

Late in the Game

A Play in Two Acts

by Barbara Snow

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Characters:

Margaret – Recently divorced, early 60s. Teaches poetry and creative writing at the local community college.

Iris – Margaret’s long-time friend, widow, early 60s. Teaches technical writing at the same community college. A founding member of the writers group.

Callie – Daughter of a recently deceased member of the group. Early twenties, pierced, and fierce, with a soft little underbelly that you rarely see.

Donald – early 60s. Teaches accounting at the community college. Never married. Likes to bake. Founding member of the writers group.

James – Mid-forties. Recently hired to head the IT department at the community college. New member of the writers group.

Gina Mae - Manager of the Lilac Cove Community Center. Boomer age.

John Miller - New President of the Lilac Cove Community College. Trump-like in his attitude. Can be played by one of the other male cast members.

Assistant to President of Community College. Can be played by actress playing Callie.

Most of the play is set in a conference room at the Lilac Cove Community Center or Margaret’s dining room. One scene in a coffee shop, one in a hospital room. In all cases, this is a minimal set play. Rearrangement of tables and chairs cover all the scenes save the hospital room. That one scene requires a bed and side chair.

The play is set in the present day.

Act One, Scene One

Lights come up and we see President Miller of the Community College, dressed in a business suit and seated at his desk, reading from a file. His Assistant enters the office.

Assistant

Margaret Manning is here.

President Miller

(Without looking up) Send her in.

Margaret enters, dressed in a flowing sixty-ish skirt and blouse. She looks every bit the part of an aging creative writing instructor.

President Miller

Hello Ms. Manning. Please have a seat. *(Gestures to the chair in front of his desk)* I'm sorry we haven't met before.

Margaret

That's understandable, isn't it? You've only been here, what, three weeks? I assume there will be a reception for you once the school term gets underway again.

President Miller

(Looking through the file) Yes. I see that you've been teaching poetry and creative writing at this college for thirty-two years. *(Looks up at her)* Any other classes?

Margaret

Yes, I've taught Shakespearean sonnets, memoir writing, and classes on the art of writing.

President Miller

What's that?

Margaret

The art of writing? You know, tapping into your creative muse.

President Miller

(Looks confused) Your muse?

Margaret

The inspirational creature that drives us to produce artful things.

President Miller

How does he do that exactly?

Margaret

Well, he *or she* is the spirit that nurtures our creative ideas.

President Miller

How?

Margaret

It depends on who you are and what form your art takes. It could be a poem, or a story, or perhaps a play, but it can be much simpler. Something you knit, or sew, or cook, or paint. Anything really, that involves creativity.

President Miller

And you've taught people how to tap into that muse thing?

Margaret

Well, I hope I've given them skills and exercises that allow them the possibility of connecting with their muse. That's really the best a teacher can do, wouldn't you agree?

President Miller

(Closing the file and looking directly at Margaret for the first time) Ms. Manning, I'm sure you've heard this institution has hired me to establish a more business-centric curriculum with the goal of students achieving a higher degree of employability upon graduation. Obviously, such a move requires a complete revamping of the academic offerings.

Margaret

(A little confused, but determined to go on) Okay. How exactly do you see me fitting into this new curriculum?

President Miller

I don't.

Margaret

Sorry?

President Miller

We're not renewing your teaching contract, Ms. Manning.

Margaret

(Stunned) You're firing me!?!?!?

President Miller

We don't fire people. We're just not renewing your contract.

Margaret

That's the same as firing me! I can't believe it! I've been teaching here for my entire career.

President Miller

Irregardless of that fact, we simply can't afford to teach courses that do not adhere to the goals of a business-centric approach to education.

Margaret

(Stunned, but still the teacher) That's not a word.

President Miller

What isn't? Business-centric? It's a phrase commonly used to--

Margaret

(Interrupting) Irregardless.

President Miller

Are you sure? I've heard lots of people use it.

Margaret

They probably majored in business. Of course I'm sure! I have a PhD in English Literature. It's a double negative with the "ir" at the beginning of the word and "less" at the end, meaning it is a non-standard or incorrect use of language.

President Miller

(In a patronizing tone) Look, I know this is a bit of a shock—

Margaret

I don't understand how you can come in for three weeks and just fire me. You don't even know what I contribute to this college. Or the community!

President Miller

Again, I'm not firing you. I'm just not renewing your contract.

Margaret

Is that how they teach you to talk in business? "I'm not firing you. I'm just taking away your employment." How is that not the same as firing someone?

President Miller

Ms. Manning, you're being too semanticalistic in your thinking.

Margaret

(Seething) Again - not a real word.

President Miller

Really? Because I'm pretty sure--

Margaret

(Interrupting) Stop talking like Mary Poppins! Semanticalistic? Supercalifragilistic? Neither of those are real words!

President Miller

(In a calming voice) Okay, okay. Irregard-- *(catching himself)* I mean be that as it may, the board has hired me to steer this college in a new direction. And the truth is nobody wants to learn how to write poetry anymore.

Margaret

That is not the truth. That is simply your opinion. All sorts of people want to learn how to write poetry and fiction. I've been facilitating a writer's group at the Lilac Cove Community Center for years for people who love to write. And some of them are even faculty members.

President Miller

Are you compensated for facilitating that group?

Margaret

No, I do it for free! It's my way of giving back to the community.

President Miller

(Opening the file) I can't afford to do things for free here. And enrollment in your courses has steadily decreased to the point where it's no longer financially feasible to sustain your tenure here.

Margaret

I don't have tenure, that's why you can fire me!

President Miller

That's right, you don't. You are a community college teacher who has a contract that is annually renewed. But not this year.

Margaret

You won't be renewing it. Don't pretend like this is some kind of group consensus. It's entirely your decision.

President Miller

It's a decision based on a set of criteria that evaluated the popularity and profitability of the courses being taught here. Factor that into the development of the business-centric curriculum that is being sponsored by many of our local corporations and I'm sorry, but poetry doesn't fit anymore.

Margaret

So you're saying our curriculum needs sponsorship? You mean like, *(dramatically)* The Art of Writing Poetry - brought to you by those inspirational folks at Frost's Ice Cream Shoppe, who believe that the road less-traveled leads to our store? Is that where higher education is headed?

President Miller

(Pleased with himself) Hey - I got that. Frost - Road less-traveled. That's kind of funny.

Margaret

(Quietly) Nothing about this is funny.

President Miller

(Sobers up) Under the circumstances, I'm sure I'd feel exactly the same way.

Margaret

I'm just supposed to go? That's it?

President Miller

Long story short, that's it. I wish you well and of course we'll be more than happy to provide a recommendation should you require it for future employment.

Margaret

I'm a 63-year-old creative writing teacher in a mid-size town that has one community college. I've spent my entire adult life here. Who do you suppose is going to hire me next?

President Miller

Yes, well. I am sorry.

He stands and offers his hand to shake. Margaret ignores it, gets up to leave, almost makes it through the door then turns back to face him.

Margaret Miller

You think there's no place for poetry in the business world? You couldn't be more wrong. Imagine if, instead of preying on people during the financial meltdown, all those bankers had read Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, "Do anything, but let it produce joy." Or W. B. Yeats who said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Or Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day*, when she asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Those corporate leaders just might have paused and said, "Is this the right thing to do? Instead of screwing my fellow citizens, aren't I part of a larger family and what I do to one person affects everyone?" Poets know the answer to that. Poetry teaches you that. Don't tell me there isn't a need for poetry in the corporate world. My God, I can't think of single profession that needs it more. Shame on you for trying to drive it to extinction!

She exits. President Miller remains standing for a moment looking thoughtful as though he is considering what Margaret has just said. The spell is broken by his assistant at the door.

Assistant

I have the Ceramics instructor waiting for you.

President Miller

(Hesitates for a second then snaps out of it) Right, send her in. *(Picks up a small notebook, consulting it)* I'm also going to need to see the professors of Dance, Music Theory, and do we really have a Swedish Language and Cultural program here?

Assistant

(Doing her best Scandinavian imitation) Yah sure! You betcha. *(President Miller stares at her puzzled and she sobers up immediately)* I mean, yes, we do.

President Miller

Amazing. Schedule them all for this week, please.

The assistant nods and leaves. President Miller beckons someone outside the door.

President Miller

Ms. Jenkins, please come in.

Stage to black.

Act One, Scene Two

Lights come up on a conference room at the Lilac Cove Community Center. The room has a rectangular table and chairs that could seat eight in a pinch. Upstage there is a clock on the wall and a sign that states, "NO FOOD OR DRINK ALLOWED IN THIS ROOM." A large blackboard is also upstage facing the audience. It's a comfortable room that has obviously been in use for many years.

Donald enters from a doorway stage right. He is wearing a backpack and carrying a shopping bag. He places the bag on the table and removes a box clearly holding pastries or cookies. He opens the box, looks in, smiles and closes the lid. He starts unpacking his backpack, which contains writing supplies, some notebooks, pens, etc., as Iris enters.

Iris

Good evening, Donald.

Donald

Hi Iris. Where is everybody?

Iris

(Setting her bag down) I don't know. Margaret had a meeting at the college, maybe it ran over. What's in the box?

Donald shows her.

Iris

Oh, yummy.

He closes the box as Gina Mae, Director of the Community Center, enters the room.

Gina Mae

Hey guys. Where is everyone?

Iris

Evening, Gina Mae. I don't know.

Gina Mae

What's in the box, Donald?

Donald

(Sweetly) None of your business.

Gina Mae

(Pointing to the sign) You're gonna get me fired. I'm supposed to be enforcing the rules.

Donald

That's not a rule. It's just something someone made up. I doubt I could find any reference to it in the by-laws of the Lilac Cove Community Center, now could I?

Gina Mae

Don't blame me. There's a new board member who's been making noises about big changes to come. Have you met him? He's the President of the Community College. And I'd like to keep my job while he implements his "big changes."

Margaret enters while Gina Mae is talking.

Margaret

I'd liked to hire someone to kneecap him.

Gina Mae

(Surprised) That's a little extreme, don't you think? Meantime, could you at least try to look like you're following some of the more obvious rules? *(Gestures to the sign)*

Donald

(Mildly) For all you know, this box contains the severed head of the last person who got on the wrong side of me.

Gina Mae

I'm guessing it contains another of your fabulous pastry bakes. Listen, why I really stopped by was to see if you could leave at quarter to nine tonight? I've got something to go to that starts at nine fifteen sharp and it's on the other side of town so I'd like to lock up at that time.

Iris

No problem.

Gina Mae

Appreciate it. Gracias, amigos. *(She exits)*

Margaret

(Looking at the box) Is there any chance that box has a bottle of scotch in it? *(She sits down abruptly)*

Iris

What's the matter?

Margaret

I got fired only they don't call it that anymore. They're just "not renewing my contract." *(Makes quotation mark signs in the air)* I still can't believe it. Over thirty years. It's like being erased by some inhuman....*(fumbles for a word, fails)* human.

Iris

I knew something like this was going to happen! Ever since he showed up promoting his "business-centric" bull crap I've been worried. Donald, didn't you get that sense?

Donald

No, but I'm not very intuitive. *(Reaches into the box of goodies and extracts a plate of beautifully decorated pastries)* Here Margaret, have one of these.

Margaret

(Takes a pastry and bites into it, then moans) Seriously Donald, that's better than sex. Or better than how I remember sex.

