

# For the Life of Me

by Timothy X. Troy

A drama in two acts

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Synopsis (4 women, 1 man. Single interior):

A parent's capricious demand to inflate her son's grade threatens Kate Kavey's career. Surrounded by her eclectic siblings who've conspired to reconcile an on-going family crisis, she desperately pursues renewed stability in her personal and professional relationships. Kate looks to art, literature and religion to lead her past doubt, learning that even a middle school teacher is vulnerable to those who will use faith as a weapon.

Cast:

The Kavey children

Kate – 42

Rosa – 37

Julie – 23

Francis – 31

Marian Sandersfeld – Mid-50's

Time and Place: 2005. Autumn. Saturday morning in Francis Kavey's townhouse apartment in a Midwestern near-suburban city.

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Character notes

**The Kavey's –**

They are an Irish-American family originally from New England. The children were raised in the Midwestern heartland and have an aura of self-sufficiency about them. Mom (Gina) recently died of a fast, overwhelming cancer. Dad (Bernard) is shell-shocked from the loss.

**Kate**, 42, a teacher in a Catholic middle school in a wealthy suburb. She is well regarded throughout the whole culture of private schools for her effective and innovative teaching. She is near the end of a marriage. She has three thriving children. Her husband doesn't understand that he married a woman who has values and aspirations that go beyond the nuclear family.

**Rosa** is 37. She has two kids. She's apolitical and focused on family life. She is moody and can be quite dark at times. Her guiding principle comes from James Taylor: *shower the people you love with love....*

**Julie** is 23. Newly out of college in a 'transitional' job. She excelled in school. She excelled so much that she didn't prepare to leave. She spent her time pursuing so many majors and extracurricular activities, that she didn't focus on an academic area and demarcate herself from the whole crowd of excellent students.

**Francis** is 31. He's very well read – sophisticated. He's a poet. He's anthologized, but has published no collections. The hope that he would be a *wunderkind* has passed. He's well traveled. He teaches artist residencies in schools to pay the rent. Kate moved in with him when she left her husband.

**Marian Sandersfeld** - 55 years old, earnest and burnt out for her age. She was hip once, but the trials of life after her divorce have aged her quickly. Best friend to Mrs. Kavey, Gina. Actor note: Marian frequently mispronounces words, so avoid self-correcting what appear to be typographical errors in her text.

Note on text: the use of / (sometimes @ , \* , +) in a speech means the next actor should begin her or his next line at the next / preceding his or her line. A line-break means to begin, as usual, at the end of the previous speech.

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**Act One**

*Saturday morning. Late autumn. Francis' apartment in a near suburban multi-unit. A balcony behind a sliding glass or French doors. Kitchen and bedrooms off right and left. Functional. Cheap art prints on the walls. Rent-to-own furniture. It's clean, but cluttered with books and piles of letters, files, etc. There are 3-4 miscellaneous boxes piled in the corner with some books scattered nearby – Kate's belongings. No one is on stage. The phone rings. It's a landline.*

**Francis**

*(Off)* Will you get that, Kate?!

*(Kate emerges in a bathrobe, glasses she only wears before and after bed, barefoot.)*

**Kate**

Hello. Francis Kavey residence. Yes it is -- I thought I recognized your ... Sure? *(Kate gets suddenly uncomfortable. Pause.)* Mrs. But Mrs. ... I understand you're upset. No, he's not late with his work ... I can hear that. So am I, now ... He didn't do anything wrong; he's not working to his potential. ... That's not the point -- I don't .... Where did you get an idea like that? ... The grade reflects the quality of his work, and ... How did you get this number? ... Yes, I'm staying here for now. Who gave -- who gave you this numb-? .... They're with their father, I'm not sure why that should concern you. ... No, but there is an issue of privacy ... OK. *(She listens for long time.)* Nellie loved her year with me; you told me yourself. ... Ye- yes -yes, she is. I'm happy to hear it. She's very talented. Yes, she, sh-, she works hard ... always. *(She listens.)* Mrs. Kincade has her class and I have mine and it would be either her or me, and that's always been clear to everyone. *(She listens.)* We meet in the spring and agree on next year's placement. We ... we ... try to, try to bal- ... we try to balance, distrib-, each classroom ... make sure the achievement level is distrib- ... so it's fair for every- ... I doubt Mrs. Kin- ... said that ... She gave you this number? *(She listens)* Just as I do any other student. *(She listens.)* He's 13 years old, and he'll be starting high school next year; we do him no favor if he's not r-... ready f – for high school.

