

The Playground

a one-woman show

By Jim Dalglish

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Characters

Joan - Mid-to-late 30s. Intelligent. Left a tenure track job teaching ethnography at Berkeley to follow her husband to New York. Her behavior sometimes hides the pain she feels inside. She is more vulnerable than she wants you to believe.

Voices

(Roles that appear as voice overs.

The characters are pictured as photos and video fragments in projections.)

William - Joan's husband. A teacher at Stanford before he left his position to work for a hedge fund in New York. He is a mathematical genius who has miscalculated in his plans for the future.

Billy - Joan's four-year-old son. Active and a little rambunctious. A bit of a daredevil. Sweet kid.

Female Professor - Middle-aged anthropology professor at Columbia University. She is a supermom.

Ashley - Late 40s to early 50s. Wealthy, well-connected wife of a hedge fund manager. Mother of Cyrus. Homes on Central Park, East Hampton, and somewhere outside of Jackson Hole. William works for her husband.

Cyrus - Ashley's four-year-old son. Sensitive, awkward, with eyes that seem to see through you. Something about him makes you want to protect him from the world.

Britney - A composite of three wealthy young mothers who live on the Upper East Side. Friends of Ashley - because of the connections she can provide.

Gracia - Cyrus's nannie. Late 20s. Undocumented worker. Fled Guatemala after gangs killed her father and brother. Alone in the world, she has few places to turn.

Man - Wealthy, arrogant, loud blowhard who has a habit of mansplaining to attractive young women during social engagements.

Little Girl - One of the Britney's daughters.

Setting

Joan's mind - Places from her memories of the Upper East Side neighborhood of New York and East Hampton. But it is set mostly the place that haunts Joan the most - the East 72nd Street Playground in Central Park.

Time

Now. In Joan's memory. It will always haunt her. It won't go away.

Production Notes

This is a one-woman show. The **Voices** should be presented as audio voiceovers that Joan hears in her mind. Other sound effects that support the setting and action of the play would also be effective in taking audiences into the action as Joan recounts what has happened.

The projections that can be seen behind Joan contain photos and videos of the settings and the secondary characters. A few of the videos help to support the action. The projections are what Joan sees in her mind. They don't have to be fancy. They might resemble the quality of the Google Slides presentations she makes for her college students.

Dialogue in *Italics* indicates the actual dialogue in a scene as Joan remembers it and should take the audience directly into the action of the scene. **Roman** dialogue indicates Joan's narration and the remarks she addresses to the audience.

In many plays there is a direct correlation between the number of pages in a script and the number of minutes it will take to perform - usually a one-to-one correlation. Because **The Playground** is a one-character play with lines of extended narration, this will not be the case. The playwright has included paragraph breaks to lighten the text on the page and to indicate thought processes. But the playwright anticipates that *The Playground* will run about 90 minutes in performance. It is a full evening of theatre.

Precedence

This full-length, one-person drama draws on a tradition of similar plays. These include: "I Am My Own Wife" by Doug Wright, "Thom Pain, Based On Nothing" by Will Eno, "Grounded" by George Brant, "Krapp's Last Tape" by Samuel Beckett, "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Wolf, "The Vagina Monologues" by Eve Ensler, "Shirley Valentine" by Willy Russell, "The Year of Magic Thinking" by Joan Didion, "The Bell of Amherst" by William Luce, "Sea Wall" by Simon Stephens, "A Life" by Nick Payne, etc.

(Lights up on an empty stage.

Joan - an intense woman in her mid-to-late thirties - stands center stage.

A projection screen appears behind Joan. Occasionally a photo appears or a video plays to show a secondary character or to support the action or to elucidate a point.

Joan faces the audience and addresses them directly.)

JOAN

This is about what we think we deserve.

As you sit there and watch me, something deep down inside - maybe a little voice? - is saying I'm here right now at this point in my life because this is where I belong. Where I want to be. This is what I deserve.

(Addressing a man in the audience - with humor:)

JOAN

Maybe not you. Did she drag you here tonight?

(She laughs:)

JOAN

Yeah. That happens.

(Including the rest of the audience:)

JOAN

But for the rest of you? Everything you have ever done - your triumphs, your catastrophes - have led you right here to this moment.

Cause.

Effect.

Action.

Reaction.

That's the way the world works.

And it's glorious because for most of us it really works out well.

I mean, we could quibble. And we do. About the service we receive at the dealership. Or the fact that we were passed up for a promotion. Or the wrong dress was overnighted and now we have nothing to wear to the party.

So yeah. We could complain.

But we shouldn't.

Because for us - you and me - there's very little true unfairness in our world. It's part of the package we inherited and then decided to call *hard work, fortitude, luck, or fate.*

You are here because you deserve this. This thrill of seeing me make a total ass of myself. And I'm here because this is what I deserve too.

(She starts again.)

(PROJECTION: a photo of the East 72nd Street Playground in Central Park.)

JOAN

There's a playground in Central Park.

Not too far from the Met.

It makes the ones we grew up with look like they were designed for neanderthals. The merry-go-rounds that would spin so fast you vomit. The slides with the shiny metal chutes that on a sunny summer day would give the back of your bare legs third degree burns. Ragged sharp metal edges and coated with rust and sunk into concrete covered with little stones that would take hours to pick out of the cuts on your palms and kneecaps. And when all this fun was happening - and it was fun, really fun - remember where our parents were?

(She laughs.)

JOAN

Somewhere else.

The good old days.

There are no sharp edges to this playground in Central Park. Low molded plastic platforms with safety rails. Padded rubber. Something that springs under your feet. You could drop an egg and I swear it would bounce right back up un-cracked into your hands. Every inch ensures that nothing bad could ever happen.

(She loses patience with herself.)

JOAN

I'm Joan.

That's my name.

Joan.

I was there at the playground in Central Park with my son. And he was playing on the... I don't even know what you would call it... a tall plastic platform about 6 feet above the... It was an icy winter day. And he was playing. And having fun. And...

(She stops herself.)

JOAN

No. I have to tell this right. So that you'll understand.

(She laughs wryly.)

JOAN

You probably won't understand what happened. Why it happened. Not from the way I tell it. Which is kind of ridiculous because I have a Ph.D. in Ethnography.

From out West.

Berkeley.

Whatever.

Ethnography. Like Margaret Meade...

(She looks to the audience for recognition.)

JOAN

"Coming of Age in Samoa?"

(PROJECTION: a photo of Margaret Meade appears as a projection behind Joan.

Joan points to the projection.)

JOAN

Yeah. Her.

That's going to happen every once in a while. You'll see things that I remember... I'm a teacher. Where would I be without my google slides, right?

I hope it's not too distracting.

Margaret Meade helped popularize a form of Anthropology - Ethnography. Basically a culture's stories are just as important as the broken pottery shards they throw down the latrine. So for me - an Ethnographer - to say I can't make sense of my story is ironic.

Maybe it would take someone as brilliant as Margaret Meade to puzzle it out.

(Sincerely:)

JOAN

Maybe after hearing it, you can help me?

Not that I deserve it.

(She starts over again.)

JOAN

The playground.

Billy.

My little boy. Named after his father. William.

(PROJECTION: a photo of William.)

JOAN

So my husband... Will... is this brilliant kind of charming super-nerd who basically grew up in a lab at Stanford. Statistical analysis. Economics. Finance. High order mathematical computation. He had developed - I don't know what you would call it, it's not my field of study - he created an algorithm. You plug it in with the right data and it can pretty much predict... the market?

Or at least the performance of a specific company, country, or currency.

A hedge fund in New York discovered his brilliance and that was the end of the Bay Area for us. Good bye tenure track at Berkeley for me.

Isn't that the way it usually goes? Co-parenting in the rarified world of liberal academia. Split equitably so that neither of us would lose momentum. But once money comes into play, that's the end of the enlightenment.

(To a husband/wife couple in the audience:)

JOAN

Does he make more money than you?

I know I'm being intrusive. But that is my profession. To get in there and...

Does he make more money?

(She nods her head in agreement.)

JOAN

Yeah? So if he were to be transferred... say... to a new town. To stay together, you'd give up everything and follow.

Right?

(She nods her head in confirmation.)

JOAN

I mean... you are probably equal partners in every way. But on average women are paid 82% of what men make for equal work in this country and when money enters the equation in domestic decision making...

How many of you would give up your career, pack your bags, and follow the money trail?

(She probably will not get a response. Wryly, but gently:)

JOAN

It's the American way.

The hedge fund owned some pretty nice properties on the Upper East Side, and that's where they put us.

(PROJECTION: a photo of a nice - but small - apartment with a great view of Central Park.)

JOAN

An apartment on the 32nd floor of a high rise with a balcony and a stunning view of the Park.

So Will could walk to his Mid-town East office at dawn and sit there computing until the partners decided he was done.

While I stayed home with our son.

Our 4-year-old son.

(PROJECTION: a photo of Billy.)

JOAN

Billy.

(She stands frozen for a moment as she looks at the photo of her son. It's like her heart has stopped for a beat.

She composes herself and continues her story.)

JOAN

There's so much to do in New York City.

Isn't there?

The museums. The Broadway shows. The little boutiques. The night clubs. But when you have a young son and you're pushing a stroller the size of a small car?

I think he missed being with us. Will. He said he did. When he would come home late at night, crawl into bed, and place his cold hand on my lower back.