Donald

(Very pleased with himself) Thank you.

Iris

(Also sampling the pastry) You should open a bakery instead of teaching accounting. You could make a fortune.

Donald

I thought about it when I was younger but the hours are brutal, your chance of success is predicated on a number of factors outside of your control and your margin of profit is not that high even in the best of times.

Margaret

Spoken like a business major.

Donald

Plus my parents talked me out of it. They wanted me to have a profession that more or less guaranteed financial security. And that's how you end up teaching accounting for thirty years, folks. It's boring, but a steady income.

Iris

That's why I teach technical writing and instructional design. Boring, but steady.

Margaret

(Reaching for another pastry) I never thought higher education needed to be exclusively about obtaining jobs. I always thought there was room at the table for everyone. *(James enters)* Who decided that beauty was expendable? That's what I want to know. God, I'm so screwed!

James enters and goes directly to Margaret.

James

(Putting an arm awkwardly around Margaret) I just heard. I'm so sorry, Margaret.

Margaret

(Equally awkwardly moving away) Thank you, James. Who told you?

James

Molly Jenkins. She teaches pottery, I think. I found her crying in the parking lot. That's why I'm late.

Donald

Oh man, this is brutal.

Iris

I think it's pretty clear he intends to gut the whole liberal arts program.

Donald

And replace it with what?

Iris

Whatever he decides is appropriate. The man is megalomaniacal. He thinks he's going to create the Harvard of the North and turn out all these little corporate clones to keep feeding the great capitalist society.

Donald

(To Margaret) What will you do?

Margaret

Right now the only thing going through my mind is, screwed. Screwed. Screwed.

Iris

Yeah, and not in the fun way. *(The others stare at her a little shocked)* Sorry.

Donald

Margaret, can I be blunt and ask if your ex-husband is paying you any support?

Margaret

Nothing.

Donald

Why not? He's a tenured professor of Anthropology at the University in Duluth. He makes a lot more than you.

Margaret

Yeah, well good luck finding him. He's in China.

Donald

(Disbelieving) No!

Margaret and Iris exchange glances and Margaret nods her head.

Iris

Remember that visiting archeologist from China who worked in his department for a semester? Turns out she helped him get a research grant to study the terracotta army that's been buried for millions of years near Xian. He's living over there now. *(Waits for a beat)* With her.

Margaret

How's that for humiliating? *(Sighs)* He's twenty years older than her and he's never coming back. I can't touch him while he's there.

Donald

Is your house paid for?

Margaret

Yes, I inherited it from my parents. But it needs maintenance, like every old house does. I have to have an income. I need money! Food, utilities, you know, basic creature comforts! I really don't know what's left for me in this town. *(Puts her head down on the table)*

Callie bursts through the door, unaware of what's going on.

Callie

Fuck this fucking place! That witch at the front desk told me I couldn't bring a fucking energy drink in here. What the fuck is that about?

All

(In unison) Hi Callie.

Callie

(Looks at the group quizzically) What the fuck's wrong?

James

Margaret lost her job at the college.

Callie

Oh. That fucking sucks.

Iris

Callie, darling, do you ever complete a sentence without inserting the F-bomb?

Callie

Fuck, no. Not if I can help it anyway.

Margaret

Your mother would be rolling in her grave if she could hear you.

Callie

Well she was cremated, so that's not going to happen.

Margaret

I know, dear. I was her best friend. I gave her eulogy, remember?

Callie

Yeah. She dies and I find out she's been writing about me my whole fucking life and bringing it to this little group of writing wannabes. My life - and nobody had the fucking courtesy to tell me.

James

Callie, this is about Margaret right now, so could we stick a pin in your anger for a little bit? When we're done you can go back to hating us.

Donald

(Passing the box of pastries over to Callie) Here, help yourself, you scary little person.

James

(To Margaret) What have you always wanted to do that you never did before?

Margaret

What do you mean?

James

This is your chance to start over. What do you want to do? No limits.

Margaret

If I were your age, I could believe that, but it's not easy to reinvent yourself at my age.

James

Forget about the age thing.

Margaret

Says the man who's young enough to be my son.

James

Age is just a state of mind, you know that. Wisdom - that's what matters. So be smart and re-imagine your destiny.

The rest of the group is watching this tête-à-tête intently until Callie breaks the spell.

Callie

Don't you get paid for your poetry and stories? Mom was always showing me your stuff in these freaky little lit magazines I never heard of.

Margaret

Nobody gets rich writing poetry or short stories. Most of the time you get paid in contributor copies of the magazine. Occasionally you get a check that allows you to go out and have a nice dinner. That's about it. *(She is quiet for a second)* Oh my God, he's right - no one wants to learn poetry anymore! I feel like a total loser.

Callie

(Reaching for another pastry) So write something else.

Margaret

Sorry?

Callie

If poetry doesn't pay, write something that does.

Margaret

It's not that simple, dear. I specialize in creative writing. Poetry, short stories, that kind of thing - and there's a lot of competition to get published.

Callie

How about erotica? That's creative. God, these cookies are fucking awesome, Don.

Everyone in the room looks at Callie silently, and then they all reach for a pastry.

Callie

(Looking back at them defiantly) What? *(To Margaret)* Aren't you the generation of free-love and all that happy bullshit? Stop looking at me like the uptight village virgin. You want to make money off writing? Try erotica.

Margaret

How would you know? Do you read it?

Callie

I sell it. I work at Frisky Business, remember?

Donald

(Without thinking) I know that place. *(All eyes turn to him and he fumbles a bit)* I mean, I've heard of that place. Sex toys and stuff, right?

Callie

And books. We sell a shit-ton of books.

Margaret

I'm sure you do, Callie, but I can't just switch gears and start writing in a genre I have no frame of reference for.

Iris

You've taught people how to write poetry who never wrote a poem before, haven't you?

Margaret

Well, yes. I suppose.

Iris

So how's this different? Teach yourself how to do it.

Margaret

Oh, it's different. Believe me. Anyway - enough about my troubles. Let's just get on with reviewing our writing exercises. What was our theme for this session?

James

Trust. *(Gets up and writes it on the blackboard then faces Margaret)*

Margaret

(A little flustered) That's right, trust. Who wants to read first?

Callie

(Raising her hand) Me!

Iris

Hang on. Maybe we should talk about this a little more.

Margaret

You can't be serious?

Donald

Why not? You're in a bind. It's at least worth a little research to see if it has potential.

Iris

Yeah. From an academic angle it could make for a fascinating exploration.

Margaret

Writing porn? C'mon.

Callie

(With emphasis) Erotica.

Margaret

There's a difference?

Callie

Yeah, a big difference. One's legitimate and one's illegal to distribute.

Iris

Where's the line between the two?

Callie

(Shrugging) Oh, you know it when you see it.

Donald

I think we should check it out.

Margaret

(Amazed) Exactly what would we be checking out?

Iris

Like Donald said, the potential. Find out what sells, what doesn't, how to get published, that kind of thing.

Callie

Lots of authors self-publish. E-books. They opened a whole new readership of erotica. All those suburban commuters reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* on their Kindles to and from the office. That author made millions. She's a fucking genius. Kindles and wet panties on the bus.

Donald

(After an embarrassed pause) Okay. So we check out how you self-publish. What else?

Iris

What are the sub-genres of erotica?

Donald

What type sells the most?

Callie

That's easy. Your basic BDSM. Then you have LGBTQ, multiple partners, billionaire romance, vampire, shapeshifters, alien, tentacles, paranormal, and then there's some kinkier shit, like--

Iris

(Interrupting) BDSM?

Everyone in the room looks at Callie waiting for an answer.

Callie

Bondage, dominant, submissive, sadomasochism. C'mon, everyone knows that!

Iris

Shapeshifters?

Margaret

Tentacles?

James

(Hesitantly) There's stuff kinkier than tentacles?

Callie

Seriously? Don't you guys go out, or watch TV or go to movies? Tentacle sex has to do with----

Margaret

(Cutting her off) Stop, stop, stop!

Callie

Come down to the store, for fuck sake. We have a lending library. You can literally check out books but you have to bring them back within two weeks.

Donald

(Smirking) I wonder what the fine is if you fail to return them.

Callie

(Seriously) You really don't want to know.

Donald sobers up immediately.

Iris

I like that idea. A field trip to Frisky Business.

Callie

Then you'll love this. At the start of every semester, this professor of women's studies brings her senior class to the store and she gives them an assignment to come up with as many words as possible for male and female genitalia. *(Laughing)* You should see the looks on the faces of these students while they're going through the books, it's hysterical. *(Snorts)*

Awkward pause.

James

I think we need to define erotica versus porn. What makes something one or the other?

Donald

Yeah, we need a list of rules.

Callie

Spoken like a true dominant.

Donald

(Flustered) What?

Iris

A set of rules that delineates one genre from another.

Callie

Legal versus illegal isn't good enough?

Iris

Sure, but what's the distinction? Everyone needs to come up with five rules for writing erotica versus porn. And a list of words used for male and female genitalia, but no cheating by searching on the internet. You have to come up with it using your own recollection. Otherwise we'll all end up with the exact same list.

Callie

You academics nerds, you fucking kill me.

Margaret

Callie, please. I really don't think--

James

(Interrupting) Callie, don't pick on us. We're all new at this.

Iris

(Eyeing Donald) Most of us are new at this.

Donald

(Defensively) Hey, I'm new at it too. Okay?

Callie

(Skeptical) Uh-huh. Sure.

Margaret

I don't know.

James

Why?

The others wait for her to respond.

Margaret

Well, because.... *(Pause)* You can't seriously be thinking this could work?

James

It's something new. Just what you need right now.

Iris

Let's approach it from an analytical perspective and see what we discover.

Donald

Yeah. We've been writing the same stuff for what, ten years now? No offense, but this could be fun. Exploring our sex, sexual, sexually----*(fumbling until Callie interrupts)*

Callie

(Loudly) Your **sexuality!** Everyone, say it! Own the word.

The group reaches for pastries as they mumble.

All

Sexuality.

Callie

Oh man, you guys definitely need to visit Frisky Business.

Iris

(Gets up and writes the assignment on the board) Okay, what are the assignments? A list of names for male and female genitalia. *(Stops and erases the word "genitalia")* Oops - probably shouldn't display too much. Field trip to Frisky Business. What else?

Donald

Five rules to distinguish erotica from porn.

Iris adds that to the board.

James

Publishing stats. How to break in, who publishes it, self-publishing, articles on that kind of thing.

Margaret

Fine. I'll take that as my assignment.

The others smile at her.

Donald

Atta girl.

Callie

(Annoyed and bored) Yeah, great. You go, girl. Blah, blah, blah. Can we get back to the assignment for this session? Trust? I want to read a piece I wrote about how my mother betrayed my trust when she wrote all these stories about my personal life and then shared them with you guys. It's called "Mind Your Own Fucking Business."

James

And she's back!

Stage to black.

Act One, Scene Three

Same set. The clock on the wall reads 8:40 PM. Donald is about to read his poem. The others are listening intently, except for Callie who is methodically biting her nails.

