

SAMUEL FRENCH SAMPLE PERUSAL

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Better Late

by Larry Gelbart

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

FOUNDED 1830

NEW YORK HOLLYWOOD LONDON TORONTO

SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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BETTER LATE was first produced by the Northlight Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. The performance was directed by BJ Jones, with sets by Jack Magaw, costumes by Rachel Laritz, lighting by JR Lederie, original music and sound by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. The Production Stage Manager was Laura D. Glenn. The cast was as follows:

LEE John Mahoney
NORA Linda Kimbrough
BILLY. Steven Key
JULIAN Mike Nussbaum

This play was the recipient of the Selma Melvoin Playwriting Award, given by Northlight Theatre in Chicago, IL.

NOTE: The Northlight production used an earlier version of the script. The play has been substantially rewritten for this acting edition.

CHARACTERS

LEE BAER - A middle-aged composer, with a tongue as sharp as the mind that hones it.

NORA BAER - Four years older than Lee, his dynamic wife.

BILLY COWAN - 32. Still a child of divorce.

JULIAN COWAN - 73. Not one for going gently into the night.

SETTING

Beverly Hills and Santa Monica, California

The settings are minimal. A chair here, a table there - just enough to know our people are real and not just in a play.

TIME

The present.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The “elegy” referred to in the script is *Goodbye for Now* by Stephen Sondheim, from the soundtrack of the motion picture, *Reds*. Larry Gelbart intended this music to be used, but other music may be substituted.

Samuel French, Inc. licenses the right to perform *Goodbye for Now* in productions of *BETTER LATE* for a separate fee. The license does not include the right to use any existing recording of the song. If *Goodbye for Now* is used, the following program credit shall be given in the same size and prominence as that accorded any other composers and lyricists listed in the credits of the program:

GOODBYE FOR NOW

Stephen Sondheim

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ACT ONE

Scene One

(Lights up on the Baers' bedroom. LEE is knotting his tie, taking an occasional, anxious sip of a martini.)

(NORA, still dressing, is not having an easy time of doing it.)

NORA. Don't.

LEE. Don't?

NORA. Don't stare at me, while I'm dressing.

(a beat, then)

I saw you. You were. You always do.

LEE. Never!

NORA. Trying to remember where a few things have shifted around? Where some of them have gone a little south?

LEE. I hadn't noticed.

NORA. *(flatly)* Uh huh.

LEE. Really.

NORA. I've noticed how often you don't.

(smoothing her dress, mutters)

Damned gravity.

LEE. Come off it, Nor. You know damned well how you've held up.

NORA. "Held up?" Run out of right-handed compliments, have we?

LEE. About half an hour into your phone call from Billy, I did.

NORA. The boy's a train wreck, how could I not talk to him?

LEE. Of course.

(The phone trills. LEE beats NORA to the receiver.)

LEE. *(impatiently, recognizing the caller's voice)* Hi...Can she call you back? We've got one foot out the door.

NORA. Is that Billy?

LEE. It's Julian.

(On NORA's cross to him:)

LEE. *(unhappily)* Nora –

(As NORA takes the receiver, a sullen LEE points to his wrist watch)

NORA. *(ignoring the gesture, into the phone)* Julian? ...No problem, dear. Really, what?

(listens, then)

...Honest to God? Congratulations! That's terrific news!

(aware of LEE's growing impatience, into the phone)

Let me call you from the car.

LEE. Preferably while you're making a left hand turn into oncoming traffic.

NORA. *(into phone)* Have you called Billy? He'll be as thrilled!

(She hangs up.)

(During the following, NORA will continue dressing as LEE re-ties his tie several times, unsuccessfully trying to make its ends come out even.)

LEE. I hope you're aware that in two minutes we will have blown the curtain, thank you very much.

NORA. I'm rushing my guts out, okay?

LEE. The odd phone call to one side.

NORA. How could I not take his?

LEE. This is a recording.

NORA. It's not as though they ever start on time. Opening nights, especially.

(off LEE's silence)

I can't be sorrier than sorry, okay?

LEE. Staying off the phone would be a help.

NORA. No problem.

(a beat, then)

Guess what Julian said.

LEE. I'll just eavesdrop in the car, all right?

(checking his watch again)

It's the actors I feel bad for.

NORA. For all the actors? Or just for poor Marla?

LEE. For all of them.

(miming getting to a theatre seat)

Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me. Oops. Sorry, ma'am.

(stops miming)

All while they're onstage, trying to get through the middle of the second scene.

NORA. So we'll miss what the play's about. It might be a blessing.

(attacking her dress' rear zipper)

I never minded people coming in late. I just didn't like it when they left early.

LEE. Spoken like an ex-actress.

NORA. There's no such thing.

(a beat, then)

If we get the lights, we'll be there in twenty minutes.

LEE. The whole evening's less than an hour. No one can sit still anymore. Some day each theatre seat'll have its own remote, so people'll be able to change plays. Or fast forward right through the clichés.

NORA. You afraid you'll miss her entrance?

LEE. (*ignoring that*) Can we please just get there before the reviews come out?

NORA. (*her back to him, hating to ask*) Zip me.

(*As he does:*)

Don't you really want to know?

LEE. Know what?

NORA. Why Julian called? How he's doing?

LEE. The truth?

NORA. Try it once.

LEE. The truth, my dear, is that somewhere in this world, there's a huge, gray rat whose cheese-ridden ass I care maybe ten times more about than however it is "dear" Julian may or may not be doing at this particular time.

NORA. Nice.

