections instead of natural births to preserve their pre-conception figure, sums up an antagonistic stance towards the difficult or, perhaps “unsightly,” aspects of our biology. Extending this idea, the end of *Tricks Are For Kids* reveals the parents true apathy towards the fate of their daughter, despite their previous actions towards helping her, ultimately they discover the work of parenting too difficult to perform.

Martha and Paul are the primary representatives of absurdity in my play. Their normative, conservative appearance is contrasted with bizarre, often childish behaviour. They make decisions based on impulse and at times near hysteria. Christopher Durang's short play *Naomi in the Living Room*, served as a useful model for this hysterical vision of parenting.

Like *The Homecoming*, *Naomi in the Living Room* takes place, unsurprisingly, in a single, living room setting. Durang's play is much more overtly comedic, even slapstick, than *The Homecoming*, however both works employ similar strategies. As Pinter does in *The Homecoming*, Durang plays against expectation, creating surprising observations about families, material culture, and the modern home.

Durang's short drama depicts a young man and his wife come home to visit his parents at Christmas. The entire play occurs as the young man and his wife sit on the couch while the mother, Naomi, rants and raves. Naomi is a maniac, screaming, throwing things, forgetting her husband's name, interrupting her son constantly, and displaying a strange obsession with Hummel figurines. Her son, and his wife, are, in contrast, quite reserved.

They react to Naomi's hysteria with mild surprise or barely at all.

Naomi's hysteria indicates psychosis but also a callous indifference to everything outside the domain of her living room. She is brutally frank, grotesquely self-interested, and supremely callous. The suggestion is not that Naomi is evil, but unaware. The following exchange demonstrates Naomi's hysterical tone as well as the fundamental disinterest she holds towards her son and daughter-in-law:

NAOMI: Tell me all about yourselves, do you have children? (*Sits, listens attentively*)

JOHNNA: We had five children but they all died in a car accident. The baby sitter was taking them for a ride, and she was drunk. We were very upset.

NAOMI: Uh huh. Do you like sitting on the couch?

JOHN: Mother, Johnna was telling you something sad.

NAOMI: Was she? I'm sorry, Johnna, tell it to me again.

JOHNNA: We had five children...

NAOMI: (*Tries to concentrate, but something impinges on her consciousness*) Wait a minute, something's bothering me!!!! (*She rushes over to the little stuffed Santa pig, snatches it up and throws it against the wall in a fury*) This belongs in the kitchen, not in the living room. The living room is for living, it is not meant for sincerely designed but ludicrously corny artifacts! Kitsch! (*She sits down again*) Do you like Hummel figurines?

JOHN: Very much. Now that the children are dead, Johnna and I have begun to collect Hummel figurines, especially little boy shepherds and little girl sheperdesses.

NAOMI: Uh huh, uh huh. Isn't that interesting? Excuse me if I fall asleep. I'm not tired yet, but I just want to apologize in advance in case your boring talk puts me to sleep. I don't want to offend you. (*Screams*)

AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!! I'm just so bored I could scream.

Did you ever hear that expression? AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!

Really, children these days have no sense. In my day we killed them. Stop talking about your children. (*Naomi 4*)

Naomi's mood swings, and screaming hysterics, are of course absurd. Durang inverts the normative figure of the middle-class mother into something highly abnormal, playing against traditional maternal notions of generosity, warmth, and altruism. Naomi's incredible callousness when reacting to the tragic deaths of John and Johnna's children, and her insistence on constantly re-focusing the attention onto herself, betray both an apathy to the fate of others and an all-consuming solipsism. It seems that Naomi, focused on the arrangement of porcelain minutiae, is unable to empathize or engage. Her obsession with material objects, and the precedence they have over her own family, speaks to a perverted sense of value and the same disposable attitude towards life represented by the transience of the Furby and Tamagotchi.

Naomi's apathetic attitude towards life is a recurrent theme in this short play.

Beyond her disinterest in the death of her grandchildren, Naomi displays a highly inhumane attitude towards the fate of her husband, whose name she continually fails to remember:

NAOMI: Hubert! Rupert! Leonard! (*To them*) I hope he's not dead. I wouldn't know what room to put him in. We don't have a dead room. (*Naomi 3*)

Naomi's desire to "put" her potentially dead husband somewhere aligns him with the

Hummel figurine, as well as her other material possessions. This construction posits a lack of difference between a human being and an inanimate object. Dehumanized as such, a dead body is little more than a possession to be scuttled away somewhere.

Like *The Homecoming*, the inversion of expectation is central to *Naomi in the Living Room*. From the setting (a living room), to the characters (an outwardly normal family), to context (Christmas-time), everything communicates the normative and Rockwell-picturesque. However, once the drama begins, it is clear that this is a disturbed world, a world of “moral dismay” (Gussow, 9).

Absurdity is used in these plays to suggest inherent disfunction at the centre of the home. This disfunction is often communicated through attitudes about death. Naomi is shockingly casual about both the possibility of her husband's death and the tragic fate of her son's children. Similarly, in *The Homecoming*, the characters react quite mildly to the false news of Sam's death:

JOEY. He's not dead.

LENNY. He probably was dead, for about thirty seconds.

MAX. He's not even dead! (Pinter 78)

These carefree attitudes towards tragedy represent a “disassociation of cause and effect on the largest scale,” forming an obtuse “super-real” logic (Jiji 435). “The result is that the play seems very funny, while our subconscious awareness of the appropriateness of its seeming madness to our primordial unconscious processes is very satisfying” (Jiji 433). Durang acknowledges this balance between humor and dark commentary in his work stating that he “asks for a complicated response. I ask people to laugh at things that I know are also serious and tragic. And some people hate that” (“Suspending” 38).

The “disassociation of cause and effect on the largest scale” may have real world corollaries in our technologically saturated worlds. The transposition of experience to artificial domains often results in a dampening of consequence. Expressing romantic feelings may be difficult and frightening in person, yet, through an intermediary technology, one in which you can carefully construct both context and content of the information, this act becomes safer. Apps like Tinder take the act of “picking up” and transpose it to an abstract, digital space. Within this space there is little consequence; rejection is facile, as is interaction, the brief co-mingling of one picture with another. The space that Tinder occupies is artificial, dissociated from reality, yet modifies behaviour of the real-world users. Such a drastic reordering of social behaviour, in essence the courtship ritual, divorces participants from the “instinctive under-standing” Max represents in *The Homecoming*. This is the shift Baudrillard and Benjamin anticipated from authentic to replica to replica of replica; eventually the authentic, in this case, tangible experience, is lost.

Absurdism, emerging in the wake of World War II, reacted to a breakdown of traditional institutions and the shift towards a dehumanizing mechanization. This dehumanizing tendency presaged the modern world in which many natural processes have been transposed into a digital realm. The result of this is the dampening effect through which actions lose consequence and accordingly value. My research into technology suggested alienation, as well as the disposable quality of modern relationships. These findings contained a kinship to the historical motivations behind Absurdism. The elements of alienation and disconnection so prevalent in the case studies of Sherry Turkle and the plays of Oriza Hirata were reflected in the worldview of the Absurdists, who posited this

quality as inherent to a modern, industrial world removed from spiritual and organic understandings. This ideological connection would inform my shift towards an absurdist paradigm. As research illuminated new concerns within my work, it became clear that the stylistic model I had been employing was unsuitable. *The Homecoming* and *Naomi in the Living Room* served as models for new stylistic and thematic directions, while clarifying my motivations and illustrating the relationship between paradigm and commentary. A deeper understanding of this connection between style and message emerged as my perspectives changed. As other aspects of my play evolved, so too did the paradigm. This resultant evolution suggests a fundamental interrelationship between dramatic elements. Just as I found plot and theme developing out of a clarification of the protagonist's desire, so too did paradigm emerge from a deeper investigation of commentary.

Conclusion

The development of my play has been a process of discovery. I did not follow a straight line from conception through creation, yet I now understand this to be representative of the creative instinct. Inspiration is a starting point, not a blueprint. Ideas and insights suggested from inspiration can be unexpected, even contradictory. The less linear aspect of this process means consideration of these contradictory elements, even at the risk of altering an expected outcome. The prospect of alteration can be frightening. For me, it necessitated venturing into unknown territory, beyond the comforting familiarity of routine and experience. Part of the struggle in reconciling my intentions was a fear of this unknown. Initially, I resisted the direction my project took because it did not conform to my preconceived notions about writing. My prior writing strategies and techniques suggested a model that proved incompatible to the material I was developing. Moving forward meant rethinking and expanding upon preconceptions, as well as developing new techniques for approaching my play.

My difficulties realizing this project forced me to consider less traditional strategies towards creation. My initial inspiration proved difficult to understand and resistant to familiar methods of interpretation. In order to deconstruct the motivations and curiosities contained in my inspiration I looked to alternative artistic processes. Stochastic approaches such as Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies* helped to expand my understanding of creative technique, allowing for an increased awareness and embrace of intuition, chance, and unconscious intent. Eno's practices were a key influence as I sought to understand the “hidden intentions” within my work. His embrace of unconscious, potentially latent, motivations helped fortify me as I searched to find a foundation for my work.

The embrace of divergent, even contrary ideas applied to the stylistic direction of my play as well. I began this project envisioning it as a realistic domestic drama. As my perspectives regarding the material changed so too did the manner in which I wished to present it. As themes of alienation and dehumanization began to emerge, realism increasingly felt ill-suited to the material. In Pinter's *The Homecoming* and Durang's *Naomi in the Living Room*, I found a combination of commentary and comedy I wished to emulate. These plays, using obtuse, unreal paradigms, suggested an existential disconnect central to the modern home. The presentation of this disconnection was linked indelibly to style. A kinship to the historical motivations of the Absurdist movement and an increased understanding of the link between theme and style affirmed my shift to this paradigm. Altering the stylistic paradigm of my project helped clarify my intentions. The Absurdist worldview suggests an inherent irrationality to existence. This irrationality is represented in Absurdist drama through a dissonance between expectation and outcome. In this viewpoint I found a model suited to my depiction of alienation, apathy, and disconnection.

These themes of alienation, apathy, and disconnection emerged out of my research into human-robot technology. Of all of the changes that occurred during the course of my thesis project, my relationship to the theme of technology was likely the largest. I began my thesis project focused on technology. I believed that my narrative would take shape around this concern. However, as I began to research and later write, the results didn't coalesce with my original intentions. I struggled to reconcile these divergent motivations. Part of this struggle was the attempt to shoehorn emergent ideas with a preconceived structure. I felt a duty to my initial motivations and sought to reframe my findings to reflect this thinking. My resistance to the directions suggested by research reflected both frustration and fear. I

was frustrated by my inability to cohere my findings to an expected structure and fearful at the prospect of abandoning expected outcomes.