This was supposed to be a three-year deal. Make a killing. Take the money and run.

Someplace.

(In addition to seeing projections of William - and the other characters - we will hear their voices. Dialog marked with italics indicates that Joan is in the scene and speaking to the characters in her mind. Roman indicates she is speaking to the audience.)

PROJECTION: a photo of William.)

WILLIAM (V.O.)

It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Joan. If I do this right, we'll be set for life.

JOAN

But what kind of life?

A return to what exactly?

But I knew I could trust Will. We made this decision together.

(Breaking the flow:)

JOAN

That's going to happen a lot. That voice you just heard. It's what's inside my head.

The voices that sometimes sneak up on me no matter how hard I try to push them out.

(PROJECTION: a video of William showing Billy how to make a möbius strip.)

WILLIAM (V.O.)

See this loop of paper, Billy?

JOAN

This is Will playing a game with Billy.

(PROJECTION: a video that shows Will completing each of the steps that follow.)

JOAN

He's taken a strip of paper and pasted it together in a loop.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

What would happen if I cut this loop of paper down the middle?

(PROJECTION: video of Will cutting the piece of paper.)

BILLY (V.O.)

Two loops!

JOAN

That's my son Billy's voice.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Let's see!

JOAN

Will cuts the loop down the middle and shows Billy the two loops.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Yes! See?!

(The projection freezes on Will showing the two loops. We hear Billy laugh.)

JOAN

Do other mothers experience this? A special connection between a father and his son that is somehow just out of reach?

WILLIAM (V.O.)

But what happens when we take another strip and twist it before we turn it into a loop?

(PROJECTION: a video of Will making a Möbius strip.)

JOAN

Will creates a Möbius strip.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

What happens when we cut this one down the middle?

BILLY (V.O.)

Two loops!

(Will cuts down the middle of the Möbius strip.)

JOAN

Will cuts down the center of the Möbius strip... all the way around...

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Let's see.

JOAN

Fathers and sons. Little moments... here and there... A shared language between them... That you will never be able to speak.

(Will hands to paper to Billy.)

JOAN

Billy unfolds it and is thrilled to see that it isn't two loops, but one long twisting loop.

(The projection freezes on Billy holding up the twisted loop of paper. We hear him shriek with laughter.)

BILLY (V.O.)

Magic, Daddy!

WILLIAM (V.O.)

No. It's math, little man.

JOAN

Everything makes sense when life is a simple loop. You follow the path around an orbit. Your perspective never changes. You know where you are, where you are going, and what to expect... even if you are just traveling in a circle.

But cut that loop by, say... breaking ties with your former career, your home... Berkeley. Packing up and moving to a huge city... a place more aggressive and confusing and hostile than anything you are used to. I mean, New York...

Am I right? Just getting from one side Fifth Avenue to the other can be fraught.

(PROJECTION: a photo of the Columbia University campus.)

JOAN

I pushed the stroller over to Columbia one day to see a professor I had met once at a conference. To check out their research. See if there was some way I could stay in the game.

Billy was being Billy. He wasn't happy in the stroller and he wouldn't stay on my lap. He ran around her office, trying to play with the unusual - and valuable - cultural artifacts she had on display to impress her graduate students.

Which is something I did too... back in my office in Berkeley.

They were all in a box now... in storage... somewhere.

I couldn't control Billy. He wanted to touch everything he saw. I probably looked like every other first-time mom you have ever seen desperately trying to calm a hyperactive child and do it in a way that was supposed to convey that everything was normal, under control, and fun.

(PROJECTION: a photo of the Female Professor.)

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

You've got your hands full there.

JOAN

He's a bit of a stimulus junky.

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

Do you have help?

JOAN

He's just one child. It's not like I have 3 toddlers...

It was at that precise moment that I saw the photos on her shelves...

(PROJECTION: A photo of the Female Professor and her three daughters - all in their mid twenties.)

JOAN

Three daughters.

Will and I wanted to make sure that Billy... we didn't feel good about trusting other people with him... So we decided that Will would work full time and I would... His new job is really...

She was a pro. Like any good anthropologist, she let me go on and dig myself deeper. I grabbed Billy by the leg, dragged him into my arms and regrouped...

Is there any opportunity for me to help you out? Maybe be a reader for you... Review a paper you may have in the works before you submit it to publication...

She crossed to a shelf behind her desk and removed three books. She handed them to me.

(PROJECTION: photos of the covers of the books mentioned.)

JOAN

“The Reproduction of Mothering.”

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

It’s surprisingly still relevant.

JOAN

“Narcissistic Mothers - A Survivor’s Guide”

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

Don’t be put off by the title.

JOAN

“Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead”

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

When you need a good laugh.

(Joan decides to go off on a tangent.)

JOAN

Motherhood isn’t sacred.

Is this news to you?

It’s a commodity just like everything else in our culture. Only it has the potential to be as damaging as any weapon of mass destruction.

(Joan refers to a woman in the audience.)

JOAN

Have you seen the meme... *If mothers ran the world, there would be no war?*

It’s all over social media.

(PROJECTION: photo of Margaret Thatcher.)

JOAN

Margaret Thatcher was a mother.

(PROJECTION: photo of Catherine the Great)

JOAN

So was Catherine the Great.

(PROJECTION: photo of Aung San Suu Kyi.)

JOAN

How about Aung San Suu Kyi? The Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister of Myanmar. Mother of two children. Didn't lift a manicured pinky to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

For almost 100% of the cultures on earth, women assume the responsibility of child rearing. Since our primordial ancestors managed to raise themselves up on two feet.

Women.

Look at the world around you...

Mothers are in charge of raising our children to be decent human beings...

Ever think that maybe we're doing something wrong?

Think about that the next time you insist on glorifying the role of motherhood.

(Joan laughs.)

JOAN

I'm sorry. Sometimes I have this perverse need to challenge and provoke. To throw out a hypothesis and see what lands and what's thrown back in my face. Most boomerang and hit me right in the kisser. It drives Will crazy.

Why do I do it?

Because I want to make the world a better place.

(For a moment Joan feels an ache deep inside.)

JOAN

Thanks for not laughing. I owe you one.

(She returns to her story.)

JOAN

Back to Columbia... The professor's office...

I managed to get Billy into the stroller, juggle the books, and walk to the door.

If you need my references, just let me know.

(PROJECTION: photo of Professor.)

FEMALE PROFESSOR (V.O.)

I'll keep you in mind.

JOAN

But she didn't...

When I abandoned my tenure-track position in California, it must have sent a clear signal. That I didn't value my career enough. I was a woman who wasn't willing to make the sacrifices necessary to be taken seriously in my field. I wasn't the right kind of material.

(PROJECTION: photo of hands holding a cut loop of paper.)

JOAN

I had cut the loop... That comfortable circular orbit of privilege that I had grown accustomed to... That had formed my identity.

I cut it.

And it unwound.

That's when I discovered that I don't necessarily deal well with adversity.

For a few months it wasn't pretty.

I'll spare you the details.

Will suggested that I go to a therapist.

I did.

They wanted to start me on a medication that would help me... But I was convinced that it was just a temporary thing... anxiety from the move...

caring for a rambunctious young child... new surroundings. I could do this... figure out a way to take that severed strip, paste it back into a loop, and begin an exciting new orbit with Will, Billy, and me.

(Returning to her story.)

(PROJECTION: a photo of Central Park.)

JOAN

Central Park.

The playground.

Billy.

Central Park is... I don't know... unexpectedly beautiful? Can you imagine what a hell-hole Manhattan would be without it? The first couple of weeks, I'd strap Billy into the stroller and away we'd go. Sure, he was old enough to walk on his own. He was old enough to run on his own, but it was just easier to....

And that's how I found the playground. South of the Met. Past the Alice in Wonderland sculpture. Around the model boat pond.

(She looks to the slide as though she is visualizing the scene.)

JOAN

And there it is.

(PROJECTION: a photo of the East 72nd Street Playground in Central Park.)

JOAN

The East 72nd street playground.

And that's where she was.

(PROJECTION: a photo of Ashley.)

JOAN

Ashley.

(Back to the audience:)

JOAN

New York City is filled with more than 8 million people, so you might think it would be a little freaky to discover how often you run into people you know. But it's not freaky to someone who is trained to see behavior patterns within social strata. People have a way of clumping together no matter how hard they try to stay apart.

(Back to visualizing the scene.)

JOAN

I turned the corner pushing my stroller.

Ashley.

Sitting on one of the rows of benches facing the playground equipment. With the Britneys.

(PROJECTION: a photo of Ashley with the three Britneys.)

JOAN

Britney 1, Britney 2, and Britney 3. Not their real names, but they're not important to the story other than to convey a certain persona of women. By that I mean *Wealthy New York Wife*. A woman who resides a few days of the week in one of the neighborhoods of Upper Manhattan before being driven or flown out to a property in Westport or East Hampton.

The persona sounds uncharitable.

(Sincerely:)

JOAN

It is. And I'm sorry for that because each of these women has her own dreams and desires and fears and triumphs and disasters...

But they are secondary characters in my story. It will be easier to follow if I flatten them out a little.

Back to Ashley.

(PROJECTION: Ashley.)

JOAN

She is the wife of the lead partner of the hedge fund Will works for. She's pretty much the alpha of this pack of wolverines. The Britney's husbands were either connected to the fund in some way, or they traveled in the same social circles.