LEE. All I know is he's made us potentially a half hour late. And counting. That's without parking, if we can even find a space in the structure, which, when you do, now starts at a minimum of twelve dollars.

NORA. Did you think it was going to stay 1950 forever?

LEE. In 1950, I had a much different future in mind. It was a lot cheaper, far less crowded, and -

(*rechecking his watch*)

- We got to wherever we were going when we agreed we were supposed to.

NORA. Didn't get much work done today, right?

LEE. I got a lot of work done. I wrote almost half the second movement before I realized Leonard Bernstein wrote it first. Beware of ideas that come to you whole and complete.

(*knowing her look*)

What?

NORA. Nothing.

LEE. Except?

NORA. How do you know what scene they're going to be in the middle of when we get there? Have you been running lines with someone?

LEE. (*annoyed*) I read the play.

NORA. Where'd you get it?

LEE. I read the published version.

NORA. Since when do you read plays before we go see them?

LEE. Since every actor in the world started mumbling.

NORA. (*softly*) What'd you say?

LEE. Since every actor started – very funny.

NORA. I think maybe you're hearing mumbles. Or not hearing them, as the case may be.

LEE. We took the same hearing test last week. My hearing's just fine. I could hear you flunking yours in the next office.

NORA. Yours is completely selective. You only hear what you want to hear.

LEE. Unlike everyone else?

(*adds*)

Oh, and about Marla? You know good and well I haven't seen from her or heard from her since we both ran into her at Jerry Pollack's Oscar party.

NORA. There've been no phone calls?

LEE. (*sighs*) No phone calls. No e-mails. No smoke signals, no tom-toms, no carrier pigeons! For God's sake, is it impossible for us to go twenty-four hours without getting into her?

NORA. You tell me.

LEE. Look. It's as over as I've sworn over and over it is. Every last, precious bit of me is as yours alone as it can be. You ready?

NORA. So I can understand –

LEE. One postmortem for the road?

NORA. What did she mean to you? I mean, really. What was it, the lure of the hunt? The thrill of coming to someone whole and new, flawless? The pleasure of a never-before-lied-to-clean-slate?

LEE. Whatever it was, the past is exactly the right tense.

NORA. You get a little rusty at believing, you know?

LEE. (*a beat; then, giving up on his tie*) It's such a drag going to the theatre in L.A.

NORA. Say the word, we've got meatloaf.

LEE. (*mutters*) I detest putting on a tie while the sun's still up.

NORA. No one's making you wear one.

LEE. I want to wear a tie when I go to the theatre. It's generational. I'm stuck. Did you notice at Herb's funeral how many guys didn't wear one?

NORA. Herb must have been furious.

LEE. Same thing at Arnie Ross'. Somebody dies nowadays, people get dressed for a demolition derby.

NORA. You're the one who doesn't like to put on a tie when the sun's still up.

LEE. For a play! This is death we're talking about! It's a sign of respect.

NORA. It's a sign of being uncomfortable.

LEE. Life is uncomfortable.

NORA. Nothing is fun for you anymore unless it's tortured.

LEE. Save the gratuitous therapy for the car, okay?

(*a beat, then*)

I want everyone wearing a tie when I go. Including me.

NORA. I'll make a note.

(*LEE checks his watch again.*)

NORA. (*selecting jewelry*) Two seconds.

LEE. You don't need a watch.

(*a beat, then*)

Ever.

NORA. (*strapping a watch on*) I just hope she's playing a Nazi.

LEE. It's a play about Thomas Edison. There weren't too many Nazis running around Menlo Park.

NORA. I swear, if we didn't have to meet the Bergmans, subscription or no ...

LEE. Meatloaf's fine with me.

NORA. (*donning a bracelet*) So? You not the least bit curious? You don't want to know how Julian is?

LEE. I assume that Julian is just peachy.

NORA. Why would you assume that?

LEE. Because if he weren't, we wouldn't be on our way to see half a play.

(*relenting*)

Fine, fine, fine, give me an update. Give me the daily, hourly Julian Report.

NORA. The doctors are releasing him tomorrow.

LEE. Really? When did he have his thingie?

NORA. Two weeks ago. And are you ever going to get over your talent for denial? What Julian had was not a "thingie." What Julian had was a stroke. A mini-stroke, to be exact.

LEE. Two weeks for - (*finding the courage to say it*) - A stroke is pretty good, isn't it?

NORA. He said he's not really a hundred percent yet.

LEE. When a doctor tells you can go, you get the hell outta there. They kept Hal Kramer at Cedars way longer than they should have after his prostate, you know, cancer thingie.

NORA. Don't remind me. I remember.

LEE. What an oozing, dripping mess that mistake was.

NORA. Thank you.

LEE. His legs got so rubbery, he kept plopping to the floor. The man was like an old cucumber when they buried him. He died like a Russian side dish.

NORA. Stop dwelling on it!

LEE. Make up your mind. You can have dwelling or you can have denying, all I'm saying's Julian's much better off in his condo than he is lying around at Cedars.

NORA. To his condo? In the shape that he's in? Are you serious?

LEE. Why? Is it some kind of Eskimo association where if you get old and sick they send you out on the ice?

NORA. You've been to his place.

LEE. Never had the pleasure.

NORA. It's like a tomb. He hasn't got one single window that faces the sun.

LEE. So, why can't he stay with Billy and Barbara?

NORA. Like they've suddenly got the room? And with the boys going through their wild Indian phase?

LEE. I find it hard to believe that Billy can't somehow accommodate his own father.

NORA. In the middle of the remodeling job they're in the middle of? Which, incidentally, I told him we're going to help out on some of the overruns.