Donald

It's called *Cardinal at the Feeder*

(Pauses, then begins)

She comes to me at sunset.
 Signaling her arrival
 with a series of staccato riffs.
 I wait, still as glass,
 hoping to avoid her eye.
 She doesn't like to be watched.
 The ruffian sparrows and chickadees
 wait at a respectable distance.
 They know better than to intrude.
 Does she know I put out the seed?
 That her nightly visits are a meditation for me?
 Whispering softly,
 so as not to scare, I repeat my mantra.
 Hello again. You can trust me. You are always welcome here.

Brief pause after he finishes.

Iris

Donald, that's lovely. Very visual.

James

Yeah, I could really see the little birds holding back, waiting for her to finish.

Margaret

I like the phrase "staccato riff." They really do sound like that, don't they?

Iris

The whole poem feels like a meditation of sorts.

Donald

(Nodding his head, pleased) That's what I was trying to do!

Margaret

You've definitely succeeded in that.

James

Nice job, Donald.

Callie

Don't you ever write about anything other than birds? *(Spits a hangnail out)*

Margaret

Callie!

Donald

I like birds. I've been working on my bird poems for two years. What's wrong with that?

Margaret

Nothing. Callie, if you plan to stay in this group, you need to follow the guidelines of offering constructive criticism and analysis, or stay quiet. *(Looks at the clock)* I think that's all the time we have for tonight. Does everyone have their assignment for next week?

Iris

(Erasing the blackboard) Yep. We're gonna explore the wonderful world of erotica. Anyone want to stop for a drink?

Donald

I could go for a quick one.

Margaret

Thanks, I just want to go home.

James

I'm good. Next time.

Callie

(Looking at them amused) Yeah, I can just imagine how much fun it would be drinking with you guys. *(Snickers)* See you at the store. *(Exits)*

Iris

She's a little charmer, isn't she?

Margaret

She's still hurting.

James

I know.

Margaret looks at him, surprised he gets it.

James

Way too young to lose your mom. Is her dad in the picture at all?

Margaret

No. He was never really in the picture. I've tried, but....she's a handful sometimes.

Iris

See everyone in two weeks. *(Smiling)* Lots to do between now and then. Mags, I'll stop by for coffee in a few days, okay?

Margaret

Anytime. 'Night.

Donald

This is going to be fun.

The group looks at him and he fumbles a bit trying to explain.

Donald

It's something new. Here Margaret, you need these more than the rest of us. *(Hands her the box of pastries)*

Iris

(Ready to leave) More fun than accounting, right?

Donald

Definitely. *(Exits with Iris)*

Margaret

(Fishing her car keys out of her purse) Well, 'night, James. *(Turns towards the door)*

James

(Unexpectedly) When I moved to this town, you were one of the first people I met. Do you remember?

Margaret

(Turning back to face him) Of course. I dumped an entire cup of coffee into my laptop and you had just taken over the IT department. I was always in trouble with your predecessor for things I have no idea how I did, so I thought you were going to yell at me, but you just smiled and gave me a new laptop.

James

And you asked me what brought me to Lilac Cove, and did I think I was going to like it here, and then you told me about the writing group. And you invited me to join.

Margaret

God knows, we needed some fresh blood. Callie's mom had just died and the group was getting smaller and older. Maybe Donald's right. We've been a group for a long time, doing the same old exercises. A change can't hurt. I'm just not sure this is the right kind of change.

James

The point I'm trying to make is nobody ever invited me to do anything with them in any of my other stints at colleges and universities. My job is always the same. Come in, upgrade all the systems, put some processes in place and then leave, usually within twelve to eighteen months. Not much chance at establishing any real friendships.

Margaret

That sounds really appealing to me right now. *(Smiles)* You write beautiful poetry. You must know that.

James

You have no idea how scared I was when I read that first one out loud. Margaret, I speak nine languages but only machines understand me. I needed to communicate with words, not code. But that first step, man that was terrifying. And the whole time I was reading it, you sat there smiling at me and nodding. You gave me back my words. That was such a gift.

Margaret

(A little embarrassed and pleased at the same time) Teachers always like hearing that.

James

You're not my teacher. *(Looks at her silently for a moment)* And I'd like to help.

There is a moment between them until Gina Mae appears in the doorway breaking the spell.

Gina Mae

(Sounding like a drill sergeant) Let's move it! *(Points to the clock)* Time! *(Steps away)*

Margaret

You're sweet, James. Really. Not that I think this whole erotica thing has a hope in hell, but I like your willingness to go out on a limb for something.

James

(As they leave the room) Like you said, you never know where the next inspiration will come from or where it will lead.

Margaret

Yeah, that sounds like something stupid I would say.

Gina Mae appears almost as soon as they leave the room. She inspects the table and then looks at the blackboard that Iris erased. She squints at it, trying to read what was there.

Gina Mae

Frisky Business? The sex shop? Interesting.

Stage to black.

Act One, Scene Four

Margaret's dining room. A table, some chairs, a painting on the wall facing the audience. Margaret sits at the table, staring at her laptop, making notes. There is knocking and we hear a door open.

Iris

(Calling from off stage) It's me.

Margaret

In here.

Iris appears with two cups of take-out coffee.

Iris

How are you?

Margaret

Unemployed. *(Takes coffee from Iris)* Thanks.

Iris

Consider yourself lucky, just for the moment. You will not believe what is happening at the college. Let me read you the latest email from our President. *(She holds the email as she reads)*
Subject: Proper attire for upcoming term.

Margaret

A dress code? Seriously?

Iris

"As we enter our new academic year, I will be implementing a series of changes to further our goal of creating an employable workforce. Therefore, effective immediately, professional attire will be required of all faculty members. Professional attire is defined as suits, dress pants, business shirt, dress shoes, dress socks, with tie optional, but desired. An understated color palate of neutral tones works best. Female faculty may wear pantsuits or skirts and dresses with appropriate hosiery." *(Looks at Margaret in amazement)* You realize he's talking about pantyhose, right? I haven't worn pantyhose since the last millennium.

Margaret

Do they even sell them anymore?

Iris

(Reading from the email again) He goes on: "Studies have shown that students do better when faculty presents an image of professionalism and my intent is to encourage the student body to adopt the same requirements of dress in the near future."

Margaret

Oh man, he really is trying to turn this into his version of Harvard. Doesn't he know our students can barely scrape up the tuition much less money for professional attire?

Iris

Let me finish: "As it is commonplace in the corporate world, we will allow business casual dress on Fridays. I have attached an inventory of acceptable clothing that is considered business casual. I recognize that some of you may not be pleased with this change but irregardless of how you feel, I expect you to comply with these recommendations."

Margaret

(Slapping her forehead) He used irregardless again! The man doesn't listen.

Iris

Most fascist dictators don't. I mean, he can't just go around issuing executive orders! That's not how the world works. Who does he think he is?

Pregnant pause.

Margaret

So what are you going to do?

Iris

I'm not buying pantyhose that's for sure. What are you doing?

Margaret

Reading a lot about porn.

Iris

(Correcting her) Erotica. What have you learned?

Margaret

That human beings will have sex with anything.

Iris

Like?

Margaret

ANYTHING! If you build it, they will come. And then they will have sex with it.

Iris

No, I did not know that.

Margaret

(Whispering) I know what tentacle sex is.

Iris

Do I want to know?

Margaret

You should probably *Google* it, but not on your work laptop. How did we not know about this stuff? That it even existed?

Iris

We were married for a lot of years then suddenly I'm a widow and you're a divorcee. We're hopelessly archaic. What else did you learn?

Margaret

Pick an object and you'll find no end of articles about having sex with it.

Iris

Yeah? How about hedgehogs? They're prickly little buggers.

Margaret

Watch. I'll enter hedgehogs and erotica *(Enters something in her laptop)* Look at that - hedgehog erotica.

Iris

(Reading from the laptop) Sexy hedgehogs and the future of erotic fiction. Oh my God! BBW Hedgehog Romance. What's that?

Margaret

BBW - Big beautiful women. Another sub-genre. *(Looks at Iris)* You would not believe the things that are in this laptop.

They both stare at the laptop a moment as Iris tips it to one side, eyeing it suspiciously.

Iris

And I thought it was just about having sex with a lot of different people in a lot of different places and positions.

Margaret

Not just people, there's the whole shape-shifting sub-genre. They're having sex in outer space with aliens, underwater with tentacle creatures, inner sanctums of hell with Satan, it's, well, I'm not sure what it is - overwhelming, I guess.

Iris

But fascinating, right? I mean, here we are heading towards the end of our respective lives and we've found something completely new to look at.

Margaret

Are we really at the end of our lives? I don't feel like that. For some reason, I still think of myself as being in my forties. Then I remember I'm in my sixties and it's always a little startling. How the hell did that happen?

Iris

In the blink of an eye, my friend. Who said, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be?"

Margaret

Robert Browning. What a dork.

Iris

Maybe we're heading into the best of it.

Margaret

Define "It." I'm divorced with no prospects of sex with anything, including hedgehogs, so please don't tell me these are the best of times.

The phone rings.

Iris

Go ahead, take it. I wanna see these hedgehogs.

(Iris pretends to study the laptop but is obviously listening)

Margaret

Hello? Oh, hi. How did you get--? Oh yeah, the staff directory. Thought I'd be deleted by now. What? You're in charge of that. *(Laughs)* Figures. What can I do for you? *(Listens)* Uh-huh. I don't know. *(Pause, then whispering)* Okay, just coffee. Yes, I'll see you then. Bye-bye. *(Hangs up)*

Iris

Who was that?

Margaret

Doesn't matter. What were we talking about?

Iris

Why are you so resistant?

Margaret

I think it's fairly obvious.

Iris

It's not obvious. But I'm not going to argue with you right now, because of your circumstances. Except---*(pauses)*

Margaret

Except what?

Iris

(Speaking carefully) If the best is yet to be, don't you think we should embrace opportunities instead of pushing them away?

Margaret

You think James is an opportunity?

Iris

I sure don't think he's a disaster!

Margaret

What about you? Do you have any "opportunities?"

Iris

I'm finally at the point where I don't think being interested in another man is a betrayal of Harold. For a long time I felt that way. But I'm sure he wouldn't want me to be lonely.

Margaret

Are you lonely?

Iris

Sometimes. Aren't you?

Margaret

I was too mad and embarrassed and shocked to be lonely. I thought I was almost over that, and bam! I get fired and all those feelings are back. So - are you saying you'd consider *dating* again?

Iris

Does anyone date anymore? Kids today just have hook-ups if I understand the terminology correctly. It's an antiquated notion - dating. Remember the first date you had with your husband?

Margaret

Oh yeah. We went to a Woody Allen movie. *Radio Days*. He paid for the movie so I insisted on paying for dinner afterwards. We went to a vegetarian restaurant that was horrible and then sat in his car outside my apartment, smoking and talking for two hours.

Iris

I didn't know you smoked. Or liked Woody Allen for that matter.

Margaret

Neither statement is true today. But back then, yeah, I liked both of them. A lot. When did you know it was the real thing with Harold?

Iris

We were both studying abroad for a semester in London. I lived in a fourth floor walk-up with three other girls. He lived with three guys a floor below us. We never had any privacy so we'd go to the British Library to study. Have you ever been there?

Margaret shakes her head.

Iris

Oh, you'd love it. They had these study tables with beautiful lamps in the center of each. Remember - this was before computers. We'd sit side-by-side studying and then one day, when we were done, we went into the part of the library where they keep the valuable collections. I remember seeing a Gutenberg Bible from the 1400s, a Leonard da Vinci portfolio, a manuscript written by Jane Austin – in her handwriting! Pages from a Shakespearean sonnet. Really, this is your kind of place.