The most difficult aspect of this process has been learning to rethink the role of expectation. Initially, I perceived my inability to achieve a specific intention as a failure, rather than an organic result of research, inquiry, and the creative process. Openness to the possibility of change requires courage and humility. Artistic creation is a product of discovery, and, as I have discovered, sometimes these discoveries prove contrary to an initial thesis or intention. Accepting and understanding these discoveries can be difficult, yet doing so represents an honest engagement with the creative process. This honest engagement may result in a product that is conflicted, even chaotic, as in the case of Mailer's "unearthly" *Barbary Shore*. I believe that *Tricks Are For Kids* may yet evolve. A continued clarification and simplification of character desire would likely aid in delivering my intended commentary. Similarly, continued refinement may be necessary to ensure all elements are "adding to the conversation," rather than simply adding narrative bulk. Despite the possibility for refinement, this play represent a long and considered inquiry and its conclusions are, I believe, hard-won. While this play is far from what I initially imagined it would resemble, I am proud of my perseverance and my commitment to honestly engage with my material, even at the risk of radical change.

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TRICKS ARE FOR KIDS

Written by Ted Stenson

2014

CHARACTERS:

MARTHA – Middle-aged, prim

PAUL – Middle-aged, stuffy

LISA – Seventeen, typical

TANK – Rough-looking, wears a leather jacket, maybe a scar on his face

ACT ONE

A middle-class living room. PAUL sits on a large leather recliner. MARTHA sits on the couch. PAUL is reading the newspaper. MARTHA is reading off an iPad.

PAUL

Well, how about that.

MARTHA

How about what, honey?

PAUL

They've discovered a new way to inseminate cows using - get this - computers.

MARTHA

No.

PAUL

Yes. They just plug a - you know - whatchamadoodle, into the cow, and download some sort of *sequence*.

MARTHA

Oh my.

PAUL

And then, a few months later, a little cow pops out.

MARTHA

Calf.

PAUL

Hmm?

MARTHA

A baby cow is a calf.

PAUL

What did I say?

MARTHA

A little cow.

PAUL

Oh. Right. A little calf pops out.

MARTHA shakes her head.

MARTHA

My goodness, what will they think of next?

PAUL

I wish I knew, Martha. I really wish I knew...

They return to their reading. A few moments pass. PAUL puts down his newspaper.

PAUL

It just occurred to me, as we were talking about cow insemination, and then calving, and then the proper term for "baby cow," that I don't know where our daughter is. I suppose it must have been the whole birthing, *child* thing, that reminded me...

MARTHA

Mmm.

PAUL

Do you know where she is?

MARTHA

Who?

PAUL
Lisa.

MARTHA
Our daughter?

PAUL
Yes.

MARTHA
Oh. I don't know. Out, I suppose.

PAUL
Mmm. Yes. I suppose that makes sense. If she's not here, she's probably out. Good deductive reasoning, Martha. I commend you.

PAUL returns to his paper. A few moments pass. He puts the paper down again.

PAUL
I wonder *where* she's out though. Do you think it's somewhere, I don't know, unscrupulous?

MARTHA
Unscrupulous?

PAUL
Yes. A venue lacking in scruples.

MARTHA
Paul, you're being cryptic.

PAUL
Like, I don't know, an underground nightclub. Or an - opium den.

MARTHA
I'm sorry. I don't understand where you're going with this.

PAUL
I'm just wondering where she is.

MARTHA
Where who is?

PAUL
Our daughter.

MARTHA

Lisa?

PAUL

Yes!

MARTHA

Well, I don't know, Paul. Where does she like to go?

PAUL

I'm not sure. Perhaps if I listened to her stories instead of drifting off into a melancholic stupor every time she speaks I might have some clue, but as it stands I'm drawing a blank.

PAUL chuckles.

MARTHA

Sorry, what did you just say?

PAUL

Hmm?

MARTHA

I didn't hear what you said, I drifted off into a melancholic stupor.

PAUL

Well, it's not really that important.

MARTHA nods. They return to their reading. A few moments pass. PAUL puts down his paper again.

PAUL

It's just - what if she's dead?

MARTHA

Who?

PAUL

Lisa.

MARTHA

Our daughter?

PAUL

Yes. What if she's dead?

MARTHA

Well, it would be a shame.

PAUL

Yes. It would be a shame.

Pause.

PAUL

What would we do?

MARTHA

What do you mean?

PAUL

If she died. Lisa. Our daughter.

MARTHA

Well, I guess we'd weep and wear black and arrange some sort of burial.

PAUL

Burial?

MARTHA

Sure. For her body.

PAUL

You wouldn't cremate?

MARTHA

Oh, we could cremate I suppose.

PAUL

I think I'd like to cremate.

MARTHA

Fine. We cremate then.

PAUL

Good.

Their daughter, LISA, enters.

PAUL

Lisa, you're not dead!

LISA

No...

PAUL

Oh, what a relief. We were just discussing what we'd do if you *were* dead. It was a grim scene.

LISA

Okay...

LISA takes off her backpack, steps inside.

MARTHA

So, honey? How was your day? Apart from not dying, which we've already covered. *Ad nauseum.*

MARTHA glares at PAUL.

LISA

(Shrugging) Good. I guess.

MARTHA

Where did you go? What did you do? Who did you see?

LISA

I went to school. Like I do every day.

MARTHA

Oh. Well, what did you do there?

LISA

Learn?

MARTHA

Is that all? Who did you see? What was the social scene like?

LISA

I saw my classmates. And friends.

MARTHA

Excellent.

PAUL

Good for you, Lisa. Friends are important. I wouldn't know, because I don't have any, because I'm insufferable, but I've been told as much.

MARTHA and PAUL smile at her proudly.

LISA

Could I talk to you guys about something.

PAUL

Right now?

LISA nods.

PAUL

Well, I was sort of in the middle of an article. It's about cow insemination. Fascinating stuff.

MARTHA glares at PAUL.

PAUL

What?

MARTHA

Of course you can talk to us, honey. What about?

LISA

Well -

PAUL

Wait. Do you want to talk to us because something is wrong?

LISA

No.

PAUL

Are you sure?

LISA

Yes.

PAUL

Is it - Are you pregnant?

MARTHA

You're pregnant?

LISA

I'm not pregnant.

MARTHA
Oh my God, she's pregnant!

PAUL slams down his newspaper.

PAUL
Pregnant!?!

MARTHA buries her head in her hands.

MARTHA
My poor baby...

LISA
I told you, I'm not pregnant!

PAUL
I can't believe this...

LISA
I'M NOT PREGNANT!!!

MARTHA looks up.

MARTHA
Wait, what?

LISA
I'm not pregnant. God...

MARTHA
You're not?

LISA
No!

PAUL
You're positive?

LISA
Yes!

PAUL
Because sometimes people don't think they're pregnant and then one day - when they're taking a tinkle - whoosh! Out pops a baby.

LISA
I'm positive. (Beat) I've never even -

LISA stops herself.

MARTHA
Never even what?

LISA looks down, blushes.

MARTHA
Oh...

PAUL
Never even what? What are we talking about here?

MARTHA
She's never, you know -

MARTHA makes an in-out motion.

PAUL
Never poked someone? I don't follow.

MARTHA
Paul...

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
She's never freaked. (Beat) Done the nasty. (Beat) FUCKED.

PAUL
Oh...

PAUL looks at LISA.

PAUL
Never? Not even with the neighbour boy? You spent a lot of time up in that tree house when you were little...

LISA
Dad!

PAUL
What?

LISA
No, I never had sex with the neighbour boy!

PAUL
Well, even if you haven't - what did you call it, Martha? Funked?

MARTHA
Freaked.

PAUL
Right. Even if you haven't "freaked,--" that's no guarantee you're not with child.

MARTHA
True.

PAUL
Because there was that Mary lady...

MARTHA
And the little baby what's his name...

PAUL
That's right.

LISA
I'm *not* pregnant.

PAUL
Well, good.

MARTHA
Yes. Because, if you want to get pregnant, you should wait a few years.

PAUL
Until you're out of high school at least.

MARTHA
Because they're a tremendous burden, babies.

PAUL
A real ball and chain. *Completely* murdered our sex life.

MARTHA

We haven't had sex since we had you, as a matter of fact.

PAUL

Nope, it's been what - seventeen years?

MARTHA

(Nodding) Seventeen years, two months, and thirteen days.

PAUL

Though there was that one time -

MARTHA

When?

PAUL

At Cradle Lake? I accidentally, you know, onto your leg?

MARTHA

That doesn't count, Paul.

PAUL

Either way. Babies are a nuisance.

MARTHA

And they're ugly little critters.

PAUL

Especially you. You looked like one of those weird creatures from Empire Strikes Back. You know, the ones that suck the power from the Millenium Falcon.

MARTHA

A Mynock.

PAUL

Yes, exactly. You looked like a Mynock.

LISA

Can I *Speak*? Please?

MARTHA

(Taken aback) Of course you can. Why didn't you say so?

LISA

I *did*.

MARTHA

Oh, well, I guess we just weren't listening.

PAUL and MARTHA cackle hysterically.

MARTHA

But, seriously, we probably weren't.

PAUL

No, and that's because -

MARTHA

That's because, well, you tend to be a *little* dull when you talk.

PAUL

(Nodding) Mmm.

MARTHA

So, if you are going to talk, maybe you could try spicing it up a little bit?

PAUL

Yes. Use some juicy adjectives. Like *mellifluous* or *crepuscular*.

MARTHA

Or *dandelion* or *figurehead*. I mean, those aren't adjectives but -

PAUL

No, but they're juicy.

MARTHA

So, yes, it's fine with us if you talk but only if you somehow use the word "dandelion."

LISA

I'm not using the word dandelion.

MARTHA

Why not?

LISA

It's ridiculous.

MARTHA

It's not ridiculous. It's *juicy*.

LISA
Mom...

MARTHA
Oh, Lisa. Don't be such a shrew, just say it.

LISA
I'm not saying dandelion!

MARTHA looks at PAUL.

MARTHA
Paul -

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
Discipline her.

PAUL
Me? Why don't you?

MARTHA
Because I'm comfortable!

PAUL sighs, stands up.

PAUL
Alright, now listen up, young lady. As long as you are in *my* house -

MARTHA coughs.

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
Whose house?

PAUL rolls his eyes.

PAUL
Our house

MARTHA
Thank you.

PAUL
(Continuing) As long as you're in *our* house, under *our* roof, you will do as *we* tell you. Even if that means saying "mellifluous" or "dandelion" or whatever other odd word we should insist upon. Capiche?

LISA huffs and looks away.

PAUL
Lisa...

LISA
Dad...

PAUL
SAY THE FUCKING WORD!!!

LISA
Alright, alright. I'll say "dandelion."

PAUL sits down.

PAUL
Thank you.

MARTHA
So - what was it you wanted to talk to us about?

LISA
Well, graduation is coming up -

MARTHA
Sorry, *what* is coming up?

LISA
My graduation?

MARTHA and PAUL furrow their brows, confused.

LISA
From high school?

MARTHA
Oh... Right! (Beat) Yes, high school. Go on.

LISA

Well, I wanted to talk to you guys about my present.

MARTHA and PAUL look at LISA expectantly.

LISA

You did say you were going to get me a present.

MARTHA

Yes, but...

LISA

But, what?

PAUL

Well, I think you're forgetting something...

MARTHA

A certain *word* we discussed?

PAUL

You promised you were going to say it, Lisa. Now fair's fair.

LISA

I -

MARTHA

It starts with a D?

PAUL

And ends with an ANDELION?

LISA

Are you -

MARTHA

Come on now.