LEE. I was wondering when that topic was going to stop hiding in the bushes. Which I got the bill for yesterday.

NORA. (*sailing on*) Somehow, I don't think Julian living in the middle of a construction site is exactly what the doctors had in mind for him.

(*LEE's tie ends as close to even as he can manage:*)

LEE. Can we finally go? Please?

NORA. You know what I was thinking?

LEE. That would certainly be a first.

NORA. (*a beat, then*) I was thinking he could stay with us.

LEE. Who? Julian?

NORA. Julian.

LEE. We would have him stay with us?

NORA. That's right.

LEE. Which car were you thinking he'd sleep in?

NORA. Don't be silly.

LEE. You first, okay? Where could he possibly stay?

NORA. When's the last time you used the game room you just had to have so badly I fixed it up for you? A couple of coats of paint and we could turn that into a doll of a guest room.

LEE. (*flippantly*) Billy's contractor could probably do it in a couple of hours.

NORA. Three. He gave me an estimate.

LEE. No way, Nora. Forget it.

NORA. It'd only be for a couple of weeks, babe. That's all Julian needs.

LEE. He told you that?

NORA. His doctors did.

LEE. You talked with Julian's doctors?

NORA. Last week.

LEE. Last week? How long have you been consulting on this case?

NORA. From the day he went into Cedars. Billy wasn't visiting him as often as he could have, which is fine, Billy being Billy, but somebody had to take charge.

LEE. And you didn't say one word to me?

NORA. I didn't want to disturb you.

LEE. But it's okay to do it now?

(*after a beat*)

Nora, not only do I have to finish the new piece I just got that grant for, I have to score two pictures, both at the same time.

NORA. You'll just do what you have to do, that's all. You always do.

LEE. (*a deepening frown*) There's always, and then there's always.

NORA. Sweetheart, where else in the world can Julian turn to for the kind of hand God forbid anyone should ever find themselves in need of?

LEE. You don't owe him this. I certainly don't.

NORA. There's no owing anyone anything. A decent act doesn't need an excuse.

(a beat, then)

We're only talking a few weeks here. Then, he's willing to sell his condo and move into that new assisted living place in Santa Monica.

LEE. What new assisted living place?

NORA. It used to be Charles Laughton's estate. They call it The Bounty House. Penny Siegal did the interiors. She did a beautiful job.

LEE. You've been there?

NORA. Was I just gonna dump him somewhere sight unseen? Peggy gave Billy and me a tour.

LEE. Are you also taking flying lessons, running for president, or building an ark? What else is going on that I'm totally clueless about?

NORA. I just thought our house could serve as kind of an airlock while Julian recuperates.

LEE. An airlock. I'll be emptying bedpans in an airlock.

NORA. You won't have to empty anything. He'll have a professional caregiver.

LEE. And this bedpan engineer will be provided by –

NORA. An agency.

LEE. With whom you've already made the arrangements?

NORA. With whom I've been in preliminary contact. If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing well, isn't that what you always say?

LEE. And just who is going to pay for all these well-done deeds?

NORA. Well, we're certainly gonna help out however we can, aren't we?

LEE. I guess we certainly are. Quite clearly, we're going to, but am I mistaken or isn't Julian a wealthy man?

NORA. Nobody's wealthy anymore.

LEE. That, I know. I was one of the pioneers of that movement.

NORA. This is a conversation we can have when we have it - number one, for a start, is getting him settled in.

LEE. No matter how it may upset the order of life as we know it.

NORA. (*perfecting his imperfect tie knot*) Lee...put yourself in his place!

LEE. You're asking if he can be in my place, why would I put myself in his?

(*A beat; then, finally, with a sigh*)

Okay, okay, okay! Julian can come stay with us.

NORA. (*terrifically pleased*) Thank you, sweetheart.

LEE. But only because he's your ex-husband.

(*Lights fade, as THEY start to exit. The first, tentative bars of what LEE is composing are heard on a piano.*)

Scene Two

(Daytime)

(The living room of Julian's Santa Monica condo.)

(Stairs lead to a second floor. NORA is with her son,

BILLY. BILLY holds an archive box.)

NORA. *(consulting her list)* While you're in the bedroom, bring down your father's robe. The tartan.

BILLY. The plaid one?

NORA. *(patiently)* Yes, Billy. His plaid tartan. It's on his hassock. His hassock footstool. And collect whatever he's got on top of his nightstand, book-wise.

BILLY. Right.

NORA. Especially all of his Reader's Digests. And his Magic Markers and his Post-Its.

BILLY. What about his DVDs? He really enjoyed the Holocaust I gave him last Christmas.

NORA. Leave 'em. He said had enough TV in the hospital. The truth is, he falls asleep anyway. Even before his stroke. He hasn't seen the last hour and a half of anything in years.

BILLY. What else up there?

NORA. *(looking at her list)* His navy blue track suit. Look on the back of the chairs. To your father, every chair has become a closet.

BILLY. *(somewhat scattered)* The blue one with the white stripes?

NORA. He looks very handsome in it. Anything blue, in fact.

(off BILLY's look)

Your father's always been an extremely attractive man.

BILLY. ...Mom?

(NORA is busy checking her list.)

Is Lee really okay with this? With Pop moving in with you guys?

NORA. A hundred percent.

BILLY. You sure?

NORA. Your father made that an absolute condition. Lee had to give his okay or there was no way he would consider living with us. If there's one thing Julian Cowan is a stubborn mule about, it's his pride.