*(Francis emerges from the hallway in running clothes. Gives Kate a curious look. She makes a sign that the other person is talking too much.)*

**Francis**

I'm getting some coffee. Do you? *(Kate gestures 'yes, please.' He exits to the kitchen.)*

**Kate**

*(Still listening.)* What are we talking about now? ... I'm sure you know I don't have-, have him f -, for, for, or those subjects ... In homeroom, sure. Every student shows- ... That is so personal. I really don't ... It's in flux at the momen- ... No, I don't think it has changed my teaching practices ... *(She listens.)*

*(Francis brings her coffee. He goes out to the balcony to smoke and stretch. We see him past the open curtains.)*

**Kate**

What can I do to fix this for-? Tell me what you want. Surely, you have some sort of goal or outcome ... prompted you to call.

*(She quickly puts down the phone and grabs paper and a pen from her briefcase that is just out of reach.)*

**Kate**

At this point in the year it's likely to be embarrass- for him, it will be awkw-. The kids will know why. Changing classrooms, isn't likely to change his study habits ... She's on the same track I am. *(She listens. She gasps. Trying to hold back her tears)*. Mrs. ... I'm sorry you feel... *(She listens.)* I can't make this decision on my own. I'll have to talk to principal Webster and to Mrs. Kincaid. *(She listens.)* You want me to – I'm not fin– I've served this parish and this school for year- – I have no intention of submitting a lett-, on Mon-, or any other - *(She listens.)*

*(Francis returns from the balcony surprised that she's still on the phone and concerned that she seems so upset. He pauses and goes to the kitchen.)*

**Kate**

This is the circum-, how we live in now ... *(coolly)* I appreciate your concern for my family, thank you, but we still have to work togeth- ... It's not a diocesan scho- ... We need to finish this conversa- ... Because I don't think we can settle this on the pho- ... I'm very careful to be the sure the students don't –

*(She listens to a deeply wounding final comment from the caller and hangs up. She holds back a cry. Crosses to her briefcase, pulls out a prayer card. Kneels, quietly and humbly prays. Francis appears in the doorway and he doesn't know what to do. Kate senses him and quickly recovers.)*

**Francis**

That was heavy. / A work call here?

**Kate**

/Ah ... well  
She remembered you from the workshops.

**Francis**

I gather she thinks her kid's the next Einstein and your grades will prevent him from getting into Harvard.

**Kate**

Mrs. Postilink. No perspective. You probably remember her daughter, Nellie from that guest artist stint you did. Depression Era poets, two or three / years ago.

**Francis**

/Sweet kid.  
Bright. Cute. Cheery.

**Kate**

Precisley ... so how come her mother ... I mean I knew she was odd, but I didn't know she was ... I can't believe I just / She called me here!

**Francis**

/Should have just let the machine...  
Sorry, I should have answered.

**Kate**

How could we have known?

**Francis**

Great thing about my gig: all the teaching, none of the grading. I've met her. She's simultaneously limp and aggressive. The worst kind of bitch. What did she hope to accomplish?

**Kate**

Clear the air. Clear me out. Her boy is being impeded.

**Francis**

I'll kick her ass if she messes with you.

**Kate**

Francis ... She started to talk about my marriage. What is she think- ...?