Margaret

Please tell me you and Harold didn't "hook-up" in the precious manuscript room.

Iris

(Laughing) No. But I think studying with someone is a great way to get to know them. You see how their brain works, how they process data, absorb their surroundings, react to stimuli, and everything really started from there for us. And when we were standing in front of the handwritten lyrics of the Beatles "I Want to Hold Your hand," he reached over and held my hand. And my heart melted.

Margaret

Really?

Iris

Really. What made you fall for your husband?

Margaret

The day they shot the students at Kent State. We marched that night at our university and when we reached the quad, there were police and National Guard everywhere, and we were afraid of them, but determined. There was this moment when everyone held up their candles and vowed to continue to protest against the war. And he took my hand, kissed it, and said, "Let's never forget how this feels."

Iris

How did it feel?

Margaret

At the time it made me feel safe in a very dangerous world. It was the moment I looked at him and thought, yeah, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And I know that's what he was feeling too.

The women are silent for a moment.

Iris

So basically our hook-up moments really came down to holding hands with our future husbands.

Margaret

And now look where we are. *(Shakes her head)* Why do I never see these things coming?

Iris

Because nobody can! Stop beating yourself up. No guarantees for happy endings. You know that. *(Margaret nods)* Change of subject: how's your list coming?

Margaret

List? Oh, you mean the words for genitalia. I started it, but then got distracted.

Iris

I found myself squeamishly writing down words that I don't think I've ever said in my life because they have so much negative connotation for me.

Margaret

You mean like-- *(writes a word on her laptop as Iris leans over to read it)*

Iris

Yep. That's definitely one of them.

There is a knock at the door.

Iris

(Looking towards the doorway) It's Callie. (Beckons her in with arm gestures)

Callie

I figured you were too chicken-shit to show up at the store, so I brought you these. *(Dumps a pile of books on the table)* I need them back in two weeks though.

Margaret

Thank you. *(Examining the titles)* I think.

Iris

Callie, it's only been a couple of days. Most of us have a job you know.

Callie

(Smiling) Donald's been there already.

Iris

(Flustered) Really?

Callie

Yeah, but I didn't help him. I had one of the guys do it. Figured he'd be more comfortable with a dude.

Iris

How thoughtful, Callie.

Margaret

Have you had any breakfast?

Callie

No.

Margaret

There's some cereal in the kitchen. Go.

Callie

Fine. Don't nag. *(Exits offstage)*

Iris

(After she leaves) Does she come here a lot?

Margaret

A few days a week. I encourage it. I promised her mom I'd watch out for her.

Iris

You're a good friend. I'm not sure I could put up with Callie's shenanigans.

Margaret

She's exceptionally bright. Just needs to focus that energy and verve. I'm trying to get her back to school but she's very resistant.

Iris

Can you imagine her adhering to a dress code at the community college?

Margaret

That place isn't a good fit for her. Too many memories of her mom. Plus, now it's being run by Attila the Hun.

Callie comes back into the room, cereal bowl in hand.

Callie

(While chewing) Whatcha looking at?

Margaret tries to hide the list of genitalia terms but she's not fast enough.

Callie

Lemme see. *(Peers at the laptop)* Oh - your list. *(Perusing)* Well, it's a start, I guess. You've got a ways to go.

Margaret

Callie, you have to understand, some of these are very uncomfortable words for a feminist to say.

Callie

Why?

Margaret

Because they are considered derogatory terms meant to hurt the person who's being called that word. And most of the time that person is a woman.

Callie

That means you're giving them the control to hurt you. These are just words! Own them. Then they can't hurt you. *(Looking at the laptop again)* Some of these aren't even bad words, they're just descriptive.

Iris

Like what?

Callie

This one. It's kinda cute. Say it out loud.

Iris

(Uncomfortably) I don't really want to.

Callie

There you go. That's how they own you. Say the word. Both of you.

Margaret

Really Callie---

Callie

(Firmly) On my count. One, two, three - say it!

Margaret and Iris

(Sheepishly and softly) Clit.

Callie

Louder. Own it! One, two, three -- *(points at them)*

Margaret and Iris

(A little louder) Clit.

Callie

Wow - did you see what happened just now? *(Pause)* Nothing! It's not even a bad word, just an abbreviation for a female anatomical part. What's the big deal?

Margaret and Iris look at her and each other.

Callie

Uh-huh. That's what I thought. I gotta go. I'm opening the store today. Ciao.

Leaves without a backward glance.

Iris

You know, she has the makings of a good teacher. Or a terrorist.

Margaret

(After a pause) Maybe she has a point. We need to become de-sensitized to the slang if we're going to do this.

Iris

So now you're thinking about trying to write something?

Margaret

Isn't that the reason for this exercise?

Iris

It is. What do you have in mind?

Margaret

I....I don't have anything right now.

Iris

Yes, you do - I can tell.

Margaret

Nothing I'm prepared to talk about. And if I'm going to try this, then the whole group has to participate. Otherwise forget it.

Iris

I have a job. I don't need to do this. I'm just academically intrigued by the whole subject.

Margaret

You have a job **for now**. Trust me; that can change in a heartbeat. So let's get used to saying these words. (*Shares her laptop so Iris can see*) Alright - from the top. (*Points at a word*) One, two, three--

Stage to black.

Act One, Scene Five

Coffee shop. James is sitting at a table with a pot of tea. Margaret enters and comes to the table as James rises.

James

Thanks for coming.

Margaret

I have no idea why I'm here.

James

Tea. I remember you said you liked tea in the afternoon, so I got tea. Is that okay?

Margaret

Tea is fine, thanks. I think maybe we should clear up a few things.

James

(Smiling, knowing full well what she's going to say) Like what?

Margaret

Like the nature of our relationship.

James

Do we have one yet? *(Looks around like he's trying to find it)* How did I miss that? I mean, I've been trying to get something going but I didn't think I was doing very well---

Margaret

(Cutting him off) It's not funny. People are becoming aware of this, you know.

James

Well, first of all, I don't know what "this" is, and neither do you, so good luck to anyone else trying to figure it out.

Margaret

It's a small town, James. And we both have reputations to maintain.

James

(Trying to make a joke) Not you. You were fired, remember?

Margaret

Really not funny.

James

(Quickly) You're right. It's not. Look, I don't have an agenda. I just find you interesting.

Margaret

You mean, interesting in a let's-just-be friends kind of way?

James

No.

Margaret

No???

James

That's too limiting.

Margaret

Well that's the best I've got.

James

We'll see. Have dinner with me some night.

Margaret

Probably not a good idea.

James

Don't people who want to get to know each other in a let's just-be-friends kind of way ever have dinner? I'll buy. Or if that's too threatening, we'll split the bill.

Margaret

Ordinarily I would find your sense of humor refreshing, but under the present circumstances, I'm not amused.

James

(Imitating royalty) We are not amused. *(Back to normal)* Okay then. I'll stop being funny and just say this: I don't have a lot of friends. IT people like me have a reputation for being weird, and it's totally deserved, believe me. But you introduced me to writing, so you have to accept some responsibility for bringing me out of my shell and into the world of people who do something other than play video games for fun.

Margaret

I am willing to accept that responsibility. Every two weeks at the community center.

James

But you're not willing to pursue anything else?

Margaret

What I need to pursue right now is a job. It's hard to think beyond that.

James

(Relenting) I understand. I'm not going to push you. I'll just be there waiting.

Margaret

Not sure what that means.

James

We'll just let it unfold. *(Pours her another cup of tea)* For now, tell me how you ended up majoring in Poetry.

Lights start to dim as the conversation continues.

Margaret

(A little more comfortable) I didn't major in poetry - I majored in 19th Century English Literature.

James

Who was your favorite author?

Margaret

Back then? Keats. I wrote my dissertation on his poetry. He died at the age of twenty-five but what an amazing poet.

James

And now?

Margaret

Ted Kooser. He's at the opposite end of the age spectrum, a poet who really didn't kick into gear until much later. He was an insurance executive for most of his life.

James

So you're saying there's no age limits on creativity?

Margaret

(Thinking) Okay, I'll give you that one, although I'm not sure where you're going with it.

James

(Smiling) Relax Margaret. We're just having tea and conversation.

Stage to black.

Act One, Scene Six

The Community Center. Iris, Donald, Margaret, James and Callie are all in the conference room. Each of them has their back to each other, except Callie who is standing in front of the blackboard. They are in the process of reviewing and reciting their lists of words for male and female genitalia.

Callie

God, you're making this so painful. Why are you so fucking afraid of these words? They're just words. Let's say them again!

The Group

(Quickly overlapping each other) No! Thanks, we're good. Got it. Thanks.

Margaret

(Rising from her chair) Thank you for your feedback, Callie. I think we'll work on it individually. Let's proceed with the next part of the assignment. I put together a list of publishing houses and on-line self-publishing sites that accept erotica. Here are some articles on sales figures and other points of interest. *(Passes out copies)*

Donald

Wow, there are so many. I had no idea.

Iris

I'm surprised too. These are bona fide publishing houses that have been around for a long time.

Margaret

And they've been making a lot of money off erotica, which I did not know.

Callie

(Raising her hand) I knew.

James

(To Callie) Tell us about the typical customer that buys this type of book.

Callie

Can't. We maintain strict client confidentiality at the store.

Donald

But if you had to give a general description of the average client, what would it be?

Callie

(Squinting her eyes) You want me to tell you that the average customer is male, mid-fifties, overweight, dresses like a slob, never makes eye contact, and always stares at your boobs when he talks to you. Well guess what? Not true.

Iris

I read an article about this. One sex therapist said she referred people to places like Frisky Business who had injured or disabled partners and were looking for ways to keep their sexual relationship alive.

Callie

You have no idea the shit some of these people are going through. Your life is a fucking walk in the park by comparison.

The group is silent for a moment.

James

Callie, you're confusing me. *(Teasing)* Just now you sounded like a really nice person.

Callie

(Snarky) Not that it lets my mother off the hook for writing about my entire life and sharing it with you Nimrods.

Donald

There she is. That's the Callie we know and love.

Margaret

Did you know that Nimrods were skillful hunters in Biblical times? Only in North America did the word take on a negative connotation.

Callie

(Sweetly) Did you know that nobody gives a fuck about the origin of that word?

Margaret

(Tries to think of a witty response, fails) Yes, I did.

Donald

We had another assignment: Five rules for writing erotica versus porn.

Iris

(Rising and going to the blackboard) Here's the most important one, I think. *(Writes as she speaks)* Everyone in the story has to be of legal age. Did you all have that on your lists?

The group nods.

Donald

How about this: No one gets hurt unless that's their thing.

James

That rule should include animals. In fact, I think there should be something about not using animals in any way except that shape-shifting thing I'm still not sure I understand.

Iris

Where hedgehogs turn into the lover of your dreams, you mean?

James

(A little embarrassed) Yeah, that.

Callie

The thing about legal age is really important. That's the shit that can get you in trouble. Plus - no one will publish it. What else you got?

Margaret

Respect women and the choices they make in the story.

Callie

That sounds like a moral decision instead of an erotica vs. porn rule.

Margaret

All rules have a basis in morality. You may not like the morality at work, but that doesn't mean it isn't valid. And the deliberate denigration of women is pornographic in my opinion.