(PROJECTION: Ashley in party mode.)

JOAN

I had met Ashley at one of the parties the fund had thrown to introduce us to New York. She was gracious.

Honestly... yes... gracious.

She seemed to take an interest in me and my life. Like we were two childhood friends who had been separated for a few years and needed to catch up. Which is a real trick to pull off with a complete stranger when you have 30 people over for dinner at your co-op on Central Park West.

I could never do that.

I'm not a charming person.

Are you surprised by that?

(PROJECTION: photo of Will telling a story at a party. Joan is seen watching.)

JOAN

Will, my husband, is. He is dynamic. And fun-loving. And emotionally accessible. God, is he emotionally accessible. Sometimes I just want to tell him that every feeling he has doesn't deserve to be verbalized.

(She laughs.)

JOAN

What am I saying? I mean. That's what I'm doing now. Isn't it?

Billy is like his father.

(She pauses again as she thinks about her son and smiles.)

(PROJECTION: montage of Billy.)

JOAN

Billy.

He was only 4, but by that point I already knew that he would be the most amazing... I would look at him, and I see my husband.

Billy.

He's a handful. Just takes the world by the... But in a good way. We've decided not to be helicopter parents. To set firm boundaries for him, but to let him have the freedom to explore on his own as much as possible. It's how we believe we were raised.

It seems to be working. He is open to anything. Excited about each new adventure. Never one to sit still. A complete pain in the ass.

(PROJECTION: photo of Billy and his father.)

JOAN

Like his father.

And I know that my one job now is to make sure that he has every opportunity that he needs to succeed. Despite all the privileges he was born into. It's my job to help him see how lucky he is. And help him become a kind and compassionate man.

To become a good person.

(She stops at a realization.)

JOAN

I used to think I was a good person.

Do good people do bad things?

(She breaks and goes back to her story.)

JOAN

The playground.

Ashley.

(PROJECTION: photo of Ashley at the playground.)

(She puts herself into the scene.)

JOAN

Hi?

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Joan...

JOAN

New Yorkers rarely act surprised... surprise shows a certain degree of weakness.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Britney was just showing us her push present.

JOAN

Push present?

ASHLEY (V.O.)

From her husband.

(PROJECTION: photo of a Britney.)

BRITNEY (V.O.)

A little thank you for destroying my body for 9 months in order to push this one out.

JOAN

Britney gestured toward an infant that was fussing in the arms of a dark-skinned nannie a few yards away. She held up her hand.

(PROJECTION: photo of tennis bracelet on her wrist.)

BRITNEY (V.O.)

A new tennis bracelet.

JOAN

You play? So do I... I would give anything to find someone to...

They chuckled. I found the diamond bracelet online later that night. Tiffany. 18 grand.

(PROJECTION: photo of tennis bracelet on the Tiffany website.)

JOAN

(To "Ashley":) *Is Cyrus with you?*

(PROJECTION: Photo of Cyrus - a beautiful, slightly frail little boy wearing glasses.)

JOAN

Cyrus was Ashley's son. About the same age as Billy. She gestured to the park where I saw a little boy attempting to climb a sort of rope-runged ladder to a platform about 6 feet off the ground. A young woman stood beside him, holding the back of his jacket to make sure he didn't fall. Her skin was almost as dark as the woman holding Britney's infant. I unbuckled the three straps that secured Billy in the stroller. He stood and tore into the playground.

Honey!

Ashley's hand took hold of my arm.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Don't worry. Gracia! Keep an eye out for this one. His name's Billy.

JOAN

She had never seen my son before, but she had remembered his name from our brief conversation at the party.

I turned to Gracia...

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia.)

JOAN

Thanks.

I watched as Billy jumped up on the rope ladder a foot from Cyrus and within a few seconds had scrambled up to the top of the platform, leaned out to grab the coated metal pole, jumped, wrapped his legs around the pole and slid down to earth as nonchalantly as an EMT at a firehouse. Cyrus gave up and walked over to my son and extended his hand.

CYRUS (V.O.)

I'm Cyrus.

JOAN

Billy extended his hand in reply.

BILLY (V.O.)

I'm William. But you can call me Billy.

(PROJECTION: photo of Billy and Cyrus shaking hands.)

JOAN

Gracia looked on as a new friendship formed in front of her eyes.

Billy pointed to me.

BILLY (V.O.)

That's my mom.

JOAN

Cyrus ran to a little berm of grass on the edge of the playground. To a patch of yellow blooms. He picked a flower and ran to me. He held the dandelion up.

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus holding a dandelion.)

(She kneels down as though Cyrus is right in front of her.)

JOAN

What have you got there, Little Man?

CYRUS (V.O.)

For you.

(She is genuinely touched by the gesture from the boy.)

JOAN

For me?

He blushed and looked down at his feet.

(Joan mimes accepting the little flower and smiles warmly at the boy.)

JOAN

A dandelion!

Cyrus looked up and nodded. I reached out and gently pushed his glasses back up to the bridge of his little button nose.

What a treasure! Thank you!

Cyrus... A gentle boy... with big watchful eyes. Maybe it was just the way his glasses magnified them when he looked at you. And when he looked at you... with those big, unguarded eyes... It was like a hard place inside you would melt a little.

This was a little boy who needed a protective cocoon... And parents who were wealthy enough to provide it.

Put your head up, sweetheart...

I placed the yellow flower under his chin.

(PROJECTION: photo of dandelion under
Cyrus's chin.)

(Joan pretends to be surprised.)

JOAN

You like butter. Don't you?!!

CYRUS (V.O.)

How do you know?!

JOAN

The dandelion told me!

CYRUS (V.O.)

How?!

JOAN

By then Billy had joined us.

Watch!

I placed the dandelion under Billy's chin.

(PROJECTION: photo of dandelion held under
Billy's chin.)

JOAN

See how it makes Billy's chin glow yellow?

Cyrus nodded enthusiastically.

It means Billy likes butter too!

BILLY (V.O.)

I love butter!

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Why don't you join us, Joan?

JOAN

Looking back, I guess that's how I did it. How I took the severed loop of my former life and pasted it back together.

What I didn't know at the time is that joining Ashley would be like twisting that severed strip before pasting it back together.

A möbius strip.

The new orbit of my life.

(PROJECTION: photo of the playground.)

JOAN

Every morning. Between 10 and 11:30. The East 72nd street playground in Central Park. Sitting on the bench with Ashley and the Britneys occasionally glancing out at our children having fun under the careful supervision of black and brown-skinned women who counted themselves lucky for the honor.

What would we talk about?

These women were intelligent. They had college degrees. And work experience before their first child. Some pretty challenging, professional positions. But they mostly talked about the TV series they were watching. Or what a certain influencer posted. And shopping. So much shopping! Do you know that you could buy a simple leather purse for 22 grand and think it was a steal?

I'm not a shopper.

But mostly they talked about *self care*. This was their religion. And by *care* I don't mean *health*. Or the sometimes woo woo notions of the West Coast about healing energies or meditation or forest bathing or weekend encounter groups...

Or the strange almost cult-like enthusiasm for cross fit core... Is that what it's called? Or any of the other wacky fitness and nature fads.

The Britneys didn't seem to care about being healthier or more fit or living longer. Sure, each owned a Peloton. And that's what they did between their husbands leaving for work in the morning and when they ate their breakfast with their children. None of them were going to compete in motocross, run a half marathon, or go rock climbing.

I guess I wasn't going to do that again either. Will and I enjoyed rock climbing. The real thing... not just a wall in some gym. Before Billy. That was so much easier in California.

Self care.

In this case, *Care* meant *Beauty*. Nothing was more important to these women. The desire to be young and attractive. Or at least look like it. Maybe their kids were up there too? Okay, yeah... they were. But in a very hands-off way. That I didn't understand... at first.

Self Care.

Manicures. Pedicures. Facials. Blow outs. Botox. Chemical peels. Laser Resurfacing, Radio-frequency Micro-needling. Collagen Boosters. Restylane. Juvederm. CoolSculpting. And the planning of these treatments - usually around their travels, benefits, galas, and family gatherings. The sequencing of these things takes up an unbelievable amount of time.

After 90 minutes at the park, they'd follow their nannies to drop the kids off at a private pre school. The nannies would get four hours off. Ashley and her pack would have lunch. Then they would break up for the rest of the afternoon. Usually head off to the spa. Or the stores. Or maybe volunteer work? Ashley had a few causes she was passionate about.

I would take Billy home, make lunch, read to him and play games - educational games - until dinner. There would be the inevitable phone call from Will saying he would be late. I'd tuck my little boy in. Maybe TV. Maybe early to bed with a book.

I was lonely.

That didn't occur to me at the time, though.

(She takes a new track. A brighter tone.)

JOAN

So I should probably clarify something here. About the citizens of New York. No one is actually from there.

I mean, yes, some are, but the vast majority in this socio economic bracket move to the City from somewhere else. And for a purpose. Usually professional.

When I told one of Will's coworkers about my studies... this was during that first party at Ashley's.

(PROJECTION: photo of middle-aged man at a party.)

MAN (V.O.)

If you want to study an authentic New Yorker, you came to the wrong place. These people may call themselves New Yorkers, but they are mostly just passing through on their way someplace else. They're here for a few years to suck the town dry and either find a way to isolate themselves in a gilded enclave or flee to Connecticut and raise a family. Of course, these are the people who move to New York with inherited money or solid prospects. For those who are younger... (singing:) If I can make it there...