**Francis**

I won't, I promise, actually go to her house and kick her ass, but I have friends who would. Make it look like a car accident. Wire that pie hole of hers shut for a year.

**Kate**

You're so crass.

**Francis**

I'm so right. Second-guessing you. Shit head.

**Kate**

She's shit-something. Listen to how I talk I'm with you! (*with a light laugh*) If my students could hear me. You're such an adolescent. Sometimes I think my boys are more grown-up.

**Francis**

That's the 'thing.' The big secret. (*As if it were a secret.*) Men don't really grow-up after about 14. You hit 15, and that's it. We're done. Watch ads during an NFL game and you'll see. Your boys make you think they're grown-up. We might learn how to make a living, or whatever, but deep inside, we still laugh at a good fart joke, play baseball, and make-out with girls in the woods. Beer, racecars, guns, pussy.

**Kate**

For a man with your verbal acuity, it floors me you swear like a sailor.

**Francis**

I like *all* the words available to us in our rich and storied language. House rules: All words allowed here. Even foreign and archaic words. Like gob-shite. When's the last time you heard anybody call someone (*in an Irish dialect*) "a gob-shite piece of fuck"?

**Kate**

(*chuckles*) Never. I'm not sure I know what it means.

**Francis**

Gob, mouth. Shite, well ... shit. Shit-mouth. You've got shit in your mouth. You talk shit.

**Kate**

Where did you hear that one?

**Francis**

(*Irish dialect like the radio ads.*) "Dublin Pubs. The best in the world."

**Kate**

And this is what you brought me back from Ireland? 'Gobshite'! Where're my presents? Sweaters, scarves. 'Piece-of-fuck.' It's a verb; it's not divisible.

**Francis**

It's the sound of it, the rhythm. I have no idea where I'll ever use it, but it's so good to say. Taste it. (*highly aspirated*) Gob-shite piece of fuck. Hmmnn...

**Kate**

I just got an earful of 'gob-shite' from Mrs. Postilink. / Ha!

**Francis**

/Fuckin'-A.

**Kate**

Gob-shite, gob-shite, gob-shite, gob, gob, / gob, blah, blah, blah, blah ... HmMMMM.

**Francis**

/You see: the right word for the right moment. Blessings fall softly from the heavens. Call her back and tell her she's an idiot. (*Pick up phone.*) One button: 'call back.' (*Pretends to talk to her.*) Hi, Mrs. Prissy-turd? Good. You smell like butt-crack and you're ugly.

**Kate**

Stop! (*She laughs.*)

**Francis**

There you go. Even as a child, I loved your laugh. It was the sound, of ... of joy. Mom would laugh with you, and I knew all was right in the world, and food was cooking on the stove, and you'd hug me and tell me I was cute, and take me for a drive in the car. So long as I was seen with you. 'Cause you were so beautiful, and so cool, everyone seemed to know who you were, and your friends were exotic, and I could watch the world ... unfold.

**Kate**

You were cute. You were my hobby. And now ...

**Francis**

And now, Madame Bovary, you've grown bored with the chemist and all things provincial.

**Kate**

I did *not* have an affair. Let's not provide inaccurate grist for the already voracious rumor mill.

**Francis**

True, no affair. But a general malaise that requires sanctuary in a humble garret, think *La Boheme*: (*he sings – it's not studied or flashy*) *Chi son? Sono un poeta. Che cosa faccio? Scrivo.* ... the garret of an introspective, malleable young poet / to contemplate ...

**Kate**

Maliabile!? This from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grader who came home from his first Cub Scout meeting convinced it was a fascist organization and refused to return.

**Francis**

Dad never understood that one. And we're not here to talk about my precociousness, but your --

**Kate**

Marital malfeasance.

**Francis**

You're really thinking about divorcing John?



**Kate**

I'm thinking about a lot of things.

**Francis**

I'll leave you to yourself. For lunch, we'll go to my favorite cafe. I haven't been there since I came home. If I bring you, I won't be the oldest person there./ I'll be a half- hour or so.