PAUL

Yes. Let's hear it.

LISA

God, you guys are weird. *Dandelion*. There, I said it.

MARTHA and PAUL clap their hands together excitedly.

MARTHA
Bravo! Bravo!

PAUL
Look at you. Our little orator over here!

MARTHA
Yes. Our little Barrack Obama!

PAUL gets up, massages LISA's shoulders.

PAUL
She's got a way with words this one!

MARTHA
The gift of gab!

PAUL
A regular Thomas Jefferson!

MARTHA
A regular Barbara Charline Jordan!

PAUL
(Stilted) A regular other person that speaks the words well!

PAUL pats LISA on the back, sits.

PAUL
Well, that was great, honey. Just great.

MARTHA
Yes. You've made us so very proud.

MARTHA and PAUL nod and smile.

LISA
So?

PAUL
Hmm?

LISA
My present? For graduation?

PAUL

I'm sorry, what?

MARTHA

Yes, I don't follow.

LISA

I asked you if we could talk about my present for graduation.

PAUL

Did you?

LISA

Yes.

PAUL

Huh. I didn't catch that.

MARTHA

No.

PAUL

I guess I was too distracted by your superlative use of the word *dandelion*.

MARTHA

It was superlative, wasn't it?

PAUL

Yes. Bravo, dear.

They clap some more.

LISA

So...

PAUL

Right, sorry. *When* did you ask this, whatever it was, er, question?

LISA

Like, ten seconds ago.

PAUL

Ten seconds ago - God, I really wish I could remember that far back.

MARTHA

Yes, honey. You have to remember we're old. And old people are forgetful.

PAUL

That's right. They forget the street where they grew up, the names of their childhood pets - they even forget to love their spouses.

MARTHA

Yes. And that's why we have so much divorce.

LISA

Okay but, now that you *do* remember it - my asking about my present for graduation - *can* we talk about it? Please?

MARTHA and PAUL look at each other, frown.

LISA

I'll be brief.

MARTHA

Okay...

LISA

And I will try to use some juicy adjectives.

PAUL

You promise?

LISA

Fine. Yes.

MARTHA

Let's have an example.

PAUL

Yes. Give us a sneak preview.

LISA huffs, but goes on.

LISA

I *fervently* resolve -

PAUL

Good...

LISA

To be as *fleeting* as possible -

MARTHA

Excellent...

LISA

While *urgently* delivering my statement.

MARTHA

And?

LISA

Ugh. *Dandelion*.

PAUL and MARTHA look at each other, nod in satisfaction.

PAUL

Alright. You may now commence your fleeting statement.

LISA

So, some of my friends are planning a trip. For graduation. Like a graduation trip. To celebrate the fact that we're, you know, graduating. And I'd like to go on it.

PAUL

Well, that was pretty fleeting, but I'm struggling a bit to understand - where *we* fit in?

MARTHA

Yes, how does this relate to *us*?

LISA

Well, I was hoping -

PAUL

Juicy adjective!

LISA

I was *mightily* hoping -

MARTHA

Good...

LISA

That you would help me out. Financially.

MARTHA

Oh...

PAUL

You want *money*.

LISA

Yes.

MARTHA

I see.

Pause.

LISA

So, is that a possibility?

MARTHA

Gosh, honey. That's hard to say.

PAUL

Yes. Difficult. Very difficult.

LISA

Why?

MARTHA

Well, as you know, we're broke.

LISA

I didn't know that.

MARTHA

Well, we are. Nary a penny to our name.

PAUL

Not just broke, but in debt.

MARTHA

That's right. Swimming in it.

PAUL

And getting deeper all the time.

MARTHA

What with my strict diet of Panda meat.

PAUL

And my strange habit of burning money.

PAUL takes out a twenty dollar bill and lights it on fire.

MARTHA

As well as the fact that your Father just quit his job at the University.

LISA

He did?

PAUL

That's right.

LISA

Why?

MARTHA

He had a disagreement. With a co-worker.

PAUL

My boss -

MARTHA

The Dean -

PAUL

Yes. "The Dean," brazenly -

MARTHA

Accidentally -

PAUL

Took my sandwich from the lunch fridge. AND HE ATE IT. And it was on purpose, Martha. He's been eyeing my sandwiches for months.

MARTHA

Oh, Paul...

PAUL

Obviously, I had no recourse but to quit.

MARTHA

So, you see? Financially we're over a barrel.

PAUL

Up poop's creek.

MARTHA

With no ladle.

LISA

Oh.

MARTHA

But we're not saying no.

PAUL

No, no. Absolutely not.

MARTHA

We're just letting you now how things sit.

PAUL

Yes. Giving you the rundown. The lay of the land.

MARTHA

Because, if anything, I'd say we're leaning towards helping you out.

PAUL

Yes. (Beat) Wait, we are?

MARTHA

Sure. Why not?

PAUL

Because - we're broke?

MARTHA

Oh, right.

PAUL

But, I guess that's no reason not to -

MARTHA

No, I don't see why we couldn't -

PAUL

Though we should find out a bit more about this trip.

MARTHA

Right. This trip, where's it to? Uganda? Darfur?

PAUL

Because those are dangerous places.

MARTHA

And we'd strongly advise you to bring a whistle.

PAUL

Yes. So you can go "tweet" if you get into trouble.

MARTHA

So, what we're saying is that "yes" you can go to Uganda or Darfur -

PAUL

If you bring a whistle.

LISA

I'm not going to Uganda or Darfur.

MARTHA

You're not?

LISA

No!

PAUL

Well - where are you going then?

LISA

Los Cabos.

MARTHA

Los -

LISA

It's in Mexico.

MARTHA

Oh, Mexico. I've heard of that before.

PAUL

Yes. It's where the people wear those funny hats. What are they called?

MARTHA

Fedoras.

PAUL

Right, fedoras. And they eat spicy food and conduct drug wars in the streets. Oh, yes. I can understand why you'd want to go there.

LISA

Well, it's a resort. It's pretty safe.

MARTHA

Why would you want to go to a resort? Don't you want to experience some of the local color?

PAUL

Yes, it's very unlikely you'll witness a drug war at a resort.

MARTHA

You've got to be in the *streets*, with the *people*.

LISA

But - I don't *want* to witness a drug war.

PAUL

What?

LISA

I don't want to witness a drug war. I want to lie on the beach and get tanned. Maybe get cornrows in my hair.

MARTHA

Lie on a beach and get tanned?

PAUL

Get cornrows in your hair?

LISA

Yes.

MARTHA

That's it?

LISA
(Shrugging) Yeah, kind of.

PAUL
That's rather prosaic, dear.

MARTHA
Yes, imagine if Ernest Hemingway had just "laid on a beach" instead of fighting in the Spanish Resistance.

PAUL
Or "cornrowed his hair" instead of watching bullfights in Paloma?

MARTHA
Yes, where would modern literature be? Hmm?

PAUL and MARTHA stare at LISA expectantly.

PAUL
No, seriously. Where would it be? I'm curious.

LISA
(Confused) I don't know?

Pause.

MARTHA
Well, that's true. You wouldn't know, would you?

PAUL
No, it's impossible to answer that question actually.

MARTHA
As it's a hypothetical...

PAUL
With a multiplicity of potential answers...

MARTHA
Because Hemingway *did* fight in the Spanish Resistance.

PAUL
Well, "aid" would be a better word for it.

MARTHA

Fine. He *did* "aid" in the Spanish Resistance.

PAUL

And watch bullfights in Paloma.

MARTHA

Though, accepting James' theory of the Multiverse...

PAUL

And Schroedinger's Cat...

MARTHA

Yes. So, perhaps we *can* extrapolate a modern literature -

PAUL

Existing in an alternate -

MARTHA

Possible -

PAUL

World.

LISA

Can we stay on topic, please?

PAUL

Oh, right. The subject of your "trip." That's right... Yes, I suppose we could cease our theoretic inquiry into the alternate history of twentieth century literature to discuss your trip.

MARTHA

For a minute.

PAUL

Yes, because we don't want to get distracted for too long.

MARTHA

As I think we were really getting to something there -

PAUL

Opening up a real philosophic can of worms -

LISA

Look, I just want to know if it's a possibility.

MARTHA

Well, I think - yes. It's a possibility.

PAUL

But - as we just established with our reference to the Multiverse, *anything* really, is possible.

MARTHA

True.

LISA

Well, in this particular configuration of time and space, are you willing to help me, financially, with my trip?

MARTHA and PAUL look at each other.

MARTHA

Well - it's something we'll have to discuss.

PAUL

Yes. We're really going to have to mull it over.

LISA

Because, maybe it's not such a good idea.

MARTHA

What? Why not?

LISA

Well, you just said you were swimming in debt.

MARTHA

That's right.

LISA

And Daddy just lost his job.

PAUL

I didn't *lose* anything. I gave it away. On principle.

LISA

Either way -

PAUL

Honey, *everyone* is swimming in debt these days. It's the modern condition.

MARTHA

That's right. We're only being normative, hon.

PAUL

And my job... Jobs come and go. Dust in the wind, you know?

LISA

I could take a job.

MARTHA

What?

LISA

I could get a job.

PAUL

Nooo...

LISA

Why not?

MARTHA

Well, you're pregnant for one.

PAUL

Yes. No one is going to want to hire a teen Mom.

MARTHA

Plus, the strain of working, not good for the baby.

LISA

For the last time, I'm not pregnant.

MARTHA

Oh, right.

PAUL

But, still -

LISA

I don't mind. Honestly. It might be fun to get a job.

MARTHA puts an arm around LISA, sits her down.

MARTHA

(Soothing) Honey, we're not going to make you work.

PAUL

Yes. This isn't *Russia*. We're not going to send you to the salt mines just because you have opposable thumbs and aren't pregnant.

LISA

But, you're broke. It makes sense.

MARTHA

Don't you worry. We'll figure something out.

PAUL

Yes, we'll find a way to make it work.

MARTHA

Even if it means having to falsify our EI claim.

PAUL

Or kidnap the child of a wealthy diplomat.

LISA

But, I don't want you to falsify your EI claim *or* kidnap the child of a wealthy diplomat.

MARTHA

Why not?

LISA

Because, it's illegal. You'd go to jail.

MARTHA

Well, jail's not so bad. Ask your Father.

PAUL

It's really not.

LISA

You haven't been to jail.

PAUL

No... But I've watched *Orange is the New Black*. *And* read the book.

MARTHA

It's true. He has.

PAUL

They get up to some real hijinx in there.

LISA

Look, if that's what it comes down to I'd rather not go at all.

MARTHA

Lisa, don't say that!

LISA

I'm serious. I don't want you getting into trouble.

MARTHA

We're not going to get into trouble.

LISA

You will if you falsify your EI claim or kidnap the child of a diplomat.

MARTHA

Look, we won't falsify our EI claim or kidnap the child of a wealthy diplomat.

LISA

You promise?

MARTHA

Yes, we promise.

PAUL

We'll just have to think of something else to do. Like organ theft or -

MARTHA

Scamming the elderly.

LISA

Nothing illegal!

PAUL

But, it's so hard to make money in the straight world!

LISA

NOTHING illegal!

MARTHA and PAUL roll their eyes, huff.