JOAN

I'll spare you his singing voice.

MAN (V.O.)

Sure. It could happen. But if it doesn't within 5 years, it won't. And If you don't make it, it's a dingy one-room studio in a place with a broken elevator. They're the ones waiting on you at the bodega on the corner. The ones who stand clutching the grips in the subways during rush hour. The ones babysitting the wealthy elderly in their homes. If you survive that for ten years, that's when you can call yourself a New Yorker. Which is nice because they provide the local flavor to the town. The accents on Law and Order.

JOAN

This is the line I will never forget...

MAN (V.O.)

They are the furniture in a room where interesting people with dynamic lives gather.

JOAN

Furniture. I had never heard people described as furniture before.

(PROJECTION: photo of Will.)

JOAN

When I recounted this to Will, he laughed and told me to write it down. In fact, I should write it all down. Everything that caught my eye and ear, and use it for my studies.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

I mean, what else are you doing?

JOAN

Raising our son?

(She breaks from the scene and address the audience.)

JOAN

Okay. So... Will didn't mean it. I know he didn't mean it. He once scolded a fellow grad student when he expressed pride in himself for *Helping Out* at home with his child.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

You're not helping out, buddy. It's your fucking job as a father and don't you forget it.

JOAN

When I heard Will say this back out West, I knew I had made the right choice when I got down on a knee and asked him to marry me.

But even after only a short time, things can start to rub off on you. You find yourself saying and doing things.

(PROJECTION: photo of the playground.)

JOAN

Like sitting on a park bench with a bunch of mothers of a certain socio-economic bracket that is way above your pay grade as you watch your children be supervised by underpaid nannies.

What I just said about New Yorkers? I hope you realize that I was talking about white people.

The brown and black-skinned people... They live a different New York. It's almost like you exist in a Multiverse. Parallel worlds that operate in tandem. But in this case, you can see the other world... if you look. But you have to look. Sometimes it comes at you and knocks you over the head.

But for Ashley and the Britneys, their contact was minimal. Usually through interactions with their doormen. Maintenance people. Shop attendants. Drivers. Their nannies and au pairs. The inner lives of these people... these *others*... their hopes, and dreams and fears never really broke through into the Britney dimension of the multiverse.

(She sets up a scene with Gracia - looking to the side to address her.)

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia.)

JOAN

Gracia. For the past few weeks... Here in the playground... I know you didn't sign up to take care of two boys...

Gracia interrupted me, saying something about how it was no bother and that she adores little Billy and how good it was for Cyrus to have someone who could challenge him a little...

(Joan breaks into a parenthetical.)

JOAN

I would give you more of her words and present them the way I hear them in my head... with a Spanish accent... the whole works. But I know that half of you would accuse me of cultural appropriation. I know that no matter how accurately I would try to convey her words and emotions, you would discount everything as being tarnished from my own perspective of white privilege.

You're right.

Of course.

And you should leave right now. This will only get worse and I won't be held responsible for your triggers.

(Joan returns to her story.)

JOAN

Gracia had been helping me out for weeks as I sat there chatting with the other mothers, I'd asked Ashley to accept a little extra cash from me... as a token of my appreciation. But she wouldn't have it.

(PROJECTION: photo of Joan's hand tucking a twenty into Billy's jacket pocket.)

JOAN

So I tucked a twenty... yeah, okay, not much... not as much as Gracia deserved... I slid a twenty into the top pocket of Billy's jacket.

(Returning to the scene with Gracia.)

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia.)

JOAN

Gracia, when you know no one's looking, go ahead and take it. It's yours. I'll replace it with another every time I come to the playground. It's the least I can do.

She blushed and nodded her head.

(Back to the audience.)

JOAN

During Billy's naps or as I was waiting for Will to come home, I started to take notes. On cards. About Ashley. And the Britneys. And the nannies. All the people I had seen in the park that day. I cleared a wall in the living room and got to work.

(PROJECTION: a white wall with PostIt notes and connecting yarn.)

(Joan refers to the projection.)

JOAN

At the top of the wall I took some of Billy's finger paints and wrote *The Social Strata of the 72nd Street Playground*. I applied everything I had learned from my years of research as an ethnographer. I kept track of all the people I had observed and categorized them by my perceptions of their demographics, affiliations, psychographics, learned behaviors, wants, needs, motivations, attitudes and preferences. With special emphasis on their own personal journeys and their interaction points with each other.

(Joan moves around imaginary cards on the imaginary wall.)

JOAN

From there I began to move them around. Characterize the people on a number of dimensions to see where they clumped together in any given scenario.

(PROJECTION: animation showing how the wall postings grew.)

JOAN

Personas began to emerge. Ashley and her friends. Their nannies. White women who didn't have nannies. Non-white women. The children.

All of which I segmented by gender, age, perceived wealth, and developmental stage. What was shocking was my realization that so few men were present at the playground during weekdays. Sure, there were always a few who walked, jogged, or biked past. And sometimes a non-white man would be there with his family. But seldom would we be graced with the appearance of a middle-aged white male... unless it was a weekend and his entire family were present. Or it was a father/son outing - most likely a non-custodial visit after a divorce.

Like I said before, caring for these children is women's work. And within the past 30 years, more and more of this has become the work of poorly paid women of color. If you don't believe me, look it up. We think we live in liberated times.

(She laughs ironically.)

JOAN

Maybe we just don't want to live in liberated times. Or maybe it's just the ones who can afford not to. The ones who have been provided for. We'll get to that expression in a minute.

(Back to the projection. Gesturing to the groups of cards.)

JOAN

Over the months the schema became massive. A whole wall devoted to my cards grouped on one side into the Alphas - Ashley - and the Betas - the Britneys. The absentee wage earners - the husbands. And on the other side, the toilers - the child care givers, the hot dog and coffee vendors, the park rangers, and janitors.

(PROJECTION: close up on the "Nannie" section of the wall - photos and cards.)

JOAN

So... I need to break down the nannies a little for you.

Humor me.

The hired caregivers at the playground can be divided into two personas. The au pairs - who are hired and trained through EF or some other service. These are mostly international students taking a break from their studies to live in a first-world country and see what it was like.

Okay, that's a massive oversimplification, but it's pretty accurate. They live with a family. Watch the kids. Maybe teach them some of their language.

Have three days a week off to do... whatever. And after two years - when the visas they acquired through the service expire - they go back where they came from. It's a very regulated industry.

Nannies, on the other hand, are a different animal. They are hired by the individual family, are usually paid under the table in cash - about \$15 an hour - and work at the whim of their employers. And by *whim* I mean that they have absolutely no protection from exploitation and abuse.

Sure, there is a Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights in New York. But no one follows it. Live-in Nannies are on call 24 hours a day 7 days a week and that can mean housecleaning and cooking as well as caring for the kids. If you work for a kind and empathic mother, then...

(Joan shrugs.)

JOAN

But if you don't?

(She scrunches her face.)

JOAN

Let's take it a step further...

(PROJECTION: animation showing the different Nannie segments.)

JOAN

You can divide nannies into two categories. *Documented* and *un*. If you are undocumented, you will earn less. You don't receive sick pay and you probably don't have health insurance or seek medical care on a regular basis. It's been estimated that up to a third of the nannies in the Big Apple are undocumented. They travel to the US on a tourist or student visa, or cross the border illegally... (ironically:) ...and forget to go back home.

So why would Ashley... who could hire practically anyone she wanted at any rate... hire an undocumented worker?

Yes. That's right. Gracia. Lovely, hard-working, warm-hearted, caring Gracia...

Why would Ashley do that?

Because Gracia was lovely, hard-working, warm-hearted and caring, and she wouldn't leave Ashley's extremely sensitive and needy son after two years.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

It would break little Cyrus's heart, Joan. We can't have that!

JOAN

No. We can't. Cyrus and all the other little white kids on that playground in the Upper East Side must never experience that. That brush with reality. They must be protected. And given whatever they need.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Why wouldn't you want what's the best for your son, Joan...? Don't you want him to be happy?

JOAN

Yes. Of course. But how can you raise a little white boy to be a complete, empathetic person if he never experiences any of the frustration, pain, or ordeals of those who are less fortunate? Especially if your little boy sees people who are not like him as existing to provide for his every need no questions asked? Especially if they are dark-skinned people. People who find themselves in situations where they have very little control. One need only look to their fathers to see the assumptions these little men are forming about themselves and their place in the world. It doesn't help that most children have so little contact with their fathers that they form all sorts of fantasies about what it is to be a man.

(She calms down a little.)

JOAN

Will isn't like that. He could never be like that. Will is a good man. We both want our son to see life from as many perspectives as possible. We both know how to set limits and say *no* to him. That's how we were raising Billy. Before we moved to New York.

(Pursuing a new path:)

JOAN

Do you know how you can tell if a nanny is undocumented? Watch her body language when a uniformed policeman passes by.

That's how I knew without asking that Gracia was undocumented. One glance at a trio of approaching cops and she froze. The frightened look on her face. She and I made eye contact. She knew I knew.

(Directly to the audience.)

JOAN

You're bored with this, aren't you?

Suck it up. It's important. You'll find out why later.

I'm sorry. That was harsh. I didn't mean that.

Okay?