BILLY. Lee's a lot less easy-going than he looks, you know. He's one of those quiet steamers.

NORA. Your stepfather has a very big heart. He knows this is the right thing to do.

BILLY. You know what he said? He said you were taking Dad in because of your guilt.

NORA. Lee said that?

BILLY. Because, you know - because of you leaving Pop for him.

NORA. As right as he can be, that's how wrong he is. I left your father for me, not for anybody else. Can someone only do a good deed because someone else thinks you did a bad one, which I'm not for one minute saying my leaving your father was?

BILLY. Do you still love him at all?

NORA. Who're we talking about? Your father? Julian?

BILLY. Even a little?

NORA. No, not romantically, I don't. But I'll always love that time when I did. A divorce is not a lobotomy, Billy.

(consulting her list)

Don't forget his aftershave. I got Saks to order him some more.

BILLY. Right.

(He looks around the room.)

NORA. What?

BILLY. This place. I don't know if I should say it.

NORA. Say it.

BILLY. It's such a kind of a, I don't know.

NORA. A shithouse, right?

BILLY. It hurts me to see him living here.

NORA. That's why, starting tomorrow, he's not going to be here one day more.

BILLY. (*a beat, then*) Was it really that awful?

NORA. Transient ischemic, according to your father's heart man. He said, if you're going to have one, it's the Rolls-Royce of strokes.

BILLY. I mean being married to Pop.

NORA. What happened happened, Billy. There's a reason it's called the past, you know.

BILLY. Right.

(*taking the list from her*)

I'll be back down in a day or two.

NORA. (*apologetically*) I know it's a lot. I want him to feel at home.

(*BILLY starts up the stairs.*)

Billy?

BILLY. (*stopping, testily*) What? You want me to bring down his bathtub? His toilet seat? What??

NORA. There's no need for that.

BILLY. Sorry.

(*a beat, then*)

I am. What?

NORA. I just wanna say, Friday night, after they let your father go, why don't you and Barbara come to the house for dinner? The boys, too, if they can use each other as punching bags for five minutes.

BILLY. Fine. Good. We'll come.

(*a beat, then*)

It'll probably be just me, though.

NORA. Bring everybody. A little ruckus'll pep him up.

(*off his nervous tugging at a lock of his hair*)

Why're you doing that again?

BILLY. What?

NORA. (*miming him*) That nervous thing you used to do with your hair.

BILLY. (*lying*) I didn't get a lotta sleep last night.

NORA. (*not buying it*) Billy? The truth?

(*After a long moment:*)

BILLY. (*blurting it out*) Barbara's having an affair.

NORA. Get out of here!

BILLY. She is! I saw her, Mom!

NORA. You couldn't have!

BILLY. I saw them both!

NORA. You saw Barbara and someone together?

BILLY. I sure as hell did!

NORA. What, having coffee, that kind of thing?

BILLY. No, Mom. Having sex, that kind of thing!

NORA. Sex? You're sure that's what they were doing?

BILLY. ...What else looks like that?

NORA. That is sickening!

BILLY. Trust me, they didn't seem to think so.

NORA. Where were they doing it? Where did this happen?

BILLY. On the floor.

NORA. On the floor?

BILLY. On the floor.

NORA. On what floor?

BILLY. On the floor in our den!

NORA. In your den - in your own house?

BILLY. That's right.

NORA. They were on the floor? And they were doing it to each other?

BILLY. Screwing each other's brains out.

NORA. On the Berber?!

BILLY. On the Berber!

NORA. That's disgusting!

BILLY. You think?!

NORA. That carpeting was a wedding present from me and Lee!

BILLY. Well, she's getting a lot of enjoyment out of it.

(twisting a lock of his hair again)

Loads.

NORA. What happened? What did she say?

BILLY. All I heard was her moaning.

NORA. I mean, when you told her you saw her.

BILLY. I haven't told her I did.

NORA. What're you talking about? You didn't talk to her?

BILLY. No.

NORA. *(re his fooling with his hair)* Stop that!

(HE does.)

NORA. How can you not have said something? Anything?

BILLY. I don't know if I could without throwing up.

NORA. Have you told your father?

BILLY. It only happened yesterday.

NORA. Take my advice: don't! His heart's on one leg as it is.
He doesn't need this kind of news now.

BILLY. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell Lee either.

NORA. Lee? Why?

BILLY. He always told me that sooner or later Barbara would do this kind of thing. I don't want to give him the satisfaction.

NORA. Lee said Barbara would cheat on you?

BILLY. More than once.

NORA. Where would he get that idea?

BILLY. I don't know. He said he knew the look.

NORA. I'm sure he does.

BILLY. Meaning?

NORA. Meaning never mind.

(a beat, then)

How did you catch 'em at it? Did you just happen to walk in and surprise 'em?

BILLY. Yesterday, I got a lift home from work 'cause my car's still in the shop. I'm not two steps into the front hall, and there they are, big as life, going to town all over the closed circuit.

NORA. On the closed circuit?

BILLY. That's right.

NORA. Since when do you have closed circuit?

BILLY. Barbara decided to install it. For security. It's part of the remodeling.

NORA. You never told me you were doing that.

BILLY. He only just put it in last week.

NORA. Who put it in?

BILLY. The guy who's been putting it into Barbara!

NORA. (*comes the dawn*) She's having an affair with the contractor?

BILLY. Can you believe it?

NORA. How long has this been going on?

BILLY. Months.

NORA. Months?

BILLY. He's a contractor!

NORA. So now?

BILLY. So now what now?

NORA. Tell me what you're gonna do about it!