MARTHA

Fine. Nothing illegal. Goodness... the moral crusader over here.

LISA

Pinky swear?

PAUL

Fine. Pinky swear.

They pinky swear.

LISA

Thank you.

PAUL

Now, why don't you go to bed and let the adults talk.

LISA

But - it's four o'clock in the afternoon.

MARTHA

Exactly. Already *way* past your bedtime.

LISA

I haven't had a bedtime in years.

MARTHA

Honey, don't be difficult.

LISA

I'm not even tired.

PAUL

Hush now. That's just the fatigue talking.

PAUL gets up, takes LISA's arm.

PAUL

Come on now. I'll sing you a beddy-bye song.

LISA

I -

PAUL takes LISA's arm, leads her off-stage.

PAUL

Hush little baby, don't say a word. Daddy's gonna buy you a mockingbird.

They exit. PAUL returns a moment later.

MARTHA

(Whispering) She asleep?

PAUL

Out like a light.

MARTHA

She must have been exhausted. What with going to school and not dying and all.

PAUL sits.

MARTHA

What are we going to do, Paul?

PAUL

I don't know.

MARTHA

We've got to pay for that trip.

PAUL

Do we?

MARTHA

I think so, yes.

PAUL

Really? Because, what with our financial situation - not to mention Lisa's rather prosaic aims - it just seems like perhaps it's not such a hot idea.

MARTHA

But, Paul, it's parent-y.

PAUL

Hmm?

MARTHA

It's parent-y. To pay for our daughter's graduation trip.

PAUL

Parent-y?

MARTHA

Yes. Something parents do.

PAUL

Is it?

MARTHA

Absolutely, *several* of my girlfriends have paid for trips for their children.

PAUL

Several?

MARTHA

That's right.

PAUL

Well, I suppose I can't argue with that logic. But, the question remains, *how* do we pay for it? We've already established our dire financial straits.

MARTHA

Well, first of all - I think you should stop burning money.

PAUL

What?

MARTHA

It's a ridiculous habit, Paul.

PAUL

But - it feels so good.

MARTHA

Well, so does self-flagellation, but there's a time and a place, you know? Maybe once we've paid for Lisa's trip you can start again.

PAUL

Well, fine. But - just let me burn one more.

MARTHA

Paul...

PAUL takes out a bill, then a lighter.

PAUL

Last one. I swear.

MARTHA

Paul, give me that...

PAUL

But -

MARTHA snatches the bill from him, pockets it.

MARTHA

Honestly...

PAUL

Fine. But if I'm going to give up burning money then *you* need to give up eating a diet of strictly panda meat.

MARTHA

It's not like that's a choice, Paul.

PAUL

Yes, it is.

MARTHA

You heard what Dr. Kacyzinski said! My stomach can only tolerate nearly extinct mammalian flesh!

PAUL

Yes, and it just so happens that Dr. Kacyzinski *conveniently* runs the only nearly extinct mammalian flesh importing business in town!

MARTHA

What are you saying?

PAUL

It's a racket, Martha!

MARTHA

That's not true.

PAUL

Sure, it is. He's got you hook, line, and sinker. If I'm going to stop my bad habit, you have to stop yours.

MARTHA

Fine. But just until we have enough money to pay for Lisa's trip. You know how ornery I get when I don't have my panda bacon for breakfast.

PAUL

Fine.

MARTHA

However, not eating panda meat - and not compulsively burning money - will only take us so far.

PAUL

True. We've got to think of other ways to raise money.

MARTHA

But, how? Lisa already said she didn't want us falsifying our EI claims OR kidnapping the child of a wealthy diplomat.

PAUL

Which doesn't leave us with a lot of choices.

MARTHA

No...

They think.

MARTHA

Well, *I* could look for a job?

PAUL

Martha, no one is going to hire someone without opposable thumbs.

MARTHA holds up her hands, she has no thumbs.

MARTHA

True. If only this were Russia...

PAUL

We could sell something?

MARTHA

Like what?

PAUL

I don't know. Our television?

MARTHA
We don't have a television.

PAUL
Right...

They think.

PAUL
What about our television?

MARTHA
I just told you, Paul. We don't have one.

PAUL
Right, sorry.

They think for a moment more.

PAUL
Ooh, I've got it!

MARTHA
What?

PAUL
We'll sell our television!

MARTHA
Goddamnit, Paul. WE DON'T HAVE A TELEVISION!

PAUL
Maybe we could borrow the money?

MARTHA
From who? Our credit is all maxed out.

PAUL
Well, what about your parents?

MARTHA
They're *dead*, Paul.

PAUL
Oh, right. Sorry.

Pause.

MARTHA

What about *your* parents?

PAUL

They're dead too.

MARTHA

Oh, right. Sorry.

Pause.

PAUL

What about Lisa's parents?

MARTHA

We're Lisa's parents.

PAUL

Oh, right. (Beat) Well, do we have any money to lend ourselves?

MARTHA

Paul, if we had money to lend ourselves we wouldn't need to borrow it in the first place.

PAUL

Right. Shoot.

MARTHA

We've got to raise that money, Paul. I just can't bear the thought of not being parent-y.

PAUL

No.

MARTHA

Remember that one time we forgot to bring a foodstuff to the PTA meeting? And all the other parents looked at us like we were less than?

PAUL

(Nodding) That *was* embarrassing.

MARTHA

I won't go through that again. I just won't. I'd even be willing to -

MARTHA turns to PAUL, looks him over.

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
Yes. I think I'd even -

PAUL
What? What are you talking about?

MARTHA
I think I'd even turn you out.

PAUL
Turn me -

PAUL stops.

PAUL
You don't mean...

MARTHA nods.

MARTHA
That's right. Put you on the street.

PAUL
Martha!

MARTHA
It's the only way, Paul!

PAUL
That's ridiculous. Why don't we turn *you* out?

MARTHA
Paul, no John is going to want a trick without opposable thumbs.

PAUL
True...

MARTHA
So, you'll do it?

PAUL
I didn't say that!

MARTHA kneels at PAUL's feet.

MARTHA

You've always said you wanted to walk on the wild side...

PAUL

I meant like wearing a wacky tie or drinking cocktails with umbrellas in them, not - *hustling*.

MARTHA

But, Paul. Don't you see? It's the only way!

PAUL gets up, walks to the corner.

PAUL

No...

MARTHA

You'd be a natural.

PAUL

Martha...

MARTHA

It's true! You're such a considerate lover. Or were - seventeen years, two months, and thirteen days ago... And you look so cute in leather!

PAUL

It's dangerous!

MARTHA

Oh, don't be such a sissy.

PAUL

It's true! I've heard the Johns can get really rough.

MARTHA

Well, we'll get you a can of mace or something. You'll be protected.

MARTHA rubs PAUL's back affectionately.

MARTHA

Besides, you like a little rough-housing...

PAUL

No, Martha. It's not kosher.

MARTHA

Kosher smosher, Paul. We're in a bind!

PAUL

It's distasteful! I mean, what would the people in my department say?

MARTHA

Well, you're not working there anymore. You don't have to worry about it.

PAUL

I'll still get invited to the Christmas party. At least, I hope so...

MARTHA

Our hand has been forced. I'm sorry, but decorum takes a backseat at this juncture.

PAUL

Couldn't *she* trick?

MARTHA

Who?

PAUL

Lisa.

MARTHA

Our daughter?

PAUL

She said she'd be willing to get a job.

MARTHA

She's not experienced like you. She doesn't know all of your little "moves."

MARTHA slinks up to PAUL, runs her fingers down his arm.

MARTHA

You know how good you are...

PAUL blushes.

MARTHA

Remember how you used to tease me with the feather duster? And you'd dress up like Tom Selleck from Magnum P.I.? Remember? With the fake moustache? And the taser?

PAUL nods.

MARTHA

I'm getting hot just thinking about it...

MARTHA rubs up against PAUL, he backs away.

PAUL

I can't, Martha.

MARTHA

You've got a gift, Paul! And if you're not going to share it with me you might as well make a few bucks with it!

PAUL

It's not so simple.

MARTHA

Why?

PAUL hesitates.

MARTHA

What is it?

PAUL

Do I have to spell it out for you? The old plumbing doesn't work like it used to. Daddy's limp.

MARTHA

There's medication for that now. And we can get those old Olivia Newton-John tapes out of the garage... That always got your motor running.

PAUL waves her off.

PAUL

Martha, I can't... My heart's just not in it anymore.

PAUL slumps down on the couch. MARTHA sits down beside him.

MARTHA

It won't be for very long. Just a couple months. Long enough to raise the money for Lisa's trip - and maybe enough to pay for a new dishwasher...

PAUL

Martha!

MARTHA

We need one! All the glasses are coming out streaky.

PAUL frowns.

MARTHA

Please, honey?

MARTHA cuddles up next to him.

MARTHA

Do it for Mamma-Wamma.

PAUL

Martha... stop it.

She nuzzles her nose into his ear.

MARTHA

Come on, be a good boy now.

She nibbles his earlobe.

MARTHA

I'll make you a grilled cheese sandwich...

PAUL looks over at her.

PAUL

(Cautiously) Really?

MARTHA

(Seductively) That's right.

PAUL thinks.

MARTHA

With *extra* cheese...

PAUL grimaces, trying to resist.

MARTHA

I'll even cut the crusts off...

MARTHA strokes his belly.

PAUL

(Begrudgingly) Fine! I'll do it.

MARTHA

Really?

PAUL

But I want you to use the good cheese. Not those Kraft singles.

MARTHA

Oh, baby!

MARTHA embraces him, kisses him on the cheek.

MARTHA

I'm going to make you the best grilled cheese ever!

MARTHA goes to the kitchen, takes out a pan.

PAUL

Now, hold on a second.

MARTHA

What?

PAUL

Well, what are we going to tell, Lisa? I hardly think she'd approve of this "scheme."

MARTHA

Mmm. You're right. What with her "morals" and her "conscience."

They think.

PAUL

Well, there's only one thing we can do.

MARTHA

Kill her?

PAUL
No.

MARTHA
Off her?

PAUL
No!

MARTHA
Dispose of her?

PAUL
No, Martha. *Lie*.

MARTHA
But, Paul - that's dishonest.

PAUL
Well, sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette.

MARTHA
And that's why I don't make omelettes, Paul. They're far too messy.

PAUL
Look, if we want to be parent-y, we're gonna have to get our hands dirty, ethically at least. I hope we don't have to *actually* get our hands dirty.

MARTHA
No. I agree.

PAUL
You get all the dirt under your fingernails -

MARTHA
And your skin gets all rough.

They shudder.

PAUL
But, we have to think of some kind of an explanation for us coming across a large sum of money - that isn't illegal, or distasteful.

MARTHA
Yes, lest we upset her delicate sensibility.

PAUL

So, so how do people come across large sums of money?

MARTHA

Legally...

They think.

PAUL

What is that thing? People buy tickets for it? And then they spin a bunch of balls in a wheel?

MARTHA

The lottery?

PAUL

Yes. We could say we won the lottery.

MARTHA

No, that's too far-fetched. That's the most obvious "fake" way of claiming to have come across a large sum of money. She'll be suspicious.