(PROJECTION: close up of wall with cards describing Joan. They may not be all that flattering.)

JOAN

The grid on the wall.

I - the cards describing me - were somewhere in the middle of the elaborate hierarchy. I was a sort of the Omega to the alphas and betas in the wolverine pack - unsure of my role in all of this.

Sometimes when Will would come home early we'd review my progress with the wall and laugh at my observations. Funniest for him were the quotes I'd gathered.

Like any good ethnographer, I had been trained to ask questions in a way that was empathetic and non-threatening. Like it was just part of a normal conversation.

You don't want to have a conversation with me. You will think it's normal. But it never is. I'm reaching inside your soul to see what makes you tick. And I've trained myself to memorize your word choice, diction, and inflection so I can analyze it and reproduce it later. This is what it is to be an ethnographer.

The quote that really blew Will's mind was the invariable answer I would get when I'd ask a Britney why she married her husband.

(PROJECTION: Britney.)

BRITNEY (V.O.)

Because I knew he would be a good provider.

JOAN

A good provider.

Will pointed out that it was like these women are beautiful little Fabergé eggs.

Ornamental, but hollow. Until they'd find the right man to fertilize them and keep them safe and sound in their pretty little glass display cases.

(PROJECTION: Photo of Will.)

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Is that why you chose me, Joan? To be a provider? Please say no.

JOAN

What happens when the egg gets a little tarnished and its owner no longer feels the need to provide?

WILLIAM (V.O.)

That's not us, Joan. This bullshit is only for a few more years. Then things will go back to normal and we'll be set for life. Trust me.

JOAN

One day at the playground as I was talking to a Britney, her daughter - 5 years old? - came up and yanked at her mother's sleeve.

(PROJECTION: Photo of little girl.)

LITTLE GIRL (V.O.)

Can I go play with Roger?

JOAN

Britney glanced to where her daughter had pointed.

(PROJECTION: Photo of a little boy on the playground facing the camera. His nanny and her mother a short distance behind.)

JOAN

A little boy roughly the same age as her daughter stood on the other side of the playground waving at us. Behind him was a nannie. And behind her was a woman. She sat on the benches directly across from our group. Older than the Britney's. About the same age as Ashley.

Our chatter stopped as the girls stared intently at the woman on the other side.

The woman returned the stare.

After a moment the gloved fingers of her right hand arched up and fanned slightly before going back to rest on her purse. The merest sort of wave.

BRITNEY (V.O.)

Go play with your brother.

JOAN

As the little girl joined her brother on the swing set, I felt a wave of relief pass over our group. A few moments later. Out of the corner of my eye. I saw Ashley nod her head slightly in the woman's direction. The nod was returned with much subtlety.

(PROJECTION: photo of Jo Jo's restaurant from the street. The woman from the playground can be seen in the window.)

JOAN

A few days later as I pushed Billy's stroller in the late afternoon past Jo Jo's on East 64th, I happened to glance inside. There was the woman. Eating alone. Staring off vacantly at a wall as she ate her salad. A part of me — the ethnographer part — wanted to enter the restaurant and pretend that I hadn't seen her before. Ask her if she minded sharing a table. I wanted that story.

But I think I already had it.

(PROJECTION: photo of a Fabergé egg.)

JOAN

The woman was a tarnished Fabergé egg.

And tarnished eggs are not allowed back into the club.

(Joan changes to a new, brighter tone.)

JOAN

At that point my time with Ashley and the Britneys was pretty limited. 90 minutes per day tops. They and their nannies would go off to drop their kids off at preschool, have lunch, and do their... stuff.

But I noticed that during the time we spent together, Ashley's attention was dedicated more and more to me. Maybe she was getting bored with the Britneys. She told me that it was a shame that I was saddled with such a lively little boy throughout the day with no help. I told her that while our apartment was amazing, it wasn't big enough to house a nanny.

She had the perfect solution, the private preschool Cyrus was attending. The boys get along great. Why not extend their playtime to the afternoon?

(PROJECTION: montage of Billy and Cyrus playing.)

JOAN

Cyrus and Billy actually did get along well. Billy's natural athleticism - something he inherited from both me and Will - was a little awe-inspiring for Cyrus, who was much more timid and awkward. Something I assured Ashley he would outgrow. He followed Billy around the playground, trying to copy his every move as he scrambled up and over and through all the plastic-coated obstacles, ropes, bars, hoops, and slides.

Gracia loved Billy too. Her face would light up whenever she saw him come running. Billy took some of the burden to entertain Cyrus off of her and she genuinely enjoyed my rambunctious little guy.

(She smiles as she thinks about Billy.)

JOAN

Billy.

One of my favorite memories of this time is when Billy finally managed to get Cyrus to climb up the rope ladder all on his own. Billy was standing at the top of the platform cheering him on.

(She sets the scene.)

(PROJECTION: montage of images to support the action.)

BILLY (V.O.)

Come on Cyrus! You can do it!

JOAN

When Gracia stepped over to help.

BILLY (V.O.)

It's okay, Gratzee! He can do it on his own!

JOAN

When Cyrus got to the top, Billy cheered and gave him a high five. He kind of had to show Cyrus how. As they stood there up on that platform... Cyrus blushing from the attention... So sweet and artless and awkward and adorable. Billy's face... It was utterly incandescent. Brighter than the sun.

(PROJECTION: Photo of Ashley.)

ASHLEY (V.O.)

That little gift is your son, Joan. Don't you want what is best for him? Isn't that your role? To lie, cheat, beg, borrow, and steal to give him every advantage? They can give him what he needs at the Trevor School.

(PROJECTION: Photo of the Trevor School.)

JOAN

We were doing fine financially. I mean on the books we were doing spectacularly well. I'm embarrassed to tell you how well.

See that's the thing about hedge funds. With something they call "shorting" you do great on either side of rising or falling market. In fact with high volatility...

(Loses patience with herself.)

JOAN

Shut up, Joan. They don't need to know that.

Our plan was to re-invest everything above our basic living expenses back into the fund to guarantee that after a few short years we would be... I would be able to go back to academics. Will would take over caring for Billy. And... as if by magic... In our late thirties, we would be set for life.

That was the plan. Before we arrived in New York.

Ashley, the Trevor School is \$50,000 a year.

She just gave me smile.

That night Will came home early. Before I could say a word, he thrust a piece of paper into my hands.

(PROJECTION: Photo of bonus check.)

JOAN

It was a bonus check for \$50,000.

I looked up.

(PROJECTION: photo of Will's face.)

JOAN

His face.

Brighter than the sun.

I slipped a hundred dollar bill into Billy's jacket the next day before we headed out to the park.

(Joan changes tone.)

JOAN

At that point, my life changed again. A new curve in my möbius strip.

After I would drop Billy off at preschool, I began to have lunch with the girls... or to be more accurate... with Ashley.

Usually Le Pain Quotidien on 65th and Lex. They had long wooden tables that ran down the center of the room.

Ashley and the girls pretty much owned this place from Noon till 1:30. Then the spa. Shopping. Maybe a gallery?

I'll never forget the time Will came home one night.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

What the hell is that?

(PROJECTION: Joan with a blowout.)

JOAN

It's called a blow out. The girls get one every three days.

We laughed. But if I were to be honest. I'd have to say that it did look good.

(PROJECTION: montage of luxury goods and clothing.)

JOAN

So did the clothes Ashley picked out for me.

And my new makeup.

And hand bags.

And shoes.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

You can't continue to wear those old Birkenstocks.

(Joan laughs.)

JOAN

These are not Birkenstocks!

ASHLEY (V.O.)

May as well be.

JOAN

I guess I never had a personal style before. Or maybe it was just the wrong one for New York. I think in some ways I was a new challenge for Ashley. I think she was honestly having a great time being my own Pygmalion.

(PROJECTION: photo of Le Pain Quotidien.)

(Joan recreates the following scene in the restaurant.)

JOAN

We played a game at Le Pain. Usually when the Britneys weren't around.

Whenever Ashley and I would see a beautiful woman sitting at a table alone - usually eating a Cobb salad - we'd play *How old is she?*

(PROJECTION: montage of a particular woman - what she is wearing, jewelry, etc. - as she sits at a table of Le Pain Quotidien.)

JOAN

After examining the woman... her ensemble... her jewelry... her hair... her face... her skin... We'd try to guess her age.

So... this is much more challenging than you may think. Especially if your subject is a wealthy white woman living in Upper Manhattan. She could be a younger woman mid twenties to late thirties trying to look a little more sophisticated or she could be an older woman forties though late fifties. And there would often be times where you would absolutely have no clue how old she was.

Self Care.

Really expensive and successful self care.

Ashley was adamant about her age estimations. I questioned how she could be so sure of herself.

(PROJECTION: montage of a woman's hands, wrists, and forearms.)

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Look at the back of her hands. And then her wrists. And if you can - her forearm. The skin there. That's the tell.

JOAN

I fought the urge to examine Ashley's hands for the rest of the lunch. Until she reached out to pick up the check. I took a quick glimpse. But not quick enough.

I knew she was older than me. But she was expert at maneuvering the conversation away from anything that would reveal her age. Except for one detail.

She told me it had taken her a great deal of effort to conceive. She had gotten a late start and Cyrus - her cherished, adorable little son - was destined to be her only child.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

That mark on your forehead... Have you ever seen a dermatologist...?