BILLY. I don't know.

(*a beat, then*)

Nothing, I guess.

NORA. Nothing? That's your master plan? Nothing?

BILLY. I'm going to let it run its course, what else can I do?

NORA. The woman's ass is covered in rug burns, there's omelet all over your face, and you're gonna just let it run its course?

BILLY. You want me to get down on my knees? You want me to beg her to stop? No way! Forget it!

NORA. Stop yelling at your mother!

BILLY. I'm sorry!

NORA. I'm not the one who's spread out all over the Berber, Billy!

BILLY. I said I'm sorry!

NORA. (*a beat; then, calmly*) All right, now, let's work this out, step by step.

BILLY. Like how?

NORA. The first thing is, you talk to her.

BILLY. Never!

(*after a beat*)

And say what?

NORA. For openers, she's gotta know that you know. You've gotta find out for sure how long she and this rat've been - keeping company. For all you know, that floor business could've been a one-shot thing.

BILLY. Not from the way they were going at it.

NORA. Okay, okay. Then, you've gotta get tough. You have to really lay it on her. You have to tell her you're both going to start getting counseling.

BILLY. No, sir! I'm not starting up with a counselor.

NORA. Everybody sees one sooner or later.

BILLY. Never again! I still remember that guy in the Valley you sent me to when you and Dad broke up, the one with the gross breath and the Disney action figures.

NORA. He was a child psychologist. You're not going this time because someone tried to touch your pee-pee.

BILLY. I'm not doing it! I can handle this myself.

NORA. To save your marriage, you won't try it just once?

BILLY. So I can sit there and listen to everything I've done wrong?

NORA. Who says you've done anything wrong?

BILLY. Barbara will. She'll say I'm not romantic. She'll say I don't want it enough. She'll say I want it too often. She'll make me sound like I'm two different people than who I am!

NORA. You let this fester, it'll eat you alive.

BILLY. I am not going to have that conversation! I don't even want to have this one!

NORA. Your marriage means nothing at all to you, is that what you're saying?

BILLY. My marriage means everything to me! That's why I'm not going to cut it open with a friggin' chain-saw and make it run around somebody's office with its guts falling out! I didn't talk to you about what's going on in my life so you could send me to see someone I could talk about it to. I just wanted a little sympathy, that's all.

NORA. That you've always got, you know that. But think, sweetheart: if you do nothing but let this thing run its course - it might just run its course right out the front door. And with all its bags packed.

BILLY. Like you did?

NORA. I'm not on trial here! Maybe in Lee's mind I am, but I certainly am not in my own!

BILLY. You went your separate way, I'll go my separate way.

NORA. And the boys?

BILLY. This boy turned out just fine.

NORA. In that if you're not careful you're gonna wind up looking like a plucked chicken?

(a beat, then)

Face this, Billy. Don't bury it. You go home and you talk to her.

BILLY. What if she doesn't want to?

NORA. Ask her again. Let her know you at least tried to turn things around. That you think she's valuable enough to hold onto forever.

(a pause, then)

Darling boy? For me?

(A long moment passes.)

BILLY. All right. Okay.

NORA. Better, right?

(pleased, her arms around him)

Rest. Relax.

BILLY. Good luck.

NORA. *(spotting an object)* Oh. Don't forget to take Dad's album.

BILLY. I will.

(NORA picks up the cracked leather album and opens it.)

(BILLY retrieves an old snapshot that falls out of its pages. Re picture:)

BILLY. Pop took that.

NORA. I know.

BILLY. That's the pony that threw me.

NORA. I remember.

BILLY. What was I, like four years old?

NORA. Uh huh.

(studying the snapshot)

I hope they made glue out of the dirty little bastard.

(As BILLY boxes the album, the lights fade.)

(A more developed version of Lee's composition is heard.)

Scene Three

(Afternoon.)

(LEE, in bright, Hawaiian shirt, jeans and loafers, “drives” an “SUV.”)

(His frail backseat passenger is JULIAN COWAN.)

(Dressed for the arctic, JULIAN will occasionally drink from a large sippy cup.)

(After a long, long beat:)

LEE. How you doing back there?

JULIAN. *(not really)* Terrific.

(a beat, then)

Best day of my life.

LEE. *(another long beat, trying for affability)* It never fails how you can't see the hills sometimes, you know? Bigger than life, and we can't see them for all the sludge up there. When I first moved to L.A.? When the West Coast was still like a secret? Every day was crystal-like. Restaurants gave away free orange juice, they were so anxious to get rid of all the goddamn things.

JULIAN. *(a beat, then)* Can I tell you something?

LEE. Of course, Julian.

JULIAN. We don't need to talk.

LEE. It's strictly your call.

JULIAN. I don't say that to be rude.

LEE. Hey, you don't want to talk, you don't want to talk.

JULIAN. All I'm saying is we don't have to make conversation.

LEE. Gotcha. The next sound you hear from me will be total silence.

JULIAN. Don't take it wrong. I appreciate all this immensely, your letting me stay with you, etcetera.

LEE. I'm sure you'd do the same if it were the other way around.

JULIAN. I'm sure I would, too, because Nora would make me. Just like she's making you.

LEE. That's not true.

JULIAN. Did she tell you I told her in no uncertain terms she had to ask you? That she had to give you every opportunity to say no?

LEE. I was given every opportunity to do that.

JULIAN. We were married a long time. I know how things go with her. I made it very clear that going back to the condo wouldn't faze me one iota.

LEE. There's no need to do that, Julian, absolutely none!

JULIAN. Good.