PAUL

I suppose... What about that other thing? People buy shares in it? And then white collar criminals manipulate it and crash the world economy?

MARTHA

The stock market?

PAUL

Yes. We could say we struck it rich on the stock market.

MARTHA

I suppose...

PAUL

We could say we bought shares in a hot, up and coming company, like... Atari, or BetaMax. And the stocks shot through the roof because they were so hot and up and coming and now we're rich and we can pay for her trip!

MARTHA

You think she'll buy it?

PAUL

Sure. Why not?

MARTHA

Because it's far-fetched? Implausible?

PAUL

Martha, she's a teenager. She's too busy thinking about soda-pops and whirligigs to know the difference.

MARTHA

I don't know...

PAUL

Trust me, Martha. She'll never be the wiser.

MARTHA

Well, okay...

PAUL gets up, starts for LISA's door.

MARTHA

Where are you going?

PAUL

To tell her.

MARTHA

She's asleep, Paul.

PAUL

But - she'll be so excited.

MARTHA

You *know* what a hassle it can be getting her to bed.

PAUL

Couldn't we make an exception? Just this once?

PAUL casts puppy-dog eyes at MARTHA.

MARTHA

Fine. But don't complain when she's up all night crying.

PAUL goes to LISA's door, knocks.

PAUL

Honey?

The door opens, LISA steps out.

LISA
Yes?

PAUL
I'm so sorry to wake you.

LISA
You didn't wake me.

PAUL
I know that you're still probably half asleep.

LISA
I *wasn't* asleep. I was doing homework.

PAUL
But, we wouldn't have disturbed you except to tell you something really important. Come sit.

PAUL ushers LISA into the room, sits her down.

MARTHA
We've decided to pay for your trip.

LISA
Really? But, what about all your money problems?

MARTHA
All over with, darling.

PAUL
We've struck it rich on the stock market!

MARTHA claps excitedly.

MARTHA
Isn't that wonderful, honey?

LISA
I - *When* did you strike it rich on the stock market?

MARTHA
Now! Just now!

LISA

Like, in the last five minutes?

PAUL

(Nodding) That's right! Thanks to our shares in the hot, up and coming companies, Atari and BetaMax.

LISA

Atari?

PAUL

Yes, they make "video games."

LISA

Uh...

PAUL pats her on the head.

PAUL

Don't worry, you'll be hearing about them soon enough.

MARTHA

Aren't you pleased, dear?

LISA

I guess...

MARTHA

You don't sound very pleased.

LISA

Are you *sure* you're not doing something illegal?

MARTHA

Lisa! A little gratitude would be nice.

PAUL

She's just tired, dear.

LISA

I'm *not* tired.

MARTHA

You're right, Paul. (In a baby voice) You're just a little drowsy, isn't that it?

LISA
Oh, Jesus...

PAUL
I'll get her off to bed. She's had a lot for one day.

PAUL picks LISA up.

LISA
Dad!

MARTHA pinches LISA's cheek.

MARTHA
Aw... somebody's gwumpy.

LISA swats MARTHA's hand away.

PAUL
Alright. Off to bed now.

PAUL carries LISA off.

LISA
Put me down, Dad!

MARTHA
Hush now, baby. All our troubles are over!

Lights fade. End of Act One.

ACT TWO

MARTHA sits at the kitchen table in a housecoat, a steaming cup of coffee beside her. She punches numbers into a calculator. There is noise outside the front door, the hubbub of revellers. PAUL enters. He is dressed in tight blue jeans, a tight white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a leather vest, and a small leather cap. A red bandana pokes out of his back pocket. A thick matte of stubble covers his chin.

PAUL
(Yelling out the door) Haha. Not if I see you first, Chico!

PAUL laughs, makes a thrusting motion with crotch.

PAUL

Yeah, right. YOU keep it up! Haha! Yeah, yeah. I'll catch you later!

He closes the door, cackling. He notices MARTHA.

PAUL

Oh, Martha. I didn't think you'd be awake.

MARTHA

You're home late.

PAUL

I was just having a couple beers with the fellas.

MARTHA

Oh, yeah? Is that beer under your nose.

PAUL wipes some coke dust from his nostrils.

PAUL

We just had a couple toots.

MARTHA scowls.

PAUL

Just a little pick me up. What? It's no big deal.

MARTHA

No big deal?

PAUL

I've been working like a dog, Martha. Cut me some slack.

MARTHA

I won't cut you some slack. Not until we get this damn trip paid for.

PAUL

Well, I'm *trying* my best.

MARTHA

Are you?

PAUL

Of course I am.

He pours himself a cup of coffee.

MARTHA

I've heard the rumors, Paul.

PAUL

(Waving her off) Ah...

MARTHA

Limp dick Willy. Isn't that what they call you?

PAUL

I *warned* you, Martha!

MARTHA

Yeah, and I've been shelling out for Cialis like a geriatric housewife. It's the coke, Paul.

PAUL

Get off my back, Martha!

MARTHA

No John'll go near you now! They know spoiled meat when they see it.

PAUL raises his fist.

PAUL

I'm warning you.

MARTHA

What are you gonna hit me? Big man picking on his disabled wife?

MARTHA holds up her non-opposable thumbs.

PAUL

I'm not afraid to hit a cripple.

MARTHA back off.

MARTHA

No. No, I bet you aren't.

PAUL

It's so simple for you, isn't it? With your non-opposable thumbs. You just get to sit here and count money. You don't know what it's like out there! It's murder, baby. Murder! I hate to tell you, but we're in a recession. Limp dick or not, the Johns ain't buying!

MARTHA sits.

MARTHA

There are other ways.

PAUL

What are you talking about?

MARTHA

Dr. Beidermeier called.

PAUL

Oh, he did, did he?

MARTHA

He wants to offer you your old position. Said the department just isn't the same without you.

PAUL

Did he say anything about the sandwich?

MARTHA looks down.

MARTHA

No.

PAUL

That piece of shit.

MARTHA

I asked him about it, Paul. He doesn't even remember.

PAUL

Like hell he doesn't.

MARTHA

He said they'd give us an extension on the money! And you'd only have to work a semester, maybe two.

PAUL

Forget it.

MARTHA

Please, Paul!

PAUL

No! I refuse to set foot in that school! Not unless I get an apology.

MARTHA

It was a *misunderstanding*.

PAUL

Misunderstanding, my foot. He *knew* that was my PB and J!

PAUL shakes his head.

PAUL

That pompous bastard... I can just imagine him - fingering my Ziploc, peeling it open, then stuffing my perfect sandwich into his old, crumbly mouth. Ack! It's too much to bear!

MARTHA

Honey, *please*. I'm begging you.

PAUL

I'm sorry, Martha. But there are some things I won't tolerate, and snaking another man's lunch is one of them. He went too far!

MARTHA

You and your stupid pride! We promised our daughter a trip, Paul! Or are you too jumped up on snow to remember?

PAUL

I'll just have to work doubles. I don't know...

MARTHA

You've got to cut out the dust is what you have to do.

PAUL

Lay off.

MARTHA

I'm serious, Paul. It's worse than my panda meat habit.

PAUL

I can't help it, Martha.

MARTHA

You've got to!

PAUL

Don't you understand? I'm hooked, Martha...

PAUL sits, shakes his head.

MARTHA

I'll help you, baby. We can beat it together.

PAUL

But - I don't *want* to beat it. It feels so good. Even better than burning money. You get this rush like you're riding on this perfect, ice-cold roller coaster and your heart is pounding and you feel like you could just fucking tear the world in half. But then it stops... And you need more...

PAUL looks up at MARTHA desperately.

PAUL

I need more, Martha. I need more!

MARTHA

Paul -

PAUL

Oh, what's the use? I'm nothing but a junkie!

PAUL clutches his face with his hands. MARTHA rubs his back.

MARTHA

We just have to put our noses to the grindstone. Just for a little bit, longer...

PAUL looks up.

PAUL

It's not so simple, Martha.

MARTHA

What are you talking about?

PAUL

Oh, Jesus...

He walks to the corner.

MARTHA

What happened, Paul?

PAUL
I'm in deep, Martha.

MARTHA
What are you talking about?

PAUL pounds the wall with his fist.

PAUL
It was a sure bet! A sure bet!

MARTHA
What did you do, Paul?

PAUL turns away, shakes his head.

PAUL
I can't...

MARTHA grabs him, spins him around.

MARTHA
What did you do!

PAUL
Chico had a tip...

MARTHA
You didn't...

PAUL
Jumping Jack Flash. Ten to one in the eighth.

MARTHA
How much, Paul?

PAUL
Chico saw the jockey eating Wheaties that morning! It was a sure thing!

MARTHA
HOW MUCH?

PAUL
(Quietly) All of it.

MARTHA
What?

PAUL looks down.

MARTHA
All of it? Lisa's Cabo money?

PAUL
And four thousand more. I have to come up with it by the end of the day.

MARTHA
You stupid son of a bitch.

MARTHA slaps him across the face.

MARTHA
How could you?

PAUL sinks to his knees, weeping.

PAUL
I'm sorry, Martha. I'm a weak man!

MARTHA walks to the couch, dazed. PAUL gets up, goes to her.

PAUL
There's only one thing we can do now.

MARTHA
Kill ourselves?

PAUL
No.

MARTHA
Off ourselves?

PAUL
No!

MARTHA
Dispose of ourselves?

PAUL
No, Martha!

MARTHA
What then?

PAUL
Run away. Just take off. Go to a non-extradition country. Like, Panama or one of those other places where people eat spicy foods.

MARTHA
But, Paul -

PAUL
We have to! The Bookie said he was going to chop off my thumbs!

MARTHA
Then we'd both be non-opposables...

PAUL
Exactly!

PAUL grabs MARTHA.

PAUL
We've got to go. Tonight!

MARTHA
What about Lisa?

PAUL
Our daughter?

MARTHA
Yes!

PAUL
What about her?

MARTHA
Well - it wouldn't be very parent-y to abandon her, now would it?

PAUL lets go of MARTHA.

PAUL

Shit. I hadn't thought of that...

MARTHA

Being parent-y is the reason we got into this mess in the first place. We can't just give that up.

PAUL

Maybe - maybe we just *aren't* parent-y, Martha. Maybe we're not *cut-out*.

MARTHA

Why would you say that, Paul?

PAUL

Think about it, Martha. Who were the ones always forgetting to pick up their kid from school, losing her at the mall, trading her for a trip to Whitefish in that auction? Us! We're no damn good at being parents....

MARTHA

Exactly, Paul! And that's why we've got to pay for this trip. We've got to show we *can*. We've got to prove our mettle!

PAUL

Sometimes you just have to accept your shortcomings, Martha. And maybe we have to cut Lisa loose, yeah. Maybe we just have to tell her, sorry dear, train's pulling out and you don't have a ticket.

MARTHA

I won't do it.

PAUL

Tank said if I don't have the money by noon he'll be coming for me with a set of knitting needles and a ballpeen hammer! You want me to look like Mickey Rourke? Huh? Do you?

MARTHA

No...

PAUL

It's our only option.

MARTHA looks off into the distance.

MARTHA

Maybe...

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
(Slowly) Maybe it's not our *only* option...

PAUL
What are you talking about?