Callie

What about submissive women?

James

No, I see where Margaret is coming from.

Callie

(Smiling) Of course you do.

Margaret

What does that mean?

Callie

He always takes your side.

Margaret

(Embarrassed) My side? There are no sides here.

James

(Quickly) If women choose to be submissive, it's erotic. If they're forced into it, it's porn. The woman needs to get something out of the relationship too. Isn't that what you mean, Margaret?

Margaret

Yes. And it applies to whatever sub-genre of erotica you're writing. The choice of who she is and what she does has to be the decision of the woman.

Iris

So if she chooses to engage with the hedgehog shape-shifter, that's okay?

Donald

You seem to be fixated on hedgehogs. Do you want to talk about it?

Iris

(Shoots him a look) Maybe later.

Donald

(Flustered) Okay. That's four rules - what's our last one?

The group is silent for a moment.

Callie

C'mon people, this isn't rocket science.

They look at each other.

Callie

(Finally) You have to care about your characters. Erotica is character-driven. Porn is sex-driven. You can't just write about sticking this thing into that thing, you have to write characters that people will care about. And then create tension for them.

Donald

Why tension?

Callie

'Cuz nothing is more boring than two people having ordinary sex. Who wants to read that shit? Get some characters, create a situation that is filled with tension then let it rip.

Iris

Let what rip?

Callie

Whatever! Ask yourself, "What is the kinkiest thing I've ever wanted to do?" And then go way, way beyond that, 'cuz I bet your kinky probably isn't kinky enough. You know what I mean?

The group nods sheepishly and all reach for cookies.

Donald

We know what you mean. You think our sex lives are dull.

Iris

And our sexual fantasies are boring, right?

Callie

(Looking at the group and throwing down the challenge) So prove me wrong. I dare you.
(Looks at Margaret) What's next?

Margaret

It's time to try our hand at this, if everyone still wants to.

James

(Quickly) Yes.

Iris

Sure.

Donald

I guess.

Callie

You guess? That attitude won't work. Embrace it or go back to writing those poems about birds and shit.

Margaret

Callie, that is inappropriate and rude. Apologize to Donald. Now!

Callie

(Sizing up Margaret's mood) Sorry, Don. I didn't mean it.

Donald

Apology accepted. I only meant that it's scary. It feels a little like we're...I don't know what the word is, maybe being naughty.

Iris

It also feels like we're waking up and we're a little more alive.

Donald

Yes. More alive. That can't be a bad thing, can it? *(Looks at Iris shyly, then looks away)*

Iris

(Answering Donald) No - the more alive you are, the better.

Margaret

(After a pause) Okay, so we need to write something. And I thought we'd write a quickie. I didn't make that up; I found it on the internet. You write something erotic in any style, poem, short story, whatever, but it can only be one page long.

Iris

One page? C'mon.

Margaret

No, listen it's the latest thing in erotica. Isn't it Callie?

Callie

Yep. It forces you to concentrate on the important elements of the story. Millennials don't have a lot of time to waste. They have things to do, like yoga classes and shit like that.

James

Are we going to read these out loud at our next meeting or how's it going to work?

The group is quiet for a moment, thinking.

Donald

(Snaps his fingers) We all need to pick out a, what is that called – a nom de plume?

Iris

Pen names! Perfect. Everyone come up with a pen name and put it on your quickie. Make enough copies for each of us and we'll read and discuss them.

James

So that way no one will know who wrote the piece?

Iris

Exactly. We can feel more comfortable writing and commenting.

Callie

No fucking Tristans.

Iris

What?

Callie

Have you ever met someone named Tristan in real life? No. But there are tons of them in erotica land, for reasons I'll never understand. Don't call yourself Tristan.

Margaret

Are you going to do this assignment with us, Callie?

Callie

(Gathering up her belongings) Nah. I'll just read 'em if I don't have anything better going on. Are we done? *(Pause)* Okay, we're done. See you in two weeks. Ciao.

Callie exits as the others get ready to leave.

Donald

She probably could out write us, the little shit. *(The others laugh)* Anyone up for a drink?

Iris

I'd never say no to you. *(Smiles at him in a flirty way)*

Donald

(Flustered) Really? How about you guys?

Margaret

No thanks.

James

I'll pass.

Iris

(Taking Donald's arm) Looks like you're stuck with me. 'Night you two. *(Donald shoots James a look of surprise as Iris pulls him out the door. Margaret continues to gather up her belongings during a little pause before James speaks)*

Gina Mae appears outside of the door listening during Margaret and James's conversation. They are unaware of her presence.

James

Is there something going on between those two?

Margaret

Donald and Iris? I don't know. Donald was a friend of Iris's late husband. They used to golf together once in a while but that's about it.

James

When did he die?

Margaret

Around a year and half ago.

James

How?

Margaret

Cardiac arrest. It was fast. One minute he was here, the next he was gone.

James

Well. Just goes to prove....*(pauses)*

Margaret

What? What does it prove?

James moves around the table slowly as he speaks, until he is standing next to Margaret

James

That all the clichés are true. Life is impermanent. We can't take any of the time we have for granted. That all it takes is one random turn to the left or the right for your whole world to change. *(Standing next to her as speaks the last line)* That you shouldn't put off the things that you know are meant to happen.

Margaret

(A little spellbound) Like what things?

James

Like this. *(Slowly James reaches down and tips Margaret's head up and then kisses her. A long, slow kiss. There is no resistance from Margaret)*

Gina Mae covers her mouth to keep from being found out as she witnesses the scene.

Margaret

(Finally) James----

James

Shhhh. *(Puts his finger on her lips)* Margaret. *(Kisses her again)*

Gina Mae is trying desperately to contain herself.

Margaret

(Finally pulling away) I have to go. Really, I need to go. And think. This is...that was.... I just need to go. Good night, James.

Gina Mae quickly moves away from the door as Margaret leaves the room. James looks at the blackboard, half-heartedly erases it, picks up his backpack and slowly leaves the room. After a moment, Gina Mae enters, scrutinizes the blackboard, then picks up a sheet of paper that has fallen on the floor. It is one of the lists of genitalia names.

Gina Mae

(Reading the list) Oh my! More and more curious. Ugh, I hate that word! *(Looks around the room suspiciously)* Ha! Gotcha!

Stage to black.

End of Act One

Act Two, Scene One

Margaret's dining room. Margaret is sitting at the table, coffee cup in hand, not working on her laptop. She's thinking, or maybe remembering. Sometimes she breaks into a goofy smile, then quickly stops. She gets up, paces around a bit, sits down. Looks at her coffee cup, gets up again and goes offstage (kitchen) to get coffee. There is a knock at the door and the sound of the door opening as Margaret hurries from the kitchen.

Callie

Yo!

Margaret

(A little disappointed) Oh, it's you. Hi.

Callie

Expecting someone else?

Margaret

No. Of course not. Have you had breakfast?

Callie

Yeah, I just wanted to see how you are.

Margaret

(A little flustered) I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine? Fine, fine, fine. Are you sure you don't want something to eat?

Callie

(Tickled to death) Oh my God, something happened between you and James last night, didn't it?

Margaret

(Flustered) What? Of course not! No!

Callie

(Laughing) You're such a shitty liar.

Margaret

And you are being overly precocious. I have a lot of work to do, so either get some breakfast or get out.

Another knock at the door.

Iris

(Calling) It's me. Oh, hi Callie.

Margaret

Callie was just leaving.

Callie

I really wasn't.

Iris

What's going on?

Callie

(Teasing, sing-song voice) Margaret's got a boyfriend.

Margaret

Callie, that's enough!

Iris

James?

Margaret

No!

Callie

(At the same time as Margaret) Yes!

Iris

Which is it?

Callie

He's hot for you.

Margaret

That's not true.

Callie

The fuck it isn't.

Iris

(Nodding and pointing at Callie) What she said.

Callie

He likes you. What's the big deal?

Margaret

I am old enough to be his mother.

Iris

Obviously he doesn't care.

Callie

Or he's into that kind of thing. He's not bad looking. For an old guy, that is.

Iris

And he's a nice guy. Really nice.

Margaret

Yes, he is. But I can't...I'm not... *(Fumbles for the words)*

Callie

Are you scared he'll see all your saggy parts and freak out? 'Cuz I can tell you right now, he won't care.

Margaret

(Embarrassed) I care!

Iris

Why?

Margaret

Oh please, you're my age. You know everything up here (*motions to her chest*) is reinforced by wires and everything down there (*motions below her waist*) is...well...gravity affected.

Callie

He sees you differently than you see yourself.

Iris

Listen to that girl! She speaks the truth.

Callie

And you should come down to the store because we have stuff that can enhance the experience – especially for mature women, if you get my drift. (*Winks at Margaret*)

Iris

(*Interested*) What kind of stuff?

Callie

(*Eyes her for a moment*) You'd better come too.

Margaret

What is happening here????

Callie

Looks like there's some frisky business going on in Lilac Cove. (*Before Margaret can object*) Don't bother kicking me out, I'm going. See you at the store, ladies. And don't make me lecture you on safe sex. Old people can get diseases too. You're gonna need condoms.

Callie exits, smiling.

Iris

Talk to me.

Margaret

(*Collapsing in her chair*) It was just a kiss, I swear. (*Pause*) A really nice kiss.

Iris

That's terrific! (*Looks at her friend's face*) Isn't it?

Margaret

It's terrifying!

Iris

Is your heart racing?

Margaret

Yes! I feel like I'm on the verge of a heart attack.

Iris

That's because you forgot how much fun it is to be seduced, darling idiot friend of mine.

Margaret

He didn't seduce me. Don't be ridiculous.

Iris

Maybe a bit of ridiculousness is exactly what the two of us need right now.

Margaret

Why are you smiling so much? Is it Donald?

Iris

(Giggling) He's sweet. Why not?

Margaret

At least he's your age.

Iris

I agree with Callie, it doesn't matter. As we both know, there's no guarantee at happiness just because you're the same age. Why not accept what's being offered to you?

Margaret

You sound like James. Or maybe you've been reading too much porn.

Iris

Erotica. It certainly opened my eyes. And my mind.

Margaret

Really?

Iris

Think of the rules we came up with for writing erotica versus porn and apply it to the situation.

1) I'm of legal age, 2) I'm not getting hurt, 3) No animals are involved - hedgehogs included, 4) I'm getting what I want, and 5) There's definitely sexual tension, but that's kind of fun too.

Margaret

And Donald? How's he feeling?

Iris

(Smiling) He's come out of his accounting shell quite enthusiastically.

Margaret

(Shaking her head and pacing) A month ago I was a teacher and I knew what was expected of me. In the classroom, in the community, I had a grip on my life. Now, nothing makes sense. How did I get to the point where I'm actually trying to write porn?

Iris

Erotica.

Margaret

Potayto, potahto. The line between them is very fine.

Iris

Newsflash sweetie. This didn't start with you getting fired. Your husband ran off with a younger woman to a faraway country to live out his late-life dreams. You got stuck with an old house and a job you could do in your sleep. Alone.

Margaret

Yes, but I was getting used to being alone. I was working on it really hard.

Iris

Is that what you want? And before you answer, remember rule #4: Respect the woman and the choices she makes. Because if you are choosing to be alone for the rest of your life, I'll shut up, but if not, it's a little like you're choosing to live a life of porn instead of a life of erotica.