(PROJECTION: photo of a small mole on Joan's forehead.)

JOAN

It's nothing... I've had it checked... It's not pre-cancerous. Just a mole.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Does Will like it?

JOAN

The mole on my forehead?

ASHLEY (V.O.)

You have such beautiful skin otherwise.

JOAN

Oh... Why, thank you?

Has this ever happened to you? Someone makes a casual comment about your appearance... something tiny.

And the next two thousand times you look into a mirror that's the first thing you see? And after that first few thousand? It's the *only* thing you see.

The more I looked at the mole, the larger and more hideous it became. I started wearing my hair to try to cover it up. Pulled hats to one side - ostensibly to achieve a rakish angle - but in reality to cover it up. Within a few weeks I had an appointment with Ashley's cosmetic dermatologist.

I didn't tell Will. I guess I wanted to surprise him?

He was... surprised.

I told him it was precancerous.

Ashley was there when I took off the bandages.

(PROJECTION: photo of Joan's forehead without the mole.)

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Feel better now?

JOAN

I guess?

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Don't you think it would be criminal to miss an opportunity to reach your full potential?

JOAN

And there it is - Self care.

One day I wore shorts to the park. Ashley noticed a few stubborn veins that hadn't disappeared completely after Billy was born.

(PROJECTION: photo of a few varicose veins on Joan's legs.)

ASHLEY (V.O.)

You know... there is a simple laser procedure for that.

JOAN

That night I stood in front of the mirror.

That's all it took.

The laser surgery was followed by cool sculpting for my thighs and baby bulge. Then the botox.

Did you know that doctors in New York don't accept insurance?

(PROJECTION: photo of Ashley.)

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Not any doctor you'd want to go to.

JOAN

But I didn't have to worry about that. As long as I went to Ashley's surgeons.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

You don't have to repay me. Just be grateful for allowing me help you find who you are inside. Isn't that what every woman wants?

JOAN

One of the procedure was so intense, I had to spend a week in recovery.

I'm ashamed to tell you what I had done.

(PROJECTION: photo of Ashley's beautiful home in the Hamptons.)

JOAN

Ashley arranged for Billy and me to stay at her place in the Hamptons. If you have ever lived through the odors of a hot summer in New York City, you understand why we went.

Will had to stay back for work.

(A side note:)

JOAN

Ever been on a helicopter?

(She abandons the side note.)

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus and Billy playing in Ashley's pool.)

JOAN

Billy had the best time playing with Cyrus in the pool. Teaching him how to swim and dive off the board. Something that came very naturally to my son. I guess some boys are just born with natural athletic abilities.

Cyrus wasn't. He was quieter... with those ever observant eyes.

Billy was completely oblivious about the real reason for our stay in East Hampton - other than to know I was recovering after a visit to the doctor.

But Cyrus knew.

He would sit across the table from me as Billy ran around the marble pool deck.

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus staring intensely into the camera.)

JOAN

He would sit there and observe me... And in his eyes I could see that he saw me as I once was and what I was becoming.

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus next to a large bouquet of flowers.)

JOAN

One rainy day when we were inside, I caught him taking a flower stem out of an arrangement in the hallway and place it back in the vase in a better spot. He saw me and looked a little panicked. Maybe flower arranging was something his parents said was beneath him.

You like flowers. Don't you?

(Joan laughs.)

JOAN

So do I. What is your favorite?

CYRUS (V.O.)

Dandelions.

JOAN

They are beautiful. Aren't they?

CYRUS (V.O.)

Mommy pays someone to come every Spring and kill them.

JOAN

But the most wonderful thing about dandelions... beside their remarkable ability to tell if you like butter... is that no matter how hard you try to get rid of them, they always manage to find a way to come back.

(To the audience:)

JOAN

Like the memories of something you would give anything to forget.

Will didn't come out to the Hamptons. In fact, he began spending more and more of his time at work.

(PROJECTION: photo of Will stroking Billy's hair as he sleeps.)

JOAN

He'd come back home at night and go to Billy's room and sit on the side of his bed and stroke his hair as he slept.

When we did spend time together...

(Joan sighs.)

JOAN

I could tell he was confused by what was happening. With me. With the situation. We both talked about how these three years were going to be a challenge. But all we had to do was persevere and we could return to what we had... with a freedom we never had before. The financial means that would make it possible to never have to worry about money again.

(PROJECTION: photo of Will staring into the camera.)

JOAN

When it was just us two. Late at night. Before bed. I saw in his eyes what I saw when Cyrus looked at me.

If only he could see what I saw in the mirror. How differently I now felt.

Maybe it's something all you women may have felt at one time or another... When I wore my expensive clothes... when it was obvious that they were expensive. When I strapped on my high heels... When I wore my hair the way they told me... when I applied my makeup the way the cosmetologist at Ashley's spa advised... When I walked the floors of a restaurant... a nightclub... social gathering... or a gala... When I felt the gaze of the people who met my eyes as I cut through the thick lumbering swath of the rest of humanity. I felt something I had never felt before...

Power.

I thought at the time that that was what he was upset by... That somehow I had left him behind in some way.

I was wrong.

(A new tone.)

JOAN

During my afternoons... after I had dropped Billy off at school... when I wasn't lunching with Ashley or shopping with the Britneys or getting my hair done or getting a facial or the rest... I devoted my time to Gracia.

(PROJECTION: photo montage of Gracia.)

JOAN

Okay. Let's call it what it is, shall we?

White Guilt.

I felt bad for her and what she had to deal with on a daily basis. Wouldn't anyone with any degree of empathy?

But it was more than White Guilt. I honestly liked Gracia. And I knew she liked me from that moment I slipped the twenty into Billy's jacket. No, I don't think she liked me because of any nominal compensation I may have given her. It was more than that.

It was the glances we shared when Billy did something *Billy*.

(PROJECTION: photo montage of Gracia and Billy.)

JOAN

There's no other way to describe it. Just *Billy*. She adored my little boy. Everyone did. And the looks we shared when a Britney did or said something ridiculous or pretentious or clueless? Which was often. Let's just say that Gracia was an intelligent woman who had a great appreciation for irony.

(PROJECTION: photo montage of Gracia in Guatemala.)

JOAN

Back in Guatemala she had been a high school teacher. English and Spanish. Before gangs killed her father and brother and she and her mother fled to the North.

(PROJECTION: photo montage of Gracia's mother.)

JOAN

Her mother turned back at the Chihuahuan desert and she hadn't heard from her since. A separation that made her tear up every time she recounted their last moments together. She managed to get over the boarder and found her way to New York where her cousins had landed.

(PROJECTION: photo of crowded Morris Heights apartment.)

JOAN

She lived for a few years in a one-bedroom apartment in Morris Heights that she shared with six other people. This was before she was able to score her housecleaning job with a woman who recommended her to Ashley.

Moving into the servants bedroom of a home in a high rise on Central Park was a god-send to Grazia. Something that she was terrified she would lose.

At about that time she met a man who had recently moved from Puerto Rico. She showed me a photo.

(PROJECTION: photo of Grazia's boyfriend.)

JOAN

He was hot. But a good marriage prospect? I mean... would he be a good provider?

He could have provided her with a green card. Something he regularly accused her of expecting from him. But I don't think she would have married someone just to stay in this country. She was a deeply religious woman who believed that would be a violation of a blessed sacrament.

Do you want to know what life is like for someone who is undocumented in this country?

(She addresses the audience.)

JOAN

That's a serious question. Do you?

I mean... How many of you sitting out there right now have had any meaningful interactions with anyone who is undocumented? Meaningful... as in asked them about their lives and what they were dealing with.

Anyone?

(She waits. She probably doesn't get a response.)

JOAN

Right.

But I bet you have some really strong opinions. Don't you? About the immigration crisis.

Yeah.

So what are you basing those opinions on?

I'm not saying I know all that much or have any practical answers to the crisis. And I'm sure some of you don't feel I have any right to talk about Grazia and what she and other undocumented workers face.

But I will say that after spending six months with Gracia, I have seen the impact of what constant fear and lack of agency has on a person. At any moment of any day, she could be seized, ripped out of Ashley's cocoon, and deported back to face the death squads in Guatemala.

There are so many wonderful charitable organizations out there for undocumented people who need legal advice.

And if you are connected 24/7 to the digital universe you will find them. If you aren't... or if you are afraid to use your burner phone or a computer at a public library because you think ICE will swoop down once you've googled *free legal services for immigrants...*

(PROJECTION: photo of ICE personnel in paramilitary uniforms.)

JOAN

Go ahead. Tell me that ICE would never do that.

While Billy was in school, I started to do the legwork for Gracia.

(PROJECTION: montage of screen shots of charitable organizations and government bureaucracy websites dedicated to immigration.)

JOAN

I'd google for her on my computer. Dial the agencies and organizations and talk to as many people as I could. I concentrated on the few people who I thought I could trust.

(PROJECTION: photo of an immigration case worker.)

JOAN

I did my due diligence. These were the people who thought Gracia might stand a chance at claiming refugee status. It would be an uphill climb. She had been in the country for 5 years and hadn't gone through the appropriate channels when she entered the country.

Will and I decided that if we could find a good lawyer, we would pay for it. Anything to give this wonderful woman a sense of peace. A chance to reclaim her life and reach her potential.

(Ironically.)

JOAN

Noble of me. Right?

(A troubling memory.)