**Kate**

/Thanks.  
I'll wear a mumu.

**Francis**

It's nice having you here.

**Kate**

This "sanctuary" won't be long/ I just couldn't go back home ... not yet.

**Francis**

/It doesn't matter.  
'Nough problems there.

**Kate**

At my age, going back home was ... I couldn't.

**Francis**

Shhh....

**Kate**

Dad's doing his best, but...

**Francis**

Shh...I like having you here. I love you. (*As he leaves.*) For a sister, you're cute.

(*Kate's anxious mood returns. She picks up the phone. Pretends to talk to Mrs. Postilink.*)

**Kate**

*Ad libs:* Gob, gob, gob. Poop-head. Your mother eats worms, etc.

*(Kate hangs up. Shuffles through her boxes and books. Nothing. She goes to the kitchen and returns with a cigarette. She goes to the balcony. We see her light it up. She savors the first drag, and it instantly makes her dizzy. She handles it like a foreign object. She tries another drag. Bends over to put it out in the ash can, and is visibly light-headed when she stands up. Recovers. Looks out toward the sky, arms open, hopeful.)*

**Kate**

Anything?!

*(She returns. She rifles through the books. Considers a couple. Gives up. Goes to her purse and pulls things out. It is compulsive and unorganized. She stops suddenly.)*

**Kate**

*(Prayerfully.)* St. Anthony, on whose intercession I rely for piece of mind: Where? *(Quickly back to her earlier mood.)* And why is that woman such a turd? And why am I here? What happened? What did I do? *(She continues looking.)* And where is that book? *(She looks on bookshelves and through Francis' notebooks and miscellany.)* And where is my mother?

*(She selects a thin volume with a bookmark from an anthology of poetry. She reads Yeats.)*

That every day I have cried, at length  
My darling understands it all  
Because I have come into my strength,  
And words obey my call;

*(slowly)* And words obey my call. And words obey my call. *(Searches again. Picks up a news magazine. Points to it.)* Obey my call! *(Opens it. Skims through it expectantly. Nothing there. Picks up an art or architecture magazine.)* Obey my call! *(Nothing. She exits to the bedrooms.)*

*(A moment of silence. We hear Rosa from outside.)*

**Rosa**

Francis! Kate! *(Opens the door. Knocks.)* Franky! It's me, honey. Kate ... *(as she enters)* Are you in the shower? *(She peeks down the hall towards the bedrooms.)* OK, hon, it's me. I'll be out here.

*(Rosa picks up the phone, dials.)*

**Rosa**

Hey, Julie. Are you ready? ... Yes. This is when we agreed ... I don't know. He isn't here, so I don't know ... She's getting dressed. I'll keep her occupied. Just don't, you know, dawdle. OK? ... Don't call Dad first. It's best if we tell him afterwards ... 'Cause it'll be solved by then. With any luck, we may not have to tell Francis at all ... We've been over this, Julie ... I know it doesn't just stop. We did our best, and ... old people die, it happens every day, but you only lose your own mom on one particular day, and that's what happened to us ... No, honey, that's not why Kate is here ... Yes, it's because of Kate's divor-, separat- ... I'm glad she's here, too ... Franky has room. I called him first and emailed, so he knew that Dad or Kate were gonna call ... His decision. If he said 'no', no one would blame him, because if everyone doesn't honestly agree about these things, then people resent it. And it's family, and you don't say anything 'cause you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but you feel bad and it becomes a prob- ... well, it festers, you know? ... We believed him when he said 'sure', and I had his key. *(She listens.)* We don't expect you do anything. *(She listens.)* Yes, Julie, of course we want you here. So, just get here. Because it's important. We have to fix this now. Please Julie we need you here for the intercept- ... Right? *(She listens.)* OK. Right now, yes? Thanks. I love you, Julie.