Margaret

Oh my God, stop applying the rules of writing erotica to everything in life! It's a terrible analogy.

Iris

Really? I thought it was more of a metaphor.

Margaret

(Patiently) A metaphor is a figure of speech. It uses one word to mean another.

Iris

(Leading her on) What's a simile then?

Margaret

Also a figure of speech, but the difference is---*(sees that Iris is jerking her chain)* Oh shut up! Now you're just being a smart ass.

Iris

(Chuckling) Sorry. Don't you miss being intimate with a man?

Margaret

(Dodging the question) See - what you did there is almost a metaphor. You're using the word "intimate" to mean sex, aren't you?

Iris

Now who's being a smart ass? Just answer the question.

Margaret

What's the real question you want to ask me?

Iris

Fine! Sex. Don't you miss having sex with someone?

Margaret

Fine! Yes. Maybe. I don't know. Are you having sex with Donald?

Iris

No! Maybe! I don't know.

They look at each other for a moment then embrace like the old friends they are.

Margaret

There is no way life should be this complicated at our age.

Iris

(Putting her hands on Margaret's shoulders and shaking her a bit) Tell me something. Why is it okay for your husband to run off with someone twenty years his junior, but you're all hung up on James being twenty years younger than you?

Margaret

Twenty-two years. And I never said it was okay for him to run off with her.

Iris

I'm more interested in why you're so hung up about the age thing.

Margaret

I don't know. It's just the way society works, isn't it?

Iris

Only if you let it. Like Callie would say, own it and it can't hurt you anymore.

Margaret

You think this is some kind of fetish he has?

Iris

I do not. I think he finds you attractive. And that's not a metaphor or an analogy or simile for anything. He wants to get to know you better. What's wrong with that?

Margaret

Oh my God. *(Holds her head in her hands)*

Iris

Listen, one more question for you and don't judge, okay?

Margaret

Okay.

Iris

Have you ever used a condom?

Margaret

What? Umm, no. We didn't really need to back then. We had the pill and what's the worst you could get in the seventies - a bad case of crabs? And then we were married and, well....

Iris

I know. I've never used one either.

Margaret

So???

Iris

Nothing. Just wondering.

Margaret

Ask Callie the Expert. She'll be able to guide you through the process and probably recommend something that's guaranteed to enhance the pleasure and where am I going with this?????

Iris

Okay, I'm leaving. I have a class. Anyway, try not to over-think this one, dear friend. We'll talk soon.

Iris leaves. Margaret looks around the dining room and starts tidying up. After a moment or two there is a knock and the sound of the door opening.

Margaret

What did you forget?

Gina Mae enters the dining room.

Margaret

(Surprised) Hey Gina Mae. What are you doing here?

Holding up the page of genitalia names she found in the community center conference room.

Gina Mae

I want to talk to you about what's going on in your writing group!

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Two

The Community Center. Lights come up as Margaret, Iris, and Donald are once again not facing each other, each of them reading a page and occasionally make a note on it. Callie is hanging out in front of the blackboard.

Callie

God, you all read slower than first graders. These are supposed to be quickies, you know.

Margaret

(Looking at Iris and Donald) Has everyone finished? *(They nod)* Okay, let's start our critique with *(looks at the name on the page)* Derek Evergood's story, "The Long and the Short of It." Comments about this one?

Silence. Callie writes Derek Evergood and the title on the blackboard.

Margaret

This isn't going to work if we aren't able to objectively talk about the quality of the writing.

Donald

I can't believe James isn't here. Makes it a little awkward being the only guy in the room.

Callie

I'll bet. *(Pause)* Derek.

Donald

Margaret, make the scary girl go away.

Iris

How do you know he's Derek? I could be Derek. *(Pointing to Margaret)* She could be Derek.

Callie

Yeah, right.

Margaret

(To Callie) Behave yourself.

Iris

Did James say he was going to try to join us?

Margaret

He just left a message that something came up and he'd explain later.

Callie

Sure. The old I gotta work late excuse. That's not cliché at all.

Margaret

(Quietly) Callie, there's a fine line you're about to cross. I wouldn't if I were you.

Callie

(Realizing her mistake, mumbling) Sorry.

Donald

(To Margaret) How'd you do that?

Margaret

Never mind. Focus people. What was working in this story?

Iris

(After a pause) I liked the use of repetition when ummm, describing the uhhh, the way the male character, ummm, you know.

Callie

(Snickering) Reminded me of that kid's story with the little train, "I think I can, I think I can...choo-choo! *(Makes the sound of a train and laughs and snorts)*

Donald

(Stands up) Nope. I can't do this with her here. *(Reaches for the plate of cookies)*

Callie

Okay, okay. I'm leaving. Except here's thing, Derek, *(emphasizing the name and looking at the group of three)* whoever you are. Write what you know.

Iris

What do you mean?

Callie

Derek might want to try his or her hand at writing gay erotic lit.

Donald

Why do you say that?

Callie

(Skeptically) C'mon. (Looks at Donald)

Donald

You think I'm gay? Why - because I like to bake? Because I've never been married? Because I, I, I, don't look butch enough? Why?

Iris

(Quietly) How very cliché of you, Callie.

Callie

(Embarrassed, she gathers her stuff quickly and heads towards the door) Screw you. I didn't mean it that way.

She exits. The rest of them sit there a few moments.

Margaret

(Finally) I think maybe we should just put our review on hold for the evening. Why don't we all write up our notes on each of the assignments and deliver them to the group at our next session? (Pause) If you want to continue to do this, that is.

Iris

(Nervously) I want to read my piece. I need to know from you guys whether you think it's erotic or not. I didn't use a lot of the vocabulary we discovered in the last few weeks, but I just want to know what you think.

Margaret

Sure. Good for you.

Iris

It's a poem. I call it *Reminiscence*. (*She takes a breath, lets it out slowly and begins*)

I dream of white taffeta and pearls
 tall men in tuxedos
 and a baroque ballroom
 with candlelit chandeliers.
 Rustling as we waltz
 some Viennese melody echoing
 off the marbled walls and ceiling
 sets our world in motion.
 Fingers entwined
 circling faster and faster
 the magic swirls thick as sea-fog
 drawing us closer and closer together.
 And the music never stops.

I remember the roses
 held captive in crystal prisons,
 filling the air with scented promises
 that we cannot, will not ignore.

Later, you removed my gloves
 kissing each finger softly, so softly,
 on a night that will never
 know an encore.

And though decades have passed
 you remain with startling clarity
 always there in my darkest hours,
 dispelling my loneliness.
 And the music never stops.

Iris looks up at Margaret and Donald, who stare at her, mouths slightly open.

Iris

Was that erotic do you think?

Margaret

(After a pause) I'm honestly not sure if it's erotic, but I think it's the best poem you've ever written for as long as I've known you.

Iris

(Pleased) Really?

Donald

Are you kidding - that's an amazing poem! Is it erotic? Yes. Oh my gosh, I just want to.... I mean, it's wonderful! *(He looks at her longingly)* Wonderful.

Iris

It's funny. I sat down and it just came to me like that! *(Snaps her finger)* I don't even know where it originated because I've never been in a ballroom in Vienna, but it must have been there all along, right? Just waiting I guess. *(Looks at Donald)*

Donald

(Nodding) For the right audience.

Iris

Yes. I've never written anything so fast in my life. But going back to my original question: is it erotic? I didn't use any of the "words" *(makes the quotation sign marks with her hands)* that we all studied. It's not overtly sexual at all, so what is it?

Donald

It's beautiful. That's what.

Iris

(Shyly) Thank you.

Margaret

It is beautiful. And it's also very suggestive of actions to come. Isn't that part of erotica?

Gina Mae enters the conference room.

Gina Mae

(To Margaret) I saw the kid leave. Am I too late?

Margaret

No, nothing is going as planned so you're welcome to join us. Gina Mae has something she wants to share with the group.

Gina Mae

(Very matter of fact) Yeah. Let me know if you want any pointers about writing erotica. I've made a nice chunk of change doing it for years.

Donald and Iris stare at Gina Mae incredulously then look at Margaret, who nods and rolls her eyes.

Iris

You make money from writing erotica?

Gina Mae

Yeah. I mean at first, no. I started out writing erotic fan fiction based on well-known TV characters but then I starting making up my own characters and that's when it paid off. I suggest you try writing some fan fiction first - it's easier, because the characters are already established in people's minds.

Donald

Is that legal?

Gina Mae

(Hedging a little) Most of the time.

Donald

What's that mean?

Gina Mae

Depends on the author of the original work. A lot of them consider it a form of flattery. Some don't, so you should avoid them. The point is, once I knew what people wanted, I set up my own website and developed my own characters.

Iris

Who did you write about when you first started?

Gina Mae

I'm a *Masterpiece Theater* geek. So I started with *Sherlock*, but I really hit my stride with *Downton Abbey*.

Donald

(Horrified) You wrote erotic fiction about characters from *Downton Abbey*? That's, that's just wrong!

Gina Mae

Why?

Donald

I loved *Downton Abbey*! I was devastated when it ended.

Gina Mae

So were a lot of people. And they were eager for more. I just built on what was there and threw in a little sex. Or sometimes a lot of sex.

Donald

No! *Downton Abbey* was perfect!

Iris

Do you have a pen name?

Gina Mae

I write under the name of Lady Mary-Edith.

Donald

(Pointing at her accusingly) But, but, that's the name of two of the daughters in *Downton*!

Gina Mae

I know. But that's where I got my following, so I had to keep it.

Donald

This is a lot to absorb! *(Sits down and reaches for a cookie)*

Margaret

I think we should take Gina Mae up on her offer.

Iris

Me too. I could use some pointers. What about James?

Margaret

He's not here. He doesn't get a vote.

Iris

(Quietly) Don't be like that.

Margaret

You want to lead us in a discussion next week?

Gina Mae

I get paid to do classes like this, but for you guys, sure. I'll throw in a freebie.

Iris

Where do you teach? For money, I mean?

Gina

Different places. Writing conferences, conventions, sometimes in people's homes. I have a lot of followers on Facebook. Or they contact me on my website for a class.

Donald

Facebook? Website? Really? I'm, I'm stunned.

Gina

You have to take advantage of every social media outlet available to you. Don't worry. I'll explain it all at the next meeting.

The group stares at her with new-found admiration.

Margaret

Okay, does everyone want to try this? If so, let's call it a night and we'll meet next week.

Iris

(To Margaret) Don't you want to read what you wrote tonight?

Margaret

(Shaking her head) Next time, okay?

Donald

(Reaching for the pastries) Have a cookie, Gina Mae. In fact, have the whole box.

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Three

Margaret's dining room. Margaret is trying to pick up the books, papers, and coffee cups that litter the table. We hear a quick knock and Callie enters the room. She looks at Margaret seriously, and a little scared, knowing she crossed a line the day before.

Margaret

(Finally) Did you have breakfast?

Callie shakes her head no.

Margaret

Go get some cereal and we'll talk.

Callie goes into the kitchen while Margaret makes room at the table for the two of them. She comes out with a cereal bowl in hand.

Callie

(A little defensively) I'm sorry, okay. I don't know why I said that to Don. Tell him I'm sorry.

Margaret

Tell him yourself. I want you to write him an apology note.

Callie

You're kidding.