(The sound of LEE's cell phone is heard coming from his pocket. As LEE fishes it out:)

On the subject of talking, the last thing we need is a lot of pointless chit-chat, pretending what's happening's some kind of fun for either one of us.

LEE. *(re cell phone)* Let me get this.

(into the cell)

Hey!

(Light rise on NORA on a treadmill stage left.)

NORA. *(on her cell phone)* Did you get our boy?

LEE. Got him right here. I'll put you on speaker.

(LEE "does" so.)

NORA. Julian? It's Nora.

JULIAN. *(suddenly weaker)* Hello, Nora.

NORA. Are you all right?

(seeking confirmation)

Lee?

LEE. I'd say he's ready to go ten rounds with anyone.

NORA. Are you warm enough, Julian?

JULIAN. *(unconvincingly)* I'm okay.

NORA. Put the heater on, Lee. The last thing he needs is a chill now.

LEE. Nora, it's 86 degrees outside.

NORA. Lee?

LEE. I'm doing it, I'm doing it. You two let me know if you want it any warmer, I'll set the car on fire.

NORA. Listen to me, sweetheart.

BOTH. (*in unison*) What?

NORA. I was talking to Julian.

LEE. Pardon me.

NORA. I'm sorry about not picking you up at the hospital. I forgot about the conflict with my personal trainer.

JULIAN. I understand.

NORA. Before I call the bed place, I wanna make sure they're gonna send the right one over. Have you decided between the Sealy and the Tempur-pedic?

JULIAN. Go with the Sealy. It's good enough.

NORA. You said the Tempur-pedic was the top of the line.

JULIAN. I'm not looking to spend a fortune. Nora. The Tempurpedic's like a thousand more. I'm not spending that much money just to be unconscious on!

NORA. Don't concern yourself. The bed'll be our gift to you, right, Lee?

LEE. (*optionless*) Right.

JULIAN. (*aside, to LEE*) This is not a good start.

LEE. It'll be fine.

NORA. If you're going to have a stroke, you're not gonna go tourist, Julian. And, Lee?

LEE. Yes?

NORA. Remember what I told you about not taking the freeway!

LEE. I remember.

NORA. I'll see you both when you get here, okay? You boys stay out of trouble.

(*The light fades on NORA.*)

JULIAN. (*a beat, then*) I'm going to pay you back, you know.
For everything.

LEE. You don't have to, Julian.

JULIAN. I do, Lee. And I will.

LEE. She won't let you, you know that. But thank you for offering.

(After another long moment:)

JULIAN. You like this gas guzzler?

LEE. I thought no small talk?

JULIAN. Cars are my business.

(corrects himself)

Were my business, before my heart joined up for the ischemic club. Billy gave you a good deal on your lease, right? I'm not making dime one on this one.

LEE. Much appreciated, Julian.

(After a beat, LEE "turns the wheel.")

LEE. Do me a favor? Don't tell Nora I took the freeway.

JULIAN. Why would I?

(a beat, then)

Nora still handles all the car stuff for you two?

LEE. The car, the house, our taxes. I'm in charge of the piano, she's in charge of the world.

JULIAN. It suits you, though, right?

LEE. It's fine. I can't tell you the last time I felt like a grown-up, though.

JULIAN. Maybe you should just shut up and count your blessings.

LEE. (*a little annoyed*) Okay.

JULIAN. Believe me, the alternative is pretty miserable.

LEE. (*coolly*) Thanks for the reminder.

JULIAN. (*after a long moment*) I'm probably gonna give my Buick to Billy.

LEE. Why don't you wait awhile, see how you feel?

JULIAN. I was thinking in the hospital. Whether I get better or I don't, either way, there comes a time you turn off the car key in your head. How many people'd that old guy run over last year in Santa Monica, up to his ass on God knows how many meds?

LEE. He killed as many as he could, I guess.

JULIAN. Sixty years I've been driving. What's sixty times, say, ten thousand miles a year? Must be like almost a million.

LEE. It's a long trip.

JULIAN. I must be there by now, huh? Wherever I was going?

LEE. (*a beat, then*) How 'bout some music?

JULIAN. (*not interested*) I'm good. Nora tells me you got a commission to write something on your own?

LEE. If I ever get past bar twelve, I will.

JULIAN. What is it? Some kind of a concerto like?

LEE. It's an elegy, actually.

JULIAN. Anybody I knew?

LEE. No, no, it's kind of a generic dirge. Every time I turn around these days, I find myself speaking at the funeral du jour.

JULIAN. Lately, it's like they started giving death away for free.

LEE. (*agreeing*) Y'know? I thought I'd write a piece of music instead of just getting up and making one more speech. Words don't seem to cut it anymore. If, in fact, they ever did.

JULIAN. That's some talent, y'know? Hearing all that stuff in your head that no one else does.

LEE. In some places, it's called insanity.

JULIAN. As long as it pays well, right?

LEE. I guess. What can I say? I've been lucky.

JULIAN. You've been very lucky. Very. But you also went out and took what you wanted. You still do. That's a very efficient combination.

(LEE's cell phone warbles again. As LEE picks it up:)

LEE. (to JULIAN) I guess I'll take that as a compliment?

JULIAN. I never had a tenth of your moxie. If I did, I'd probably still be married to Nora.

LEE. (uncomfortably) Julian...

JULIAN. Answer the phone.

LEE. (gruffly, into his cell) What do you want?

(A light rises on NORA, astride a stationary bike stage right, her cell phone to her ear.)

NORA. What kind of way is that to answer a phone?

(imitating him)

"What do you want?"