*(She hangs up. Looks out the window. Looks about. Waits for Kate. Kate enters dressed for the day.)*

**Kate**

Rosa. *(Rosa gives her a warm embrace, a kiss.)*

**Rosa**

*(With sudden seriousness.)* How are you? Really...

**Kate**

I was reading the paper. *(She picks up the news magazine.)*

**Rosa**

We started to gather mom's things like shoes and clothes.

**Kate**

I should help.

**Rosa**

Did Julie tell you? We started finding money, ya know?! Cash, like – actual money! Tucked in her clothes.

**Kate**

Depression baby.

**Rosa**

No kidding. Maybe it's like when Nana and Papa died. You remember, they found like – I don't remember exactly, but around 15 or 20 thousand dollars / ... hidden in the closets and in the basement, top of the basement walls, under floorboards. All that cash! So, Dad starts finding it: a 100 dollar bill stuffed in the toe of a shoe; a couple, three 50s in a sweater pocket. A small wad of twenties in her socks.

**Kate**

/In 1980!  
He had no idea.

**Rosa**

We wanted to be careful before we gave the clothes away, 'cause, I don't know, when you give shoes away you don't think you're giving away shoes AND two-hundred dollars! We were thorough, but no doubt someone out there bought a sweater at a thrift store for two dollars, got it home put it on, reached in the pocket and found, I don't know, eighty smackers! Wouldn't that be a hoot? We talked about it a little, Franky and Dad and me, and decided, if a person is buying clothes at a thrift store, they probably need a few extra greenbucks. Julie said Mom did it just 'cause we all talked about the money she found at her parents. She wanted us to talk about it, too. Like a tradition. / Franky said it was compulsive, and Dad said it was like squirrels.

**Kate**

/Mom was sweet that way.  
Squirrels?

**Rosa**

Did you know that squirrels bury nuts, but don't remember where they buried them, so they just start digging when they get hungry in, I don't know, good nut hiding places, and BAM, there's a nut! Woo-hoo! I get to eat a nut today, but could be maybe the neighbor squirrel buried it; he doesn't know. Is that a compulsion, do you think? Or just instinct? You just *do* it! Rrahhh, stretch-scratch. You search 'cause that's how you're hard-wired. You're not thinking, "I think it's time to dig for nuts!" you just do it, you know – ZOOM, dig, there's a nut. Cool! Now where's a power line I can run across?" ZIP.

**Kate**

I'm not following the thread here.

**Rosa**

Yes, you do. Dad, whenever something good happens, kinda fortunate, like a good thing that surprises you, he says, "Isn't that the nuts."

**Kate**

I always thought 'nuts' – you know, like balls, testes – is what I was thinking.

**Rosa**

I just thought: nuts are good. Mom always got special nuts at Christmastime, so nuts are like a celebration. But now, I get it: Isn't that the nuts! You're a squirrel and you're hungry, and you're digging and it's all so random and then "Viola!" You find an acorn under a dried up turd (*she giggles*), next to a worm! But you don't care, and you think, "Isn't that the nuts!" Aahh... shwooo ....I'm so glad we figured that out.

**Kate**

Isn't that the nuts?

**Rosa**

Yep! Where's Francis?

**Kate**

Out for a run. Was he expecting you? He didn't/ say anything if he was.

**Rosa**

/No.

**Kate**

'Course, he's been lying low since he got home/ from Dublin. I cleaned. Not that he's a slob, but it was – dusty. I don't think he noticed.

**Rosa**

/Is he good?

That was nice of you. Is he still jet-lagged?

**Kate**

Can't tell. He's on the porchy-thing a lot.

**Rosa**

He sent me the cutest card with Celtic crosses and all the words in Irish. I couldn't read it. I think it was a prayer.

**Kate**

Or an invitation to reclaim ancestral homelands stolen by the Protestants during the Penal Laws.

**Rosa**

What's that?

**Kate**

Old-timey Irish thing.

**Rosa**

Oh, that. Dad talks about that.