Margaret

I'm not. You hurt his feelings and you've been doing that to a lot of people lately and we've been cutting you some slack but that ends now.

Margaret hands Callie a note card and a pen.

Callie

Seriously?

Margaret

(Nodding) Actions have consequences. Write.

Callie picks up the pen and applies it to the card.

Callie

(A little dramatically) Dear Donald, I'm so sorry I hurt your feelings. *(Looks at Margaret)* Now what do I say?

Margaret

(Not about to let her off the hook) How about this: I'm not really mad at you or Iris or Margaret or James. I'm mad because my mom died. She died and I was left alone, and it's killing me, because I don't know what to do with my life. I could always count on her to keep me calm and focused, and now she's gone and I'm a raging firestorm. Do you have any ideas what I can do? Because I'm lost right now, and sure could use advice from someone older and wiser. Write that!

Callie's face betrays all the feelings she's kept bottled up.

Callie

Fuck you!

Throws the note and the pen across the room. Gathers up her belongings as she lets out a heartbreaking sob. Margaret blocks her way out.

Margaret

You can't keep running from it, kiddo. You're wasting time. And you might think you have all the time in the world, but if there's one thing your mom's death should have made clear to you, it's that we get no guarantees.

Callie

(Emotionally) Don't you think I know that? *(Looks at Margaret intensely)* I'm never going to see her again! I'm never going to get to tell her I'm sorry.

Margaret

(Taken aback) What are you sorry for?

Callie

(Still crying) Everything!

Margaret

(Patiently) You have to be more specific. Tell me one thing.

Callie

We fought. Right before she died, we had an argument.

Margaret

That's what mothers and daughters frequently do. They fight.

Callie

She wanted me to promise to go to college. I wouldn't.

Margaret

It's okay, Callie. She understood.

Callie

What kind of person fights with their mom when they know she's dying?

Mom

The kind who's really pissed off at the world. With good reason.

Callie

I just wanted one more day. I could have made it okay with her if I had one more day.

Margaret

I know, baby. But you still can make it okay.

Callie

What do you mean?

Margaret

Her writing. She left you an incredible legacy. It's all there; the love, the exasperation, and the fear she felt about bringing you up alone, everything. Poems, and stories, and memories, all written so you would know how much she loved you.

Callie

Yeah, so?

Margaret

So you need to do something with them. I think they would be of comfort to a lot of people who are going to lose their mothers someday. Or someone else they love dearly.

Callie

It would fucking kill me to do that.

Margaret

No, it will cure you if you do that. You know how you keep telling us old farts to own it? Well, you need to own your pain and then you'll be able to bear it.

Callie

I wouldn't even know how to begin.

Margaret

I'll help you. It's a great way for you to honor her. And you need a project right now. In fact, we both do.

Margaret hugs Callie, who is stiff at first, then relaxes a little.

There is a knock at the door. Margaret looks out to see who it is.

Margaret

Excuse me.

She exits as Callie dries her eyes and tries to compose herself. Margaret returns carrying something from a florist.

Callie

(A little sarcastically) Gee, I wonder who sent those.

Margaret unwraps the flowers slowly.

Margaret

Finish your card to Donald. *(She reads the card from the florist then smiles)*

Callie

What does it say? They're from him, aren't they?

Margaret

They're from George Clooney. My secret lover. Finish your card.

Callie

Real funny. Fine, be that way. I gotta go open the store. I'll work on this (*motioning to the card*). (*Hesitates a moment*) I'm... you know.

Margaret

I know. Think about what I said.

Callie nods and exits.

Margaret picks up the card, reading it out loud.

Margaret

(Reading aloud) "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Keats!!!! You're killing me, James. Oh my God, you're killing me!

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Four

The Community Center. Clock reads 7:10. Margaret and Gina Mae sit side by side in front of the blackboard. No one else is there.

Gina Mae
Well?

Margaret
Well what?

Gina Mae
Where is everybody? I made handouts of useful resources and stuff for them. That costs money, you know.

Margaret
Didn't you use the copy machine here for free?

Gina Mae
(Relenting) Yeah.

Margaret
Maybe you scared them away. You have a formidable side to you.

Gina Mae
Maybe. But I don't have all night.

Margaret
Yes you do.

Gina Mae
(Relenting) Yeah, I do. *(Pause)* So how's everything been going for you?

Margaret
(Sarcastically) Great, just great. I'm unemployed, sitting here waiting for you to teach me how to write porn---

Gina Mae
(Interrupting) Erotica.

Margaret
(Continuing) And I haven't a clue, not one damn clue, about what's going to happen next.

Gina Mae

(Unfazed) I hear that.

Margaret

Don't you find it disconcerting? I thought at our age we'd know more.

Gina Mae

(Shrugging) Sure, but it beats the alternative.

Margaret

What do you mean?

Gina Mae

Think of all our friends who didn't make it this far. Wouldn't you rather be in a state of constantly not knowing what happens next, than being, you know, constantly dead?

Margaret

Well when you put it that way.

Gina Mae

Besides, if you knew what was going to happen next, you'd spend all your time trying to change the outcome to ensure a happy ending.

Margaret

I suppose. Why wouldn't you?

Gina Mae

Because the universe doesn't approve of that kind of behavior. There needs to be an equal distribution of happy and sad outcomes.

Margaret

Why?

Gina Mae

(Shrugging) Balance. So we can appreciate the good times, I guess.

Margaret

So how come some people seem to have all the luck and others just can't catch a break? Why doesn't the universe dole out the good and the bad times a little more equitably?

Gina Mae

(Stares at her a little annoyed) I don't have the answer to every existential question you have. I'm lucky just to know the basics.

Why did you start doing it?
Margaret

Doing what?
Gina Mae

Writing erotica.
Margaret

Boredom mostly.
Gina Mae

C'mon.
Margaret

Gina Mae
Really. I was bored with my job, bored with the lack of sexual partners in this community, bored with life in general. So one day, I was walking by Frisky Business and they were having a book signing event and I went in, met the author, bought the book, went home, and that's it. That's where it started.

Margaret
So if you had taken a different route on your walk home....

Gina Mae
Who knows? I might be selling yarn and teaching knitting at Ruth-Hanna's Stitch-in-Time shop.

Margaret
(Remembering what James said to her) One random turn to the left or right and your whole world changes. Damn.

Who said that?
Gina Mae

A friend. At least I think he's a friend.
Margaret

Gina Mae
(Smirking) Is he a friend who knows a lot about computers?

Margaret
(Flustered) What? No, why would you say that?

Callie enters with James.

Callie

Look who I found loitering in the parking lot.

Gina Mae

Speak of the devil.

James

I wasn't loitering. *(Looks at Margaret)* Sorry I'm late. I can explain. Everything.

Margaret

(Really flustered now) No, it's fine. We're still waiting for Iris and Donald. In fact, I'm going to call her. Be right back. *(Takes her phone and goes to the doorway)*

Gina Mae

(Eyeing James) So. Getting all settled in, are you?

James

Yeah. I like it here.

Gina Mae

(Grinning) I bet you do.

James

What's that supposed to mean?

Gina Mae

Nothing. Just that it's a nice town with friendly people.

James

Yeah, it is.

Gina Mae

And some people are friendlier than others.

James

What?

Callie

God, Gina Mae, leave him the fuck alone.

Before Gina Mae can respond, Margaret turns to the group.

Margaret

Iris is at the hospital! Donald is with her. It looks like a stroke. I've got to go. They want her medical directive, which I've got at home.

James

I'll drive you. C'mon, get your stuff.

Margaret starts gathering up her stuff.

Gina Mae

Do they know how bad it is?

Margaret

No. But it can't be good if they want the directive, can it?

Gina Mae

I don't know. Maybe that's just standard procedure. Go. But keep us posted, okay?

Margaret nods and leaves with James. Callie and Gina Mae look at each other. Callie looks really scared and Gina Mae picks up on it.

Gina Mae

Hey, take a breath. We don't know anything yet.

Callie nods and breathes.

Gina Mae

I didn't realize you and Iris were close. *(Remembers)* Oh, of course, she was a friend of your mom.

Callie nods again.

Gina Mae

Your mom was a good friend of mine. Did you know that?

Callie shakes her head.

Gina Mae

Well she was. And I miss her.

Callie

Me too.

Gina Mae

I have some stories about her if you ever want to hear them. Stuff I'm pretty sure you don't know.

Callie

Really?

Gina Mae

(Grinning) Oh yeah. She was a wild child when we were growing up.

Callie

She was?

Gina Mae

We both were. Margaret was always the voice of reason.

Callie

She still is.

Gina Mae

You remind me of your mom. Wanna get a drink?

Callie

Now? With you?

Gina Mae

(A little annoyed) Do you see anyone else asking you?

Callie

(Shrugs) Okay.

Gina Mae

C'mon, kid. I'll drive.

Callie and Gina Mae gather up their stuff.

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Five

Hospital room - Iris is in a hospital bed hooked up to whatever she should be after suffering a stroke. Donald is sitting by the bed in the only chair in the room talking to her as she sleeps.

Donald

Margaret and James were here. Margaret gave the doctor your medical directive and nobody's going to make you live, you know, (*struggles to remember the phrase*) in a persistent vegetative state. The doctor said it's too soon to know how much damage the stroke did. He said it happened on the right side of your brain, so your left side is damaged. And maybe your vision. And there's some other stuff. We just don't know yet. We have to give you some time. So that's what we're going to do right now. You need to sleep, rest, heal. We have time, Iris. Take all the time you need.

Donald reaches over and adjusts the blanket on Iris before sitting down again.

Donald

Just do me one favor, okay? Don't die. Please don't die. I've waited a long time for you. You didn't know that, but it's true. I remember when I first met you, almost twenty years ago. You had just joined the faculty and I thought what a lovely person she is. Of course you were married to Harold, so that was that. And don't get me wrong, I was very fond of Harold once we got to know each other, and I never once thought to do anything improper. But to be totally honest with you, I think...no, I know, my friendship with Harold was partly because then I could see more of you. Away from work in a social setting. And I loved those times. When you invited me to dinner, or we met at the club after a round of golf, I got to see you in a different setting. It's the reason I joined the writing group. I know my stuff isn't very good, but I got to see you. I'm not proud of my behavior but it's the truth. And I'm really sorry that Harold died. He was a good man, Iris. A very good man.

Donald pauses, stands up and fusses with the bedding again.

Donald

Thing is, I think I could be a good man for you now. And you, well you would be more wonderfulness than I deserve. Is that a word, wonderfulness? Margaret would know. She knows everything about words.

Donald sits there for a while looking at Iris, then stands, reaching into his backpack.

I wrote you something. I wasn't sure if I had the courage to read it tonight at class, but I guess no one is going to critique it now. The doctor said you might be able to hear, so I'm just going to read it, because I wrote it for you. I really did. I don't want to write about birds anymore. I want to write about you and how I feel around you. I call it, *Finding Erotica*.

Clears his throat and then begins to read.

It's in the moment just before.

When the brain knows
but the muscles have not yet engaged.

It's what hasn't happened yet
but if all the planets align, it will.

It's when you breathe in,
but can't breathe out.

My brain has known for a long time
What it desires.

My muscles ache
as they wait for the moment.

I count my breaths
And remind myself to exhale.

My heart beats faster
when I see you in the distance.

You. You are the erotic.
You are who I want to be with.