JOAN

Things were getting pretty intense with Ashley. At some point I had transitioned from an oddity to a member of the club. Maybe it was the clothes or the hairstyle... makeup... maybe my new, more curvaceous body.

Or maybe it was something deeper. Something I wasn't willing to admit. Something I'm sure Will saw.

(PROJECTION: Photo of a glammed up Joan.)

JOAN

She started to ask me to the parties, openings and benefits she was invited to. It's not like her husband had any time or inclination to go with her. So I started to do all these social things. These big-ticket events in the rarified world of New York high society.

(PROJECTION: Photo montage of New York social functions and places she mentions.)

JOAN

Fashion week? Check.

Met Gala? Check.

Opening night at the ABT, NYBT, and NYSO? Check. Check. Check.

I got to know Cipriani well. And there is this special spot at the apex of the horseshoe in the Metropolitan Opera House lobby... You could stand there and look up at the shiny people... and the glittering sputnik chandeliers... and think you have just been rocketed to heaven.

(A sobering memory.)

JOAN

One night I came home a little tipsy. It was after the Sloane Kettering Autumn Ball. I was wearing a black, strapless Armani gown Ashley loaned me. I had misplaced the stole that was supposed to cover my shoulders. Ashley wouldn't care. It was probably where I had left my purse and my phone. I stumbled into the apartment. It was late. I must have forgotten to tell Will.

(PROJECTION: Will's expressions.)

JOAN

Within a split second I saw his face transition from fear... to surprise... to relief... and then to anger.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Where's Billy?

(Slightly drunk:

JOAN

He's at Ashley's. Gracia is looking after him.

Will walked over to the wall with the cards. He unpinned the card with my name on it.

Moved way to the left side. Slapped it to the wall. And pinned it hard. Right under Ashley's.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Don't go there, Joan. Two more years. We just have to hang on and we'll be set.

JOAN

Hang on to what?

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Us. Our family. Who we really are. Don't give up on that.

JOAN

But what if what we really are is what we had become? Two people living a lifestyle that required the right connections and a hefty salary to bankroll?

What if all that was something I didn't want to give up?

I had gotten a taste of a life I never knew existed.

And I liked it.

What would you do... if you were me?

(She pauses.)

JOAN

There was one more trick Will showed Billy... with the Möbius strip.

(PROJECTION: video of a Möbius strip being cut in the way Joan describes. It will probably have to be speeded up.)

JOAN

Cut the strip a third of the way in and go all the way around until it reaches the initial cut.

Then let it go.

What do you have?

Two möbius strips twisting in their disorienting orbits.

But now you have one little one trapped by a larger one.

(She takes a deep breath.)

JOAN

Okay.

I think I'm ready.

The playground.

The incident at the playground.

(She pauses.)

JOAN

The City is beautiful after a heavy snow.

(PROJECTION: montage of Central Park covered with snow.)

JOAN

Especially the park. It's exactly like it looks on the Hallmark Christmas Movies when they're set in New York. But with real snow.

I had set up a meeting for Gracia with a high-powered immigration attorney I knew I could trust. School was called off and she would have to take care of Cyrus, but It was too important for her to miss. So I told her to meet me at the playground.

Ashley and the Britneys wouldn't be there. I could just imagine their heels in the snow.

So that day would be just me and Billy and Gracia and Cyrus.

(PROJECTION: photos of Billy and Cyrus playing in the snow.)

JOAN

We met at the playground.

(PROJECTION: photo of Grazia.)

JOAN

After I gave her a few papers I had printed out, Gracia hurried off over the icy sidewalk to the attorneys office in Midtown. I used my new pair of winter gloves to clear the snow off my spot on the bench. I would keep an eye on the rascals until she got back.

No one would be the wiser.

We were the only ones in the playground.

(PROJECTION: photo montage of Billy playing in the snow.)

JOAN

Billy was just... Billy. I had never seen him so ecstatic. It was like snow was a magical thing that you can run through. Jump into. Slide over. Roll into a ball and throw. Laughing and whooping it up the whole time.

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus - bundled up for the cold.)

JOAN

Cyrus was less enthused. He stood next to me. Shivering a little. A little drop of... at the end of his nose.

Hey, little guy. Go play. It will be fun!

BILLY (V.O.)

Come on, Cy! I'll race you!

JOAN

So he trudged through the ice and snow to join Billy on the equipment.

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus following Billy to the snow-covered playground equipment.)

JOAN

And I... I just sat there. It was a crisp day and I sat there. Admiring how the pure white snow added another dimension to the twisted branches of the trees... the drifts pushing into the large boulders and rocks that framed the enclosure of the playground.

Snow is so safe. Isn't it? I mean. When you fall on it, it's soft... like a down comforter. And it muffles the sound so beautifully. It was actually pleasant to sit there as the boys trampled around in the snow... Billy throwing snow balls at Cyrus... Their yelps and giggles... the joy...

(She acts the following out:)

JOAN

I tilted my head back so I could feel the snow flakes land on my face.

I closed my eyes and just soaked it all in. My wonderful man. My beautiful little boy.

And for the first time, I felt at home in the City. I wanted this to last. I remember thinking to myself... *Joan, you have arrived. You have finally come into your own.*

(She opens her eyes and looks at the audience.)

JOAN

There was a little slab of ice on the top platform. The one that you had to climb the rope ladder to get to. This little piece of ice... You had to get close to see it. I guess when the first flakes came down, the dark plastic planks were still warm enough to melt them. And as the temperatures dropped over night, that bit of melted snow formed a little sheet of ice... that was then covered by the snow that followed. Under normal conditions you could run across the platform and stop at the edge no problem. I had seen my rambunctious little boy do it a million times.

I heard a shrill cry.

(SFX: sound effects parrot Joan's descriptions.)

JOAN

A shout.

Then a dull *thwack*.

I opened my eyes and saw a little boy standing on the ice at the edge of the platform. Staring down. I followed his gaze down.

A little beneath him there was a splotch of red. On the curved edge of the plastic slide. Glistening in the sunlight.

And then. On the ground below. A little crumpled figure. Splayed out like a scarecrow toppled from its perch.

I ran.

BILLY!!!

(She acts the following out.)

JOAN

I grabbed the boy and turned him over. I saw the blood spurting from his head...

(PROJECTION: photo of Cyrus - eyes closed, bleeding from a cut in his head.)

BILLY

Mommy?

(PROJECTION: photo of the shocked expression on Billy's face.)

JOAN

I looked up and saw Billy staring down from his perch.

BILLY

Is Cyrus okay?

JOAN

He's going to be fine, Billy. Come down from the there. Go the other way.. Use the steps. Be careful.

I looked down at the little boy in my arms. His broken, blood-spattered glasses half-buried in a red-streaked drift just out of reach.

Come on Cyrus. Wake up for me, baby. Come on. Open your eyes. Take a deep breath for me baby. You can do it. What the fuck have I done? Oh, god... oh god... Please... Breathe for me, baby... Wake up... Wake up...

(She acts the following out:)

JOAN

As I held Cyrus's lifeless little body... As I cradled his head, blood pouring onto my gloves from the deep gash over his left eye. This can't be happening. I had closed my eyes for only a minute. How could this have happened? I looked around for help.

That's when I saw her.

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia running toward the camera.)

JOAN

Gracia. Running toward us. She had been too afraid to meet the attorney so she had doubled back. As she got close, she started screaming hysterically.

BILLY

Mommy, is Cyrus okay?

JOAN

Gracia pushed me away and clutched the little boy to her chest.

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia holding Cyrus in her arms - her head thrown back.)

(SFX: Gracia crying out in anguish.)

JOAN

Wailing like... Like... Like a woman who was clutching the murdered bodies of her brother and father. Keening against the insanity of it all.

I called 911, told them there had been an accident at the 72nd Street Playground, and they needed to send an ambulance quick. I gave them Ashley's number.

(PROJECTION: police running up.)

JOAN

In less than a minute two officers ran up. One reached for the little boy in Gracia's arms. The other asked me what had happened.

(PROJECTION: Close up of police officer's face.)

JOAN

So I told him.

(Joan pauses for a beat.)

JOAN

I told him that I had gone to the little cart at the edge of the park to get a coffee.

I told him that I had left Gracia in charge. And when I had come back Cyrus was dead.

(She stares at the audience. Guilt in her eyes.)

JOAN

Lie.

Cheat.

Beg.

Borrow.

Steal.

You do what it takes to keep what you have.

That moment is when it happened.

I became a Britney.

(She starts to hyperventilate.)

(PROJECTION: Montage of the action as Joan describes it.)

JOAN

The next hour... I don't recall exactly everything that happened. It was... I couldn't think... It wasn't making any sense. Billy was crying and I spent most of my time holding him and trying to calm him down. He had just seen his best friend die. The trauma would be written in his mind for the rest of his life. The ambulance... the police.

They had gotten our IDs. They had pulled Cyrus out of Gracia's arms. She stood there in shock... babbling Spanish words as though she had lost all her English. They separated her from us and put her with a police woman with a walkie-talkie on the other edge of the park.

Then Ashley arrived. Oh, god. Ashley...

(She buries her face in her hands.)

JOAN

She was inconsolable. She kept grabbing at him and trying to... Cyrus... That sweet little awkward boy... After they lead her away from him, she clung to me as though she were drowning and I was some piece of floating wreckage.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

He's gone, Joan. They've taken him from me! My little boy!