MARTHA
Get the vice.

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
The vice. In the garage. Get it.

PAUL
You're not...

MARTHA nods.

PAUL
Martha...

MARTHA
GET IT!!!

PAUL stumbles to his feet, runs off. He returns with a large steel vice.

PAUL
I'd just like to say, I don't think this is a very good idea.

MARTHA
You know how long I've been waiting for thumb reassignment surgery.

PAUL
But, if it goes wrong...

MARTHA
And what choice do we have, Paul? You've forced our hand! Literally!

PAUL
This is barbaric.

MARTHA

Well, what did Morrissey say? "Barbarism Begins At Home?"

PAUL

He also said "Meat is Murder," but that didn't stop you from guzzling panda burgers like it was going out of style.

MARTHA

Well, one can't subscribe to every one of Morrissey's tenets, now can they?

PAUL

Martha, please. Don't do this.

MARTHA

It'll be for the best. I'll finally be able to work. Put that haircutting degree to good use.

PAUL

And what about Tank?

MARTHA

Well, you're going to have to lay low for a bit. Until the heat cools down. I'll pay Tank your vig when I get the chance.

PAUL

No. The risk is too high. Your thumb could wind up gnarled. Or worse, you could wind up without a thumb at all!

MARTHA

And what is having a non-opposable triphalangeal thumb but the equivalent to not having a thumb? For years, I've watched people operate their video game joysticks, scroll on their touchscreens, count "one-two-three I declare a thumb war," all while I sit in the shadows, hands stuffed in custom made gloves, just *yearning* to be a part of their prehensile world. Don't you see, Paul? It's not just about Lisa. *I* want this. I've *always* wanted this.

PAUL sighs.

MARTHA

You don't know what it's like, Paul. The dirty looks, the distinct feeling of *otherness*. I'm tired of being a square peg, baby. I'm so very, very tired.

PAUL nods slowly.

PAUL

I'm tired too, Martha.

MARTHA
So?

PAUL
Alright. If it's what you really want.

MARTHA
Wind the crank.

PAUL winds the vice down, until it is nearly closed on MARTHA's finger.

PAUL
You ready?

MARTHA closes her eyes, nods.

PAUL
Alright. One, Two -

PAUL stops.

PAUL
Wait.

MARTHA
What is it?

PAUL
What about my monograph?

MARTHA
On the mating habits of the pygmy population of West Calcutta?

PAUL
I could sell it.

MARTHA
But, Paul - it's not finished.

PAUL
Martha, I'm not going to let you *deform* yourself...

MARTHA
No, Paul. You have your reputation to think of.

PAUL

Nuts to my reputation.

MARTHA

Paul!

PAUL

I mean it. We've got to do *something*.

MARTHA

You can't just put an un-edited manuscript out there willy nilly. You'd be the laughingstock of the anthropological community.

PAUL

Let them laugh then.

PAUL grabs MARTHA.

PAUL

They're not my family. They're not what *matters*.

MARTHA

Paul, while there's no doubt that an unpublished monograph on the anthropological characteristics of a little known Indian tribe could fetch huge sums on the open market, the fact is - it's simply not ready yet.

PAUL takes out a pen.

PAUL

Well, it looks like I've got some work to do.

MARTHA

Paul, you can't.

PAUL

Why not?

MARTHA

You're out of practice. You haven't been at the University for weeks. Face it, your chops just aren't what they used to be.

PAUL

Well, damn my chops, Martha! We need money, not academic excellence.

MARTHA

It hasn't even been peer reviewed!

PAUL

Ah, peers schmeers.

MARTHA

Are you forgetting how cruel academics can be? Remember when Barbara Sifton inappropriately used a semi-colon in her PhD dissertation? She'll never live that down. Never! She almost committed suicide! Thank God they put bars on the windows of your offices...

PAUL

And so what if I'm forced to kill myself? At least we'll have been parent-y.

MARTHA

And what about *us*, Paul? It's not just you that will have to live this down. Your academic shame could be a blot on our family until time immemorial. I'm not prepared to get dirty looks in the supermarket, un-friended on Facebook, because you put out a hastily prepared thesis.

PAUL

Well, maybe I'm not asking anymore. Maybe I'm telling.

MARTHA

Paul...

PAUL

That's right, Martha. All along it's been your schemes, hasn't it? Turning me out, crushing your thumb in a vice. I've just been along for the ride. Timid little Paul, seen not heard. Well, I'm tired of that. I'm taking some initiative for a change. I'm selling my fucking monograph, Martha. Academic shame be damned!

MARTHA

You're kind of sexy when you're angry.

PAUL

What?

MARTHA

I think - I'm horny.

MARTHA rubs up against PAUL.

PAUL
Martha...

MARTHA
Come on... it's been so long. Momma wants to fuck.

MARTHA rubs her hand on PAUL's shirt.

PAUL
But - it's been years.

MARTHA
Seventeen and nearing three quarters...

PAUL
What about my, you know, *problem*?

MARTHA presses up against PAUL.

MARTHA
Doesn't feel like you have a problem to me.

PAUL looks down.

PAUL
Holy shit. You're right. Hurry, we can't let this go to waste.

With great haste they undo each other's clothes, covering each other in kisses.

MARTHA
Should I go get your fake moustache? The taser? Hmm? You can do your little Magnum P.I. routine?

PAUL
(Between kisses) We don't have time, Martha. I could lose my nerve at any moment. Not to mention the fact that the bookie is going to be here post-haste.

MARTHA slouches, pulls away.

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
I don't know...

PAUL
What is it?

MARTHA takes a step back.

MARTHA
It's just - it's not the same.

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
I love you with that big handlebar moustache. You're so manly.

PAUL
Oh, for fuck sakes...

PAUL pulls away, buttons his shirt up.

PAUL
I knew this was a bad idea.

MARTHA
Paul...

PAUL
Seventeen years and you pull this?

MARTHA
I can't just "turn it on," Paul.

PAUL
And I can? I'm running on fumes here, Martha. I need half a package of Cialis before I can take a piss.

MARTHA
Forget I said anything about Tom Selleck. Let's try again.

MARTHA tries to embrace PAUL, he backs away.

PAUL
No, I'm wilted. It could be hours before I'm ready again. And we don't have hours.

MARTHA

Where are you going?

PAUL

To get the laptop. We've got a monograph to sell, remember?

PAUL exits, returns with a black laptop. He sets it down on the kitchen table, pops it open. MARTHA stands behind him, playing with his hair.

PAUL

Stop that, Martha.

MARTHA

(Coy) Stop what?

PAUL

Please!

He swats her hands away. MARTHA frowns.

PAUL

I thought you wanted to be parent-y?

MARTHA

I did. But now I want to sexual-y.

PAUL

Well, I don't. And it's distracting.

MARTHA

Come on...

MARTHA starts rubbing his shoulders.

PAUL

No, you hurt my feelings.

MARTHA

Oh, poor baby...

She starts nibbling his earlobes.

MARTHA

Let Momma kiss it better...

MARTHA kisses him all over.

PAUL

God damnit, Martha. How can I set up an ebay account with you *gnawing* on me like that?

MARTHA

You can set it up later.

PAUL wheels around.

PAUL

Did you not hear me? If I don't come up with that money asap, Tank is going to rearrange my face.

MARTHA

I don't know why you're getting so riled up.

PAUL

Because he's going to use my ass as a pin cushion, that's why!

MARTHA

Honey, we can deal with Tank.

PAUL

Oh, really?

MARTHA

Really.

MARTHA goes to her purse, pulls out a small gift wrapped box.

MARTHA

I got you a little present.

PAUL

What does that have to do with -

MARTHA

Just open it.

PAUL unwraps the box. It is a small handgun.

MARTHA

I know you've been worried about protection...

PAUL

What exactly are you suggesting?

MARTHA

I'm *suggesting* that you lay "Tank" or whatever his name is, low. Ice his sorry ass!

PAUL

Martha -

MARTHA

What?

PAUL

That's murder!

MARTHA

Well, *duh*.

PAUL

It's not nice to murder someone.

MARTHA

Well, it's not nice to reject someone in the throes of passion either, but you had no trouble doing that, now did you?

PAUL

I don't know...

MARTHA

What choice do we have?

PAUL

If you'd let me set up this damn ebay account I could sell my monograph. That's what choice!

MARTHA

And Paul, if you kill Tank we can use the money from the monograph to pay for Lisa's trip.

PAUL sits back.

MARTHA

You hadn't thought of that, had you?

The doorbell rings.

PAUL
Fuck. That's probably him.

MARTHA pushes the gun into PAUL's hands.

MARTHA
Do it, Paul. Do it for Lisa.

PAUL
I -

MARTHA
I thought you wanted to take control? Put your foot down?

PAUL frowns but takes the gun. MARTHA answers the door. TANK stands in the doorway.

TANK
Is Mr. Schaeffer home?

MARTHA
Yes. Come on in.

TANK
Thanks.

TANK enters.

MARTHA
You must be Tank.

TANK
That's right.

MARTHA
Martha.

They shake hands.

TANK
Hi, Paul.

PAUL
Tank.

MARTHA

You don't have your knitting needles.

TANK

Hmm?

MARTHA

Paul said you were going to come down here with knitting needles and a - what was it, Paul?

PAUL

A ballpeen hammer.

MARTHA

Yes. You were going to come down here with a set of knitting needles and a ballpeen hammer and rearrange his face or something.

TANK

Oh well, I left them in the car. I only bring them in if necessary. Hopefully, that won't be the case...

PAUL

Well actually, Tank...

TANK

What is it?

PAUL

We were sort of thinking -

MARTHA

Go on.

PAUL

Well, we were thinking we *wouldn't* pay you.

TANK

What?

PAUL

Yeah, we kind of - reconsidered.

TANK

Well, that's not really how it works, Paul.

PAUL

We sort of thought that, instead of paying you, we'd just -

PAUL looks at MARTHA, she nods in encouragement.

PAUL

We thought we'd - *shoot* you.

PAUL pulls out the gun.

TANK

But - that's murder.

PAUL

I *know*. However, my wife is quite adamant.

MARTHA

It seems to be our best course of action. You see, our daughter -

PAUL

Lisa.

MARTHA

Yes. She wants to go to Cabo. For graduation.

PAUL

And if I pay you we won't have enough to pay for your trip.

MARTHA

No.

TANK nods slowly.

PAUL

So, yeah...

TANK

Well, I, um, I'm quite surprised, Paul. You know, I thought we had a deal.

PAUL

And I apologize.

TANK

It's kind of how my business works. You make a speculation and if it doesn't pan out you're indebted to me.

PAUL

I understand the principle, Tank.

TANK

And generally, if someone doesn't settle with me, I have to...

MARTHA

The knitting needles.

TANK

That's right.

PAUL

Yes, but see - *we* have the weapon.

PAUL waves the gun.

PAUL

So, you know, it sort of changes the situation.

TANK

Well, this is not very orthodox.

MARTHA

Well Tank, I'm sure you're aware of the expression "desperate times call for desperate measures."

TANK

Well, no. I'm not actually.

MARTHA

It just means more or less, that sometimes you can't *do* the orthodox thing, you have to improvise. You understand?

TANK

Well, I suppose. However, it's not very honorable of you.