We are at that intersection
when our brains know but our muscles haven't moved.

It's not too late
to take the next step together.

Time for us to engage.

At the end of the poem, Donald looks carefully at Iris, waiting.

Donald

Okay, well..... *(trails off)* I admit I was kind of hoping you'd wake up when you heard the poem. That would have been really dramatic. And definitely a good sign. But it's okay. You rest. I'm just going to sit here in case you wake up. *(Reaches over and brings her hand to his lips and then holds it)* I'm not going to leave you. I'm gonna stay here and hold your hand so you know you're not alone.

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Six

Later that night. Lights come up in Margaret's dining room as James and Margaret enter.

Margaret
Do you want some coffee?

James
Got anything stronger?

Margaret
I do. Whiskey? Scotch? Wine?

James
Whiskey. Neat please.

Margaret
Excellent choice.

She goes to a small cabinet, pours two glasses as they talk.

James
I wouldn't have pegged you as a whiskey drinker.

Margaret
Are you kidding? Poets and whiskey are old friends.

Hands him the glass of whiskey. They clink glasses.

James
Aren't you going to take your coat off?

Margaret
I'm cold. *(Pause)* If I lose Iris, that's it - that's everyone I loved gone in the space of a year.

James
(Putting down his drink and approaching her) Not true. You have Callie. You have Donald, Gina Mae. *(Pause)* You have me. Give me your coat.

Margaret lets James remove her coat then faces him.

Margaret

Okay, let's get this out in the open. Why are you pursuing me? It doesn't make any sense.

James

(Noticing the bouquet) I see you got the flowers.

Margaret

Yes. Thank you. Answer the question.

James

You of all people should know by now, very few things in life make sense. At least the really important things.

Margaret

(Skeptically) Maybe, but there's stuff you're not telling me.

James

There's a lot of stuff I haven't told you. Why don't we spend some time trading facts about each other? You tell me something, I'll tell you something.

Margaret

You start.

James

I was married once.

Margaret

Okay.

James

And I have a daughter just a little younger than Callie.

Margaret

Huh. Didn't see that one coming.

James

She lives with her mom in California.

Margaret

Do you spend much time with her?

James

No. I was stupid and I gave her mother full custody. I was angry about the divorce and a lot of things. They moved away and my ex-wife got remarried and her new husband became the father I never was. I'm pretty sure I'm going to regret that decision for the rest of my life, because my daughter has no interest in getting to know me better.

Margaret

I'm sorry.

James

That's where I was last week. She just started college and I wanted a chance to see her before she left. *(Pause)* It didn't go well. She said I abandoned her when she was little and she didn't see how she could ever forgive me for that. There's no way to walk it back.

Margaret

She may come around when she's older.

James

I hope you're right. I'd like to know her and maybe make it up to her if she'd give me a chance. *(Pause)* So there you go - now you know my deepest, darkest secret. Still think I'm a nice guy?

Margaret

Everyone has things they wish they could change. Regrets. That's the stuff that keeps poets in business.

James

Your turn. Tell me one thing.

Margaret

(Thinking for a moment) You scare me.

James

(Incredulous) Why? I'm not scary, just messed up like everyone else.

Margaret

I don't want to feel the way you want me to feel about you or anyone else ever again.

James

What way?

Margaret

I don't want to care about someone only to end up getting my teeth kicked in. And then, you know, there's the age thing, which you really haven't fully explained.

James

The age thing is your thing. Not mine.

Margaret

That doesn't answer the question. Why me when you could have anyone?

James

I fell in love with your mind.

Margaret

(Unbelieving) Oh, please!

James

Okay. I fell in *like* with your mind. After we met I looked you up. I read every poem and short story I could find. I bought your chapbooks, back issues of literary magazines that had published you, anything I could get my hands on. And I loved your writing. I loved the fact that I knew the woman creating these gems.

Margaret

You only think you know her.

James

"I bury my face in the lilac blossoms
knowing full well
the preciousness of impermanence."

Margaret

Oh shit. I can't believe you remembered that.

James

"The preciousness of impermanence?" That line just resonated with me. And look where we are, right in the middle of another lesson on impermanence.

Margaret

It's a poem, James. Nothing more.

James

There's nothing more intimate than poetry. Nothing more truthful. You said it yourself.

Margaret

Let me tell you another important truth – listen carefully. Whatever fantasy is going on inside your head about us right now is so much better than what the reality would ever be. I promise you that.

James

(Smiling) And you are basing this on your extensive experience dealing with younger men like me?

Margaret

I'm basing it on facts. Facts that I know and you apparently don't.

James

Margaret, I'm not asking you to marry me. I just want to spend some time with you, see where it goes. What's scary about that?

Margaret

You make it sound innocuous, but we both know that at some time... You know. Things go to the next level. I just feel like it's too late for me to go there.

James

Stop projecting. Some time, in the future, too late, blah, blah, blah. How about we focus on now? C'mon, both of us are a little damaged, maybe a little lonely. What's wrong with seeing what we can give each other in the way of comfort?

Margaret

I don't know what that means.

James

Me neither. We'll make it up as we go along.

Margaret

That is so...so....*(grasping for the right words)*

James

(Grinning) So what? So child of the sixties? You should be familiar with that concept. *(Flashes her the peace sign)* Peace, love, rock and roll.

Margaret

Very funny.

James

(Reaching for her hand) C'mon, right now, tonight, let's just sit here and get to know each other better. You ask me a question, I'll ask you one. Pour us another and let's see how it goes.

Margaret

(Relenting and reaching for the whiskey) Where did you grow up?

Lights start to fade as the dialogue continues.

James

Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You?

Margaret

Right here, Lilac Cove. What's your favorite color?

James

I'm colorblind so if I say purple I'm not sure it's the same purple everyone else sees.

Margaret

Interesting. Let me find something purple and we can see if you think it's purple.

Margaret starts to rise as James reaches for her hand and pulls her back into her chair.

James

(Still holding her hand) Time for that later. Tell me about the worst date you ever had.

Margaret

Oh my god, there are so many to choose from.

James

Take your time. I got all night.

Stage to black.

Act Two, Scene Seven

The next morning. Lights up in Margaret's dining room. The whiskey bottle is empty and there are two empty glasses on the table. Margaret comes in from the kitchen clutching a cup of coffee and looking sleepy and hungover.

She sits, takes a drink of the coffee, and moans.

Margaret

Oh sweet Jesus. *(Pushing away the whiskey bottle)* Never again. *(Looks at the coffee cup)*
C'mon magic elixir, do your thing. *(Takes another sip)*

A knock at the door, Margaret looks up and moans.

Callie enters, carrying a pastry box and looking as hungover as Margaret.

Callie

Do you have more of that? *(Motions to the coffee)*

Margaret motions towards the kitchen. Callie goes to get cup of coffee as Margaret tries to get rid of the whiskey and glasses.

Callie

(Returning with the coffee) Any news about Iris?

Margaret

I called the hospital and they said she was still out. I'm going over there to give Donald a break. He doesn't want to leave her alone. But he's got classes to teach, so that's something I can do.

Callie

(Sitting down next to Margaret) Whose car is in the driveway?

Margaret

You know perfectly well.

Callie

Is he still sleeping? What did you do to him?

Margaret

He may be sleeping, but not here. He took a cab home last night. Actually, he left early this morning.

Callie

Gina Mae took me out. Man, that chick can drink.

Margaret

Shhhh. Don't talk about drinking right now.

Callie

Did you know she and my mom tried to hitchhike to Woodstock together?

Margaret

(Smiling at the memory) Oh yeah, I remember. They didn't make it very far before they ran out of money. Your grandma had to go get them. Boy was she pissed off.

Callie

How come I didn't know that?

Margaret

People have secrets, kiddo. We don't always get to know.

Callie

I thought I knew all her stories. I was surprised.

Margaret

Yeah, well being surprised is one of the best things we can hope for in a relationship.

Callie

You're sounding very philosophical this morning. Please knock it the fuck off, will ya? *(Puts her head in her hands)*

Margaret

What's in the box?

Callie

Cookies. For Donald.

Margaret

That's nice of you. I'm sure he'll appreciate the gesture.

Callie

(Opening the box) Check 'em out. We've got a bakery that makes them for the store. *(Holds up a penis-shaped cookie)*

Margaret

Put that away please.

Callie

I thought it might cheer him up. Will you give him these?

Margaret

Why don't you come with me and you can give them to him?

Callie

(Hedging) I don't know. Hospitals always remind me of Mom right at the end.

Margaret

(Patting her hand) I understand. But I'm not really comfortable giving Donald penis-shaped cookies, so you're coming with me.

Callie

I can't stay long. I have to get to the store. Which reminds me - there's a part-time opening for someone to help maintain the inventory and organize readings and stuff. Are you interested? I could put in a good word with the owners.

Margaret

I don't know anything about the kind of inventory your store keeps.

Callie

You know books. And authors. That's a big part of it. You said you needed a job. Here's a job.

Margaret

(Hedging) It's a bit out of my comfort zone.

Callie

Isn't that a good thing?

Margaret

Don't be precocious. I can't handle it right now.

Callie

I just thought if you were at the store maybe we could also work on that project with mom's journals. I don't know how to organize it. But you're good at that shit.

Another knock at the door - Margaret looks and motions to come in.

Callie

(As James enters) Just think about it, okay?

Margaret nods.

James

(Smiling and looking at Margaret) Hi. Just came to pick up my car.

Margaret

Hi.

They grin at each other like school kids.

Callie

(Watching the two of them look at each other, waves at James) Hello????? What the fuck?

James

(Looking at her finally) Hey Callie. How's it going?

Callie

I have a hangover.

James

Yeah, I know the feeling. Anything from the hospital?

Margaret

No change. I was just about to head over there.

James

Why don't I stop by after work and bring some food?

Margaret

Good idea. I'll let Donald know.

James

And call me if there's any change. Good or bad, okay?

Margaret

I will.

James

I should probably go.

Margaret

I understand.

Callie stands there watching them like at a tennis match.

James
Yeah. Okay. So I'll see you tonight?

Margaret
At the hospital, you mean?

James
Sure. Or maybe afterwards?

Margaret
Yeah. I mean, let's see how things go with Iris.

James
Right! That makes sense.

Callie
(Getting up) Oh my God! So awkward!

Callie exits to the kitchen.

James
(Jokingly) I think she knows about us.

Margaret
She knew before we did, I'm afraid.

James reaches for Margaret's hand and kisses it.

James
I'm going to the office and write you a poem.

Margaret
Nobody's ever done that. Except when I assigned it in class, but that doesn't really count.

James
Good. I like the idea that I can still be the first to give you something.

Margaret
You'd better go. Callie's listening to everything.

Callie
(Offstage) No I'm not.

James

(Kissing her hand again) See you later, Margaret.

Margaret

Bye James.

James leaves. Callie comes out of the kitchen.

Callie

Don't blow this.

Margaret

What?

Callie

You know what. Don't fuck it up because of some stupid notion of age and time and it being too late. Just go with it.

Margaret

I'm going to the hospital now. Grab the cookies and get in the car.

Callie

(Picking up the box of cookies) You know I'm right.

Callie exits out the door as Margaret gets her keys and purse and heads to the door.

Margaret

I know you are. *(Looks at the flowers and the empty whisky bottle)* One random turn. I'll be damned.

Margaret exits.

Stage to black.

The End