LEE. I'm sorry! What do you want, darling?

NORA. Put me on speaker.

LEE. (aside, to JULIAN) It's the mothership.

(LEE switches NORA's call to the car's speaker-phone.)

NORA. Julian?

JULIAN. I'm as warm as a bug in a rug.

NORA. I know how concerned you are about expenses so I want to check with you before I pull the trigger with the nursing agency.

JULIAN. And?

NORA. I've interviewed a few girls, and the one I think you should go with for the daytime is called Lotis. That's Lotis with an "I."

JULIAN. Never mind the spelling lesson, what does she get?

NORA. One twenty.

JULIAN. (pained) For the day?

NORA. One twenty an hour.

JULIAN. What're you, crazy?

NORA. (overlapping his comment) She's worth every penny. She's got a lovely disposition.

JULIAN. Wouldn't we all, at those prices?

NORA. (*pedals a bit, then*) ...You're going to need one for the night, too, you know.

JULIAN. I have to pay to watch someone fall asleep before I do?

NORA. I talked to one woman who comes highly recommended.

JULIAN. By who? By Lotis, with an "I?" What does she charge, the night girl, if the day one gets one-twenty? Forget I even asked.

NORA. Two hundred's the going rate.

JULIAN. (*to LEE*) Take the airport exit. It's cheaper to drive to Lourdes.

NORA. (*stops pedaling*) The exit? The exit?

LEE. (*sotto voce, angrily*) What the hell, Julian?

JULIAN. (*sotto voce*) Sorry.

NORA. Lee? Didn't I tell you about the freeway? Especially after three in the afternoon?

LEE. The surface streets were jammed! I've been in the right lane the whole time!

JULIAN. (*helpfully*) He's driving like a soldier.

NORA. My God. You be careful with him, Lee. You hear me?

LEE. Christ, it's not like I'm bringing a baby home.

JULIAN. (*after a sip from his sippy cup*) A little, maybe.

NORA. (*towelings off*) Don't think we're not going to have a little talk about this freeway business.

LEE. I'd bet the car on that.

NORA. (*back to business*) What I suggest we do, Julian, is we go with Lotis for the daytime, and hire the registered nurse to stay with you through the night.

JULIAN. Absolutely not!

NORA. If you can't afford it, and you and I both know you can't, Lee and I'll help out until you get rid of the condo.

LEE. Is there a card I can sign to go with all these gifts?

JULIAN. Nora, I am not some kind of charity case!

NORA. Compassion is not charity.

JULIAN. Tell that to cash. Cash doesn't know the difference.

NORA. (*continuing her thought*) Compassion for someone I'll always care about.

LEE. (*aside, to JULIAN*) I see this scene with violins.

NORA. You got anyone else that can help you at this point in your life, Julian?

JULIAN. It wasn't my idea to outlive everyone I knew.

NORA. Look, we don't have to solve what're not even really problems yet all in one call.

LEE. Who can keep track anymore?

NORA. Was that you, Lee?

LEE. I forgot we're still on the air.

NORA. How many times have I told you? Stay off the phone when you're on the freeway!

(*She hangs up.*)

(*Lights down on NORA.*)

(*A moment passes; then:*)

JULIAN. He never saw it coming.

LEE. Who's that?

JULIAN. This *Reader's Digest* story where a guy got hit by a bus. That was the title.

LEE. "He Never Saw it Coming?"

JULIAN. That's right. He was walking alone at night down a highway. He was minding his own business, he wasn't looking for trouble, he was just walking along with an iThing in his ear.

LEE. (*helpfully*) An iPod.

JULIAN. I said that.

(*a beat, then*)

It's pitch as black can be outside. The road is icy. By the time the bus driver made him out, the poor bastard'd already lost one arm and both of his legs. He dove right into therapy though. Now, he's teaching chess to the same inner city kids that were on the bus that hit him.

(a beat, then)

JULIAN. It got me really thinking, that story.

LEE. Oh?

JULIAN. It got me thinking what were you thinking that night?

LEE. The night the guy got hit by a bus?

JULIAN. If you even were thinking at all.

LEE. Wait a minute. What are we suddenly talking about here?

JULIAN. You meet a woman at a party. An unattached woman, except she's got on a wedding ring, which you either ignore, or worse, you don't give a good goddam about. Or worse than worse, you figure that makes her some kind of a door prize.

LEE. Julian, after so many years of avoiding this conversation - after all the times you've come to dinner, shared birthdays and Billy's Little League games with us, why are you suddenly bringing this subject so completely out of the blue right now?

JULIAN. Because it's important that we finally talk about it.

LEE. Who says?

JULIAN. The injured party says, that's who!

LEE. (*heatedly*) Excuse me, but maybe you should have filed a complaint at the time, sir!

JULIAN. I didn't just think about Buicks and car keys in the hospital, all right? Like it or lump it, you and I are going to have a talk about what I want to talk about even before we get to your house!

LEE. And I'm telling you that if we do have it, we might never get to the goddam house!

JULIAN. (*overlapping the above*) I just need to understand how you saw the situation!

LEE. (*continuing, overlapping the above*) Because I'm gonna pull over and first kill you and then myself with a tire iron!

JULIAN. Just for once, finally explain to me why you had absolutely no regard for what I might have felt about what was going on without me having so much as one stinking inkling about it! I accept that you had no regard for me! I understand that it was so much easier stealing someone from someone you didn't even know! But what about Nora? She was a married woman, for God's sake! A married woman with a child, which you soon enough found out about! Did you ever once give as much as a hoot about anyone else just as long as you got whatever - or whoever - you wanted?