PAUL

Well, maybe not.

TANK

It's not so much the money, or even my imminent death, that bothers me but the breaking of your word.

PAUL

Well, I'm not happy with it either, Tank...

TANK

I just - I'm really quite disappointed.

MARTHA

Well, we're sorry you feel that way.

TANK

I just think it's quite *low*.

PAUL

Okay, fuck. We get it. You're disappointed. Jesus...

TANK

I just want to make it clear.

PAUL

It's crystal. Now, could you like, I don't know, turn and face the wall?

TANK huffs.

PAUL

And hurry it up, we don't have all day.

TANK turns and faces the wall. PAUL hands MARTHA the gun.

PAUL

Martha, could you do it? I've really need to get this monograph up on ebay.

TANK

Monograph?

PAUL

That's right.

TANK

You're an academic?

PAUL

(Impatient) *Yes*.

TANK

What's it about? If you don't mind me asking.

PAUL

Look, we really don't have time for twenty questions.

MARTHA

Paul -

PAUL

What?

MARTHA

There's no need to be *rude*.

TANK

It's just that - I'm currently completing my doctorate in anthropology and -

MARTHA

You're kidding. Paul is an anthropologist!

TANK

No?

MARTHA

Yes, he is! Honey, isn't that a coincidence?

PAUL

Yeah, that's quite strange.

TANK

So, what is your -

PAUL

Monograph?

TANK nods.

PAUL

It's on the mating habits of the pygmy population of West Calcutta. I've been doing field studies there for the past few summers.

TANK

You're kidding. I was in the Maldives this fall.

PAUL

What is your field of study?

TANK

My thesis is on fetishistic imagery in tribal ritual.

PAUL

Oh, you must be working with Wally Feldstein then.

TANK

You know Dr. Feldstein?

PAUL

We did our masters together at Berkley.

TANK

No kidding?

PAUL

Yes, Wally's an old friend.

TANK

Well, that's, uh, what a coincidence.

MARTHA

So, when will you be finished, Tank?

TANK

Well, I'm hoping this April. You know, God willing.

TANK knocks on the countertop for luck.

MARTHA

Oh, we know.

They laugh.

PAUL

Have you got a position for next year?

TANK

No, not yet. I'm really hoping something will open up in my department, but - we'll see.

PAUL nods.

MARTHA

You know what? I just had a great idea. Why don't you get Tank to peer review your book, honey?

TANK
It hasn't been peer reviewed?

PAUL
Martha -

MARTHA
What?

PAUL
(To TANK) It's not really ready yet. I'm just selling it to raise money to pay for our daughter's graduation trip.

MARTHA
She's going to Cabo.

TANK
Right.

MARTHA
(To PAUL) So, what do you think?

TANK
I'd be happy to do it. I've actually been trying to get my name on some papers. Bolster my resume.

PAUL
Well -

TANK
Honestly, I'd be happy to.

MARTHA
Really?

TANK
Of course. The only thing is- well, I'd like to ask that you don't kill me.

MARTHA
Well, I think that's reasonable.

PAUL
Yeah, but - what about the debt?

TANK

Well, I guess we could work something out. A payment plan.

MARTHA

What do you think, Paul?

PAUL

I don't know...

MARTHA

It seems like a pretty good compromise.

TANK

To be honest, I'd love to take a look at your work. I imagine there's some crossover with my own research.

MARTHA

Well, honey?

Pause..

PAUL

To be honest - I was kind of looking forward to shooting him.

MARTHA

What?

PAUL

When will I ever get the chance to kill a bookie again?

MARTHA

But, Paul -

PAUL

I want to shoot him, Martha!

TANK

Look, forget about the debt. We'll just call it even.

MARTHA

Honey...

TANK

And I'll still review your book. No charge.

They look at PAUL, he hesitates.

MARTHA

Paul, you're being very unreasonable.

PAUL

Well, I suppose that's part of the thrill, Martha. Flying in the face of reason, convention, morality... You know, the dark pleasure of transgressing everyday norms.

TANK

But, there's no reason to!

PAUL points the gun at TANK.

PAUL

You just keep quiet.

MARTHA

I don't know, Paul...

PAUL

Martha, this hasn't been an easy couple of weeks for me. Tricking, it's an ugly business. I guess I just need to blow off some steam.

MARTHA frowns. PAUL turns, points the gun at TANK.

TANK

Paul, please. Come on, man. Have some understanding. For a fellow academic.

PAUL

I'm not an academic, Tank. Not since my boss stole my sandwich.

PAUL cocks the gun. TANK cringes.

MARTHA

Wait!

PAUL

What is it, Martha? I want to get this over with so we can sell the monograph and I can stop blowing guys for twoonies.

MARTHA

Lisa said she didn't want us doing anything illegal.

PAUL
And?

MARTHA
Murder is illegal, Paul!

PAUL
You know what? I'm sick of Lisa and her rules. Since when does she get to boss us around?
We're the parents, aren't we?

MARTHA
Well, she does have a point. We shouldn't *really* be doing anything illegal.

PAUL
Why not?

MARTHA
I don't know. I can't imagine it's great for your karma to *kill* someone.

PAUL
Nuts to karma.

MARTHA
Paul, we promised her.

PAUL rolls his eyes.

MARTHA
We *pinky* swore! You can't break a pinky swear!

PAUL frowns.

MARTHA
Paul.

PAUL
I just -

MARTHA
WE PINKY SWEARED!!!

PAUL
Fine!

MARTHA

Now give me the gun.

PAUL hesitates.

MARTHA

Come on, Paul.

Grudgingly, PAUL hands the gun to MARTHA.

TANK

So - you're not going to shoot me?

MARTHA

No, we're not going to shoot you, Tank.

PAUL

Unfortunately...

TANK

Thank you. Now, I'm just going to get out of your hair.

TANK starts for the door.

TANK

If you'd like me to review that book, um, you have my number.

PAUL

This isn't right, Martha. We can't just let him walk out.

MARTHA

Why not?

PAUL

What's to stop him from coming back here? With the knitting needles next time?

MARTHA

I suppose that's - Well, what if he gave us his word? Tank, will you give us your word that you won't return to terrorize us?

TANK

(Nodding feverishly) Yes, absolutely. I promise to never terrorize you or return with knitting needles. Scout's honour.

MARTHA
See, Paul?

PAUL
He's a bookie, Martha. I don't think his "word" is exactly trustworthy. I mean, it's not just me you have to worry about. What about you? What about Lisa? It's not very parent-y to leave your daughter open to the threat of terrorization, now is it?

MARTHA frowns.

MARTHA
No, you're right, it's not. But, what are we going to do with him? We've already established that we can't kill him, murder being illegal and all.

PAUL
What if he kills himself? Here, Tank, shoot yourself.

PAUL tries to force the gun on TANK.

TANK
(Cowering) No!

PAUL
Take the gun!

TANK
Please, Paul!

MARTHA
Paul - lay off. We're not going to make him shoot himself.

PAUL steps away from the cowering TANK.

PAUL
Well, I don't know. We've got to do something! (Beat) Look, we don't have to *tell* Lisa we did something illegal. We can just keep it a secret.

MARTHA
But, we'd be breaking the pinky swear...

PAUL
Martha, sometimes you have to -

MARTHA
Yes, yes, break a few eggs to make an omelette. That analogy is well worn by now.

PAUL

Plus, I don't really think we have a choice. She could be home from school any minute. We need to do something fast. We can't have a bookie in our living room, it'll give the whole game away.

MARTHA hesitates.

PAUL

Come on, do it for Poppa-Woppa.

PAUL nuzzles up to MARTHA.

PAUL

I'll make you a grilled cheese sandwich...

PAUL nibbles MARTHA's ear.

PAUL

With *extra* cheese...

MARTHA

Paul...

PAUL sticks his tongue deep into her ear.

MARTHA

Fine!

PAUL

Really?

MARTHA

But I want you to use the good bread. Not that flimsy Wonder whatever you favour.

PAUL

Whatever you want, honey.

MARTHA takes the gun from PAUL.

MARTHA

Alright, Tank. It appears that we are going to kill you after all.

TANK

But -

MARTHA

Let's go. Up against the wall.

TANK

Please, ma'am. I'm begging you -

MARTHA

UP AGAINST THE FUCKING WALL, YOU LOWLIFE PIECE OF SHIT!!!

TANK goes up to the wall. MARTHA aims the gun.

MARTHA

So, *how* do I work this thing?

PAUL

Just, um, pull the thing down there. The - what is it called?

MARTHA

Trigger?

PAUL

Right. Yeah, just pull down on that.

MARTHA

Okay.

MARTHA closes her eyes pulls the trigger. Nothing happens.

MARTHA

It didn't work.

PAUL

Give it another try. It probably just jammed up or something.

MARTHA re-aims, pulls the trigger. Still nothing happens.

MARTHA

I don't understand. It's a brand new gun.

PAUL

Here, let me see it.

MARTHA passes PAUL the gun. He inspects it.

PAUL

I don't know. Looks okay to me. But, I don't really know anything about guns. Can you see anything wrong with it?

PAUL hands it back to MARTHA.

MARTHA

Well, I don't know anything about guns either, Paul. Tank, you must know a thing or two about guns.

TANK

What?

MARTHA holds the gun out towards TANK.

MARTHA

Would you mind taking a look at this for us? It seems to be jammed up or something.

TANK

Are you serious?

MARTHA

Of course I'm serious.

TANK

I'm not going to *help* you shoot me.

PAUL

Tank, I think we've established very sound reasons for why we're killing you.

TANK

I'm not going to do it.

MARTHA

Come on now. Let's not make this harder than it needs to be.

MARTHA shakes the gun at TANK.

TANK

Fine. Give it to me.

TANK takes the gun, looks it over.

PAUL

Can you tell what it is?

TANK

Well, it's not jammed.

He pops out the clip.

TANK

Oh, well there's your problem.

MARTHA

What is it?

TANK

You don't have any bullets. The clip is empty.

TANK shows MARTHA.

PAUL

You didn't get any ammunition?

MARTHA

(Shrugging) I thought it would come with.

PAUL

Oh, Martha...

MARTHA

Well, I'm *sorry*, Paul. It's my first time buying a firearm.

PAUL

What are we going to do now?

TANK

Look, if you let me go I *swear* you'll never see me again. I will never terrorize you or your daughter. Honest to God.

MARTHA

Well, I guess we'll just have to find something else to kill him with.

PAUL

Mmm.

PAUL takes a butcher's knife out of a cupboard.

PAUL

We could chop him up?

MARTHA

I think that would be awfully messy, no?

PAUL

Yeah, you're probably right.

MARTHA

Plus, I've heard it's quite hard to chop through bone.

PAUL puts the knife back in the cupboard.

MARTHA

What about poison?

PAUL

That's an idea.

MARTHA

I think there's some Draino under the bathroom sink.

PAUL

I'll go take a look.

PAUL runs off.

TANK

(Whispering) Please Mrs. Richtig. I swear I'll never bother you again. Honestly.

MARTHA

Now, Tank. I've asked you nicely to be quiet.

TANK

I have kids. Twin baby girls. Lily and Tamika.

TANK pulls out his wallet, fumbles for baby pictures. He shows MARTHA.