JOAN

What do you say to a woman who has just lost the only child she will ever have? Any ideas? Any of you? What would you say? Would you have told her the truth?

Ashley spotted Gracia with the officer on the other side of the park.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

After all we have done for you. This is how you repay us?

JOAN

Ashley took off after her. But I grabbed her and pulled her back. She collapsed into my arms.

Sometimes you can find comfort in the most dishonest embrace.

After a few moments they took Ashley away. With her son. An ambulance? A van from the coroner? I don't recall.

After they told me I was free to go home, I looked over to Gracia.

(PROJECTION: Gracia is seen being questioned by two officers wearing ICE uniforms.)

JOAN

Two new officers had joined the policewoman. One had stood facing away from me. On the back of his jacket in big letters, *Police ICE*.

Gracia stared back at me. I could tell she knew what was about to happen. What she was about to lose. Where they were going to send her. She knew all was lost and she would never see any of us again.

Because of what I had told them.

By the time I got home I was shaking. I was having problems catching my breath. I thought that if I just focussed on what I was doing, I wouldn't feel what I was feeling... The shock of what I had said... The hideous thing I had done to Gracia...

And all of it because I was afraid of what I would lose. The life I had laughed at and mocked. That privilege that I wore now like a fucking mink stole.

I yanked Billy's bloody jacket off him...I pushed him back on his butt and tore his boots from his feet. Surprised, he got up and backed away from me.

BILLY (V.O.)

Mommy?

JOAN

I sunk to my knees. Tears began to well up in my eyes. My breath. Where was my breath? It was like some powerful god had yanked the life force... the essence of my being... out of my body and all that was left was shame.

BILLY (V.O.)

Mommy?

JOAN

I glanced up at the wall.

(PROJECTION: The wall.)

JOAN

The wall. The fucking wall.

I reached over to the empty wine glass I had drunk from the night before, threw it as hard as I could at the wall and watched it splinter into a thousand pieces.

(We hear Billy screaming and crying.)

JOAN

Billy screamed.

I scrambled over the shards of glass and I tore the cards from the wall. Ripped them up and scattered the pieces all over the living room.

Confused and frightened, Billy ran back and forth screaming and crying.

BILLY (V.O.)

Where did they take Cyrus?! Where is Cyrus, Mommy?!

JOAN

I needed Air... I needed Air... I tugged at the slider... it was frozen... iced over... would't budge. I yanked as hard as I could and it finally flew open.

(PROJECTION: View from the apartment balcony.)

JOAN

The cold, bracing air blasted my face as I stepped out on to the balcony. Billy had collapsed on the floor in the corner of the living room and was curled up in a fetal position... staring at me with those eyes....

BILLY (V.O.)

Mommy?... mommy?

JOAN

He had seen what had happened. What I had done. I knew that for the rest of my life... each time I would look into his beautiful face... somewhere deep inside his eyes... I will see that look of fear and disbelief and anguish... I will see his memory of what I had done on that playground today.

I stood in the freezing cold, looking out from the 53rd floor... there it was... three blocks away... the park... the 72nd street playground... under a blanket of white.

I didn't deserve the trust of a friend... I didn't deserve the love of my husband and all the sacrifices he was making for us.

I didn't deserve Billy... My beautiful little boy who meant more to me than anything else in the world.

I didn't deserve any of it.

And god knows they didn't deserve me.

I told you at the start that this is about what we think we deserve.

So tell me...

What do I deserve?

(PROJECTION: photo of Gracia.)

JOAN

Within 24 hours they put Gracia on a plane and flew her back to Guatemala.

That's what the officials at ICE told me.

What happened to her from there?

You would think that in this day and age of constant digital connection that it would be impossible for someone to disappear off the grid.

You'd be wrong.

I used as many resources as I could find online to find her... Where she had gone after they dumped her on the tarmac of the airport in Guatemala City.

In the twisted orbit of some alternative reality in the multiverse there is another Joan. An alternative reality Joan. And that Joan would have dropped everything, flown south, combed the streets of the capital, braved the death squads, camped in the rainforests, sacrificed her home, family, health, safety... her life... to somehow find Gracia.

And after that alternative reality Joan finds her... Then what?

Show Gracia the guilt and shame she felt at what she had done to her and apologize?

That would be enough?

Return her to New York?

How?

One thing is clear. That white savior Joan would become more of a burden to Gracia than anything else.

BILLY (V.O.)

Where is Graci, Mommy?

(The words upset Joan. She closes her eyes for a moment to try to hide her guilt, shame, and pain.)

JOAN

I spent five days in the apartment without going out.

I couldn't go back to that playground and see those women. See the place where it happened. The snow had melted, but I knew I would never get out of my head the image of blood spattered over the slide... across the ice and snow.

I couldn't look Billy in the eye. Every time I tried all I saw was the expression on his face as he listened silently to what I told the police. His eyes as he watched the person he had trusted most lie. Lie to save her own skin.

(PROJECTION: photo of Billy.)

JOAN

Will was patient and compassionate and gentle with both me and Billy. We had experienced an horrific event and he knew he had to be there for us... to help us get through what we had seen.

He would try to hold me in bed at night.

But I'd pull away. Because I didn't deserve the comfort of his touch.

On the fifth day...

(PROJECTION: photo of Will.)

WILLIAM (V.O.)

Joan. Tell me. Whatever it is, just tell me.

JOAN

I told him.

And it was like turning the strip one more time. I knew that he would continue to love me. But his definition of love would not be the same as it was before. His love for me would continue to flow, but now with swirling currents... eddies of regret, disappointment, anguish, and pain. I knew that from that moment on that was what we would live with for the rest of the time we may have together.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

You know what you have to do, Joan.

JOAN

I wore black the next day as I walked across the park to Ashley's Central Park West co-op. The doorman tipped his hat to me. The concierge called up and I was cleared. As I exited Ashley's elevator, I felt the change immediately. Usually so bright from the sunlight that filtered in through the window panes of her terrace - the hallway was dark. The flowers from a bouquet that stood on a column had been plucked from its glass vase and thrown about the floor. The petals were crushed - turning brown from the abuse. Housekeeping would never have allowed...

ASHLEY (V.O.)

I'm in here.

(PROJECTION: Photo of Ashley in black sitting in a large chair. She looks 20 years older.)

JOAN

When I saw her... as she sat in that large chair in her front room... in a rumpled black blouse and pants... with cheeks drawn from five days of eating or drinking very little... her eyes shrunken and red... it occurred to me that for the first time I had known her... I didn't need to see her hands or wrists or arms... Despite everything she had ever done to hide and conceal it, I could now plainly see her true age.

I sat down on the couch a short distance away.

And I told her.

I told her exactly what had happened that day on the East 72nd Street Playground. What I had done. What I had lied about.

I finished by telling her that I was sorry. That I was not asking for forgiveness. I didn't deserve it. And I assured her that the guilt and shame I felt for my actions would be a burden that I would carry for the rest of my life.

ASHLEY (V.O.)

Go. And don't come back.

JOAN

I exited the building and walked back to the apartment in a state of shock.

When I unlocked the apartment door, Will was busy shoving clothes into a suitcase. Garbage bags filled with bedding and towels and toys were strewn across the floor. Billy was sitting quietly in the corner, watching.

Two men in business suits followed me in before I could close the door. They presented me with a letter, had me sign a form that indicated had I received it. They turned and headed back to the elevator.

I opened the letter.

WILLIAM (V.O.)

How much time do we have?

JOAN

Twenty-four hours.

Ashley had wasted no time calling her husband and he had acted fast.

We packed as much and as quickly as we could. Our savings?

It had been re-invested in the hedge fund. So that was gone.

We had a little more than \$3,000 to our name.

Will drove the U-haul. I drove our car. All the way to his brother's home in Utah.

Will's brother is a very kind man. We owe him so much. My sanity. Like I told you before, I'm not the best at dealing with adversity.

After a few months of looking, Will found a research opportunity at a state school in Kansas. I managed to teach a few courses in the sociology department - as an associate lecturer. We rented a house on the edge of campus. Not too far from the endless rolling wheat fields that stretch you would swear to infinity.

This is our new orbit.

Last week I took Billy to the playground behind his new elementary school.

It was one of the old-fashioned type - slides, merry-go-rounds, swings, even a teeter-totter. All made of metal... but not too rusty. Billy was having the time of his life.

I put a blanket down... I had packed a picnic lunch and was waiting for Will to arrive and share it with us - during his lunch break.

I was sitting on the blanket. Enjoying the sun on my face. Thinking about our new life... a world we had never expected to occupy. So different from our big plans.

New York was like a distant memory of someone I didn't recognize. The people. The places. The events that unfolded.

Have you ever felt that about some aspect of your life? That it feels like it was lived by someone other than yourself?

Maybe it's our way of dealing with things about ourselves that we can't live with. We bury them in a new context not of our own... divorce them from our remembered reality. We kill them before they have a chance to kill us.

I was sitting on the blanket when I felt someone kneel beside me.

It was Billy. My precious and beautiful and rambunctious and cherished son.

He was smiling up into my face.

Holding a dandelion under his chin.

I looked around.

And that's when I noticed. We were surrounded by a field of bright yellow blooms dotting the lawn of green grass.

And it all came back to me.

Every.

Single.

Detail.

(Black out.

End of play.)