LEE. I didn't walk up to her with a plan, Julian! I didn't wake up that morning with the idea that that was the day I was going to change my whole life!

JULIAN. How about three whole lives?!

LEE. All it started out as was a simple conversation at a party.

JULIAN. But you pushed it! Just tell me if you were thinking you were doing the right thing when you pushed it!

LEE. I wasn't thinking, Julian, I was falling in love!

JULIAN. But I fell in love with her first!

(LEE's cell phone rings.)

(LEE answers.)

(Both men, both irritated, respond.)

LEE & JULIAN. WHAT?!

(Blackout)

(In the darkness, we hear Lee's elegy played at its next stage of development.)

Scene Four

(The Baers' morning room.)

(A casually dressed LEE is playing gin rummy with JULIAN.)

(An old, plaid robe over his pajamas, JULIAN's garb is topped by a jaunty, paisley ascot, as much for the touch of flair it lends as the warmth that it provides.)

(After drawing a fresh card from the center pile and giving his next move a moment of thought:)

LEE. *(nervously)* It may be a little late, but –

(laying the cards in his hands down)

Six.

(a beat, then)

Any good?

(turning his face-down knock card right-side up)

That's the Jack you've been waiting for, right?

(getting no response)

The Jack of Hearts?

(stares at JULIAN; then, to himself)

Jesus.

(clinking JULIAN's teacup with a spoon)

Julian?

(more clinking, then)

Julian!

JULIAN. *(coming to, disoriented)* What?

LEE. Are you all right?

(As JULIAN reaches toward the center pile:)

No! Don't!

JULIAN. (*startled*) What?!

(*trying to remember*)

You just discarded, didn't you?

LEE. I just knocked.

JULIAN. With how much?

LEE. Six points.

(*hopefully*)

Am I okay?

JULIAN. (*looking at LEE's face-up knock card*)

Is that the Jack of Hearts?

LEE. It's the card you needed, right?

JULIAN. Not any more I don't!

(*He snaps up the Jack gleefully.*)

(*Using one triumphant elbow, JULIAN inserts the Jack into his cards, and declares:*)

Gin!

(*He lays down what he thinks is his winning hand.*)

LEE. You can't do that.

(**JULIAN** *cackles.*)

You can't gin after someone knocks.

JULIAN. Who knocked?

LEE. I did.

JULIAN. When?

LEE. When you fell asleep.

JULIAN. Never! I didn't!

LEE. I saw you!

JULIAN. I was resting. I was waiting for you to make up your mind.

LEE. I did make up my mind. I went down with six. You got less than that?

JULIAN. You caught me with a million points, but I'd've ginned, if you'd have given me the chance.

LEE. Close only counts in horseshoes.

JULIAN. (*testy*) Whatever you say, Tom.

LEE. (*puzzled*) Tom?

JULIAN. Tom Mix. Horseshoes. You're a maven on those, too, now?

LEE. (*keeping his cool*) How about we just pack it in for while, all right, Julian?

JULIAN. It's your bunkhouse. You call the shots. I was only playing to please you.

LEE. (*gathering up the cards*) I think I've had more than enough pleasure for one day.

JULIAN. (*truculently*) Fine.

LEE. Same time tomorrow?

JULIAN. (*the same*) Fine.

LEE. Right. Same time, same place.

(*under his breath, wearily*)

Or else at Guantanamo.

JULIAN. What'd you say?

LEE. I said "Same time, same place."

JULIAN. I heard that part. I meant when you said, "Or else at Guantanamo."

LEE. (*re-boxing the deck*) For someone who doesn't hear well, you could give hearing lessons.

(*offering JULIAN the remote channel changer*)

You want to watch some Wimbledon if it's on?

JULIAN. (*refusing the remote*) They play whether I watch them or not.

(*a beat, then*)

Tell me something.

LEE. (*bracing himself*) What's that?

JULIAN. Are you as tired as you look lately?

LEE. A little, maybe. Could be.

JULIAN. (*after a beat*) Around three this morning, I could hear you playing the piano.

LEE. It kind of goes with the territory around here.

JULIAN. Was what I heard you playing the thing you're writing?

LEE. The thing I thought I could, yes.

JULIAN. The little I heard sounds like it would go over very big at a funeral.

LEE. I'm sorry if I woke you.

JULIAN. (*with a shrug*) Everything wakes me. Sleeping wakes me. That goes with another kind of territory.

(*a beat, then*)

Can I tell you what I thought about what I did hear, for whatever it's worth?

LEE. (*automatically defensive*) It's not finished yet.

JULIAN. (*barging ahead*) Sometimes, in places, the melody, you probably call it, it goes up when I thought it was going to go down. Sometimes I just didn't know where it was going altogether. I never knew what to expect.

LEE. It's called the element of surprise, Julian. It's not unlike life itself.

JULIAN. Only when you make something up, you decide what's in, you decide what's out. You get to be God, right?

LEE. Until I have to take a leak, I am.

JULIAN. (*off LEE sneaking a look at his wrist watch*) Did Nora tell you?

LEE. That depends on what, but the answer is probably no.

JULIAN. I got a call from Sonia today.

LEE. (*instant interest*) The real estate Sonia?

JULIAN. She just got another offer on my condo.

LEE. Another tentative offer?

JULIAN. Better than that, she said. The Russians want to take a second look.

LEE. (*most interested*) They do? Really?

JULIAN. Maybe this time, huh? Maybe, maybe?

LEE. I'm keeping everything crossed for you, Julian, I really am.

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