TANK

They're just about to enter kindergarten.

PAUL enters.

PAUL

We're all out of Draino, but I found this.

He drags a cinder block in from off-stage.

MARTHA

What are we going to do with that?

PAUL

Well, I figure we raise it up real high above Tank's head and then - kablooey.

TANK cringes.

PAUL

We just have to figure out how to get it high enough.

MARTHA

Well, if I help...

MARTHA grabs an edge.

PAUL

Now, let's get up on the table here.

They step up onto the kitchen table, hoist the cinder block above their heads.

PAUL

Now Tank, if you wouldn't mind just getting under us here -

TANK

But, my daughters!

TANK thrusts the baby photos out towards them.

MARTHA

Tank, honest to goodness. You're making this *much* harder than it needs to be.

PAUL

Yes. Come on, Tank. Let's get this over with.

He starts to cry.

TANK

(Weeping) It's their birthday next Wednesday. I told my wife I'd take them to the park...

TANK collapses, bawling.

MARTHA

Paul, why don't you go get Tank and I can hold this.

PAUL

You're sure you can manage?

MARTHA nods. PAUL hands MARTHA the cinder block, PAUL gets down.

PAUL

Alright, Tank. Let's go now.

TANK

I was going to push them on the swing set!

PAUL attempts to drag TANK over.

PAUL

Come on, Tank. Honestly...

TANK

We were going to do horsey rides!

PAUL pulls TANK to his feet, drags him under the cinder block.

PAUL

There you go. Nice and steady.

TANK weeps into his hands.

TANK

Oh, God...

PAUL

You ready?

MARTHA positions the cinder block over TANK's head.

MARTHA

Now, if you could move it just a *little* bit to the left.

PAUL

Let's go, Tank.

TANK dutifully moves over.

MARTHA

Great. Now, on the count of three, dear. One - Two -

The front door opens and LISA enters. They all freeze.

LISA
Mom? Dad?

MARTHA
Lisa... What are *you* doing home?

LISA
What's going on?

MARTHA
What do you mean?

LISA
Why are you holding a cinder block over that man's head?

MARTHA
Because, well.... we were playing a sex game...

LISA
What?

PAUL
What?

MARTHA
Yes, we were being - kinky.

PAUL
(Under his breath) What the fuck, Martha?

MARTHA looks at PAUL, shrugs.

LISA
Who is this guy?

MARTHA
He's our new "friend," Ricardo. We met him on the "internet."

LISA
Uh...

MARTHA
Say hello to our daughter, Ricardo.

TANK wipes his eyes.

TANK
Hi.

LISA
This seems very odd.

MARTHA
Sex isn't odd, honey. It's natural.

LISA looks around at the scene.

LISA
Are you guys lying to me?

MARTHA
Uh...

PAUL
Oh, to hell with it Martha. Let's just tell her the truth.

MARTHA
But, Paul -

PAUL
(To LISA) We aren't playing a sex game. This is Tank, my bookie, and your Mother is holding a cinderblock over his head because we were about to kill him.

LISA
What?

PAUL
I owe him money from gambling. It was the only way.

LISA
So then, if this wasn't a sex game. Why are you dressed like that?

PAUL
Because I've been hustling.

LISA
Hustling?

PAUL

Giving guys, sometimes chicks, hand-jobs, blowers in public bathrooms for money.

LISA

What?

MARTHA

We're doing it for you, honey. To raise money for your trip.

PAUL

We're not doing anything. Your Mother's been sitting on her fat fanny. *I've* been raising the money.

MARTHA glares at PAUL.

LISA

You told me you struck it rich in the stock market.

MARTHA

Yes, well, that was an *itty bitty* little white lie.

MARTHA puts her arm around LISA.

MARTHA

Honey, sometimes you have to break a few eggs to make an omelette. Or so I've been told, because I don't make omelettes, they're too messy. The point is, it wasn't pretty but we've almost raised the money. Just as soon as your Father hocks his unfinished monograph on ebay.

PAUL

And after we kill Tank.

MARTHA

Right. And after we kill Tank.

TANK

But, my babies -

PAUL

SHUT THE FUCK UP!

TANK cowers.

MARTHA

So, you see? It all worked out alright. Just like we promised.

LISA

It didn't work out alright.

MARTHA

What do you mean?

LISA

You promised me you wouldn't do anything illegal.

MARTHA

Well, we didn't *really*.

LISA

You're going to kill a guy.

MARTHA

Okay, *one* thing.

LISA

What about Dad's hustling?

PAUL

Technically tricking isn't illegal, honey.

LISA

You guys *pinky-swear*ed!

MARTHA

I know, it's just -

LISA slumps down into a chair.

LISA

I hate this!

MARTHA

You hate what? I don't understand?

LISA

Why can't you just be *normal* for a change?

MARTHA

Normal? We are normal.

LISA

No, you're not. You take everything and *pervert* it. It's like Dad, he can't just be an academic, he has to be the academic that quits over a misunderstanding about a sandwich.

PAUL

That was no misunderstanding.

LISA

And Mom, with your non-opposable thumbs...

MARTHA

That's *hardly* my fault, Lisa.

LISA

All I wanted was to *talk* about going to Los Cabos. Sit down, have a normal discussion, maybe you'd tell me to get a job or contribute some of my money that Grandma Clinker gave me last Christmas, *expect* something out of me. But no, you had to turn it into this bizarre *charade*, which now you're going to kill someone over!

MARTHA

We're doing it for you.

LISA

No, you're not. You never listened to a thing I said!

MARTHA

Well - I'm sorry you feel that way.

LISA sits, folds her arms and pouts. A silence falls over the room. MARTHA looks down into her lap. TANK sniffles.

PAUL

You know what? I've had it with this shit.

PAUL lets go of TANK.

PAUL

I've slaved for the past *three* months for you! Jacking random guys off. French-kissing old ladies... You think I liked that? (Beat) I mean, okay, *some* of it wasn't *terrible* but - it wasn't exactly a Mexican vacation either.

MARTHA

Paul -

PAUL

All that for you, and you just trot in here with your "moral superiority" and starts lecturing us?

PAUL points his finger at LISA.

PAUL

Not "what's wrong with *us*," missy, what's wrong with *you*?

LISA

Are you serious? You're getting mad at me because I don't want you to kill someone?

PAUL glares at her, hands on hips.

LISA

Mom?

MARTHA

You can be a *bit* self-righteous darling.

LISA

What!

PAUL

You know, Martha. From where I'm standing, Tank isn't the problem, *she* is.

MARTHA

Darling -

PAUL

I'm serious, Martha. I've had enough of this.

MARTHA

What exactly are you proposing?

PAUL

I'm saying, to hell with Tank, let's get rid of Lisa.

PAUL grabs LISA.

LISA

What?

MARTHA

Paul, let's not be hasty.

PAUL

For seventeen and nearing three quarter years we've sacrificed for her. Feeding her, clothing her, occasionally even *speaking* to her. And now we've nearly gone to ruin for what? To pay for some stupid trip?

LISA

I told you I never expected you to pay for it!

PAUL shakes his head.

PAUL

I want things to go back to how they were, before we had this *burden* hanging over our heads.

MARTHA thinks.

LISA

You're *considering* this?

MARTHA

I would be able to eat panda meat again...

PAUL

And I could start burning money! Either that or buy some good quality dust. This stuff I've been snorting is more Comet than cocaine. We'd be free, Martha. Free!

MARTHA

Well...

TANK

Could I - could I say something.

PAUL

I already said we'd let you go, Tank.

TANK

No, it's not that. I - Well, I could take her. Your daughter.

MARTHA

Take her?

TANK

Adopt. My wife, there were complications with the birth of our girls. She can't have anymore children. And with my criminal history, we're not exactly prime candidates for adoption.

PAUL

You'd take her - even knowing that she's such a pest?

TANK

What can I say? I really love kids.

MARTHA

Well...

LISA

You can't just give me to a bookie!

PAUL

Would I still have to pay you back?

TANK waves PAUL off.

TANK

We'll call it a finder's fee.

PAUL and MARTHA look at each other, nod in agreement.

PAUL

You've got a deal.

LISA

This is preposterous! YOU CAN'T DO THIS!

PAUL

Why not?

MARTHA

Yes, I don't understand, honey.

LISA

Because - it's - well...

LISA stops, thinks, turns to TANK.

LISA

Do you have cable?

TANK

(Nodding) And an XBOX 360.

LISA
Huh.

TANK
Plus, the pantry is stocked with soda pops. And I even think I have some old whirligigs kicking around.

LISA
Well... (Beat) okay.

MARTHA
Really?

LISA
To be honest. I've never been that fond of you guys either. You're kind of pieces of shit.

MARTHA
Guess we just never really clicked, did we?

LISA walks over to TANK, he puts his arm around her.

LISA
This could be a chance for a fresh start. Someone that actually listens to me.

TANK cocks his ear towards LISA, feigning deafness.

TANK
Sorry, what was that?

LISA playfully slaps his hand away. They all laugh. Then, an awkward silence falls on the room.

LISA
Well, I guess I should get packed.

TANK
Right. Um, I'll be in the car.

LISA smiles at TANK, then walks off to her room. TANK starts for the door.

MARTHA
Well Tank, I'm sorry things had to get so "hairy" there.

TANK waves her off.

TANK

Water under the bridge.

PAUL

You know, if you ever need a reference...

TANK

Thanks, Paul. I appreciate that.

PAUL

And maybe I'll send over that book. Now that I don't have a trip to pay for, or a debt to settle - I can start working on it again.

TANK

Well, I'd love to read it.

PAUL

Great.

MARTHA

Well, you take care now.

TANK

I will. Thank you.

They all smile. TANK exits. LISA enters, carrying a suitcase.

LISA

Well, I guess this is it.

MARTHA

Yeah...

LISA

Well, it's been nice knowing you guys...

MARTHA

Yeah, you too.

LISA

I mean, not really...

MARTHA

No...

LISA
But, anyway...

PAUL
Well, don't be a stranger.

MARTHA
Or do. Your prerogative.

LISA
Sure.

The honk of a car horn.

LISA
I should go.

MARTHA
Take care, honey.

LISA
You too.

LISA exits. PAUL shuts the door behind her.

PAUL
Well - that was an eventful afternoon.

MARTHA
That's putting it mildly.

PAUL and MARTHA look around at the living room.

MARTHA
Have the whole place to ourselves now, don't we?

PAUL
Mmm.

MARTHA
What are we going to do with ourselves?

PAUL
I don't have the foggiest.

MARTHA

Well, you can finish that article on cow insemination.

PAUL

That's a good idea.

They sit, as at the top of the show, resume their reading. After a moment, PAUL looks up.

PAUL

Guess we don't have to worry about burying her anymore.

MARTHA

Hmm?

PAUL

Earlier, we were discussing what we'd do if she died. Guess we don't have to worry about that now.

MARTHA

No. No, I guess we don't.

PAUL

Tank's problem now.

They chuckle, return to their reading. A few moments pass, MARTHA looks up.

MARTHA

You know what?

PAUL

What?

MARTHA

I think we're going to enjoy this.

PAUL smiles, nods. They return to their reading. Lights fade.

THE END